



Scaling up success in majority Indigenous schools

Noel Pearson

THE CENTRE FOR
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STUDIES

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Noel Pearson:

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I want to start with one very brief thing about evidence; we need no more evidence about what works. The evidence has been well known about what works for children's reading, numeracy, and learning generally. It is just that there has been a concerted effort to impede the known and very effective means by which children could learn in Australian schools — and it is the disadvantaged that have suffered the most. There's been an evidence revolution over the past 10 years ever since John Hattie's *Visible Learning*, but it is more than 10 years later, and we're not acting on the evidence ... but the evidence in relation to teacher-led instruction is even older — 50 years old.

When are those who have opposed evidence-based teaching going to be told to step aside so that we allow Australian students to learn from teachers, from good teaching, from effective teaching practice. I don't share the anxiety that we need more evidence. Aboriginal children are no different from other human children. They have the same capacity and they have the same learning mechanism of other human students, there's nothing *sui generis* about Indigenous children. They're humans. If they're taught with effective pedagogy, they will learn.

So those who say we need more evidence to prove what's effective with Indigenous education I think are almost making a racial distinction. The distinctions that are valid concern context, social community context ... we have to take them into account. Kids coming from

poverty, kids with bad hearing, kids coming from homes without books and illiterate parents. These are all important contextual questions that bear on the capacity of kids to learn, but the fundamental mechanism for learning is human.

That's why I believe that Indigenous education will not be fixed up until we get education fixed up for all students, particularly disadvantaged ones. The important point that is lost about direct and explicit instruction is that they are *non-categorical* approaches to learning and teaching. We don't distinguish between human learners. What we will make efforts to do is address the social context from which these kids come and the cultural context in which they live. These are all very legitimate things to take into account, but don't tell me that the evidence for effective instruction does not apply to Indigenous learners. Okay. That was just the introduction.

Okay 21 years ago, soon after Alan joined me in Cape York, I wrote a little monograph about my convictions about Indigenous policy and I recently recollected what I wrote about identity politics in 1999:

Related to the impediments to Aboriginal education which some poor ideological thinking seems to have caused is the impediment which prescriptive identity politics represents to the development of our people. There is now a tendency for Aboriginal people to be told what their identity should be. There are a lot of prescriptions about what behaviour, work, interests, endeavours, writing, art, poetry, ambitions, dreams, aspirations are essentially Aboriginal and those that are not. We need to seriously think about the effect of these prescriptions on the possibilities for our children.

The autonomy, individuality, and creativity of our children should not be stifled by nonsense concepts of true identity. Such prescriptions are mostly peddled by people who are uncertain and unconfident about their own identities. Our children in Cape York Peninsula must be completely

confident in their identity and their right to express their identity in the way they choose. It is their values and relationships which bind them to us, not the political or identity straitjackets which are imposed upon them. After all, our traditional society allowed for great eccentricity of personalities and often fierce personal autonomy.

Let me tell you about our program in Cape York. We're in partnership with the Queensland Department of Education in relation to two small primary schools in Cape York, including the school at which I was educated, at Hopevale. We have a six 'C' curriculum program, the first being Class, and we teach literacy, numeracy and science through Direct Instruction and explicit instruction — that is, teacher-led instruction. I recently viewed a video from a correspondent who is in the audience here tonight whom I've never met, who sent us footage of his parents, teaching Direct Instruction in a state school in Wagga Wagga in 1975. That footage is what goes on in our classrooms.

The teaching of the DISTAR method of literacy — the direct instruction model developed by Siegfried Engelmann and Wesley C. Becker — was in many Australian schools 45 years ago, and I've come across many Australian teachers of that generation who taught DISTAR, the early generation Direct Instruction program to Australian kids in many, many schools across the country. We could have got it right had we continued teacher-led instruction in literacy and numeracy starting in the 1970s, but the progressive educationalists pursuing the dream of John Dewey and Lev Vygotsky and all of the social constructivists in education, who opposed Direct Instruction, won the day across Australian schools.

It was why I wondered my grandfather and father were literate in both their traditional language and English far above the powers of their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. I wondered why, and I started to understand this debate about the *Reading Wars* between those who favoured explicit teaching of phonics and phonemic awareness, and those who said children should be taught by teachers who see themselves as 'guides by the side', who are going to 'immerse' these

children in literature and books and somehow they're going to learn the mechanics of reading. I sided with Professor Kevin Wheldall from the *MultiLit* program at Macquarie University. I said, he's on the right side of this debate, let's get Kevin up to Cape York and have a trial of his method with our children.

