

**From:** Kon Kalos  
**To:** [Committee, Indigenous Affairs \(REPS\)](#)  
**Subject:** How to Improve Educational Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students  
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This response to the House of Representatives' Inquiry into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education

is on behalf of Kon Kalos who was the Principal, and Shoba Kalos who was Head of Curriculum(HOC) at Aurukun State School in 2015 under the auspice of the Cape York Academy.

This is our story on behalf of all the teachers and Wik people we had the privilege of working side by side ; and for the benefit and dignity of every child in Aurukun we had the pleasure of engaging with during an extraordinary year in 2015. Sadly what has happened in 2016 is a community issue of governance not a school issue.

2015 was a period of significant cultural and academic progress at the school. It was a year marked by strong participation by all who attended school. It was also a year marked by profound community unrest that tragically ended with a homicide during term 4. During this time the school was positioned at the centre of community with a 'flatline' democratic process of leadership that involved the co-leadership of a Wik Community Elder and the support of approximately 12 Wik Teacher aides and the strong consistent pedagogy of Direct Instruction (DI). The school worked to bring together an integrated approach of that worked to create culturally safe and peaceful learning spaces. This also involved a collaboration with Queensland Health (Apunipima), Aurukun Council and the Police. Sadly the Council was found wanting and this was a major barrier to the support families and children required who were socially and emotionally affected by intergenerational and historical trauma; and the consequent impact of ongoing waves of disempowerment, and alcohol and drug fueled social and family violence . Today the corruption of culture suggests that self-advancement at the leadership level takes on many hues in society.

AT Aurukun State School each morning began with a strong sitting on country and a cultural lesson where the children and teachers learnt about the national and local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage of Australia. This was often a bilingual experienced delivered in English and in Wik –Mungkan. These lessons were initially delivered by the Principal in conjunction with a Wik cultural co-leader. During the second half of the year teachers began to take the lead in this organic process . The end of each day concluded with the upper primary students sitting on country in yarning circles with their club and culture teachers combining both nutrition , silence and reflection on their individual progress before they went home The pan –Aboriginal and the Torres Strait Islander Flags were deconstructed and became the basis of the school's vision statement, engagement with self- discipline and communal strength. A calm transformation came over the school community midway through term 2 that seemed to sit outside the ongoing violence in the community. There were no suspensions in the second half of the year. Noel Pearson at all times allowed my community a democratic freedom and uninhibited support through the Cape York Academy, to seek his 'radical centre': that point where high expectations and cultural identity meet with a pedagogy that allowed accelerated learning to take place for students who were often 3-4 years behind their national cohorts in literacy and numeracy. In fact the school was described by one visiting dignitary who viewed our morning cultural gatherings and morning DI lessons to have a 'zen -like ' calm of the like he had not experienced in a remote context and of a school of this size. ( officially around 208 enrollments and attendance around 60-65% when violent

ruptures in the community did not disrupt safety getting to school) . That was Aurukun Sate School in 2015.

Visiting Principals from our sister schools Coen and Hopevale adopted various aspects of our cultural program and Principals from the Northern Territory and Western Australia came to view our model that conflated a strong scaffolded classroom pedagogy which guaranteed success through mastery at appropriate levels of literacy and numeracy progress , with a profound Wik local cultural base and input by those who carried the stories and history of the Wik people and their five clans. ( Wanam, Winchanam, Puch, Apalech, and Sara). Our Aboriginal heritage is the heritage of all Australians and this needs to be clearly symbolised and referenced /spoken into in every school (regardless of Aboriginal cohort) in the delivery of our lessons so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can see themselves in the classroom and within the wider community of the school, community and nation. Such a shift requires more than cultural awareness. It requires an internal shift of consciousness within the Australian psyche.

