DODGY DATA, LANGUAGE INVISIBILITY AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF INDIGENOUS STUDENT LANGUAGE DATA IN QUEENSLAND SCHOOLS

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As part of the 'Bridging the Language Gap' project undertaken with 86 State and Catholic schools across Queensland, the language competencies of Indigenous students have been found to be 'invisible' in several key and self-reinforcing ways in school system data. A proliferation of inaccurate, illogical and incomplete data exists about students' home languages and their status as English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D) learners in schools. This is strongly suggestive of the fact that 'language' is not perceived by school systems as a significant operative variable in student performance, not even in the current education climate of data-driven improvement. Moreover, the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), the annual standardised testing regime, does not collect relevant information on students' language repertoires and levels of proficiency in Standard Australian English (SAE). Indigenous students who are over-represented in NAPLAN under-performance data are targeted through 'Closing the Gap' for interventions to raise their literacy and numeracy achievements (in SAE). However, Indigenous students who are EAL/D learners cannot be disaggregated by system data from their counterparts already fluent in SAE. Reasons behind such profound language invisibility are discussed, as well as the implications for social inclusion of Indigenous students in education.

KEY WORDS: Indigenous education, school language data, student assessment, multilingual education, English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D)

INTRODUCTION

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school students in Queensland are over-represented in the under-achievement data assessed through the medium of Standard Australian English (SAE) (e.g., Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2012). As a strategic response to this, Queensland's then Department of Education and Training conceived the Bridging the Language Gap (BLG) project[i] with the broad aim of building school capacity to recognise and support Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (henceforth

'Indigenous') students who are multilingual learners acquiring SAE as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D).[ii] As well as delivering professional development and mentoring to educators, the BLG project design incorporated baseline research on significant topics, including the investigation into student language data held by schools, which is reported in this paper.

Researching student language data was considered highly relevant to school capacity building because data-driven improvement agendas and policies currently hold great sway in Australian schooling contexts and Indigenous student performance is targeted through, for instance, the National Indigenous Reform Agenda, also known popularly as 'Closing the Gap' (Council of Australian Governments [COAG], 2008). Although language data is required for identifying and disaggregating Indigenous EAL/D learners in order to diagnose and respond to any language learning needs and to evaluate the effects of any teaching interventions, no such system-wide information is actually available at a state or national level (e.g., Angelo, 2012a; Angelo & McIntosh, 2010a; McIntosh & Angelo, 2011).

Research about Indigenous EAL/D learners who speak languages/dialects other than SAE at home typically has not explained or problematised the systems or processes by which schools identify students with these language characteristics. Instead, it usually bypasses this and addresses issues resulting from students' language backgrounds and second language (L2) learning needs (e.g., Wigglesworth, Billington, & Loakes, 2013; Wigglesworth, Simpson, & Loakes, 2011), although see Angelo (2012b, p. 52) for an acknowledgement of this 'loophole': '[...] these suggestions are dependent on the accurate identification of Indigenous EFL/ESL learners and the ability to assess their levels of L2 proficiency [in SAE]', and also Angelo (2013a) about identifying school-aged Indigenous EAL/D learners. Most research on Indigenous language data concerns the collection and accuracy of demographic information obtained about speakers and their communities through the national Census and other population surveys of Indigenous Australians, often with a focus on understanding Indigenous language ecologies (e.g., Angelo & McIntosh, in press; Kral & Morphy, 2006; McConvell & Thieberger, 2001; Simpson, 2008).

This paper addresses gaps in the above research. It investigates the data sources, categories and collection processes associated with the language data in 86 schools across Queensland during the BLG in 2011–2013. Furthermore, it reveals the way these are managed 'on the ground' and the factors that affect their operationalisation. Of particular interest to the overall BLG project was ascertaining the relationship between school language data and the visibility of Indigenous students' language learning. Therefore, specifically, the research into school language data sought to answer the following questions:

i.   How accurate is the language data for each student, and particularly Indigenous students, including Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE), Main

Language Other Than English (MLOTE) and English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D) status?

ii.   What factors contribute to the variability of this data?

To this end, a survey of language data and data recording practices was conducted with staff from the 86 participating project schools.

In this paper, we show how the social inclusion of Indigenous students with rich linguistic repertoires and EAL/D learning needs is affected by the quality of school language data. The paper first provides background information to our project research and methodology, to Indigenous language ecologies and to what constitutes school language data. The findings of the school language data survey are then presented, followed by a discussion which teases out major factors influencing the quality of this data and argues a self-perpetuating relationship between poor language data, its resulting lack of explanatory power and the consequent de-emphasis on its (accurate) collection. The paper concludes with the implications of poor school language data for social inclusion of Indigenous multilingual students including those who are adding SAE to their existing language competencies.

