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REVIEW

The positioning of Aboriginal students and their languages within Australia's education system: A human rights perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a critical review of past and present languages policies in Australian schooling. We highlight the One Literacy movement that contravenes the human rights of Australia's Aboriginal students. This in turn impacts students' right to freedom of opinion and expression as stated in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The One Literacy movement operates by equating Standard Australian English literacy acquisition with Australia's global competitiveness and economic success. There is only one pathway through the Australian English curriculum with common assessments and standards. However, the Australian Curriculum provides three distinctive pathways when students from an English-speaking background learn languages other than English. We reveal this double standard, where current educational policies prioritise the languages of trade (e.g. Chinese) and accommodate speakers of these languages. Meanwhile Aboriginal-language-speaking students are not provided with the same accommodations. For educational equity, there should be a distinctive English language learner pathway that recognises that the majority of remote Aboriginal students from the Northern Territory are learning English as an additional language. We advocate for these changes because all children have a right to an appropriate education that will enable them to flourish as learners and citizens.

Keywords: *Australia; English language learner; multilingual; Aboriginal languages; Standard Australian English; Universal Declaration of Human Rights; Article 19*

There are 14531 Aboriginal school children enrolled in the 151 government schools operated by the Northern Territory Department of Education in Australia (NTDoE, 2016). A majority of these learners live in remote and very remote communities and will enter school speaking an Aboriginal language, living in communities where Aboriginal languages are spoken, and having had very limited exposure to Standard Australian English. The dominant discourse in Australian Aboriginal education policy literature is one of “deficit, failure and intractable problems” (Disbray, 2017, p. 237) and educational success is defined by comparing Aboriginal with non-Aboriginal students' performance on standardised literacy and numeracy tests (Osborne & Guenther, 2013).

The aim of this article is to provide a critical review of Australian Aboriginal education policies over time. We consider how the binary discourse that constructs the performance of remote Aboriginal students who learn English at school as a “drastic failure” (Wilson 2014, p. 109) could be transformed by adopting a human rights perspective. We highlight the overlooked fact that the developmental

language and literacy milestones of these students are different to the national benchmarks (standards), which are based on the typical development of monolingual English-speaking students. This is an oversight that the Northern Territory education system must address if they are to meet Aboriginal students' learning needs (Lee, Fasoli, Ford, Stephenson & McInerney, 2014).

In this article, we first describe the analytical tools used to review Australian education languages policy documents. We then share the major policy events that have influenced Aboriginal education. We conclude with a discussion urging government to bring human rights to the forefront and reconsider the language rights of Australia's first people, particularly as they intersect with the school system.

Analytical framework

Governmental technologies are the changing discursive techniques that governments utilise to encourage, persuade, manage or motivate particular behaviours in citizens. Government techniques, such as the creation of policies and programmes,

are designed to reward citizens (in this case students), who embody and give effect to the government's ambitions. This enables governments, through their institutions, to exercise power. It is essential that researchers analyse the associations between political entities (e.g. schools) and governmental technologies (e.g. policies) to understand the functioning of modern forms of government, which endeavour to administer the lives of others (Rose & Miller, 2010).

This critical analysis of Aboriginal education policies and reports seeks to gain an insight into the changing moral justifications used by governments to exercise power over Aboriginal learners. Our analysis concentrates on the labels used to classify Aboriginal students, in different government policies and Aboriginal education reports at different intervals in Australia's history. Hacking (1999) introduces the concept of interactive kinds to describe the phenomena where institutions create labels (such as "fidgety", "hyperactive" or "attention-deficit") to classify children as problematic. Hacking (1999) claims "that we should focus not on the children but on the classification" (p. 103) because the words and phrases used by institutions to describe kinds of classifications of children strongly reflect the social attitudes and institutional practices of that time and place. By monitoring the classifications used to describe and justify the positioning of Aboriginal students, the analysis elicits how the different interest groups, and their policy positions, have intersected in different ways at different times to construct labels which classify Aboriginal students.

The classifications and descriptions of Aboriginal students in policy documents are not simply neutral statements, they are specifically designed to derive reactions from institutions, such as schools regarding the provision of specific services, such as the teaching of languages and literacies (Lo Bianco, 2000b). As such, the ways teachers and educational institutions interact with these labels are considered interactive kinds (Hacking, 1999).

