

The mismatch between rhetoric and action – A study into the
Commonwealth's role in redressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander educational inequity

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Statement of originality

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university. To the best of the author's knowledge, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

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Statement of ethical conduct

As per the National Statement of Ethical Conduct in Human Research (NS. 5.1.8), this research is claimed to be exempt from ethical review because it has been deemed to be (a) of negligible risk (as defined in paragraph 2.1.7 of the Statement); and (b) involves the use of existing collections of data or records that contain only non-identifiable data about human beings. Australian National University Human Research Ethics Committee decision to waive the requirement for ethical review for protocol number: 2021/121.

Abstract

Educational issues are almost always represented as the failings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, families and communities, with insufficient attention given to the dominant ideologies that frame educational policy and practice.

This research endeavours to bring a fresh perspective to the understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity, in relation to the role of the Commonwealth in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. In doing so, it illuminates how discourses, narratives and ideologies are mutually reinforced across multiple layers of social organisation, permeating all levels of education from policy to practice. It also highlights the simplistic behavioural framing of educational problems and dominant narratives that attribute educational underachievement to deficits in the sociocultural background of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

This understanding of educational issues creates the perception that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's educational predicament is one of misfortune rather than the direct result of the previous and ongoing actions of the state. I argue that centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in education, acknowledging the power of language in shaping educational issues and embedding counternarratives that challenge dominant ideologies and assumptions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners would vastly improve the educational experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and thus contribute to enhanced conditions to support improvements in educational outcomes.

To bring about fundamental change in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, this research presents a roadmap for the Commonwealth to begin to make steps towards redressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity. I advance a framework for contesting and replacing dominant ideologies in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education through the articulation of a theory of change. I also develop a blueprint for future Commonwealth investment to reframe the current approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. There is a need for an overarching national vision, led by the Commonwealth, to mobilise support and drive systemic and structural reform in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, in order to progress this important agenda.

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The personal and academic experience of this project have profoundly shaped me, as I dedicate this thesis to the picinninys¹. While I am filled with optimism for the future, we must continue to be unrelenting in our advocacy for our peoples.

To the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, especially my own, you are the inheritors of the oldest continuing living cultures in the world. Wear your crowns with pride, for you hold the hopes, dreams and aspirations of all who come before you and will forge the path for those who come behind.

¹ Torres Strait Islander creole word for ‘children’

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Chapter 1 – Setting the scene

1.1 Acknowledgment of Country

Following the protocols of Country, I would like to acknowledge that this thesis was written on the unceded lands of the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people. I acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of Canberra and its surrounds, and I pay my respects to their Elders past and present. I thank them for generously sharing their culture and for their ongoing stewardship of this beautiful country on which I now live and work. I also acknowledge my ancestors from the Maluilgal nation and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, inheritors of the oldest continuous cultures in the world and traditional owners and custodians of Australia and its islands since time immemorial.

1.2 Introduction

Access to education is a basic human right that is protected by several international human rights instruments. As a settler colonial country, Australia faces serious human rights issues in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, starting with the failure of colonists to enact a treaty between the state and the First Peoples to policies that ratified the forcible removal of children up until the 1970s. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) is an international framework for advancing the rights of the world's Indigenous peoples. It also supports Indigenous people's rights to self-determination. The UNDRIP was endorsed in 2007 by an overwhelming majority of the world's states, with Australia one of only four countries that contested its adoption (UN General Assembly, 2007). It was only after the election of the Rudd-Labor government that Australia finally endorsed the UNDRIP, almost two years after voting against it. The rights to education enshrined in the UNDRIP under Article 14 state that:

1. "Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning".
2. "Indigenous individuals, particularly children, have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State without discrimination".
3. "States shall, in conjunction with Indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for Indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language" (UN General Assembly, 2007, pp. 13-14).

Under the UNDRIP and several other international conventions and declarations (for example, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)), states are obligated to provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with a high quality and culturally respectful education. Despite many policies, statements and frameworks acknowledging these rights, this remains an aspiration, with Australia yet to make any progress towards achieving these goals. Education has been, and is currently, deployed to systemically discriminate against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and disrupt our sovereignty (Vass, 2014a). The lack of access to a high quality and culturally respectful education, as well as assimilation being the central tenet of education in Australia, poses an existential threat to the survival of our ancient cultures (Jacob et al., 2015).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up 3.8% of the Australian population and comprise just under one million people (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2021). For this group of Australians, the education statistics paint an alarming picture. Under current education arrangements, “a student’s postcode, socioeconomic status and background can dictate the type of education they can access” (Teach for Australia, 2023, p. 1). Unfortunately, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will find themselves in lower socioeconomic postcodes and just because they are born an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person, in receipt of a substandard education (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2023).

The pursuit of educational equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has been highlighted in statements, frameworks and policies for many decades. However, beyond shallow words, this rhetoric has not translated into any sustained or substantial change in the educational situation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. One of the greatest challenges impacting the achievement of equity in education is the inability of education systems and structures to disentangle from the legacy of colonial education and to acknowledge its role in perpetuating and reinforcing cultural assimilation (Ma Rhea, 2015).

1.2.1 Background

Since colonisation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been subject to exceptional forms of governance, involving “dominance and coercion over their lives, in ways not experienced by the non-Indigenous population” (Page & Petray, 2016, p. 88). This extends to all realms of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ lives, including education. The history of educational policy and practice in Australia has been founded on colonial notions that deemed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ cultures and knowledge as inferior and not of any worth (Griffin & Trudgett, 2018).

As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples', our intellectual traditions have been transmitted for generations, it is what has enabled us to thrive on this continent for millennia.

Government policy and practice in Australia in relation to education is premised on educational inequality being 'normal' (Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA] & Curriculum Corporation, 2006) and a view that educational issues stem from environmentally deduced deficits. The following statement was made by Mellor and Corrigan (2004, pp. 1-2) regarding the then current state of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational disadvantage almost 20 years ago:

Unfortunately for Australia, the full benefits of education have yet to be realised for the Indigenous peoples. At the beginning of the 21st century, ameliorating Indigenous educational disadvantage was presented as 'an urgent national priority' by MCEETYA (2000a, p.1). Although the rate of Indigenous students' access to, participation in, and retention in education has shown improvements in some recent decades, equitable outcomes are not being achieved (Hunter & Schwab, 2003). Improvements in Indigenous education remain dwarfed by the magnitude of the discrepancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous educational achievements (Ridgeway, 2002). According to the Commonwealth of Australia: 'serious gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous outcomes remain in [English] literacy, numeracy, student attendance, retention into senior secondary education, Year 12 certificates and some completion rates in VET and higher education (2002, p.xviii).

As I write this thesis, there has been little to no change to this situation as described almost 20 years ago. This has been exacerbated by the lack of inclusion of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice at all levels of educational policy and practice. The inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in decision-making on issues that primarily affect us, is a fundamental right articulated in Article 18 of the UNDRIP. This Article states "Indigenous peoples have the right to participate in decision-making in matters which would affect their rights, through representatives chosen by themselves in accordance with their own procedures, as well as to maintain and develop their own Indigenous decision-making institutions" (UN General Assembly, 2007, pp. 15-16). Further, Article 19 articulates the responsibility of governments to consult and cooperate with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, stating that "states shall consult and cooperate in good faith with the Indigenous peoples concerned through their own representative institutions in order to obtain their free, prior and informed consent before adopting and implementing legislative or administrative measures that may affect them" (UN General Assembly, 2007, p. 16). The silencing and

disenfranchising of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in education will be discussed throughout this thesis.

National education policy agreements are the primary vehicle through which the Commonwealth government asserts its power and authority over education in Australia. These policies have focused on raising the quality and standards in education institutions, yet this has not translated to improvement in the quality and standards of education provided to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This poses serious consequences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in achieving not only our rights, but social and economic justice for individuals, for our families and for our collective community.

1.3 Research question and thesis aims

This study examines the role of the Commonwealth in redressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity. The language of 'redress' is deliberate in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity because it highlights the need to remedy or set right an unfair or undesirable situation. This study sets out to answer the following question: How do narratives and discourses shape the educational experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?

Through this study, I seek to add new insights and perspectives in the understanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity through the analysis of education policies. It is important to note that the intention is not to evaluate the effectiveness of policies as a solution to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational 'problems'. Rather, it is to interrogate the way in which policies frame and shape Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational 'problems' and imply that they simply exist in isolation from historical, social and political influences.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education is a highly contested and contradictory arena. Luke (2009, p. 2) highlights that "there is clear consensus that the current educational situation requires action" – it is the "evidence on how to proceed that remains unclear". This study attempted to fill this gap by articulating a way forward for the Commonwealth to begin to make inroads into redressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity.

1.4 Locating myself in this research

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander unspoken conventions dictate the importance of making a relational connection before getting into the business of what you came to do. Moreton-Robinson (2000, p. xv) articulates this in the following statement, “the protocol for introducing one’s self to other Indigenous people is to provide information about one’s cultural location, so that connection can be made on political, cultural and social grounds and relations established”.

1.4.1 *Indigenist thesis*

The social position of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers differs markedly from researchers of settler background. Nakata (1997) emphasises that how we know ourselves as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is “different from the way in which we are represented within and by Western knowledge systems” (Moreton-Robinson, 2013, p. 339). Moreton-Robinson (2004b, p. 85) explains this dynamic, noting that “it is white scholars who have long been positioned as the leading investigators of the lives, values and abilities of Indigenous people”. She goes on to state that “the knowledge we have developed are often dismissed as being implausible, subjective and lacking in epistemological integrity, despite the fact that colonial experiences have meant Indigenous people have been among the nation’s most conscientious students of whiteness and racialisation” (Moreton-Robinson, 2004b, p. 85).

Rigney (1997, p. 118) explains that “Indigenist research is research which gives voice to Indigenous people”, with education for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars seen as a form of agency and self-determination. Nakata (1997, p. 9) highlights the tension for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers within the academy, noting that “in operating in institutions from an already disadvantaged position then, educating ourselves runs the risk of blindly taking on knowledges and practices that have served to keep us in a disadvantaged position”. In the same vein, Rigney (1997) also argues that the minds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers are not free of colonial hegemony. However, Nakata (1997, pp. 8-9) goes on to acknowledge that scholarship is important for our self-determination noting that the “understanding of non-Islander’s institutional knowledges and practices, have been recognised as the path to effectively negotiating our position with non-Islanders about the terms and conditions of our participation in a changing order brought on by non-Islander intervention in our lifeworlds”.

Throughout my public service career, I sat through countless high-level policy conversations regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. In many instances I was the most junior person in the room and the only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person in the room. These

conversations followed the same pattern and would inevitably conclude with sentiments to the effect that ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people don’t value education’. The issues were considered to have ‘come about’ because of deficits on the part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities, hence the proposed solutions would always aim to address these deficits. Each subsequent experience ignited a spark within me that led to a resolve to equip myself to challenge these deficit perceptions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

As many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people know, if you are born Indigenous in Australia, you understand from life experience the need to continuously ponder, reflect and critique our position within Australian society. You also understand the struggle. To be educated in a system that has for so long tried to eradicate us is a profound act of resistance and empowerment.

Several Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars have highlighted the importance of challenging the episteme. Nakata (1998, p. 4) emphasises that “in order to understand our own position better, and to ultimately act to improve it, we must first immerse ourselves in and understand the very systems of thought, ideas and knowledges that have been instrumental in producing our position”. Herbert (2012, p. 93) also argues that “Indigenous peoples must take up the challenge of acquiring the education they need to take on the system, make their voices heard and force the change that is needed”. In line with my dedication to counter dominant representations of the ‘Indigenous other’ (Moreton-Robinson, 2004b), this thesis is framed by a decolonising voice and theory.

1.4.2 My story

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ interactions start from the premise that before anything else, it is more important to know who you are. In that vein, my story is outlined below.

I am from the Maluilgal nation, the near western islands of Zenadth Kes (the Torres Strait Islands). This grouping of islands are remnants of the now submerged land bridge that was once an extension of the Great Dividing Range. I have ancestral ties to Mua (Moa) Island where my family genealogy was first recorded with Athe² Goba. Traditionally, Islanders were a warrior race and Athe Goba was said to be the last standing warrior on Mua Island after an inter-island conflict. He had a son Goba (junior) whose second wife was Dub and one of their children was my great-grandmother, Aka Merian.

Aka Merian was adopted through traditional island adoption practices and raised by Maivanga Joe Savage and Annie Zarzar on Badu Island. It was on Badu that Aka Merian met and married Walter

² Grandfather

Mye Mairu who was also known as Athe Dobi. Athe Dobi was the son of Athe Jimmy Mairu, one of two brothers who had travelled to Badu from Vanuatu. Athe Dobi and Aka Merian had a large family, consisting of 11 children, one of which was my grandmother, Aka Bethel.

Athe Dobi inherited a parcel of land on Badu Island where he built the Mairu family home. This place came to be known as Dobi Town, named because it was the first substantial structure on the Island. Athe Dobi was a carpenter by trade and built a water-well that marked the rear boundary of Dobi Town. He also built many other structures throughout the islands, including the store house on the wharf of Kubin village on Mua Island and a water-well on Masig (Yorke Island). These structures bear his signature which is etched into the concrete, with the water-well on Masig still in use today. Athe Dobi's carpentry was enabled by his son, Athe Egito, who was the skipper of a successful pearl lugger named Jennifer Jill. It was on this lugger boat that they transported building supplies to the islands for his projects. Athe Egito was set to inherit the family land but passed this on to my grandmother, Aka Bethel, as she had never married and was responsible for raising seven children, one of which was my mother, Annie.

Aka Bethel was a staunch woman. She was educated by the Christian missionaries so was fluent in English and could read and write very well. This was well known and when teachers and principals visited Badu, they came to Dobi Town. She would often house them, and along with her good friend Athe Yopelli Paniel (who is considered to be the last great orator), teach them about Island culture and translate for them. She did the same for the many anthropologists who visited the Islands to study Island life and culture. Aka Bethel lived her whole life on Badu and was subject to protection policies and restricted movements. As a single woman, she also had a 'guardian' appointed to watch over her. By extension, much of my mother Annie's early life involved restriction of her personal autonomy. She was sent to the mainland to attend boarding school from a very young age, then to business college and then later to teacher's college in Brisbane. It was there that she met my father, Jan, and they started their family. Acknowledging the importance of their children knowing their culture, they decided to raise us on Country. This is my Mairu Ontology, the story of my connection to Badu Island.

As a young child on Badu, my siblings and I had a childhood grounded in in culture, language, customs and traditions. We would run around the Island barefoot, exploring, fishing, swimming, eating mangos and raiding people's veggie patches. Our favourite swimming spot was ulumine, our Mairu family rock formation on the main beach. Most afternoons we would visit my Aka Bethel, who would be sitting on the verandah having a cup of tea and yarning with Athe Yopelli. My Aka had a vibrant sense of humour and I have many fond memories of her. It was with her that we learnt

stories of creation through song and dance, that you can navigate using the stars, that they tell us optimal times for planting and harvesting, when the winds are changing and when it is dugong and turtle mating season.

Island society is organised in totemic clans, with our Mairu totem the thupmul (stingray), so we have a strong connection to the saltwater, and it as a means for healing, and giving and sustaining life. Through our family clan we know our rights and obligations and our kinship relationships. We also have a social culture with strong family values and extended family structures. I come to this research with a grounding in Torres Strait culture and knowing my connection to the land and sea. How we come to know about the world is passed through our oral history, wakai waiyan, which is the guidance we provide and receive along life's journey. It is also shaped by ailan pasin which is the moral framework for our behaviour and reciprocity.

Because of a lack of access to secondary education on Badu, and with boarding school the only option, my family relocated to the mainland, to Townsville in Queensland. I completed secondary schooling and went on to study an undergraduate teaching degree. I enjoyed teaching and inspiring students to learn but found the staff room conversations about students and their families challenging. By chance, I came across an opportunity to work in the Australian Public Service and relocated to Canberra. Over the last decade and a half, I predominantly worked on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy and programs.

In terms of my positionality:

- I have lived experience – I am an Indigenous person, and I grew up in a remote Indigenous community;
- I am an end user – I experienced education as an Indigenous person, both schooling and higher education and currently have children in early childhood and school, so am experiencing the education system as a parent;
- I am a practitioner – I experienced pre-service teacher education and was a primary school teacher; and
- I am a policy maker – As a Commonwealth public servant I have had extensive experience working on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy and programs.

In this way, I am the research, and the research is me. My thoughts and ideas have been influenced by my yarns over many years, with family, friends, colleagues, academics and stakeholders. This thesis is a culmination of my experiences and relationships, all of which have shaped and contributed to my thinking about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational issues.

1.5 Central thesis and chapter structure

Throughout this thesis I develop the argument that the way in which Australian governments have approached Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education is fundamentally flawed. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational issues are almost always represented as the failings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, families and communities, with insufficient attention given to the dominant ideologies that underpin educational policy and practice. I argue that embedding counternarratives about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the appropriate inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in educational decision-making would vastly improve the educational experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and thus contribute to enhanced conditions to support improvements in educational outcomes.

Chapter 1: Setting the scene

In this chapter I provide a context that reflects on 20 years of working in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. As an Indigenous scholar, I locate myself within this research and introduce my Mairu Ontology, the story of my connection to Country. I acknowledge my background, experiences, family, friends, other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars, academics and colleagues who have influenced my thoughts and ideas and thus shaped the way in which I have come to see the world.

Chapter 2: Theoretical framework and methodological approach

As part of this study, I draw on three complementary approaches, discourse theory, critical theory and Indigenous standpoint theory to gain new insights and perspectives in the understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity. The theoretical framework and methodological approach aim to privilege Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ontologies, axiologies, and epistemologies, by providing an emancipatory approach to challenge current ideology and norms, while also allowing exploration of what could and should be through a decolonising lens.

Chapter 3: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education context

In this chapter I pursue a line of inquiry to determine the educational service provision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The primary purpose of this chapter is to outline the role of the Commonwealth in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, as opposed to that of the states and territories which have constitutional responsibility for education delivery. This primary focus on the Commonwealth is due to it being a significant funder of education and holding responsibility for the development of national education policy which can drive systemic reform in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. I also provide context about the history of Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander peoples engagement with education, past and current education policies, and major national education initiatives. This chapter concludes with data on the participation and achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in education. This is based on the metrics that Australian governments have agreed is the benchmark to measure their success in endeavours to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational outcomes.

Chapter 4: Literature review

In this chapter, I undertake a synthesis of the literature observed through a critical whiteness perspective and underpinned by Indigenous critical and standpoint theories to gather information on the current understandings and discourses in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' participation and achievement in education. Two perspectives emerge from the literature: the first focuses on the urgency of improving educational outcomes, closing gaps, addressing shortfalls and remedying underperformance; and the second focuses on challenging deficit discourse, valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, ways of learning and understanding through the lens of decolonising educational institutions and systems. Despite growing decolonising scholarship by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous scholars, such as Moodie (2017), Burgess, Fricker, et al. (2023), Lowe and Weuffen (2023) and Vass (2015), this hasn't even begun to address, in any sustained way, many of the issues in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational policy and practice landscape. The one commonality across all the education literature is consensus that more needs to be done to improve the current educational situation.

Chapter 5: Dominant ideologies in education policy

This chapter investigates the way in which narratives and discourses shape the educational experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. I undertake an interdiscursive analysis of representations in education policy together with linguistic analysis of text and broad narrative analysis of problem representations using key Australian education policy texts. I find that the dominant discourses and narratives informing the development of education policy that are based in difference are counter-productive for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. I also highlight an overarching hegemonic narrative that has become synonymous with the story of Indigenous education, how the success of education policy is hampered by multiple competing and indiscriminate discourses and how a paternalistic meta discourse disempowers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from exercising agency in relation to their own education.

Chapter 6: Contesting and replacing dominant ideologies in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education

In this chapter I identify the dominant ideologies and problematic representations in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education research, policy and practice. I also provide a framework for contesting and replacing these deficit dominant ideologies through the articulation of a theory of change which covers eight areas for action. I then propose a blueprint for future Commonwealth investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education with six specific measures that should be considered as part of a whole of system approach to addressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

In this chapter I present a summary of the key contributions of the research, examine the broader implications of this research, identify the limitations of this study and provide some reflections for a way forward. In investigating the Commonwealth's role in redressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity, I uncover how dominant narratives, discourses and ideologies in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education are illuminated and mutually reinforced across multiple layers of social organisation, permeating all levels of education from policy to practice. I also identify the neoliberal assumptions that produce a simplistic behavioural framing of educational problems and an overarching hegemonic narrative that the academic underachievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is due to deficits in our sociocultural background. In concluding this study, I present a framework contesting and replacing these deficit dominant ideologies in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education through the articulation of a theory of change. I also present a blueprint for future Commonwealth investment, which outlines a practical reform agenda to bring about fundamental change in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational policy and practice.

1.6 Conclusion

In setting out to gain new insights and perspectives in the understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity, this chapter has mapped out the theoretical and analytical terrain that will be covered in this thesis. I have highlighted the diverse lines of inquiry which attempt to articulate the complex and contested landscape that encapsulates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education landscape, which is further complicated by investigating the unique role of the Commonwealth in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. I start by providing an overview of the theoretical framework and methodological approach that have underpinned and guided this study.

Chapter 2 – Theoretical framework and methodological approach

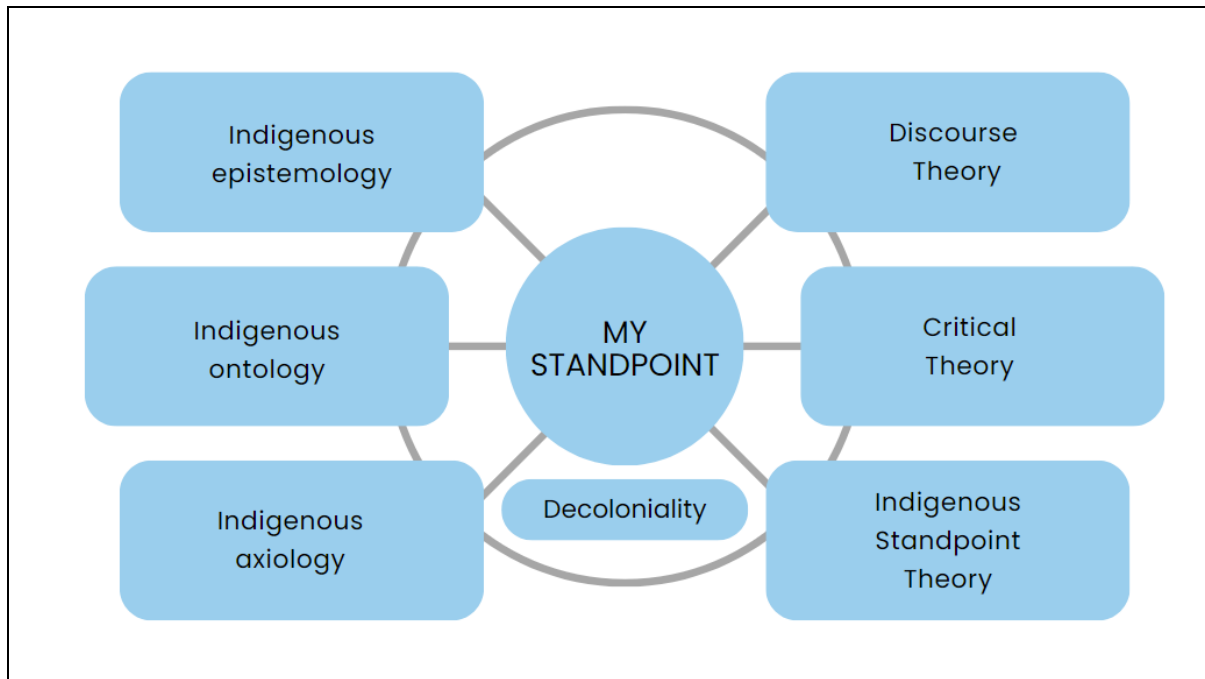
2.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework and methodological approach that have underpinned and guided this research. A multiple methods approach was incorporated into this study to examine how narratives and discourses shape the educational experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It is informed by Foucauldian discourse analysis in the examination of discourses, power, knowledge, normalisation, and truths, and is underpinned by critical and Indigenous standpoint theories in order to highlight the complexities inherent in investigating issues of culture, race and difference. This chapter follows on from the previous chapter, which introduced the research topic, the aims of this study and provided background about my positionality in relation to this study.

The theoretical framework underpinning this study integrates discourse theory, critical theory and Indigenous standpoint theory to gain new insights and perspectives in the understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity. Discourse theory provides a framework for the analysis of meanings and constructs in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, in particular, how power and knowledge are privileged and experienced, and exercised in policy making processes. Critical theory offers a corrective tool for exposing unjust norms and provides a framework for challenging these, while Indigenous standpoint in terms of my insights, experiences and positionality is used as a theoretical framework for decolonising education policy, research and practice.

The methods adopted for this discourse analysis include: critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995; Hogarth, 2018) as a framework for examining discourses within educational policy; and the ‘what’s the problem represented to be?’ (WPR) approach (Bacchi, 2012) which is utilised to uncover the narratives associated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. These methods allow for the uncovering of hidden neo-colonial/normalised ideology in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education literature and policy, most importantly in relation to hegemony and its link to discursive power structures. The theoretical framework and methodological approach underpinning this study aim to privilege Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ontologies, axiologies, and epistemologies (see Figure 1 - Theoretical framework for gaining new insights and perspectives in the understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity).

Figure 1 – Theoretical framework for gaining new insights and perspectives in the understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity



2.2 Theoretical framework

The following sections provide an overview of the theoretical framework underpinning this research including discourse theory, critical theory and Indigenous standpoint theory. These theories are drawn upon across all aspects of this study, with each holistically providing a framework for examining discourses and narratives in educational literature, policy and practice. They also provide an emancipatory approach to challenge current ideology and norms, while also allowing exploration of what could and should be through a decolonising lens.

2.2.1 Discourse theory

Foucauldian discourse theory is primarily concerned with power relationships in society and how these are expressed through language and practices (Salma, 2018, p. 462). It focuses on how a social system produces knowledge and meaning (Khan & MacEachen, 2021). The understanding is that the basis for this knowledge and meaning is historical and that it has been iterated over time (Khan & MacEachen, 2021).

Discourse can be understood as a set of statements that are systematically organised (Foucault, 1972). How particular discourses are organised contribute to the construction of a version of the social world, or 'truth' (Foucault, 1972). As noted by Foucault (1980, p. 131),

“each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of the truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true”.

Discourse analysis examines the processes in which the social world is constructed and maintained (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). Therefore, a key outcome sought in undertaking discourse analysis is to better understand and interpret socially produced meanings. When thinking about education institutions in this context, Foucault (1972, p. 46) highlights that “every education system is a political means of maintaining or modifying the appropriateness of discourses with the knowledge and power they bring with them”. O'Halloran (2003) extends this idea by suggesting that discourse refers to how knowledge is organised within a given institution, with statements expressing both the meanings and values of these institutions.

A critical aspect of discourse theory in relation to this study is the notion that meanings and truths can never be permanently fixed because social phenomena are mediated through discourse (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; O'Halloran, 2003). Because society is evolving and changing, so too are people's perceptions of society and identity. This also extends to the meanings that people and institutions ascribe to things. Competition among discourses can lead to meanings being recast into new representations. This is important when considered in the context of discourse analysis, as the end goal is to analyse how discourses construct a particular reality, noting that these meanings and constructs can always be redefined and changed. In relation to this study, discourse theory provides a framework for understanding the ways in which power and knowledge are privileged and experienced, which “raises questions about how power is exercised in the policy making process” (Thomas, 2005, p. 27).

2.2.2 Critical [Indigenous] theory

Critical theory originated as a social theory and philosophy with the fundamental goal “to understand and to help overcome the social structures through which people are dominated and oppressed” (Britannica, 2022, p. 1). Critical research studies aim to investigate the taken-for-granted characteristics of our social world (Schwandt, 2001), to “dig beneath the surface of social life and uncover the assumptions that keep human beings from a full and true understanding of how the world works” (Crossman, 2020, p. 1). This emancipatory approach aims to “call current ideology into question, and initiate action, in the cause of social justice” (Crotty, 1998, p. 157). The underlying notion being that knowledge is power. Critical theory is not only intended as a framework for this

analysis but aims to explore what could and should be. Horkheimer's (1993) work in this space identified three key standards that critical theory must meet: it must be explanatory, practical and normative, in that it "must explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify the actors to change it, and provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation" (Bohman, 2005, p. 1).

Brookfield's (2005) work in relation to critical theory for adult teaching and learning focusses on utilising critical theory as a mechanism for examining our world, investigating ways in which it can be improved to create a more democratic society. His work centres on challenging ideology, contesting hegemony and unmasking power (Brookfield, 2005). There are some core assumptions of critical theory that emerge from his work that align directly with Indigenous standpoints. These include: "that modern democracies are inequitable societies; that dominant ideologies maintain inequity; and that this situation must be revealed, challenged and changed" (Brookfield, 2005, p. 370). Critical Indigenous theory pursues an understanding of the "structures and relations of power in settler colonialism, nested sovereignty and culturally specific Indigenous philosophical traditions" (Williams College, 2023, p. 1) with critical analysis offering a corrective tool for exposing unjust norms and a framework to challenge these.

2.2.3 Indigenous standpoint theory

Research practices and approaches are moulded by social position. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers, our social, political, cultural, racial and economic position differs markedly from researchers of settler background. The work of Rigney (1999) on the 'Indigenist Research Perspective' emphasises that the Indigenous epistemological approach to knowledge is "that there is more than just one worldview and interpretation" (Foley, 2003, p. 45). Moreton-Robinson (2013, p. 340) supports this notion, arguing that "our cultural and social positioning informs how, when, where and why we conduct research [and that for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples] our lives are always shaped by the omnipresence of patriarchal white sovereignty and its continual denial of our sovereignty". Indigenous standpoint theory is informed by history, politics, knowledges, family and collective consciousness (Cox et al., 2021), with Nakata's (2007a) scholarship on this topic extending the concept of Indigenous standpoint theory beyond just being a perspective, arguing that standpoints can produce evidence and compete against each other.

Moreton-Robinson's (2013) Indigenous women's standpoint is a recast of feminist standpoint theory that builds on the work of Nakata (2007b). She notes that "the constitutive elements of Indigenous social research paradigms are axiology, ontology and epistemology" (Moreton-Robinson, 2013, p. 337). Moreton-Robinson (2013, p. 340) elaborates on this point, noting that "an Indigenous

women's standpoint is ascribed through inheritance and achieved through struggle, constituted by our sovereignty and constitutive of the interconnectedness of our ontology (our way of being); our epistemology (our way of knowing); and our axiology (our way of doing)".

Indigenous standpoint theories are drawn upon in this study as a framework for decolonising educational research, policy and practice, with Cox et al. (2021) noting that "engaging in decolonizing research forces researchers to consider the ways that colonial oppression plays a role in marginalizing and exerting epistemic superiority over Indigenous Knowledges" (p. 462). They contend that Indigenous standpoint theory "rejects ethnocentric research methodologies and epistemologically situates the Indigenous perspective as central to research with Indigenous communities" (Cox et al., 2021, p. 462). A view supported by Khalifa et al. (2019) who highlights the importance of Indigenous scholarship by suggesting "that it is not possible for non-Indigenous researchers to ever fully understand the needs of Indigenous peoples, nations, and communities" (p. 580). They go on to note that "Indigenous epistemologies possess the power to generate new knowledges, experiences, and outcomes, all of which inspire new sets of research questions, along with approaches to educational leadership" (Khalifa et al., 2019, p. 580). A critical aspect of Indigenous standpoint theory is that it repositions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the research process, from being the researched who only participate as informants, to being the knowers, uniquely placed because we exist within the same social, political, cultural and historical contexts (Iddy, 2021). The incorporation of cultural values, such as reciprocity, care and accountability are important aspects of utilising Indigenous standpoint theories as a basis for this study, as it enables me to give back to my community.

To recap, this theoretical framework includes three complementary approaches that are integrated to form the basis of this study. Discourse theory and critical theory provide a framework for the analysis of meanings and constructs in the discourses and narratives related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy, research, and practice. Importantly, they offer a corrective tool for exposing unjust norms, challenging these, and providing an avenue for how these can be redefined and changed. Further, Indigenous standpoint theory enables the decolonisation of education policy, research and practice, a critical aspect of this study. The next section builds on this theoretical framework by providing detail on the methodological approach and research design.

2.3 Methodological approach

The following sections provide an overview of the methodology and research design underpinning this study. This includes frameworks for undertaking discourse analysis and the examination of how 'problems' are represented in education policy. The research design articulates a multiple methods

approach to gain new insights and perspectives in the understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity.

2.3.1 Methodology

Social order in our contemporary world is arranged based on power relations and dominant ideologies. When considering knowledge and how it is created and maintained, there are “ways of thinking about aspects of reality that have come to be viewed as being natural or normal and therefore tend to be taken for granted” (Cheek, 2008, p. 356). In relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, whiteness has been socially constructed as the norm. Whiteness is made invisible and is deracialised in education policy, research and practice because it is encompassed within the definitions of what is ‘normal’. Foucault (1980) notes that normalisation is an instrument of power, and it plays a central role in classification and hierarchisation. This view of whiteness as the obligatory standard encompasses how society is framed in racialised and classed ways. The way that those of the dominant culture see, analyse, and classify society and its people is rooted in an understanding and interpretation that is defined by those who belong to this group.

An examination of dominant relations and ideologies provides the opportunity to not only challenge, but to also change ways of thinking about particular aspects of our social world. Critical theory is a useful tool in this context as it considers knowledge from a social evolutionary perspective. This has implications for progressive social change as this perspective assumes that knowledge and ways of thinking can be challenged and then reconstructed. Understanding how individual groups are marginalised within typical social constructs enables an examination of the social legitimacy of these dominant relations. Two analytical tools, CDA and WPR are utilised in this study to examine the narratives and discourses in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

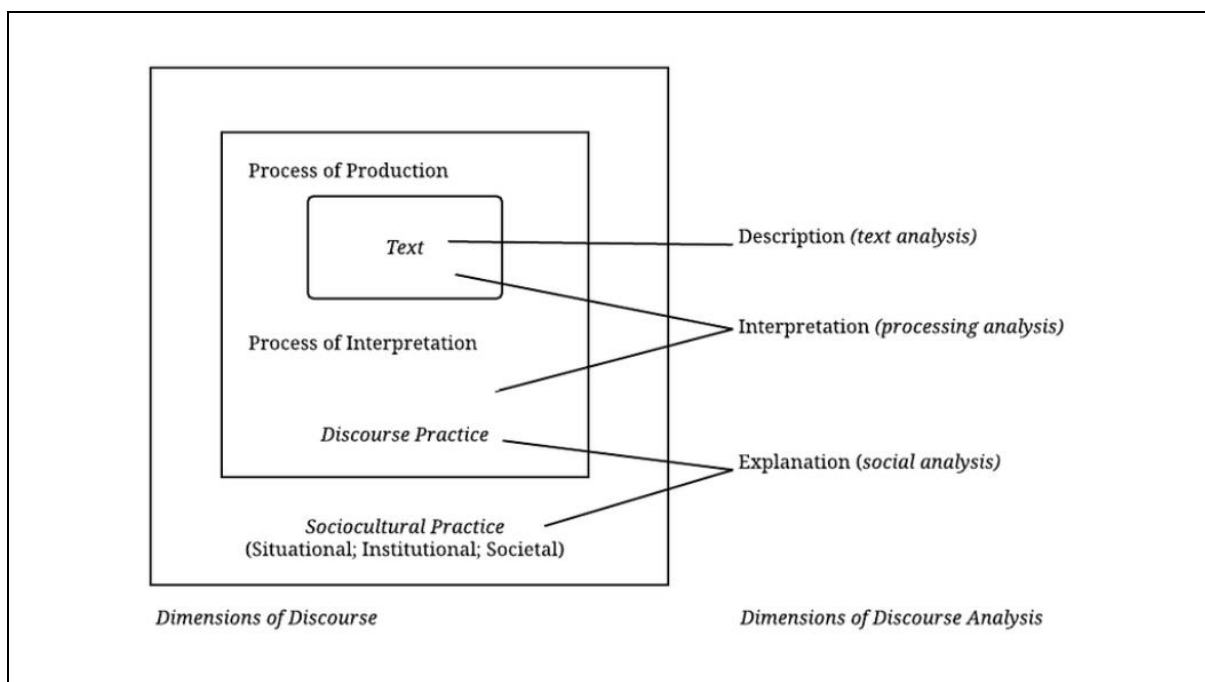
2.3.2 Critical discourse analysis

Discourses can be thought of as “ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic of practice” (Hall, 1997, p. 6). They can also be “a cluster (or formation) of ideas, images and practices, which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society” (Hall, 1997, p. 6). In its most simple terms, it is the language associated with a particular field or practice. Undertaking discourse analysis provides an avenue to examine theories of power and ideology. Mumby (1987) outlines a range of factors to be investigated when undertaking ideological analysis, including, among other things: “the presentation of socially constructed things as natural (and only) facts”; and “the interests of a particular group being presented as everybody else’s interests (universal)”. It is however important

to note that “a critique does not consist in saying that things aren’t good the way they are, [rather] it consists in seeing on what types of assumptions, of familiar notions, of established, unexamined ways of thinking the accepted practices are based” (Foucault, 1994 [1981], p. 456). CDA differs from other discourse studies in this way as it asks questions differently, allowing the scholar to act as an advocate for marginalised social groups (Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

There are a range of ways in which to conduct discourse analysis, with two main approaches: those which focus on the linguistic features of texts; and those which are concerned with the historical and social context of texts (Fairclough, 2013). Fairclough (1989) developed an analytical framework for examining language and its ability to maintain deficit views and power. His framework articulates three inter-related dimensions of discourse tied to three processes of analysis, see Figure 2 (Fairclough, 1995, p. 98). The three dimensions of discourse include: (1) the object of analysis (text); (2) the means by which the object is produced and received (discourse practice); and (3) the socio-historic conditions which govern these processes (sociocultural practice) (Fairclough, 1995). The three processes of analysis include: (1) text analysis (description); (2) processing analysis (interpretation); and (3) social analysis (explanation) (Fairclough, 1995). This model for CDA “explores the connections between the use of language and the social historical and political contexts in which it occurs, how language is used in social interactions and how language influences social relations and practices” (Waller, 2006, p. 10).

Figure 2 – Three dimensional CDA Framework



Source: Fairclough (1995, p. 98)

As articulated by Fairclough (1995, p. 96), CDA is an approach that is suitable for research into social and cultural change, because “it foregrounds links between social practice and language, and the systematic investigation of connections between the nature of social process and properties of language texts”. While there is no comprehensive guide for conducting CDA, the following analytical framework for exploring the relationships between text and its social context is provided by Fairclough (1995, p. 97):

discourse, and any specific instance of discursive practice, is seen as simultaneously (i) a language text, spoken or written, (ii) discourse practice (text production and text interpretation), (iii) sociocultural practice at a number of levels; in the immediate situation, in the wider institution or organisation, and at a societal level.

He goes on to note that “the method of discourse analysis includes linguistic description of the language text, interpretation of the relationship between the discursive processes and the text, and explanation of the relationship between the discursive processes and the social processes” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 97). The first step involves the analysis of vocabulary, semantics, cohesion and grammar; the second uncovers the authors encoded ideas and ideologies, which is decoded according to the audiences’s beliefs, knowledge and previous experience; and the third examines the ways in which discourses operate in various domains of society in relation to power and dominance. Utilising this approach for text analysis provides multiple points of analytical entry, and the ability to consider all dimensions simultaneously, allowing for the identification of patterns and disjunctions (Fairclough, 1995).

Fairclough (1989, p. 26) also elaborates on the “three components of discourse as a text, interaction and context: *description* is concerned mainly with the formal properties of the text; *interpretation* is concerned with the relationship between the interactions with the text (with the latter seen as the end product of the process of text production and as a resource in the process of text interpretation); and *explanation* deals with the relationship between social context and interaction (with the social determination of the processes of production and interpretation), and their social effects”. Fairclough (1995, p. 97) notes that CDA “facilitates the integration of ‘micro’ analysis (description and interpretation) and ‘macro’ analysis (explanation)”. He takes this framework one step further, by linking CDA to three different types of critiques that are tied to critical theory – ideological, rhetorical and strategic. Fairclough (2001, p. 463) defines these as:

- “ideological – critique of how a system of social relations is sustained through representations of a social order which are in contradiction with its realities;

- rhetorical – critique of the subordination of considerations of truth and sound argumentation to the will to persuade; and
- strategic – critique of how discourse figures in the development, promotion and dissemination of the strategies for social change of particular groups of social agents, and in hegemonic struggle between strategies, and in the implementation of successful strategies”.

Building on the work of Fairclough, Hogarth (2018) integrates Indigenous theoretical frameworks with CDA to develop Indigenous Critical Discourse Analysis (ICDA). Hogarth (2018, pp. 176-177) notes that ICDA is distinguished from traditional CDA “used by allies of the marginalised” as it “privilege[s] the voices of marginalised as they are in a position to articulate the lived experience”. Hogarth (2022, p. 8) identifies that “ICDA critiques the inequity of power distribution between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous peoples [and] aims to nurture greater awareness of the social construction of minorities and the maintaining of social constructions that maintain ‘othering’”. She articulates three overarching principles of ICDA:

- (1) Analysis of discourses – challenging dominant discourses, institutional and societal constructs by providing an alternative lens and privileging Indigenous voice;
- (2) Standpoint of researcher – Identification of how the lived and professional experiences as well as theoretical constructs and members’ resources influence our standpoint; and
- (3) Position of researcher – Recognition of how our position shapes and is shaped by institutional and societal constructs (Hogarth, 2018, pp. 183-184).

The three principles of ICDA are critical to this study, along with a number of key principles of CDA (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, pp. 271-279):

- “The relation among discourse, social structures and culture is dialectical”.
- “Discourse is a social practice and the creator of social practices”.
- “Power relations are produced, applied and re-produced by discourse”.
- “The relation between the representations of the world and people and identities are established discursively”.
- “Linguistic characteristics are not coincidental but are intentional choices, they contain deletion and inclusion mechanisms which defend the author’s own interests and purposes”.
- “It establishes links between macro and micro”.
- “It is interpretative and explanatory, a dynamic process in which different studies lead to different interpretations”.

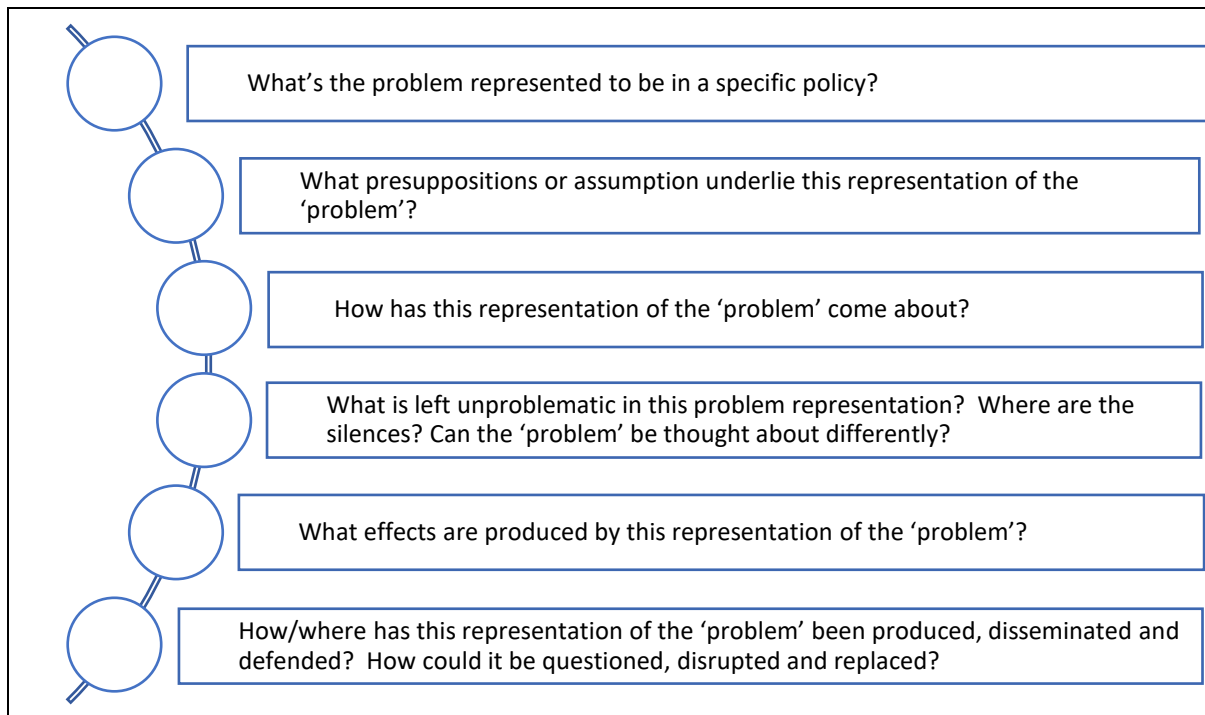
These principles inform the approach to conducting CDA for this study; however, it is important to note that there are some limitations. Criticism of the use of CDA for research most centres on issues of context and interpretation. Widdowson (1998) argues firstly, that CDA blurs the distinction between concepts, disciplines and methodologies and secondly, that “despite claiming the opposite, CDA interprets discourse under the guise of critical analysis and does not analyse how a text can be read in different ways, or under what social circumstances it is produced and consumed” (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 455). The issues of interpretation raise questions about representation, as to whether it is possible for analysts to speak for the average consumer of texts (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). CDA can be subjective, therefore, one’s own biases and assumptions need to be considered when conducting discourse analysis. Although, it should be noted that to some degree, assumptions can constrain and direct the findings of all social science research. Another criticism is that critical discourse analysts appear to carefully choose the texts they analyse, resulting in only finding what one sets out to find (Hoey, 2001; Widdowson, 2004).