BACKGROUND TO THE BRIDGING THE LANGUAGE GAP PROJECT RESEARCH

The Bridging the Language Gap (BLG) project aimed to build capacity in participant State and Catholic schools throughout Queensland for identifying, teaching and monitoring Indigenous EAL/D learners (see Figure 1 below).

i.   Improve the capacity of targeted focus school personnel and teachers to:

- identify language backgrounds and language differences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students;

- assess students' levels of SAE and monitor their ongoing development;

- analyse the language demands of classroom learning;

- plan with a language perspective and implement classroom pedagogy which is inclusive of all language learners.

ii.   Increase the number of personnel across the system who have a significant knowledge base to bring to language issues in education alongside experience in a school leadership role.

iii.   Contribute to the research, knowledge base and best practice for meeting the language learning needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander EAL/D students.

Figure 1. Aims of Bridging the Language Gap project.

In order to build this capacity, BLG schools engaged in a multi-tiered, wrap-around professional development approach. As well as receiving entry-level training for classroom

teachers, schools also nominated a staff member as a trainee 'Language Leader' who undertook intensive training for gathering base-line language data and developing school-based responses. Language Leaders were given intensive professional development plus access to specialist BLG project staff and researchers with linguistic and/or TESOL (Teaching English as a Second or Other Language) expertise in Indigenous contexts. Each Language Leader was also assigned a personal Professional Mentor who assisted them with completing 'back-to-school' training tasks. This gave Language Leaders opportunities to apply what they had heard in workshops to their own school context and to discuss particular questions with their Professional Mentor or other specialist project staff.

Two of these 'back-to-school' tasks addressed student language data and formed the basis of our survey: students' language backgrounds and students' status as EAL/D learners. Language Leaders were asked to ascertain the nature of the language data that existed about their students in the school system. They were then asked to examine this data with the new understandings about the language ecologies of Indigenous families and communities that they had acquired through BLG professional development. As the focus of this project was building school capacity for supporting Indigenous EAL/D learners, these tasks explicitly included Indigenous students alongside students with overseas language backgrounds.

BACKGROUND TO ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER LANGUAGE ECOLOGIES

Schools participated in the BLG in order to increase their staff capacity in identifying, teaching and monitoring Indigenous EAL/D learners. Target students are learners of SAE and proficient speakers of other, Indigenous languages/varieties, although their language backgrounds are not an entirely straightforward matter because present-day language ecologies surrounding Indigenous families and communities in Queensland reflect widespread and long-term language contact. It is therefore only school-aged students in or from some remote locations who may speak as their first language (L1) a 'traditional' Indigenous language, such as Kala Kawaw Ya in the top western islands of the Torres Strait, Wik Mungkun on Western Cape York and Alyawarr in far western Queensland.

As such, Indigenous students with language backgrounds other than SAE are likely to speak contact language varieties, which have generally been described as 'creoles' and 'dialects' (e.g., Angelo, 2013a). There are two creoles spoken in Queensland with a long-term history of linguistic description: Yumplatok (also known as Torres Strait Creole, Broken and Cape York Creole) and Kriol. More recent linguistic work in Queensland has proposed that hitherto undescribed creoles exist in Queensland, such as the autochthonous contact language spoken at Yarrabah, a former mission in far northern Queensland (e.g., Sellwood & Angelo, 2013). In addition, Indigenous students in Queensland may have speech varieties which differ significantly from SAE, but are not so linguistically distant as to be considered creoles.

These have often been described as dialects of English and this terminology is the source of the 'D' in EAL/D (e.g., Department of Education Training and Employment, 2013a): Eades describes Aboriginal ways of using English for south-east Queensland (e.g., 1983), whilst Torres Strait English is described by Shnukal (2001).

Recognising and fostering multilingualism in this Indigenous student population is also of particular interest, as there is variation in the number of languages/varieties spoken (with varying degrees of proficiency) by Indigenous students in Queensland, and also in their ability to move between 'heavy' and 'light' varieties of creoles/dialects. BLG professional development aimed to assist schools to be strongly supportive of students' (incipient) multilingualism, as it was clear that educators often have little in their toolkits for encouraging and celebrating multilingual behaviours in students (e.g., Angelo, 2009).

BACKGROUND TO LANGUAGE DATA IN QUEENSLAND SCHOOLS

Three main kinds of data were accessed by Language Leaders in their quest for school language data, namely enrolment data about language spoken at home, EAL/D status and the language background information used to disaggregate National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results. An overview of each of these data points now follows.

ENROLMENT DATA: 'MAIN LANGUAGE OTHER THAN ENGLISH' (MLOTE)

Information about a Main Language Other than English (MLOTE) spoken by the student and/or their caregivers is requested on school enrolment forms. MLOTE information can be provided by parents filling out an enrolment form independently or with assistance. Alternatively, it could be recorded during an interview that occurs simultaneously as the enrolment form is filled out, or subsequently. Names of the language(s) spoken at home are sought and respondents are asked to give a percentage estimate of how much each language is spoken. A single, main language taken from enrolment forms is then listed in school language data. In State schools this is entered in a state-wide student database, OneSchool, which uses a list of languages derived from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. It appears that the collection of this information had been considered optional at certain times and/or at certain sites. There is also evidence (e.g., through comparison of hard copies to electronic data and/or via follow-ups with parents/caregivers) to suggest that in some cases, if no language was entered here, this category may have been accidentally populated by default as 'SAE' rather than as a null response.