Classifications and descriptions of Aboriginal students in policy documents

The protection era

Governor Phillip's original instructions from the British monarch in 1788, the time of Australian colonisation, were to maintain peaceful relations with the Aboriginal natives. Aborigines (the classification of this era), while having no recognised claim to land title, were defined as British subjects and therefore entitled to protection under British law. However, the reality of life for Aboriginal communities living on the frontiers of an ever-expanding British colony was very different.

By the late nineteenth century, people in Australian cities, who knew nothing of remote conditions, "heard of the atrocities on the frontier" (Elkin, 1954, p. 325). Recognition of the abuse of Aboriginal people and their communities led the government to formally implement a policy of protection. The Australian Law Reform Commission's (1986) report, notes that each State and Territory gradually introduced formal and extensive policies of protection during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. These policies classified Aboriginal people as full bloods, half-bloods, mixed bloods and half-castes, which are all racial terms used to denote the amount of Aboriginal ancestry an individual possessed.

The object of school education for Aboriginal children during the Protection era depended "on the goal to be reached, and this includes the social and economic position and opportunities which await the child when he reaches adult life" (Elkin, 1937, p. 481). For example, Queensland's Education policy makers, guided by the conviction that aborigines suffer from "racial and temperamental disabilities" (Elkin, 1937, p. 481) limited education for "Aborigines (mostly mixed-bloods) up to what may be called a useful labourer's standard, for to do more, if it be possible, would not help them" (Elkin, 1937, p. 481) because these policy makers claimed that Aborigines were "handicapped in the fields of skilled labour" (Elkin, 1937, p. 481).

There are two critical aspects to the positioning of Aboriginal education during the Protection era. Firstly, education was viewed through a human capital lens, which framed schooling as something to be limited to the level that learners have the ability to attain. Further, it was essential to be able to translate their learning into productive work. Elkin states that aborigines were "to be educated by the government with a view to taking their place as efficient economic units ... in the white community" (Elkin, 1937, p. 483).

Secondly, the race-based deficit classifications of this era, such as aborigine and mixed-bloods, portrayed Aboriginality, as a deficit condition that limited a person's cognitive capacity and ability to learn and perform complex tasks. Educational institutions interacted with these two facets of the protectionist era policies by determining that the appropriate standard of education for Aboriginal children should be "limited to 3rd or 4th standard, and the object of it is life on a settlement or as a labourer in the white economic structure" (Elkin, 1937, p. 497).

The assimilation era

After World War II, the Australian government believed that it needed to encourage immigration due to its sparse population in the strategically vulnerable Asia Pacific region (Clyne & Kipp, 2006).

The subsequent emigration of migrants from non-English-speaking countries, such as Greece and Italy, marked a new era that shifted Aboriginal affairs policy from segregation to enculturation, with the understanding that Aboriginal people must integrate into mainstream society. White Australia now welcomed immigrants and Aboriginal people, under the assumption that they would assimilate to build a strong European Australian nation (Beresford, 2012). Attempts by governments to construct the object of community as one of uniform social citizenship, through “citizen forming and nation building strategies” (Rose, 1999, p. 178) were commonplace in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Without consultation with Aboriginal people, the policy of assimilation became official Commonwealth policy in 1951 (Beresford, 2012). Assimilation policy was designed to replace earlier discriminatory policies including segregation. In their various manifestations, the idea behind Assimilationist policies was that “Aboriginal people should adopt the outlook and habits of European Australians in return for similar opportunities” (Beresford, 2012, p. 101).

Assimilationist goals were notable in education through the 1960s. Specifically, the prioritisation of the teaching of English in schools. Commonwealth assistance was denied for Northern Territory mission schools unless they committed to teaching in English (Gale, 1990). Teaching through Aboriginal languages in schools may have been perceived as a threat to the Commonwealth’s assimilationist agenda at the time. Beresford (2012) reviewed the impacts of assimilationist policies and found that promoting an ethnocentric European view of education “undermined the ability and the willingness of Aboriginal young people to participate in learning” (p. 111) and this had damaging impacts on progress in Aboriginal education.