Acknowledging these criticisms, CDA is the most effective method for studying the use of language in specific domains. It is critical for this study regarding the examination of power dynamics and social inequality. This approach to the study allows for the uncovering of underlying discourses, narratives and ideologies. It also enables the examination of power structures that both shape, and are shaped by, language use with the desired outcome to produce meaningful social change. Fairclough (2013, p. 185) notes that the very point of a critique is to ask “what the problems really are”.

2.3.3 What’s the problem represented to be?

Language conflicts in public policy have increasingly been the focus of research, “because the words that label a problem also constrain the solution” (Thomas, 2005, p. 25). Bacchi’s (2012, p. 21) ‘What’s the Problem Represented to be?’ (WPR) approach is a useful tool for critically analysing public policy: it “starts from the premise that what one proposes to do about something reveals what one thinks is problematic (needs to change)”. She provides the example, “if forms of training are recommended to improve women’s status and promotion opportunities, the Implication is that their lack of training is the ‘problem’, that is ‘holding them back’” (Bacchi, 2012, p. 21). Bacchi (2000, p. 50) highlights the “non-innocence of how ‘problems’ are framed within policy proposals” and “how this affects possibilities for action”. The “aim is to understand policy better than policy makers by probing the unexamined assumptions and deep-seated conceptual logics within implicit problem representations” (Bacchi, 2012, p. 22). The WPR approach to policy analysis, see Figure 3 (Bacchi, 2009, p. 2), outlines six guiding questions.

Figure 3 – WPR guiding questions



Source: Adapted from Bacchi (2009, p. 2)

Bacchi (2012, p. 22) defines the questions as follows:

Question 1 assists in clarifying the implicit problem representation within a specific policy or policy proposal. Subsequent questions encourage: reflection on the underlying premises in this representation of the 'problem' (Question 2); consideration of the contingent practices and processes through which this understanding of the 'problem' has emerged (Question 3); careful scrutiny of possible gaps or limitations in this representation of the 'problem', accompanied by inventive imagining of potential alternatives (Question 4); considered assessment of how identified problem representations limit what can be talked about as relevant, shape people's understandings of themselves and the issues, and impact materially on people's lives (Question 5); and a sharpened awareness of the contestation surrounding representation of the 'problem' (Question 6).

The WPR approach contests the typical 'problem-solving' paradigm in policy research and proposes a 'problem-questioning' form of critical practice (Bacchi, 2012). It is not concerned with identifying "gaps between the terms of a specific policy and what is actually delivered" but rather the deep-seated ontological and epistemological assumptions on which policies are built (Bacchi, 2009, p. xix). WPR is a powerful tool to analyse the process of policy formulation, as it provides a "systematic methodology to critically question the 'taken-for-granted assumptions' in government policies by

interrogating the problem representations it uncovers within them (Bacchi, 2009, p. xv)” (Tawell & McCluskey, 2002, p. 137). In this way, it is an “open-ended mode of critical engagement, rather than a formula” (Bacchi, 2012, p. 23) which challenges the notion that there is only one possible interpretation of a ‘problem’.

As with CDA, the limitations previously outlined are relevant to WPR. These include the subjective nature of critical analysis of policy, the requirement for the analyst to be aware of their own biases and assumptions, and the need to be mindful of the texts chosen for analysis to ensure the findings aren’t predetermined. Additionally, the WPR approach is not a tool for evaluating policy or judging its effectiveness.

The methodological approach informing this study enables the examination of how narratives and discourses shape the educational experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. CDA is used as a framework for examining discourses within educational policy and WPR is utilised to uncover the narratives associated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. While both approaches involve discursive analysis, there are a couple of important distinctions to be made in relation to the two approaches. Firstly, discourse in the context of CDA relates to language, while in WPR it focuses on knowledge and unexamined ways of thinking. Secondly, CDA aims to examine how people shape arguments, while WPR is about the deep-seated ways of thinking that underpin political practices. Both approaches of critical analysis are undertaken from an Indigenous standpoint in examining the way in which knowledge is produced and transmitted. Overall, discourse analysis provides the ability to investigate underlying attitudes and examine the systemic nature of the reproduction of discourses. This is essential for understanding why they persist in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and society more broadly.

2.4 Research design

This study takes a multiple method (multimethod) approach in order to gain new insights and perspectives in the understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity. Multiple method research is broadly defined by Hunter and Brewer (2015, p. 187) “as the practice of employing two or more different methods or styles of research within the same study or research program rather than confining the research to the use of a single method”. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003, p. 13) extend this idea and define the multiple method approach as “research in which more than one method or more than one worldview is used”. This research approach differs from mixed methods, which refers to the combination of qualitative and quantitative research components. Johnson et al. (2007, p. 119) make an important distinction between the two noting that “multimethod research is when different approaches or methods are used in parallel or sequence

but are not integrated until inferences are being made". The main benefit of multiple method research is that it allows for expansion, which is the overall widening of the scope, breadth, or range of a study. Using this approach for this study offers the potential for deeper understanding of the complex and interrelated factors affecting the educational participation and achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

This study examined the role of the Commonwealth in redressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity. The specific research question investigated was: How do narratives and discourses shape the educational experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples? This study includes three main lines of inquiry: a qualitative review of archival materials, education reports and historical texts to establish an overview of the educational service provision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; an analysis of information and evidence from the literature associated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in Australia, observed through a critical whiteness perspective and underpinned by a decolonising lens to examine colonial dominance in educational institutions and systems; and an interdiscursive analysis of representations in education policy together with broad discourse analysis of text and narrative analysis of problem representations using key Australian education policy texts.

The first component of this study involved a qualitative review of archival materials, education reports and historical texts related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. The purpose of this review was to establish an overview of the educational service provision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Grey literature was a feature of much of this review due to the study being focused primarily on the role of the Commonwealth in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. The policy literature, government documents, terms of references, internal documents and government reviews are generally produced outside of traditional publishing and distribution channels.

The second component of this study involved the synthesis of information and evidence from the literature associated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in Australia. This included an exploration and evaluation of information in journals, reports, books and theses to better understand the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' engagement with education; the systemic issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; the barriers and factors affecting the participation and achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in education; and approaches to good practice common across the literature. The literature was observed through a critical whiteness perspective and underpinned by a decolonising lens in order to examine colonial dominance in educational institutions and systems. McLaughlin and Whatman

(2011, p. 367) note that “a commitment to decolonising processes evolved as a way of redressing colonial processes of knowledge generation and its implications of imperialism and knowledge/power relations”. It involves the recognition of “colonial hegemony” and “forms of domination” (McLaughlin & Whatman, 2011, p. 367).

The third component involved an interdiscursive analysis of representations in education policy. This was undertaken in two parts, firstly, a broad discourse analysis and combined narrative analysis of problem representations using key Australian education policy texts. The purpose was to describe:

- how the government’s policies position Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners (discourse practice);
- the social framing of education policy (sociocultural practice); and
- how these policies influence the educational experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (narratives).

The discourse analysis undertaken in this study comprised several close readings of education policy texts, and an iterative process of reflection on the content. The first step involved the development of an initial coding framework for organising and categorising the qualitative data. The second step involved describing the text and all references in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within them. Words and text sequences were analysed, focusing on word choices and coherence between references to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across different sections of the documents. The third analytical step was to interpret the intertextuality of how various representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education discourses were articulated in national education policy, both in the mainstream policy and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific policy. These were drawn out with five questions of interrogation:

- (1) How does the policy position the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student?;
- (2) How is the issue framed and addressed?;
- (3) How is inclusion proposed?;
- (4) What does success look like in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students?;
- and
- (5) What attributes are considered necessary for success in the education system?

Ideology is often embedded in the text, with this analysis allowing for the identification of what lay behind the initial face-value reading. Fourthly, an analysis of problem representations was undertaken through the systematic application of the WPR approach and its guiding questions. This enabled the interrogation of: the solutions that policy texts suggest; how the ‘problem’ of Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander education was represented; the underpinning presuppositions and silences; and the effects of these problem representations. This analysis integrated both policy texts and allowed for the identification of conceptual relationships, thematic links, and overlaps, as well as the uncovering of the hidden ideology in the texts, particularly in relation to hegemony and its link to discursive power structures. The two analytical methods allowed for an iterative process, with the interpretation of the government's discourse embedded within education policy developing in complexity throughout the analysis.

2.4.1 Rationale for methods

This study views public policy as discourse, with discourse analysis the chosen research method to conduct this analysis. Discourse analysis examines “the language presented in a corpus or body of data” and aims “to draw meaning” (Crosley, 2021, p. 1). While this type of analysis is most often associated with the specifics of language, it can also focus on how language is used to achieve a specific aim. The primary benefit of discourse analysis is that “reality is socially constructed and our experience of the world is understood from a subjective standpoint” (Crosley, 2021, p. 1). In the context of this study, the analysis goes beyond the literal meaning of words. It investigates the functions of language and how meaning is constructed through a sociopolitical approach, which examines the influence that language has in social contexts. The other unique feature of discourse analysis is that it can reveal a lot about power and power imbalances, how these are developed and maintained, and in particular, how language can be used to maintain it.

This analytical method was chosen because this study focuses on the role of the Commonwealth in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. The primary way in which the Commonwealth influences education is through national education policy development. National education policy articulates the standards for how systems and education settings deliver education to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, with the Commonwealth integral in driving the “availability, responsiveness and effectiveness of education services” to ensure “equitable and appropriate educational outcomes” (Department of Education, 2022, p. 1). It was considered the most appropriate method for researching: forms of inequality or power; how people communicate in specific contexts; and ideology (including how values and beliefs are shared through text). There are two main benefits of this analysis. Firstly, it gave specific attention to analysing how language is used in education policy documents and allowed for the identification of themes, discourses, narratives, recurrent issues and representations, as well as the gaps and silences. Secondly, it enabled reflection on dominant ideologies and the underlying assumptions and values, and how these are influenced by the broader social and political context.

2.4.2 Text selection

The main component of this study takes the form of a critical analysis of educational discourse and narratives using education policy texts. The two policy documents chosen for this analysis are the most recent versions of the national mainstream education policy and the national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy. The most recent versions have been chosen to avoid selection bias of specific texts, with both policy documents analysed in their entirety. All references to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were considered, so as to attempt to avoid selection of citations for the purpose of supporting my own prejudices.

The texts include the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration 2019 (see Appendix 1 for specific references) and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy 2015 (see Appendix 2 for specific references). These policy documents are agreed and endorsed by the Commonwealth and state and territory education ministers. It is important to note that “formal policy documents comprise only one aspect of larger policy making and implementation processes” (Tawell & McCluskey, 2002, p. 140). By conducting a CDA and analysis of problem representations on these policy texts, I aimed to expose the values that shaped the development of education policy and ultimately the educational experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

2.4.3 Previous use of methods

Discourse analysis has been applied by many researchers, although predominantly non-Indigenous researchers, “to investigate the dominance of settler society” (McCartan et al., 2022, p. 2). In the Australian context, Fairclough’s (2013) CDA approach has been used to research a range of topics, for example: teacher identities in educational policy (Thomas, 2005); Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy (Hogarth, 2015); political communication (Sengul, 2019); and the Australian curriculum (Parkinson & Jones, 2019). While Bacchi’s (2012) WPR method has been widely used to analyse policy on a range of topics, such as: workforce participation and childcare (Beutler & Fenech, 2018); COVID-19 policy response for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander remote communities (Donohue & McDowall, 2021); the National Disability Insurance Scheme (Horsell, 2023); employment participation of disadvantaged young Australians (Davidson-Tear, 2021); and primary specialisation in initial teacher education (Bourke et al., 2020). In the schooling context, WPR was utilised by Patrick and Moodie (2016) in their analysis of Indigenous education policy discourses, by Maxwell et al. (2018) in examining the Australian Curriculum’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures cross-curriculum priority and by Burgess, Lowe, et al. (2023) in their analysis of New South Wales Indigenous education policies. Scholars note that both CDA and WPR are useful tools for examining dominant discourses and narratives in specific policies. To date,

there has been some utilisation of CDA and WPR in relation to education policy, although not in the context of the role of the Commonwealth in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

2.4.4 Positioning myself within the analysis

In conducting this study, it is important to note my past experiences, knowledge and values and how these shape my identity, and thus influence this study. In this vein I acknowledge the impact of my own positionality on my analysis, as well as my personal and professional background in relation to the way in which I perceive, interpret and identify problem representations. The theories and methods have therefore been chosen to allow for the application of a considered and methodical approach to the analysis, enabling any prior assumptions and prejudices to be opened up to view and limitations acknowledged. Importantly, as a Torres Strait Islander, this study presents: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander epistemologies, our ways of knowing, characterised as the “system of knowledge and how you come to know about your world” (Martin, 2008, p. 71); Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ontology, our ways of being, understood as “the theory of the nature of existence or the nature of reality” (Wilson, 2008, p. 33); and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander axiology, our ways of doing or “a set of ethics and morals that guide the search for knowledge and judge which information is worthy of searching for” (Wilson, 2008, p. 33). Nakata (2007a) acknowledges that way in which we have been portrayed both within and by Western knowledge systems is not how we as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people know ourselves. When working in the ‘cultural interface’, “the contested space between the two knowledge systems” (Nakata, 2007a, p. 9), that is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and Western knowledge, it is important to produce knowledge that is accountable to our community, but also accountable to Western academia.

Critical language awareness is integral to this study “because it is not possible to reach an understanding of, and hence control over, your social circumstances without this awareness” (Grosse, 2021, p. 155). This awareness facilitates taking back control of the narrative of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, necessary because overarching narratives about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are often presented in deficit terms. Hogarth (2017, p. 21) argues that “the need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers to challenge the societal norms is necessary to contribute to the struggle for self-determination”. Indigenous standpoint theory (as a theoretical framework for decolonising education policy, research and practice) underpins all components of this study. Decolonising methodologies aim to highlight problematic ‘truths’ and ideas that contribute to the marginalisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by repudiating deficit accounts and limiting discourses, and amplifying resistance and self-

determination. This includes promoting the relevance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and perspectives in every sphere of knowledge and practice and ‘writing back’ against the ongoing colonial mentalities that permeate all institutions and systems of government (Sium et al., 2012).

2.4.5 Ethical considerations

The *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies* aim to “ensure that research with and about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples follows a process of meaningful engagement and reciprocity between the research and individuals and/or communities involved in the research” (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2011, p. 1). The principles of these guidelines were adhered to throughout the research process. The topic of this study is essentially focused on public policy as a discourse, however, consistent with the theoretical underpinnings of my approach, the lived effects of policies, particularly those on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, cannot be understated.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the theoretical framework and methodological approach that have underpinned and guided this research. A multiple methods approach was incorporated into this study, with the study informed by discourse analysis in the examination of dominant ideologies and underpinned by critical and Indigenous standpoint theories in order to highlight the complexities inherent in investigating issues of culture, race and difference. This poststructuralist stance for policy analysis challenges the belief that language is neutral and value-free. Chouliaraki and Fairclough (2010, p. 1215) note that “discourses emerge as particular ways of construing (representing, interpreting) particular aspects of the social process that become relatively recurrent and enduring”. This understanding is important in the study of how narratives and discourses shape the educational experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

To recap, the theoretical framework for this study draws on discourse theory, critical theory and Indigenous standpoint theory. Each of these theories work together to provide a framework for examining dominant discourses and narratives in educational literature, policy and practice. They also provide an emancipatory approach to challenging current ideology and norms, while also allowing exploration of what could and should be through a decolonising lens. A critical aspect of discourse theory in relation to this study is the notion that meanings and truths can never be permanently fixed because social phenomena are mediated through discourse. Discourse analysis gives rise to the examination of dominant relations and ideologies and provides the opportunity to

not only challenge, but to also change ways of thinking about particular aspects of our social world. Critical theory allows for the investigation of the taken-for-granted characteristics of our social world and is underpinned by the notion that dominant ideologies maintain inequity. Critical analysis offers a corrective tool for exposing unjust norms and a framework to challenge these in order to create a more equitable society. Lastly, Indigenous standpoint theory is drawn up for its importance in repositioning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the research process, from being informants to being the knowers, with reciprocity and accountability as key.

The methods adopted for this study include CDA as a framework for examining discourses within educational policy and the WPR approach to uncover the narratives associated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. The limitations of these approaches mainly centre on issues of context and interpretation, with discourse analysis seen to be subjective, raising the importance of the analyst being aware of their own biases and assumptions. To follow on from this discussion of the theoretical framework and methodological approach that have guided and underpinned this study, the following chapter provides context and background about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in Australia. This takes the form of a qualitative review of archival materials, education reports and historical texts to establish an overview of the educational service provision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Chapter 3 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education context

3.1 Introduction

Social indicators of wellbeing indicate that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as a community, have the lowest economic status of all Australians (AIHW, 2023). This is despite decades of investment and policy efforts by successive Commonwealth, state and territory governments to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'disadvantage'. A key contributor to the continued disadvantage and marginalisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is a lack of access to a quality education. Educational inequality has persisted despite efforts to address it, and in some cases, it has even been reinforced by the education process (Francis & Wong, 2013).

This chapter follows from previous chapters which: provided an introduction to the research topic, the aims of this study as well as background about myself and my positionality in relation to this study; and an outline of the theoretical framework and methodological approach that have underpinned and guided this study. The purpose of this chapter is to provide context and background about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in Australia. This is done through a qualitative review of archival materials, education reports and historical texts to establish an overview of the educational service provision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The review will cover three main areas. The first main area to be discussed is the role of the Commonwealth in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and its associated education infrastructure, including relevant authorities responsible for education policy development. Secondly, an outline and critique of the major Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational policy initiatives since 1989 and a brief chronology of where the Commonwealth has prioritised its efforts to improve educational outcomes will be presented. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a picture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational achievement based on the equity indicators that Australian governments use to measure their success to highlight the result of 30 years of education policy.

The focus of this critique is the school sector as schooling in the years from kindergarten to Year 12 is compulsory in Australia for all children. Consequently, it has been the focus of much activity and policy attention over the last few decades. In 2022 there were 255,796 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in primary and secondary schools, comprising 6.3% of all Australian school students (ABS, 2022). Enrolments increased by 6,693 students (2.7%) from the previous year, highlighting the increasing number of students identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander

and higher birth rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (ABS, 2022). Currently, most (82.4%) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are enrolled in government schools, with the vast majority attending schools in large regional and urban centres where they are a small percentage of the overall school population (ABS, 2022). Of the roughly 9,600 Australian schools, there is a very small proportion without any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student enrolments, so schools cannot ignore their role in addressing educational disparities.

In this chapter, I initially argue that the Commonwealth's education policies have failed to deliver on their stated outcomes. Education policies have expressed the urgency of improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, with each policy iteration commencing with an acknowledgement of previous policy failures. Secondly, education policy making processes are flawed, demonstrated by the minimal change in the Commonwealth's policy agenda over the last 30 years. Thirdly, there has been too great a focus on searching for the panacea in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, with approaches to policy and program development ad hoc, fragmented and inconsistent. Fourthly, I argue that governments have failed to listen to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and involve them in the designing, developing and implementing education policy. This has been compounded by an absence of formal consultation mechanisms with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and grossly inadequate community engagement processes. Finally, I argue that educational disparities remain despite significant resources and funding being mobilised to address them, leaving us with the conundrum – why is it that educational equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students remains elusive?

3.2 Role of the Commonwealth in education

The Commonwealth and state and territory governments share responsibility for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. While the state and territory governments have constitutional responsibility for education, the Commonwealth leverages its influence by purchasing educational services and providing funding for institutions across all sectors, including, early childhood, schooling, vocational education and training (VET) and higher education (Parliament of Australia, 2000). It is important to note that the Commonwealth does not: manage education systems; run schools; nor employ teachers.

The 1967 Referendum granted the Commonwealth specific responsibilities concerning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs. This included constitutional power to make laws for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and to legislate policies and funding in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs, including education (Parliament of Australia, 2000). This saw the Commonwealth offer financial incentives to the states and territories to “pay additional attention to

their Indigenous students over and above their usual activities” (Langton et al., 2009, p. 102). As a consequence of this, “over time, this came to be interpreted that if anything special was to be done in the provision of education services for Indigenous students that it was a federal responsibility” (Langton et al., 2009, p. 102).

Past policy and program design history demonstrates that where governments exercise their constitutional power without the involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, measures have had little positive, and in many instances, detrimental impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Shay et al., 2023). One example of such policy measures was the 2007 Northern Territory National Emergency Response (the Intervention) which was introduced in what has been seen as a conflicted response to apparent widespread child abuse and family violence in Northern Territory remote Aboriginal communities (Brough, 2007). The Intervention saw governments deploy the military into remote communities, quarantine welfare payments, commandeer Aboriginal-controlled land and ban the consumption of alcohol and pornography (Ottley, 2020). A preliminary assessment which aimed to “foreshadow significant human rights concerns that are raised by the particular approach adopted by the government” (Australian Human Rights Commission [AHRC], 2007, p. 197), found that the Intervention measures were not “consistent with Australia’s international human rights obligations” (AHRC, 2007, p. 303). This is just one example of how the Commonwealth’s powers to exercise laws on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has been enacted. It is unsurprising that this mechanism has been criticised as a way in which to micromanage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, with Ottley (2020, p. 1) noting that “the 1967 Referendum has done little to address disadvantage, systemic oppression and power imbalances between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia, particularly in relation to white Australians and the federal government maintaining their role as benevolent benefactors”.

The Commonwealth provides significant funding contributions to states and territories for the provision of education. In 2023, recurrent funding for schools was estimated to total \$27.3 billion, including an estimated \$0.5 billion under the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander loading to support initiatives to improve educational outcomes (Department of Education, 2023). The Commonwealth therefore has a significant interest and role in formulating educational policy at the national level, although the implementation of this policy requires the involvement of state and territory governments. The Commonwealth’s formal engagement mechanism with the states and territories is through the National Federation Reform Council (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021a). At the Commonwealth level, policy responsibility for education lies primarily with the Department of Education. The National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) provides policy advice on Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander issues, including education, and funds a range of specific education programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students that are generally supplementary to those administered by the states and territories (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021b).

The Commonwealth's role in education policy formulation is enabled under Section 96 of the Constitution which allows for the Commonwealth to make stipulations in relation to funding it provides to state and territory governments. Over time, the Commonwealth's role in education has shifted from providing minor funding for capital works in the 1960s to being the primary national authority and power in relation to education today. Cumming & Mawdsley (2012, p. 24) note that "the Commonwealth government is directing education activity in Australia while states manage the services [and] each successive appropriation act for provision of funding to education over the last two decades has increased the control of the Commonwealth government over state policy and school activity". The Commonwealth's interest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education specifically, stems back to when education became free and compulsory for all Australians, and other parents were no longer allowed to veto Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's participation in schooling.

As a result of these haphazard arrangements, the provision of an equitable and appropriate education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students "has been dependent on a complex mix of politics, cap-in-hand begging by the federal government, and the willingness of variously engaged state and territory departments of education to address Indigenous education challenges" (Langton et al., 2009, p. 102).

3.3 Education infrastructure

The education infrastructure allows for the provision of funding from the Commonwealth to the states and territories. It also articulates the formal structures responsible for progressing education priorities in exchange for this funding. The architecture for federal relations has been through a number of iterations, with the latest announced in 2020 as the National Federation Reform Council, mentioned earlier. Under these arrangements, the Education Ministers Meeting is the most senior forum for decisions related to education in Australia. The Education Ministers Meeting is a forum for collaboration and decision-making on education across Australia, including early childhood education and care, school education, higher education and international education (Department of Education Skills and Employment [DESE], 2021b). The Commonwealth, state and territory government ministers with responsibility for education are standing members at these meetings and it is chaired by the Commonwealth Minister for Education (DESE, 2021b).

The Education Ministers Meeting is supported by the Australian Education Senior Officials Committee (AESOC). This committee is comprised of Commonwealth and state and territory heads of departments of education, and it is directly responsible for the execution of Education Ministers Meeting decisions. Established in 2009, AESOC, among other things, has specific responsibility to: provide policy advice; oversee decision-making for the implementation of policy decisions; and manage and coordinate jurisdictions' funding contributions for nationally agreed projects and initiatives, through the Australian Government Department of Education (DESE, 2021a). AESOC also has ongoing oversight (including approval of work plans and budgets) of the following five ministerial authorities and companies in the national education architecture:

- the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority which administers the National Quality Framework for early learning services;
- the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) which manages the national curriculum, the National Assessment Program, data collection and reporting;
- the Australian Education Research Organisation which commissions research on effective teaching and learning practices for teachers and school leaders across Australia;
- the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) which supports implementation of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers and Principals, in partnership with jurisdictions; and
- Education Services Australia which provides technology services for the education sector (DESE, 2021a).

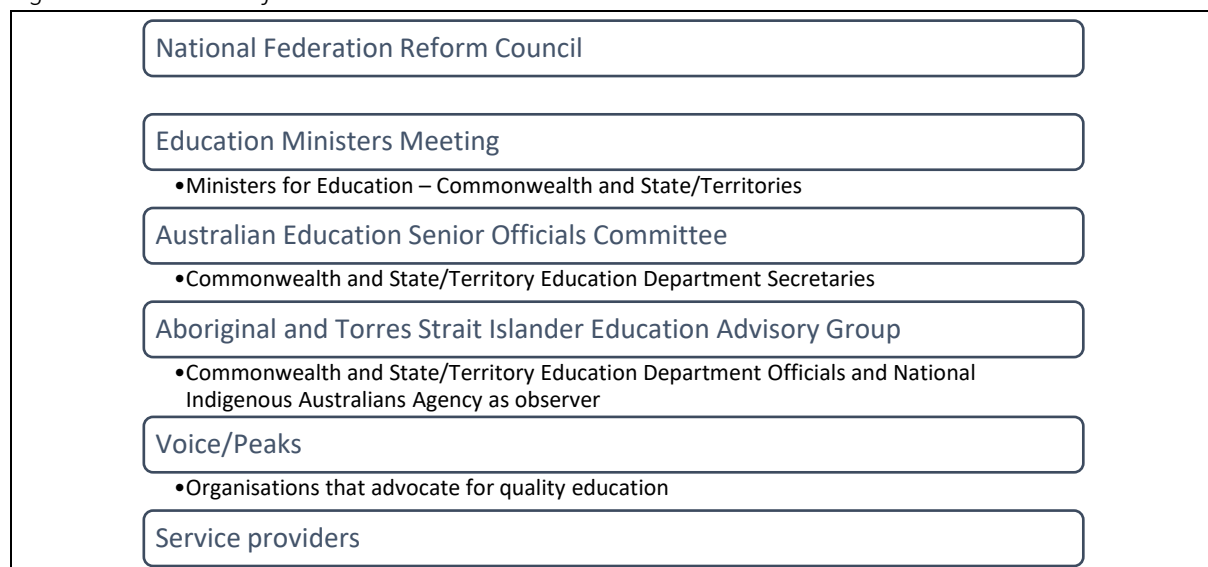
The boards of each of the five ministerial authorities and companies is accountable to the Education Ministers' Meeting and reports to it through AESOC.

The only specific entity focussed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education within this architecture (Figure 4) is the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Advisory Group (ATSIEAG). This group was formed in 2014 and is tasked with providing support and strategic policy advice on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education to two ministerially appointed Standing Working Groups - the Schools Policy Group and Early Childhood Policy Group. Membership of ATSIEAG consists of senior officials with responsibility for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education from each state and territory, including: the Commonwealth (Department of Education, with the NIAA as an observer); representatives from the National Catholic Education Commission; Independent Schools Council of Australia; and Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022). It is important to note that those who occupy positions on this group are not necessarily Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and it has never been led by

an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person. Membership is comprised of government officials with responsibility for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education within their jurisdiction.

All of the groups within the education infrastructure are connected through AESOC. Each of the working groups report to Education Ministers through AESOC, while AESOC approves the workplans and budgets for each of the ministerial authorities and companies. Essentially, it is Director-Generals in each state and territory and the head of the Commonwealth Department of Education that drive all activity within the education infrastructure, with the Commonwealth taking a lead role.

Figure 4: Education infrastructure



The education infrastructure (Figure 4) ensures the involvement of education ministers, senior officials from education departments and includes some very limited (those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of ATSIEAG) formal consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in relation to the development of education policy and practice. In addition to these, there are a range of organisations at the national and state and territory level that formally and informally represent the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in education. The most prominent national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups are in the higher education and early childhood sectors. At the state and territory level, the schooling sector has a range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations advocating for equitable education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies (IECBs). These bodies have had a fractious relationship with the Commonwealth over the last few decades, as outlined in the example below, however, fill a current gap in the education infrastructure in relation to representing the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

3.3.1 Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies

IECBs are networks of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people engaged in education whose principal functions are community representation and advocacy. IECBs aim to provide a means through which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities can be directly involved in the design, development and implementation of education policies and programs (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education advisory groups have existed since the 1970s, developing widespread networks and facilitating the provision of community-based advice to governments and their education systems. Additionally, during the period 1970 to 1990, there were a number of national level advisory groups including the National Aboriginal Education Committee (1977-89) and the National Federation of Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (Holt, 2016).

With the demise of these organisations (through government policy and funding changes) emerged an absence of a cohesive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community perspective on measures to improve the educational experiences and outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Morgan, 2008). In the 1990s, the Commonwealth Department of Education commenced funding for IECBs in each state and territory in order to increase the involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in educational decision-making. IECBs were funded for various activities at the state level as well as “to promote engagement between the Commonwealth and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities and education providers to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education outcomes” (Ministerial Council for Education Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs [MCEECDYA], 2010b, p. 35). Commonwealth funding for IECBs varied between each state and territory, with approximately \$3.5 million per annum allocated to their activities (National Indigenous Australians Agency [NIAA], 2013).

IECBs have long advocated for the establishment of a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education body to advise the Commonwealth Education Minister and Education Department on national policies and objectives for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education (Morgan, 2008). In 2011, a ministerially appointed group, the First Peoples Education Advisory Group was established. This group was a cross-sectoral advisory body which operated until the end of 2013 (DEEWR, 2011).

In 2014, the Commonwealth announced significant reform in the administration and delivery of services and programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. As part of the streamlining of programs, funding for a number of advocacy and advisory groups was discontinued, IECBs being one of these (Australian National Audit Office [ANAO], 2017). The government's decision to cease funding from 2015 reflected the Commonwealth's role in school education as part-funder and contributor to national policy. It was deemed more appropriate for IECBs to be supported by their respective state-based education authorities, as states and territories have direct responsibility for delivery of school education and directly benefit from the advice of IECBs (NIAA, 2015).

In some jurisdictions, such as New South Wales and Victoria, IECBs are still operational and those that have managed to secure funding from their state or territory government are well embedded. They provide advice to relevant state/territory education authorities on ways to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This advice centres on school-related issues such as the school curriculum and teacher professional development opportunities, including ways to improve the cultural competence of teaching staff (NIAA, 2015). However, this arrangement potentially makes IECBs less responsive to the needs of the community as they will likely be less critical of education departments that procure their services.

Despite Commonwealth funding ceasing in 2015, IECBs still advocate for Commonwealth funding to be reinstated and for the establishment of a national body to provide advice on matters related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. This is primarily due to concerns with government educational decision-making processes being undertaken with little, if any, genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – the intended beneficiaries. As a result, the likely success of these policies and programs are compromised from the start (Morgan, 2008). These concerns are echoed by a range of stakeholders working in the education sector.

Over the past few decades, all governments have affirmed and reaffirmed their commitment to improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. In seeking solutions, it is critical that there is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander involvement in decision-making at all levels, given the Commonwealth's significant role in setting the policy agenda for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. This has been consistently argued by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and many non-Indigenous people, including almost 30 years ago in the Joint Policy Statement on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education which stated, "a new approach to Aboriginal education can only succeed if the Aboriginal community is fully involved in determining the policies and programs that are intended to provide appropriate

education for their community” (Department of Employment Education and Training [DEET], 1989). The call for a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education body is as relevant and important today as it was in 1970, perhaps even more so.

In reflecting on the demise of the relationship between the Commonwealth and IECBs, there are lessons to be learnt for both sides. While IECBs have a wealth of experience and knowledge, throughout their engagement with the Commonwealth, they were unable to mobilise and provide a national perspective and guidance on the national education agenda. Their advice was jurisdiction-specific and focussed on issues that weren’t within the remit of the Commonwealth. For the Commonwealth’s part, these bodies provided access to advice from prominent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education experts, academics and practitioners, however, the Commonwealth failed to fully utilise this expertise. Its approach was to only provide select pieces of information without sharing the full picture of what it was trying to achieve and then cherry pick the advice to suit its agenda. Ironing out these issues will be important in any future attempts to establish Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consultative mechanisms.

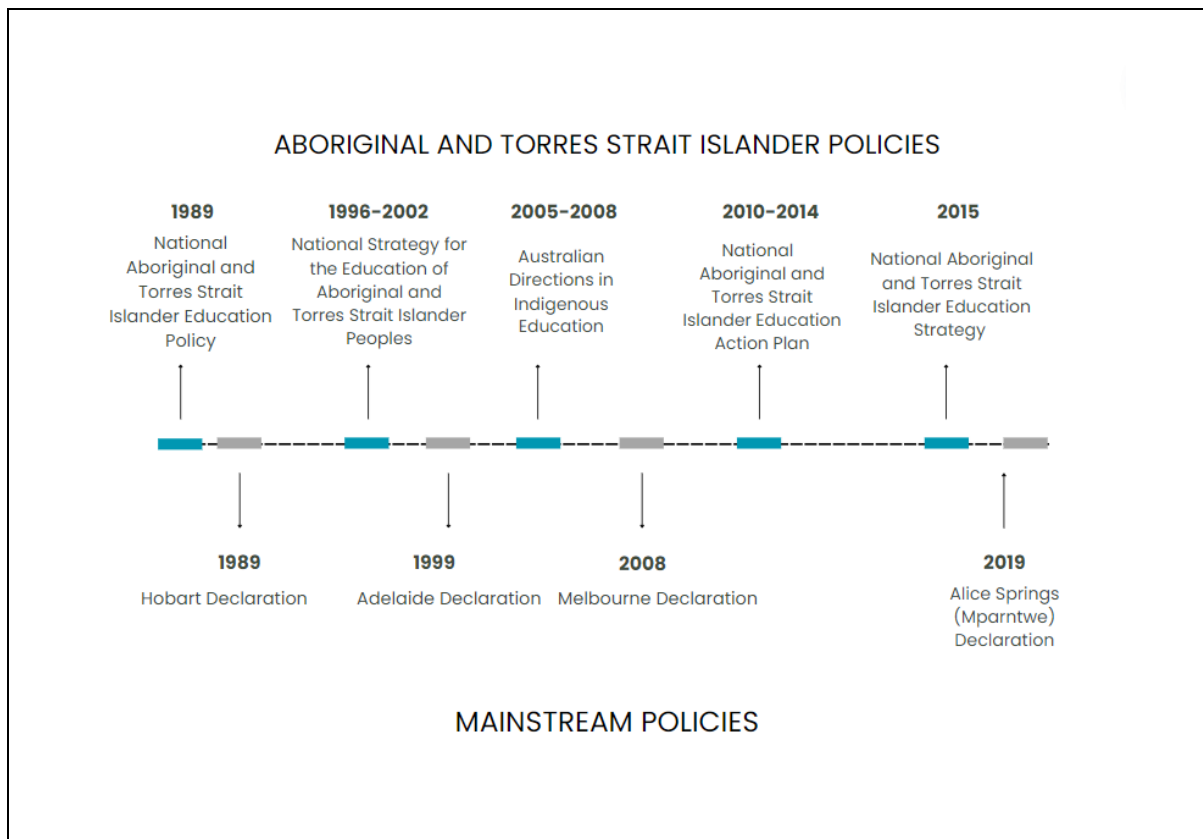
This section provided an outline of the education infrastructure including the main entities responsible for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy development. Of note is the absence of a formal engagement mechanism in the education infrastructure to involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the design, development and implementation of education policy. Despite being end users, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are almost always observers to education policy and its development. Observers in policy construction, but the focus of policy action. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have called for the establishment of a national advisory body for over 50 years (Morgan, 2008). The silencing and disenfranchising of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in relation to this, can only be seen as a deliberate act to avoid addressing key concerns of racism, social justice and sovereignty.

3.4 Major national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy initiatives 1989–present

This section presents a critique of the major Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and mainstream policy initiatives from 1989 to present. Targeted policies and strategies aimed at reducing the educational disadvantage experienced by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have been a feature of national education policy for the last four decades. These policy statements “convey recognition by all levels of government of the urgency of improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples” (Purdie et al., 2011, p. 2). The

following timeline of national policy initiatives does not capture every important event since 1989; rather it is a brief chronology of the major developments, (see Figure 5) including the five major Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific policies and four mainstream declarations.

Figure 5 - Timeline of major education policies 1989 to present



A range of national reports, reviews and policy documents led to the development of the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy* (AEP) in 1989. The AEP outlined 21 long-term goals (Appendix 3) to achieve educational equality in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education across all sectors – early childhood, schooling, VET, and higher education. The AEP was developed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and adopted by governments in 1989. The goals cover four broad themes, including:

- “the involvement of Aboriginal people in educational decision-making;
- equality of access to educational services;
- equity of educational participation; and
- equitable and appropriate educational outcomes” (DEET, 1989, p. 1).

In response to concerns regarding the “cultural appropriateness of mainstream education systems and curricula”, the policy called for the establishment of “effective arrangements for the involvement of Aboriginal people in decision-making regarding the planning, delivery and evaluation

of education services at institutional and system-wide levels” (Parliament of Australia, 2000, p. 26). Since this policy was adopted, there have been a range of perspectives regarding the relevance and effectiveness of the policy, with the majority of scholars acknowledging that the policy has led to some improvements in the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, but it also has limitations (Luke et al., 1993; McConaghy, 1998; Nakata, 1995). For instance, McConaghy (1998, pp. 352, 341) writes that while the policy has contributed to “developing a less ad hoc system for channelling resources into Indigenous education and in putting Indigenous education on the national agenda”, however, it also “constitutes an example of Australian neocolonialism [and contributes to] discourses within Australian education through which colonial power relations and the privileging of white, liberal, masculinist, normative and capitalist ideologies are reproduced”. Nakata (1995, p. 29) also acknowledges that the AEP has contributed to considerable gains in education but he highlights the “deployment of a cultural agenda” and argues that the policy itself is constituted around what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people ‘lack’ culturally, bringing to light the problem with the ‘duality’ between the pursuit of success in mainstream education and the maintenance of cultural traditions (Nakata, 2002, p. 28). At the time of development of the AEP, it was intended for all 21 goals to be realised by the year 2000. However, more than three decades later, the goals of the AEP are still a work in progress and the document remains the foundation of subsequent national reform efforts in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

In 1993 a review of the effectiveness of the AEP commenced, under a reference group appointed by the Minister for Education and chaired by Mandawuy Yunupingu AC. This process conducted during 1993 and 1994, involved public consultations, examining written submissions and analysing statistical data. The final report was tabled in 1995, containing 44 recommendations. These recommendations centred around: involvement and self-determination; information as a prerequisite for decision-making; access, participation and outcomes; reporting, monitoring and evaluation; and resources and needs (Yunupingu, 1995). The National Review noted that there were some improvements in the areas of access and participation in education, however the scale of educational inequity still remained vast for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (MCEETYA, 2000). The review called for all governments to “reaffirm their commitment to the policy”, with the Commonwealth’s response being the provision of additional funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education under the Aboriginal Education Strategic Initiatives Program (AESIP) (Ellis, 2001, p. 60). A key criticism of the AEP highlighted in the review was the focus on increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ access to and participation in “‘mainstream’ education rather than providing a framework for self-determination and community-controlled education [with some submissions] describing the policy as ‘assimilationist’” (Parliament of Australia, 2000, p. 45). Despite

the criticisms, “the Review concluded that the policy was serving a ‘vital purpose’ ...helping to build an Australian culture in which there is greater recognition and respect for Aboriginality, together with a greater awareness and sensitivity to the aspirations and concerns of Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders” (Parliament of Australia, 2000, p. 45). It is unsurprising that scholars have slated the review for “reproducing rather than challenging the significant flaws [of the AEP]” (McConaghy, 1998, p. 342).

In 1995 at a meeting of education ministers, the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) reaffirmed its commitment to the AEP. Governments pledged to increase financial efforts to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, with eight priority areas for improvement established, including: “improve literacy achievement; improve numeracy achievement; increase Indigenous employment in education and training; improve educational outcomes; increase Indigenous enrolments; increase involvement of Indigenous parents and community members in educational decision-making; increase professional development of staff involved in Indigenous education; and expand culturally inclusive curricula” (Department of Education Science and Training [DEST], 2003, pp. 110-111).

The *National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (1996-2002)* “built on the recommendations of the 1995 National Review and recommended reforms in the implementation, evaluation and arrangements relating to the goals of the AEP” (MCEETYA, 2000, p. 10). “The strategy outlined eight priority areas for each sector of education as follows:

- the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in educational decision-making;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment in education and training;
- equitable access for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to education and training services;
- the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in education and training;
- equitable and appropriate educational achievement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students;
- the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies, cultures and languages to all students;
- the provision of community development training services including proficiency in English literacy and numeracy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander adults; and
- to AEP implementation, evaluation and resourcing arrangements” (MCEETYA, 1995, p. 1).

Despite the acknowledgement in policy for systems to include community participation as a way of improving policy efficiency, this rhetoric did not translate into action. In 1999, ministers of education (through MCEETYA) established a Taskforce on Indigenous Education to “provide advice to Ministers on making the achievement of educational equality for Australia’s Indigenous peoples an urgent national priority” (MCEETYA, 2000, p. 6). The Taskforce undertook a range of work and released a report in 2000 which noted that despite considerable work over the previous decade, progress in achieving educational equality had been slower than anticipated. The Taskforce identified a number of issues that were impeding the achievement of educational equality, including:

- “lingering perceptions and mindsets in some quarters of the Australian community that the gap in educational outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is ‘normal’ and that educational equality for Indigenous Australians is either not achievable, or if possible, only achievable over a long period of time (i.e., decades or generations)”;
- “a systemic lack of optimism and belief in educational success for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, including the provision and delivery of educational services to Indigenous and non-Indigenous students at the local level which often varies according to expectations of the ability of Indigenous students to achieve academically”;
- “education of Indigenous students is often not regarded as an area of core business, with Indigenous programs often marginalised from mainstream programs”; and
- “the need for schools to work better with parents of Indigenous students to develop strong partnerships that progress high standards of education and ensure active involvement in the decision-making processes” (MCEETYA, 2000, pp. 12-13).

The Taskforce developed and recommended for implementation: “a statement of principles and standards for educational infrastructure and service delivery; a model for more culturally inclusive and educationally effective schools; and a framework for developing more efficient and effective cross-portfolio mechanisms” (MCEETYA, 2000, p. 7). It is interesting to note that the language from this review released in 2000, particularly in relation to the statement, “the gap in educational outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is ‘normal’ and that educational equality for Indigenous Australians is either not achievable, or if possible, only achievable over a long period of time” (MCEETYA, 2000, p. 12) came to play out in the Closing the Gap agenda almost a decade later.

Building on the National Strategy, *Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005–2008* (Australian Directions) was developed by a cross-jurisdictional taskforce and involved advice from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education leaders. The paper provided recommendations for

where national effort should be focussed over the 2005–2008 quadrennium and argued for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education to be ‘built in’ to core business (MCEETYA & Curriculum Corporation, 2006). The recommendations aimed to: accelerate the pace of change; foster government-to-government collaboration; and were intended to be adapted by education systems and schools to suit local contexts. They were aligned to five domains: “early childhood education; school and community educational partnerships; school leadership; quality teaching; and pathways to training, employment and higher education” (MCEETYA & Curriculum Corporation, 2006, p. 4). A review of Australian Directions was completed in 2009 and included “recommendations on priorities for future collaborative work to be undertaken by education authorities in the government, Catholic and independent school sectors” (Buckskin et al., 2009, p. 10). It was also recommended that a “national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education action plan with specific teaching and learning outcomes be established” (Buckskin et al., 2009, p. 9).

In 2008, the Commonwealth’s most cohesive whole-of-government strategy aimed at improving the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples was announced (Lowitja Institute, 2020). Australian governments (through the Council of Australian Governments) pledged to ‘Close the Gap’ in key areas where it was recognised that concerted national effort was required to address ‘Indigenous disadvantage’ (Department of Families Housing Community Services and Indigenous Affairs [FaHCSIA], 2009). Six ‘closing the gap’ targets were announced, with three of these relevant to the education sector:

- “to ensure access to early childhood education for all Indigenous four-year-olds in remote communities within five years (by 2013)”;
- “to halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for Indigenous children within a decade (by 2018)”;
- “to halve the gap for Indigenous students in Year 12 attainment rates by 2020” (FaHCSIA, 2009).

These targets were announced against the backdrop of the Rudd government’s ‘education revolution’ which aimed “to build a world class education system, which would establish Australia as one of the most highly educated and skilled nations” (Rudd & Gillard, 2008, p. 5). While mainstream education efforts focused on building Australia’s productivity globally, strategic priorities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education were articulated in terms of ‘halving’ educational attainment gaps in literacy and numeracy and Year 12 completion. This contrast in expectations has been the subject of much debate, with ‘closing the gap’ described as one of the most common manifestations of deficit discourses (Fogarty et al., 2015). Sullivan (2011) described the policy era of ‘closing the gap’ as “normalisation”, characterised by a shift away from self-determination and

Indigenous autonomy to a focus on statistical equality and accountability to the state (Altman, 2010; Sullivan, 2011). Patrick and Moodie's (2016, p. 173) examination of education policy discourses noted that "the educational achievement of Indigenous learners continues to be presented as a policy problem, for example, in the 'Close the Gap' strategy, which presents the "problem" as one of individual responsibility and follows a neoliberal accountability agenda".