Prior to that, I had been with the social constructivists. I assumed that official educators knew what they were doing. But it was the *Reading Wars* in the 2000s that opened my eyes to this debate, and of course Kevin opened our eyes to what the kids can perform in Cape York if they're led by good teachers; all of a sudden the light started switching on with our children. Two years into our trial with *MultiLit* in Cape York, Kevin told us, well there's an ancestor program, it's called Direct Instruction. So we went to the United States and called upon the inventor of Direct Instruction, Siegfried Engelmann at his National Institute for Direct Instruction, saying that we wanted to do DI in our schools — and we've been doing it ever since.

DI is just good teaching where teachers teach first and ask questions later. The operating principle of DI articulated by Engelmann is this... think about this: *If the student has not learned, the teacher has not taught.* The responsibility for the child's learning rests with the teacher, and the obligation of teachers is to adopt effective methods that are established in the evidence.

So let me tell you about DI. You do five lessons with the children, explicit teacher-led instruction with appropriate revisiting of the material for spaced practice. The program is based on mastery. We aim for the kids to master the materials and we administer a mastery test every five lessons. So once a week, the children sit a mastery test and they don't proceed to the next bit of learning until they have a 90% plus success in the mastery test. And the ingenious nature of the instructional design of Direct Instruction is that it is not old-style rote learning, there's a lot of practice. If you want to move learning from short-term memory to long, you've got to revisit the material.

But the ingenious design of Direct Instruction is about introducing examples to the kids so that the inductive logic that's built into the lesson is learned by the child, and once mastering the logic they are

then in a position to work out what the rule is and then to generalise the rule to new examples. So it's a process of learning from examples, learning the rule, and then being in a position to generalize the rule to novel examples.

We have a Club program; art, music ... we have a strong belief in instrumental music for the kids, we teach kids in a stage band to learn to read music and to play instruments for a school stage band. We want our children when they enter high school to have the option to pursue music, and we have uncompromising ambitions for the children, because we know some of them are going to be passionate about pursuing musical careers and if we don't do it in primary school, they will never have the chance in high school.

We have a Culture program; we want to teach ancestral languages to the kids. The kids learn to speak their own language and to be literate in their own language. We have a comprehensive Community program where we engage parents and the first act — the first and easiest act — you can get the parents engaged in is putting money aside for their children. We have \$3 million sitting in accounts for 300 kids, their parents' own money, their families' own money because once you set up the facilities for them, the parents want to put money aside for their children. There's some children with \$10,000 in their account. They can pay for the rugby trip away or the football boots or the excursion to Cairns because we've said to the parents listen: \$20 a week is a thousand dollars a year, start when you're pregnant, you got \$5,000 in the account. We want parents to take responsibility for their children. If there's a breakfast club, the parents pay for the breakfast club.

We have a case management system for the children to attend and we work very hard; we have the highest attenders in the state of Queensland at our schools. We have a Family Responsibility Commission that mandates parents who receive welfare from the government to send their kids to school, and our commission pulls the parents up and says to anyone that is not sending their children to school, why should we not put a clamp on your money? That's what our Family Responsibilities Commission does.

We have a Civics program; we want our children to understand their identity and their responsibilities as Australians and as Indigenous people and to grapple with these questions about identity and who they are. And how they are Queenslanders in one respect and Australians in another and Cape Yorkers in another... that they have these layers of identity, and they share identities with other people. The Lutheran kids at Hopevale share identity with Bavarians in Germany. How could they not? We're all Martin Luther fanatics. If you come from Hopevale, that's part of our identity.

Okay. We have a strong focus on childhood. We understand the importance of early childhood development. Might I say one thing about it: the key issue with early childhood programs is some academic time, 20 minutes a day. You've got to furnish the kids with pre-literacy academic support, because that's not what they're getting in the household. Their household might speak an ancestral language. They're not going to have the natural facility with phonics and phonemes of English. So putting in 20 minutes a day with a pre-literacy program is the most crucial part, in my view, of early childhood. 20 minutes a day and you can make up for the lack of books in your home, and you can make up for the lack of education of your parents. It is crucial to have an academic dimension and not just play in the early childhood program.