ENGLISH PROFICIENCY: 'ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE/DIALECT' (EAL/D) STATUS

EAL/D status is a school-assessed category so it does not appear on enrolment forms as a question posed to parents/caregivers. Such information might, however, be requested (or

become apparent) during the enrolment process. Otherwise, responses on enrolment forms about MLOTE (or birthplace, visa, etc.) might kick-start an investigation into a student's EAL/D status. In other cases, school-specific processes (such as follow-up interviews, teacher observations and referrals) are the main vehicle for identifying students' status as EAL/D learners. Language Leaders reported that a student's EAL/D status was more likely to be followed up if extra support could be available for the student (but see below for discussion about exclusion of Indigenous students from specialist EAL/D services). Note too that EAL/D status is represented simply as either a positive or null value in school and system data, with the result that a negative status has the same appearance as an undetermined one. (The ambiguity of a null value also applies to MLOTE and LBOTE data). With regard to the degree of proficiency in SAE displayed by students with EAL/D status, the use of EAL/D assessment tools is not systematised so frequency and methods, storing and reporting, purpose and responses – or whether any of these figure at all – vary greatly within and between schools.

NAPLAN: 'LANGUAGE BACKGROUND OTHER THAN ENGLISH' (LBOTE)

NAPLAN is the annual standardised literacy and numeracy (in English) testing program administered to Australian students in Years 3, 5, 7, and 9. There are bubbles on the front of each test paper which collect personal data about students, including 'Language Background Other Than English'. The LBOTE bubble is shaded if 'either the student or a parent/guardian speaks a language other than English at home' (ACARA, 2012). In Queensland, personal details about students in NAPLAN testing years are also uploaded from school data in advance by the responsible state authority, the Queensland Studies Authority. However, the uploaded data initially merely converts the existing MLOTE data (a more restrictive category) into a positive or null LBOTE status. No training or information is provided to schools about the definitional disjunct between MLOTE and LBOTE (discussed further below). If there is a conflict between a student's LBOTE status in the checked and edited uploaded data versus the subsequently elicited NAPLAN test booklet 'bubble data' it is unclear how this is resolved.

The number of different and disconnected data categories and associated processes[iii] was evidently bewildering for our Language Leaders to navigate, and so it seems likely that the very multiplicity of data categories contributes to the inaccuracy of information about students' language profiles from the outset. Although some opportunities to collect student language data occur at automatic junctures throughout students' schooling, implementing the requisite data collection procedures is clearly problematic, as we will now show.

FINDINGS FROM THE SCHOOL LANGUAGE DATA SURVEY

After investigating language data available about students in their school, only two out of 86 schools felt that their school MLOTE data was accurate[iv] for their Indigenous students.

Language Leaders found that their Indigenous students were much less likely to have an MLOTE actually recorded and that it was much less likely to be recorded accurately compared to MLOTE data about students from overseas.

Across the project schools, it was also found that there was variation between students of different Indigenous backgrounds. For example 'Torres Strait Creole' appeared to be the Indigenous MLOTE recorded most accurately insofar as could be ascertained through the project, community and school expertise available to each Language Leader. Another difference was that traditional languages were more likely to be recorded for students attending school on Cape York, but often these were students' 'heritage' languages rather than the 'main' languages actually spoken fluently by students and their families. School data mechanisms had no category for a heritage language or a more finely attuned ethno-cultural heritage than Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander: the intended purpose of the recorded information might have been either or both. Mainland contact language varieties were the least accurately recorded of the language types described in the discussion of language ecologies above.

With regard to recording whether students were learners of EAL/D, only three Language Leaders thought that their school held accurate information about students of all language backgrounds, whether overseas or Indigenous. Overall, Indigenous students were far less likely than overseas-born students to have their status as EAL/D learners recognised and recorded. In many cases EAL/D data was even inaccurate in schools with programs actively targeting Indigenous students' EAL/D learning needs.

Language Leaders reported that there was confusion about whether the EAL/D classification only reflected students' actual learning needs or their eligibility for funded EAL/D services. This distinction arose because, historically, in Queensland, funded EAL/D services such as specialist teachers or intensive centres have only targeted EAL/D learners with overseas language backgrounds, often in particular visa categories (usually 'New Arrivals'), and have never included Indigenous students. Hence, the available mechanism for identifying the status of a student as an EAL/D learner had largely been co-opted to indicate eligibility for EAL/D services.