The *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-2014* (the Action Plan), as recommended in the review of Australian Directions, was launched in 2010. The Action Plan outlined how governments would work together to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and focused on strategies to achieve educational targets developed under the Closing the Gap framework in 2008. Priority areas included: "readiness for school; engagement and connections; attendance; literacy and numeracy; leadership, quality teaching and workforce development; and pathways to real post school options" (MCEECDYA, 2010a, p. 5). Uniquely, the Action Plan included 55 national collaborative, systemic and local level actions across the priority areas, as well as outcomes, targets and performance indicators.

A longitudinal evaluation was undertaken throughout the life of the Action Plan and noted that while a common language and framework for action was established, there was a mixed picture of achievement in relation to national data and progress towards achieving the overarching Closing the Gap targets (ACIL Allen Consulting, 2014). Critical analysis of the Action Plan and how the language used within the policy positions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was undertaken by Hogarth (2015, p. ii) who found bias within the Action Plan because of the "underlying assumptions regarding the homogenous grouping of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the maintenance of the dominant ideology and the lack of recognition of the detrimental effects of past reforms and policies".

The most recent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific education policy was released in 2015, the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy 2015*. This Strategy followed on from the Action Plan and was a high-level document outlining a set of principles to foster improvement in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education outcomes. A number of priority areas for national collaboration were identified, including: "school and child readiness; literacy and numeracy; attendance; transition points including pathways to post-school options; leadership, quality teaching and workforce development; and culture and identity, and partnerships" (Education Council, 2015, p. 4). There has been no nationally agreed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific school education policy since 2015.

This brief chronology of major developments in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schooling policy highlights how little has changed in the Commonwealth's approach over the last 30 years. Since the foundation policy, the AEP was adopted by governments, ensuing national strategies and plans have included much of the same focus and same key priority areas for improvement. The most common features include a focus on outcomes, attendance, literacy and numeracy, and training for educators. Each policy iteration commenced with an acknowledgement of previous policy failures and pledged to do more to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. In analysing education policy over a 50 year period, Patrick and Moodie (2016, p. 172) note that "recommendations did not change substantially in content or direction over that time". Despite the rhetoric squarely focussed on the urgent need to improve educational outcomes, the existing policy framework has highlighted the continual failure to reduce educational inequity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

3.4.1 'Mainstream' education policy 1989–present

'Mainstream' national education policy has taken the form of four major national education policies since 1989, each spanning a 10-year period. This approach starkly contrasts the ad hoc nature of education policy specific to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It is acknowledged that a range of other national policies, initiatives and ministerial decisions contribute to the education policy landscape, however, the following long-term strategic documents provide the overarching direction for education in Australia, hence are the focus of this analysis.

The *Hobart Declaration on Schooling 1989* was an agreement between education ministers to establish common learning goals for students, culminating in the National Goals for Schooling (Appendix 4). Curriculum reform was a key focus, with agreement to undertake work to establish: common curriculum areas; national collaboration on curriculum development and a Curriculum Corporation (Cumming & Mawdsley, 2012). Other priorities included: work to determine a common entry age for schooling; national benchmarks in literacy and numeracy; and publication of a national report on schooling to monitor progress towards meeting the agreed national goals (Cumming & Mawdsley, 2012). Within the policy, the approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education was to conflate it in with a multiculturalism agenda (Patrick & Moodie, 2016), as articulated in the goal "to provide students with an understanding and respect for our cultural heritage including the particular cultural background of Aboriginal and ethnic groups" (Australian Education Council [AEC], 1989, p. 2). Hage (2012) discusses the implications of the multicultural agenda in Australian politics, noting that it is rooted in 'national patrimony' and the need to protect the national identity from outside threats. The inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues as part of broader

multiculturalism agendas is 'problematic' because "multiculturalism does not recognise First Nations status" (Patrick & Moodie, 2016, p. 175) and such representations aim to erase and trivialise the notion of Indigenous sovereignty (Vass, 2014b).

The *Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century 1999* built on the previous policy, acknowledging changes in schooling over the decade since 1989. There were a number of emerging priority areas of the curriculum which were not reflected in the 1989 goals, including information technology, vocational education and civics and citizenship (Australian Education Council [AEC], 1998). The revised goals (Appendix 5) also included "recognition of the particular learning needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and the central importance of the reconciliation process" (AEC, 1998, p. 5). Interestingly, this declaration was released under the Howard-Liberal government that espoused 'practical reconciliation'. The underlying premise of this agenda was to "reject any notion of Indigenous separateness, even of a symbolic nature" (Gunstone, 2008, p. 35) and redefine reconciliation to focus on addressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander socioeconomic disadvantage. Practical reconciliation purported to address the substantive causes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage, however was a deflection from recognising and addressing the root cause of relative hardship and political powerlessness. As Gunstone (2008, p. 40) notes, 'practical' reconciliation was a 'dismal failure' and missed the fundamental link between "Indigenous socioeconomic disadvantage and Indigenous rights".

The *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians 2008* established a new partnership between the Commonwealth and states and territories. With this statement, the national goals (Appendix 6) were streamlined to include two overarching goals: "Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence; and all young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens" (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 3). Equity and quality education remained a key focus of the statement, however there was a significant shift to include more accountability (Cumming & Mawdsley, 2012). The Declaration noted that "information should be available to the community to ensure schools are accountable for the results they achieve with the public funding they receive, and governments are accountable for the decision they take" (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 17). An action plan which included a range of strategies and initiatives governments would undertake in collaboration with all school sectors accompanied the Declaration to support progress towards achieving the national goals. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, this policy marked a change of approach to discourses related to equitable outcomes (Patrick & Moodie, 2016). The preamble of the Declaration noted as a primary concern the failure "to improve educational outcomes for many Indigenous Australians" and that addressing this would

be “a key priority over the next decade” (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 4). Equitable approaches entail giving everyone the resources they actually need and can often be perceived to be unfair because it is essentially unequal. While this may be the case at face value, it doesn’t account for how inequity is embedded in history, context and cultural relativism.

The most recent statement, the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration 2019*, included the same two overarching goals as the previous declaration. However, there was a shift in the detail underpinning each goal, “reflecting the changing nature of education, the economy and work” (DESE, 2022, p. 1). The refreshed goals (Appendix 7) “articulate the knowledge and skills required for the 21st century” and aim to ensure that all students “become confident and creative individuals, successful learners, and active and informed community members” (DESE, 2022, p. 1). This policy document represented a shift to discourses of normalisation in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with ‘Mparntwe’ (the Arrernte people’s name for Alice Springs) incorporated into title. There was also a continued commitment by Australian governments to ensure “the education community works to ‘close the gap’ for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples” and that students were “empowered to reach their potential” (Education Council, 2019, p. 16). A key example of incongruity in education policy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, conflating potential with closing educational achievement gaps.

This section provided a brief chronology and critique of the major Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific and mainstream education policies since 1989. The range of statements and policies present a mix of opportunities and obstacles. One major obstacle is the mismatch between policy rhetoric and action. When looking at each policy iteration, it is clear that these policies have failed to deliver on the Commonwealth’s stated priorities to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The minimal tweaks and amendments to national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy and the inclusion of the same discourses around the need to ‘fix’ deficiencies highlight the limited imagination of policy makers and governments in developing solutions to address educational disparities. Endeavours to: ensure equitable and appropriate outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; ensure equality of access and participation; and involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in educational decision-making constitute major achievements in the national policy landscape. However, beyond the rhetoric, this has not translated into effective action. The Commonwealth increasingly expanding its remit and authority in relation to education over the last few decades, however, it has not adequately leveraged its power to compel states and territories to drive the necessary improvements to contribute to substantial change. As outlined above, a key element missing from national policy development is the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Where

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been involved in major reviews of educational policy and programs, their recommendations have been inconsistently applied to the national policy landscape, showcasing the paternalistic nature of government in thinking that it knows what is best for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

3.5 Prioritisation of effort – national initiatives and interventions in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education

This section adds to the picture of educational service provision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (including the Commonwealth's efforts to reduce education disparities), with an overview of some of the major national initiatives and interventions proposed by governments in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

Commonwealth government priorities and initiatives to achieve educational equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have traditionally established broad policy and program parameters and provided targeted funding. Over time, there has also been a raft of legislative changes that have aimed to advance equity in education. From time to time, the Commonwealth has targeted attention to prioritising specific national policies and programs. The following is a brief overview of some of the major federal government initiatives in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education since 1989. The history of education reform in Australia has largely shifted with political cycles, with approaches to education dependent on the government of the day.

As a result of the AEP, in 1990, the Commonwealth (under the Hawke Labor government) passed the *Aboriginal Education (Supplementary Assistance) Act 1990*. This Act aimed to support the goals of the AEP and legislated the provision of funding through AESIP and several direct assistance programs (DEST, 2003). This was the first time legislation of this nature and specificity (exclusively dedicated to the advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education) had been enacted by an Australian Government. The Act determined and defined the following four goals:

- “increasing Aboriginal [and Torres Strait Islander] involvement in educational decisions;
- equal access to education by Aboriginal [and Torres Strait Islander] peoples;
- equity of participation by Aboriginal [and Torres Strait Islander] peoples in education; and
- equitable and appropriate educational outcomes for Aboriginal [and Torres Strait Islander] peoples” (DEST, 2003, p. 109).

Through AESIP, the Commonwealth provided significant supplementary assistance to education providers to enhance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education outcomes over the triennium

1990 to 1992 (DEET, 1992). AESIP funding was provided to government and non-government organisations in the preschool, school and VET sectors to advance the AEP's goals, while in the higher education sector, support was provided under the Indigenous Support Funding program. Additional support through direct assistance programs was provided to: increase school-based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander decision-making through the Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness Program; the provision of funding for Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups in each state and territory; support for students through the Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme; and measures to increase higher education enrolments through the Aboriginal Participation Initiative (DEET, 1992). AESIP funding continued to supplement mainstream funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in its second triennium from 1993 to 1995.

In 1996, a newly elected Howard Liberal government, restructured AESIP into the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Programme (IESIP). The main changes included: establishing a per capita funding model for Supplementary Recurrent Assistance for government and non-government preschools, schools and VET providers; as well as an amendment to the Act to include a provision for submission-based project funding from organisations (Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs [DETYA], 2001). At the beginning of the 1997–99 funding triennium, baseline service standards and outcomes were established under Indigenous Education Agreements between education providers and the Commonwealth. These included performance indicators against key priority areas and the setting of targets for improvement over the funding period (DETYA, 2001).

In 1998, the Commonwealth introduced a major initiative in “recognition of the importance of fluency in English to the participation of Indigenous students in the classroom and their subsequent acquisition of English literacy skills” (DEST, 2003, p. 112). The English as a Second Language – Indigenous Language Speaking Students (ESL-ILSS) program aimed to provide students with limited exposure/use of English to “function and participate in a meaningful way in classroom activities” (DEST, 2003, p. 112).

In 1999, the Commonwealth undertook a process to establish greater accountability for IESIP. This involved the introduction of a monitoring and evaluation framework and reporting on progress towards achieving national equity in educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous people. It was also intended to give education and training providers valid and transparent data to better inform their current and future practice and provide the Commonwealth with a database of performance information (DEST, 2003).

In 2000, a major Commonwealth initiative was launched, the National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (NIELNS), which sought to achieve literacy and numeracy for Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander students at levels comparable to those achieved by non-Indigenous students (DEST & Hugh Watson Consulting, 2003). The strategy was more a readiness-for-learning program rather than a literacy and numeracy program, and focused the effort of education providers on six key elements, including: “lifting school attendance rates; overcoming hearing, health and nutrition problems; enhancing preschooling experiences; getting good teachers; using effective teaching methods; and measuring success and achieving accountability” (DEST & Hugh Watson Consulting, 2003, p. 6). Education providers were required to submit implementation plans with site-specific initiatives across the six key elements. NIELNS projects were funded from 2000–2004 with the intention of projects being ‘mainstreamed’, meaning that they would become a part of the providers normal practice and be sustainable into the future without continuing Commonwealth funding (DEST & Hugh Watson Consulting, 2003). There is still a number of NIELNS initiatives for preschool and VET providers being funded by the Commonwealth today.

In 2000, a decision was made to extend the funding triennium by one year and to move to a funding quadrennium. From 2001–2004, accountability and reporting requirements were strengthened, with governments agreeing to national IESIP performance indicators, based on the eight priority areas agreed by education ministers in 1995. This data would form the basis of Indigenous Education Agreements and permit aggregation of data across providers for reporting in national reports (DEST, 2003). Developed in consultation with the preschool, school and VET sectors, nationally consistent monitoring and reporting frameworks were introduced in 2001 (DEST, 2003).

During the 2005–2008 funding quadrennium, a major restructure of IESIP (rebranded as the Indigenous Education Program (IEP)) was undertaken in order to direct funding to those initiatives that were considered to have demonstrated improvements in educational outcomes. There was also a push to allocate a greater weighting of funding toward Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students of ‘greatest disadvantage’, particularly students in remote areas (DEEWR, 2008a). The IEP allocated funding towards several national programs, aimed at supporting access to education, in-school participation of students and parental involvement. Significant funding was also allocated to other national strategic projects across the early childhood, schooling, VET and higher education sectors (DEEWR, 2007).

A change of leadership in 2007 to the Rudd Labor government prompted some major reforms to Commonwealth and state and territory relations. In 2009 the Commonwealth government restructured its funding to schools with the establishment of a new framework for federal financial relations. A National Education Agreement (NEA) defined Commonwealth, state and territory roles and responsibilities in relation to education provision and funding. The NEA included some targets

for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation, attendance and achievement in education (Council of Australian Governments, 2009). With the announcement of this new framework, supplementary schools funding provided under the Indigenous Education Program through the *Indigenous Education Targeted Assistance Act 2000* was rolled into base funding.

During the period 2009–2014, Indigenous Education Program funding continued to support initiatives across the four education sectors aimed at advancing the goals of the AEP. Discretionary funding for the schooling sector focussed on activities that were ‘outside of the school gate’, such as parental engagement and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander involvement in decision-making, while the preschool and VET sectors continued to be heavily reliant on the IEP for core funding.

Another change of leadership to the Abbott Liberal government in late 2013 led to significant reform in the administration and delivery of services and programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (ANAO, 2017). In 2014, the Commonwealth government announced the Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS). The IAS consolidated more than 150 programs into five major program streams. One of these being the Children and Schooling Program which aimed to: increase school attendance; improve educational outcomes; and improve transitions to further education and work (NIAA, 2014). The IAS was intended to be flexible, with a range of mechanisms for funding, such as: open competitive rounds; targeted rounds; demand driven allocation; and ad hoc grants. However, once funding for the majority of existing service providers was continued, there was very little discretionary funding left for new and innovative projects. A range of shortcomings were outlined in audits and reviews regarding the initial IAS grant round process and in the ongoing administration, monitoring and evaluation of ‘Indigenous programs’ (ANAO, 2020). The Remote School Attendance Strategy was the Commonwealth’s key initiative under the IAS, which focussed on improving attendance in remote schools by employing community members to be attendance officers. The IAS remains the primary vehicle for the provision of supplementary Commonwealth funding to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education related activities.

Commonwealth initiatives to advance equity in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education were progressed against a backdrop of significant developments in schooling education in Australia. Over this period, work was undertaken to promote greater regulation and standardisation across each of the education sectors, with the introduction of a range of frameworks and standards. Governments introduced a suite of reforms to improve school and student performance, including: increasing funding and making it more equitable and transparent; implementing a national curriculum; improving teacher quality; greater school autonomy; and national testing and reporting. While the mainstream education agenda has evolved and become more sophisticated over time, the

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education agenda has been more ad hoc, with multiple changes in approach and a lack of consistency. Furthermore, many reforms designed to improve accountability to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities were rolled back. One example of this is the following case on reporting to the Australian Parliament on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and training.

3.5.1 Reports to parliament on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and training

In 1990 the Commonwealth government passed the Aboriginal Education (Supplementary Assistance) Act 1990. The Act legislated the provision of funding through AESIP, as well as through several direct assistance programs (DEST, 2003). This was the first time legislation with the sole focus of the advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education had been enacted by an Australian Government.

Section 14 of this legislation required the Commonwealth Minister for Education to provide a report to each House of Parliament on the operation of the Act since its commencement. The Act stipulated that the report was required to:

- “identify types of programs, projects and other matters in respect of which payments were made under AESIP agreements; and
- contain an assessment of the extent to which each type of program, project or other matters advanced the objects of the Act:
 - increasing Aboriginal [and Torres Strait Islander] involvement in educational decisions;
 - equal access to education by Aboriginal [and Torres Strait Islander] peoples;
 - equity of participation by Aboriginal [and Torres Strait Islander] peoples in education; and
 - equitable and appropriate educational outcomes for Aboriginal [and Torres Strait Islander] peoples”.

The AESIP Implementation Report, released in 1992, was the first report prepared to fulfil this legislative requirement and outlined findings of a departmental post implementation review of AESIP (DEET, 1992). The review focussed on the implementation of AESIP over the period 1990 and 1991, as well as the program’s contribution to three immediate priorities: “developing effective arrangements for the involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in local and state and territory level decision-making; increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people employed in education areas; and achieving equity of access and

participation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children of preschool and compulsory schooling age by 1996” (DEET, 1992, p. 8).

In the first triennium, “AESIP funding totalling \$214 million was provided to advance the objects of the Act” (DEET, 1992, p. 15). The Report noted that progress had been made in relation to the establishment of effective Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education consultative groups and there were significant increases in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolments. This was particularly the case in the schooling and higher education sectors, as there were no existing national data collections on enrolments in the preschool and training sectors.

Over the period 1992 to 2000 there was a range of ad hoc reports and reviews on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, with significant work undertaken under AESIP to establish a national database of participation and achievement information, as well as data that could be aggregated to determine national trends.

In 2002 the *National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training, 2001* was released. This was first in a series of annual reports to the Parliament of Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the general Australian community on the progress towards achieving equity in education participation, achievement and involvement (DEST, 2002). National reports covered progress in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and training across the preschool, schooling, VET and higher education sectors. Educational outcomes data was presented for each sector under the eight MCEETYA priority areas: “literacy achievement; numeracy achievement; Indigenous employment in education and training; educational outcomes; Indigenous enrolments; the involvement of Indigenous parents and community members in educational decision-making; professional development of staff involved in Indigenous education; and the provision of culturally inclusive curricula”. The reports provided a comprehensive picture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education outcomes, as well as transparency about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education funding including recipients, programs and initiatives and formulas for allocation of funding.

There were eight national reports to parliament published for the years 2001 to 2008. The final *National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training, 2008* reported that for the funding quadrennium 2005–2008, a total of \$1.158 billion had been committed to programs and initiatives under the Indigenous Education Program (formerly AESIP) (DEEWR, 2008b). The report noted mixed outcomes in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and training over the period 2001 to 2008. There were significant increases in enrolments, particularly in the VET and higher education sectors, and increases in the retention rates of secondary school students and

bachelor level completions. Educational outcomes including attendance and literacy and numeracy achievement tended to be either stable or declining (DEEWR, 2008b).

Due to changes in funding arrangements in 2009 and to a large proportion of Indigenous Education Program supplementary recurrent assistance in the school sector being rolled into 'mainstream' funding, a smaller more streamlined *Indigenous Education Targeted Assistance Act* Report was produced. This report outlined national programs and initiatives, as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education specific funding and was produced annually until 2012. The legislation was eventually amended with Section 14 removed, along with the requirement to produce an annual report.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education participation and outcomes are now included across a range of government reports, however, there is currently no single place where key information on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and training across all four education sectors can be found. In the 30 years to 2008, a significant body of work was undertaken to establish: a national longitudinal database of key indicators that measured progress towards improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational outcomes; comprehensive monitoring and reporting mechanisms; and funding transparency.

The most recent reforms to education funding and reporting arrangements suggest that the implementation of these was to achieve greater transparency and accountability, and while this may be the case in relation to the states and territories being more accountable to the Commonwealth, it is not the case regarding accountability to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. More robust and effective arrangements in relation to monitoring and reporting on progress in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education appear to have been in place in the past.

This section provided a brief chronology of the Commonwealth's prioritisation of effort in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. The information paints a picture of just how inconsistent and variable the approach has been to date. The changing of governments nearly always prompts reforms, particularly in light of unchanged outcomes. Starting with the Hawke/Keating governments from the 1980s to the early 1990s, approaches to education were characterised by an integration of policies of self-determination and self-management. A shift to the Howard government in the late 1990s and early 2000s prompted a shift to a mutual obligation agenda. The Rudd-Gillard governments (2007–2013) social inclusion agenda redefined disadvantage and represented perhaps the most significant shift in the education architecture to date. Following this phase of significant

reform, there was a return to the liberal Abbot -Turnbull-Morrison governments (2014–2021) which represented a return back to mutual obligation. The election of the Albanese government in 2022 marked a shift to the most collaborative relationship between Commonwealth-states and territories in terms of national policy and decision-making, however given its infancy, there have been no major changes in the approach to education to date.

As can be seen in the chronology of initiatives outlined earlier, the cumulative effect of the multitude of changes to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational policy frameworks is substantial. In the 25 years from 1989 to 2014 there were four different (AESIP, IESIP, IEP and IAS) national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education initiatives, with the key flagship Commonwealth interventions focused on English literacy skills, numeracy and attendance. This highlights the fragmented and ad hoc approach to the development of overarching educational programs and the Commonwealth's focus of effort from year to year. The policy frameworks outlined above predominantly relate to funding and the allocation of resources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. These have a significant impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students both in terms of the equitable distribution of resources to address educational inequalities, and in the educational experiences of students within education institutions. The reality of government terms, funding cycles and competing priorities is evident in the fragmented nature of Commonwealth education policy frameworks.

When you consider the education service provision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, which has proved to be chaotic and ineffective, it is unsurprising that little inroads have been made in addressing educational inequity. Effective policy frameworks should ideally include rigorous monitoring and evaluation processes, aim to be long-term and sustained in effort over time. Governments' focus on searching for the panacea in educational policy and practice to improve the outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has clouded better judgement, with targeted activity often piecemeal and uniformed, and focussed on playing catch up through Indigenous-specific reforms. At the same time, non-Indigenous people have continued to progress at the same or more rapid rate through mainstream reforms. This is problematic in terms of policy development and prioritisation of effort, but it has also led to generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people being unable to gain the full value of the benefits of education.

3.6 Present state of educational arrangements

There has been no agreed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific education policy since 2015. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy appears to have been subsumed by the overarching National Schools Reform Agreement (NSRA) and the Closing the Gap framework.

The NSRA is a joint agreement between the Commonwealth, states and territories lift student outcomes across Australian schools (Department of Education and Training [DET], 2018). The NSRA was agreed in 2018 and sets out eight national policy initiatives under three reform directions:

- “supporting students, student learning and student achievement;
- supporting teaching, school leadership and school improvement; and
- enhancing the national evidence base” (DET, 2018, p. 8).

Sitting under the NSRA are individual bilateral agreements with each state and territory. These including varying commitments to progress Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education initiatives, many of which were existing initiatives already underway within the jurisdictions.

As highlighted earlier, in 2008, the Labor Rudd government made a commitment to ‘close the gap’, that is, to reduce the gaps between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians across a range of social indicators. These indicators ranged from infant mortality to life expectancy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, with some specific education targets focused on early childhood participation, literacy and numeracy and Year 12 completion. As part of this framework, the Prime Minister tables an annual report to the parliament each year, which reports on progress toward achieving these targets. These reports articulate the gaps in educational participation and achievement, however, fail to address how these came to be, beyond alluding to deficits in the sociocultural background of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (NIAA, 2020).

Closing the gap is proving elusive, with the lack of progress in reducing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and economic disadvantage now mentioned consecutively across 12 years of annual reports (NIAA, 2020). These reports are consistent in highlighting the same areas of concern and recommending actions such as regular attendance and cultural recognition, illustrating how policy rhetoric lacks innovation. This along with repeated calls for codesign with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, despite not adequately implementing the structures to effectively progress this. In 2020, Australian governments attempted to address this through a Closing the Gap “refresh” to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the development and implementation of the strategy (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2020). The new national agreement was signed by the National Federation Reform Council and the Coalition of Peaks (a representative body of around fifty Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations and members). This shift in approach to Closing the Gap was highlighted as important step for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in determining what is important to them (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2020). However, the targets are designed by governments and based on metrics set by governments. It is important to critically reflect on

whether these indicators contribute to the sovereignty and self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

The fact that this framework has subsumed specific education reporting and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific education policy is telling. National education policy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students should be far more than just ‘closing the gap’ because it only takes a cursory look at the education reform strategy of Closing the Gap to see that it has largely been unsuccessful. At present the entire focus of policy is on approaches to meet equity indicators, which only serves to ensure success in the mainstream. There is a need to consider alternative approaches to education that might better serve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their aspirations.

3.7 Data on participation and achievement

The final section of this chapter presents data on the participation and achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in education. Data is sourced from a range of national standardised assessments and measures in education. The limitations and cultural appropriateness of these measures aside, they provide a useful benchmark of the requirements to satisfactorily progress through the Australian education system. The following commentary reports on the data as it is collected within each of these assessments and measures. In some of these collections, the way in which data on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is reported, generates the implication that it is ethnicity, not the effect of counterproductive policies that creates disadvantage. Where possible, a strengths-based narrative is adopted to present the data, however it does paint an alarming picture of the disparities between the educational achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their peers. The equity indicators discussed below, are those which Australian governments use to chart their ‘success’ in improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, so are pertinent to the discussion on educational inequity.

3.7.1 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people comprise 3.8% of the Australian population, with 984,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people estimated to be residing in Australia in 2021 (ABS, 2021). The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is younger than Australia’s overall population, with one third (33.1%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people under 15 years of age (ABS, 2021).

3.7.2 Participation in education

Participation in preschool and early childhood education has a positive impact on children's development (Biddle et al., 2017). In 2018, the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander four-year-olds participating in early childhood education was 86.4%, compared to 91.3% of non-Indigenous children (NIAA, 2020).

In the schooling sector, there were 255,796 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled in Australian schools in 2022, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students accounting for 6.3% of all students (ABS, 2022). New South Wales had the largest number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, with over 85,000, while the Northern Territory had the largest proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students compared to all students, 39.4% (ABS, 2022).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have had consistently high participation rates in VET. The VET pathway often starts quite young, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students participating in VET in schools at higher rates than their non-Indigenous counterparts (Misko et al., 2017). In 2020, there were 143,810 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people undertaking VET courses, with the vast majority (60.4%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people undertaking training package qualifications.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people comprised 2% of the domestic university student population in 2021, with 23,997 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enrolled in higher education courses (DESE, 2021c). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander females had more than twice the participation rate of males, with 16,424 females studying in universities across Australia, compared to 7,469 males. The top three fields of study for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were society and culture, health and education (DESE, 2021c).

Attitudes toward education participation reported in the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey found that 53% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 15 years and over reported that they intended to study in the future. One-quarter (25%) reported that they wanted to study in the past 12 months, but cited financial reasons and other personal or other family reasons as impediments (ABS, 2015).

3.7.3 Educational achievement

Successful completion of formal education is central to later life outcomes. Most Australian students finish schooling with the literacy and numeracy foundation for further learning, however some do not. The Productivity Commission (2016) notes that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are more likely to be among lower achieving students, as can be seen in Table 1 - Educational

achievement rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people compared to other Australians across a range of indicators.

Table 1 – Educational achievement rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people compared to other Australians across a range of indicators

AEDC - Language and cognitive skills (school-based) domain¹		
Measurement	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	Non-Indigenous
On track	59.4%	84.1%
At risk	18.1%	9.6%
Vulnerable	22.5%	6.3%
NAPLAN – Literacy and Numeracy²		
Measurement	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	Non-Indigenous
Year 3 Reading	83.0%	96.4%
Year 5 Reading	78.5%	96.2%
Year 7 Reading	76.6%	95.5%
Year 9 Reading	67.2%	91.2%
Year 3 Numeracy	79.6%	96.1%
Year 5 Numeracy	78.2%	96.3%
Year 7 Numeracy	69.1%	93.6%
Year 9 Numeracy	80.9%	96.0%
Retention in School³		
Measurement	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	Non-Indigenous
Year 7/8 to 10	99.4%	100%
Year 7/8 to 12	56.9%	82.0%
Year 12 Attainment⁴		
Measurement	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	Non-Indigenous
Year 12 or equivalent qualification	68.1%	90.7%
Highest level of non-school qualification⁵		
Measurement	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	Non-Indigenous
Undergraduate 5-year completion rate	40.5%	66.4%
Undergraduate 9-year completion rate	49.4%	72.2%
Bachelor degree qualification	6%	26%

¹ Proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous children assessed as developmentally on track/at risk/vulnerable in the language and cognitive skills domain of the AEDC (Australian Early Development Census [AEDC], 2021)

² Proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous students meeting national minimum standards for reading and numeracy for years 3, 5, 7 and 9 in NAPLAN testing, 2022 (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Report Authority [ACARA], 2022b)

³ Proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous students who remained in schooling from year 7/8 to 10 and year 7/8 to 12, National Schools Statistics Collection, 2022 (ABS, 2022)

⁴ Proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous 20 to 24 year olds who had completed Year 12 or equivalent qualification (Productivity Commission, 2021)

⁵ Proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous people who had a bachelor degree as their highest level of non-school qualification (ABS, 2015); Undergraduate 5-year completion rates (DET, 2016); and Undergraduate 9-year completion rates (Universities Australia, 2020).

As can be seen in Table 1, data shows that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children commence school at a disadvantage when compared to their non-Indigenous peers. The 2021 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) measures the development of children in their first year of full-time schooling. The language and cognitive skills domain measures children's basic literacy and numeracy, interest in these areas and memory. Children are considered to be developmentally on track; developmentally at risk or developmentally vulnerable. Within this domain, a developmentally vulnerable child experiences: challenges in reading and writing; challenges with numbers; an inability to attach sounds to letters; and an inability to count to 20 or recognise and compare numbers (AEDC, 2021). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were nearly four times as likely to be developmentally vulnerable in the language and cognitive skills domain, 22.5%, compared to 6.3% (Table 1) of non-Indigenous children. They were also twice as likely to be developmentally at risk (18.1%), compared to non-Indigenous children (9.6%) (AEDC, 2021).

When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students reach schooling, there are marked differences in their educational outcomes compared to that of their non-Indigenous peers. The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) measures whether Australian students are meeting basic educational outcomes in reading, writing, spelling and grammar and numeracy. Students are measured against 'national minimum standards' which outline the minimum requirements below which, students would have difficulty progressing through schooling (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Report Authority [ACARA], 2022b). A comparison of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous student outcomes shows that in the reading and numeracy domains, across Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes were 13 to 25 percentage points lower than non-Indigenous students. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' literacy and numeracy scores ranged from 67.2% to 83.0% of students meeting national minimum standards, compared to 91.2% to 96.4% of non-Indigenous students.

A key measure of success in schooling is the retention of students from one year to the next. In 2022, nearly all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students remained in formal schooling from Year 7/8 to Year 10. However a significant decline in retention is seen from Year 7/8 to Year 12, with only 57% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students remaining in formal education over this period, compared to 82% of non-Indigenous students (ABS, 2022). Research shows that if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous students reach the same level of academic

achievement by 15 years of age, there is no significant difference in subsequent educational outcomes such as completing Year 12 or undertaking tertiary studies (Mahuteau et al., 2015).

One of the main indicators of educational achievement in Australia is completing high school to Year 12. For many jobs, “completion of Year 12 is a minimum prerequisite and where this is not an explicit criteria, it is seen as an indicator of aptitude and attitude” (Biddle, 2010, p. 5). In 2021, the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 20 to 24 year olds who had completed Year 12 was 68.1%, compared to 90.7% of non-Indigenous Australians (Productivity Commission, 2021).

The economic and social benefits of participation in, and completion of, formal tertiary education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is well documented, as is the research on the role of education in improving labour market participation (Gray et al., 2012; Karmel et al., 2014; Mahuteau et al., 2015). In 2021, there were 23,997 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled in universities in Australia (DESE, 2021c). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students comprise only 2% of all domestic students, well below population parity. The vast majority (66%) are enrolled in bachelor level degrees, with 19% undertaking postgraduate courses and 15% undertaking award and enabling courses (DESE, 2021c).

Evidence highlights Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander undergraduates have lower completion rates when compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts. Less than half (40.5%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who commenced university studies in 2010 had completed a degree by 2015, compared to 66.4% of non-Indigenous students (DET, 2016). The nine-year completion rates for those students who commenced in 2012 show that 49.4% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students completed their bachelor degree compared to 72.2% of non-Indigenous students (Universities Australia, 2020). Despite lower completion rates, for those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students that go on to complete their degree, they are able to find work more quickly than their non-Indigenous counterparts and have, on average, higher commencing salaries (Social Research Centre, 2021). In 2021, over 76% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university graduates were in full-time employment, compared to 68% of non-Indigenous graduates (Social Research Centre, 2021).

Data from the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (2014-15) showed that 6% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had a bachelor degree as their highest level of non-school qualification, compared to 26% of non-Indigenous Australians (ABS, 2015). The importance of a non-school qualification cannot be understated as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged between 15 to 64 years who had a non-school qualification were more likely to be employed (61%) compared to those without non-school qualifications (36%) (ABS, 2015).

This section outlined data on the participation and achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in education. There are some positives that can be drawn from the data however, overall, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have lower participation and achievement rates in education compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts across all education sectors. The outcomes tell us a lot about the efficacy of government policy, reform priorities and how funding is prioritised.

The equity indicators outlined above are often used by Australian governments as a basis for the development of policy, to inform reform priorities and to prioritise funding. When charting the 'success' of governments in reducing educational inequity, the statistics paint a bleak picture in relation to reducing educational disparities. In fact, educational disparities remain despite significant resources and funding being mobilised to address them. This raises serious concern about the cyclical nature of policy and outcomes. Governments set policies with the aim to improve outcomes, measure their success in achieving targets in said outcome areas, only to find little to no change in outcomes and to then use these outcomes as a reason to change policy priorities. While the data is important in painting a picture of 'progress', it cannot provide the solutions. It does, however, clearly inform us that different policy approaches are required.

3.8 Conclusion

Government sets the goals, targets and strategies in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy. Government also set the measures of success. The failure of policy to contribute to progress towards these goals, points to the need for the development of more effective measures. Since 1989, a plethora of specific Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policies in early childhood, schooling and higher education have been developed and agreed. These policies have failed to deliver on the Commonwealth's stated priorities to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, with each policy iteration articulating the failure of the previous policy and purporting to this time do things differently. Endeavours to: ensure equitable and appropriate outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; ensure equality of access and participation; and involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in educational decision-making constitute major achievements in the national policy landscape. However, beyond the rhetoric, much of this national reform effort contained no accountability to act, presenting only priorities, principles and recommendations which were variably taken up at the discretion of individual jurisdictions. Despite the Commonwealth increasingly expanding its remit and authority in relation to education over the last few decades, it has not adequately leveraged its power to compel states and territories to drive the necessary improvements to contribute to substantial change.

The challenges and perceived solutions to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational disadvantage have been the subject of much debate over the years. Given the overall lack of sustained improvements in educational outcomes, the Commonwealth has yet to develop appropriate policy responses to overcome barriers to achieve academic success, indicating that policy making processes are flawed. This is evident in the minimal tweaks and amendments to national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy since 1989. Ensuing policies have included much of the same discourses around the need to ‘fix’ deficiencies, with the Commonwealth continuing to dictate strategies to address the perceived ‘problems’ in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and failing to address the particular social, historical and political conditions under which these were produced (Bacchi, 2009). While some of the structures and frameworks may have changed, the actual means of addressing educational disparities proposed by governments have remained the same. This includes a focus on key initiatives, such as: developing culturally appropriate pedagogical practice and culturally inclusive curriculum; improving attendance, literacy and numeracy; increasing parental participation; and increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and education workers.

The brief chronology provided on the Commonwealth’s prioritisation of effort in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education shows just how inconsistent and variable the approach has been to date. The cumulative effect of the multitude of changes to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational policy frameworks is substantial and has a considerable influence on the educational experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The ad hoc and fragmented approach to policy and programs and the intense focus on searching for the panacea in educational policy and practice has distracted from the need to implement wholesale structural and systemic reform. Governments have focussed their efforts on playing catch up through Indigenous-specific reforms, while non-Indigenous people have continued to progress at the same, or more rapid, rate through mainstream reforms. It is fair to say that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have failed to gain the full value of the benefits of education because they have not been in receipt of the same levels of educational service provision afforded other Australians. A national policy framework that does not see anything new will have limited scope to address issues of educational inequity.

Critically, a missing ingredient underpinning the failure of previous approaches has been the lack of adequate involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the design, development and implementation of education policy and programs that directly affect them. Despite being end users, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are almost always observers to education policy and its development. This has been exacerbated by the absence of a formal engagement mechanism in the education infrastructure, including the lack of a dedicated national Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander body to advise on educational policy and practice. While there has been an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational advisory group in the last few iterations of the national education infrastructure, it is the only group within this structure that is not a standing committee. Further, representatives on this committee comprise bureaucrats from education departments in each jurisdiction and are not necessarily Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals. There has been a call for the establishment of a formal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education advisory body for over 50 years, a call which is still yet to be heard. There is consensus that collaboration and co-design are necessary for effective policy, but policy making processes clearly show that there is no firm commitment to fulfill these ideals. Symbolic consultation appears to be the most widely used approach where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are asked for their opinion but have no power over the design or implementation of policy. It is highly likely that the mistakes of previous decades will be repeated through the inability of governments to invest in the inherent strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities, and to listen, and trust in their decisions about matters that primarily affect them.

Lastly, educational disparities remain despite significant resources and funding being mobilised to address them. Additional Commonwealth funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school students is estimated to be \$0.5 billion in 2023 to support 255,796 students, which is significant at a per capita rate. While Commonwealth efforts to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are noble, the inability to achieve sustained and long-term improvement highlights that there should be little confidence in previous and current policy settings. McConaghy noted in 1998 regarding AEP and subsequent review, that they are “unlikely to lead to the types of social justice outcomes and material transformations desired and demanded by Indigenous and many non-Indigenous Australians” (McConaghy, 1998, p. 342). It is unfortunate that more than two decades later this statement has come to bear and is still applicable to the Commonwealth’s current approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy and practice. Future success is contingent on policy being approached, framed and thought of differently. Equally important is the need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices to be elevated in the conversation on education policy and practice if there is to be any substantial change or progress towards redressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity.

Chapter 4 – Literature review

4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the literature related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, in particular, the current understandings and discourses in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' participation and achievement in education. This follows on from previous chapters which: provided an introduction to the research topic, the aims of this study, and background about my positionality in relation to this study; an outline of the theoretical framework and methodological approach that underpinned and guided this study; and context and background about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in Australia to establish an overview of the educational service provision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The aim of this literature review is to present an analysis of information and evidence from the literature associated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in Australia. The literature is observed through a critical whiteness perspective and is underpinned by Indigenous critical and standpoint theories. The literature outlined below is by no means exhaustive on the topic of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, but provides: information on the historical context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' engagement with education; an outline of the key systemic issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' participation and achievement in education (including racism, deficit discourse and intergenerational transmission of disadvantage); an overview of the educational and non-educational factors that influence Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' participation and achievement in education across the early childhood, schooling, vocational education and training (VET) and higher education sectors; and an overview of the key approaches to good practice common across the literature.

The literature is underpinned by two broad perspectives. The first perspective focuses on the urgency of improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, closing gaps and addressing shortfalls and underperformance. The second focuses on challenging deficit discourse, valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, ways of learning and understanding through the lens of decolonising educational institutions and systems.

In observing the literature through a critical lens, some key themes emerged. Firstly, any discussion regarding the need to improve educational outcomes must start with a conversation about the historical context and impact of colonisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, as well as the lingering effects of these on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's ability to engage

with education today. Secondly, educational issues cannot be considered in isolation from the broader context, with systemic issues such as racism, deficit discourse and intergenerational transmission of disadvantage having a significant impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' experiences of education. Thirdly, research across the education sectors regarding participation and achievement are mostly localised qualitative case studies that are small in scale and overly focused on 'problems', with these studies forming the bases for government intervention in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. Finally, the approaches to good practice that emerge from the literature are critical in supporting the participation and achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in education, however, in isolation from a broader systems approach to addressing educational inequity and without an acknowledgement of the broader social, historical and political influences on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational policy and practice, these approaches will have little impact in reducing educational disparities.

4.2 Background

To understand the current context and issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, it is firstly necessary to understand the historical context and 'colonialist impositions' that continue to manifest as everyday issues in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Sandri, 2013). This historical overview is intended to provide an understanding of how past events shape the current experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in education, given that "historical and colonising realities are not typically considered in educational policy, practice and literature" (Sandri, 2013, p. 19). The history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' engagement with education has been marred by discrimination, marginalisation and alienation (Universities Australia, 2011). Prior to the arrival of Europeans in Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples practiced their own forms of education that was "staged" and "began as soon as the child moved in the womb" (Price, 2012, p. 3). This education enabled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to pass on the rich culture, traditions and ways of life to successive generations which enabled us to survive and thrive for tens of thousands of years.

Since colonisation, "Western education was used to negate the cultures, languages, knowledge and identity of Indigenous children and peoples" (Universities Australia, 2011, p. 9), and it has been used as a weapon to disrupt Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sovereignty (Jacob et al., 2015). Western education reinforced the notion that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values and beliefs were inferior to Western values and up until the 1970s, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were taught to disregard their culture in exchange for a Western education (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). Prior to the 1960s, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

were restricted access to educational opportunities that were readily afforded to non-Indigenous Australians (Burrige et al., 2012). Even with the dismantling of many racist policies post the 1967 Referendum and the opening of education to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, racism and discrimination was widespread. The discrimination, marginalisation and alienation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has led to a “lasting legacy of distrust and ongoing negative association with the Western schooling system” (Krakouer, 2015, p. 7).

The Western education system and its processes have positioned Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as ‘guests’ in an unfamiliar and ‘culturally barren learning environment’ (Morgan, 2019). Morgan (2019, p. 111) attributes this ‘guest paradigm’ and its elements as an “underlying cause in the continuing failure of Australia’s education systems to adequately and appropriately respond to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students”. Weuffen, Lowe, et al. (2023, p. 133) aim to provide an explanation for this, noting that within the Australian education system, “practices of exclusion do not occur by error; they are situated deeply in this post-colonial state’s fear of losing control [and] are used to dispel the case for Indigenous educational sovereignty”. Australia’s history of extermination, exclusion and assimilation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is woven through its social fabric and thus its education systems, which continues to impact the participation and achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in education today. It has been observed that “the legacies of the historical marginalisation of Indigenous peoples from education are myriad and transgenerational and have proven difficult to overcome” (Universities Australia, 2011, p. 10).

This historical overview of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s engagement with education is intended to provide context when considering the issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in education today. It is essential that any discussion regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ engagement with education (or how and why educational disparities persist), start with a conversation about the historical context and impact of colonisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This should also include an acknowledgement of the lingering effects of these on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s ability to engage with education today. When you have a group of people who are excluded from education, marginalised, alienated and discriminated against, it should come as no surprise that their interactions with the very system that enacted these regimes are guarded and overshadowed by mistrust and scepticism.

In providing an overview of the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s engagement with education, two major issues emerge. Firstly, Western education has historically been forced on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and used to destroy our cultures and identity, and

secondly, the standard of education that has been made available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has been inferior to that experienced by other Australians. This historical overview is provided to convey the significance of the impacts of colonisation processes and their continued impact on the everyday lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their engagement with education institutions.

4.2.1 Defining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education or Indigenous education has many definitions, which often interplay, but generally fall into two overarching themes. The first relates to the learning systems, philosophies and methodologies that have ensured the transmission of Indigenous Knowledges and practices from generation to generation. The second refers to educational policy and practice that is undertaken or implemented specifically to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This interplay is articulated in the *Coolangatta Statement on Indigenous Peoples' Rights in Education* as follows: "Education for our communities and each individual is central to the preservation of our cultures and for the development of the skills and expertise we need in order to be a vital part of the twenty-first century" (Morgan et al., 2006, p. 236). Throughout this thesis, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education is intended to be thought of in light of the second theme, that is, education provided to develop the knowledge and skills to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to participate fully and equally in society (King & Schielmann, 2004).

4.3 Systemic issues

Having provided an overview of the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's engagement with education, I now turn to the major systemic issues that impact the educational experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Systemic issues refer to those issues that are experienced by the whole of a system, not just particular parts of it. They are so intricately embedded in systems, that they are often assumed to reflect the natural order of things. In the context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, there is a range of systemic issues that permeate all parts of the education ecosystem from the development of overarching national education policy and practice, to implementation of programming in local education settings.

Systemic issues such as racism, deficit discourse and the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage have a significant impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' experiences of education. These issues, along with the historical context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' engagement with education, continue to contribute to educational inequality. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, "educational inequality has persisted both despite, and

because of, the education process” (Dean, 2019, p. 1), in the sense that the very system designed to educate and advance the lives of individuals is also the system that has played a significant role in oppressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This concept is articulated by Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson (2016, p. 784) who note that “many lifelong inequalities can often be perpetuated within the very education systems that should act as one of the strongest tools to redress such inequalities”.

4.3.1 Racism

Racism has a profound effect on the learning, development, achievement and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Research indicates that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and those from culturally and linguistically diverse communities face the highest levels of racism in schools, with more than 40% of these students reporting that they had been racially discriminated against by their peers (Priest et al., 2019). Further, 43% of all students reported witnessing incidents of racial discrimination directed towards other students by teachers (Priest et al., 2019).

Moodie et al. (2019, p. 274) conducted “a systematic review of empirical research published between 1989 and 2016 into racism and its impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students” and found that the effects of racism on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were ‘well described and significant’. The research categorised the most common effects of racism on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as “school withdrawal, de-identifying as Indigenous, emotional distress and internalisation of negative beliefs about Indigenous intelligence and academic performance” (Moodie et al., 2019, p. 289). These experiences were found to shape the decisions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people regarding engagement with education both in real-time as students and in the future as parents. The literature on racism points to many inquiries which outline the evolving nature of racism in education from overt acts of discrimination and oppressive practices in the past to more subtle and pervasive forms. Racism has previously only been articulated as discrimination, prejudice, stereotyping and negative representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Blanch, 2011; Keddie, 2013; Mansouri & Jenkins, 2010; Michaelson, 2006; Wilkinson, 2005). However, perceptions of racism have now evolved into more nuanced forms such as deficit thinking and low expectations (Bodkin-Andrews et al., 2013; Helme, 2005; Hewitson, 2007; Sarra, 2008).