The era of multiculturalism

The 1970s marked the beginning of recognition and support for Aboriginal languages and marked an end to the assimilationist stance by government which had sought to deny Aboriginal languages (Taylor, 2001). From a historical viewpoint, the 1970s appear as a shift in the stance towards Aboriginal and migrant languages, with Australian languages policies characterised as assimilationist from 1914 to 1970, and as accepting and even fostering post 1970s (Clyne, 1991).

In 1973, the Commonwealth Government’s new policy of multiculturalism was outlined in A Multicultural Society for the Future (Grassby, 1973). Grassby (1973), the Minister for Immigration, argued that equality of opportunity was “a goal which no right thinking person could dispute” (p. 1). The Government formally adopted a

policy of multiculturalism which was presented as a framework of justice and law and established fundamental human rights principles in Australia, by recognising that “different cultures, languages and religions do not represent a threat to the cohesion of Australian society and are bound by Australian law” (Jupp, 2009, p. 157). In 1975, after implementing the policy of multiculturalism, the government ratified the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (United Nations, 1965). Multiculturalism transformed Australian culture to cultures, religion to religions, language to languages and literacy to literacies.

The place of bilingualism in schools

The multicultural policy era lasted from approximately 1972 until 1990. During this period, research into second language acquisition and bilingualism provided a scientific basis for arguing that learning an additional language was a natural and desirable phenomenon, both individually and socially. Lo Bianco and Slaughter (2009) note “a new discourse of treating the community languages of the nation as a resource and seeking intergenerational multilingualism took hold” (p. 16). During this time, teachers and researchers of English as a Second Language (ESL) developed pedagogical practices and national assessment frameworks (Lo Bianco, 2001).

The 1980s were a time when the three broad interest groups of (1) minority language communities, (2) researchers and teachers of ESL, and (3) prominent government officials, who advocate for English literacy and languages of trade “collaborated in a coalition of interests” (Lo Bianco, 2001, p. 14). This collaboration culminated in the development of Australia’s National Policy on Languages (Lo Bianco, 1987).

Importantly, the National Policy on Languages recognised that English is not the mother tongue for a large number of Australian students and so the policy went beyond the simplistic deficit classification of the Aboriginal or migrant child without English proficiency by recognising that

these Australians, who are both children and adults, are invariably proficient speakers of at least one language other than English. This is an important fact to acknowledge so that incapacity with English is not assumed to equate with incapacity with language (Lo Bianco, 1987, p. 85).

Policies prior to the National Policy on Languages, were traditional government policies, which interpreted educational equity primarily in terms of access to mainstream education and measurements of mainstream outcomes. However, from 1987 to 1991, the Australian Advisory Council on Languages and Multicultural Education (1990)

reported that the “four principles [that] underpin the National Policy on Languages: English for all; Support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island languages; A language other than English for all; Equitable and widespread language services” (p. iv) were funded and implemented. The implementation of the National Policy on Languages therefore created pathways of different services based on students’ educational needs and thus reframed equity as a multidimensional concept dependent on each learners’ needs. Yunupingu (1995) contends, equity,

is not just about relative parity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, instead the primary focus is about achieving reasonable outcomes which are relevant to the individual students. In this sense mainstream education should not be seen as a single goal but as a diverse set of educational options and pathways which can accommodate unique and distinctive educational outcomes (p. 16).

The National Policy on Languages thus visualised Yunupingu’s (1995) notion of a truly equitable education, by mainstreaming diversified learning pathways. Teachers of English to speakers of other languages during this era interacted with the classification ESL learner: the classification constructed by specialist ESL teachers and researchers, by implementing ESL and bilingual teaching programmes that focussed appropriately on addressing multilingual students’ language learning needs.

From “human rights” back to “human capital”

In 1991, the government re-evaluated its languages policy and Minister Dawkins released Australia’s Language: Australian Language and Literacy Policy (Dawkins, 1991). This policy marked a shift to an English literacy first ideology (Lo Bianco, 2001) and built links that resonate today, between education, literacy and trade. While Australia’s Language: Australian Language and Literacy Policy was presented as a continuation of the aims of the National Policy on Languages, continued support of community language programs under the new policy would now be conditional on their perceived usefulness at imparting skills valued by the economy (Lo Bianco, 2000b).