Within this context what evolved was the development of culturally safe and peaceful learning environments , along with the in-servicing of every teacher in the neurobiology of trauma and the effects socio-emotional dysfunction on learning. As a result Direct Instruction flourished with virtually all pre-prep and prep students at grade level for reading by the end of the year. This was an outcome that had never occurred to our understanding at Aurukun. Direct Instruction is a pedagogical tool (among many others);and with its systematic teaching methodology it processes small concise increments of learning and immediate feedback loops that allow for remedial contexts to manifest immediate successful positive learning outcomes for students. Positive praise and emotional coaching form keystone tenets of the explicit classroom experience within the DI pedagogy. My involvement was as an intimate classroom based educator not an as a desk-bound administrative Principal. We were practitioners who modeled each day's cultural expectations for students and staff as we sat strongly on Country, as well as visiting each classroom every day and also teaching when necessary to model pedagogy/content in club and culture/literacy & numeracy or relieve staff who were not well. There was nothing robotic about a pedagogy that has an explicit focus that models, practices and then releases students to dynamically engage with each organic stage of numeracy and literacy empowerment. Teachers who have mastery of their content humanise their pedagogy while bringing a consistent focus to school practices. Each classroom used similar strong pedagogical practices in the teaching of literacy and numeracy informed by the dynamic embodiment of their individual differences and unique intimate understanding of every student in their lesson. What also informs DI is a powerful collaborative understanding of student needs that comes into play during twice weekly feedback sessions and allows for a more holistic ownership of the school community. This was our experience of DI in the classroom. High expectations alone do not furnish students with the means of meeting these expectations. High Expectations, culturally conflated with a strong Wik narrative and a sense of Country fired a potential in the students that had previously been only piecemeal at Aurukun; but the means of achieving this potential was manifested by a DI pedagogy that met the immediate needs of the students who were 3-4 years behind grade level in numeracy and literacy. In order to empower these students maximise their life opportunities we needed to attempt to urgently get them to grade level before high school . This was the moral imperative that informed the school's adult community and the pedagogy.

In fact our experience of student pride, manifested when they could read and not just read anything but often things they had written and internalised in lessons.

This included public readings of the poetry of Oodgeroo Noonuccal by individual students, after the whole school had cultural lessons around her journey from Kath Walker to her people's ancestral name that had taken a lifetime. DI is a pedagogy that through its consistency suits the needs of highly traumatised students and children who suffer from disorganised attachment due to the ongoing impact of disrupted family life because it is firmly structured around differentiated student needs. It is a program that builds and scaffolds skill-based knowledge through repetition and a simple explicit learning structure framed by the mantra of 'I DO; WE DO ; YOU DO' followed by reflection and any necessary correction as an individual moves towards mastery of a skill that aims to give them the literacy and numeracy contexts they need for independent critical thinking, evaluation and communication. This is precisely what happens once students have reached the last stage of the DI program. At Aurukun we had four (4) students who had moved beyond the literacy program and were working with a range of visible pedagogies but still guided by the same underlying explicit framework of good teaching which encourages student engagement practices.

DI as a pedagogy has strong empirical foundations. In his landmark book (Visible Learning, 2009) Professor John Hattie notes that Direct Instruction is the most effective of interventions in schools. While the average effect size of student learning over one year is 0.40, he found the effect size of Direct Instruction to be 0.59. This means students doing Direct Instruction can progress one and a half times faster than an average intervention. Professor John Hattie was voted Australia's most influential education academic. In addition our experience of DI revealed a program that displayed a very high levels of accountability around what actually had been learnt not just taught. This accountability was maintained via regular classroom observations by a team of mentor teachers led by the HOC (and this included Club and Culture classes that were working with the KLAs from the Australian National Curriculum); weekly feedback and pedagogical refinement sessions along with weekly DI coaching conferences and Club and Culture meetings.

The Wik staff formed a key voice and pedagogical feedback tenet amidst all our teaching through integrated and separate weekly meetings evaluating the school's academic and cultural progress. There was always scope afforded at Aurukun to culturally contextualise the DI program and content where we felt it necessary to meet the needs of our Wik community. A dialectic was always in place, both with the DI coaches and Cape York Academy that is amongst the most open we have ever experienced during our 30 years plus as educators. Rational empathic reasoning always guided our practices but as pragmatic educators with a moral imperative to empower with literacy and numeracy some of the most disenfranchised students in Australia the guiding force was also always the evaluation of the quality of our outcomes.

Finally, it is thus interesting to note the criticism that has sometimes been fired at DI for its overly American focus when the reality is that our experience of the Australian Curriculum and school pedagogies, across two states and one territory, is that they operated from a very western worldview where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and ways of knowing and being continue to be an adjunct to the core curriculum and KLAs. The story in this country is an incomplete truncated narrative that firstly and foremostly does not allow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to see themselves within the national narrative and few educators have ever been empowered to engage with indigenous spirituality or identity as part of our Australian heritage. Maybe that is where we need to start by sitting strongly with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples who hold their stories and listen deeply and then we may have a chance of seeing clearly without all the ideological wars that inform a western

educational policy and practice. As educators we are pragmatists and we do not work from a one –size fits all panacea for each educational context . DI worked very well for the context we have attempted to describe as an example of effective differentiated learning. Above all else as educators we want to know what works in any given context and what does it look like. That is what we have attempted to pass on, in this response to the HR review committee. The strength of DI, is that it counters decades of deficit discourses around the education of Aboriginal students and as the young Queensland Aboriginal poet Ellen van Neereven extols *what is happening/ with the dialogue of this country/ they are killing people with words*. What she points to is the disjunction that exists between policy and effective practice on the ground.

Yours sincerely

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