Racism in education occurs at many conceptual levels. Paradies (2005, p. 3) outlines three distinct levels which overlap in practice: “internalised racism – the incorporation of racist ideologies within an individual’s world view; interpersonal racism – racist interactions between people; and

systemic/institutional racism – the racist production, control, and access to material, informational, and symbolic resources within society”. Racism in education at the systemic level materialises as practices, policies, processes, conditions or requirements that maintain and reproduce avoidable and unfair inequalities across racial groups (Paradies, 2006). These systemic and structural forms of racism are also deeply embedded in practices and beliefs and perpetuate the widespread unfair treatment and oppression of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Systemic encouragement to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues as part of broader inclusivity and multiculturalism agendas was highlighted by Schulz and Fane (2015) as racism “elided beneath inclusive rhetoric that conflates openly oppressive discourses with those relating to multiculturalism, diversity or human rights” (p. 139). Patrick and Moodie (2016, p. 175) also highlight this, noting that “this is problematic, as multiculturalism does not recognise First Nations status” and such representations aim to erase, diminish and trivialise the notion of Indigenous sovereignty (Vass, 2014b).

The broader discourse on racism positions it as deliberate action to reinforce the dominance of ‘whiteness’ and to perpetuate white privilege (Hardy, 2016; Keddie, 2013; Martino, 2003; Mills, 2006; Paki, 2010). Moreton-Robinson (2004a, p. 75) defines ‘whiteness’ as “the invisible norm against which other races are judged in the construction of identity, representation, subjectivity, nationalism and the law”. In this context, white privilege can be thought of as the unearned access to resources as a result of social group membership (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Moreton-Robinson, 2004a). These concepts are pertinent to the discussion on racism because white society often disassociates itself from being implicated in the construct of Indigenous disadvantage and tends to posit ‘problems’ as stemming from ethnicity and culture.

The study of whiteness in education highlights the structures within education institutions that produce and reproduce white privilege. This can include the symbols, celebrations, days of significance, curriculum content, classroom processes, assessment practices and wider social practices. It is also embedded in concepts of knowledge itself and what counts as knowledge. All of these aspects make up the “silent cultural dominance of whiteness” which “encourages forms of student assimilation in order to succeed, suggesting Australian education may often inhibit and exclude Indigenous students, despite a veneer of policy concerns with inclusion and equity” (Rudolph, 2013, p. 207). Further, Rudolph (2013, p. 214) argues that “confronting issues of whiteness is essential if we are to establish an education system that values diversity and establishes educational justice for Indigenous Australians”.

The literature highlights the impact of racism on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's ability to engage and succeed in education, with racism manifesting in different ways. On an individual level it can manifest in the form of discrimination, prejudice and stereotyping; and at the systemic level in the form of deficit discourse, inclusivity and multiculturalism agendas, and whiteness in education. While there is a significant body of research related to racism and its prevalence and impact, relatively little has been written about how to reduce or eliminate racism (Paradies, 2005). Educational institutions provide the perfect setting to implement interventions to combat racism, with Paradies (2005, p. 14) highlighting the need "to provide anti-racist education that includes intercultural understanding and effective conflict resolution, in age-appropriate format, as an integral part of school curricula". The importance of educational policy and practice acknowledging racism and actively implementing strategies to dismantle it cannot be understated.

4.3.2 Deficit discourses

The second major systemic issue impacting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education are deficit discourses. Discourse can be understood as a set of statements that are systematically organised, and contribute to the construction of a version of the social world, or 'truth' (Foucault, 1972). Discourse "draws attention to the circulation of ideas, the processes by which these ideas shape conceptual and material realities, and the power inequalities that contribute to and result from these processes" (Fogarty et al., 2008, p. vii). Dominant discursive practices are often taken for granted and escape our notice because over time they have just "come to be" (Veyne, 2010, p. 14). In this way, they are thought to reflect the natural order of things.

Deficit discourse "refers to discourse that represents people or groups in terms of deficiency", it "narrowly situates responsibility for problems with the affected individuals or communities, overlooking the larger socioeconomic structures in which they are embedded [and] is implicated with race-based stereotypes" (Fogarty et al., 2008, p. vii). Deficit discourse can be observed at many conceptual levels, including in overarching policy, within education institutions and in relation to individuals where deficit approaches or modes of thinking frame Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity in a narrative of negativity, deficiency and failure (Fforde et al., 2013; Guenther et al., 2013). An example of where deficit discourse can be observed in overarching policy is in the Closing the Gap framework. Since the framework was launched in 2008, in the ensuing 15 years, it has become a catch-all for describing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'disadvantage'. Scholars have highlighted the limitations of 'closing the gap', noting that "a focus on the statistical 'gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is one of the most common manifestations of deficit discourses"

(Fogarty et al., 2015, p. 4), with Smit (2012, p. 370) arguing that 'disadvantage' has become an "umbrella term to cover a wide array of perceived shortcomings".

Deficit discourse can be observed in oppressive structures, policies and practices within educational settings, with Ball (2013, p. 115) noting that "normalisation and exclusion are embedded in the everyday practices of mainstream schooling". Deficit perspectives in relation to student capacity feature heavily in the education literature, with the standard of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' success often articulated at levels below that expected of other Australians. Beresford (2003, p. 27) notes that deficit perspectives are underpinned by a "conservative worldview that Aboriginal people lack the cognitive capacity to succeed at school" [and] "although discredited for several decades among informed educationalists, the view persists among some conservative teachers who continue to believe that a lack of adequate preparation for schooling in the home, poor language and literacy skills, and problems of attendance, health and nutrition explain the failure of many Aboriginal children to thrive in school" (Beresford, 2003, p. 27). This emphasis on cultural and individual deficiencies masks broader systemic inequities that permeate educational institutions (Altman & Fogarty, 2010; Vass, 2012), with Gutiérrez et al. (2009, p. 238) arguing that it is necessary to find ways to oppose "the default scripts of risk, difference, and deficiency".

Nakata and McConaghy (2000) describe the phenomenon 'culturalism', which refers to the tendency to attribute Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational problems to 'culture'. When educational issues are thought of in this way, the corresponding policy response is to solve these through the implementation of a more culturally relevant education. They argue that this focus leaves the major structural and moral bases of injustice which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been subject to unchallenged (McConaghy, 2000). An example of this can be seen in the Australian Curriculum with Lowe and Galstaun (2020, p. 93) arguing that the "structuring of the Australian curriculum directly influences teachers' approaches to constructing learning opportunities" and that it "mis-appropriates and distorts Indigenous knowledge" (p. 95). Education institutions have a historic legacy of being active promoters of racism, exclusion and discrimination, and "unless teachers and other school leaders are aware of the colonial mindset that influences their thinking, they will unwittingly reinscribe the contemporary school experience with tropes of education that are painfully familiar to generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people" (Ma Rhea, 2015, p. 92).

There is an abundance of research that has explored the way in which marginalised social groups have been described in deficit terms. Theory, thinking and approaches that are characterised by deficit discourse, have "typified the subtext of the education systems and their engagement with

Indigenous students across all jurisdictions” [resulting in an] “intergenerational impact, with more than three generations of Indigenous people believing that they cannot perform in the mainstream” (Gray & Beresford, 2008, p. 208). The impact of deficit discourse and perspectives in education at all levels has a significant impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ experiences of education. Deficit discourse is observed in disempowering patterns of thought, language and practice that represents Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in terms of deficiencies and failures. While challenging deficit discourse has gained some traction with a number of scholars, it is still deeply embedded and permeates much of educational policy and practice, with Vass (2012, p. 93) noting that “the enduring impact and influence of deficit thinking, assimilationist ideologies, and race-based assumptions are all built on the legacies associated with dispossession and the ongoing denial of Indigenous sovereignty”.

4.3.3 Intergenerational transmission of disadvantage

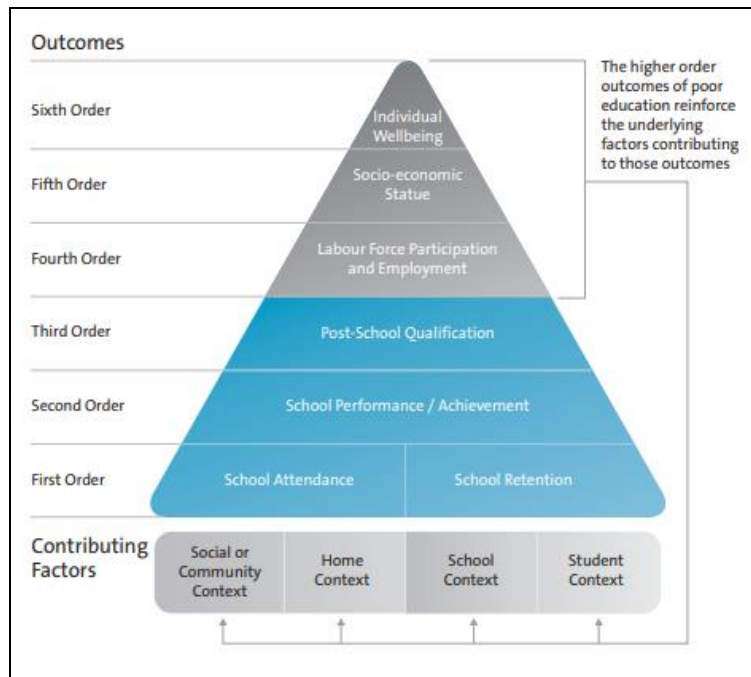
The third systemic issue to be discussed is the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s history of exclusion, marginalisation and alienation from education has meant that we have been unable to obtain the full benefits of a good education. This inability to not only access but to equitably participate in education has led to the social polarisation of generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. When children are raised in challenging socioeconomic circumstances, they themselves tend to grow up to be disadvantaged as adults and subsequently raise their children in similar circumstances. This cycle of disadvantage is referred to in the literature as ‘intergenerational disadvantage’, which can be defined as the reproduction of challenging social or economic circumstances from one generation to the next (Vinson, 2009). In the education context, this is often described as the intergenerational transmission of educational disadvantage (Committee for Economic Development of Australia [CEDA], 2015).

Gray and Beresford (2008, p. 205) note that “dispossession, segregation and assimilation have created intergenerational disadvantage and trauma that impede educational progress among most Indigenous students”. The intergenerational effect of lower educational attainment has been articulated by Doyle and Hill (2008) in their hierarchy of education outcomes. As outlined in Figure 6, Doyle and Hill (2008) describe education outcomes ranging from first order to sixth order, noting that:

At the most basic level education engages students and encourages participation in learning, which is reflected in school attendance and retention. At the next level it promotes the development of skills and the acquisition of knowledge, which is reflected in student

achievement and performance. Student performance in turn influences the capacity of students to access post-school qualifications. These qualifications, combined with school performance, influence labour force participation and employment, which in turn influence socioeconomic status and individual health and wellbeing (p. 38).

Figure 6 – Conceptual framework of intergenerational effect of educational outcomes



Source: Doyle and Hill (2008, p. 38)

This hierarchy shows that the ability to progress from lower to higher order outcomes requires progressing through higher levels of education. Education outcomes are impacted by contributing factors which are classified into four categories – “social or community context, home context, school context and student context” (Doyle & Hill, 2008, p. 38). Doyle and Hill (2008) argue that many, if not most, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are affected by factors across all four contexts. These contexts contribute to how well students will be able to progress through the hierarchy, while the higher order outcomes (of their parents) reinforce the underlying factors contributing to those outcomes. This shows the interdependent nature of many issues contributing to lower educational attainment from generation to generation and the difficulty in breaking the cycle of disadvantage.

The literature on the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage tends to have an economic focus, with earning, income and welfare receipt being the main drivers for research in this area. In the education context, “families can reproduce advantage and disadvantage by directly transferring genetic, social, economic, and cultural resources between parents and children, as well as by

indirectly influencing life choices and pathways through shaping opportunities, experiences and orientations” (Lee et al., 2022, p. 22). However, Lee et al. (2022, p. 26) note that “given the history of colonialism, European settlement, dispossession of lands and discriminatory treatment of Indigenous people in Australia, intergenerational transmission may have less to do with parents and more to do with the trauma and inequities imposed by these broader circumstances”. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] (2018, p. 17) also argues that “there is nothing inevitable about socioeconomic advantage or disadvantage being passed from one generation to another”. A study aimed at addressing entrenched disadvantage in Australia, highlighted that for policies to be effective in addressing ‘Indigenous disadvantage’, they should “be set in collaboration with communities and customisable to the local needs and context; not impinge on a person’s independence and autonomy, and if such policies (for example, income management) are unavoidable, they should be on opt-in and voluntary basis, carefully targeted and evaluated; and address labour market discrimination issues such as unconscious bias” (CEDA, 2015, p. 9).

In reviewing the literature on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, three key systemic issues (racism, deficit discourse and the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage) were identified as having a significant impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s experiences of education. Educational issues cannot be considered in isolation from the broader context, with systemic issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ participation and achievement in education at all levels. The literature points to strong empirical evidence documenting the effects of racism on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in schools. It also highlights deficit discourse, manifesting as: the normalisation and widespread acceptance that there will always be disparities in the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; as well as an articulation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ success at levels below that expected of other Australians. Finally, the importance of understanding the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage was highlighted, emphasising the interdependent nature of issues across the social, home, school and student contexts and how these contribute to a lack of upward social mobility from generation to generation. Systemic issues perpetuate inequalities and are a social justice issue because when they are prevalent within a system, they work against equality by further disadvantaging and marginalising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

4.4 Educational factors and non-educational factors by sector

The initial sections of this chapter focused on providing background and context emerging from the literature on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. This section turns to a large body of

research related to the barriers and factors affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's educational experiences across each of the education sectors from early childhood education through higher education. The focus of this analysis is literature on the educational and non-educational factors affecting the participation and achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in education. It should be noted that much of this research does not take into account the significant and lasting impact of historical policies on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. The research across each of the education sectors have mostly been localised qualitative case studies that are small in scale and overly focused on 'problems'. Racialised and deficit discourses also permeate much of the literature which has been produced predominantly by non-Indigenous researchers. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education research has also, to an extent, been isolated from the broader research related to teacher quality, school leadership and autonomy, professional development and social and emotional wellbeing. An overview of the research in early childhood, schooling, VET and higher education is presented below.

4.4.1 Early childhood

Participation in early childhood education has been identified as one of the key factors influencing children's subsequent achievements at school (Biddle & Bath, 2013; Hewitt & Walter, 2014; Torii et al., 2017), with better language, literacy, numeracy, cognitive and problem-solving skills identified in children who have participated in early childhood education at the start of formal schooling (Harrison et al., 2009; Sylva et al., 2009). Research shows that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have traditionally attended preschool and early childhood education at a lower rate compared to their peers (Dockett et al., 2011; Kitson & Bowes, 2010). Dockett et al. (2011) identify that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have lower performance in cognitive and language tasks upon entry to school compared to their peers. They attribute this gap in school readiness to: lower socioeconomic status; lower preschool participation rates; the presence of risk factors in home and community environments; and differences between home and school environments, particularly in terms of language and culture.

Barriers identified in the literature in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's participation in early childhood education include: "out-of-pocket costs, a limited awareness of services, administrative complexity, lack of transport or locally available services, poor child health, a perception that the child is too young to participate, a lack of confidence in the value of early education services or fear of racism and judgment (AIHW, 2018; Holzinger & Biddle, 2015; Productivity Commission, 2014)" (NIAA, 2020, p. 25). Zubrick and Silburn (2006, p. 165) have argued that the disparities between the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

children and non-Indigenous children are evident on entry to formal schooling and either remain or continue to widen as they progress through schooling.

The Commonwealth has increasingly highlighted the importance of early childhood education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Increasing early childhood participation is one of the key indicators of the Closing the Gap framework used to chart the success of government strategies in alleviating the under-engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across the many activities across the state. The literature has a strong focus on gaps and deficiencies, resulting in a collective narrative pointing to deficits within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, their families and communities. There is limited scholarship on the structural and systemic barriers to participation in early childhood education.

4.4.2 Schooling

In schooling, standardised assessments and data collections indicate that there are significant achievement gaps in literacy and numeracy achievement, and in the attendance and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students when compared to their peers. The literature identifies a range of in-school and out-of-school factors that affect the participation and achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in schooling.

The literature suggests that relative disadvantage is strongly associated with poorer school attendance from the beginning of formal schooling (Hancock et al., 2013), with regular school attendance found to be crucial for academic success, particularly in the literacy and numeracy domains (Gillan et al., 2017). The frequency of school attendance has been highlighted by Purdie and Buckley (2010) as important, with their research finding that missing even half a day of school a week (less than 90% attendance) is associated with a drop in academic success. The Commonwealth has had a significant focus on attendance for decades, and in particular remote attendance, with the literature often used to argue for the implementation of punitive measures to enforce attendance. An example of this was the School Enrolment and Attendance Measures which threatened to quarantine the welfare payments of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families if their children failed to attend school regularly. Justman and Peyton (2018) rightly argue that:

withholding welfare payments from truly needy families in these circumstances is problematic on various levels, not least of which is the immediate harm it may cause the children it means to help, creating new obstacles that may further impede their regular school attendance [and] moreover, it places all the responsibility for poor attendance on the

family, ignoring the role of the education system and the broader environment as contributing factors (p. 224).

Guenther et al. (2022, p. 4) sum up the situation by arguing that “the priority that governments have placed on remote school attendance in the last 20 years is based on flawed assumptions that attendance leads to educational achievement, particularly academic achievement”.

The quality of teaching and effective school leadership have been identified as critical factors in students’ educational experiences at school. The quality of teaching is recognised as the largest ‘in school’ influence, accounting for around 30% of the variation in student achievement (Hattie, 2009). High quality teaching is a key contributor to improving student achievement with teachers playing a crucial role, both through their pedagogies and everyday interactions with their students (Productivity Commission, 2016). School leadership is also highlighted as playing a significant role in improving educational outcomes. Principals who have high expectations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, who facilitate the integration of culture within schools and build cultures of excellence are able to elicit better educational outcomes (Burgess, Fricker, et al., 2023; Trimmer et al., 2021). Despite a wealth of literature on the topic of quality teaching and effective school leadership, there remains a problematic gap between theory and everyday practice. Moodie et al. (2021, p. 8) note “there is often a disconnect between practice and outcomes [and] this means that there is often some distance between what teachers think they do and what they actually are doing in the classroom or in their relationships with Indigenous students”.

A range of other in-school factors impacting on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ experiences of schooling have been identified in the literature. These include, students’ previous negative experiences with school, alienation from school, or an earlier lack of educational success (Doyle & Hill, 2008). A recent study which examined trends in suspension, exclusion and enrolment cancellation incidents over a six-year period for students in Queensland government schools found that “the scale and nature of Indigenous overrepresentation in exclusionary discipline incidents in [Queensland] indicate clear need for further research to secure political commitment to systemic inclusive school reform” (Graham et al., 2023, p. 167). This has implications for the ‘school-to-prison pipeline’, as “almost half (49%) of the young people aged 10–17 in detention on an average day in 2020–21 were Indigenous” (AIHW, 2022, p. 1). This is despite making up “only about 6% of young people aged 10–17 in Australia” (AIHW, 2022, p. 1). The overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth in detention prompted the inclusion of a target in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. The target aims to “reduce the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (10–17 years) in detention by at least 30%, by 2031” (Department of the Prime Minister and

Cabinet, 2020, p. 33), which equates to a proposed reduction from “31.9 per 10,000 young people on an average day in 2018–19 to 22.3 per 10,000 young people by 2030–31” (AIHW, 2022, p. 1). This highlights the critical importance of systemic inclusive reform to counter current exclusion practices.

There is some evidence to support a range of other social, economic and environmental factors negatively affecting student achievement. These factors have been highlighted in the literature, including: limited access to or use of mainstream services, poverty or low household income, language barriers of families and students (Doyle & Hill, 2008); while the prior educational experience of parents, and level of parental education attainment has been found to positively correlate with the academic success of their child (Doyle & Hill, 2008; Higgins & Morley, 2014). Remoteness has also been identified as a contributing factor, as the further a student resides from a metropolitan centre, the larger the gaps in academic achievement between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous students (Productivity Commission, 2016). Finally, the literature points to health, safety and wellbeing as essential for children to engage with and succeed at school. Students who live in secure, not-overcrowded housing and a safe community environment will have lower stress levels, better sleep patterns and improved overall health, with these factors directly linked to improved educational outcomes and school performance (Doyle & Hill, 2008; Productivity Commission, 2016).

In reviewing the literature related to schooling, much of the research is viewed through the lens of ‘issues’, ‘concerns’ and ‘problems’. Educational institutions are predominantly “built and continue to operate on colonial structures” (Khalifa et al., 2019, p. 583) that largely undervalue the heritage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and work against supporting us in the preservation of our cultures. The Commonwealth reports annually on many of the indicators related to attendance, achievement in literacy and numeracy and completion of formal schooling, with increases in these measures often cited as the success of the education system in helping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Khalifa et al. (2019, p. 586) argue that “Westernised measures may signal progress for those who embrace Western education [however] standardisation is not always the goal for Indigenous communities, and they have not been linked to community empowerment and progress”. They go on to argue that, “in fact, colonial schools have served to stifle the self-determination and existence of Indigenous peoples” (Khalifa et al., 2019, p. 586).

4.4.3 Vocational education and training

The literature on the VET sector highlights a range of barriers in relation to the participation and achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in this sector. VET has been seen as a stepping stone for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to navigate their way into the labour

market, with the broader narrative linking VET to economic development. Research has found that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are more likely to participate in VET, with young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students indicating a preference for VET than university (Biddle, 2013b). Annually, there are around 10 times more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in VET than in higher education (Ackehurst et al., 2017). The barriers to successful course completion and securing skilled employment, as articulated in the literature, fall into four broad categories, including: personal factors; family and community influences; education and training factors; and social-contextual factors (Ackehurst et al., 2017; Windley, 2017).

Alford and James (2007) highlight low levels of literacy and numeracy and low motivation as barriers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' participation in VET. This was supported by Karmel et al. (2014) who found that readiness issues affect VET participation, particularly in relation to adult literacy and sufficient preparation at school, with this view also noted in relation to other pathways such as pre-apprenticeship training (Biddle et al., 2014). Aspirations were also a key feature of the literature in relation to perceptions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people having low educational aspirations (Ackehurst et al., 2017). Conversely, the literature also highlights the mismatch between the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and mainstream ideas of educational attainment (Barney, 2016; Osborne & Guenther, 2013). The literature also highlighted a range of education and training factors adversely impacting success in VET, including: culturally inappropriate content and teaching methods; a lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff; and a lack of vocational and pastoral support (Alford & James, 2007). It also pointed to family and community influences affecting successful completions in VET, including a lack of education, experience and support for students, as well as poorly developed networks with industry and employers (Alford & James, 2007). Social-contextual factors that were found to have an impact, included the apparent fear of mainstream work experience and placements, and racism in and beyond the institutional setting (Alford & James, 2007). Differences based on geographic region were also emphasised in the literature highlighting issues with a 'one-size-fits all' approach to training and the inability of institutions to accommodate cultural diversity as a key factor affecting participation in remote communities (Cuervo et al., 2015).

The VET literature points to a range of institutional factors requiring attention, including: the provision of culturally appropriate content and teaching methods; increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff; better vocational and pastoral support; as well as the impact of racism both within and beyond the institutional setting. Criticism of research in the VET sector highlights that more evidence is required on the long-term outcomes of participation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as existing studies suffer from selection bias (Karmel et al., 2014). A key

theme emerging from the literature is the perception of VET as a potential panacea for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as it is often viewed as a second chance to secure Year 12 or equivalent qualifications or to provide pathways into employment (Ackehurst et al., 2017). This perception has fuelled the Commonwealth's interest in this sector in supporting its efforts to increase Indigenous employment. Increasing Commonwealth government-supported training opportunities in VET (with equity as a key policy approach), has been against the backdrop of a significant shift from government delivery of VET to the marketisation of VET provision. Zoellner and Stephens (2019) have problematised this issue noting that:

increased prevalence of conceptions of equity that are defined in economic terms (rather than social good) has facilitated changes in policies that have reduced/eliminated culturally appropriate local decision-making and ownership of the education/employment nexus in favour of priorities and programs determined by central government agencies (p. 6).

4.4.4 Higher education

The literature on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's participation in higher education articulates the crucial role the sector plays in reducing disadvantage through improving employment, economic and health outcomes (Behrendt et al., 2012; Pechenkina & Anderson, 2011). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' participation in higher education has increased significantly over the last few decades, however despite increased enrolments, the literature points to a range of personal access, educational, institutional and cultural barriers that affect participation and achievement in higher education (Behrendt et al., 2012; Kemp, 2014).

Personal access barriers to the pursuit of higher education feature strongly in the literature, with financial pressures, living away from home, health-related issues and previous employment all having notable impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Behrendt et al., 2012; Pechenkina & Anderson, 2011). Educational barriers impacting entry into higher education institutions, as articulated in the literature, include low levels of prior academic achievement and academic readiness, with the most significant barrier experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students once they have already commenced study being the high demands of academic study (Behrendt et al., 2012; Pechenkina & Anderson, 2011). Institutional barriers are described in the literature as those within higher education institutions that affect participation and achievement. These include: the level and quality of support provided to students; entrance requirements and university support for enrolments; and participation and completions (Hearn et al., 2021; Oliver et al., 2016). Although there is strong evidence on institutional barriers impacting on access, it is more difficult to evaluate actions aimed at addressing these (Naylor et al., 2013).

There is evidence to suggest that university pathway programs can be highly effective at overcoming access barriers and entrance requirements (Ober et al., 2017), however further research into effective actions to address these barriers is required. University culture is another major barrier outlined in the literature – issues identified relate to the lack of perceived support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research programs, knowledges and cultures; a lack of culturally affirmative learning environments; and low levels of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment and representation in governance and management positions (Asmar & Page, 2018; Coates et al., 2021; Lydster & Murray, 2019). The literature notes that increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment (particularly in teaching and research positions) is critical in the provision of role models for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, however more evidence is needed on the best way to achieve a critical mass in the academic workforce (O'Sullivan, 2019).

In relation to successful completion of university, research highlights that the completion rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are lower than that of other students. A report tracking enrolments in 2005 against completions by 2013 found that only 46.7% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students completed their degree, compared to 68.9% of students from a low socioeconomic background and 73.9% of non-Indigenous students (Edwards & McMillan, 2015). Socioeconomic status is often argued as being a major factor affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in higher education. However, a review of the participation of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in higher education found that while there are similarities in the educational participation patterns of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and those from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people face additional distinctive challenges (James et al., 2008).

The literature on the higher education sector is more advanced than the other education sectors, however, challenges in increasing participation, retention and completions still plague much of the research agenda in this sector. The Commonwealth has implemented a range of strategies to address these issues, with varying levels of success. That said, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander higher education enrolments have been increasing over time. Consistent with the other education sectors, 'problems and issues' language permeates much of the literature on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' participation and achievement in the higher education sector. This is observed within the deficit framing of apparent poor performance, attrition and completion rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, inadequate academic skills and limited cultural capital (Burgess, 2017; Pechenkina, 2019). Pechenkina (2019, p. 497) highlights the problem with this view, arguing that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are positioned "by the dominant university systems as a 'problematic' homogenous group at risk of failure and needing support".

This section provided an overview of the literature on the educational and non-educational factors affecting the participation and achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in education across the early childhood, schooling, vocational educational and training and higher education sectors, and in doing so, it highlighted a diverse body of research. While there is some emerging research challenging deficit and racialised discourses within education, and a growing body of decolonising research, much of the literature points to the deficiencies of individuals, families and communities as the primary reason for the failure of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to thrive in the Western education system.

Educational research across the four education sectors has mostly been localised qualitative case studies that are small in scale. This research has also been found to be overly focused on ‘problems’, with a concentration on particular practices and outcomes, without extricating contributing or confounding factors (Burgess et al., 2019). This view has is supported by many scholars, with (Khalifa et al., 2019, p. 586) noting that “Western notions of educational advancement are not reflective of the ways in which Indigenous people measure educational progress [and] broadly speaking, Indigenous peoples are most interested in how educational experiences will improve communities, humanity, or natural resources (Ahnee-Benham & Napier, 2002; Brayboy, 2005; Henderson et al., 2015; Pheko & Linchwe, 2008)”. While there has been considerable research into the barriers and factors affecting the participation and achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from early childhood through to higher education, there is limited research on effective measures to address these barriers or how to implement wholesale structural and systemic change within education institutions.

4.5 Approaches to good practice

The challenges and perceived solutions to addressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational ‘disadvantage’ have been debated since the 1960s (Malin & Maidment, 2003). This highlights that there is a lack of reliable evidence and consensus about the most appropriate policy responses to overcome barriers to achieve educational success. In reviewing the literature, a number of approaches to good practice emerge. These have largely been implemented at local levels and have been found to positively impact participation and achievement. However, there is an absence of a coordinated whole-of-system approach to addressing educational barriers and there has been almost no research into the role of the Commonwealth in driving the necessary changes to advance educational equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The Aboriginal Voices Project is the most comprehensive review of educational literature related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners. Under this project, researchers reviewed more than

13,000 publications addressing the experiences and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners in schooling (Moodie et al., 2021). The key findings from the project note the following:

[It] allows us to make some claims about what is working well: where teachers are supported to engage in robust professional learning, and families and communities are meaningfully involved in the life of schools and decision-making, outcomes for Indigenous students improve. Yet we find there is still some distance between practice and perceptions of practice, between mapping cause and effect, and between the aspirations of Indigenous students and families, and the ability of settler colonial education systems to meet those aspirations (Moodie et al., 2021, p. 5).

These findings are supported by the following review of educational literature that points to five key areas that are common across the literature that are critical in providing quality educational experiences. These include: the involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in educational decision-making; effective pedagogical approaches; the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and perspectives; effective school leadership and quality teaching; and systems level thinking, and are discussed below.

4.5.1 Involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in educational decision-making

The participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in all stages of the design, implementation and evaluation of education policies and programs is vital to their success. Unfortunately, this is not common practice, with governments and education institutions often lacking the mechanisms to adequately involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in these processes. Research points to the imperative of education institutions to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in all educational matters (Munns et al., 2008; Munns et al., 2013), with a small study finding that genuine collaboration with communities regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in the curriculum facilitated a valuable exchange of knowledge and ongoing positive relationships (Wray, 2008).

At a local level, engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families has been found to be important in supporting better learning outcomes (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012). While there is little research on the effectiveness of programs designed specifically to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents in their children's education, their involvement is nonetheless important. Parental engagement exists on a continuum, ranging from those who participate at schools in the form of volunteering, talking to teachers and attending events, to those

who assume the role of at-home educator which involves promoting academic socialisation, increasing their child's enjoyment of learning, discussing learning strategies and fostering educational aspirations (Chenhall et al., 2011; Emerson et al., 2012; Higgins & Morley, 2014). The literature discusses the effects of parental influence on attendance, engagement, motivation and attitudes towards education (Higgins & Morley, 2014; MacLaren, 2011; Mansour & Martin, 2009), however this engagement is highly dependent on a number of key factors, including the parent's own experiences with education institutions (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008; Muller, 2009), socioeconomic factors (Berthelsen & Walker, 2008; Mansour & Martin, 2009; Walker & Berthelsen, 2010) and health and wellbeing (McInerney et al., 1998).

School-community partnerships have been a key feature of contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific education policies, with research pointing to the benefits of these partnerships in promoting more positive educational experiences (Gower et al., 2021). However, there is a range of factors that impact these partnerships, with research also highlighting the short-lived and often tokenistic nature of schools' efforts when engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, noting that "this typically manifests through designated 'Aboriginal' events (such as NAIDOC week, Sorry Day, Reconciliation Day)" (Bishop et al., 2021, p. 183). School-community partnerships can create the conditions for improved educational outcomes, however there "is no clear evidence that efforts have been made towards establishing an empirical basis to verify the processes of models that lead to and sustain [these]" (Gower et al., 2021, p. 360). In order for these partnerships to be effective, they need to be "genuine, equal and reciprocal in all aspects" (Gower et al., 2021, p. 362).

A systematic review of factors affecting school and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community engagement identified a number of enablers for productive school and community collaborations, including the "incorporation of cultural and language programs, the inclusion of local community knowledge in the schools' curriculum and the enhancement of the educative role of Elders" (Lowe et al., 2019, p. 261). It also found that "while policies have exhorted schools to establish collaborations with Indigenous families, the realities of bringing these to actual fruition are problematic, except in those cases where schools demonstrated exemplary leadership in opening themselves to an examination of the policies and practices which have been shown to educationally and epistemically marginalise Indigenous students" (Lowe et al., 2019, p. 266)

4.5.2 Pedagogical approaches

Western education theory and philosophy forms the basis of the Australian education system, providing the pedagogical framework from which teachers draw, to support students in their

learning. Unfortunately, compensatory education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is entrenched in education policy and practice, with little being done to challenge this deficit approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

Alternative teaching pedagogies have been presented by several scholars, including Osborne's (1996) culturally responsive pedagogy for Torres Strait Islander students which identified nine assertions that capture ways of thinking and actions to support teachers to enhance their teaching practice, as well as the 'Eight Aboriginal ways of learning' pedagogical framework by Yunkaporta (2010), for teachers to use as a starting point to include Aboriginal perspectives and learning techniques in their practice. While not specifically developed for this purpose, frameworks such as these are synonymous with 'Indigenous learning styles' and useful for engaging students, but there is no empirical evidence to suggest that they actually improve educational outcomes. Some scholars (Scott, 2010; Vass, 2018) have raised concerns with learning style theories, noting that many of these practices are "taken up naively and superficially as being *for* Indigenous students" (Vass, 2018, p. 99) [resulting in] "the perpetuation of deficit and stereotypical thinking about students and communities" (Vass, 2018, p. 97). Instead of a focus on strategies or frameworks to cater for learning styles, a more effective approach is the adoption of culturally relevant or culturally responsive teaching practices that incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pedagogies, knowledges, and ways of being. With this in mind, Ladson-Billings (1995) identified three main components of culturally relevant pedagogy: students must experience academic success, students must develop cultural competence to assist in developing positive ethnic and social identities, and students must develop critical consciousness to challenge the status quo and critique societal inequalities. The inclusion of all of these elements, in particular, the development of critical consciousness, is as important for students as it is for educators.

A conceptual model for an 'Australian culturally nourishing model of schooling' has been proposed by Lowe et al. (2021, p. 468), which is summarised as a "localized model of leadership, pedagogic practices, family engagement, and student voice". The model includes four key elements: learning from Country; cultural inclusion; epistemic mentoring; and teacher professional change to be incorporated as a whole-of-school approach for the provision of a quality education for not only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, but all students. Lowe et al. (2021, p. 468) argue that "whole of school initiatives that genuinely engage in depth with these four elements, as intertwined and interrelated parts of a living localized learning community, will more likely result in educational experiences that improve the academic achievements of Indigenous students, while also further strengthening their identities and connections to place".

4.5.3 Inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and perspectives

The recognition and inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and perspectives in the planning and implementation of education policy and practice is important in increasing awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and identity, as well as providing additional social and cultural dimensions to Western perspectives. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges are diverse and cover a range of disciplines from cultural to environmental and scientific, however it is important to note that knowledge is not homogenous and not necessarily shared by everyone in the community. In recent years there has been emerging scholarly work on ‘Indigenous Knowledges’, which has been attributed to knowledge becoming a global currency (Nakata, 2007a). This has provided an opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to “insert their own narratives, critique, research and knowledge production” into the realms of the non-Indigenous ‘corpus’ – the “body of knowledge, both historical and ongoing, that is produced by others”, “about us” (Nakata, 2007a, p. 8). While Indigenous Knowledges has permeated the realms of tertiary education, it is yet to be incorporated into discourses in school education (Christie, 2006; Nakata, 2007a; Tur et al., 2010).

In the schooling sector, there has been a strong focus on the incorporation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives into the curriculum. There has been a range of initiatives across each of the jurisdictions, such as Queensland’s Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Perspectives in schools program, launched in 2004 (Department of Education and Training (QLD), 2008) and Western Australia’s Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework implemented in 2015 (Department of Education (WA), 2015). The Australian Curriculum, since 2014, has included Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures as a key cross-curriculum priority area. ACARA (2022a) envisions that through the opportunity to learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories, all students will deepen their knowledge of Australia and engage in reconciliation, respect and recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. In their analysis of the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in the Australian Curriculum, Lowe and Yunkaporta (2013, p. 12) argue that “it would be fair to summarise the current inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content as weak, often tokenistic and overwhelmingly unresponsive to historical and contemporary realities”. They also note that “the curriculum does little to provide teachers with content that would enable them to explore with students both the social context in which knowledge is developed, and the possibility that Indigenous knowledge has its own ontological validity that is independent of that of the ‘hard’ sciences” (Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2013, p. 8). This is further compounded by the view that in relation to the incorporation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, there is a “mainstream belief that the ‘real’ business of schooling should come

first, and ‘Aboriginal’ content slotted around the edges” (Bishop et al., 2021, p. 193). The challenge going forward is for schools to incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in a meaningful way where equal value is placed on Indigenous Knowledge systems and alternative perspectives to dominant Western paradigms are seen as complementary.

4.5.4 Effective school leadership and quality teaching

The quality of educational experience is highly dependent on teachers and school leaders. Consecutive government reports (Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group, 2014) identify initial teacher education programs as critical in preparing graduate teachers for diverse classroom contexts. While initial teacher education has been the focus of reform, there is high variability in the quality of preservice programs offered across the higher education sector. The focus of teacher training is often on being neutral and objective, with issues such as inequality and racism not critically examined, resulting in educators being ill-equipped to serve the needs of all children (Osborne, 1996). By instilling in preservice teachers the mantras of being a classless society or that those who want to, can do well, “teachers become perpetuators of cultural capital” (Osborne, 1996, p. 292).

Australia’s education workforce is predominantly from a middle-class, Anglo-Saxon background. Teachers’ perceptions of the potential of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have been ‘learned’ and are influenced by a considerable history. Partington (2003) suggests that many of the difficulties experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in schools are predominantly artefacts of teacher’s beliefs and practices, rather than the behaviours or attributes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. These deficit perceptions are being increasingly challenged by the reality of an emerging number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders, and a growing body of research and evidence of the importance of strengths-based approaches that feature high expectations and the important of building educational excellence, and promote these through professional development programs for school leaders and educators.

The literature on what constitutes ‘quality’ teaching is more elusive, with Martin et al. (2017, p. 1159) noting that “much of the existing debate on quality teaching and pedagogy is based upon rhetoric and assertion rather than evidence”. In their review of the literature on effective teaching practices for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, Lloyd et al. (2015) identified a wealth of published literature inundated by opinion, with very little known about the actual influence on learning. They also argue that “adjusting teaching practice is likely problematic if systemic issues influencing education are not similarly considered and adjusted” (Lloyd et al., 2015, p. 13).

Similar issues permeate the school leadership literature, with a systematic review undertaken by Trimmer et al. (2021) of school leadership and Aboriginal student outcomes, highlighting a number of emerging themes. Firstly, the importance of the relationship to and collaboration between principals and community, noting that “successful leadership in Indigenous schools requires a collective effort that needs to be co-constructed to empower community leaders, serve individuals and the community” (Trimmer et al., 2021, p. 7), with trust, respect, reciprocity and cultural understanding as essential (Lowe, 2017). Secondly, while models and styles of leadership feature heavily in the literature, they conclude that “there was no one best method of leadership because all communities are unique, [however] distributed and collective leadership styles were found to have positive results across the studies” (Trimmer et al., 2021, p. 9). Finally, the literature points to the “impacts of governance, policy, procedures and accountability requirements on leadership and decision-making”, with Trimmer et al. (2021, p. 10) highlighting the ‘incongruities’ between the discourses taking place within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities’ and those taking place with education institutions.

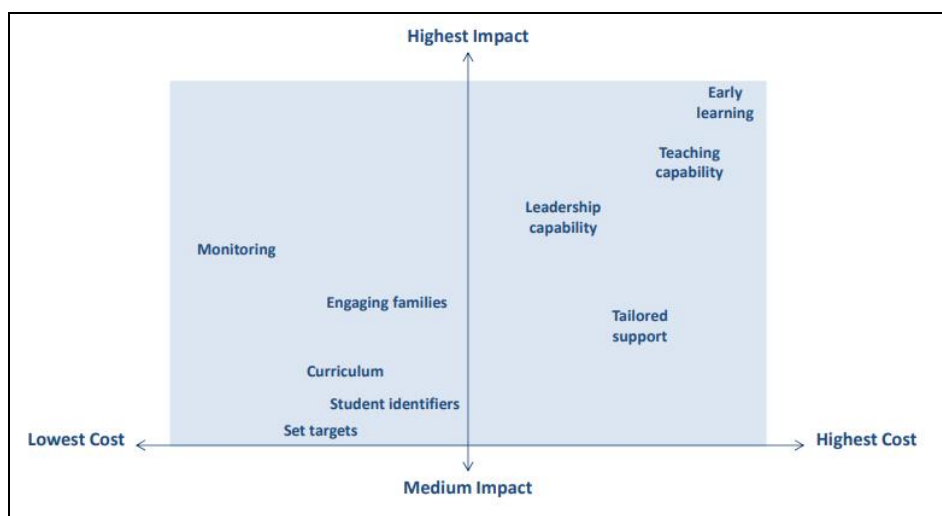
Effective teachers and school leaders are able to build strong, positive relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, their families and communities, with these relationships critical to successful engagement (Bennet & Lancaster, 2012; Byrne & Munns, 2012). They also consider the political, structural and historic issues that have impacted on teaching practice, which starts with developing their critical consciousness (Freire, 2018; Thorpe et al., 2021) to better understand and be able to examine the effects of colonisation, racism and power relations on the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2016). The challenges of school leaders demonstrating culturally responsive school leadership were highlighted by Burgess, Fricker, et al. (2023, p. 126) who note that “any cultural responsiveness was motivated by an assumption of limitations within the children and an overarching desire for Eurocentric defined measures of success”. Trimmer et al. (2021, p. 12) argue that “new models of professional development that include intercultural awareness, and identified leadership models are also required for new leadership patterns to become established and sustainable systemically”.

4.5.5 Systems level thinking

When considering reform processes to improve the educational outcomes of students, effort is required at all levels, including the system and school levels, with action often best taken at the system level in order to initiate and drive change at the local level (OECD, 2017). System-level educational reforms in Australia to date have focused on interventions in particular areas, including the curriculum, teacher and principal standards, schools resourcing and standardised testing. The

literature has few examples of reforms that have used systems thinking to demonstrate measurable improvements in educational outcomes. Systems thinking refers to “an approach which recognises the dynamic complexity of an education system and works with the end goal of improving learning outcomes at scale” (Ndaruhutse et al., 2019, p. 25). The OECD has identified a number of system-level priorities for supporting progress for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and have grouped these according to cost and likely impact on student outcomes (see Figure 7) (OECD, 2017, p. 18).

Figure 7 - System-level priorities supporting progress for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, likely impact on student outcomes and cost



Source: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] (2017, p. 18)

From the OECD’s research, they have identified three system-level initiatives “that should be included in any strategy to improve the educational experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students” (OECD, 2017, p. 18). These include: “high quality early learning opportunities; supporting teachers and leaders to develop awareness, capability and confidence; and monitoring progress at system and school levels across key indicators” (OECD, 2017, p. 19). Ndaruhutse et al. (2019, p. 11) offer the following point-of-view: “systems thinking in education offers a glimpse of a different future, it can help policy makers achieve faster and more sustained progress in education”. The Commonwealth, as the primary national authority and power in relation to education, is uniquely placed to drive systemic change in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

Five key approaches to good practices were discussed in this section. Many of these approaches feature in contemporary education policy. There is little doubt that these measures undertaken and implemented into everyday practice within education institutions would contribute to a better

educational experience for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and thus create the conditions for improved outcomes. However, education systems lack the capacity to effectively implement these approaches in a holistic and coordinated manner. The participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in all stages of the design, implementation and evaluation of education policies and programs is vital to their success, with governments and education institutions requiring a significant uplift in capability to develop the mechanisms to adequately involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in these processes. There is also a need to challenge compensatory education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as well as for education institutions to incorporate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in meaningful ways. This should include equal value being placed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledge systems and how these complement Western knowledge. The literature also points to the importance of effective school leadership and quality teaching in creating the conditions for improved educational experiences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, with the need for educators to develop critical consciousness and culturally responsive practices.

The approaches to good practice that have been discussed are critical in supporting the participation and achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in education, however, in isolation from a broader systems approach to addressing educational inequity, will have little impact in reducing educational disparities.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the literature related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, in particular, the current understandings and discourses in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' participation and achievement in education. This included an outline of the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' engagement with education; the systemic issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; a review of the barriers and factors affecting the participation and achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in education across the four sectors; and finally, an outline of approaches to good practice common across the literature. These aspects, building on the analysis of the previous chapter add to the picture of educational service provision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. They also add further insight into how education is experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across the life course. This review highlighted aspects of a large body of literature on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational practice and policy, with one major theme emerging – there is clear consensus that the current educational situation requires action, it is the evidence on how to

adequately implement sustainable approaches to improve practice in a holistic manner that remains unclear.

The historical context provided background information on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' engagement with education. Stemming from this history, education can be seen to manifest as two distinct problems for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Firstly, the standard of education that has been made available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has been inferior to that experienced by other Australians, and secondly, the effects of colonisation continue to impact the everyday lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their interactions with education systems. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families have a living memory of education being used as an instrument of disempowerment, to disrupt cultures, languages, knowledge and identity. It is therefore fundamental that any discussion regarding the need to improve educational outcomes starts with a conversation about the historical context and ongoing impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's engagement with education today.

