

Towards embedding a narrative of high expectations and positive thinking into the policy framework regarding the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

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Abstract

The background to this year's *Sambell Oration*, delivered by Professor Chris Sarra, highlights the "low expectations and deficit thinking (that) have for too long framed Indigenous education" and how implementing Sarra's positive approach regarding the education of Aboriginal children might also "unlock the potential of other Australian children".

Professor Sarra refers to *policy intent* - some people think that "policy success lies in making Aboriginal Australians just like everybody else ... The *policy intent* here has always been about taking Aboriginal Australians from *surviving to complying*. We must instead plot a course that takes us from *surviving to thriving*".

Sarra notes "a contaminated view of being Aboriginal explains how in education we cherry-pick a small number of children from remote Aboriginal communities and send them off to private schools while leaving the majority of Aboriginal children to be subjected to a remedial curriculum that does not comply with national curriculum standards".

Ken Wyatt, Australia's first Indigenous member of the House of Representatives, recently wrote, "I know what it is like to be denigrated for my race, to be told to leave school and to get a job on a farm because 'Aboriginal kids don't succeed'".

A report by Simon Collins, on Kirsty Johnston's research, noted a similar situation in New Zealand, where "Māori and Pasifika students are disproportionately channelled into non-academic subjects such as hospitality and retailing".

Regarding application to non-Indigenous children, a report by Henrietta Cook found deaf students being discouraged from completing the Victorian Certificate of Education.

Professor Sarra emphasises the importance of "a positive sense of Aboriginal cultural identity, which ... like any sense of cultural identity, is inherently connected with the very essence of who we are ... Any quality educator knows that a student will struggle ... when they lose any sense of their personal value".

This year's 2nd bi-annual conference of the *Te Akatea Maori Principals Association* and the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Principals Association* saw significant papers touching on the aforementioned issues.

In considering what is the best approach towards embedding a narrative of high expectations and positive thinking into the education policy framework, the range of

views held by various Indigenous leaders is acknowledged, how research efforts might best contribute to policy development, both within the major political parties, and also via a properly constituted voice, is explored, and the question of whether it is sufficient to aspire simply to 'close the gap', is asked.