When it comes to school and school system reform... well, I've been around consultants for a very long time and they mostly get it wrong, but I'm going to tell you about the work of McKinsey and how they've got so much right. McKinsey have produced three crucially important reports over the last dozen years. First in 2007, where they identified what successful systems around the world have done in order to improve the outcomes for their countries. Three very straightforward things came out of that McKinsey work in 2007; you need to get the right teachers in place. You need great teachers.

Two: you have to have effective instruction. Three: every child in the system has to benefit from it. That's why we talk about our organisation as *'Good to Great Schools'* and our handle is: great teachers, effective instruction, every child. That's what a system must have the capability

of delivering if it's going to advance. Kind of very much nose on your face, but so very important to keep those three things in focus.

Secondly, in 2010, McKinsey looked at systems across the world over a period of time to work out what did these systems do to advance from poor to fair, to good, to great, to excellent. They didn't just look at where different school systems sat on that continuum, but where individual systems sat at a particular point in their development. Singapore was once poor, and then it became fair and then it started to become good, and then it became great, and now they're an excellent system. They made a journey over the past 50 years under Lee Kuan Yew and those amazing policy leaders in Singapore; they progressed across the performance spectrum. And what they did at different stages of the spectrum was different, McKinsey learned. What you do with a poor school is different to what you do with a great school. The policy interventions are different at each stage.

And you look at this playbook, it's fantastic. If I were Minister, I would look at the McKinsey 2010 playbook and say, that is my playbook. And guess what, the poor to fair journey says: you've got to get bums in the seat. You've got to get the kids in the seat, they've got to attend. Secondly: they need a feed, their basic needs need to be met. Thirdly: your teachers need to be supported in those schools with prescriptive training.

Fourthly: they need a scripted program. They don't have great teachers. The teachers need a script in front of them to teach. That's what Singapore originally did. And all of the systems that have gone through the poor to fair performance spectrum have had these common interventions. Of course, if you want a school to go from great to excellent, you best step back and let them work out their own journey.

There's a set of prescriptions at the high-performing end that actually mean that they should be unleashed. So I would urge policymakers, members of the public, Ministers, anybody interested in school reform to look at McKinsey 2010, the playbook is entirely there, including adjustment for context, adjusting these interventions according to context.



McKinsey (2010)

from Poor to Fair to Good to Great to Excellent

Poor to Fair	Fair to Good	Good to Great	Great to Excellent
Achieving the basics of literacy and numeracy Providing motivation and scaffolding for low skill teachers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scripted teaching materials • Coaching on curriculum • Instructional time on task • School visits by center • Incentives for high performance Getting all schools to a minimum quality level <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outcome targets • Additional support for low performing schools • School infrastructure improvement • Provision of textbooks Getting all schools to a minimum quality level <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand school seats • Fulfill students' basic needs to raise attendance 	Getting the foundations in place Data and accountability foundation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transparency to schools and/or public on school performance • School inspections and inspections institutions Financial and organisational foundation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Optimization of school and teacher volumes • Decentralizing financial and administrative rights • Increasing funding • Funding allocation model • Organizational redesign Pedagogical foundation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School model/streaming • Language of instruction 	Shaping the professional Raising calibre of entering teachers and principals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruiting programs • Pre-service training • Certification requirements Raising calibre of existing teachers and principals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-service training programs • Coaching on practice • Career tracks • Teacher and community forums School-based decision-making <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-evaluation • Independent and specialised schools 	Improving through peers and innovation Cultivating peer-led learning for teachers and principals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborative practice • Decentralizing pedagogical rights to schools & teachers • Rotation and secondment programs Creating additional support mechanisms for professionals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Release professionals from admin burden by providing additional administrative staff System-sponsored experimentation/innovation across schools <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing additional funding for innovation • Sharing innovation from front-line to all schools