Three key systemic issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' participation and achievement in education were discussed. The first of these being racism, with strong empirical evidence documenting the effects of racism on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in schools. Secondly, deficit discourse was highlighted across all levels of social organisation. This was evident in the normalisation and widespread acceptance of disparities in educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, as well as in the articulation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' success at levels below that expected of other Australians. Thirdly, the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage was discussed, with the literature demonstrating the interdependent nature of issues across the social, home, school and student contexts and how these contribute to educational underachievement from generation to generation, making it difficult to break the cycle of disadvantage. The three key systemic issues permeate all parts of the education ecosystem from the development of overarching national education policy and practice to implementation of programming in local education settings. With these issues so intricately embedded, they are often assumed to reflect the natural order of things, presenting a strong rationale to focus on cultural safety, holistic approaches, strengths-based approaches and the provision of culturally and contextually relevant learning environments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Educational issues cannot be considered in isolation from the broader context, with racism, deficit discourse and intergenerational transmission of disadvantage having a significant impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' experiences of education.

The review of the literature on the educational and non-educational factors impacting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' participation and achievement in education across the early childhood, schooling, VET and higher education sectors highlighted a range of complementary and contradictory perspectives. Many of the studies were localised qualitative case studies that were overly focused on 'problems' with racialised and deficit discourses permeating the literature. Education research is often hampered by a range of issues. Mellor and Corrigan (2004) have articulated these as being scattered, small scale, mostly qualitative and isolated from broader research discourses. They also highlight the tendency for findings to promote single solutions. It is important to note that most of the education research in Australia has been done by non-Indigenous researchers, with the existing body of evidence used to inform Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy not produced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This gives rise to ethical issues about the roles and responsibilities of non-Indigenous researchers and how they examine their own sociocultural position, power and standpoint.

A common theme emerging from the literature was that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational disadvantage was seen as stemming from complex social, cultural, economic and environmental factors experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, with almost no acknowledgement of the role of colonisation in contributing to these circumstances. Lowe (2018, p. 127) argues that educational underachievement is "by and large the aggregated localised consequences of the complexities of colonisation, and the enacted histories of intergenerational educational disadvantage". Education literature largely fails to recognise institutional factors which contribute to the exclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from education and instead focuses on perceived deficits of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and communities.

The final section outlined some approaches to good practice that are common across the literature. The involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in educational decision-making at all levels relating to education policy and practice was seen as critical. As was the adoption of alternative pedagogical approaches and the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and perspectives that embodied Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander values, philosophies and epistemologies. Effective school leadership and quality teaching were recognised as key areas that contribute to improved educational experiences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, while systems thinking was identified as a valuable approach when considering innovative solutions to educational issues, through its promotion of the importance of overarching strategies and frameworks in ensuring a holistic approach to education.

Two broad perspectives underpin much of the literature and debate on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. The first is a focus on the urgency of improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, closing gaps and addressing shortfalls and underperformance by following global trends in education towards standardised measurement and ranking of educational achievement and attainment. This perspective heavily places responsibility for the poorer educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with them and their families, highlighting a behavioural framing of educational issues. The second perspective, largely promoted by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars, is a focus on challenging deficit discourse, valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges, ways of learning and understanding through the lens of decolonising educational institutions and systems. Despite growing decolonising scholarship by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous scholars, this hasn't even begun to address, in any sustained way, many of the issues in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational policy and practice landscape.

The review of existing literature has served to provide further context about the educational experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It also emphasised the literature that has been used as a basis for policy development, including the discourses and narratives that have been relied upon as 'truth' and have therefore informed the approaches and overarching directions for educational policy and practice. The Commonwealth has, over the last decade or so, increasingly promoted evidence-based policy development, with research drawn upon to inform approaches to policy development, evaluation and program improvement (Head, 2013). When research is primarily undertaken from Western perspectives and points to the deficiencies of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as the primary reasons for the failure to thrive in education, the natural policy responses developed by policy makers are those which seek to address these deficiencies and place priority on activity aimed at improving aspects of individuals, families and communities. This has implications for how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational issues are viewed, because modern discourses built from the sociology of the dominant culture result in the reproduction of inequities. Key themes underpinning much of the literature relate to assimilationist, meritocratic and racialised narratives, these are discussed in detail in Chapter 6. The analysis of language and discourses allows for the exposure of unequal social hierarchies and power structures (Hall, 1997), which is important in understanding the dominant narratives that inform policy development and in turn educational practice.

Not all evidence is created equal and what counts as evidence is subjective. The research and evidence outlined in this chapter is used to justify many of the policy decisions related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. Policy makers often lack the skills to critically analyse research,

or the ability to utilise decolonising methodologies to better understand the underlying assumptions that inform research. When policy is developed based on flawed assumptions or particular problematisations, the effectiveness of that policy solution is compromised from the start. This is compounded by policy makers' deep-seated naivety about the impact of colonisation, with many often diminishing the social, economic and ideological effects and how these continue to manifest in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. When you consider the language associated with education research that point to problems, issues and concerns, as well as the narratives used as a basis for educational policy development, it is not surprising that decades of education policies and strategies have been unable to make any significant inroads towards addressing educational inequity. This is summed up by McConaghy (2000, p. 187) who notes that "equity in education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people needs to be understood as something beyond the potential to be 'more like' dominant culture Australians".

Chapter 5 – Dominant ideologies in education policy

5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the way in which narratives and discourses shape the educational experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This chapter follows from previous chapters which provided: an introduction to the research topic, the aims of this study, background about myself and my positionality in relation to this study; an outline of the theoretical framework and methodological approach that underpinned and guided this study; context and background about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in Australia (including an overview of the educational service provision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people); and an analysis of information and evidence from the literature associated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

The analysis within this chapter serves to complete the picture of educational service for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by undertaking an interdiscursive analysis of representations in education policy together with linguistic analysis of text and broad narrative analysis of problem representations using key Australian education policy texts. Fairclough's (1995) analytical framework for Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was utilised to describe: how the government's education policies position Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners (discourse practice); the social framing of education policy (sociocultural practice); and how these policies influence the educational experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (narratives). A broad narrative analysis of problem representations utilising the What's the Problem Represented to be? (WPR) approach was undertaken to interrogate: the solutions that policy texts suggest; how the 'problem' of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education is represented; as well as the underpinning presuppositions, silences, and effects of these problem representations on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Bacchi, 2012).

In undertaking this analysis, I find that the dominant discourses informing the development of education policy that are based in difference are counter-productive for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Secondly, I highlight an overarching hegemonic narrative that has become synonymous with the story of 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education'. Thirdly, I articulate how the success of education policy is hampered by multiple competing and indiscriminate discourses. Fourthly, I argue that an underlying paternalistic and Western-oriented meta discourse disempowers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from exercising agency in relation to their own education. Finally, I raise the importance of: including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

voices in educational policy development; acknowledging the power of language in shaping educational experiences; and the urgent need to shift the educational paradigm by privileging and elevating counternarratives that challenge dominant ideologies and assumptions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners.

5.1.1 Education policy

Education is an important area of focus for governments and their citizens across the world. For the most part, the purpose of education in the Western world is wholly economic (Rutherford et al., 2019). Education is seen to contribute to social stability and drive long-term economic growth, while also being a powerful change agent for individuals, with education levels often impacting earnings, employability and livelihoods (OECD, 2023). In the Australian context, the Commonwealth is a significant funder of education, but it does not run education systems, schools, nor employ teachers. It has taken on responsibility for managing the education architecture and infrastructure and has a significant role in setting the overarching direction and objectives for education, through the development of national education policies.

Education policy and its development has been increasingly under the microscope, as global pressures draw greater attention to the “outcomes of education policy” and its “implications for economic prosperity and social citizenship” (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, p. 1). While education is often considered in social and cultural contexts, it is always implicitly or explicitly a political issue (Bell & Stevenson, 2006). How education institutions are organised and resourced, what is taught (or not taught) and how students are taught are fundamentally political questions (Bell, 2020). The political context of education policy development has a profound effect on students, as a learner’s educational experience is shaped by the wider policy environment.

Education policies have been described as ‘operational statements of values’, with Kogan (1975) identifying four key values that inform education policy – educational, social, economic and institutional (Kogan, 1975). Broader definitions of education policy note that it is “about both intention and outcome” (Bell, 2020, p. 32). Education policies are written with the intent of solving a particular problem, with cultural, socioeconomic, and political ideologies shaping education policy development. However, policy formulation is often viewed as a neutral, technical process, with policies developed by those considered experts. The analysis of education policy therefore aims to understand the changing social, cultural, economic and political conditions, to reflect on these, and to determine what needs to evolve in order to meet the changing needs of citizens.

National education policies are agreements between the Commonwealth and state and territories about the actions or priorities that will be the focus of collective efforts. Overarching education policy documents articulate nationally consistent future directions and aspirations for Australian schooling (MCEETYA, 2008). Since 1989 there have been four major national education policies, each spanning a roughly ten-year period. These include: the *Hobart Declaration on Schooling (1989–1999)*; the *Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century (1999–2008)*; the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (2008–2019)*; and the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (2019)*. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific education policies have been aimed at improving educational access, participation and achievement. Since 1989 there have been five main policies which have been a little more ad hoc and inconsistent in terms of continuity, including: the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy 1989*; the *National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (1996–2002)*; *Australian Directions in Indigenous Education (2005–2008)*; the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010–2014*; and the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy (2015)*. While efforts to prioritise action related to access, participation and achievement are noble, there remains ongoing issues with focus and framing.

5.1.2 Success in education

Government education policies generally have the key goal of enabling success for individuals. Success in education policy is often equated with improvements in outcomes, however, this measure of success is contingent upon an individual's social and cultural standpoint. Success is also expressed in different terms, depending on the context and audience. In relation to Australian schooling, success generally entails possessing a foundational level of knowledge to successfully transition into formal schooling, attending school, achieving key performance measures in relation to literacy and numeracy, remaining in schooling from each year level to the next and the completion of formal schooling to Year 12 (DET, 2018).

When discussing success for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students there is often a profound difference. The standard of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' success is often articulated at levels below that expected of other Australians. This is evident in the Closing the Gap agenda which aims to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' outcomes across a range of social indicators, to a level that is closer to, but not comparable to other Australians. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders and scholars have attempted to challenge lower expectations in educational policy and practice, by working to highlight deficit models and promote a more positive discourse in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. Despite these voices clearly

articulating the need to reform approaches to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational policy, the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings, as well as the series of measures included within education policy remain static.

The focus of the following analysis of discourses and narratives are two Australian education policies. The first is the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration 2019* (the Declaration), a ten-year overarching education policy for all Australian students. The second is the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy 2015* (the Strategy), the latest agreed national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific education policy. The texts were chosen as they are the most recent national education policies and “can be understood as discursive strategies that foreground political ideologies and shape pedagogic practice” (Wilcox, 2021, p. 42).

The first stage of this analysis is intended to uncover the discourses evident within each of the policies. It does this by investigating the how the policy positions the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student; how the issue is framed and addressed; how inclusion is proposed; what success looks like in relation to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student; and what attributes are considered necessary for success in the education system. This is undertaken for each of the two policies separately.

The second stage involves drawing together the narratives within both policies utilising the WPR framework, which seeks to understand policy by questioning the presuppositions or assumptions that underlie a particular representation of a ‘problem’. Moreover, the framework seeks to understand: “how this representation of the ‘problem’ came about; what is left unproblematic in this problem representation, the silences and whether the ‘problem’ can be thought about differently; what effects are produced by this representation of the ‘problem’; and finally how/where this representation of the ‘problem’ has been produced, disseminated and defended, and whether it could be questioned, disrupted and replaced” (Bacchi, 2012, p. 22).

5.2 Analysis of the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) education declaration

The Declaration was released in 2019 and formed the fourth instalment of a series of key headline policy documents released by Commonwealth and state and territory ministers for education outlining national education goals and commitments. The ten-year strategy articulates two overarching goals for education in Australia: “that the Australian education system promotes excellence and equity; and that all young Australians become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners, and active and informed members of the community” (Education Council, 2019, p. 4). It also includes 11 commitments for action. The Declaration was released

following substantial changes to federal financial arrangements and partnership agreements between the Commonwealth and states and territories in relation to schooling. It was also the first Declaration to include an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language in its title, with Mparntwe being the Arrernte people's name for Alice Springs. This represented a shift to discourses of normalisation in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students within the mainstream policy landscape. Normalisation is characterised by the state re-engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, with the aim to normalise them with the wider population (Sullivan, 2011).

5.2.1 Discourses within the declaration

The Declaration includes several discourses in relation to education in Australia. The first discourse evident is a social justice agenda, with equity and the provision of quality education as key focus areas of the statement. This is articulated in one of the main goals of the Declaration, that "the Australian education system promotes excellence and equity" (p. 4). The concept of quality features throughout the statement, with the Declaration aiming to "provide all young Australians with access to high-quality education that is inclusive and free from any form of discrimination [and] "ensure that Australia's education system is recognised internationally for delivering high quality learning outcomes" (p. 5).

The Declaration goes on to frame education as a social and economic investment, nodding to a globalisation agenda, with the education system seen as a driver of economic advancement. This is evident in the statements: "improving educational outcomes for all young Australians is central to the nation's social and economic prosperity..." [and] "...Australia's education system is recognised internationally for delivering high quality learning outcomes" (pp. 4-5).

A knowledge economy discourse also emerges in the Declaration, which commits the education system to play a great role in driving economic advancement. The Declaration notes, "our education system...must also prepare young people to thrive in a time of rapid social and technological change, and complex environmental, social and economic challenges" (p. 2). Further it states that "education plays a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians, and in ensuring the nation's ongoing economic prosperity and social cohesion" (p. 2).

A cursory comparison of this Declaration to its predecessor, finds that overall, the sentiments are not a great departure from those articulated previously. There are, however, two notable differences. The first relates to an acknowledgment of declining student performance overall, with an even greater spotlight placed on the achievement gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander students and non-Indigenous students. The second is a call for greater recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures within education, including as part of the curriculum. This, of course, does not come at the expense of Australia's colonial roots, with the statement also calling for all students to "have an understanding of Australia's system of government, its histories, religions and culture" (p. 8).

5.2.2 Text references related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students

Having outlined the high-level discourses evident within the Declaration, I now turn to the specific text references that relate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to understand the social framing of education policy. The first reference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is found in the preamble of the Declaration which states:

We recognise the more than 60,000 years of continual connection by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as a key part of the nation's history, present and future. Through education, we are committed to ensuring that all students learn about the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and to seeing all young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples thrive in their education and all facets of life (p. 3).

This is a nice sentiment to centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as part of the Declaration. In relation to goal one of the Declaration, equity and excellence is articulated for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as a commitment to "ensure that learning is built on and includes local, regional and national cultural knowledge and experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and work in partnership with local communities" (p. 5). In relation to goal two, the Declaration states that a component of all students being active and informed members of the community is that they:

...understand, acknowledge and celebrate the diversity and richness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures; and possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians (p. 8).

Out of the 11 commitments to action, one has a specific focus on "supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners to reach their potential" (p. 16). This commitment calls for "the education community to focus on imagining what is possible and promoting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, knowledge and learnings" and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to be "empowered to achieve their full learning potential, shape their own futures, and embrace their cultures, languages and identities as Australia's First Nations peoples" (p. 16).

The Declaration includes an acknowledgement of educational disparities, noting that “educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young peoples remain behind those of other learners in a number of key areas” and that “meeting their needs and fostering access, engagement, progress, and achievement for their educational performance requires strategic effort and investment” (p. 16).

The key strategies outlined in the Declaration that aim to address educational disparities include the need for the education system to “embrace Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural identities”, to provide ‘safe learning environments’ and to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities (p. 16). Increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the education workforce is another key strategy, as well as an acknowledgement of the need to “support coordinated community services for learners and their families to increase productive participation” (p. 16). The Declaration notes that the proposed strategies are “based on the principles of shared decision-making, place-based responses and regional decision-making, evidence, evaluation and accountability, targeted investment, and integrated systems” (p. 16).

5.2.3 Analysis of in-text references

A cursory read of the references in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and students within the Declaration appear to be inclusive and positive. However, a more in-depth analysis of the text highlights some fundamental flaws.

Firstly, the statement considers the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as problematic, noting that “outcomes remain behind those of other learners in a number of key areas” (p. 16). There is no explanation provided within the policy on why or how these outcomes have come to be. The responsibility for working to improve these outcomes and to ‘close the gap’ is delegated to what the Declaration calls the ‘education community’ (p. 16). There is no definition or additional information provided within the Declaration about who comprises this ‘education community’. For such an important action that has been articulated in education policies for decades, this lack of accountability runs the risk of nothing being done, because when something is everyone’s responsibility, it becomes no one’s responsibility.

This framing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational outcomes points to deficits within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This is because the Declaration provides no explanation provided for why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student’s educational outcomes remain behind those of other students. It can therefore only be implied that deficits within the sociocultural background of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is responsible for their

collective underachievement. The educational disparities are also highlighted as something the education system deems necessary to 'fix' for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Inclusion for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is proposed in the Declaration in a number of references articulating how the broader student population will come to know more about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and cultures. This is referenced in the following statements, that all students will: "learn about the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures" (p. 3); "understand, acknowledge and celebrate the diversity and richness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures" (p. 8); "possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, reconciliation" (p. 8); and "learn about Australia's rich Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures" (p. 15). The Declaration also includes an acknowledgement of the need to include the "knowledge and experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples" in relation to learning (p. 5). These statements highlight necessary actions that should occur within the education system, including that every child should know about Australia's history in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and learn about the depth, wealth and diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. However, beyond focusing on everyone knowing more about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, there are no further strategies proposed for inclusion, exposing an intense focus on this as the primary means for remedying educational inequities.

The definition of success within the Declaration adopted for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can be found in the following statement: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students "must be empowered to achieve their full learning potential, shape their own futures, and embrace their cultures, languages and identities as Australia's First Nations peoples" (p. 16). The Declaration provides no further detail on how this will be achieved or who is responsible for driving these actions. The overall aspiration within the Declaration for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is that: "Australian Governments commit to empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to reach their potential and to ensuring the education community works to 'close the gap' for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples" (p. 16). Two opposing discourses emerge within this statement, one related to achieving potential and the other related to not quite reaching par with average Australian outcomes. The ambition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is confused by the marrying of these two opposing ideals, that is 'potential' and 'closing the gap'.

The Declaration highlights a number of attributes considered necessary for students to experience success in the education system, these include: possessing essential skills in literacy and numeracy as

the foundation for learning; being productive and informed users of technology; possessing the ability to think deeply and logically; and being creative, innovative, resourceful, inquisitive, experimental, self-motivated, and confident (p. 7). The document is elusive about what successful Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners look like, so it can only be assumed that these sentiments also relate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The ideas and ideologies encoded in the policy point to ethnicity as the fundamental issue. In the sense that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are a problematic cohort requiring support. This gives rise to an overarching needs discourses embedded throughout the policy in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Symbolically, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students appear to occupy a position of at least some priority at the national level, although the discourses within the statement and those attributed to how the issues are framed is problematic, with nuanced and subtle manifestations of deficit discourses. These will be discussed further in the overarching narrative analysis of both policy documents.

5.3 Analysis of the national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education strategy 2015

The Strategy was launched in 2015, the latest iteration in a long line of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific education policies. The Strategy is a high-level document outlining a set of principles to foster improvements in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education outcomes. It includes a number of priority areas, identified by ministers, “that will inform local approaches, and national collaborative actions to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people” (Education Council, 2015, p. 4).

5.3.1 Proposed approaches to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational issues

The Strategy outlines seven key areas for focus, including: “school and child readiness; literacy and numeracy; attendance; transition points including pathways to post-school options; leadership, quality teaching and workforce development; and culture and identity, and partnerships” (p. 4). The Strategy states that it is intended to be a living document, with changes to be made to the national collaborative actions as national education priorities shift. A review point is identified, with the Strategy stating that: “this strategy will be reviewed in 2018, which is a significant year in measuring progress against COAG’s [the Council of Australian Governments] Closing the Gap targets” (Education Council, 2015, p. 8). It is unclear whether this review was undertaken as there has been no updates or amendments to the version of the Strategy that was released in 2015, and there has been no subsequent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific education policy released to date.

The Strategy includes eight principles that should “underpin the approach taken by all education systems and providers to achieve the Strategy’s vision” (p. 3), these include: “achieving potential; equity; accountability; cultural recognition; relationships; partnerships; local approaches; and quality”. The Strategy’s main departure from its predecessor is in relation to the areas for action. While the previous plan included 55 national, systemic and local level actions, the Strategy only includes five national actions.

National collaborative actions are the main feature of the Strategy. This refers to those actions that the Commonwealth is responsible for progressing, in collaboration with states and territories and education systems. The five national collaborative actions in the Strategy include:

- *Attendance and engagement domain* – attendance data to be “disaggregated by Indigenous and non-Indigenous status”, as well as the provision of advice regarding initiatives to support ‘transience and mobility’ (p. 6).
- *Transition points* – ‘senior officials’ are responsible for providing advice on how to support the “engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ pathways to tertiary education through high-quality vocational learning and vocational education and training”, as well as the “promotion and encouragement of high quality career education and advice” for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (p. 7).
- *Early childhood transitions* – undertake an analysis of Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data and the consider strategies “to enhance the engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in early childhood education and care” (p. 7).
- *Workforce domain* – work to be undertaken to develop assessment criteria and the provision of advice on how to assess the competence of graduate teacher standards, related to “strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students” and “understand[ing] and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians” (p. 7).
- *Australian Curriculum* – the “sharing of possible ways to implement the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures cross-curriculum priority” [as well as the] “sharing of approaches to developing and implementing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Indigenous languages curricula” (p. 7).

The five national collaborative actions seem to be at odds with their primary purpose. If national collaborative actions are meant to enable joined up effort across the Commonwealth, jurisdictions and service providers, these do not fit this criterion. Rather, the actions are vague recommendations that aim to provide advice, to better utilise data, and to investigate strategies to address a handful of

issues perceived to be affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' ability to achieve academic success. There is no accountability for delivering any holistic or integrated measures that might be more effective in tuning the dial. This approach could be interpreted as the Commonwealth taking a step back from its responsibility in driving action, largely leaving the challenge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education to the jurisdictions and disappointingly, educators and schools. The preface of the Strategy states that it should be "considered alongside the approaches of each state, territory and local community, which together map out the ways in which governments, educators, families and communities can work in collaboration to improve outcomes" (p. 1). This statement suggests that this interpretation of the Commonwealth's role is fitting, and further bolstered by the statement that "this strategy sets the principles and priorities that act as a framework to guide jurisdictions in developing and implementing localised policies and actions to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people" (p. 2).

5.3.2 Discourses within the Strategy

The Strategy includes a plethora of discourses in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. Firstly, discourses of equitable outcomes and opportunities are evident in the Strategy. This can be seen in the Strategy's aspirations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people which is to make sure that they "are able to access the same educational opportunities and achieve the same education outcomes as other Australians" (p. 3). Much like the Declaration, quality is also a feature of the Strategy, evident in calls for: quality teaching, quality partnerships; "high quality, culturally inclusive early childhood education services and schools"; high quality vocational learning; and high quality career education (p. 4).

Inclusivity discourses also feature in the Strategy and can be found in the statement: "policies, practices, programs and partnerships are inclusive of the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and their families, and are informed by knowledge, evidence and research" (p. 3). The Strategy also highlights inclusivity in calls for schools to be culturally inclusive and adopt culturally inclusive literacy and numeracy approaches (p. 5). The Strategy also implies that it has been inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in its development, noting that the Strategy has come about as a "result of robust discussion, reflection, debate and cooperation and its development has been championed by the Education Council's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Advisory Group..." (p. 1). As mentioned in earlier chapters, this group is not comprised of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, rather it is made up of Commonwealth, state and territory government bureaucrats with responsibility for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in their jurisdiction.

Deficit discourses can be found in a number of references throughout the Strategy. The opening statement of the Strategy notes that, “despite determined effort much more needs to be done to close the gap in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education outcomes” (p. 1). Instead of starting with an uplifting statement, the tone of the Strategy is set by placing an emphasis on how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are lacking in relation to other Australian students. The concluding statement of the preface notes that, “the Strategy will only succeed with commitment and good will” (p. 1), this is despite education (access to a quality education in particular) being a fundamental human right. The language of deficit discourse within the Strategy continues to locate the ‘problem’ of educational disparities within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families. These can be seen in the following examples:

- “high expectations are held for, and by, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people” (p. 3), implying that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students do not have high expectations for themselves; and
- the issue of attendance is sought to be addressed by “schools and services work[ing] with families and communities on strategies to address barriers to school attendance” (p. 5), with no acknowledgement of the role of schools in providing culturally safe and welcoming environments where students want to be.

Deficit discourses are also apparent in the specific actions that are proposed within the Strategy. The Strategy calls for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to be “...supported at critical stages of their education to improve engagement, retention and attainment and develop the skills to participate fully in schooling, society and work” (p. 5). It also highlights the need for “...schools [to] work with families and communities to set a strong foundation for early learning...” (p. 5) and for the development of “...English literacy and numeracy proficiencies...in order to improve their educational attainment, life choices and options” (p. 5). These actions signpost the assimilatory and economic purposes of schooling and don’t necessarily take into account Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ aspirations for education. Finally, deficit discourses are articulated in the following statement regarding the Strategy as “...a framework to guide jurisdictions in developing and implementing localised policies and actions to improve outcomes *for* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people” (p. 2). The inclusion of the word ‘for’ presumes that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families are passive actors in this process, highlighting the paternalistic nature of government policies.

5.3.3 Analysis of in-text references

In analysing how the policy positions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, the Strategy has almost identical sentiments to those in the Declaration, with the vision for the Strategy articulated as “all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people achieve their full learning potential, are empowered to shape their own futures, and are supported to embrace their culture and identity as Australia’s First Nations peoples” (p. 2). However, despite the strengths-based nature of this vision, the remainder of the Strategy is characterised by underpinning assumptions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ deficiencies and how these should be addressed.

The issues within the Strategy are framed in a way that points to the failings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families. This is evident in the proposed strategies which aim to improve educational outcomes, squarely focussed on actions that need to be taken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. There is limited acknowledgement within the Strategy of the structural or systemic changes that need to occur within education systems and institutions to ensure that they are fit for purpose for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This is evident in the Strategy’s calls for more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be employed in the education workforce, for increased engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families, for children to be ready for school, for attendance and literacy and numeracy outcomes to improve and for children and families to better navigate critical transitions (p. 5). The onus is placed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to build their capacity to engage with the system.

The Strategy includes two sentiments that imply how it proposes to support the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This is by having “...skilled educators who are culturally competent in the local context”; and through all students having the “...opportunity to learn about the histories and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people” (p. 5).

A key priority of the Strategy is for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to reach the same educational outcomes as other Australian students. It is, however, not entirely explicit on what success looks like for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Rather it clearly articulates the attributes considered necessary for success in the education system, including: being ready for school, attending, possessing foundational literacy and numeracy skills, completing formal education to Year 12 and making a successful transition to training, further study or employment.

The representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families within the Strategy are largely underpinned by deficit and racialised discourses. These discourses emphasise

simplified and often stereotypical representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. They also place the blame for the lack of progress in educational outcomes squarely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families. This can be observed in the strategies put forward as a means of addressing educational disparities, with the onus for change and adaptation placed primarily with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

5.4 Overarching narrative

Having analysed the discourses and social framing of education policy in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, it is clear that education policy is underpinned by multiple competing and supporting discourses. I now turn to uncovering the broader narratives about the way in which the 'problems' of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education are framed and represented within both policies. Bacchi's (2012) WPR approach is a useful tool for critically analysing public policy. This approach challenges the premise that policies address problems that exist in isolation from them, and instead, calls for an examination of how specific policies shape or constitute the very problems they claim to address (Bacchi, 2016).

Utilising the WPR framework and drawing together the analysis of the Declaration and the Strategy, a broad analysis of the narratives within education policies in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is discussed below. At the most general level, these education policies represent the problem as sitting squarely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – individual learners, their families and communities (step 1). The deep-seated assumptions that underlie this representation of the problem emphasises the collective underachievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners (step 2) as resulting from a lack of participation and engagement (step 3). What is left unproblematic in this representation of the problem is the settler colonial context, with the texts silent on the broader social, historical and political factors that influence education (step 4). The effects of this representation of the problem are that policy measures almost solely focus on addressing the perceived deficiencies of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples which stigmatises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, causing them to feel blamed for circumstances that are beyond their control (step 5). This representation of the problem has been produced, disseminated, and defended in the plethora of education policies, frameworks, and structures, highlighting the need to privilege and elevate counternarratives that challenge dominant ideologies and assumptions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners (step 6).

This overarching narrative about the story of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education underlies the following more detailed analysis of the Declaration and the Strategy utilising the WPR approach.

5.4.1 WPR Q1: What's the problem represented to be in mainstream and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific education policies?

The first step in this analysis involves “clarifying the implicit problem representation within a specific policy or policy proposal” (Bacchi, 2012, p. 22). This is done by investigating the solutions proposed within each of the policy documents. The Declaration and Strategy articulate a number of cursory solutions in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, with three key themes emerging from the analysis, a focus on ‘potential’, culture and ‘closing the gap’.

The main premise of both documents focuses on supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners to reach their *potential*, articulated as one of the main goals of the Declaration, “Australian Governments commit to empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to reach their *potential* and to ensuring the education community works to ‘close the gap’ for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples” (Education Council, 2019, p. 16). It is also articulated as the main vision in the Strategy, that “all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people achieve their full learning *potential*, are empowered to shape their own futures, and are supported to embrace their culture and identity as Australia’s First Nations peoples” (Education Council, 2015, p. 2).

The specific solutions proposed in the Declaration (Education Council, 2019, pp. 10, 16) in relation to improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students include:

- “the development of partnerships and connections with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities”;
- “promoting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, knowledge and learnings”;
- “meeting their needs and fostering access, engagement, progress, and achievement for their educational performance requires strategic effort and investment”;
- “provid[ing] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with safe learning environments”;
- “engag[ing] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, their families and communities in all aspects of education”;
- “increase[ing] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ participation in the education workforce at all levels”; and
- “support[ing] coordinated community services for learners and their families to increase productive participation”.

Those proposed in the Strategy (Education Council, 2015, p. 5) include:

- having “skilled educators who are culturally competent in the local context”;

- “set[ting] high expectations for learning that incorporates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives”;
- “building a well-qualified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workforce”;
- developing “quality partnerships...between education sectors and local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and other stakeholders”;
- “work[ing] with families and communities on strategies to address barriers to school attendance”;
- supporting students “at critical stages of their education to improve engagement, retention and attainment and develop[ing] the skills to participate fully in schooling, society and work”; and
- developing “English literacy and numeracy proficiencies”.

From the range of proposed solutions, nearly all within both policy documents point to improvements required by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – individuals, their families and communities. These include: the call for better partnerships, connections, leadership and knowledge, engagement, progress and achievement; increased participation in the education workforce; the incorporation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives; attendance; supporting transitions; and developing English literacy and numeracy proficiency. That is an extensive list of capabilities that are perceived to be lacking in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The policies articulate these skills as necessary for achieving success in the education system. There are only a handful of solutions that point to how the education system can be improved to provide more appropriate educational provision, these include: safe learning environments, skilled educators and strategic effort and investment.

Culture is also a recurring theme across both policy documents, with this problem represented as two distinct matters. The first is a focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures being visible in schools, so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can see themselves and their identities reflected in teaching and learning. While the second is focused on all students learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures to promote respect and reconciliation. The first perspective is articulated in the following excerpts from the policies:

- “Australia’s education system must embrace Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural identities and provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with safe learning environments” (Education Council, 2019, p. 16);

- “all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young peoples must be empowered to achieve their full learning potential, shape their own futures, and embrace their cultures, languages and identities as Australia’s First Nations peoples” (Education Council, 2019, p. 16); and
- “all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people achieve their full learning potential, are empowered to shape their own futures, and are supported to embrace their culture and identity as Australia’s First Nations peoples” (Education Council, 2015, p. 2).

The second perspective can be found in the following statements:

- “through education, we are committed to ensuring that all students learn about the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures...” (Education Council, 2019, p. 3);
- “all students understand, acknowledge and celebrate the diversity and richness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures” (Education Council, 2019, p. 8);
- “students learn about Australia’s rich Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures [and] this cross-curriculum priority provides Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with the ability to see themselves, their identities and cultures reflected in the curriculum and allows all students to engage in reconciliation, respect and recognition of the world’s oldest continuous living cultures” (Education Council, 2019, p. 15);
- “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s histories, values, languages and cultures are acknowledged and respected” (Education Council, 2015, p. 3); and
- “through the delivery of the Australian Curriculum, education sectors acknowledge, respect and reflect the histories, values, languages and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people [and] all Australian children and young people have the opportunity to learn about the histories and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people” (Education Council, 2015, p. 5).

All students learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories appears to be the primary means through which the policies aim to address educational disparities. There is a wealth of literature highlighting issues with teaching about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and histories in schools, in particular, educators’ concerns about possessing the necessary knowledge and skills to do this (Harrison & Greenfield, 2011). This focus on culture also appears to be at odds with the overall purpose of the policies, which largely seek to normalise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, so that they are like other Australian students. There are clearly conflicting ideologies if you take the sentiments of the policies on face-value or if you consider their underlying premise.

The third theme emerging from the analysis of the proposed solutions is ‘closing the gap’. Both the Strategy and Declaration state that they are underpinned by the Closing the Gap framework (discussed in previous chapters). The policy documents reference this theme in the following statements:

- “despite determined effort much more needs to be done to close the gap in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education outcomes” (Education Council, 2015, p. 1); and
- “Australian Governments commit to empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to reach their potential and to ensuring the education community works to ‘close the gap’ for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples” (Education Council, 2019, p. 16).

The Closing the Gap framework has, since its launch 15 years ago, become a catch-all for describing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage. The lack of progress across all social and economic indicators of ‘closing the gap’ demonstrate that the framework appears to be little more than a political agenda masked under the rubric of advancement. Scholars have highlighted the limitations of ‘closing the gap’, noting that “a focus on the statistical ‘gap’ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is one of the most common manifestations of deficit discourses” (Fogarty et al., 2015, p. 4).

Based on the solutions proposed in the education policy documents, the implicit problem representation can be seen as sitting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as individuals, families and communities. Meaning that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and cultures are presented as the problem. This was highlighted in the solutions proposed under the three themes of ‘potential’, culture and ‘closing the gap’.

5.4.2 WPR Q2: What presuppositions or assumptions underlie the problem representations outlined above?

Having identified the implicit problem representation, the second step in this analysis involves “reflection on the underlying premises in this representation of the ‘problem’” (Bacchi, 2012, p. 22). Both policy documents have as their main focus, the need to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Therefore, the deep-seated presuppositions or assumptions that underlie this representation of the problem relates to the collective underachievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners. The way in which this collective underachievement is portrayed is that it stems from the failures and deficits of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, their communities and cultures.

The texts are underpinned by racialised discourses in articulating the problem as a failure on the part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This is evident in the portrayal of the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the state. In the texts, the settler state is positioned as the saviour of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This can be seen in the following excerpts from the Strategy (Education Council, 2015):

- “the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) determined that a key priority is the advancement of educational standards and outcomes *for* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people” (p. 1), there is no mention of whether this priority was agreed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people themselves;
- “this strategy sets the principles and priorities that act as a framework to guide jurisdictions in developing and implementing localised policies and actions to improve outcomes *for* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people” (p. 2), again an articulation of what will be done ‘for’ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; and
- “Ministers have collectively identified seven priority areas that will inform local approaches, and national collaborative actions to improve outcomes *for* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people” (p. 4), another example of the system deciding what is best for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the state is also highlighted in the Declaration (Education Council, 2019) in the following references: “Australian Governments commit to ... ensuring the education community works to ‘close the gap’ *for* young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples” (p. 16) and “in particular, the development of partnerships and connections with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities will greatly improve learning outcomes *for* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples” (p. 10). The frequent use of the word ‘for’ throughout both texts highlights an underlying paternalistic ideology, in the sense that the government adopts the role of authority and decision-maker and dictates what it thinks is best for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Furthermore, these sentiments reinforce the role of the Commonwealth as an omniscient benefactor who needs to provide special forms of assistance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students because they perceive them to be especially vulnerable. These ideals are intertwined with the perception that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people lack agency and require things to be done for them. They also infantilise the student and see schooling as the saviour of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

5.4.3 WPR Q3: How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?

To recap: the first step of this analysis involved the identification of the implicit problem representation as sitting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; and the second step reflected on the underlying premises of the underachievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners as stemming from the failures and deficits of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and culture. The third step involves “consideration of the contingent practices and processes through which this understanding of the ‘problem’ has emerged” (Bacchi, 2012, p. 22).

In analysing the policies it became clear that there was a perception regarding the lack of participation and engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in educational processes and that perhaps, these were the primary reasons for the educational underachievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This was evident in the reoccurring messages around the need to increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ participation and engagement. The policies included a number of references about the need to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, their families and communities in education. This theme was also reinforced in calls for the development of more effective partnerships. Specific references from the policies include:

- “the education community need to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, their families and communities in all aspects of education” (Education Council, 2019, p. 16);
- “quality partnerships are encouraged between education sectors and local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and other stakeholders” (Education Council, 2015, p. 5);
and
- “in particular, the development of partnerships and connections with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities will greatly improve learning outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples” (Education Council, 2019, p. 10).

This idea of increasing engagement and participation also extended to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the education workforce. Increasing this participation was a feature of both texts, articulated in the statements:

- “the education community need to...increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ participation in the education workforce at all levels...” (Education Council, 2019, p. 16); and

- “further support for the engagement of children, young people and their families is provided by building a well-qualified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workforce” (Education Council, 2015, p. 5).

The importance of improving engagement in order to support participation was highlighted in the following statements:

- “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are supported at critical stages of their education to improve engagement, retention and attainment and develop the skills to participate fully in schooling, society and work” (Education Council, 2015, p. 5); and
- the need to “support coordinated community services for learners and their families to increase productive participation” (Education Council, 2019, p. 16).

This hyperfocus on better participation and engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across all aspects of education attributes the responsibility for change overwhelming to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This ideal is linked to responsabilisation discourses, which place the onus for change on individuals and communities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are, in this sense, called on to take an active role in resolving their own problems. While this would be a welcome change in the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the state, the issue is that it asserts the authority of the settler state in determining the nature of change and under what circumstances, instead of being informed by the end user, that is, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

5.4.4 WPR Q4: What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? What are the silences? Can it be thought about differently?

This step in the analysis shifts the focus from what the texts say about the problem representations to what they do not say. It involves the “careful scrutiny of possible gaps or limitations in this representation of the ‘problem’, accompanied by inventive imagining of potential alternatives” (Bacchi, 2012, p. 22). From the analysis of the Declaration and the Strategy, two major issues are left unproblematic in the problem representation: the settler colonial context; and the intense focus on culture as a negative and destructive attribute.

In relation to the settler colonial context, the key issue that is left unproblematic in the education policy texts is that of colonialism. In particular, the role of education in the assimilation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the ongoing colonial governance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities. Prout-Quicke and Biddle (2017, p. 58) note that “formal education has been a tool of colonialism: employed initially to physically exclude Indigenous people

from schools, and later to attempt to remake them culturally and socioeconomically into closer replications of their colonising counterparts". These practices continue to manifest in the Australian education system and are "situated deeply in this post-colonial state's fear of losing control" and "used to dispel the case for Indigenous educational sovereignty" (Weuffen, Lowe, et al., 2023, p. 133). The representation of education policy as a platform to address educational disadvantage is intended to mask the continuing role of the settler state in its coercive and interventionist governance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The second major issue that remains unproblematic is the intense focus on culture as one of the primary means by which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational disparities can be remedied. Despite the policy texts calling for a greater incorporation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in schools (so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can see their cultures reflected and so that all students can learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures), the link between these calls and improved educational outcomes remains elusive. The main issues being the challenges related to the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and which ones should be present in schools. This coupled with teacher's knowledge (or lack thereof) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and their ability to engage with these in non-tokenistic ways.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and their perceived mismatch to the dominant culture leads to an inability to see Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures as an asset, with analysis of the texts revealing that any positive sentiments about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are made in symbolic and superficial terms. This observation is exemplified by the following statements:

- "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, knowledge and experiences are fundamental to Australia's social, economic and cultural wellbeing" (Education Council, 2019, p. 16); and
- "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the first Australians with the oldest continuing cultures in human history [and] governments across Australia affirm the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to maintain languages and cultures and acknowledge their deep cultural associations with the land and water" (Education Council, 2015, p. ii).

The policy texts are silent on the broader social, historical and political factors that influence education, including colonisation, racism and power relations. There is a wealth of possibilities for how these problematisations could be thought of differently, the most obvious are for policies to

articulate strategies that directly address the issues mentioned above, and to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' aspirations for their education.

5.4.5 WPR Q5: What effects are produced by this representation of the problem?

The fifth step in this analysis involves an examination of the effects of the representation of the problem through “considered assessment of how identified problem representations limit what can be talked about as relevant, [and how they can] shape people’s understandings of themselves and the issues, and impact materially on people’s lives” (Bacchi, 2012, p. 22).

The main effect of this representation of the problem (deficiencies in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as individuals, families and communities) is that policy measures almost solely focus on addressing these perceived deficiencies. This results in deficit constructs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures which is harmful because it stigmatises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It also causes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to feel blamed for circumstances that are beyond their control.

Education has been constructed through dominant culture standards, values, and philosophies, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s experiences of education marked by discrimination and marginalisation. The underlying assumptions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ deficiencies and failures as a cause of educational disparities is attempted to be neutralised by emphasising ‘potential’. This is seen as one of the 11 key goals of the Declaration which is aimed at “supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners to reach their potential” (Education Council, 2019, p. 16) and mirrored in the vision of the Strategy which is that “all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people achieve their full learning potential...”(Education Council, 2015, p. 2).

The focus on potential within both policies is seemingly positive and uplifting, however this type of language is inherently problematic. This is because the standard of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ success is often articulated at levels below that expected of other Australians. It implies that potential is about natural ability and talent and is isolated from broader social, cultural and educational inequalities. The bar is often set far too low for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and it is unfair that ‘potential’ can mean a wealth of opportunities for some students and just the bare minimum for others.

5.4.6 WPR Q6: How and where has this representation of the problem been produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced?

The final step in this analysis calls for investigation of how and where this representation of the problem has been produced, disseminated and defended, involving “a sharpened awareness of the contestation surrounding representation of the ‘problem’” (Bacchi, 2012, p. 22). This representation of the problem around the need to ‘fix’ the deficiencies of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners has been produced, disseminated, and defended in the plethora of education policies, frameworks, and structures, including in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific education policies, the four mainstream education declarations, the National Education Agreement, the Closing the Gap framework, the Australian Curriculum, and the National Assessment Program. This means that the ‘good intentions’ of policies are not questioned, nor is the structure of schooling in Australia and whether it is fit for purpose.

The language used within these policies, frameworks and structures has evolved over the last few decades, however, the underlying assumptions that produce a simplistic behavioural framing of educational problems have not. This highlights the need to privilege and elevate counternarratives that challenge dominant ideologies and assumptions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners. The problem representation could be questioned, disrupted and replaced by: redefining the ‘problem’ of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education; recognising that disparities are symptoms of broader social, historical and political influences; examining the modes of delivery of education and what needs to change within the education system; and incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ aspirations.

5.5 Discussion

The analysis of the Declaration and the Strategy involved an interdiscursive analysis of representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in education policy together with linguistic analysis of text and broad narrative analysis of problem representations. From the analysis of the key policy documents, there emerges the idea that education policy promotes and reinforces the normalisation of difference, with three main themes emerging: an overarching hegemonic narrative that has become synonymous with the story of ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education’; multiple competing and indiscriminate discourses in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education; and a paternalistic meta discourse in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, families and communities.

5.5.1 Overarching hegemonic narrative

An overarching hegemonic narrative emerges from the analysis, in relation to the story that the dominant group tells about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. In its simplest form, this narrative is characterised by: deficit, the idea that academic underachievement is due to deficits in the sociocultural background of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; assimilationist ideals, that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students should conform to the dominant white culture; and meritocratic ideals, that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people just need to work harder and their social position can be improved. This hegemonic narrative has become synonymous with the story of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. It also permeates all layers of social organisation, including political, bureaucratic and practitioner levels.

This dominant ideology is presented and accepted as natural and is supported by legitimating norms and ideas. It serves to justify the power of the dominant culture and imposes certain knowledge and values onto Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Smith (2003, p. 3) articulates hegemony as “a way of thinking [that] occurs when oppressed groups take on dominant group thinking and ideas uncritically and as ‘common-sense’, even though those ideas may in fact be contributing to forming their own oppression”. In the context of education policy development, these ideologies are based on the normalisation of difference. This plays out in education policy when it centres the non-Indigenous experience as the default experience, resulting in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students being othered. Hall (1997) articulates that in unequal social hierarchies, the less powerful are considered ‘others’. This is considered a state of normality, which gives rise to the idea of normalisation.

Normalisation in education policy entails the creation and sustainment of dominant discourses wherein problematic statements are often married with seemingly desirable language. This was highlighted earlier in the marrying of ‘potential’ and ‘closing the gap’. The introductory statements of both policies assert that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are valued as the cultural foundation of Australia, however it is Western structures, legal frameworks and religious beliefs that are core to national identity. The normalisation of difference is particularly problematic from the standpoint of equity.

