

# Webwords 57

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples: Rights, reading and moving out of the shadows

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Since 1994, the United Nations International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples has been observed annually on 9 August. Its supporters aim to promote and protect the rights of some 370 million indigenous individuals across 90 or more countries, and to recognise their achievements and contributions. In the mix of key constituents are indigenous peoples' fundamental roles in tackling global issues like environmental protection, social justice, and the survival and ongoing evolution of their dynamic, living and distinctive cultures, customs and languages. Promoting its 2016 theme, the right to education, Secretary General Ban Ki-moon emphasised that the UN would not achieve its ambitious sustainable development **goals**<sup>1</sup> without addressing the educational needs of Indigenous peoples.

The right to education is protected by both the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, and the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. Its Article 14.1 reads, "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." In general accord, successive Australian governments have pledged to achieve better results for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, but right now, things mostly look **dismal**<sup>2</sup>. Within the ten Australian government legislatures, 38 Indigenous members (14 of them women, and all of them Aboriginal) have been appointed, beginning with Senator Neville Bonner (Liberal, Qld) in 1971. Of these members of parliament, 22 were elected to the Northern Territory assembly, six to the Australian federal parliament, four to the parliament of Western Australia, three to the parliament of Queensland, one each to the parliaments of Tasmania and New South Wales, and one to the Australian Capital Territory assembly. Currently, Linda Burney (Labor, NSW) is in the House of Representatives, and Patrick Dodson (Labor, WA) and Malarndirri McCarthy (Labor, NT) serve in the Senate.

The government's priority areas for reform include: reducing incarceration rates and black deaths in custody, getting children to school and adults into work, fostering safe communities, and addressing **health**<sup>3</sup> and mortality issues – all within culturally responsive frameworks. Thinking Australians are alert to the complex, nuanced interconnections between education and health, unemployment, disempowerment and depression, school refusal, child protection, and young people with developmental language disorder (DLD or #DevLangDis) (Bishop, Snowling, Thompson, Greenhalgh, & the CATALISE-2 consortium, 2016), or low or non-existent literacy skills, who get caught up in the criminal justice system, including **youth detention**<sup>4</sup>.

**"EMPOWERMENT.** *Noun: The process of becoming stronger and more confident, especially in controlling one's life and claiming one's rights.*"

Oxford English Dictionary

The overrepresentation of Indigenous people, and people with language and literacy difficulties in the nation's prisons and in custodial remand, encapsulated in Nathaniel Swain's **Three Minute Thesis**<sup>5</sup>, plagues the collective SLP consciousness in this country. That feeling of having to do something about it has propelled the likes of Tasmanian Australian of the Year Rosalie Martin, Professor (and blogger) Pamela Snow, Professor (and blogger) Sharynne McLeod, and of course Nathaniel Swain himself, into action in the forms of advocacy, political lobbying, research, teaching, and clinical and educational interventions. The biannual Productivity Commission report on Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage, released in November 2016, drove home mercilessly the necessity for such action, indicating that while the figures for infant mortality, some educational outcomes, and household income had improved, rates of violence, incarceration, mental illness, and suicide continued to balloon.

### Senate submission by Indigenous Allied Health Australia

A proactive stakeholder organisation, Indigenous Allied Health Australia (IAHA) was impelled to speak up in 2014, producing a forceful **submission**<sup>6</sup> to the Senate enquiry into speech pathology services in Australia. They say that it is simply down to the individual speech pathologist to deliver culturally responsive health care, explaining that cultural responsiveness is a strengths-based action-orientated approach to building cultural safety.

**"BEING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE** *places the onus back onto the speech pathologist to appropriately respond to the unique attributes of the person, family or community they are working with. Self-reflection and reducing power differences are central to being culturally responsive; therefore, making assumptions based on generalisations about a person's ethnic, cultural or social group is unacceptable. Part of the challenge of becoming culturally responsive speech pathologists is learning to reach beyond personal comfort zones and being able to comfortably interact and work with people, families and communities who are both similar and markedly different.*"

IAHA, 2014, p. 7

The IAHA submission authors pinpoint the needs for: acknowledgement of SLPs' capacity and potential to

address, collaboratively with stakeholders and other professionals, multiple determinants of the health and well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, families and communities; research into the prevalence of speech, language and communication disorders in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across the lifespan; and research into, and development of, culturally valid assessment tools and culturally responsive assessment approaches. They also recommend provision of additional resources in schools to ensure appropriate development of Standard Australian English as a second dialect or language, comparable to that provided to migrant populations acquiring English as an additional language.

On the higher education front, they press for culturally responsive speech-pathology-based resources to support the implementation of the Health Workforce Australia (HWA) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health curriculum **framework**<sup>7</sup> into all Australian university speech pathology programs, and the desirability of culturally responsive speech pathology education. In this connection, they stress the necessary development and resourcing of evidence-based strategies aimed at recruitment, retention, education and support of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander speech pathology students and graduates.

They further call for research funding to investigate the skill-mix, health professions and service delivery models required to best meet the speech pathology requirements of Indigenous Australians across urban, rural, remote and very remote areas. Exhibiting courageous optimism they advocate an overhaul of the incentive structures that drive health service delivery (e.g., Medicare), to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have equitable access (available, appropriate, acceptable and affordable) to speech pathology services. Tub-thumping SLPs, frustrated by long wait-times for sketchy services, and a litany of other barriers to the delivery of evidence-based practices, can become shrill in pointing out that such equitable access to adequate assessment and intervention **eludes**<sup>8</sup> the bulk of the Australian population. They also give their tubs a fair hammering when the topic of the excellent September 2014 Australian Senate **report**<sup>9</sup>, "Prevalence of different types of speech, language and communication disorders and speech pathology services in Australia" is mentioned, because, at the time of writing (November, 2016), it had still not been handed down.

