Gap or no gap?

THE GAP BETWEEN INDIGENOUS AND NON-INDIGENOUS STUDENTS IS EITHER A MYTH OR A REALITY. AS SUSANNAH IVORY REPORTS, THERE ARE NO EASY CONCLUSIONS ON INDIGENOUS EDUCATION.

A report on Indigenous education released by the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) in April has claimed that the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is a myth and the result of ‘poorly performing’ remote schools, particularly in the Northern Territory. The report, Revisiting Indigenous Education, attacks state and territory educational policy, and focuses on the performance of individual schools and learning centres.

Authors Helen Hughes and Mark Hughes, citing data from the 2008 National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy, state that Indigenous students ‘within mainstream schools…perform at the same literacy and numeracy levels as non-Indigenous students.’ Remote students in New South Wales, Western Australia, South Australia, and Queensland are performing poorly in comparison to students in mainstream schools, they say, while students in remote schools in the Northern Territory perform the worst of all. The report concludes that ‘schools, not ethnicity, determine outcomes.’ ‘Education departments are unwilling to admit that badly run schools with dumbed-down curriculums and poor teaching are major reasons for non-attendance,’ the authors conclude.

The CIS report calls for:

- performances on benchmark testing to be released on a by-school basis to assist poorly-performing schools
- learning and educational centres to be converted to schools or be shut, and
- the scrapping of ‘bilingual programs.’

In place of current arrangements, the authors propose that the teaching of standard curricula with an emphasis on English as a second language, taught by qualified teachers rather than by teaching assistants, in adequately equipped buildings would result in higher standards in three years. In place of learning centres, children would attend a smaller number of schools, with those in more remote locations bussed to day or boarding schools. The authors suggest parents might have to move to more populous areas to allow their children to attend school.

While it may be an over-simplification of the available data to conclude that shortcomings in the provision of remote education for Indigenous children explain the whole of the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, the national aggregation of results under the category of ‘Indigenous and Torres Strait Islanders’ has been criticised for homogenising a range of factors that are, in reality, complex and varied.

The lack of resources and facilities within remote Northern Territory schools was brought into focus by the Australian Education Union’s Education is Key report as far back as 2007. That report called for more qualified teachers and the supply of materials and equipment – such as more desks and chairs.

Another report, specifically on Northern Territory education, was submitted by Chris Sarra to the Northern Territory Education Department, also in April. Sarra has also condemned the practice of ‘creating an underclass’ and has criticised policies for creating teaching practices that hold Indigenous children to different or lower standards. ‘For too long too many of us had thought we’d been culturally sensitive by having watered-down or second-rate outcomes for Aboriginal children…. These are actually just kids at school who deserve just as much of an education as anybody,’ Sarra says.

Meanwhile, the Productivity Commission’s Report on Government Services 2009, published in January, found that there is a gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, and it widens between Years 3 and 7.

Using data from 2007 national basic skills tests, the Report on Government Services 2009 found that fewer Indigenous students achieve numeracy, reading and writing outcomes than non-Indigenous students, but ‘outcomes for Indigenous students declined as remoteness increased,’ the report also found. ‘Furthermore, the gap in learning outcomes between Indigenous students and all students increased as the degree of remoteness increased.’

In numeracy, the proportion of all Year 3s who achieved the benchmark in 2007 was about 92 per cent, compared with about 75 per cent for Year 3 Indigenous students. By Year 5, those proportions were about 88 per cent and 62 per cent respectively. By Year 7, they were about 80 per cent and 43 per cent respectively.

In reading, about 92 per cent of Year 3s achieved the benchmark, compared with about 77 per cent for Year 3 Indigenous students. By Year 5, those proportions were about 88 per cent and 63 per cent respectively. By Year 7, they were about 89 per cent and 62 per cent respectively.

In writing, about 92 per cent of Year 3s achieved the benchmark, compared with about 73 per cent for Year 3 Indigenous students. By Year 5, those proportions were about 95 per cent and 77 per cent respectively. By Year 7, they were about 91 per cent and 71 per cent respectively.

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May contain traces of nuts

Australia is creating an ‘allergy generation,’ according to the lead author of a study that suggests the number of children treated for food allergies has doubled in the past decade. That’s bad news, according to Canberra-based clinical allergy physician Dr Raymond Mullins, who is the lead author of the study. Mullins says the number of children he treats for food allergies has risen from two a month in 1995 to almost one a day in 2008. Mullins, in ‘Characteristics of childhood peanut allergy in the Australian Capital Territory, 1995 to 2007,’ published in the Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology, reported that the prevalence of peanut allergy by age 72 months for children born in 2004 was double that for those born in 2001.

The good news is that we can do something about it. Research published in ‘Successful oral tolerance induction in severe peanut allergy,’ in the journal Allergy by Dr Andrew Clark and a team from Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust in England, indicates that children with a peanut allergy can build up their tolerance by being desensitised through the administration of gradually increased doses of peanut flour.

Peanut allergies cause reactions ranging from difficulty in breathing to anaphylaxis, with reactive children requiring an injection of adrenaline. Over a six-month period, Clark and his team exposed peanut-allergic children to five milligram daily doses of peanut flour, increasing the dosage until they were able to tolerate 800 milligrams – equivalent to five peanuts – a day without requiring adrenaline.

The children, including one who normally experienced anaphylaxis, were able to tolerate 10 peanuts after the intervention. According to Clark, the children should maintain their tolerance as long as they continue to take a daily dose.

Funding gap narrows

The Commonwealth government’s $14.7 billion ‘Building the Education Revolution’ (BER) fund for building or upgrading buildings in Australia’s 9,540 schools will help many schools that have been starved of funds, but according to Adam Rorris, a former World Bank educational economist and former manager of the Taskforce on Schools Resourcing for the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, the fact that funds will be allocated on the basis of a school’s size rather than need ‘remains a significant weakness.’

According to Rorris, speaking at the National Public Education Forum, convened by the Australian Council of State School Organisations, the Australian Education Union, the Australian Government Primary Principals Association and the Australian Secondary Principals Association, in late March, the massive spending program narrows the funding gap between students in public and private schools, but Rorris said a substantial gap remains.

Rorris estimates the capital investment last year per private school student at $1,774, and at $948 per public school student. Adding this year’s BER money, he estimates the capital investment per private school student at $3,020 and $2,470 per public school student.

The gap isn’t simply between public and private schools, however. ‘The gap remains between public and private schools, and between the poorer and wealthy private schools,’ Rorris told the Sydney Morning Herald’s Anna Patty.