The impact of Australia’s Language: Australian Language and Literacy Policy was twofold: firstly, it reconstructed literacy as a “functional, employment skill closely tied to a nation’s economic progress” (Castleton, 2000, p. 39), and secondly, it commenced “a process of ‘talking down’ pluralist interpretations of education, and distancing multiculturalism as a basis for making language policy” (Lo Bianco, 2000b, p. 15). From Australia’s Language: Australian Language and Literacy Policy onwards, literacy as “human capital” and a rise in

the phenomenon Lo Bianco (2001) coined One Literacy best explains successive government responses to literacy performance, and their prioritisation of English and the languages of trade.

The One Literacy movement is an undeclared movement that is concerned with Australian students’ literacy skills, political fears about Australia’s declining productivity in an increasingly globalised world and Australia’s monolingual mindset (Lo Bianco, 2000b). Clyne (2005) explains that Australia’s monolingual mindset views monolingualism as the norm in spite of Australia’s linguistic diversity, “it views multilingualism outside the possible experience of ‘real Australians’ or even in the too-hard basket” (p. xi). These beliefs have intersected to create a myth that Australia has an overcrowded school curriculum (Lo Bianco, 2000b) and that there is no time or space for community languages (e.g. Greek, Italian, Pitjantjatjara) (Clyne, 2005).

Australia’s literacy crisis and the era of literacy for all

In 1997, the Australian Council for Educational Research completed a national survey of Australian Year 3 and Year 5 school students’ literacy achievements called Mapping Literacy Achievement (Masters & Forster, 1997b). The report found that only 3% of Year 3 and 15% of Year 5 students’ performance on reading tests was below the draft benchmark range. Dr Kemp, Minister for the Department of Employment Education Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA) requested that the Australian Council for Educational Research reanalyse the data from Mapping Literacy Achievement to provide a cut-off level of performance, deemed adequate for students in each of the year levels (Hammond, 1999). This was re-packaged as Literacy Standards in Australia (Masters & Forster, 1997a). Minister Kemp then announced that “there were major literacy problems in Australian schools and that about one third of Australian school students could not read or write at an adequate standard” (Hammond, 1999, p. 121). With “the dramatic elevation in political discourse of concern about English literacy standards, a ‘national crisis’ of literacy was invoked” (Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2009, p. 23).

In 1998, Minister Kemp announced Literacy For All (DEETYA, 1998), this policy sought to address the problem of a perceived mismatch between Australia’s domestic language and literacy resources and the language and literacy skills deemed to be needed by society (Lo Bianco, 2000a). School-based bilingual programs drew accusations of cluttering the curriculum (Clyne, 2005) and “making the achievement of something called ‘acceptable literacy standards’ more difficult” (Lo Bianco, 2000b, p. 8). Literacy For All argued that developing “high levels

of proficiency” in English literacy was “a matter of major importance” (DEETYA, 1998, p. 9).

The analysis of the literacy crisis and the Literacy For All policy presented above, suggests that throughout the 1990s the Australian Government (on both sides of politics) used measures of Aboriginal inequality, such as high rates of Aboriginal school students not meeting minimal acceptable literacy standards as a warrant to dismantle the notion of equity (Lo Bianco, 2000b) and usher in a new notion of equality based on ensuring Aboriginal people are treated equally (Nakata, 2000). Resource allocation therefore shifted to a focus on everyone getting the same rather than a distribution based on need.

The positioning of Aboriginal-language-speaking students within the Australian curriculum

The Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA, 2014) explains that the Australian Curriculum sets the same high standards for all students and that it is the role of teachers to differentiate instruction to account for individual student needs and the different rates at which learning occurs. ACARA (2009) explains that the decision to shape Australia’s Curriculum this way was influenced by previous attempts to combat inequity:

One important lesson learned from past efforts to overcome inequity is that an alternative curriculum for students who are regarded as disadvantaged does not treat them equitably. It is better to set the same high expectations for all students and to provide differentiated levels of support to ensure that all students have a fair chance to achieve those expectations. This is a view put by, for example, many leaders in the Indigenous community on behalf of their young people (p. 8).