Language Leaders further noted the prevalence of a kind of double accounting system in some schools where, for example, students had been recognised as EAL/D or LBOTE status within the context of specific initiatives, such as assessment programmes, but this had not resulted in their status being changed in the recording system for student data. There was even confusion about whether schools were responsible for assessing and assigning these categories, or resolving contradictory data.

Language Leaders also described how the ethno-cultural category of 'Indigenous' and language categories such as 'EAL/D' or 'LBOTE' were often seen as mutually exclusive. This seemed to have its origin in the history of separate services for Indigenous versus migrant affairs; EAL/D or LBOTE could therefore be seen as macro categories for students of overseas ethnic origins, analogous to 'Indigenous', a macro category for all students identifying culturally as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander regardless of their distinctive identities at the level of the 'language group', 'clan' and so forth.

With respect to the LBOTE category, the percentage of a school's entire NAPLAN cohort with LBOTE was shown on the MySchool website (ACARA, 2013) but Language Leaders experienced great difficulty in ascertaining which individuals (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) had been identified as LBOTE in NAPLAN tests. Language Leaders needed to search each cohort's NAPLAN results and then locate this element in each individual student's data. Again, there were reports of on-the-ground confusion regarding how LBOTE information should be generated for NAPLAN test papers: Should it mirror the school's enrolment MLOTE data exactly, or should students self-declare and should teachers prompt them if they knew their students' language backgrounds? Schools had many differing approaches to these problems. Language Leader feedback was that their school LBOTE data was generally as inaccurate as the MLOTE and EAL/D data, and that Indigenous LBOTE students were under-represented.

To sum up, the school language data located by the Language Leaders was usually inaccurate, particularly – but not exclusively – about Indigenous students. It was also inconsistent across type. For example, one school had a program targeting EAL/D learners in which 17 Indigenous students were participating but only six of these actually had their MLOTE recorded in the centralised system and none were recorded as EAL/D in the centralised system. In effect, it was clear that the underlying purposes and accountabilities around school language data had been inconsistently expressed, understood and/or applied.

WHY IS SCHOOL LANGUAGE DATA SO UNRELIABLE?

The state of school language data is the result of multiple self-reinforcing factors, such as prevailing social attitudes, school improvement agendas and dominant paradigms which ignore the impact of language(s) on education. Some major factors are teased out here and their effects explained.

GENERIC LANGUAGE BLINDNESS

In the first instance, our findings reflect a general problem: inconsistent school language data is indicative of a pervasive blindness about all languages, with a particular blind spot about Indigenous languages. Clyne (2005) described pervasive language blindness as the 'monolingual mindset' of Australian society, while Siegel (2010) identified what he terms

the 'monoglot ideology' whereby monolingualism is considered the natural – or even preferred – state, rendering other languages irrelevant. The monolingual mindset has been acknowledged as a factor contributing to the invisibility of language(s) in education documentation (McIntosh, O'Hanlon, & Angelo, 2012), as well as in the lack of recognition accorded contact languages spoken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Queensland (Sellwood & Angelo, 2013) and by students elsewhere (e.g., Migge, Léglise, & Bartens, 2010; Wigglesworth et al., 2013).

In terms of school language data, the monolingual mindset is a likely factor for the missing knowledge and pieces of information about language and languages which have gone unnoticed, unquestioned and/or unrecognised. It is difficult to imagine that any other personal characteristic in student data could fluctuate so wildly without comment. A dominant monolingual mindset is probably also the reason that (pre-service) teachers in Queensland receive no compulsory EAL/D training or similar preparation, despite the linguistically complex classrooms generated by Queensland's history of invasion, colonisation, mass migration and refuge seeking.[v] Doubtlessly, this 'oversight' reflects a more general failure to implement multicultural policies consistently for Australian educators (e.g., Watkins, Lean, Noble, & Dunn, 2013). Clearly, if languages demonstrably lack visibility and esteem in a society, then data about languages in schools is liable to suffer a similar fate.

COMPLEX LANGUAGE CONTACT ECOLOGIES

Another factor contributing to dodgy language data appears to be in the nature of the contact language varieties themselves and the dynamic contexts in which they are spoken. As described above, the language ecologies of Indigenous students in Queensland are characterised by contact languages and multi-lingualism/multi-varietalism. Some linguistic descriptions of vernaculars spoken in Aboriginal communities on the mainland were carried out decades ago, for example in Yarrabah (Alexander, 1965), on northern Cape York (Crowley & Rigsby, 1979), on Palm Island (Dutton, 1965) and in the south-east corner (Eades,1983), but these did not transfer in any apparent way to informing school language data. Outside of a small number of linguistic 'specialists' in this area, people (including educators and speakers themselves) are likely to perceive contact language varieties as (corrupted) forms of the socially dominant and more prestigious lexifier and standard which in Australian contexts has been SAE (e.g., Sellwood & Angelo, 2013; Siegel, 2010).