5.5.2 Multiple competing and indiscriminate discourses

The philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of education policy are plagued by epistemological racism, with educational research, policies, and practice, and corresponding methodologies, theories and ways of knowing emerging from a social history of the dominant group, with the perspectives of

minority groups alienated and easily dismissed (Moreton-Robinson, 2011; Smith, 2012). Education institutions “play an explicit part in this construction of knowledge, as education serves the interests of those who have power” and “Schools function to reproduce these inequalities and maintain the status quo” (Mack, 2010, p. 9). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, that is the construction of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, communities and knowledges as deficient (Maxwell et al., 2018; Patrick & Moodie, 2016). The myriad of competing and indiscriminate discourses in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education emerging from the analysis are discussed below.

Discourses of normalisation are apparent in both texts, most notably in the decision to include an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language word for the title of the Declaration: Mparntwe being the Arrernte people’s name for Alice Springs. Using an Aboriginal language word implies that it must be good, relevant, and reflective of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aspirations. The Declaration however falls short of properly utilising the Arrernte language name and instead uses the colonial name, with the Arrernte language name in brackets. The assumption is that this was done for ease of pronunciation, but it results in a missed opportunity to take a powerful and culturally significant stance. It also plays into normalisation because the non-Indigenous experience is centred. Despite seemingly attempting to be inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the default position is to make it easier for non-Indigenous people. The normalisation of difference is also evident in the blanket acceptance of language about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education that focuses on gaps, shortfalls and underperformance. It is also evident in the prevailing view that the disparity in the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and non-Indigenous students is ‘normal’. In reviewing the literature related to the educational situation in the Torres Strait, Nakata (1997) notes that “all without exception deal with the ‘Islander predicament’ in schooling as a position of dissonance between different cultures, between different language groups, between different worldviews, and between different value systems” (Nakata, 1997, p. 16). The normalisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has its genealogy in policies of assimilation that assumed the settler state needed to ‘civilise’ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people so they could be incorporated into wider society. Normalisation also places the onus for change on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Partridge (2014, p. 251) notes that “normalisation imagines all necessary transformation to be on the part of Indigenous people and does not contemplate the possibility of changes in the structures, processes or priorities of the settler state”.

Opportunities discourses and equality discourses also feature in both texts, conveyed in sentiments around accessing the same educational opportunities and achieving the same education outcomes

as other Australians. These discourses reinforce beliefs about the equal agency of all individuals, expecting them to be responsible for their social position and behaviour regardless of their circumstances. The main problem with this viewpoint is that it obscures the ways in which a broader culture of whiteness negates the 'level playing field'. The idea that everyone has the same amount of time and access to the same opportunities reinforces unearned racial privilege because we're not all starting from the same base.

In the same vein, inclusivity and equity discourses also feature in both texts, noted in the statement "policies, practices, programs and partnerships are inclusive of the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children" (Education Council, 2015, p. 3), and in relation to schools being culturally inclusive (Education Council, 2015, p. 5). Rudolph (2013, p. 214) notes that "despite overt and stated concern for equity and inclusion", "remnants of colonial power relationships – in which white people were seen as superior – remain embedded in Australian education discourses and institutions".

The representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families within the texts are underpinned by racialised and deficit discourses. These assumptions place the blame for the lack of progress in educational achievement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families, which is observed in the strategies put forward as a means of addressing these disparities. This is often described in the literature as culturalism. McConaghy (1998, p. 345) explains: "culturalism refers to the notion that before issues of pedagogy, timetabling, curriculum and so on can be considered, it is first necessary to deal with 'Indigenous cultures', specifically with Indigenous cultural differences". Culturalism is "a form of stereotyping whereby culture, defined very narrowly and often in stereotypical ways, becomes the primary explanation for why certain groups of people may be experiencing particular ... social issues" (Browne et al., 2016, p. 14). Deficit discourses throughout the texts seek to blame Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners and their families for educational underachievement while ignoring the broader social, historic, and economic drivers that have their genesis in colonisation processes. These discourses are also "intertwined with meritocratic ideologies, which suggest that everyone has an equal chance to succeed within existing sociopolitical structures [and also] intersect with colourblind ideologies, which misleadingly imply that systemic racism is not a major cause of racial inequities and does not shape the experiences and outcomes of racial groups throughout society" (Davis & Museus, 2019, p. 123). Rigney (1999, p. 112) notes that "racialising discourses of difference, like all discourses of difference, are located at significant sites of power, we were racialized in order to exert power over us".

The most glaring representation of competing discourses within the texts relates to sentiments around achieving potential compared to reaching par with average Australian outcomes. This is evident in the overall aspiration of the Declaration which states “Australian Governments commit to empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to reach their potential and to ensuring the education community works to ‘close the gap’ for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples” (Education Council, 2019, p. 16). ‘Closing the gap’ in many instances means only halving educational achievement gaps between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their peers across a number of educational indicators. It has become inextricably intertwined with the idea of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander disadvantage, with Guenther et al. (2014) noting that discourse of disadvantage leads to a deficit approach to the development of policy. When non-Indigenous outcomes are made the benchmark of educational excellence, the experience of the dominant culture is legitimised as ‘normal’ and everyone else is othered. This idea of not quite reaching par with average Australian outcomes compared with the notion of potential as meaning endless opportunities and possibilities doesn’t quite gel.

The fulfilment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student’s potential has been a feature of education policies. However, definitions of what constitutes potential is shaped by previous experience and is socially and culturally contestable. Educators are often left to define the potential of students, which is problematic, given that Australia’s education workforce is predominantly from a middle-class, Anglo-Saxon background. Teachers’ perceptions about the potential of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students has been influenced by a considerable history. As mentioned in previous chapters, Partington (2003) suggests that many of the difficulties experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in schools are predominantly artefacts of teachers’ beliefs and practices, rather than the behaviours or attributes of students. Policy makers, education systems and the education workforce’s definitions of potential do not necessarily align with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldviews (Yap & Yu, 2016). While policy makers conceive of fulfilling potential in terms of individual academic achievement, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander concepts of potential relate more to collectivist goals, such as contributing to family, community or country (Yap & Yu, 2016).

5.5.3 Paternalistic meta discourse

The second major theme emerging from the analysis relates to the paternalistic meta discourse about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners, families and communities. Paternalistic ideologies (which embed racial, colonial, gendered and culturalist discourses) promote the “interference of a state with another person, against their will [which is] defended or motivated by a

claim that the person interfered with will be better off or protected from harm” (Dworkin, 2020, p. 1). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been “governed through exceptional regimes of power that would be difficult or impossible to apply to non-Indigenous citizens” (Lattas & Morris, 2010, p. 15). This exceptional governance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples stems from the view that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples require coercive assimilation to survive in the modern world. Morgan (2019) notes that schooling has been one of the most potent assimilation tools of colonisation, with current education policy encouraging forms of student assimilation in order to succeed. Nakata (2003) highlights the inherent difficulties of establishing and enacting education policies with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in mind because of the “tension of upholding and maintaining cultural difference and identity on one hand, and producing equal outcomes to make us competitive in the mainstream on the other hand” (Nakata, 2003, p. 9).

The policy documents are rife with suggestions about what the Commonwealth needs to do ‘for’ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, highlighting the underlying paternalistic ideology of policy in positioning the government as authority and decision-maker, dictating what it thinks is best for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This gives rise to a needs discourse which inherently presumes that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are passive and require things to be done for them. These assumptions underpin a governmental rationality that justifies the application of particular forms of governance or coercion. This approach of government as a saviour draws tension with the idea of responsabilisation, which has been a feature of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy landscape for some time. The narratives associated with personal responsibility and behavioural change as the key drivers for improved educational outcomes places the onus for change on individuals and communities. These imply that indigenous effort equals advancement. As mentioned earlier, the tension with this approach is that it asserts the authority of the settler state in determining the nature of change and under what circumstances, instead of being informed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In relation to the policy texts, there is only one occasion when the text implies against its own prioritisation of individual responsibility that positive improvements in the outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in education are not possible without government-delivered material improvements noted in the form of ‘strategic effort and investment’. The Declaration states, “meeting their needs and fostering access, engagement, progress, and achievement for their educational performance requires strategic effort and investment” (Education Council, 2019, p. 16).

The effects of these representations, Western neoliberal ideologies and discourses on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are profound. When policy language creates and reinforces a ‘less than’

view and a belief that there is an inherent deficit in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the result is further marginalisation of an already marginalised people. Language steeped in concepts of deficiency, failure and inadequacy is damaging, it perpetuates stereotypes, and it stigmatises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Such language is also unmerited, because it is not how we see ourselves.

The analytical tools utilised in this analysis enabled the questioning of the very notion that education policies are ‘problem-solving’ endeavours, with a range of discourses, ideologies and underlying assumptions emerging from the analysis. The key issue to emerge from this is that dominant discourses and narratives informing the development of education policy that are based in difference are counter-productive for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Discourses are powerful, “while we might think of discourse as ‘just language’, research has shown that it is inseparable from our understandings of the world and how we act [and] as such, discourse plays a fundamental role in resource and power inequalities” (Lowitja Institute, 2018, p. 2). To challenge the dominant discourses and ideologies that normalise difference, it is integral that: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices are elevated; language is challenged; and steps are taken to shift the paradigm in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

5.5.4 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice

The absence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in the development of educational policy is one of the missing ingredients underpinning the failure of previous approaches. The Aboriginal Voices project systematically reviewed more than 13,000 publications on the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in schools and concluded that “the voices of Indigenous people are often not heard, and often not counted, by teachers, school leaders or policy makers” (Moodie et al., 2021, p. 7). Despite being end users and informants, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are almost always observers to education policy and its development. To elevate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in education, excerpts from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander developed education policy are discussed below.

The National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples (Congress) was the national elected and representative body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia that operated from 2009 to 2019. As a member-led organisation, Congress advocated for “protecting and advancing the wellbeing and empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and for securing our economic, political, cultural and environmental futures” (National Congress, 2013, p. 3). The *Congress Education Policy* was released in 2013. The policy noted Congress’ “profound interest in an

improved education system for our Peoples” (National Congress, 2013, p. 4), noting that “educational success is among the highest priorities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders, communities, parents, carers, educators and students.” (p. 8). Congress argued that “the institution of colonialism brought with it a requirement that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children attend schools with an assimilationist agenda” (p. 20), and so was “committed to ensuring that our students have the best educational opportunities possible, including access to a quality education system that teaches our languages and cultures” (p. 4). This standpoint is furthered by the following statement:

Congress believes that meaningful, empowering and culturally sustaining education for our Peoples will be possible only when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have the choice to determine, as well as the resources to develop and deliver, curriculum and pedagogy that are culturally sustaining as provided for in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (National Congress, 2013, p. 4).

The main discourse emerging from the *Congress Education Policy* is a rights discourse. This is a stark departure from the discourses evident in the Declaration and the Strategy. Congress affirmed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ right to an education, a quality education, including “the maintenance and development of our cultures [and] the determination of our own futures” (National Congress, 2013, p. 6).

It should however be noted that the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to have access to education should not be mistakenly interpreted as only meaning access to a Western education. As articulated in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples, Article 14 states that “Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning” (UN General Assembly, 2007, p. 13).

Solutions to the myriad of issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education can only come from involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the discussions pertinent to educational policy and practice. Shay et al. (2023, p. 82) note that “it is only through distinctly and unwaveringly centring Indigenous voices, sovereignty and scholarship consistently across all policy/practice/research that we may see outcomes change”.

5.5.5 The power of language

Language and words are powerful, they shape beliefs and drive behaviour. Language is not neutral nor value-free, it can inhibit or empower and has the power to construct experience (Foucault,

1972). For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, words are entities that carry great power. In the education system, language, narratives, and discourses can create positive or negative images of children, which in turn, impacts on the policy and practice of education.

Language in education policy plays a central role in shaping the educational experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, with dominant narratives and discourses reproduced from one policy to the next. Beresford (2012, p. 119) notes that in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, “generations of racist-inspired policies produced intergenerational underachievement and alienation”. The incongruities between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander discourses of identity, knowledge, and community and institutional discourses often result in compensatory education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This form of education views the languages and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as a problem and assumes that there is a deficit in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students that has to be made up.

The way in which the ‘problem’ of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education is talked about, recognised and classified, shapes how policy is developed to address this representation of the ‘problem’. Shay et al. (2023, p. 75) assert that “dominant epistemologies in Indigenous education research [policy and practice] can be, and are persistently shaped by, the broader narrative about where problems are located and how to resolve them”. In this way, policy language can be disempowering, particularly when negative race-based stereotypes portray Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as unintelligent and communities as being dysfunctional.

Counternarratives are critical in challenging dominant ideologies and assumptions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures. This notion is supported by Thorpe et al. (2021, p. 68), who note that “without this epistemological and ontological stance, opportunities to challenge Western hegemonic ideologies, assumptions and discourses will be limited”. There is a need to reconstitute education along socially just approaches rather than maintaining the current policy regime which espouses the normalisation of difference. Education and education processes do not exist in a vacuum, they are embedded in broader societal structures marked by the unequal distribution of power and resources. Education institutions are intimately connected with the reproduction of the dominant culture through the management, validation, dissemination and construction of knowledge. Vass (2012, p. 93) argues that “education is well positioned to play a decisive role in critiquing the historical, social, economic and political narratives and structures that underpin inequitable relationships within Australia”.

5.5.6 Shifting the paradigm

The dominant discourses and narratives about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education have located the issues and problems as stemming from deficiencies and failures on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Gray and Beresford (2008, p. 205) counter this by arguing that, “dispossession, segregation and assimilation have created intergenerational disadvantage and trauma that impede educational progress among most Indigenous students” (Gray & Beresford, 2008, p. 205). Australia’s education system has persisted by forcing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to assimilate into Western norms, with scholars such as Hogarth (2018), Maxwell et al. (2018) and Vass (2014a) highlighting the failure of education policies to deliver effective improvements in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

It is necessary to move away from blaming educational underachievement on the characteristics of individual children, their families and communities, towards building systemic capacity to effectively deliver equitable education for all students, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Several scholars have argued that deficit perspectives are rooted in colonial mentality, with educators holding the capacity to either disrupt or maintain expectations about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ ability to achieve academic success (Price, 2012; Sarra, 2011; Thaman, 2013).

An example of how national education policy be reformed so that it adopts counternarratives that recognise the resilience, capability, self-determination, and resurgence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can be taken from the Aotearoa New Zealand context. Aotearoa New Zealand made realigning dominant deficit discourses a major priority in Māori education well over a decade ago. The *Ka Hikitia—Managing for success: The Māori education strategy 2008–2012* outlined a significant shift to their education system which saw the education system itself changing to meet the needs and interests of learners, rather than learners having to change for the system. *Ka Hikitia* was first launched in 2008, the national Māori education strategy that set out how Aotearoa New Zealand aimed to achieve system shifts in education and support Māori learners to achieve equitable outcomes.

The policy was named using a Māori language word, ‘Ka hikitia’ meaning to ‘step up’, ‘lift up’, or ‘lengthen one’s stride’ (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 11). In the context of this strategy, it meant “stepping up the performance of the education system to ensure Māori are enjoying education success as Māori” (p. 11). The use of traditional Māori language was incredibly powerful and culturally significant and aligned with the key purpose of the statement. Māori students were placed at the centre of this policy, with the policy outlining the “strategic approach to achieving educational

success for and with Māori” (p. 11). Ka Hikitia was “tailored to ensure Māori education success” (p. 11) and it drew on many perspectives including “Māori communities, researchers, academics, and education practitioners” (p. 11), while outlining wide and extensive consultation in its development, especially with Māori. Ka Hikitia successfully elevated the uniqueness of Māori culture and provided an important foundation for supporting Māori to achieve success for Māori. The education strategy provided a framework for refocusing from deficit to Māori potential, with Table 2 (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 19) articulating this vision. This was articulated in the strategy as follows:

In the government sector, the Māori Potential Approach provides the context for the shifts in attitudes, thinking and practice required to achieve significant improvements in Māori education outcomes. This approach advocates investing in strengths, opportunities, and potential. It seeks to shift the focus from addressing problems and disparities to expanding on the successes (p. 19).

A potential approach for Māori in education was articulated as having three key underlying principles: (1) Māori Potential – all Māori learners have unlimited potential; (2) Cultural Advantage – all Māori have cultural advantage by virtue of who they are – being Māori is an asset, not a problem; and (3) Inherent Capability – all Māori are inherently capable of achieving success (p. 19).

Table 2 - Māori framework for challenging deficit discourse

LESS FOCUS ON...	MORE FOCUS ON...
Remedying deficit	Realising potential
Problems of dysfunction	Identifying opportunity
Government intervention	Investing in people and local solutions
Targeting deficit	Tailoring education to the learner
Māori as a minority	Indigeneity and distinctiveness
Instructing and informing	Collaborating and co-constructing

The Māori framework for challenging deficit discourse calls for less focus on: remedying deficit; problems of dysfunction; government intervention; targeting deficit; Māori as a minority; and instructing and informing. Instead, it places more focus on: realising potential; identifying opportunity; investing in people and local solutions; tailoring education to the learner; Indigeneity and distinctiveness; and collaborating and co-constructing.

There are valuable learnings from the Māori approach which could be adopted by Australian education policy makers, including the respectful integration of Māori language, wide and extensive consultation in the development of the policy and the articulation of a framework for Māori potential. There are, however, some important distinctions to note between the two First Nations groups. Māori people and culture are relatively homogenous, whereas Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander peoples and cultures are diverse; Māori has one language, whereas Australia has more than 150 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages (and many more dialects). Moreover, Māori comprise 17% of the Aotearoa New Zealand population, compared to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who only comprise 3% of the Australian population. The framework for realising Māori potential would need to be adapted to suit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contexts and be coupled with additional resourcing and accountability to progress further.

Generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have failed to gain the full value of the benefits of education. It is time to reimagine the approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in Australia, as can be seen in the Māori education policy, which aims to address deficit language and draw on more innovative pedagogical approaches and practices that are strengths based. At the end of the day, all students benefit from reform in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education (Bishop et al., 2012). The importance of counternarratives in challenging dominant ideologies and assumptions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures are critical in shifting the current education paradigm. However Gillborn (2006, p. 15) cautions that “simply asserting our anti-racist intentions means nothing if we leave unchanged the dominant systems of testing, the curriculum, teacher education, and punitive inspection regimes”. While historical precedent and political agendas heavily influence educational reform, much can be done at the national policy level and at the institutional level through leadership and educators.

5.5.7 Commonwealth policy capability

The assessment and evaluation of educational policy is essential in ensuring that it is of high quality and able to meet the learning needs of all students. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational policy is often designed with good intent, however, seldom based on robust evidence or best practice. The Productivity Commission (2020, p. 4) notes that “after decades of developing new policies and programs and modifying existing ones, we still know very little about their impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, or how outcomes could be improved”.

Evaluations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational programs and policies are undertaken by the Australian Public Service (APS) on a regular basis, however, many of these only focus on the implementation of specific programs and policies, with little attention paid to whether these initiatives had the intended effect or if any observed results could be attributed to the specific programs or policies, rather than something else (Biddle, 2013a). The Productivity Commission (2020, p. 4) highlights that “while policy makers agree that evidence is critical for good policies, many admit that in practice they do not rely heavily on evidence, or past experience, when formulating or modifying policies and programs”. Further, Bray et al. (2019, p. 6) argue that “the APS

currently does not learn well from experience, that its approach to evaluation is piecemeal both in scope and quality, and that this diminishes accountability and is a significant barrier to evidence-based policy-making”.

Policy makers have predominantly designed and developed education policy from the dominant social and cultural standpoint. Bond et al. (2019, p. 8) argue that “even when policy is evidence-informed, it remains deeply politicised and racialised”. They go on to note that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy evaluation has been “inconsistent, racist and arbitrary, while being used rhetorically to authorise poorly-planned policy interventions without Indigenous input” (Bond et al., 2019, p. 1). This is compounded by short funding cycles and government terms, as well as high public service turnover and a lack of corporate memory.

The rigorous evaluation of the effectiveness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational policies is essential in ensuring investment is being targeted towards worthwhile efforts. Reliance on more robust evidence, more effective governance arrangements and the adoption of more bottom-up approaches in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples will go a long way to mitigating the failure of policies to achieve their stated objectives, as well as improve the delivery of effective public policy. There is a need to learn from yesterday’s lessons and create more effective arrangements to secure public service corporate knowledge in order to prevent future failures. That said, having effective policy provisions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education is critical, however it is only half of the story, with implementation the other half.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter investigated the way in which narratives and discourses shape the educational experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through the analysis of key national education policy texts. National education policy sets the direction for education in Australia, setting the standards by which governments, education institutions and the education workforce approach education, for all students and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The analysis undertaken in this chapter highlights that one of the most important aspects of the policy making process is identifying and describing the problem to be addressed. A number of key themes arise from the analysis.

Firstly, dominant ideologies and discourses in the development of education policy based in difference are counter-productive for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. These include deficit ideologies, assimilationist ideologies and meritocratic ideologies. Education policy promotes and reinforces the normalisation of difference, with normalisation placing the onus for change on

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, with no consideration of the possibility that education systems require their own transformation. The most concerning aspect of normalisation is that it entails the creation and sustainment of dominant discourses wherein problematic statements are often married with seemingly desirable language. This is evident throughout the policy documents with the overarching focus on the concept of potential as a means to mask the measures designed to remediate perceived interpersonal and skill deficits.

Secondly, there is an overarching hegemonic narrative that has become synonymous with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. This is the story that is told about why educational disparities exist and continue to persist for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This narrative blames Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners and their families for educational underachievement while ignoring the broader social, historic, and economic drivers. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, defined in very narrowly and stereotypical ways, are used as the primary explanation for this underachievement. This rhetoric speaks to Westernised notions of condescension, indifference, and blame, with the guardianship frame and the need for government intervention manifesting strongly. This understanding of educational issues creates the perception that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's educational predicament is one of misfortune rather than the direct result of the previous and ongoing actions of the state.

Thirdly, education policy in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is hampered by multiple competing and indiscriminate discourses. Discourses that are binary, that are contradictory, that compete and are haphazard and random will never be able to produce effective policy solutions if they cannot in the first place agree on what the issue is that needs to be addressed. The success of education policy is impeded by the confusing and often contradictory narratives.

Fourthly, there is a paternalistic meta discourse that disempowers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from exercising agency in relation to their own education. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been subject to exceptional governance that has its history in the presumption that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples require coercive assimilation to survive in the modern world. Schooling has been a powerful tool in this assimilation agenda, both in the past and now. The myriad of discourses and narratives evident in education policy raises the question of whether education policies are truly problem-solving endeavours. They also disempower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from exercising agency in relation to their own education.

Finally, I raise the importance of including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in educational policy development, of acknowledging the power of language in shaping educational experiences

and of the urgent need to shift the paradigm by privileging and elevating counternarratives that challenge dominant ideologies and assumptions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners. The assumptions underpinning education policies “work to limit the appropriateness and efficacy of measures, as they are neither culturally meaningful nor sufficient to address the structural barriers to [educational] equity” (Dawson et al., 2021, p. 533).

The design and development of education policy has occurred from the dominant social and cultural standpoint, with little to no input from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This coupled with policy makers deep-seated naivety about the impact of colonisation processes are key reasons for education policy consistently falling short of achieving its stated objectives. The discourses and narratives evident within education policy are shaped by social circumstances. When these position Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, families and communities in narratives of deficiency and failure, it is hard to shift and challenge these ideological assumptions and adopt more aspirational approaches. This highlights the need for counternarratives and for people engaged in all levels of education from policy makers to practitioners to develop ideological clarity. Moreton-Robinson (2004b, p. 87) notes that “as a product of modernity and colonisation, Australian Anglocentric whiteness is predicated on racial difference and dominance”. The rhetoric of successive mainstream and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific education policies maintain noble aspirations at face value, however, the deep-seated underlying assumptions about the failures and deficits of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and culture highlight the limited imagination of policy makers in articulating solutions to addressing educational issues. Further, structural weaknesses within the education system, at all levels, limits their realisation. In order to counter the issues raised from this analysis, a framework for contesting and replacing dominant ideologies in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy and practice is presented in the next chapter.

Chapter 6 – Contesting and replacing the dominant ideologies

6.1 Introduction

Many scholars, both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous (Fogarty et al., 2018; Hogarth, 2016; Shay et al., 2023; Vass & Hogarth, 2022), have advanced knowledge about problematic representations in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, including the impact of dominant ideologies. This study expands on these by adding new perspectives to existing evidence challenging deficit and racialised discourses and narratives in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, specifically in relation to the role of the Commonwealth. It also contributes to the literature by detailing how the broader discursive environment impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

This chapter provides a framework for contesting and replacing dominant ideologies in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational policy and practice through the development of a theory of change and a blueprint for future Commonwealth investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. It follows on from previous chapters which provided: an introduction to the research topic which covered the aims of this study, background about myself and my positionality in relation to this study; an outline of the theoretical framework and methodological approach that underpinned and guided this study; context and background about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in Australia (including an overview of the educational service provision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people); an analysis of information and evidence from the literature associated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education; and an in-depth investigation of the way in which narratives and discourses within education policies shape the educational experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

To date, there has been almost no research into the role of the Commonwealth in redressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity. This is quite remarkable considering the Commonwealth is the primary national authority and power in relation to education and is a significant funder of both educational services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific education activities. While there is some good research highlighting the need to address deficit discourses in education, articulating how to translate this information into tangible reforms in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education has proven challenging. This is complicated by the role of the Commonwealth, given that it does not manage education systems, run schools, nor employ teachers. Governments, educationalists, and researchers recognise the need to better understand how change occurs in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, however a key

challenge in trying to enact change is knowing what actions are likely to result in the desired outcomes. A policy framework that does not move beyond merely bridging education gaps between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their peers will have limited impact in redressing educational inequity. It will likely see further 'social polarisation' of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples "arising from unequal opportunities to join the knowledge economies" (MCEETYA & Curriculum Corporation, 2006, p. 4). This assessment is supported by Vass (2018, p. 91) who notes that "perhaps it is time to ask different questions and pursue practices that actively address the systemic constraints that seem to be actively fostered under the current arrangements". There is a need for further research and evaluation on the role of the Commonwealth in contributing to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational outcomes.

This study has so far covered three main areas. Firstly, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education context was presented and included: an overview of the role of the Commonwealth in education; an outline of the education infrastructure; a timeline of national education policy (both mainstream and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific); an overview of the Commonwealth's prioritisation of effort in relation to specific national initiatives and interventions aimed at improving educational outcomes; and an overview of educational data which provided a picture of participation and achievement. Secondly, an overview of the literature related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education was provided, in particular, the current understandings and discourses in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' participation and achievement in education was explored, including: the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' engagement with education; the systemic issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; a review of the barriers and factors affecting the participation and achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in education; and an outline of approaches to good practice common across the literature. Finally, an interdiscursive analysis of representations in education policy together with linguistic analysis of text and broad narrative analysis of problem representations using education policy texts was undertaken. This revealed that dominant ideologies and discourses in the development of education policy based in difference are counter-productive for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

This chapter extends the findings from the three key chapters by providing a rationale and framework for contesting and replacing the dominant ideologies that permeate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. This line of inquiry is pursued because it is important to add different perspectives and new narratives and discourses to the corpus of knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. Doing this facilitates competition among discourses which can enable current well-accepted meanings to be recast into new representations. Because

knowledge and ways of thinking can be challenged and reconstructed, there is a need to contest and replace dominant ideologies in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education research, practice and policy in order to instigate changes in educational participation and achievement.

Firstly, this chapter will discuss dominant ideologies and problematic representations and issues in education research, policy and practice. It will then outline the implications for government, given the focus of this study is on the role of the Commonwealth in redressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity. It then proposes a theory of change to move beyond the current rhetoric in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and shift towards more meaningful actions to drive change. Finally, it presents, for consideration, a blueprint on how and where the Commonwealth could focus future effort and investment to make steps towards redressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity.

6.2 Dominant ideologies in education research, policy and practice

Dominant ideologies are “shared ideas or beliefs which serve to justify the interest of dominant groups” (Giddens, 1997, p. 583). Ideologies can be social, political, epistemological, or ethical and relate to ideas that characterise a particular part of culture. Intertwined with this concept is that of ideological hegemony which “conveys the notion that a particular ideology can be reflected throughout society, permeating institutions, cultural ideas and social relationships so that it is more difficult, though never impossible, for alternative ideologies to achieve similar levels of influence” (Open Universities, 2023, p. 1). Dominant ideologies are reflected in the symbols and cultural practices of the dominant culture, with one of the core assumptions of critical theory being that dominant ideologies maintain inequity (Brookfield, 2005). In education, dominant ideologies are often taken for granted because they are so deeply ingrained, they escape notice. This makes it difficult to contest and replace problematic ideologies because individuals working at all levels of education, from policy to practice, will most likely fail to notice them. In examining the role of the Commonwealth in redressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity, it is important to understand the dominant ideologies that have informed the development of education policy, which in turn influences educational practice. Three key ideologies are discussed below: assimilationist ideologies, meritocratic ideologies, and deficit and racialised ideologies.

6.2.1 *Assimilationist ideologies*

Assimilationist ideologies relate to the idea that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must and should conform to the dominant culture to survive in the modern world. These ideologies promote the idea that it is best that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people lose their identities

and 'blend' into the dominant group. Assimilation emphasises cultural homogeneity and conformity, with those who are not part of the dominant group "expected to shed their previous markers of group identity and adopt those of the social whole" (Hartmann & Gerteis, 2005, p. 227). There is a subtle undercurrent across all realms of public policy that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should assimilate into mainstream society and, by extension, into the learning environments within education institutions.

In education, assimilationist ideologies are evident in policy, which focuses on whiteness as the obligatory standard and the benchmark for which other groups are measured against. At the schooling level, it can be heard in phrases like 'if you want to be successful, you need to be more like us'. Several scholars (Cross-Townsend, 2011; Gray & Beresford, 2008; McConaghy, 2000; Morgan, 2019; Prout-Quicke & Biddle, 2017; Rudolph, 2013; Vass, 2012) have highlighted the role of education in the assimilation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Cross-Townsend (2011, p. 76) notes that "assimilationist objectives based on theories of the 'deficit other' can be clearly identified throughout the history of Indigenous education policy and practice", with these ideals still manifesting today.

Assimilationist ideologies permeate education at all levels from policy to practice, with institutions reproducing and maintaining a view of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, communities and knowledges as being deficient (Maxwell et al., 2018; Patrick & Moodie, 2016). This view also extends to the languages and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people which are seen as a problem because they are perceived to contribute to deficits in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The endurance of such deficit ideologies within education policy and practice suggest that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are disadvantaged, not because of structural inequities and unfair practices, but because of their indigeneity. Assimilationist ideologies therefore place no consideration of whether education systems are fit for purpose regarding the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Assimilationist ideologies promote the notion that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students need to make adjustments in order to experience success in the education system. This view is supported by Griffin and Trudgett (2018, p. 4) who note that "the assimilation dogma became the systemic approach to Indigenous education and was reinforced by misguided research grounded in deficit theory". Despite a growing body of research attempting to challenge assimilationist ideals, education policy and practice is still largely underpinned by the assumption that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children need to be enculturated into white society. This also extends to the curriculum, with Harrison (2011) noting that assimilation policies have had a profound influence on

the design and implementation of the education curriculum in Australia. What is taught through the curriculum is, however, only part of a broader program of knowledge that is imparted in schools. Rahman (2013, p. 660) describes this as the 'hidden curriculum', the "unwritten rules, regulations, standards and expectations that form part of the learning process in schools and classrooms" which "reflect the white dominant culture values, practices and worldviews". She argues that "what this implies is that if children are to have any chance of succeeding in their education, they must take on another identity – one that is academically attuned, and aligned with the values and practices of mainstream society" (Rahman, 2013, p. 661).

The study of whiteness in education also foregrounds how assimilationist ideologies are expressed through the structures within education institutions that produce and reproduce white dominance. The symbols, celebrations, days of significance, curriculum content, classroom processes, assessment practices and wider educational social practices all make up the "silent cultural dominance of whiteness" and "encourage forms of student assimilation in order to succeed" (Rudolph, 2013, p. 207). Moreton-Robinson (2004b, p. 87) notes that "Australian Anglocentric whiteness is predicated on racial difference and dominance [and] as long as representations of Aboriginality remain the object of analysis and critique we are prohibited from scrutinising or recognising whiteness in everyday practices of representation". The implicit acceptance of assimilation as the primary goal of schooling has hampered any real consideration of how education could truly empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

6.2.2 Meritocratic ideologies

Meritocratic ideologies refer to the belief that in a given system, "success is earned and deserved" (Jost et al., 2003, p. 15). In Western societies, the notion that 'as long as you work hard enough, you can succeed' is a widespread belief in which the system rewards individual efforts and ability. These ideals underpin education policy and practice, by promoting the idea that individuals can achieve social mobility through hard work and their own merits, regardless of social position. In education, these assumptions are apparent when policies compare students as if they are starting from the same base, and they play out in educational practice when educators equate success with effort. As part of the informal cultural knowledge conveyed in schools – that is the norms, values and beliefs – there is a strongly held belief that everyone has an equal chance to succeed. Despite evidence clearly indicating that merit is not the only determinant of success in education (Brown & Tannock, 2009), meritocratic ideologies are associated with downplaying racial inequality (Knowles & Lowery, 2012) and a likelihood of embracing internal attributes as an explanation for the outcomes of disadvantaged groups (Kuppens et al., 2018).

Meritocratic ideologies reinforce the status quo and are associated with social hierarchy. Jost et al. (2003, p. 13) argue that individuals are “motivated to preserve the belief that existing social arrangements are fair, legitimate, justifiable, and necessary”. In their research into the belief in school meritocracy as an ideological barrier to the promotion of equality, Darnon et al. (2018, pp. 524-525) found that “people are particularly attached to the idea of meritocracy, especially when it comes to explaining academic achievement” [and while] “meritocracy within the educational system is seen as an equalising force”, “it may itself contribute to social inequalities”.

Meritocratic ideologies are also inextricably linked to racism because they deny that individual, systemic and structural racism cause racial inequities and have a profound effect on the experiences and outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Davis & Museus, 2019). Racism in education at the systemic level materialises as practices, policies, processes, conditions or requirements that maintain and reproduce avoidable and unfair inequalities (Paradies, 2006). These systemic and structural forms of racism are also deeply embedded in practices and beliefs, and they perpetuate the widespread unfair treatment and oppression of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Within education policy, meritocratic ideologies reinforce beliefs about the equal agency of individuals, which is articulated through opportunities and equality discourses. An example of this in national education policy is in the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (2019)* (the Declaration) in the following statement: “Australian Governments commit to ensuring the education community works to provide *equality of opportunity* and educational outcomes for all students at risk of educational disadvantage” (Education Council, 2019, p. 17). These sentiments ignore the fact that meritocracy is entangled with economic advantage. They also serve to rationalise the unjust distribution of advantage in society. Meritocratic ideologies frame what is essentially structural inequality and exclusion as an individual failure to measure up, when in reality, the system does not give everyone a fair chance to succeed. Opening the eyes of policy makers and educators to the problematic nature of meritocratic ideals is essential in making the education system more equitable, particularly in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

6.2.3 Deficit and racialised ideologies

Deficit and racialised assumptions about the capabilities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been presented throughout Australia’s history (Craven & Price, 2011). Griffin and Trudgett (2018, p. 3) note that “from the onset of colonisation in Australia, there was a belief that Indigenous Knowledges and perspectives were of no value to the first settlers and over time, this attitude became entrenched in the dominant society’s values and beliefs”. This erroneous outlook

continues to feature strongly in Australian society, with many people holding negative assumptions about the skills and abilities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Craven & Price, 2011). In education, deficit ideologies promote the notion that an individual's academic performance is directly related to pathologies in their sociocultural background, such as motivation levels, cognitive abilities, self-esteem or linguistic aspects. In relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, deficit and racialised assumptions are harmful because they "produce and naturalise the other, as well as silence, inferiorise and position Aboriginal people as deficient" (Burgess, 2019, p. 480).

National education policy is clouded in deficit discourse which frames and represents Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity in a narrative of deficiency and failure. This can be seen in the Declaration, which aspires to reduce (not actually close) educational achievement gaps between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their peers, while calling for an education system that promotes excellence and equity (Education Council, 2019). Goals of excellence and equity cannot be achieved if deficit views and assumptions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students remain uncontested. Rose (2015) argues that deficit discourse underpins the teaching practice of some non-Indigenous educators who have preconceived assumptions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and model their pedagogy accordingly. This often results in attention being focused on strategies to address or remedy the educational underperformance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students instead of standard instruction or strategies to extend high performance afforded to other students.

Deficit and racialised discourses in education policy and practice create barriers to progressing improvements in the education outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Walker (2004, p. 45) notes that in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, "the existing policy framework, underscored by persisting assumptions and the practice of defining Indigenous people in terms of the 'colonising culture' (Dodson, 1994, p. 8), tends to obscure the pervasive problems of liberal colonialism, assimilation and racism". Deficit and racialised ideologies promote low expectations, a deficit mindset about the abilities of students and often stereotype and pigeonhole Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Despite many of the assumptions underpinning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education having proven to be inappropriate and misguided, they still form the basis of efforts in relation to the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. With educational institutions "predominantly built and operating on colonial structures" (Khalifa et al., 2019, p. 583), there is widespread apathy about the impact of historical, social and political influences and a perception that educational issues stem from environmentally induced deficits. The need to emancipate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from deficit

and racialised discourses and to change narratives will be an important aspect of any attempt to remedy educational inequity.

Examining the systemic nature of the reproduction of deficit and racialised discourses is essential for understanding why they persist in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and society more broadly. Unquestioned, these discourses maintain and reproduce inequities. Educational institutions provide the perfect setting to implement interventions to combat racism and deficit ideologies, with Paradies (2005, p. 14) highlighting the importance of “anti-racist education that includes intercultural understanding and effective conflict resolution, in age-appropriate format, as an integral part of school curricula”. There is a key role for those involved in educational policy development, implementation and practice to acknowledge racism and deficit ideologies and to actively implement strategies to disrupt the current inequitable status quo in education.

6.3 Problematic representations and issues

Many representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational issues have long been problematic and more recently contested by several scholars, such as, Burgess, Lowe, et al. (2023), Vass (2012) and Patrick and Moodie (2016). Unfortunately, assumptions about the causes of disparities in educational outcomes continue to pervade all forms of public discourse on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. Some key representations and issues are discussed below, including: concepts of success, aspirations and potential; the lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice in education; the role of educators; and culturally appropriate schooling.

6.3.1 Success/aspirations/potential

There is a raft of seemingly uplifting language in education policy that is designed to promote the aspirational nature of education and its benefits. This language also serves to emphasise a strengths-based approach that highlights the abilities and talents of students, rather than focussing on challenges. While on face-value these concepts are seemingly desirable, the reality of deficit perceptions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ skills and abilities makes this language problematic.

The concept of ‘success’ is complex, particularly in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. It is difficult to define, but most commonly equated with positive outcomes in relation to educational participation and achievement. It often includes key equity indicators and is measured by standardised testing. The design of education policy, how schooling is structured and delivered, and what is valued is all defined from the dominant social and cultural standpoint. There is often a misalignment between what is measured as educational success and the learning goals that policies

aspire to. The standard measures of success draw attention to a missed opportunity to focus on the holistic wellbeing of all students and to measure what actually matters to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, their families and communities. There is also tension for those who successfully navigate the education system and achieve academic success, with Moreton-Robinson (2004b, p. 87) noting that “Nakata demonstrates how white textual representations become the measure of Indigenous authenticity and penetrate Indigenous education policy [and] Indigenous educational empowerment is reduced to the maintenance of a traditional identity because to be educated, according to the coloniser, means we can no longer maintain it”.

‘Aspirations’ is another concept that policy makers and educationalists have assigned to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. Conceptions of ‘high aspirations’ or ‘raising aspirations’ in policy discourse is underpinned by Western norms around the desirability of a particular career path and life course. This discourse is often at odds with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldviews and is problematic because there is a subjective lens through which aspirations are formed and understood (Gutman & Akerman, 2008). Individuals with higher social capital often have exposure to a range of opportunities, while those with lower social capital often face barriers and more limited choices. There are also issues of power and epistemology in interpretations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students aspirations, with education discourse often casting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as having lower ambition than their peers (Parente et al., 2003). The ability of the education system to meet the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families was highlighted by Moodie et al. (2021) in their systematic review of empirical research on the experiences and achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners in schooling. They found that “there is still some distance between practice and perceptions of practice, between mapping cause and effect, and between the aspirations of Indigenous students and families, and the ability of settler colonial education systems to meet those aspirations” (Moodie et al., 2021, p. 5).

Reaching or realising one’s ‘potential’ or ‘full learning potential’ is a feature of national education policy. The Declaration’s main aim for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is that “Australian Governments commit to empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to *reach their potential* and to ensuring the education community works to ‘close the gap’ for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples” (Education Council, 2019, p. 16). While this type of language is seemingly positive, it is inherently problematic. This is because potential is often associated with natural ability and talent. It is almost always isolated from broader discourses related to social, cultural and educational inequalities. For those students with high social capital, ‘potential’ equates to a wealth of opportunities and the ability to ‘dream big’. For many Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander students, however, the bar is often set far too low, with potential often equating to reaching par with average outcomes. 'Potential' is also intertwined with the idea of normalisation, that is, the centring of the non-Indigenous experience as the default experience, with educator's perceptions about the potential of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students articulated in comparison to non-Indigenous students. The effects of this are negative for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, because dosage is cumulative. If you are always assumed to be less competent or less worthy, this has implications in the long run for how you perceive yourself. Brayboy et al. (2015, p. 5) note that "because of their unique status and history, Indigenous peoples engage in education differently...and have aligned their educational vision and goals to meet tribal assertions of sovereignty and self-determination". It is important for education policy to attempt to bridge this gap in terms of better capturing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' definitions of success, potential and their aspirations for their education.

6.3.2 Lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice

Educational policy and practice is hampered by a lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation and involvement. Shay et al. (2023, p. 77) argue that in relation to education policy development and research, the "lived experiences, voices, knowledges, solutions and aspirations of Indigenous peoples who are the subjects of these policies and research are frequently excluded, disregarded and deliberately silenced". The implications of inadequate representation and involvement has been highlighted by Hogarth (2018, p. 383) who notes that "the lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation in all levels of Indigenous education policy production and interpretation maintains the relations of power and enables government and the coloniser to assume a hegemonic position as the 'knower'". The participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in all stages of the design, development, implementation and evaluation of education policies and programs is vital to their success. Despite calls for increased representation and participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in every single Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific education policy, report and review since 1989 (and even prior to this), this is still not common practice.

The history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy development highlights the performative nature of government calls for collaboration and codesign. Symbolic consultation has been the main form of participatory democracy, whereby Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are asked for their opinion on a particular policy or program, but not given any power over the design or implementation of said policy or program. Policy makers are deeply paternalistic and assume they know more about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people than Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander people themselves, which is to the detriment of communities and any approaches to progress or advance educational issues.

The different philosophies and values between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and policy makers also have implications for policy development. This necessitates the importance of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice to articulate success in terms of community aspirations, as well as emphasise the sociocultural change required to advance this (Burgess & Lowe, 2022). In their review of education policies, Gillan et al. (2017, p. 57) noted that “they have not encompassed the participation of a collective Indigenous voice, which as we have shown has been constantly reiterated as a necessary prerequisite to successful policy”. Further, bias that is underpinned by deficit and racialised assumptions diminishes the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ having a say in not only their education, but that of their children (Gillan et al., 2017).

The voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars in relation to educational policy development and implementation is also a point of contestation. Despite a growing number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers promoting counternarratives and practical suggestions to bring about change in education, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledges, expertise and experiences are still not considered in educational policy making processes. There is no greater expert on the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people themselves. There is an urgent need to centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and agency in educational research and policy making, as well as in relation to local implementation and decision-making. In their “review of initiatives implemented across Australia to try and improve the educational achievement” of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, Gillan et al. (2017, p. 74) found that “each of them also show how Indigenous parents *will* engage in their children’s education, given the chance, given a model which they are comfortable with, one that meets their individual and community needs”.

6.3.3 The role of educators

Educators hold primary responsibility for the learning of all students within a classroom. Given this, education policy, as articulated in the Declaration, places considerable responsibility on educators to drive improvements in the educational outcomes of students, through excellence in teaching and educating (Education Council, 2019). One of the 11 goals of the Declaration is “supporting quality teaching and leadership”, with the policy acknowledging the need for highly skilled educators and the importance of attracting, developing, supporting and retaining high-quality teachers (Education Council, 2019, p. 11).

Australia's education workforce is predominantly from a middle-class, Anglo-Saxon background (Lampert et al., 2016; Rice et al., 2023), so it is inevitable that curriculum content and planning and teaching techniques will reflect dominant cultural values and beliefs. This one-size-fits-all approach promotes a pattern of white hegemony that maintains cultural, social, historical and institutional dominance by white society. This is problematic because educators' perceptions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been learned and are influenced by a considerable history. Hayes (2010) argues that the issue is not with educators holding different opinions or worldviews, it is when these views affect their pedagogical practice. Deficit thinking paradigms place the problem of educational underachievement with the student themselves, rather than finding fault with the pedagogy, curriculum or teaching practices (Hayes, 2010). It is this focus on perceived environmentally induced deficits within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students that prevents educators from critically reflecting on their own practice, attitudes, and behaviour. Challenging these ideals is difficult, with Griffin and Trudgett (2018, p. 11) arguing that "cultural awareness will not compensate for pedagogy that is absorbed in deficit thinking".

Several scholars have highlighted the importance of educators in either disrupting or maintaining expectations about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' ability to achieve academic success, as well as the importance of educators in developing their critical consciousness to better understand the political, structural and historic issues that impact on teaching practice (Burgess & Lowe, 2022; Lowe, 2018; Schulz & Fane, 2015; Thaman, 2013). However, because dominant ideologies, assumptions, attitudes and beliefs are so embedded and often escape notice, endeavours to unmask and correct these are an individual pursuit. In their review of publications focusing on improvements in the educational experience provided for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, Lloyd et al. (2015, p. 6) note that there needs to be a "fundamental change in mindset, at all levels of education from the macro-system government level to the belief system manifest at the microsystem classroom in the student-teacher interface...it is only with this change of mindset that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students will, ultimately, experience responsive teaching practice and learning outcome".