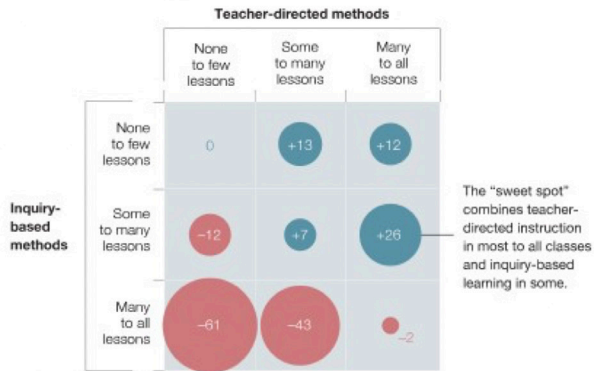
Finally, there's a third McKinsey report I want to valorise here tonight. And that is their report on the PISA results of 2015 and their report in 2017. The most crucial thing in that report, they did a massive analysis of the data, the performance data in Oceania and Asia, looking at these great systems in Asia that have done so well, they looked at all of the data for Australia and New Zealand and across Southeast Asia. And the crucial piece for me in that report is the balance between teacher-led instruction and inquiry learning, you've got to get the balance right. And guess what: the balance is preponderant in favour of teacher-led instruction.



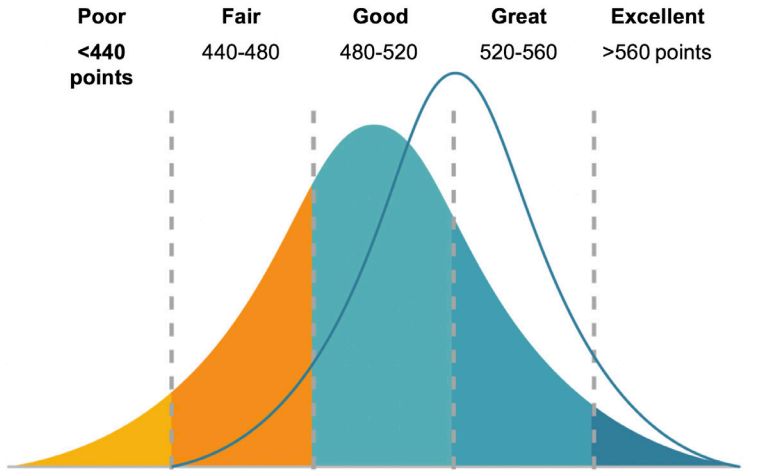
McKinsey (2017)

The sweet spot between teacher-led instruction and inquiry learning

Point change in PISA¹ science score relative to baseline,²
average score increase ● or decrease ●

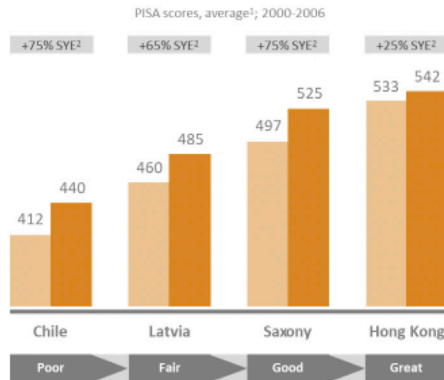


You should only do a little bit of inquiry. The best systems are those systems that are favouring teacher-led instruction; that's what the evidence says, and that's what high performing systems in Southeast Asia are doing. In our programs that we design in-house at Good to Great Schools, we teach first and then we allow kids to conduct experiments and undertake enquiry activities. Can I say there's a massive confusion in the teaching of science between 'scientific inquiry' and 'inquiry learning' ... they're not the same thing, and yet I see schools time and time again conflating the two things, that somehow inquiry learning is sanctioned by this idea of scientific inquiry.



Our challenge is to hit the bell curve of Australian schools and shift it rightwards. And if Minister Tudge's aim is to get our country to make a performance leap, I suggest the performance leap is we've got to go from good to great. We're good — we've got to get to great. And the McKinsey evidence tells us that can be done by systems within five years. It's proven around the world that a tectonic shift in performance can be executed in five years... five to six years is the average. And if we're determined about it, we can have a great system once again and start thinking about getting to excellent. But that's our task as a nation, in my view: to go from good to great — and let's do it in the next five years. How are we going to do it? We need to hit the curve and shift it one performance stage rightwards so that we no longer have any poor schools. That's got to be our goal. No schools that are poor in Australia.