Social attitudes and awareness determine whether contact languages are recognised, acknowledged, claimed or even named (e.g., Angelo, 2006; Angelo & Carter, 2010, 2013; Angelo & McIntosh, 2010b; Carter, 2010). Crucially, school language data relies on awareness of these language ecologies on the part of speakers plus school administrative personnel, who collect, enter and/or follow up on student data (Angelo, 2013a). Importantly,

however, there is nothing about the current set of language data categories or collection procedures that is responsive to the complex language situations faced by schools.

The Indigenous languages that were recorded by schools usually had a history of being recognised and named. The most common contact language variety to appear in school language data, Torres Strait Creole, also has a history of recognition albeit under a variety of names: Broken, Torres Strait Creole, Yumplatok (Sellwood & Angelo, 2013). In addition, identifying as a Torres Strait Creole speaker or acknowledging students as such for school data purposes probably occurred with greater frequency because of the alignment between language on the one hand, and ethnic and cultural identity on the other. However, proficiency in a given language is not the same as identifying with the predominant cultural group that speaks it, so this could introduce another source of inaccuracy into school language data. Furthermore, the uptake of ethno-cultural categories over language categories is arguably yet another symptom of a dominant monolingual mindset (McIntosh et al., 2012) or a simplistic ethnic determinism, such as 'essentialism' as described by Eades (2013).

OBSCURING THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE(S) IN EDUCATION

Dominant discourses such as 'literacy' can effectively obscure the role of language(s) in school learning, thereby also excluding the role for language data from this space. In the case of literacy, a high stakes ethos has been fostered in recent years by NAPLAN and the public reporting of school results. Improved student performance in literacy and numeracy (both in written SAE) is measured by a single source: NAPLAN test scores. In this climate, the value of multilingualism or promoting EAL/D learning is excluded from the education space in favour of a generic notion of literacy (and numeracy) achievement.

This generic discourse of 'literacy' effectively fails to differentiate between 'language' and 'literacy' so that the 'language' component is lost. The operative variable of students' EAL/D proficiency is not included in NAPLAN reporting and hence does not appear on the menu to be addressed through school-based support. What is assessed is 'literacy-as-if-you-already-speak-English' so what is taught is 'literacy-as-if-you-already-speak-English', such as spelling or text construction. While this can be useful, it omits the explicit teaching of the English language for EAL/D learners (i.e. in addition to curriculum content such as literacy) since the English language factor is actually subsumed by an all-purpose notion of literacy achievement. So EAL/D learners might be taught, say, spelling or structural organisation of texts (in English) without also learning, for example, past tense verb forms, relative clauses or non-finite phrases, thus depriving them of all the ingredients they need to attempt well-spelled and well-structured texts in SAE (see Angelo, 2012b; 2013b; McIntosh et al., 2012).

Even though the language and cultural diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is often acknowledged in education contexts, this glimmer of 'linguistic inclusivity' is outshone by 'literacy achievement'. This is illustrated in the current commonwealth

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-14 (Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs, 2011) which recognises 'the rich cultural, linguistic and conceptual skills that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children bring to early childhood education' (p. 9) and identifies that school-age Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students may speak languages other than SAE and may be EAL/D learners (p. 19). However, the tangible educational outcomes are stated in terms of achieving literacy standards in NAPLAN, without making explicit that this is literacy in English, and with no concomitant requirement for students' home language(s) to be recorded, their EAL/D status to be investigated nor their EAL/D proficiency levels assessed and increased. This obfuscates the fact that multilingual Indigenous students will speak languages and varieties other than SAE and that their level of SAE proficiency will be a component in their English literacy achievement. Language(s) (apparently) do not figure in the outputs of this policy so schools are not encouraged to capture language data.

COMPETING NARRATIVES ABOUT STUDENT PERFORMANCE

Another contributing factor to the 'dodginess' of school language data, is the promulgation of alternate plausible and apparently more digestible narratives about Indigenous students' (under-) achievement which renders consideration of language(s) in their education irrelevant. During the BLG project, for instance, low socio-economic status (or 'low SES' in current educator parlance) was often cited as an explanation for patterns of academic (under-) achievement by Indigenous students, to such an extent that this view was reported by BLG staff as one of the major factors affecting project implementation.

In Queensland, this poverty narrative appears to have been (re-)introduced into the schooling context through commonwealth funding initiatives targeting this population of students (e.g., Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). Various measures of real social disadvantage have been developed to assist governments to target policies and funding: They reduce complex sets of socio-economic factors to a single and necessarily simplified measure that best fits known outcomes in respect of employment, housing, health and education. In education contexts, 'low SES' is at best a probabilistic notion which employs after-the-fact education participation and achievement data (usually for a defined geographic area) to predict future education outcomes for students thus defined (e.g., Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). In the authors' experience 'low SES' can be a particularly pernicious narrative in education if understood deterministically.