6.3.4 Making schools more culturally appropriate

Policy statements reflect that the Commonwealth and state and territory governments believe that making schools more culturally appropriate will lead to significant improvements in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education outcomes. This intense focus on 'culture' as one of the primary means by which disproportionate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational achievement can be remedied was highlighted in the previous chapter. Education policy texts explicitly call for a

greater incorporation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in schools for two main reasons: so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can see their cultures reflected; and so that all students can learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures (Education Council, 2019).

While calls for more culturally appropriate or relevant schooling are well placed, the issue becomes problematic when educators only have a cursory understanding of what culturally appropriate or relevant education means. Furthermore, there are differing understandings of what this actually entails. The tension lies between culturally appropriate or relevant education – that is incorporating contemporary, relevant and meaningful content into teaching and learning – and teaching *about* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2022). These are two very different concepts. Despite good intentions, many educators may believe that they need to incorporate what they perceive to be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ‘culture’ in their classrooms and often do this in tokenistic ways. Their efforts to bridge this cultural gap often fall short, with Harrison and Greenfield (2011, p. 65) noting that “teachers often lament that they know little about Aboriginal people, while questioning how they can be expected to include Aboriginal perspectives in their programs”. It is this lack of knowledge and antipathy that leads to stereotypical representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, cultures and worldviews.

The key to culturally appropriate or relevant schooling is: for educators to develop critical consciousness in relation to their practice, to question the knowledge, curriculum and pedagogy of the dominant culture and how it negates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; to incorporate diverse resources into classrooms; and to build relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities. Taking a culturally relevant approach to teaching maximises learning for all students, not just Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Truth telling about Australia’s history is another key part of making schools more culturally appropriate. Education for both educators and students should include learning about: the process of colonisation as a sustained attack to eradicate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; the frontier wars; the establishment of Western institutions, systems and structures; official government policies regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; and the processes and ideologies that entrench and reinforce unequal power relations to legitimate the sovereignty of the Crown.

The initial sections of this chapter have outlined dominant ideologies in education research, policy and practice, as well as shed light on problematic representations and issues in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. The next section turns to the implication of these for

governments, in particular, the Commonwealth, and then proposes a way forward in the form of a theory of change and a blueprint for future investment.

6.4 Implications for government

The Commonwealth is the primary national authority and power in relation to education as it: channels taxpayer funds to systems and schools; develops national education policy; is responsible for the national education architecture, including setting the work priorities for ministerial authorities and companies such as ACARA and AITSL; collects data; and carries out a range of other administrative tasks. State and territory education authorities are explicitly responsible for the implementation of education, that is, teaching and learning.

The National Schools Reform Agreement (NSRA) is the primary vehicle for national collaboration in education. It outlines key national policy initiatives to lift student achievement, attainment and engagement (Productivity Commission, 2023). A new NSRA for implementation from 2025 is currently being negotiated between the Commonwealth and state and territory governments. A review by the Productivity Commission (2023, p. 2) on the current agreement noted that “the NSRA is a sound platform for intergovernmental collaboration”, however “the NSRA’s initiatives have done little, so far, to improve student outcomes”. This review also recommended a number of key reform challenges that should be the focus of the next agreement, including ‘reducing the differences in achievement across students’, in particular those from ‘priority equity cohorts’ (of which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are considered to be), noting that there is a need to “adopt new approaches, developed and implemented in consultation with the relevant parties, to lift outcomes for all students” (Productivity Commission, 2023, p. 2).

Government attempts aimed at reducing the educational disadvantage experienced by cohorts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have not been successful despite decades of policy statements conveying recognition by all levels of government of the urgency of improving educational outcomes, and most recently as part of the NSRA review. This is directly related to several issues, including: governments not including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the design, development, implementation and evaluation of education policy and programs; priority areas and measures for education reform remaining static and merely rephrased in policies over the last four decades; deficit and racialised narratives and discourses being reproduced from one policy to the next; the underlying paternalistic ideology of policies which positions the government as authority and decision-maker, dictating what it thinks is best for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; and the overreliance on responsabilisation agendas that blame Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander people for their predicament and seemingly justify interventions and stricter controls over Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's lives.

Despite clear consensus that the current educational situation requires action, governments have failed to deliver any material improvements in the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This is largely due to a lack of reliable evidence about the most appropriate policy responses to overcome barriers to achieve educational success. The following sections attempt to address this gap by outlining a way forward by articulating a theory of change and a blueprint for future Commonwealth investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

6.5 Theory of change

Theory of change has its historical roots in the field of theory-driven evaluation. Reinholz and Andrews (2020, p. 2) note that “theory-driven evaluation aimed to move beyond a simplistic input-output notion of evaluation and instead required that program designers explicitly state how they expected a program to work, thereby making their implicit assumptions explicit”. The focus of a theory of change was to move beyond simply asking whether something works, to understanding the conditions in which something works and for whom (Reinholz & Andrews, 2020). Initially designed as a tool to evaluate initiatives focused on social change, a theory of change is an illustration of “how and why a desired change is expected to happen” within a given context (Holtsbery, 2022, p. 49). Gray and Beresford (2008, p. 212) argue that “educational leaders at all levels of government are acutely aware of the need for sustainable change practices in Australian Indigenous education”. They go on to note that “sustainability in this context means the capacity of education authorities to maintain a shared vision of equity and to mobilise the resources, commitment and accountability to achieve a long-term change” (Gray & Beresford, 2008, p. 212). A theory of change, in this instance, is a useful tool for articulating how a series of initial and intermediate measures sets the stage for how longer-term change can occur.

Anderson (2006) developed a comprehensive guide for how to approach a theory of change, with elements of this adapted by Reinholz and Andrews (2020, p. 3) into the following four-step process:

- (1) The first step “begins with recognising the context in which the change effort will occur”;
- (2) Secondly, “a process of backwards mapping, first focusing on the end results and then working backwards to describe how one is supposed to get to those results”;
- (3) Thirdly, an articulation of “the specific interventions that will be used to try to achieve preconditions and long-term outcomes”; and

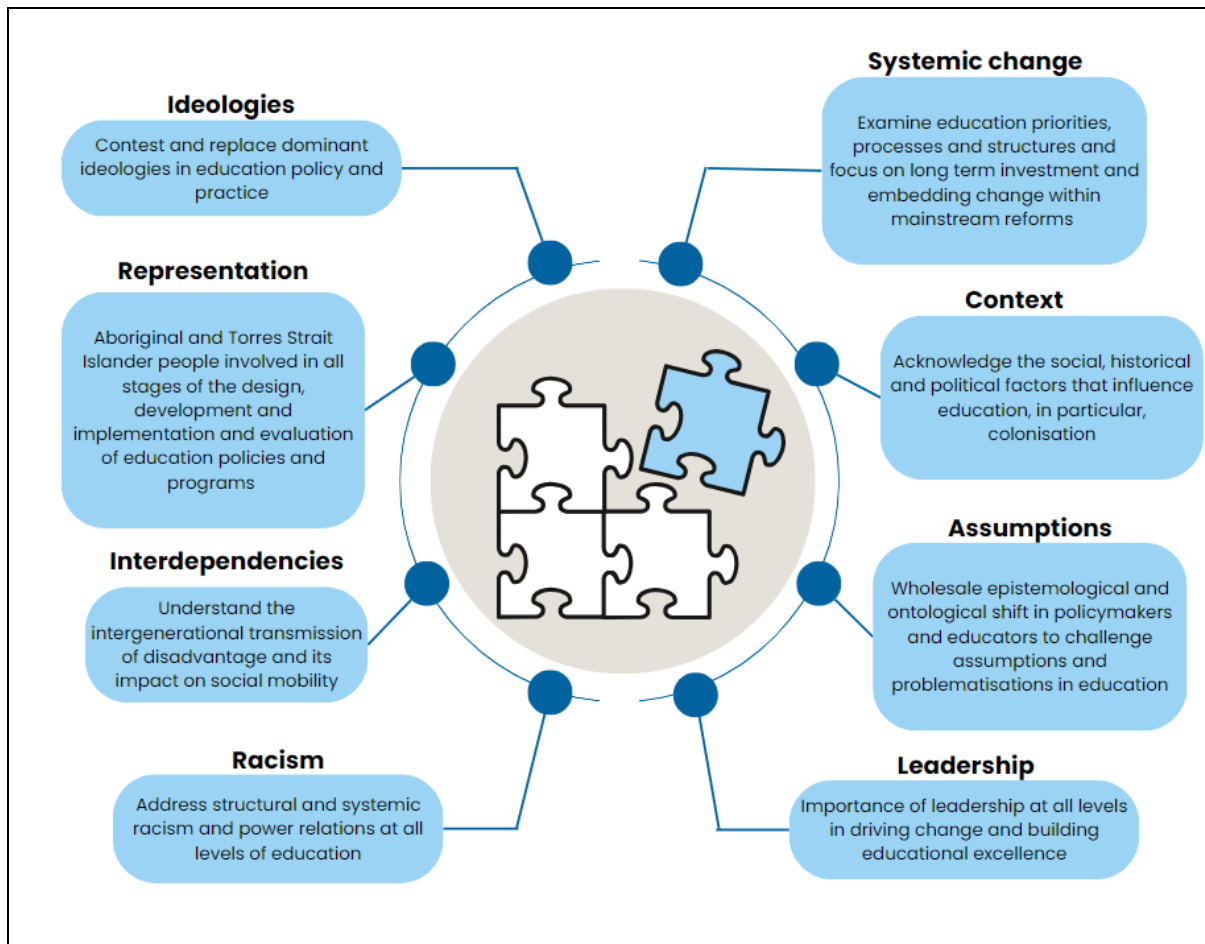
- (4) Finally, an articulation of “the assumptions behind the above elements and the linkages between them”.

The Commonwealth has a specific role in relation to education and generally funds activity that is considered complementary, so as not to duplicate existing state and territory efforts. The OECD (2017, p. 12) notes that “evidence from improvements and successes that have been achieved for Indigenous students clearly point to strategies that are deliberate in intent, open and flexible in approach, vigilant in monitoring progress, and sustained in effort over time”. Equally important is the rigorous evaluation of the effectiveness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational programs and policies in ensuring investment is being targeted towards worthwhile efforts. In that vein, Figure 8 outlines the specific measures that should be considered as part of a whole of system approach to addressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity. These measures cover eight areas for action:

- ideologies – the need to contest and replace dominant ideologies in education policy and practice;
- representation – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are involved in all stages of the design, development, implementation and evaluation of education policies and programs;
- interdependencies – individuals working at all levels of education understand the impact of the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage and its impact on social mobility;
- racism – measures are taken to address structural and systemic racism and power relations at all levels of education;
- systemic change – the need to examine education priorities, processes and structures and focus on long term investment and embedding change within mainstream reforms;
- context – individuals working at all levels of education understand and acknowledge the social, historical and political factors that influence education, in particular, the legacy of colonisation processes and how they continue to manifest in the everyday lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people;
- assumptions – the need for a wholesale epistemological and ontological shift in policy makers and educators to challenge assumptions and problematisations in education; and
- leadership – the importance of leadership at all levels in driving change and building educational excellence.

These measures are discussed in detail in the following section.

Figure 8 – Theory of change in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education



6.5.1 Contesting assimilationist ideologies by including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in educational decision-making

To counter assimilationist ideologies in educational policy and practice, it is essential that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are involved in all stages of the design, development, implementation and evaluation of education policies and programs. This also extends to elevating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in education research, curriculum development and within the education infrastructure. A formal national body to advise on educational matters is critical in advancing educational equity. Involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the discussions pertinent to education policy and practice, creates the necessary conditions to bring about change. This should also extend to the consideration of the worldviews of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and how these can be included in education policy so that they adequately reflect the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. As noted by Cross-Townsend (2011, p. 71), for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, “a true shift away from assimilationism means the right to define and engage education that is founded on Indigenous objectives, philosophies, epistemologies, values, and language literacy with an acknowledgment that

Indigenous objectives in education might include goals that both include and extend beyond dominant culture objectives of English language literacy and employment outcomes”.

Another important aspect of challenging assimilationist ideologies is the need for policy makers and educators to acknowledge the legacy of colonisation processes and the ongoing effects of these on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today. A key aspect of this includes critically understanding Australia’s history of exceptional governance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This may also go some way to challenging the paternalistic, government-as-saviour approach is grounded in the misconception that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people require coercive assimilation to survive in the modern world. Underlying paternalistic ideologies permeate all aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy, programs and practice and result in “a circular argument where the benefits of education are prescribed by the service provider, not the service user” (Guenther et al., 2022, p. 5). By empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to make decisions about matters which affect their own lives and communities, the process of bringing about meaningful change in education can begin. While there will always be tension between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s aspirations, values and worldviews and those of governments and systems, both would agree that there is a need to address educational disparities. The quest to achieve equality and equity in education can only be achieved by centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices.

6.5.2 Contesting meritocratic ideologies by understanding intergenerational transmission of disadvantage and racism

Contesting meritocratic ideologies starts with an understanding that social mobility cannot compensate for inequality. Social structures and systems by their very design are unjust and facilitate the ongoing domination and oppression of people that don’t belong to the dominant group. Systems designed around the belief that everyone has an equal chance to succeed within them, without acknowledging that individuals from varying backgrounds have vastly different social capital continue to perpetuate social and economic inequities. While there are many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that successfully complete schooling and go on to achieve the highest possible academic qualifications and remarkable careers, these achievements have been accomplished within systems that are designed to hold them back. This is compounded by the fact that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people born in the 1950s and 60s (my mother’s generation) would have grown up on missions, reserves or stations and been subject to protection and segregation policies. There have been very limited opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to build intergenerational wealth and transmit cultural capital. Gillan et al. (2017, p.

7) concur with this, arguing that “there is not a single Indigenous Australian alive today who has not been affected by the policies of colonisation, protectionism, segregation and assimilation”.

Working to dismantle the systemic reproduction of inequity is critical to the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, especially when discrimination is so deeply embedded within systems, policies, processes, laws, practices and beliefs. A key aspect of this process needs to include shifting public discourse from a focus on meritocratic ideals. This should include an acceptance of the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage and its impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, stemming directly from colonial processes and successive government policies.

Challenging structural and systemic racism is also an important part of this process. The values, capabilities and cultures of those who draft public policy are built into them, so they will often fail to notice the discriminatory aspects of their policies because they assume them to be neutral and universally applicable. The result is a perpetuation and reproduction of inequity. This combined with relatively limited scholarship on ways in which to reduce or eliminate racism, particularly at the structural and systemic levels, makes this a formidable challenge. Implementing strategies to dismantle systemic and structural racism should also give priority to addressing inequities in contributing factors in the education environment, such as economic security and social and historical factors.

6.5.3 Contesting deficit and racialised ideologies by promoting appreciative inquiry and educational excellence

To overcome deficit and racialised ways of thinking, and the projection of these ideologies in education policy and practice, it is important for policy makers and educators to engage in critical self-reflection. It is important for educators to consider their personal beliefs and where these may have originated (Griffin & Trudgett, 2018) so that these assumptions do not affect their pedagogical practice. McKay et al. (2014, p. 180) highlight the importance of examining the power relations in the teaching and learning environment and suggest reflection on three domains: “personal beliefs (moral domain); teaching practices (ethical domain); and the teaching and learning environment (political domain)”. They note that critical reflection in each of these domains “will give teachers awareness and a place to negotiate a change in their attitudes, values and beliefs” (McKay et al., 2014, p. 180). Moving away from deficit and racialised ideologies requires embracing cultural congruence and evidence-based practice as theoretical underpinnings for education policy and practice. Culturally congruent practice is the application of evidence-based education that is in agreement with the preferred cultural values, beliefs, worldview, and practices of the students (Barr & Gazaway, 2017).

A practical framework for policy makers and educators to shift their deficit thinking has been advanced by Avital (2005). This framework was developed in relation to technological systems, but the concepts are applicable to the education context. The main premise is to shift from deficit thinking to appreciative inquiry. The differences in these approaches are outlined in Table 3 (Avital, 2005, p. 126). This framework calls for a shift from problem solving/gap closing/focusing on what is wrong/preventing failure/fixing problems to generative inquiry/boundary spanning/enabling success/looking at whole systems (Avital, 2005).

Table 3 - Main features of appreciative inquiry in contrast to deficit thinking

	Appreciative Inquiry	Deficit Thinking
Method	Generative Inquiry	Problem solving
Drive	Boundary spanning	Gap closing
Focus	What is best	What is wrong
Tactical Objective	Enable success	Prevent failure, fix problems
Actors	Whole systems	Varies, isolated entities
Guiding Paradigm	Voluntaristic	Mainly deterministic

Another example of a philosophy that articulates the conditions for improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is that of Sarra (2007) which focuses on: positive engagement; a demand for high expectations; opportunities for students to develop a positive sense of their cultural identity; and for educators to work in partnership with community.

It is important to note, that no one method, framework, philosophy or approach will provide the cure-all to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational issues. There is however a fundamental need for education institutions to work towards building educational excellence. This coupled with self-determination discourses incorporated into education policy, programs and practice will go some way to addressing the disparities in educational outcomes and improving the educational experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

6.5.4 Contesting and replacing dominant ideologies in education policy through system-wide change

Education policies are rarely developed with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' participation or consent. As a result, these have mostly failed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and denied them vital life opportunities and cultural security. Education policies are underpinned by multiple competing discourses and ideologies, however a key underlying narrative woven throughout policies related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is the notion of responsabilisation. Responsibilisation discourses place the onus for change on individuals and communities by calling for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to take an active role in

resolving their own problems. While most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people would welcome the opportunity to do this, these calls are mostly framed in a way that asserts the authority of the settler state in determining the nature and specificity of the change. There is no consideration of these processes being informed by the end users, which are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This approach also serves to shift the focus away from highlighting problematic institutional and structural issues that continue to oppress Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Education policy is generally drafted by the Commonwealth, agreed with state and territory governments and then filtered down through a multitude of bureaucracy levels before finally reaching education institutions. There is a significant gap between those who design policy and the people on the ground who can ensure it is effectively implemented. This issue was highlighted by Guenther et al. (2019) who note that “it became clear through our systematic reviews that there is a strong need for a national vision; the states and territories work in their silos, and education is seen mainly as a pursuit for individuals” (Guenther et al., 2019, p. 207).

Craven and Price (2011, p. 48) point out that “decision-makers can change policy with the stroke of a pen”. While this is true, there remains the issue that policy makers themselves share the attitudes and values of the collective mainstream, and find it all too easy to proceed along the course of untested assumptions. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational programs are designed with good intent, however, seldom based on robust evidence or best practice. It is often easier to maintain the status quo, update policies to reflect the latest buzz words and issues and maintain the same deep seated underlying presumptions. That said, a mindset change is possible to achieve if there is strong leadership to champion the change. This would also need to include a system-wide approach to addressing systemic and structural issues within educational institutions and in the teaching profession, while also focusing on long term investment and embedding change within mainstream reform processes. Levin (2012, p. 11) notes that “an effective system-wide change strategy requires the following elements:

- (1) a small number of ambitious yet achievable and well-grounded goals, publicly stated;
- (2) a positive stance on improving all schools and success for all students;
- (3) an emphasis on capacity building and a focus on results;
- (4) multi-level engagement with strong leadership and a ‘guiding coalition’;
- (5) continuous learning through innovation and effective use of research and data;
- (6) a focus on key strategies while also managing other interests and issues;
- (7) effective use of resources; and
- (8) a strong implementation effort to support the change process”.

The two key aspects underpinning system-wide reform to bring about changes to the education outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students include those actions that focus on the effectiveness of the educational process and those that address institutional capacity. As part of a system-wide change process, the actual change program, as well as the accompanying capacity development need to be considered simultaneously. There is also a need to balance the change agenda with the reality of operating in a political, social and cultural context. A system-wide approach to reforming problematic discourses, narratives and ideologies in education in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is essential, as these are mutually reinforced across multiple layers of social organisation – political, bureaucratic and practitioner levels.

6.5.5 Challenging assumptions and problematisations in education through a wholesale epistemological and ontological shift in educators and policy makers

Quality teaching has been found to be the most significant in-school determinant of student achievement. Hattie (2009) identified the key major sources of variance in student achievement and found that while the attributes of students (50%) predict achievement more than any other variable, teachers account for 30% of the variance in achievement outcomes. It is important that reform efforts focus on the greatest source of variance that can make the difference – educators.

Domestic evidence indicates that teachers often enter the workforce not adequately prepared to teach students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds (McKenzie et al., 2014) and often hold deficit views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' ability to achieve academic success (AITSL, 2022). Educators are particularly impacted by discourses that position Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as deficient, with their beliefs transpiring into everyday talk, and inevitably shaping the broader educational environment. Rogers (2015) notes that teachers' negative opinions and attitudes towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their cultures can inadvertently transfer onto Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Attitudes and beliefs are predictors of behaviour, with Harrison (2008, p. 12) arguing that "in the end, teachers make a decision about whether they are with or against Indigenous people, or alternatively, they may not care one way or the other, but remember, the kids will be influenced by the decisions you make [and] you will never be able to hide your thoughts and values from them, so what you think really counts".

Quality teaching has been a focus of reform efforts in the education sector. The Commonwealth has viewed the development of teacher and principal standards and the establishment of a nationally consistent system of teacher accreditation as a key part of the solution to teacher quality. The development of the education workforce is an area the Commonwealth has significant influence in

as it funds AITSL, which is responsible for “developing expertise and empowering teachers and school leaders to create better education outcomes for Australian children” (AITSL, 2023, p. 1). AITSL has led initial teacher education (ITE) reform, the development of professional standards for teachers, professional standards for principals and nationally agreed accreditation standards and procedures. The introduction of these measures has been viewed as a positive development in the education reform agenda, however issues with implementation exist. Despite attempts to standardise the teaching profession, there is still a raft of criticism levelled at the quality of teaching in Australian, indicating that AITSL has been less than successful in effectively progressing these reforms.

All ITE programs are accredited by state and territory teacher regulatory authorities, with the main purpose of accreditation to provide assurance that graduates are professionally qualified and competent (Ingvarson et al., 2006). Results from a comprehensive teacher survey showed that almost one third of both primary and secondary teachers found their pre-service teacher education not at all helpful in assisting them to teach students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds (McKenzie et al., 2014). One of the key reasons for this is a lack of mandated units on teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (or broader concepts around building cultural capability) as a part of teacher education programs. Where relevant units are offered, these are generally not compulsory and at times are only included as a small part of a broader ‘diversity’ unit. In their report on the cultural competence of the Australian teaching workforce, AITSL noted that “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and cultural responsiveness courses are not mandatory in all ITE programs across the country [and] in institutions that do offer or mandate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, the base requirement is minimal across the whole ITE program and in the view of many, such courses were inadequate” (AITSL, 2022).

There are 37 professional standards that teachers are obligated to meet, both at the time of graduation from a teacher education program and then to varying levels of expertise as they move through the four teaching career levels from ‘graduate’ to ‘proficient’ to ‘highly accomplished’ to ‘lead’. The professional standards for teachers include two standards related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. These are: “Standard 1.4 – strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students”; and “Standard 2.4 – understand and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians” (AITSL, 2011, pp. 11, 13). The assessment of preservice teachers against Standards 1.4 and 2.4 for accreditation has been found to be inconsistent, if applied at all, with limited research into teacher’s capacity to meet the standards. For graduate and more senior teachers, the quality and type of professional development undertaken is diverse, as it is generally implemented on a

school-by-school basis. Research notes that a relatively small number of primary teachers (around one quarter) reported participating in professional learning activities concerned with ‘teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’ (McKenzie et al., 2014). Professional development is highly variable, ad hoc and lacks cohesiveness, with formal professional development offerings rarely evaluated (Ma Rhea et al., 2012). The success of professional development opportunities for the education workforce is highly dependent on the principal. Added to this, is the issue that certification at the ‘highly accomplished’ and ‘lead’ teacher career stages of the teacher standards is voluntary in relation to these specific standards.

ITE has a crucial role in shaping the practice of educators, with beliefs formed early in a teacher’s career more susceptible to change, compared to those beliefs held over a longer period, which are more difficult to shift. With ITE lacking in terms of adequately preparing teachers to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, this leaves in-service professional development as the only mechanism through which educators can gain an understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, histories and perspectives. The drawback of leaving it up to individual educators to decide how to improve their practice, means they will likely not elect to undertake professional development related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education (Booth, 2014, p. 41).

Teaching through the lens of critical whiteness and anti-racist pedagogy are two concepts that could facilitate the development of critical consciousness in educators. The development of critical consciousness allows educators to think critically about the world around them and develop the skills to challenge the status quo and critique societal inequalities. To date, these concepts have not been considered, either in the language of education policy or in educational training, professional development and practice in Australia. In reviewing the teacher standards in the context of improving teaching in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, Ma Rhea et al. (2012, p. 62) found that professional development in relation to Standards 1.4 and 2.4 would need to, among other things:

- “be explicitly anti-racist”;
- “include opportunity for understanding the history between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians”;
- “include intercultural or cross-cultural skills development involving the development of, or changing of, teachers’ personal attitudes, expectations and understandings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures”; and

- “link issues relating to the preservation and maintenance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity and lifeways, including languages and traditional practices to contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aspirations and practices”.

A similar capability uplift is required for policy makers responsible for designing, developing and implementing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy. Policy makers should ideally express many of the characteristics outlined by Ma Rhea et al. (2012) in that they should aim to be anti-racist, have an understanding of Australia’s colonial history, be able to reflect on personal attitudes and assumptions and understand the link between traditional and contemporary aspirations and practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Policy makers with these skills would be essential change agents in transforming the Commonwealth’s approach to education policy development. While many policy decisions occur under uncertainty and ambiguity, after more than 30 years of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific education policy, the staticity of the current situation and lack of imagination is cause for serious concern. The complexity of policy makers in juggling competing priorities from different actors in the political sphere is not intended to be minimised, however, the need to push back on the status quo is essential. Policy makers need to be able to challenge colonial understandings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their cultures and reflect on how this is reinforced and reproduced in education policy. Truth telling and decolonising thought processes will need to be a fundamental part of this process, in learning lessons from the past, identifying what needs to change and how things will be done differently in the future.

6.5.6 The role of leadership at all levels

School leadership has been found to be critical in contributing to student outcomes (Burgess, Fricker, et al., 2023). Effective school leadership underpins effective learning environments and fosters a positive school culture. Trimmer et al. (2021, p. 21) note that “school leadership is paramount in fostering student engagement and improving educational outcomes as it impacts upon curriculum and pedagogic practices within the school, teachers’ professional learning, cultural safety and respect for cultural identity and knowledges”. Over the last decade, there has been an increasing move toward greater school autonomy, decentralisation and deregulation to allow schools to respond more flexibly to local or regional needs and circumstances (Trimmer et al., 2021).

School leaders have a pivotal role to play in developing effective relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and the wider community. As part of a suite of critical capabilities, school leaders are responsible for creating the conditions to build and sustain high trust

relationships. A range of leadership development frameworks have been developed to build school leadership capabilities. It is important to note that no one method, framework, philosophy or approach will work for every school leader. However, there is a fundamental need for education institutions, through effective school leadership, to build educational excellence. Berger (2003, p. 2) notes that “the key to excellence is that it is born from a culture, when children enter a family culture, a community culture, or a school culture that demands and supports excellence, they work to fit into that culture”, regardless of their background. Trimmer et al. (2021, p. 31) argue that “new models of professional development that include intercultural awareness, and identified leadership models are also required for new leadership patterns to become established and sustainable systemically”.

Leadership at the policy making level is also important. There is a common “belief among decision-makers that bureaucrats, policy makers and politicians know best how to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational outcomes” (Gillan et al., 2017, p. 40). It only takes a cursory look at the outcomes of the education reform strategy of Closing the Gap to see that this approach is problematic. This is clearly articulated in 12 years of Prime Ministerial statements highlighting the failure of Closing the Gap to make any material improvements to the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (NIAA, 2020). An important part of policy leadership from the Commonwealth going forward is for it to attempt to renew its legitimacy in relation to the development of effective policy in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education by adequately including essential stakeholders in these processes.

6.5.7 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators

Increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as part of the education workforce more broadly have been key measures in education policies since 1989. A report on the achievements of a previously funded Commonwealth initiative, the More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSI) highlighted the importance of increasing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workforce, noting that “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students ‘cannot be what they cannot see’”, (Buckskin, 2016, p. 8). It also found that the benefits of having more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers enriches the schooling experience of all students, not just Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Buckskin, 2016). MATSI was run over a period of five years and undertook a range of collaborative national projects which resulted in a 16.5% increase in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers over the life of the project (Buckskin, 2016, p. 7). This is an example of

how targeted investment by the Commonwealth and sustained effort can produce effective outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

There is currently no professional body that exists to exclusively support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Principals' Association (NATSIPA) was established over a decade ago and aims to be the “representative voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school principals adding value to the national education agenda” (NATSIPA, 2023, p. 1). This body is run on membership and is not funded by the Commonwealth, with the executive made up of current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander principals doing this in addition to their roles in schools. There are currently around 100 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander principals, compared to around 3,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers (NATSIPA, 2023). Given that there is a critical mass when you combine both principals and teachers, the establishment of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific teachers' association that also encompasses principals could function as a more effective body to drive change in the education workforce domain.

There have been repeated calls to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators, however, apart from some short-term funded Commonwealth initiatives, this task has largely been left to the states and territories to progress. Conversely in the health sector, the Commonwealth funds the Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association (AIDA) whose primary purpose is to “grow ethical and professional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors who will lead and drive equitable and just health outcomes for all our peoples” (Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association [AIDA], 2023, p. 1). AIDA was born from a conference of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander medical students and doctors in the late 1990s who wanted to establish national support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander medical students (AIDA, 2023). The organisation is a not-for-profit, incorporated in 1998, and has played a pivotal role in contributing to the growth of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors, through its strong support. Since the first Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctor graduate, more than 300 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have gone onto become doctors (AIDA, 2023). AIDA plays an important role in advocacy, teaching and influencing policy, and delivers a cultural safety program (developed and delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors). It also contributes to the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors. A similar body does not exist in the education sector, and this is a gap that requires attention.

6.5.8 The case for incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in schools

The inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in school curricula has long been identified in educational policy dating back to 1989. One of the key reasons for this inclusion has been the observation that education is “mono-cultural and thus biased toward the dominant white groups” (Nakata, 1997, p. 17). Where there is no diversity represented, a prevailing culture marked by homogeneity emerges. A range of approaches and frameworks, such as culturally appropriate pedagogy, cultural competence, culturally responsive teaching and cultural safety have been proposed to make education institutions more inclusive, with these terms, and many others often used interchangeably. Khalifa et al. (2019, p. 587) note that “colonial schools played a pivotal role in normalising Western epistemologies and inferiorising Indigeneity”, while Nakata (2011, p. 6) raises the issue of “how to value and position Indigenous content in the curriculum as something that enriches the education of all students rather than something included to pacify the natives or to redress the sins of colonisers”.

Policy statements reflect that the Commonwealth and state and territory governments believe that making schools more culturally appropriate will lead to significant improvements in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education outcomes. This belief is not fundamentally flawed, however, the intense focus on this within education policies (to the exclusion of other initiatives) leads to the assumption that policy makers lack innovation and imagination in articulating alternative solutions. Education policy texts explicitly call for a greater incorporation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in schools for two main reasons: so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can see their cultures reflected; and so that all students can learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures (Education Council, 2019). The introduction of the Australian Curriculum in 2015 included a focus on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and histories. The inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies as part of the syllabus has been noted as a significant step forward, however Griffin and Trudgett (2018, p. 9) argue that the national curriculum maintains a “surreptitious deficit tone”, evidenced by the “overemphasis on Western literature”, which in turn “reinforces the superiority of the dominant culture”. The Australian Curriculum mandates the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures as a cross-curriculum priority, such that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives are to be embedded across the curriculum in each subject area. The primary aim is to normalise the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content and shift it from electives and the periphery into core business. However, there remain issues with implementation. As articulated by Nakata (2011, p. 7), in relation to the sentiments in the Australian Curriculum about the inclusion of

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content, “the nice inclusionary statements are there and then nothing”.

Many teachers express concern that they lack the necessary knowledge and skills to implement Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in their classrooms (Harrison & Greenfield, 2011). This issue was also highlighted by Quince (2012) who found that teachers were hesitant about incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content due to a perceived lack of expertise and ability to do this in an authentic way. Yunkaporta and McGinty (2009, p. 63) also note that teachers avoid Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives because they were ‘uncomfortable’ and ‘fearful of overstepping’ cultural boundaries. Many educators incorporate what they perceive to be Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ‘culture’ in their classrooms and often do this in tokenistic ways, which leads the reproduction of stereotypical representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures.

Educators would be better placed to focus their efforts on culturally relevant education, through the incorporation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content into classrooms. Nakata (2011, p. 5) argues that the “inclusion of Indigenous content into the curriculum is not difficult [and that] it cannot be such a hard thing for curriculum developers to build a sequential program of Indigenous content across English, history, geography, art, music, social studies, science, and even in maths”. Nakata (2011) goes on to provide an example of introducing students to astronomy and how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content can be incorporated into the ‘wider context in the sciences’ to develop the intercultural understanding of all students.

The key to having culturally relevant classrooms is in educators developing critical consciousness in relation to their practice, to question the knowledge, curriculum and pedagogy of the majority culture and how it often negates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their knowledges. This should also include the normalisation of the incorporation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content into classrooms as part of the broader context of learning, not just as a specific lesson. Taking a culturally relevant approach to teaching maximises learning for all students, not just Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, with Baynes (2016, p. 81) noting, “the benefits to education, teachers and students of curriculum inclusive of Indigenous Knowledges and ways of knowing are multifaceted and numerous”.

6.6 Blueprint for future Commonwealth investment

Having articulated a theory of change, with specific measures that should be considered as part of a whole-of-system approach to addressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity,

the section presents a blueprint for future Commonwealth investment. The blueprint is a call to action. The inequitable status quo and seemingly intractable ‘gaps’ in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education will continue to persist without a fundamental change of approach. A policy framework that does not see anything new, will have limited scope and flexibility to address future challenges.

The proposed blueprint for future Commonwealth investment aims to bring about change in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education by focusing on a small number of actions that have a high chance of success (Sonnemann & Goss, 2018). These activities are likely to have strong buy-in from state and territory governments and are focused on activities that are within the Commonwealth’s remit. This is to ensure that the Commonwealth does not prescribe things or impose new conditions, with Sonnemann and Goss (2018, p. 8) noting that doing so “would be a significant departure from recent approaches to Commonwealth-state relations”. The Commonwealth already has a large role in training teachers, overseeing the national curriculum, carrying out national testing, collecting data and implementing professional standards. A key aspect of the proposed areas for reform is that they could easily be embedded within existing mainstream reform processes. These processes, however, would require some implementation reform to be more fit for purpose in addressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational disparities.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy has been informed by a long history, with the underlying premise of some of the measures included in previous iterations worthwhile – specifically those aimed at culturally inclusive curricula and increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers. The issue has been a lack of adequate resourcing and support to ensure that these measures are effectively implemented, and what Langton et al. (2009, p. 102) call ‘jurisdictional conflict’ which concerns the allocation of responsibility in relation to the Commonwealth and states and territories. Sonnemann and Goss (2018) have outlined a prioritisation framework which includes three criteria for Commonwealth-driven action in education. These include:

- “Is it a good idea? There should be strong evidence that the core concept of the proposal will have a big and positive impact on student outcomes, and can address a big problem in the Australian system in reasonable time and at reasonable cost”;
- “Can government make it happen? There should be expert consensus that government intervention can make a difference, with the right system settings, policies and/or programs to help bring the idea into practice”; and

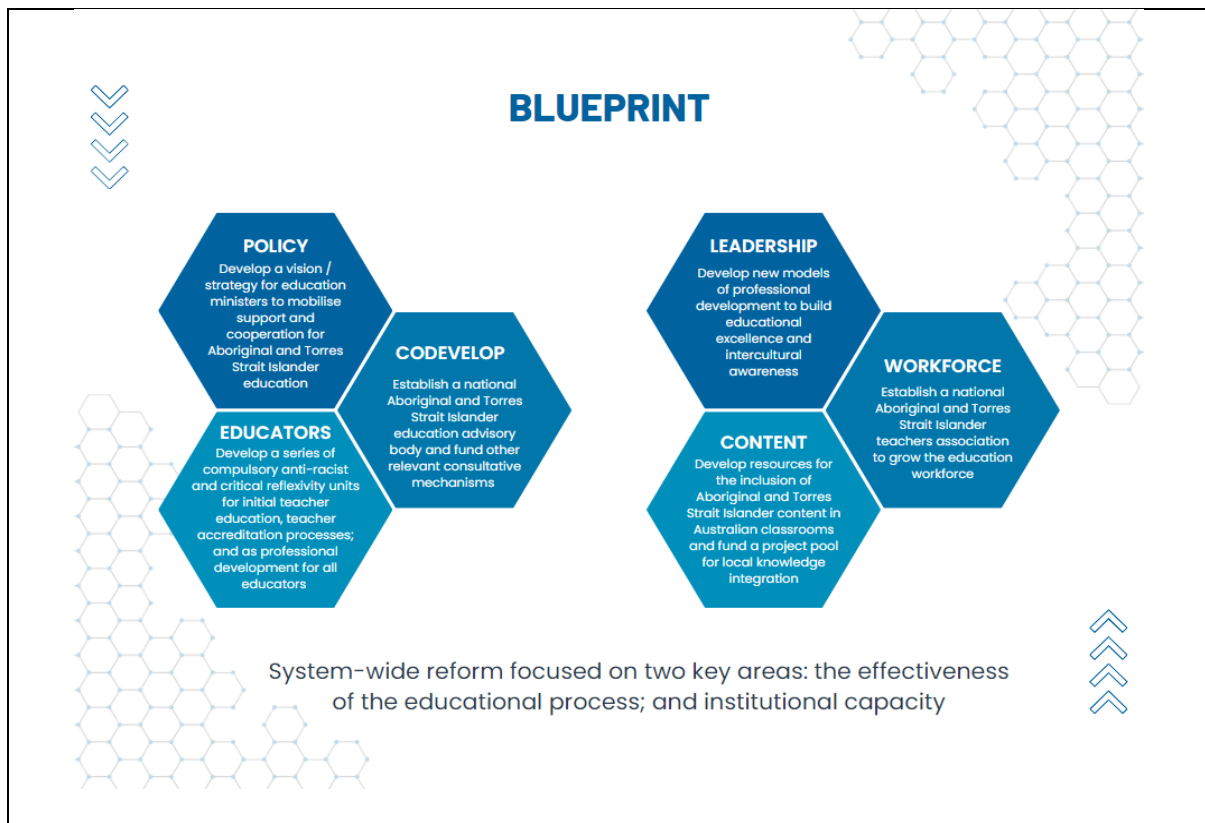
- “Will Commonwealth intervention help? The idea must be amenable to Commonwealth oversight and monitoring. Benefits such as national scale, filling a gap, and policy consistency, should be weighed against costs such as duplication, displacement of state priorities, policy incoherence, and red tape. State ‘buy-in’ to the problem and solution is critical for the collaborative effort to work” (Sonnemann & Goss, 2018, pp. 20-21).

With this criteria in mind, six key reform areas are identified in Figure 9, a blueprint for future Commonwealth investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

The six key areas proposed for future Commonwealth investment include:

- (1) Policy: Develop a vision / strategy for education ministers to mobilise support and cooperation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.
- (2) Codevelop: Establish a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education advisory body and fund other relevant consultative mechanisms.
- (3) Educators: Develop a series of compulsory anti-racist and critical reflexivity units for ITE, teacher accreditation processes, and as professional development for all educators.
- (4) Leadership: Develop new models of professional development to build educational excellence and intercultural awareness.
- (5) Workforce: Establish a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers’ association to grow the education workforce.
- (6) Content: Develop resources for the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in Australian classrooms and fund a project pool for local knowledge integration.
- (7) These actions are discussed in detail in the following section.

Figure 9 – Blueprint for future Commonwealth investment



6.6.1 Education policy

The first and most important action in the blueprint for proposed Commonwealth focus is the need to develop a new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific education policy. This could be a vision, strategy or statement, for agreement and endorsement by Commonwealth and state and territory ministers to mobilise support and cooperation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. A nationally agreed and endorsed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific education policy is an absolute necessity if any change is to be made in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational outcomes. Work to achieve educational equity requires strong coordination between the Commonwealth, state and territory, and non-government education providers and a shared understanding of the need to implement effective long-term strategies. Importantly, the disparate education outcomes highlight a broader social justice issue in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students being afforded a quality and empowering education. Redressing this goes some way to recognising the unique status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as the first people and culture of this land.

The most recent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific education policy was released in 2015, with the policy noting that it would be updated to reflect new national areas for collaboration and

would be subject to a review in 2018 (Education Council, 2015). It appears that neither of these intentions have materialised and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy has been static for eight years. The Closing the Gap framework and the overarching NSRA are inadequate replacements for targeted and specific Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy should encompass more than just a measure of the statistical gap in educational achievement and attainment.

A new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy could complement the Declaration by mobilising support for the implementation of practical actions to drive change in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. These actions should be mindful to not replicate problematic discourses, narratives and ideologies within current education policy and be coupled with a paradigm shift in policy makers to ensure ideological clarity and to counter individualistic and behavioural framing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education problems.

6.6.2 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice in education

The second proposed area for reform is in relation to the inclusion of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice in education policy and practice. The national education infrastructure includes one formal advisory body responsible for providing advice on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational issues. This group is not a standing committee, is able to be dissolved at any time and critically, does not necessarily include membership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, unless they are employed in the role responsible for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education within their respective national, state or territory education department. The call for the establishment of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education body was first raised in 1970 (Morgan, 2008). In the ensuing years, there have been various Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education advisory mechanisms stood up and then subsequently dissolved based on ministerial whims. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' involvement as co-developers to education policy is critical, particularly for the Commonwealth given its significant role in setting the policy agenda for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

The Closing the Gap Agreement calls for "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people [to] have a genuine say in the design and delivery of services that affect them" and "recognises that structural change in the way governments work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is needed to close the gap" (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2020, p. 2). This agreement also includes priority reform areas, of which two are relevant to the need to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in educational decision-making. These include priority reform one – focused on the establishment of formal partnerships and shared decision-making and priority reform

three – aimed at transforming government organisations (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2020). The shared commitment to implement these reforms provides a platform to progress the development of a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education body.

Further, to address the complex challenges in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, advisory mechanisms are also required at the state, regional and local levels. Investment in these will foster greater collaboration across jurisdictions to progress policy development and ensure relevant place-based solutions are implemented in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. This will enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities to advocate for high quality education for their children. Power in the policy world currently resides outside of the sphere of influence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, a power imbalance that must be redressed if any substantial change is to occur in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. An accompanying paradigm shift within policy organisations is also required to support system-wide change.

6.6.3 Capability of the education workforce

The education system has an important role to play in educating all Australians about the history of Australia and the impact of colonisation processes on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Griffin & Trudgett, 2018). It is essential that teaching approaches challenge colonial understandings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their cultures. For this to occur, however, educators themselves must develop their own critical consciousness to challenge problematic assumptions in education and to be able to uncover and critique societal inequalities. Educators are people – who they are as individuals will influence how they teach. This blueprint recommends the development of a series of compulsory anti-racist and critical reflexivity units as an important step in working towards having an education workforce with culturally responsive practices. These opportunities for development would need to be included as part of ITE, embedded as part of teacher accreditation processes, and offered as professional development for the existing workforce. This reform is in line with Australia’s Race Discrimination Commissioner’s calls for the development of a National Anti-Racism Framework in 2021, to be fully resourced, implemented and supported by the Commonwealth (AHRC, 2021). The importance of critical reflexivity is that it provides an opportunity for the examination of oneself.

ITE has been a focus of recent reform, with some universities including a mandatory unit on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education as part of teacher training programs. Booth (2014, p. 146) argues that “one unit on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education will not be enough to challenge colonial stereotypes which have become deeply ingrained in the values and attitudes of

many Australians". There is also high variability in the quality of ITE programs offered across the higher education sector. Education faculties within universities have a key role in determining the curriculum for ITE and are likely to be critical of the Commonwealth mandating the inclusion of a series of core units given their self-accrediting status and need to differentiate their market offerings. A strong evidence base about how faculties are currently delivering on the relevant standards will need to be developed to support this, coupled with a review of ITE in respect of how current programs promulgate understandings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational issues.

There are also complex governance structures in place within universities and academic boards that will need to be engaged as part of this process. An example of how to effectively engage within this complex structure can be taken from MATSITI. The MATSITI project entered into an agreement with the Australian Council of Deans of Education to improve the retention and completion rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in teacher education. Faculties and schools of education, in collaboration with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education centres in universities, committed to do more to support students and to proactively promote teaching as a preferred option for tertiary studies and a future professional career (Australian Council of Deans of Education, 2014). This model of engagement could be drawn upon in securing buy-in from all relevant stakeholders to effectively implement these compulsory anti-racist and critical reflexivity units.

Reform in building critical reflexivity and anti-racist educators is also required in relation to the existing educator workforce. The development of a comprehensive professional development program that includes critical elements from the ITE series of units is required. Where existing professional development programs offer similar or related content, there is potential to commission as part of the development of the series of units, a complementary framework for identifying the mandatory elements that should be included within professional development programs to be recognised as an approved course in building critical reflexivity and anti-racist practice.

As educators progress through their careers, there is a requirement that they maintain currency of practice and commit to ongoing professional growth to ensure their impact on student outcomes is maximised. Embedding the completion of such a professional development program as a mandatory component of teacher accreditation processes takes the onus off educators seeking out their own development opportunities. It is also essential that the completion of this professional development is included as part of broader reform processes, including when assessing existing educators as they

progress through the professional teacher standards to more senior teacher levels. The three stages where it would be possible to mandate the completion of this mandatory professional development program include: accrediting ITE programs against the graduate career stage; registration of teachers at the proficient career stage; and certification of exemplary teacher practice at the highly accomplished and lead career stages. While the professional teacher standards are clear about the dimensions of teachers work in relation to what they must know and be able to do, they are vague about the elements that constitute the human side of teaching. This mandatory professional development program would go some way to addressing this gap in the existing standards.