## Listening on Twitter

If, as a profession, we are to further our capacity to deliver culturally responsive care in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander preventive health, health, education, and community contexts, we must listen attentively to a representative range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices. Indigenous Australians don't need other Australians to tell them what their communities need or to force "solutions" on them; they know their communities, their needs, and the keys to solutions.

One good place to listen is in Twitter. Where Webwords had expected rants and rhetoric, she got pleasantly understated humour, hard facts, practical suggestions, a strong sense of community, and a feeling of being welcome. The same applied to the atmosphere around a gently persuasive **webinar**<sup>10</sup> on becoming a more confident teacher of Indigenous studies by Professor Peter Buckskin @BuckskinPeter, Dr Kaye Price, Dr Peter Anderson @pj\_and, and Mark Tranthim-Fryer @marktf.

Informative and interesting individuals to follow in Twitter include Bronwyn Fredericks @BronFredericks, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous Engagement), CQU; Marcia Langton @marcialangton, Foundation Chair of Australian Indigenous Studies, The University of Melbourne; lawyer Antoinette "I am the solution" Braybrook @BraybrookA; writer and actor Nakkiah Lui @nakkiahlui; and Indigenous advocate Nyunggai Warren Mundine @nyunggai. Look at their followers to decide who else you want to hear from. You might appreciate ABC Indigenous @ABCIndigenous; Aboriginal Literacy @Aboriginal\_Lit; Aboriginal Songlines @Songlines\_au; ANU Indigenous @ANU\_Indigenous; First 1000 Days @First1000DaysOz; Indigenous Aboriginal Health @NACCHOAustralia; Indigenous Allied Health Australia @IAHA\_National; IndigenousX Pty Ltd @IndigenousXLtd; Koori Mail @koorimailnews; the Lowitja Institute @LowitjaInstitut; More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative @MATSITI with its 2016 **Report**<sup>11</sup>; and WGAR News @WgarNews.

**"DISEMPOWER.** *Transitive verb: to cause (a person or a group of people) to be less likely than others to succeed; to prevent (a person or group) from having power, authority, or influence; to deprive of power, authority, or influence; to make weak, ineffectual, or unimportant."*

## Language and literacy

The blurb for Stan Grant's essay, *The Australian Dream: Blood, History and Becoming*, says that Grant (2016<sup>12</sup>):

*"writes Indigenous people back into the economic and multicultural history of Australia. This is the fascinating story of how fringe dwellers fought not just to survive, but to prosper. Their legacy is the extraordinary flowering of Indigenous success – cultural, sporting, intellectual and social – that we see today. Yet this flourishing co-exists with the boys of Don Dale, and the many others like them who live in the shadows of the nation. Grant examines how such Australians have been denied the possibilities of life, and argues eloquently that history is not destiny; that culture is not static. In doing so, he makes the case for a more capacious Australian Dream."*

Strong language and literacy abilities open doors. Relegation to the shadows of the nation may be the devastating outcome for the myriad Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with untreated DLD, those (with and without DLD) who do not become competent readers, and many of those who lack appropriate reading instruction in the first three years of school. An unacceptable proportion of these children are destined for the school to prison pipeline (Christie, Jolivet, & Nelson, 2005), and for many abject generational disadvantage is their lived experience. We do not have precise figures for DLD, illiteracy, or reading disability, among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, across the lifespan, but the indicators are that the prevalence is high. If you cannot function adequately in the areas of language and literacy, opportunities drift away. If you cannot function adequately in the areas of language and literacy, and you live in poverty, opportunities are thin on the ground.

As an evidence-based profession, speech-language pathology has the tools, and hopefully the knowhow, to engage directly with educators, community leaders, the burgeoning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander middle

class (Grant, 2016), and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to ensure that reading instruction in schools follows the recommendations of literacy experts in Australia (Rowe, 2005), the UK (Rose, 2006), and the US (National Reading Panel, 2000). We can also keep on, and on, making the case for teacher educators to follow the same guidelines when teaching prospective teachers what and how to teach (Snow, 2016; Stark, Snow, Eadie, & Goldsmith, 2016), and for robust, public evaluation of curricula and programs designed for and delivered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Productivity Commission, 2016).

Webwords 57 is at [www.speech-language-therapy.com](http://www.speech-language-therapy.com) with live links to featured and additional resources.

## References

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## Links

- <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgshttp://www.alfred.org.au/News.aspx?ID=553>
- <http://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/overcoming-indigenous-disadvantage/2016>
- <https://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/natsih-plan>
- <http://pamelasnow.blogspot.com.au/2016/11/could-better-reading-skills-save-lives.html>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XMNmX-ndtX8>
- <http://iaha.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/IAHA-Submission-Speech-Pathology-Senate-Inquiry-Final.pdf>
- <http://health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/aboriginal-torres-strait-islander-health-curriculum-framework>
- [http://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/spaweb/Document\\_Management/Public/Advocacy.aspx](http://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/spaweb/Document_Management/Public/Advocacy.aspx)
- [http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Community\\_Affairs/Speech\\_Pathology/Report](http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/Speech_Pathology/Report)
- <http://rrr.edu.au/news/3rs-webinar/>
- <http://matsiti.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/MATSITI-2016-Project-Evaluation-Final-Report.pdf>
- <https://www.quarterlyessay.com.au/essay/2016/11/the-australian-dream>

Webwords acknowledges traditional owners of Country throughout Australia, and pays respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, communities and Elders.