In terms of teaching Indigenous multilingual and EAL/D learners, the 'low SES' narrative was:

i.   'high profile' due to consistent visibility and funding thereby blocking out other less prevalent, less influential narratives, such as language approaches including assessing

and reporting on EAL/D proficiency and identifying and teaching language demands of the curriculum explicitly;

ii.   'appealing' in that it was simple, described some observable phenomena and, unlike language approaches (such as those above), did not require educators to learn a swathe of new knowledge and skills;

iii.   'comfortable' as it could shift the locus of control for (poor) student performance away from schools onto the intrinsic nature of students themselves and their parents, and family circumstances.

A simple, high-profile, appealing and comfortable narrative such as 'low SES' can out-compete other narratives, including those told by the BLG project, namely: teacher capacity is essential for providing optimal learning in linguistically complex classrooms (see project aims above).

At an individual level, we observed that non-SAE language features produced by Indigenous students, when detected by teachers, were not identified as potentially home language (in the case of contact languages) or interlanguage (i.e. learner language) features (see Dixon, 2013 for further discussion of this), but were instead seen as evidence of the deficient language of low socio-economic groups. An example is provided here by a Language Leader of an urban school in Brisbane who reflects on her language assumptions prior to participating in the BLG project:

> I had very little knowledge of Indigenous language variation and contact languages. I actually thought the students just didn't speak properly. I had often thought it was due to the fact that many children came from low socio-economic backgrounds and may not have had the same level of parental modelling and involvement as other children would have in middle class areas. (Callaghan & Ghusn, 2013, p. 1)

At a system level, the availability of an alternative generalising narrative like low SES about Indigenous students' (under-)achievements overrides a need for careful differentiation of learner characteristics and examination of demonstrated learning needs, so quality school language data is not a priority. Even language-oriented educational initiatives that focus, say, on vocabulary or academic language for low SES students perpetuate the notion that deficit, poor or impaired language exists in low SES cohorts: Since EAL/D learners are not visible within the generic low SES deficit discourse, such 'language initiatives' do not address their language learning needs so elements vital for EAL/D learners are omitted (e.g., Angelo, 2010; Angelo & McIntosh, 2010b; Angelo & Skitt, 2010).

DODGY DATA AS A SELF-PERPETUATING PROBLEM

In addition to explanations for dodgy school language data given thus far, faulty data creates its own cycle of cause and effect. Language data which is inaccurate or incomplete has little

explanatory power because it does not correlate well with performance or effect data. If (poor) language data does not seem to be particularly illuminating in the school context, then language data per se is not valued and it becomes less likely that schools would put resources towards ameliorating its quality: its paucity is confused with its nature.

In some instances, school language data categories themselves are so ill-conceived that even if the data in such categories were complete and accurate they would still not convey what they suggest. Lingard, Creagh, and Vass (2012, p. 320) describe the NAPLAN LBOTE category as 'a form of recognition that results in misrecognition'. The LBOTE category misleadingly appears to reveal something about students' language backgrounds, specifically a language learning need in SAE, which may impact upon NAPLAN scores. But the LBOTE category encompasses students ranging from monolingual or totally fluent in SAE through to students with beginner proficiency levels in SAE. So it is not surprising that 2012 NAPLAN scores in reading (Figure 2) and writing (Figure 3) for LBOTE students in Queensland look very similar to the non-LBOTE scores.
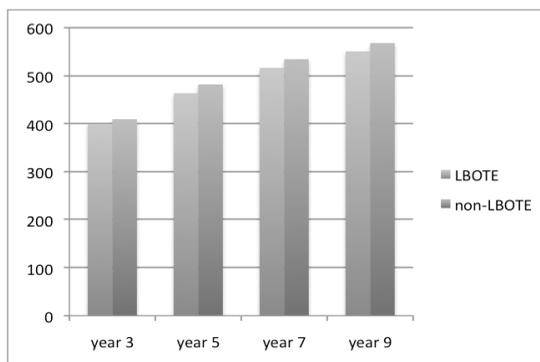

Figure 2. Mean scale score for NAPLAN reading for Queensland 2012, disaggregated for LBOTE and Non-LBOTE students' results in Years 3, 5, 7 & 9. Source: Angelo (2013a, p. 86) compiled from data in ACARA (2012, pp. 5, 69, 133, 197).
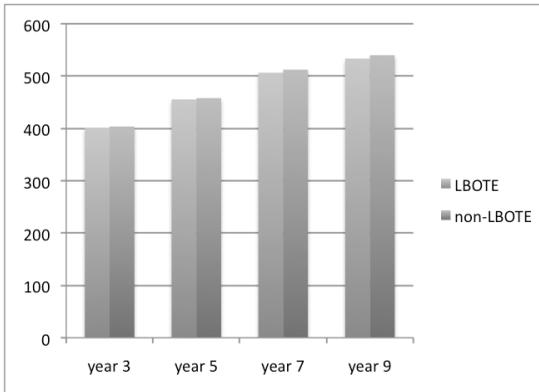
Figure 3. Mean scale score for NAPLAN writing for Queensland 2012, disaggregated for LBOTE and Non-LBOTE students' results in Years 3, 5, 7 & 9. Source: Angelo (2013a, p. 87) compiled from data in ACARA (2012, pp. 16, 80, 144, 208).

