



# New effort needed to improve Indigenous education



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*A recent ACER report - **The Case for Change: A review of contemporary research on Indigenous educational outcomes** calls for the establishment of a new national research agenda as a means to help improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students.*

Despite good intentions and considerable funding in recent years, educational outcomes for Indigenous students remain well behind those of non-Indigenous students. *The Case for Change* argues that a lack of research evidence in policy making is contributing to a slow improvement in outcomes for Indigenous students and a new national research program to examine ways of improving these outcomes is required urgently.

Our review examines the research evidence and Indigenous education policies that have been implemented over the last decade. It analyses existing educational research into the precursors and other factors that contribute to educational achievement for students generally and for Indigenous students in particular. A number of problems with current research practices are identified and alternative approaches suggested. A national research agenda that systematically identifies and supports policy changes directed at significantly improving the educational outcomes for all Indigenous students is called for.



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A major concern relating to current policy in Indigenous education is that it is insufficiently supported by comprehensive and substantive research evidence. This is largely because much of the recent research in Indigenous education has been based *either* on analyses of Indigenous students' test results with little consideration of context, or on small case studies of learning problems faced by specific groups of Indigenous students. Research aimed at improving outcomes for Indigenous students has also tended to be isolated from broader considerations of teacher quality and has been inadequately informed by advances in developmental psychology, paediatrics, sociology and community health. In addition, in the view of the authors, much of the research overemphasises the uniqueness of the Indigenous experience of education and underemphasises the many factors that impact on the learning of *all* students.

A better approach to research in Indigenous education would be to focus more on what the research tells us about the foundations of good teaching and learning generally.

These can be described as two key goals of an education, which apply to all students. These are:

- to support the moral and emotional development in the context of citizenship; and
- to be explicitly related to employment and life outcomes.

A number of other factors support these goals. They are:

- good health, both as infants and while at school;
- ensuring students' cognitive and social readiness for each developmental task and transition;
- good teachers supported by extensive and ongoing professional development;
- regular school attendance, so learning can be managed by students, teachers and parents or caregivers; and
- the development of productive and supportive relationships between schools and their communities.

The factors that are known to affect the learning of students in general should be at the centre of new research efforts. The particular needs of Indigenous students should be seen in the context of these universal educational needs. Such a context provides a better understanding of what research needs to be conducted in order to determine why Indigenous students have yet to achieve equal access, attendance and participation in schooling.

Our review also identified several particular educational needs for Indigenous students that link to broader issues, which require urgent policy consideration. These include a need to improve employment outcomes for Indigenous people; adopt culturally appropriate pedagogy; reduce teacher turnover, especially in remote areas; and improve the quality and quantity of teacher education courses in Indigenous education, both pre-service and in-service.

Another area of concern in current research and policy development is the practice of aggregating data on Indigenous students and



the inherent dangers of treating all Indigenous students as if they are the same despite their regional and socioeconomic locations. In analysing the key factors, both universal and particular, which impact on educational outcomes, more attention needs to be paid to the context of the student in his or her family and school community. It is important, therefore, that future research programs allow for the disaggregating of data.

In particular, data collected by systems need to be able to be disaggregated so that important distinctions in populations are not concealed. If data are not disaggregated, populations where progress has been made cannot be easily identified and the students and educators involved in these program initiatives miss out on the recognition and self-esteem that would come from being able to identify and report their successes.

The authors believe that rather than aggregating data into one Indigenous category, at least two different categories of Indigenous populations should be used in collecting data. These categories should be based on community rather than socioeconomic background. The first population is those generally traditional and remote Indigenous communities, where the vernacular is the common daily language, and where English exists only in the schools. The second is in those communities where English is the community and school language, even given that Aboriginal English is part of the language mix. Disaggregating data in this way would boost researchers' and policy makers' capacity to understand what will work best for any particular group of similar students.

Our review of the research concludes that, while there have been some improvements

over the past decade, the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous educational outcomes remains unacceptably large and we should not be satisfied with recent levels of improvement. Much more remains to be done, starting with a number of changes to existing policy and practice in the field of Indigenous educational research. This requires the establishment of a new national research agenda, consisting of large-scale studies using both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. Similar research agendas, when adopted in other developed countries, have led to significant policy changes and improved outcomes for Indigenous people. Australia should instigate a similar research agenda, one that would better support more effective and efficient policy development in the area of Indigenous education.

Developing successful and better-targeted policies, which are based on empirical research findings, is the key to alleviating the substantial educational disadvantages faced by Indigenous students. We owe it to the current generation of Indigenous students to ensure that all Indigenous peoples have the opportunity to reach their full potential. We must embark on this research without further delay.

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*The case for change: a review of contemporary research on Indigenous education outcomes*, by Suzanne Mellor and Matthew Corrigan was published by the Australian Council for Educational Research in February 2004 as the Australian Education Review (Number 47). The review can be purchased through ACER Press or downloaded from the ACER web site at [www.acer.edu.au](http://www.acer.edu.au) ■



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