It is important for educators to acknowledge their role in challenging assumptions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and students, as well as in understanding their influence and capacity to disrupt deficit assumptions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The education system is well placed to create the next generation of students with critical consciousness and a thorough understanding of Australia's colonial history. Anti-racist educators understand their proximity to power and privilege and can recognise oppressive systems both within education more broadly and within their classrooms. When educators actively work towards dismantling these and pursue ideological clarity, the flow-on benefits to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and all students will be profound.

6.6.4 School leadership

School leaders play an integral leadership role in creating and nurturing a whole of school culture. Building the educational leadership capacity of school leaders is important in supporting positive educational experiences for all students and driving sustained improvement in educational outcomes. This blueprint proposes a reform area focussed on the development of new models of professional development to build educational excellence and intercultural awareness of school leaders. This professional development should be an extension of the educator's program and include elements of critical reflexivity and anti-racist practice.

A range of professional development programs for school leaders are already on offer through various professional bodies and organisations. An initial step in the development of such a program would be to commission a review of educational leadership programs in relation to how current programs address the issues of critical consciousness, anti-racism, intercultural awareness and building educational excellence.

The Professional Standards for Principals highlight the importance of behaviour change in order to become better and more effective leaders (AITSL, 2015). School leaders should lead efforts to ensure

that standards for success are not lower for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students than other students and ensure they have a clearly articulated vision for meeting the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their families. Quality school leadership is a clear factor in the success of institutions and performs a critical role in contributing to improved educational outcomes.

6.6.5 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workforce

In line with calls from education policies dating back over 30 years, there is a need to progress reform in increasing the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as educators and in the education workforce more broadly. In undertaking their consultation process on building the cultural competence of the Australian workforce, AITSL (2022, p. 19) found that “a common concern arising in all stages of the consultation process was that composition of the current teaching workforce does not reflect the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learner”. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers currently make up only 3% of the Australian teaching workforce, while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students account for around 6% of all students (AITSL, 2022). While new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers enter the workforce every year, this has not lead to sustained growth in the total number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers (Buckskin, 2016). The reasons for lower retention rates are complex, however, studies have found that “many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workers and teachers report experiences of marginalisation and disenfranchisement in schools and often have reactive job roles and insecure working conditions” (Luke et al., 2013, p. 3).

Individual jurisdictions have strategies to increase Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation within the education workforce, including actions to create pathways for assistant teachers to become teachers. However, there is currently no coordinated national approach. This blueprint proposes the establishment of a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers’ association or peak body to grow the education workforce. This association could be modelled off AIDA, with Commonwealth funding provided for the establishment of the association and for annual operating costs. The association could provide policy advice, represent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interests and build and maintain a database of best practice. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators perform essential roles in schools and are often brokers, who facilitate connections between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and what is often an unfamiliar institution. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators are essential to student engagement in their functions as educators, translators and role models, with their impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is incalculable.

6.6.6 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content

The incorporation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content into classrooms, has long been articulated in government education policies, however, is still an aspiration that is yet to be realised in most Australian classrooms. AITSL (2022, p. 20) note that “educators feel they lack access to quality, authentic, and contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resources and/or, where resources are available, feel they often struggle to discern which are culturally appropriate, legitimate and sensitive”. These issues have also been identified by many scholars as impediments to incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content into classrooms (Baynes, 2016; Burgess et al., 2019; Weuffen, Maxwell, et al., 2023). This blueprint proposes reform in relation to supporting educators to appropriately embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content into their classrooms. This is an area for action that the Commonwealth could take a lead role in terms of funding the development of resources for the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in Australian classrooms as well as funding a project pool for local knowledge integration.

In order to allay educators’ challenges and impediments to integrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in schools, there is a need to commission curriculum developers to build a sequential program of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content across all key learning areas for all year levels (Nakata, 2011). To support local knowledge integration, where local schools have quality relationships with their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, an application-based project pool would assist in the development of local resources for inclusion in schools.

There are a multitude of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational resources that have been developed by a range of organisations which vary in quality and cost. It is not surprising that educators are unsure of which resources are most appropriate to use. The Commonwealth could also take a leadership role in this space and develop and maintain a central repository for approved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational resources. The central repository could include the Commonwealth-commissioned resources, as well as include other approved resources. The process for including educational resources within the repository could be modelled on processes within the higher education sector related to the submission of journal articles to academic journals. Essentially resources could be submitted reviewed and if considered suitable, could go through some form of peer review process before they are endorsed for inclusion. The appropriate inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content in schools should enrich the learning experience for all students, not just Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

6.6.7 *An end goal*

This blueprint has proposed six key areas for reform in which the Commonwealth could take a leadership role in progressing. It is essential that these specific measures are coupled with system-wide reform in two key areas: the effectiveness of the educational process and institutional capacity, with many of these areas for reform contributing to these. These aspects reflect the need to initiate structural change to underpin changes in educational practice. While there are a range of other measures that the Commonwealth could take a leadership role in advancing (such as the need to write and develop new pedagogy to deal with the digital era or greater innovation in curriculum, assessment and implementation), this blueprint has focussed on those key issues that have emerged from the insights and perspectives gained through this study in understanding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity.

This blueprint has provided a coherence and basis for better targeted Commonwealth policy initiatives to drive change in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. By focusing on a small number of key reforms, that are likely to have strong buy-in from state and territory governments, this practical reform agenda has the potential to bring about fundamental change in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational policy and practice. It does this by providing a conceptually coherent, evidence-informed series of policy measures that also pay attention to implementation realities, particularly in relation to the distinct role of the Commonwealth in education. This blueprint is the product of an informed understanding of education from practitioner to policy making levels and has been carefully developed and refined over many years.

One of the most critical aspects of effectively implementing this blueprint is resourcing. It will be important for the Commonwealth to ensure effective resource allocation, including human, financial and technological resources. This could also encompass greater transparency and accountability of the estimated \$0.5 billion of annual funding provided under the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander loading to support initiatives to improve educational outcomes (Department of Education, 2023).

If this policy reform program was successfully instituted, a glimpse into the future of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education might see: new policy settings for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples spanning beyond funding cycles and government terms; a resetting of the balance between imposed aspirations and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-determined futures; and the adoption of more bottom-up approaches to education undertaken in genuine partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as standard practice. It would also see a reinstated confidence in the Commonwealth's capacity to develop effective policy that adequately meets the needs of the community.

6.7 Conclusion

It is recognised that schooling reform is always a good place to start wider social reforms (Blikstein, 2021; Main, 2013). Within the educational system, however, social inequalities are often reproduced and legitimated. As a consequence, the implementation of interventions designed to reduce educational inequalities face important ideological barriers. Individuals hold attitudes and opinions that serve their own interests as well as the interests of the groups to which they belong. It is only through developing critical consciousness that individuals can begin to question whether the status quo unfairly elevates particular groups and oppresses others.

This chapter aimed to provide a framework for contesting and replacing dominant ideologies in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. To recap, I firstly discussed three key dominant ideologies emerging from education research policy and practice – assimilationist ideals, meritocratic and deficit and racialised ideologies. I then went on to discuss problematic representations and issues in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, including: concepts of success, aspirations and potential; the lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice; the role of educators in promoting a pattern of white hegemony that maintains cultural, social, historical and institutional dominance; and challenges related to making schools more culturally appropriate.

I then turned my attention to the implications for the Commonwealth in failing to deliver any material improvements in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational outcomes and proposed to address this gap through articulating a theory of change and blueprint for future Commonwealth investment. The theory of change articulated specific measures that should be considered as part of a whole of system approach to addressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity, these included the need to: contest and replace dominant ideologies in education policy and practice; involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in all stages of the design, development, implementation and evaluation of education policies and programs; understand the impact of the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage and its impact on social mobility; take measures to address structural and systemic racism and power relations at all levels of education; focus on system-wide reform; understand and acknowledge the social, historical and political factors that influence education; progress a wholesale epistemological and ontological shift in policy makers and educators to challenge assumptions and problematisations in education; and champion change and build educational excellence through leadership at all levels. The blueprint for future Commonwealth investment outlined a practical reform agenda with six key areas for action to bring about fundamental change in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

There are no quick fixes in relation to improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. That said, targeted policies have attempted to progress improvements in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education for over 30 years. Generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have been let down by governments who have failed to deliver appropriate reforms. A key issue that has exacerbated the lack of progress, however, is governments not treating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as essential agents in our own lives.

The overarching objective of many education policies is a social justice agenda. With that in mind, the precise means for achieving this largely rests with service providers, reflecting the limitations of the Commonwealth in articulating a clear vision for achieving its intended outcomes. The theory of change and blueprint for future investment provide a range of options for the Commonwealth's consideration in taking the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education agenda forward. A policy framework that does not see anything new will bring us no closer to redressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity. Until a commitment to progress reform in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education is made, the struggle for an equitable and just education that enlightens and empowers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continues.

Chapter 7 – Conclusion

The legacy of colonisation – including its policies, systems and structures – still exist today and continue to undermine the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to a fair and just education. A lack of access to quality and empowering education is a social justice issue because it doesn't only affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people during their experiences within the education system, it has flow on effects to their subsequent educational attainment levels, economic circumstances, overall health and wellbeing, and later life outcomes. Essentially, a substandard education affects the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people both at the time and then many times over in the future over the course of their lives.

Since the foundation Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy in 1989, governments have committed and recommitted to addressing educational inequity. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy noted that “the educational arrangements and procedures established from non-Aboriginal traditions have not adequately recognised and accommodated the particular needs and circumstances of Aboriginal people [and] not only have Aboriginal people been consequently disadvantaged, but Australian society generally has not come to understand and appreciate the significance of Aboriginal culture” (DEET, 1989, p. 5). Reflecting on the 30 years since this statement, it is unfortunate that this hasn't changed. Policy issues, frameworks and language has changed, but broad themes of inadequate access and participation and the ongoing quest for equity remain the same.

7.1 Overview

This chapter concludes my thesis. A summary of the key contributions of the research is presented. The broader implications of this research are examined, as are the limitations, followed by some reflections and next steps. As the title of this thesis suggests, I set out to explore the Commonwealth's role in redressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity.

This study intended to add new insights and perspectives in the understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity. These were investigated through critical analysis of the literature on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, an inquiry into educational service provision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and an in-depth analysis of education policies. In doing so, it uncovered dominant narratives, discourses and ideologies in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and illuminated how these are mutually reinforced across multiple layers of social organisation, permeating all levels of education from policy to practice. The complexities, contradictions and nuances of educational discourses, narratives and ideologies

revealed two key underlying assumptions in the accepted story of the 'dilemma' of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. These included: neoliberal assumptions that produce a simplistic behavioural framing of educational problems; and an overarching hegemonic narrative that academic underachievement is due to deficits in the sociocultural background of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational issues is unsophisticated and creates the perception that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's educational predicament is one of misfortune rather than the result of previous and ongoing actions of the state. These assumptions diminish the devastating impact of colonisation processes and how these continue to manifest in the everyday lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This study, therefore, contributes to the literature by detailing how the broader discursive environment impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

A reoccurring theme throughout this thesis was the paternalistic nature of government's engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The analysis of education policies revealed an underlying paternalistic ideology that positions the government-as-saviour, dictating what it thinks is best for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This issue is not isolated to education and can be found in the broader Indigenous affairs landscape, mostly to justify the application of particular forms of governance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. The disenfranchising and silencing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in education was also a common theme throughout each line of inquiry. Solutions to the myriad of issues in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education can only come from centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and scholarship.

In order to present a roadmap to bring about fundamental change in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, this study advanced a framework for contesting and replacing dominant ideologies in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education through the articulation of a theory of change and also developed, for consideration, a blueprint for future Commonwealth investment to reframe the current approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. There are clear learnings and examples provided throughout this thesis of strategies to address some of the challenges in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. However, there is a need for an overarching national vision, led by the Commonwealth, to mobilise support and drive systemic and structural reform, coupled with additional resourcing and accountability measures to progress this important agenda.

A good education can be transformative for individuals, families and communities, and provide a vehicle for empowerment and agency. It can also assist in the maintenance and transmission of our

knowledges, languages and practices, and ensure the continued survival of our ancient cultures. In 1989 governments agreed to achieve 21 long-term goals in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and training. Today, some 34 years later, this remains an incomplete project. The Commonwealth cannot continue to reproduce the same empty policy rhetoric and fail to deliver any sustained improvements in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. The growing body of academic research and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholarship on this issue cited in this thesis highlight an urgent imperative to redress Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity by addressing the underlying causes that continue to contribute to the disparate educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

In investigating the role of the Commonwealth in redressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity, it is clear that the Commonwealth has a pivotal role in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. The reasons for this are many and include, firstly, the historical muddling of responsibilities in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education whereby the Commonwealth provided incentives to the states and territories to prioritise activity over and above their usual activity. Secondly, in recognition of the special status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples of this land and the Commonwealth's specific responsibilities concerning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs, enacted under the constitution. Finally, and most critically, the Commonwealth's role is fundamental in redressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity because many of the issues affecting education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have their genesis in colonisation processes, oppressive policies and the ongoing actions of the state. The Commonwealth can work towards reclaiming its legitimacy in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education through: taking on a national leadership role to mobilise support and cooperation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education; setting the standard for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in Australia; driving structural and systemic change and essential reforms to education policy; adequately resourcing initiatives to advance educational equity; and ensuring the effective implementation of a comprehensive reform agenda. All of these aspects are critical if the Commonwealth is to remedy its track record of failure in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and counter the current mismatch between rhetoric and action.

7.2 Implications

A new National Schools Reform Agreement (NSRA) is being negotiated for implementation from 2025. As part of these negotiations and in recognition of the current NSRA having not contributed to improved student outcomes (Productivity Commission, 2023), it is essential that governments

progress a new national agenda in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. Within the NSRA, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are considered a 'priority equity cohort'. As Nakata (2011, p. 6) explains, "Indigenous is not another migrant culture" [therefore] "it is and always should be acknowledged as the first culture of this land".

There are two broad implications that arise from the study. Firstly, the implications for public discourse on Aboriginality. The many discourses on Aboriginality in Australia over the last 200 years are mostly characterised by denials of the authenticity of Aboriginality and any special rights regarding Indigenous status or past injustices (Hollinsworth, 1992). As articulated in this study and evident in public discourse more broadly, there is an overarching view that the 'Indigenous predicament' is an unfortunate situation that is largely caused by deficits in the sociocultural background of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This view obscures the root cause of this disadvantage which largely has its genesis in colonisation processes and subsequent harmful policies enacted by successive governments. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives on the dominant culture rarely feature in public discourse on Indigenous affairs, nor does the contemplation that changes may be required in the structures or priorities of the state. The growing decolonising scholarship highlighted throughout this thesis provides an opportunity to contest this portrayal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and work toward exposing the unequitable realities.

Secondly, the contributions from this research have practical implications for public policy development. Specifically in relation to the way in which public policy can be critically analysed and how this analysis can inform the development of good public policy. This research also outlines how to effectively leverage the role and power of the Commonwealth to drive structural and systemic change through policy development. The Indigenous affairs policy landscape has suffered from recurring ineffective solutions. 'Indigenous disadvantage' and 'closing the gap' have become synonymous with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Because of this, strategies to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social and economic issues are almost entirely focussed on the capacities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people themselves. There is a focus on what needs to change within individuals and within communities which draws attention away from the legacy of chosen policy options, which to date, have been detrimental to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Public policy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people needs to be more than just equity indicators measured against Eurocentric ideals of success. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been portrayed as recipients and passive objects of government action, both historical and contemporary. Paying greater attention to the problematisations in all areas of social policy enables policy to be contested to help ensure that the most appropriate responses are provided. Most critical, however, is for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to firstly have a say in

defining and shaping the problems that affect their lives before working towards any proposed solutions.

7.3 Gaps/limitations

It is through the development of national education policy that the Commonwealth impresses the overarching approach and direction for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. In investigating the role of the Commonwealth in redressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity, the analytical method chosen for this study was discourse analysis, as it views public policy as a discourse. The primary limitation of discourse analysis is that it is largely subjective. My interpretation of the policies was filtered by the theory underpinning this study and my own ontological and epistemological positioning.

The analytical methods adopted for this study were effective at revealing how policy problems are contingent on prevailing discourses. They were not intended to evaluate the effectiveness of particular policies, with the limits of this focus acknowledged. This is because the object of the study was not the policies themselves, but rather the policy discourse. The methods lent themselves to multiple lines of inquiry, as they revealed not only one discourse or problem representation, but many. The analytical methods as a mode of thinking and a form of analysis offer much in exploring complex policy terrains such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

Importantly, having reviewed and referenced a wealth of literature, public commentary and analysis produced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, this thesis reflects only a very limited range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices, perspectives and positions.

7.4 Reflections

Reflecting on over 30 years of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy, programs and efforts, it comes as little surprise that educational issues of access, participation and equity continue to plague policy makers and educationalists. Education framed in human capital terms and with employment as the ultimate outcome, signals the 'assimilatory intentions' of schooling (Burgess, Fricker, et al., 2023, p. 113). The quest for statistical equality is unlikely to be achieved until the underlying causes of educational inequity are addressed and policy makers are able to critically reflect on what education can and cannot deliver for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

No policy, no matter how well written can undo history or erase the pain and suffering of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, but an effective one can set the conditions for systemic and

structural changes that have the ability to fundamentally transform education for not only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, but for all students.

A large proportion of my studies were undertaken throughout the campaign for the ‘voice’ referendum, with the latter part coinciding with the unsuccessful vote. In 2017 a group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people gathered to discuss constitutional law, culminating in the Uluru Statement of the Heart. This statement affirmed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ ancestral rights and sovereignty, but noted that our voices are yet to be heard in relation to the many issues that directly affect us (Referendum Council, 2017). The statement recommended a constitutionally enshrined voice, which went to a referendum in October of 2023. The Australian public were asked to “approve an alteration to the Australian Constitution to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through a body called the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice which would be able to make representations to the Parliament and the Executive Government on matters relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples” (Parliament of Australia, 2023, p. 1). The proposal was overwhelmingly voted down, with 60% of Australians rejecting the voice. Post the referendum, the words of Noel Pearson from the year prior in his Boyer Lecture – *Who we were, who we are, and who we can be* – sat heavy in the air:

We are a much unloved people. We are perhaps the ethnic group Australians feel least connected to. We are not popular and we are not personally known to many Australians. Few have met us and a small minority count us as friends. And despite never having met any of us and knowing very little about us other than what is in the media and what WEH Stanner, whose 1968 Boyer Lectures looms large over my lectures, called ‘folklore’ about us – Australians hold and express strong views about us, the great proportion of which is negative and unfriendly. It has ever been thus. Worse in the past but still true today (Pearson, 2022, p. 1).

This antipathy against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is couched in the neoliberal maintenance of the embedded assumptions and ideologies that work to suppress questions about inequity. Without these silent assumptions, few people could accept the plight of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people without some questions arising in their minds. If only education could do more to remedy this situation.

7.5 Recommendations – a way forward

The receipt of a culturally appropriate and nourishing education enables Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to exercise their social, economic, cultural and civil rights. This in turn reinforces our

capacity to advocate for the protection of our human rights. The current educational situation is not one that we can settle for, as far too many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are unable to exercise these basic rights.

This thesis presented a theory of change to bring about improved conditions for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in education and articulated eight specific measures that should be considered as part of a whole of system approach to addressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity. These areas were translated into six key reforms, as outlined in the blueprint for future Commonwealth investment. This blueprint could be implemented in the immediate to short term without the need for substantial investment, but through better leadership, coordination and embedding these activities within current mainstream reforms. That said, these measures only reflect the immediate shift required in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, with effective monitoring, the ongoing revision of priorities and the need for substantial investment to drive and embed long-term substantial change. In the formulation of education policy, the consideration of teacher preparation and the design of the curriculum, there is still a chance for policy makers to change the course of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in Australia.

When considering the fundamental purpose of education and what it means for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the answer lies within the source. Education in Latin means to lead out and draw forth, therefore it is essential that first and foremost, education affirms who we are. There is a duality to the education system, in that it is often an instrument of oppression and plays a significant role in the construction of negative views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, but with genuine structural reform, it can in the present and future play an important role in recovering and uplifting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

7.6 In summary

In 1989 Australian governments embarked on a concerted effort to address educational inequalities between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians. These reform areas encompassed access to, participation in and the achievement of equitable outcomes across all areas of education and training. The long-term goals articulated in 1989 were set out to be achieved by the year 2000. Although significant gains had been made over this period, mostly in relation to facilitating access, this is the area that was perhaps the easiest to address. Educational equity, in the ensuing 20 years, remains elusive.

The purpose of this study has been to offer answers and provide insights to the following question: How do narratives and discourses shape the educational experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander peoples? The particular focus was on the role of the Commonwealth in redressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational inequity. In seeking to answer this question, this study has advanced a framework for contesting and replacing dominant ideologies in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education through the articulation of a theory of change, as well as developed a blueprint for future Commonwealth investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, which presents a practical reform agenda to bring about fundamental change in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational policy and practice.

Educational participation and achievement are complex problems that require multi-faceted systemic solutions, that need to be effectively monitored and evaluated, and sustained in effort over time. Equally important is the need to repudiate deficit and racialised discourses, narratives and accounts about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that produce a simplistic behavioural framing of issues, while ignoring the genesis of these in colonisation processes.

What is required, is more respectful and ethical engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that recognises the unique knowledges, self-determination and resurgence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, who come with our own answers and seek genuine partnerships in implementing these. As discussed throughout this thesis, the pursuit of educational equity requires policy makers to ask deeper and more complex questions of their own deep-seated assumptions and presuppositions, to be able to listen to and invest in, the inherent strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Australia needs a new national conversation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, one that supports a shift in the foundations of policy assumptions, language, and actions. The status quo will guarantee that in the decades ahead, the story of 'Indigenous failure' that we have all come to know well, will continue to be produced through the data and statistics. The greatest challenge for governments, policy makers, education institutions and educators is to not fail another generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration 2019 in text references

1	We recognise the more than 60,000 years of continual connection by Aboriginal and Torres
2	Strait Islander peoples as a key part of the nation’s history, present and future. Through
3	education, we are committed to ensuring that all students learn about the diversity of
4	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and to seeing all young Aboriginal and Torres
5	Strait Islander peoples thrive in their education and all facets of life.
6	Goal 1: The Australian education system promotes excellence and equity:
7	- ensure that learning is built on and includes local, regional and national cultural knowledge
8	and experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and work in partnership with
9	local communities
10	Active and informed members of the community who...
11	- understand, acknowledge and celebrate the diversity and richness of Aboriginal and Torres
12	Strait Islander histories and cultures
13	- possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from,
14	reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous
15	Australians
16	In particular, the development of partnerships and connections with Aboriginal and Torres
17	Strait Islander communities will greatly improve learning outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres
18	Strait Islander peoples and benefit all young Australians. Effective partnerships are based on
19	culturally supportive and responsive learning environments. Welcoming and valuing the
20	local, regional and national cultural knowledge and the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres
21	Strait Islander peoples will help the education community to build authentic partnerships
22	with local communities and teach young Australians the value of our nation’s rich history.
23	More importantly, it will foster a culturally supportive learning environment where all young
24	Australians can thrive educationally and in all facets of life.
25	Students learn about Australia’s rich Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and
26	cultures. This cross-curriculum priority provides Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
27	students with the ability to see themselves, their identities and cultures reflected in the
28	curriculum and allows all students to engage in reconciliation, respect and recognition of the
29	world’s oldest continuous living cultures.
30	Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners to reach their potential
31	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, knowledge and experiences are fundamental
32	to Australia’s social, economic and cultural wellbeing. Across Australia, the education
33	community need to focus on imagining what is possible and promoting Aboriginal and
34	Torres Strait Islander leadership, knowledge and learnings. All Aboriginal and Torres Strait
35	Islander young peoples must be empowered to achieve their full learning potential, shape
36	their own futures, and embrace their cultures, languages and identities as Australia’s First
37	Nations peoples.
38	Educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young peoples remain behind
39	those of other learners in a number of key areas. Meeting their needs and fostering access,
40	engagement, progress, and achievement for their educational performance requires

41	strategic effort and investment.
42	Australia's education system must embrace Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural
43	identities and provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with safe learning
44	environments. The education community need to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait
45	Islander learners, their families and communities in all aspects of education, increase
46	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' participation in the education workforce at all
47	levels, and support coordinated community services for learners and their families to
48	increase productive participation. This engagement needs to be based on the principles of
49	shared decision-making, place-based responses and regional decision-making, evidence,
50	evaluation and accountability, targeted investment, and integrated systems.
51	Australian Governments commit to empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
52	students to reach their potential and to ensuring the education community works to 'close
53	the gap' for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Appendix 2 – National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy 2015 in text references

1	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the first Australians with the oldest
2	continuing cultures in human history. Governments across Australia affirm the right of
3	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to maintain languages and cultures and acknowledge
4	their deep cultural associations with the land and water. This strategy will guide the
5	education of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people from birth
6	through to further education and employment pathways.
7	PREFACE
8	Despite determined effort much more needs to be done to close the gap in Aboriginal and
9	Torres Strait Islander education outcomes. In establishing the Education Council, which
10	comprises government ministers with responsibility for early childhood, school education
11	and higher education, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) determined that a key
12	priority is the advancement of educational standards and outcomes for Aboriginal and
13	Torres Strait Islander children and young people.
14	As Chair of the Education Council in 2015, I am pleased to release the new Aboriginal and
15	Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy.
16	Ministers are keen for the strategy to build on the actions underway in pursuing COAG's
17	Closing the Gap targets and the evaluation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
18	Education Action Plan 2010-2014.
19	The strategy is the result of robust discussion, reflection, debate and cooperation and its
20	development has been championed by the Education Council's Aboriginal and Torres Strait
21	Islander Education Advisory Group established by the Australian Education, Early Childhood
22	Development and Youth Affairs Senior Officials Committee to provide advice on national
23	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy initiatives and directions. The advisory group is
24	chaired by Tony Harrison, Chief Executive of the South Australian Department for Education
25	and Child Development, and comprises representatives from government departments, the
26	non-government school sector and community representatives. I thank the advisory group
27	for its commitment, drive and wisdom through the development process.
28	Recognising the different roles of governments, the strategy adopts the dual approach of
29	identifying policies and actions that require national collaboration to succeed, while also
30	outlining shared principles that governments commit to when working with communities.
31	The strategy should therefore be considered alongside the approaches of each state,
32	territory and local community, which together map out the ways in which governments,
33	educators, families and communities can work in collaboration to improve outcomes.
34	The strategy will only succeed with commitment and good will. I urge everyone involved in
35	the education and development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young
36	people to place them at the centre of their work, in order to improve the education and life
37	outcomes of Australia's First Nations peoples.
38	VISION
39	All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people achieve their full learning
40	potential, are empowered to shape their own futures, and are supported to embrace their
41	culture and identity as Australia's First Nations peoples.
42	PURPOSE
43	The strategy sets out the commitment of education ministers to the education of Aboriginal

44	and Torres Strait Islander children and young people by: » utilising the strategy's principles
45	and priority areas to inform the development and implementation of both local and
46	systemic-level actions » identifying areas where collaborative action between or across
47	governments, in consultation with the non-government sector, is required to complement
48	local efforts. » This strategy is a living document. New national collaborative actions may
49	emerge as priorities evolve and work is completed.
50	PRINCIPLES
51	Education ministers agree that the following principles should underpin the approach taken
52	by all education systems and providers to achieve the strategy's vision:
53	» Achieve potential: High expectations are held for, and by, Aboriginal and Torres Strait
54	Islander children and young people
55	» Equity: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are able to access
56	the same educational opportunities and achieve the same education outcomes as other
57	Australians
58	» Accountability: Education systems and educators are accountable, transparent and
59	responsive
60	» Cultural recognition: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's histories, values,
61	languages and cultures are acknowledged and respected
62	» Relationships: Meaningful relationships value community cultural knowledge, wisdom and
63	expertise, and demonstrate trust and respect
64	» Partnerships: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are engaged in decision making,
65	planning, delivery and evaluation of early childhood, schooling and higher education
66	services at local, sector and national levels
67	» Local approaches: Educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children
68	and young people are accelerated through local approaches for unique and diverse
69	communities
70	» Quality: Policies, practices, programs and partnerships are inclusive of the needs of
71	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people and their families, and are
72	informed by knowledge, evidence and research.
73	PRIORITY AREAS
74	Education ministers commit to having visible plans or approaches for Aboriginal and Torres
75	Strait Islander education. Ministers have collectively identified seven priority areas that will
76	inform local approaches, and national collaborative actions to improve outcomes for
77	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.
78	PRIORITY AREAS EXPLAINED
79	In advancing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education outcomes there are
80	interdependencies and synergies across the seven priority areas. Effective initiatives in the
81	three priority areas of: Leadership, quality teaching and workforce development; Culture
82	and Identity and Partnerships, will assist in advancing outcomes in the four priority areas of:
83	School and child readiness; Literacy and numeracy; Attendance; Transition points including
84	pathways to postschool options.
85	1. LEADERSHIP, QUALITY TEACHING AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT
86	Action is taken to ensure children and young people are taught by skilled educators who are
87	culturally competent in the local context. Providers, including principals, set high
88	expectations for learning that incorporates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
89	perspectives. Further support for the engagement of children, young people and their
90	families is provided by building a well-qualified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

91	education workforce.
92	2. CULTURE AND IDENTITY
93	Through the delivery of the Australian Curriculum, education sectors acknowledge, respect
94	and reflect the histories, values, languages and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait
95	Islander people. All Australian children and young people have the opportunity to learn
96	about the histories and cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
97	3. PARTNERSHIPS
98	Quality partnerships are encouraged between education sectors and local Aboriginal and
99	Torres Strait Islander communities and other stakeholders. These partnerships are
100	characterised by listening and responding, strong accountability and active engagement,
101	collaborative information sharing and informed decision making.
102	4. ATTENDANCE
103	Engaging with learning is fundamental in helping all children acquire the skills they need for
104	life. Schools and services work with families and communities on strategies to address
105	barriers to school attendance.
106	5. TRANSITION POINTS INCLUDING PATHWAYS TO POST-SCHOOL OPTIONS
107	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are supported at critical
108	stages of their education to improve engagement, retention and attainment and develop
109	the skills to participate fully in schooling, society and work.
110	6. SCHOOL AND CHILD READINESS
111	High quality, culturally inclusive early childhood education services and schools work with
112	families and communities to set a strong foundation for early learning, including a child's
113	transition to school.
114	7. LITERACY AND NUMERACY
115	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's English literacy and numeracy proficiencies
116	are developed by applying proven, culturally inclusive, responsive and personalised
117	approaches to learning, such as English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) in order
118	to improve their educational attainment, life choices and options.
119	STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION AND REPORTING
120	National collaborative actions will be driven by the Australian Education, Early Childhood
121	Development and Youth Affairs Senior Officials Committee (AEEYSOC) on behalf of the
122	Education Council. AEEYSOC will oversee these actions, including work programs for their
123	delivery in conjunction with working groups and ministerial committees and authorities.
124	The Education Council's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Advisory Group will
125	provide advice to AEEYSOC as they monitor the national collaborative actions and consider
126	proposals for future actions.
127	National reports such as Closing the gap, Australian National Report on Schooling,
128	Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage, and the Report on Government Services provide
129	information to track progress on educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait
130	Islander children and young people.
131	Reporting under this strategy will focus on the national collaborative actions in order to
132	avoid duplication of other national, systemic and local reporting arrangements.
133	The importance of community voice in this process is recognised.
134	This strategy will be reviewed in 2018, which is a significant year in measuring progress
135	against COAG's Closing the gap targets. An evaluation will consider the effectiveness of the
136	strategy as a framework.

Appendix 3 – 21 Long-term goals of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy, 1989

Involvement of Aboriginal people in educational decision making

1. To establish effective arrangements for the participation of Aboriginal parents and community members in decisions regarding the planning, delivery and evaluation of preschool, primary and secondary education services for their children.
2. To increase the number of Aboriginal people employed as educational administrators, teachers, curriculum advisers, teacher assistants, home-school liaison officers and other education workers, including community people engaged in teaching of Aboriginal culture, history and contemporary society, and Aboriginal languages.
3. To establish effective arrangements for the participation of Aboriginal students and community members in decisions regarding the planning, delivery and evaluation of post-school education services, including technical and further education colleges and higher education institutions.
4. To increase the number of Aboriginal people employed as administrators, teachers, researchers and student services officers in technical and further education colleges and higher education institutions.
5. To provide education and training services to develop the skills of Aboriginal people to participate in educational decision-making.
6. To develop arrangements for the provision of independent advice from Aboriginal communities regarding educational decisions at regional, State, Territory and National levels.

Equality of access to educational services

7. To ensure that Aboriginal children of pre-primary school age have access to pre-school services on a basis comparable to that available to other Australian children of the same age.
8. To ensure that all Aboriginal children have local access to primary and secondary schooling.
9. To ensure equitable access for Aboriginal people to post-compulsory secondary schooling, to technical and further education, and higher education.

Equity of educational participation

10. To achieve the participation of Aboriginal children in pre-school education for a period similar to that for all Australian children.
11. To achieve the participation of all Aboriginal children in compulsory schooling.
12. To achieve the participation of Aboriginal people in post-compulsory secondary education, in technical and further education, and in higher education, at rates commensurate with those of all Australians in those sectors.

Equitable and appropriate educational outcomes

13. To provide adequate preparation of Aboriginal children through pre-school education for the schooling years ahead.
14. To enable Aboriginal attainment of skills to the same standard as other Australian students throughout the compulsory schooling years.
15. To enable Aboriginal students to attain the successful completion of Year 12 or equivalent at the same rates as for other Australian students.
16. To enable Aboriginal students to attain the same graduation rates from award courses in technical and further education, and in higher education, as for other Australians.
17. To develop programs to support the maintenance and continued use of Aboriginal languages.
18. To provide community education services which enable Aboriginal people to develop the skills to manage the development of their communities.
19. To enable the attainment of proficiency in English language and numeracy competencies by Aboriginal adults with limited or no educational experience.
20. To enable Aboriginal students at all levels of education to have an appreciation of their history, cultures and identity.
21. To provide all Australian students with an understanding of and respect for Aboriginal traditional and contemporary cultures.

Appendix 4 – The Hobart Declaration on Schooling – National Goals

The national goals for Schooling will, for the first time, provide a framework for cooperation between Schools, States and Territories and the Commonwealth. The goals are intended to assist schools and systems to develop specific objectives and strategies, particularly in the areas of curriculum and assessment.

The agreed national goals for schooling include the following aims:

1. To provide an excellent education for all young people, being one which develops their talents and capacities to full potential, and is relevant to the social, cultural and economic needs of the nation.
2. To enable all students to achieve high standards of learning and to develop self confidence, optimism, high self-esteem, respect for others, and achievement of personal excellence.
3. To promote equality of educational opportunities, and to provide for groups with special learning requirements.
4. To respond to the current and emerging economic and social needs of the nation, and to provide those skills which will allow students maximum flexibility and adaptability in their future employment and other aspects of life.
5. To provide a foundation for further education and training, in terms of knowledge and skills, respect for learning and positive attitudes for life-long education.
6. To develop in students:
 - the skills of English literacy, including skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing;
 - skills of numeracy, and other mathematical skills;
 - skills of analysis and problem-solving;
 - skills of information processing and computing;
 - an understanding of the role of science and technology in society, together with scientific and technological skills;
 - a knowledge and appreciation of Australia's historical and geographical context;
 - a knowledge of languages other than English;
 - an appreciation of and understanding of, and confidence to participate in, the creative arts;
 - an understanding of, and concern for, balanced development and the global environment; and
 - a capacity to exercise judgement in matters of morality, ethics and social justice.
7. To develop knowledge, skills, attitudes and values which will enable students to participate as active and informed citizens in our democratic Australian society within an international context. .
8. To provide students with an understanding and respect for our cultural heritage including the particular cultural background of Aboriginal and ethnic groups.
9. To provide for the physical development and personal health and fitness of students, and for the creative use of leisure time.
10. To provide appropriate career education and knowledge of the world of work, including an understanding of the nature and place of work in our society.

Appendix 5 – The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling

Schooling should develop fully the talents and capacities of all students. In particular, when students leave school, they should:

- 1.1 have the capacity for, and skills in, analysis and problem solving and the ability to communicate ideas and information, to plan and organise activities, and to collaborate with others.
- 1.2 have qualities of self-confidence, optimism, high self-esteem, and a commitment to personal excellence as a basis for their potential life roles as family, community and workforce members.
- 1.3 have the capacity to exercise judgement and responsibility in matters of morality, ethics and social justice, and the capacity to make sense of their world, to think about how things got to be the way they are, to make rational and informed decisions about their own lives, and to accept responsibility for their own actions.
- 1.4 be active and informed citizens with an understanding and appreciation of Australia's system of government and civic life.
- 1.5 have employment related skills and an understanding of the work environment, career options and pathways as a foundation for, and positive attitudes towards, vocational education and training, further education, employment and life-long learning.
- 1.6 be confident, creative and productive users of new technologies, particularly information and communication technologies, and understand the impact of those technologies on society.
- 1.7 have an understanding of, and concern for, stewardship of the natural environment, and the knowledge and skills to contribute to ecologically sustainable development.
- 1.8 have the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to establish and maintain a healthy lifestyle, and for the creative and satisfying use of leisure time.

In terms of curriculum, students should have:

- 2.1 attained high standards of knowledge, skills and understanding through a comprehensive and balanced curriculum in the compulsory years of schooling encompassing the agreed eight key learning areas: the arts; English; health and physical education; languages other than English; mathematics; science; studies of society and environment; and technology and the interrelationships between them.
- 2.2 attained the skills of numeracy and English literacy; such that, every student should be numerate, able to read, write, spell and communicate at an appropriate level.
- 2.3 participated in programs of vocational learning during the compulsory years and have had access to vocational education and training programs as part of their senior secondary studies.
- 2.4 participated in programs and activities which foster and develop enterprise skills, including those skills which will allow them maximum flexibility and adaptability in the future.

Schooling should be socially just, so that:

3.1 students' outcomes from schooling are free from the effects of negative forms of discrimination based on sex, language, culture and ethnicity, religion or disability; and of differences arising from students' socioeconomic background or geographic location.

3.2 the learning outcomes of educationally disadvantaged students improve and, over time, match those of other students.

3.3 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have equitable access to, and opportunities in, schooling so that their learning outcomes improve and, over time, match those of other students.

3.4 all students understand and acknowledge the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures to Australian society and possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

3.5 all students understand and acknowledge the value of cultural and linguistic diversity, and possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, such diversity in the Australian community and internationally.

3.6 all students have access to the high quality education necessary to enable the completion of school education to Year 12 or its vocational equivalent and that provides clear and recognised pathways to employment and further education and training

Appendix 6 – The Melbourne Declaration Education Goals for Young Australians

Goal 1: Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence

Australian governments, in collaboration with all school sectors, commit to promoting equity and excellence in Australian schooling.

This means that all Australian governments and all school sectors must:

- provide all students with access to high-quality schooling that is free from discrimination based on gender, language, sexual orientation, pregnancy, culture, ethnicity, religion, health or disability, socioeconomic background or geographic location
- ensure that schools build on local cultural knowledge and experience of Indigenous students as a foundation for learning, and work in partnership with local communities on all aspects of the schooling process, including to promote high expectations for the learning outcomes of Indigenous students
- ensure that the learning outcomes of Indigenous students improve to match those of other students
- ensure that socioeconomic disadvantage ceases to be a significant determinant of educational outcomes
- reduce the effect of other sources of disadvantage, such as disability, homelessness, refugee status and remoteness
- ensure that schooling contributes to a socially cohesive society that respects and appreciates cultural, social and religious diversity
- encourage parents, carers, families, the broader community and young people themselves to hold high expectations for their educational outcomes
- promote a culture of excellence in all schools, by supporting them to provide challenging, and stimulating learning experiences and opportunities that enable all students to explore and build on their gifts and talents
- promote personalised learning that aims to fulfil the diverse capabilities of each young Australian.

Goal 2: All young Australians become:

– successful learners...

- develop their capacity to learn and play an active role in their own learning
- have the essential skills in literacy and numeracy and are creative and productive users of technology, especially ICT, as a foundation for success in all learning areas
- are able to think deeply and logically, and obtain and evaluate evidence in a disciplined way as the result of studying fundamental disciplines
- are creative, innovative and resourceful, and are able to solve problems in ways that draw upon a range of learning areas and disciplines
- are able to plan activities independently, collaborate, work in teams and communicate ideas
- are able to make sense of their world and think about how things have become the way they are

- are on a pathway towards continued success in further education, training or employment, and acquire the skills to make informed learning and employment decisions throughout their lives – are motivated to reach their full potential.

– **confident and creative individuals...**

- have a sense of self-worth, self-awareness and personal identity that enables them to manage their emotional, mental, spiritual and physical wellbeing
- have a sense of optimism about their lives and the future
- are enterprising, show initiative and use their creative abilities
- develop personal values and attributes such as honesty, resilience, empathy and respect for others
- have the knowledge, skills, understanding and values to establish and maintain healthy, satisfying lives
- have the confidence and capability to pursue university or post-secondary vocational qualifications leading to rewarding and productive employment
- relate well to others and form and maintain healthy relationships
- are well prepared for their potential life roles as family, community and workforce members
- embrace opportunities, make rational and informed decisions about their own lives and accept responsibility for their own actions.

– **active and informed citizens...**

- act with moral and ethical integrity
- appreciate Australia's social, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity, and have an understanding of Australia's system of government, history and culture
- understand and acknowledge the value of Indigenous cultures and possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians
- are committed to national values of democracy, equity and justice, and participate in Australia's civic life
- are able to relate to and communicate across cultures, especially the cultures and countries of Asia
- work for the common good, in particular sustaining and improving natural and social environments
- are responsible global and local citizens.

Appendix 7 – Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration Goals

Goal 1: The Australian education system promotes excellence and equity

Australian Governments commit to promoting excellence and equity in Australian education. This means that all Australian Governments will work with the education community to:

- provide all young Australians with access to high-quality education that is inclusive and free from any form of discrimination
- recognise the individual needs of all young Australians, identify barriers that can be addressed, and empower learners to overcome barriers
- promote personalised learning and provide support that aims to fulfil the individual capabilities and needs of learners
- ensure that young Australians of all backgrounds are supported to achieve their full educational potential
- encourage young people to hold high expectations for their educational outcomes, supported by parents, carers, families and the broader community
- ensure that education promotes and contributes to a socially cohesive society that values, respects and appreciates different points of view and cultural, social, linguistic and religious diversity
- ensure that learning is built on and includes local, regional and national cultural knowledge and experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and work in partnership with local communities
- collaborate internationally to share best practice and help young Australians learn about and engage with the world
- support all education sectors – government and non-government, secular and faith-based
- promote a culture of excellence in all learning environments, by providing varied, challenging, and stimulating learning experiences and opportunities that enable all learners to explore and build on their individual abilities, interests, and experiences
- ensure that Australia’s education system is recognised internationally for delivering high quality learning outcomes.

Goal 2: All young Australians become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners, and active and informed members of the community

- **Confident and creative individuals who...**
- have a sense of self-worth, self-awareness and personal identity that enables them to manage their emotional, mental, cultural, spiritual and physical wellbeing
- develop personal values and attributes such as honesty, empathy, loyalty, responsibility and respect for others
- are resilient and develop the skills and strategies they need to tackle current and future challenges
- are able to recognise, adapt to, and manage change
- have a sense of optimism about their lives and the future
- show initiative, use their creative abilities and are enterprising
- have the imagination, knowledge, skills, understanding and values to establish and maintain healthy, satisfying lives
- understand their responsibilities as global citizens and know how to affect positive change

- have the confidence and capability to pursue learning throughout life, leading to enjoyable, fulfilling and productive employment
- relate well to others and form and maintain healthy relationships
- are well prepared for their potential life roles as friends, family, community and workforce members
- embrace opportunities, make informed decisions about their own lives and accept responsibility for their own actions
- have a sense of belonging, purpose and meaning that enable them to thrive in their learning environment.

– **Successful lifelong learners who...**

- develop their ability and motivation to learn and play an active role in their own learning
- have the essential skills in literacy and numeracy as the foundation for learning
- engage in respectful debate on a diverse range of views
- are productive and informed users of technology as a vehicle for information gathering and sharing, and are able to adapt to emerging technologies into the future
- are able to think deeply and logically, and obtain and evaluate evidence as the result of studying fundamental disciplines
- are creative, innovative and resourceful, and are able to solve problems in ways that draw upon a range of learning areas and disciplines and deep content knowledge
- are inquisitive and experimental, and have the ability to test different sources and types of knowledge
- are responsive and adaptive to new ways of thinking and learning
- are able to plan activities independently, collaborate, work in teams and communicate ideas
- continue to improve through formal and informal learning in further education, and training or employment, and acquire the skills to make informed decisions throughout their lives
- are able to make sense of their world and think about how things have become the way they are
- are confident and motivated to reach their full potential.

– **Active and informed members of the community who...**

- act with moral and ethical integrity
- have empathy for the circumstances of others and work for the common good, in particular sustaining and improving natural and social environments
- appreciate and respect Australia's rich social, cultural, religious and linguistic diversity and embrace opportunities to communicate and share knowledge and experiences
- have an understanding of Australia's system of government, its histories, religions and culture
- are committed to national values of democracy, equity and justice, and participate in Australia's civic life by connecting with their community and contributing to local and national conversations
- understand, acknowledge and celebrate the diversity and richness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures
- possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians

- are informed and responsible global and local members of the community who value and celebrate cultural and linguistic differences, and engage in the global community, particularly with our neighbours in the Indo-Pacific regions.