Such results might seem to prove that students' language backgrounds (LBOTE) have no learning effect, whereas Indigenous students' ethnicity or cultural heritage *apparently* does affect their achievement: 2012 NAPLAN scores for Indigenous students in Queensland shown for reading (Figure 4) and writing (Figure 5) are considerably lower than those for their non-Indigenous peers.
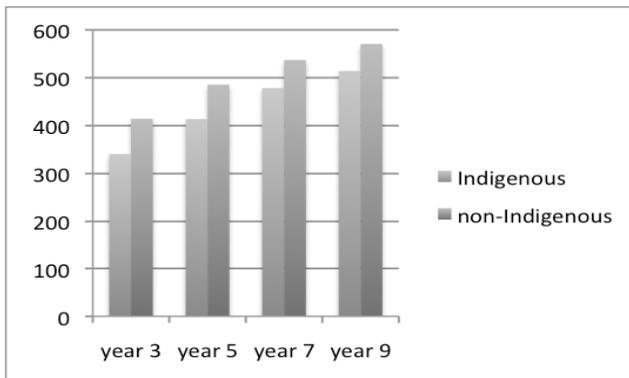

Figure 4. Mean scale score in NAPLAN reading for Queensland, disaggregated for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students' results in Years 3, 5, 7 & 9. Source: Angelo (2013a, p. 85) compiled from data in ACARA (2012, pp. 4, 68, 132, 196).
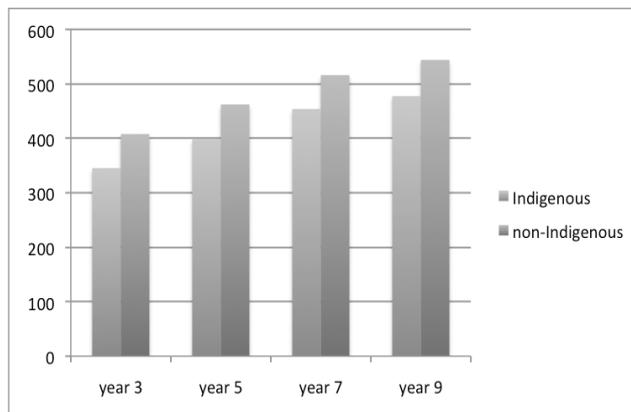
Figure 5. Mean scale score for NAPLAN writing for Queensland 2012, disaggregated for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students' results in Years 3, 5, 7 & 9. Source: Source: Angelo (2013a, p. 85) compiled from data in ACARA (2012, pp. 15, 79, 143, 207).

In reality, it is not students' languages that are irrelevant to their learning, but the data category, LBOTE. Loosely defined as it is, LBOTE catches a very disparate set of students, with different educational experiences and, crucially, the entire gamut of SAE proficiency levels. It should include many Indigenous students, but in schools participating in BLG, Indigenous LBOTE learners were found to be under-reported (due to confusions indicated above). Indeed, it would appear to have become accepted that LBOTE will not show any significant student data effect, because when an effect is apparent, it elicits comment. The 2012 NAPLAN report (ACARA, 2012) therefore explains explicitly that in the context of the Northern Territory (NT) the LBOTE category includes many Indigenous students for whom English is not the first language, thus associating the consistently dramatic underachievement of LBOTE students there with their Indigeneity, an ethnic or biological characteristic, rather than a language characteristic, such as a predominance of more beginner levels of L2 proficiency in SAE (due, perhaps, to the English as a Foreign language learning contexts of remote communities which make up a large proportion of the NT Indigenous student population).

Figure 6 below shows nationwide Year 3 NAPLAN writing results disaggregated by LBOTE status to illustrate the 'NT Indigenous effect' – this effect is noted across age groups and test domains in the NT, as the following quote explains:

> For the Northern Territory, English is not the first language for many Indigenous students and mean scores are lower in all five achievement domains than are mean scores for students with an English-language background. (ACARA, 2012, repeated on p. 71: Year 3; p. 127: Year 5; p. 191: Year 7; p. 255: Year 9)
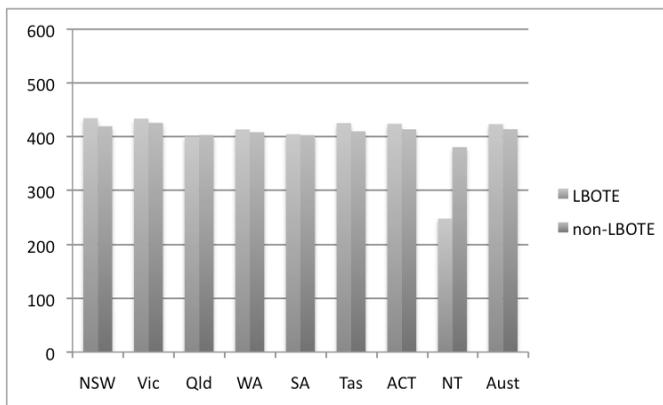
Figure 6. Mean Scale Score for NAPLAN Writing for Year 3 in States, Territories and Nationally in 2012, Disaggregated for LBOTE and non-LBOTE students. Source: Angelo (2013a, p. 90) compiled from data in ACARA (2012, p. 16)