Thus, in the interest of combatting inequality and disadvantage, ACARA has provided only one pathway through the Australian English curriculum, in an effort to ensure the same high expectations and achievement standards are set for all learners. However, ACARA’s (2009) narrow framing of the English curriculum assumes all Australian students are speakers of English. Aboriginal students’ difficulty with learning English and achieving the Australian Curriculum’s English year level standards is often framed using deficit classifications such as disadvantaged (e.g. ACARA, 2009), rather than recognising that many remote Aboriginal-language-speaking students learn English as a second language.

A notable contradiction in ACARA’s stance regarding the importance of providing a common curriculum pathway arises when English-speaking students learn an additional language. The Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Languages

(ACARA, 2011) states that “learner background is a major variable that shapes the structure of the curriculum and decisions about the curriculum content and achievement standards in learning languages” (p. 27). Further, ACARA (2011) explains that:

For all learners of languages in Australia, the different relationship between their learning of the target language and English must be acknowledged. In addition, it must be recognised that second language learners will always be on a different learning pathway from first language learners when learning the target language (p. 21).

The Australian Curriculum: Languages (ACARA, 2015) provides three separate learning pathways: first language, background language and second language learners to account for these student differences. Where background language learners have knowledge of the target language to varying degrees, it is the mother tongue of first-language learners. Second-language learners “are those who are introduced to learning the target language at school as an additional, new language for them” (ACARA, 2011, p. 21). Therefore, when students with an English-speaking background learn a second language at school, such as Mandarin, ACARA recognises the need to create a separate second language learner pathway. Yet, when Aboriginal-language-speaking students learn a second language at school (e.g. English), ACARA (2009) states it is in the students’ best interest to offer them the same curriculum, the same assessments and set the same high expectations for all learners regardless of their language background.

Both groups of learners are directly comparable because they are all learning a foreign language. They can be considered foreign language learners, because the language they are learning is only used in the classroom, not in their home, the playground nor the wider community (Lo Bianco, 1987). Language acquisition research has established that rates of learning additional languages are influenced by the amount of comprehensible input and instruction (such as teaching), and the amount of time communicating through the language (output) and interacting in the language (Ellis, 2015). This is particularly relevant for remote Aboriginal students because interacting with the teacher may be their only opportunity to practice with a fluent native speaker of the target language.

A possible explanation for ACARA’s disparate stances regarding the expectations of second language learners, is the desire to encourage students to study Asian languages. Developing Australian students’ knowledge of Asian languages has been a stated priority in National Declarations on Goals for Schools (Lo Bianco & Slaughter, 2009). However, a report by the Asia Education Foundation (2010) found that the proportion of students who

discontinue studying Asian languages in secondary school is extremely high with only three to four percent of the Year 12 cohort studying Asian languages. The report identified that many English-speaking students stopped studying Asian languages before Year 12 because they felt it was unfair to require them to compete against native speakers, as this would have a negative impact on their tertiary entrance scores (Asia Education Foundation, 2010). ACARA's (2015) second language learner pathway for learning a language other than English therefore addresses one of the major concerns cited by English-speaking students.

To summarise the current situation, it appears that policy makers have responded to the perception that it is inequitable for English-speaking students to compete with first language speakers in the final year of high school (year 12). On the other hand, Aboriginal-language-speaking students are required to catch-up with their monolingual English-speaking peers and attain the English literacy standards within four years by achieving the Year 3 NAPLAN benchmarks (Freeman, Bell, Andrews, & Gallagher, 2017). Further, when these benchmarks are not met, the system, institutions (e.g. schools) and some researchers that interact with this data label Aboriginal-language-speaking students using deficit classifications, such as disadvantaged (e.g. ACARA, 2009) or failures (e.g. Wilson, 2014).

Therefore, if the aim of the Australian government is to combat inequality and recognise the human rights of all Australian school students, it is essential that Aboriginal-language-speaking students are recognised as multilingual and the same principles are applied for all learners of languages in Australia (ACARA, 2011).

