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Book Review: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education: An introduction for the teaching profession

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Australian education systems have long been challenged by the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student outcomes. All levels of Australian government, as well as Indigenous leaders and educators, however, continue to meet the challenge through exhortation, strategies and targets. The most prominent of such strategies is 'Closing the Gap', which gives practical expression to the Australian Government's commitment to measurably improving the lives of Indigenous Australians, especially Indigenous children. In amongst the six 'Closing the Gap' targets, which generally relate to Indigenous life expectancy, infant mortality, early childhood development and employment, are two education targets:

- Halve the gap for Indigenous students in reading, writing and numeracy within a decade.
- Halve the gap for Indigenous students in year 12 attainment [the final year of compulsory schooling] or equivalent attainment by 2020.

That education should command two targets of the six (three, if one includes the target to 'ensure that all Indigenous four-year-olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education within five years') is as much an illustration of how importantly Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities value education as it is of the government's concern. This facticity must be continually stressed, however, in the face of white Australia's cultural deficit understandings of Indigenous disadvantage. Mindful of this and other impediments to improved education outcomes, the contributors to the collection of eleven essays comprising *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education: An introduction for the teaching profession* set out to effectively prepare pre-service teachers to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Guidance is offered on their responsibilities to classroom and the community, as well as the social, cultural and historical context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

The contributors are all highly regarded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics whose dogged determination to improve Indigenous education serves as an inspiration. The collection is edited by Kay Price, Associate Director of the Centre for Australian Indigenous Knowledges at the University of Southern Queensland. With a long career in primary, secondary and tertiary teaching, Price is well placed to introduce and contextualise the chapters that follow.

In the introduction, entitled 'A brief history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in Australia', Price recovers, at least for the benefit of non-Indigenous readers, the nature of the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children prior to invasion and dispossession by British colonisers. She then goes on to highlight the key policies and programs designed to assimilate children into Western knowledge systems and in so doing effectively alludes to an originary 'gap', that of the cleaving of traditional Indigenous ways of knowing from the classroom. The 'gap' that is presently described is entreated with the prospect of embedding of Aboriginal and

Torres Islander perspectives in the curriculum, so closing the circuitous route education policy has taken.

Price makes another contribution with the chapter 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in the classroom' which seeks to stress the importance of the subject to the achievement of Indigenous education policy goals, especially with regard to the National Professional Standards for Teaching (Australian Institute Teaching and School Leadership 2011), which contain two explicit standards relating to the requirement for graduate teachers to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the cultures, cultural identities and linguistic backgrounds of students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. The seeming widespread endorsement of the efficacy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in preparing teachers to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is clearly echoed here, but when Price poses the question: 'you may ask why teachers need to study Indigenous education at university' (p. 153), there is a sense that the case for it must be continually made, suggesting further that provision of such courses is not guaranteed and that attendance is met with a degree of recalcitrance. This situation must change for the better if the much vaunted professional teaching standards are to be properly observed.

A chapter by Jeannie Herbert called 'Delivering the promise' identifies issues arising from the preparation of teachers to deliver what she describes as the 'promise of education'. In delivering the 'promise', Herbert considers aspects of teaching practice that 'good teachers' use to demonstrate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island students that they value their engagement in learning processes. She is particularly concerned with a 'genuine engagement' that ideally involves communities. This inclusivity, she suggests, is likely to presage a questioning on the part of pre-service teachers of the very idea of closing the gap. She welcomes such scepticism for 'it could suggest that the very act of engagement is beginning to influence teacher thinking, enabling them to develop real insights into how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples perceive they have positioned for 'failure' within the Western knowledge system that underpins Australian education services' (p. 40). The prospect of teachers, whether in-service or pre-service, being transformed by their experience of community engagement to the extent that they no longer uncritically accept public and institutional deficit discourses is of course to be welcomed. The question then to be asked is how many universities and schools foster such opportunities and sustain that engagement, particularly beyond the celebration of annual cultural events such as NAIDOC Week (National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee).

Mark Rose, in his essay 'The "silent apartheid" as the practitioner's blindspot', is less than convinced that teachers are adequately prepared for the professional challenges that will follow the imminent mandatory inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in the Australian curriculum. He coins the deliberately emotive phrase 'silent apartheid' to describe the ways in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, despite being widely accepted as the world's oldest living cultures, have no visible presence in the curriculum. Teachers therefore are likely to have been denied Indigenous perspectives throughout their compulsory and tertiary education. As a result, he argues, this has 'denude[d] the nation of a consciousness that is essentially the basis for national identity and central to the path for national maturity' (pp. 67–8). He has reasons to be sanguine, however, for a raft of policy initiatives designed to bring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives to bear upon the national curriculum represent what he describes hopefully as an 'opportunity to connect young Australians with the cultural heritage of the land they occupy [and this] must be considered a significant step toward national maturity' (p. 77).

Peter Buckskin's essay, 'Engaging Indigenous students: The important relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their teachers', is equally positive about recent policy developments, though he first cautions that 'the mainstream has so failed to provide the necessary support and professional development for teachers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children' with the result that 'their parents and caregivers are now very wary of mainstream education as a whole' (p. 166). Buckskin identifies four areas now receiving much needed reform under the present Labor government, these being:

- the development of a national curriculum;
- the introduction of national teaching standards;
- increased investment in the professional development of teachers and school leaders; and
- improving workforce development with employment of more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers.

Though these developments are welcomed, Buckskin is wary of the tendency of education systems halting their own reform before changes are sustainably embedded. He speculates as to why this is so and poses some provocative questions: 'perhaps decision makers still believe, deep down, that

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have less innate intellectual ability; that children of a 'primitive' culture are not worth the effort?' (p. 175). These questions have likely dogged all those concerned with improving the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and it is testament to the resilience of those who have contributed to this collection, as well as good teachers, students, families and caregivers, that the demand for quality teaching and high expectations, continues unabated.

One area the collection does not address in a sustained way is race and racism. There are references to the pernicious effects of racism throughout, such as when Jeannie Hebert quotes a student who recounts how 'some teachers use the term "blacks" all the time and when you say you find it offensive they say they are only using words that are written in history books. Well it's not history they're talking about. I'm just over it 'cos the term "black" always seems to put us down' (p. 46). Race is clearly the elephant in the staff room and it is striking that the drive to embed cultural competencies in education has not been accompanied by an equal stress on anti-racism. This has not been the case elsewhere, notably in the UK and the US where an intellectual tradition of anti-racism, nurtured by postgraduate courses in race and ethnicity studies, has resulted in many disciplines, education included, devising explicitly anti-racist pedagogies. The development of an anti-racist pedagogy in Australian education appears well overdue, one that would perhaps complement an Indigenous pedagogy that this collection is clearly gesturing towards.

There are other equally enlivening essays in this collection not covered in this review and taken as a whole the book serves as an engaging and comprehensive introduction to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. The book looks set to become the standard text on the reading lists of many education programs.

### References

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