It seems that LBOTE is a language data category which not only does not reveal any language background effect, but is actually also expected not to show any data effect because of the way it is defined – and this encourages systems and schools to draw the conclusion that 'language', in a broad sense, has no effect on learning.

This is the self-perpetuating nature of 'dodgy data' and 'ill-conceived categories': the reported outputs become nonsensical. So, demonstrably yet absurdly, it would appear that LBOTE status shows no significance in national standardised testing outcomes (in SAE), unless students are Indigenous and from the NT. This is patently nonsense.

In summary, school language data with its plethora of inaccuracies and ill-conceived categories obscures real language competencies and learning needs. Dodgy data of this ilk, whether MLOTE, EAL/D and/or LBOTE, self-perpetuates and reinforces the multiple sources of language blindness in schools and systems.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL INCLUSION

Both the type of language data and its inaccuracy render language and languages invisible in the schooling of Indigenous students. Our survey revealed that neither their multilingualism nor their status as EAL/D learners was generally visible. Meaningful correlations could not be drawn between their school achievement (in SAE) and their levels of proficiency in SAE, which in turn could not be linked to any effect data for interventions (in SAE, but not targeting EAL/D learners of SAE).

The implications for the social inclusion agenda are manifold. When the multilingual nature of a significant proportion of the student cohort is largely unrecognised in the day-to-day practices of educational institutions, the school is more easily conceived of as a monolingual

space. The 'inclusion' narrative is then one of 'deficit': of bringing Indigenous students into this monolingual norm and filling them up with what they are perceived to lack (Sellwood & Angelo, 2013). We see a focus solely on mainstream monolingual outcomes. These educational outcomes are in SAE but this fact is not acknowledged and its teaching implications are not addressed. The pathway of developing the multilingual capacities and practices of students is not contemplated, indicating that multicultural policies, guidelines or other approaches supportive of students' complex linguistic repertoires have not been successfully implemented.

The messages in Indigenous education documents are similarly problematic. At most, students' language backgrounds are acknowledged in motherhood statements before we get to the real measurable data on school attendance and (literacy and numeracy) performance in SAE. The rhetoric around the National Indigenous Reform Agenda (COAG, 2008), better known as 'Closing the Gap', likewise disallows linguistic diversity. In education, and elsewhere, the 'gap' is between what non-Indigenous students do and what Indigenous students do not do – very specifically this is operationalised as NAPLAN scores, which are only concerned with performance in SAE, albeit with the SAE language factor subsumed. The 'gap' is not framed in terms of what Indigenous students do, namely, continue to develop their multilingual capacities and add SAE into their language repertoires.

The danger of defining the 'gap' this way and then focusing on small gains in NAPLAN results is that it potentially disguises 'a situation where pronounced racial inequalities of attainment are effectively locked-in as a permanent feature of the system' (Gillborn, 2008, p. 68). In the present case the racial inequality that is in danger of being 'locked in', is whether language learning is recognised as such, is supported as such and is lauded as such.

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ENDNOTES

i   Bridging the Language Gap was funded by the former Australian Government Department for Education, Employment and Workplace Relations under Closing the Gap, Expansion of Intensive Literacy and Numeracy Programs. The authors were employed as professional mentor and manager on the project.

ii   During the BLG project timeline from 2011–2013, terminology was in a state of transition from 'English as a Second Language/Dialect' (ESL/D) hitherto used in Queensland State and Catholic schools over to EAL/D which had been selected as the national terminology by

ACARA. EAL/D is used throughout this paper for readers' convenience; however, school and system terminological usage still fluctuates even now.

iii   Language data is also potentially available to schools through the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI), a triennial survey of a cohort in their first year of school. Although Language Leaders were asked to track down this information, it is not included in this paper because only 2009 data was available, which represented just a single year level. Furthermore, accessing AEDI data proved problematic because, in almost all instances, no record had been retained of the password required to access individual school data.

iv   Whilst 'accuracy' is clearly somewhat subjective here, as it depends on the level of understanding of each trainee Language Leader, every Language Leader was assisted with evaluating their school language data by (minimally) their Professional Mentor as well as project staff delivering face-to-face professional development who all provided specialist understandings.

v   An exception is the Bachelor of Education at James Cook University where 'Teaching English as a Second Language to Indigenous Students' is a compulsory core course (Sellwood & Angelo, 2010).