Exhibit: McKinsey, 2010, p. 23



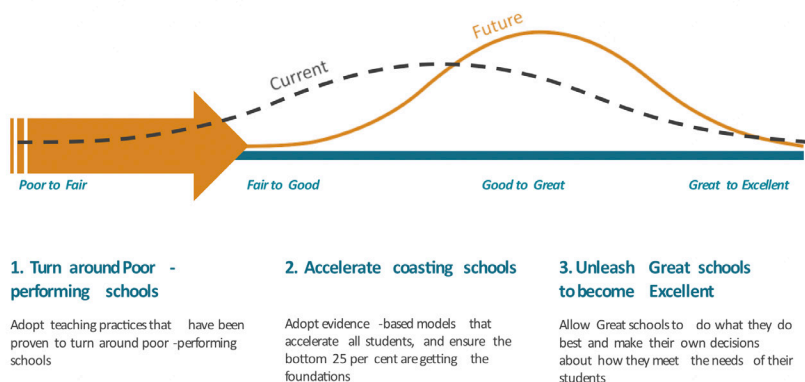
Australian systems can move from Good to Great within 6 years and in reach of Excellent within 10

We should start at fair and of course have a distribution right across to excellent, but that's got to be our goal. Hit the poor end of the spectrum and shift it rightwards so that every Australian child can put their hand up and say: "I went to a fair school, I went to a school that honoured my attendance by serving me with the teaching that I deserved as an Australian citizen."

The second thing we have to do is we've got to focus on the verb, not the noun. The 'teaching', not the 'teacher'. The teacher will come good in time —, two, three decades down the track, if we ever get the universities to cooperate. That's the noun: 'Waiting for Godot' is the noun. The thing we can change tomorrow is the teaching and if we're going to make this leap in performance over the next five years, we've got to put the spotlight squarely on the verb of teaching, and — sorry to say — we've got to act on the evidence. The evidence is in. Yes, there are marginal areas where we can learn more about what's effective and so on; but the current focus on evidence, a lot of people come late, late in the day to the evidence.

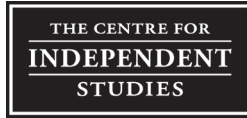
I think it can be a distraction, you know what I mean? We already know heart surgery works, do I need more evidence. Yes, evidence about context and what's effective in particular social and economic and learning disadvantaged contexts, that can be useful, but don't tell me what constitutes effective instruction is still an open question. And so let's act on the evidence rather than see the future lying in building more evidence.

Hitting the bell curve in the right places



So what do we need to do? We need to make a performance shift in five years. We need to hit the bell curve in the right places. Okay, what do I mean by that? We need to hit the poor to fair schools and not accept that anywhere in Australia an Australian child is still attending a poor school. And that means the 250 Indigenous schools that sit down at that bottom end of the system. We can't accept that they should continue as they are. They cannot be put in that too-hard basket and left there.

The second thing we have to do is we've got to shift the coasters in the middle and the fair schools that are always fair, the good schools that are always good, and the good ones that are not getting great, and the fair ones that are not getting good. And so we need to hit a sufficient number of those schools and show what is possible if we hit the curve in those places and force a shift to the right. And of course we leave the great to become excellent. There are things that we can suggest, and support great schools on their journey to excellence. But by and large the people who run great schools just need to be left to turn their schools to excellence.



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Scaling up success in majority Indigenous schools

Addressing the Centre for Independent Studies, Noel Pearson outlines his insights and observations from decades of experience supporting education in remote majority Indigenous communities.

He outlines the 6C Education model — Childhood, Class, Club, Culture, Civics, Community — adopted at Good to Great Schools, the organisation he co-Chairs, and the critical role played by teacher-led, direct instruction.

Noel argues that direct and explicit instruction methods of teaching are non-categorical — meaning that all learners can benefit, not just Indigenous students. Disadvantaged students, in particular, have the most to gain from these practices. And that's why the method has been so effective for students in the remote majority Indigenous schools that Good to Great Schools operates.

Noel challenges policymakers to drive systemic reform to lift schools from being good to being great. To make this performance leap, he urges greater focus on the verb — teaching — rather than being fixated on the noun — the teacher.



Noel Pearson has spent decades advancing reform on native title, economic development, and social policy. He is Director of Strategy of Cape York Partnership and Co-Chair of Good to Great Schools Australia. Noel has been a forceful proponent of education reform and works in partnership with government and business to advance education opportunities for Australian children.

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