Discussion

While learning languages such as Standard Australian English may seem an intuitively easy and natural task for young children from the point of view of native English-speakers, this overlooks the complexity and the time required to achieve linguistic competence in a second language (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000). Policy makers must also bear in mind that learning in and through a second language is not a matter of a simple transition to be achieved in the early years of school. As curriculum demands become more complex in the later year levels, students require higher levels of capability in English (NTDoE, 2015). Thus ongoing support is required to access the language of classroom activities and tests as they become increasingly academic and abstract (Hakuta et al., 2000). Therefore, it is essential that Aboriginal-language-speaking students who learn Standard Australian English (as a foreign language) receive ongoing English language learning support throughout their schooling.

The current education pathway that interprets student achievement against year level milestones for students with an English-speaking background is a ready-made pathway developed by non-Aboriginal policy makers for all students, including remote Aboriginal-language-speaking students. It is clear that the education policies and programs provided to remote Aboriginal-language-speaking students are not only inadequate, they are a matter of human rights, because they transform Aboriginal students' educational development from a multilingual learner to a disadvantaged student who struggles with English literacy.

Metaphors are often used in Australian Aboriginal cultures as a way of explaining a concept or moral (Freeman et al., 2017). Marika, Yunupingu, Marika-Mununggiritj and Muller (2009) use the metaphor of the ngathu (the nut of the cycad plant), to explain that like the nut, ready-made Western ideas and education programs, are poisonous for Yolngu consumption, unless they are prepared properly. The Yolngu elders of Yirkala Community, have planted a cycad tree at the entrance to the school staff room to remind Yolngu (Aboriginal) and Ngapaki (non-Aboriginal) educators of the importance of taking the time to prepare education programs by moulding and adapting Western ideas and policies to the Aboriginal teaching context, so that the "poison can be leached out of their ideas to make nourishing foods" (Marika, Yunupingu, Marika-Mununggiritj & Muller, 2009, p. 407). The development of locally distinctive pathways through the curriculum are therefore championed by the Yolngu as an approach that will support and enable Yolngu students to realise their full development.

Aboriginal students and their human rights

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) lists fundamental human rights and protections that should be afforded to all people. The decree states that education shall be "directed to the full development of the human" (Article 26.2) and that all "parents have the right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their child" (Article 26.3). These education rights are essential if students are to develop the skill set required so that they can actively participate and engage in broader democratic activities when they grow up.

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) "the right to freedom of opinion and expression" might best be interpreted for Indigenous people through the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations, 2007). In Article 14.3 it notes that:

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 (p. 7).

In other words, states need to work in partnership with Indigenous peoples so that Australian Aboriginal languages and culture can be communicated through the medium of education. Further, Article 14 also states “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” (United Nations, 2007, p. 7).

The human capital framing of education has led to our current situation where education policy makers interpret student achievement by measuring their English literacy attainment on standardised tests in relation to national minimum standards. These simplistic measures of student performance, which are based on English-speaking norms, lead policy makers to react to Aboriginal-language-speaking students limited English literacy attainment in relation to the benchmark, rather than recognising that they are on a different English language and literacy learning trajectory. Alternatively, if education policy makers adopted a human rights perspective as their overarching principle when developing languages and literacies policies and curriculums, these government technologies would be founded upon principles of respect for Australian children’s linguistic diversity, and the central object of education would return to developing the potential of every child.

Conclusions

We have analysed the discourse during key political eras in education, by contrasting the outcomes of Australia’s languages and literacies policies that prioritised a human capital perspective with policies that embraced Australia’s cultural and linguistic diversity. The analysis reveals the importance of adopting a human rights perspective and demonstrates that such a paradigm shift would lead policy makers to providing distinctive learner pathways through the Australian curriculum based on students’ educational needs. We suggest rather than continuing to operate within a monolingual paradigm that seeks to address Aboriginal disadvantage by treating everyone equally, adopting a human rights perspective would shine a light on the inequitable treatment of students learning languages and dispense with this thin veil of fairness (Freeman, 2013) that currently prevents policy makers from recognising Aboriginal-language-speaking students as multilingual.

In conclusion, we urge educators, clinicians and policy makers who interact with Australian schools

to fully consider the human rights of all students, particularly Aboriginal-language-speaking students who are expected to have mastered Standard Australian English as a foreign language by Year 3. We must ensure that our actions and decisions are guided by a framing which values and prioritises the diversity of Australia’s multicultural languages and literacies.

Declaration of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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