

I found it a deeply painful experience to leave school, after 12 years, not being able to spell, read my hand-writing or write correct sentences. I didn't have a clue where the comma was supposed to go; and I avoided at all cost writing things on paper because I was embarrassed. But unlike most remote Indigenous children who finish their education almost completely illiterate, I was able to find work as a roustabout and later a shearer. It was in the shearing sheds that I met a lot of other bashed-up boys, courtesy of the clenched fist of the 1970s Education Department. I thought I was the only one, but I was far from alone. You will only find us in statistics, faceless and anonymous.

After more than fifty years and literally hundreds of billions of dollars of a failed state run education system for, among other children, remote Aboriginal children, it was disheartening to read the thoughtless boasting comments of Liberal Federal Member for Leichardt Warren Entsch and the insincere, cold hearted rhetoric of State Labour Education Minister, Kate Jones.

Both sides of politics have been united in their response to the demise of the Direct Instruction teaching method being used in Aurukun Aboriginal Community School in FNQ. The American prescriptive teaching method, Direct Instruction, was introduced by Noel Pearson through his Good to Great Schools five years ago. Entsch suggested after Pearson pulled out of the school that '...there'll be dancing in the streets.' I hardly think so. These streets are paved with despair, cultural depression and generational trauma. And Jones claimed her 'focus was on improving educational outcomes for the community.' Well, in fifty years they haven't had one win, and they never will. The article posted on the ABC's web site claimed a 'mainstream curriculum will help solve some of the problems we've seen in recent times.' That is a bare faced lie. The education department has produced far more Indigenous prisoners than students. I couldn't get an education with a mainstream curriculum and I am white, had access to health care and lived in a working class suburb. But neither could most of my friends. The veiled attitude to our poor academic performances was that we came from a bad family. Not much had changed on that score, particularly with Aboriginal families. It is the education department that is broken. It is run by people who have never failed at school, never felt the shaming effects of their creation.

As is often the way, my big break in education came as a Father in the most unfortunate of circumstances. My first born daughter was diagnosed with an acquired brain injury at twenty-three weeks of age. When she was about three and a half and didn't speak we discovered an unusual program of exercises that stimulated her brain, specifically her cerebellum. Miraculously, she started to recover. The exercises were followed by flash cards and repetition, repetition and more repetition. Each phase of her learning had to be achieved with small increments to give adaptation the best chance. The smaller the learning loads the better chance the brain had in adapting to the stress. My daughter recovered and went on and received a degree in education, a Master's degree and is now completing a law degree. If you like, we manually overrode the damaged part of her brain and built new pathways—just like Direct Instruction overrides the neurological effects of (generational) trauma and a lack of English in Indigenous students.

After my daughter become ill, I left shearing to be home more regularly and I worked digging a sewage tunnel. A few years after she had started school I was working on a night shift gang. I was eighty meters underground inside a five metre diameter rock tunnel. I was covered in oil and sludge, water dripping all around me and I was bone tired. I was lamenting my lot in life. I felt I hadn't achieved any of my potential and I had worked hard yet ended up in a sewage tunnel. I wondered

why my daughter was able to get an education with a brain injury and I couldn't get one with a normal brain? So I decided to copy what we had done with my daughter. In short, I started reading again and started patterning sentences. I looked at education much the same as sport. Learning to write was no different than learning to kick a ball. Get the technique right and practice until the skill is consolidated and it worked. The comma though, I had to be taught over and over.

That was in 1988. In 1999 I went to university and in 2014 I was awarded a Doctor of Philosophy in Writing from the University of Adelaide. When I finished my studies I wanted to go back and put steps in place for those children, like me, who struggle to adapt to the standard curriculum in our *standard education* with its Standard English. While I was studying I worked in many remote Indigenous schools and it has been heart breaking seeing the abject failure of education in so many communities. At the same time I was observing the meteoric rise of principals to senior administrative roles on the back of long term systemic failure of whole schools. Get the numbers up, subdue the students and get out quick is the modus operandi of most opportunistic careerist.

After working in over a dozen remote Indigenous schools, with site allowances, remote subsidies, free houses and no bills, the only people who benefit from the education system are the teachers. If they are young they are buying up houses and making long term investments. If they are older they are topping up their superannuation. The students are left with nothing. The education department is a career structure for teachers, not an education program for children. There are however, some great teachers and dedicated principals. Some teachers don't like D.I. because it takes away their creativity. Others though don't like being made accountable and there is no accountability in remote schools.

When I saw the Direct Instruction program and its systematic teaching method with its small, concise increments of learning, I knew, if it was delivered properly, it would work. This year I was invited to work at Djarragun College, an Aboriginal School in Cairns. The school is part of Pearson's Cape York Program and Direct Instruction is the main teaching pedagogy. And it works—and works well. I was blown away when I saw grade one, two and three Indigenous students reading, writing and editing their mistakes. I saw grade four children writing in paragraphs. It was rolled gold education.

Is Direct Instruction the best teaching method for all children? No. Play based learning; investigative learning and visible learning have had extraordinary results for some students. But those more independent learning frameworks are a bridge too far for many students. What my white mates and I couldn't do, and remote and urban Indigenous students can't do, is intuit English. If I wasn't taught what comes next, I couldn't work it out. It wasn't second nature to us.

Do I care about Direct Instruction, or Noel Pearson and the Cape York Academy? No. I care about seeing children find the joy in learning and embracing with courage and confidence the opportunities an education can provide. I don't want to see another generation of bright, witty students end up at the bottom of a sewer.

Dennis McIntosh