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Racism towards First Nations Peoples within the education system

Abstract

This report examines the racism that Indigenous Australians continue to experience within the education system. The paper reveals how First Nations People are greatly disadvantaged by the inequities and racial behaviours toward them. Understanding the issues of racism observed within the learning system and its impact is the main purpose of this report. This paper focuses on the problem of exclusion in schools and the consequences faced by Indigenous students through this. Potential solutions such as bilingual education and further educating teachers regarding Aboriginal culture, history, and colonial consequences are provided by this report.

Keywords: racism, inequities, exclusion, bilingual education.

1. Introduction

Indigenous educator, Woodroffe (2019) explains that since colonisation in the year 1788, 'exclusionary policies, practises, and low expectations' have been attributed to Indigenous education in Australia. Several studies conducted identifies that there are educational inequities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians where history, as learned by most Australians, only focuses on European populations and British settlement, the dominant nation (Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson 2014; Gray and Beresford 2001). The authors highlight that it does nothing to make the people sensitive to the impact of the traumatic events in history perpetrated on the Indigenous population, nor does it lead to awareness or interest in the history of Indigenous peoples who have lived in Australia for at least 60,000 years. Moreover, racism within the education system toward First Nations Peoples is not entirely about the deprivation of learning about their culture and history but also the multiple incidents of name-calling and threats of assault that were reported throughout the years. Norwegian sociologist and professor, Galtung (cited in Brown 2018) suggests that violence is present in the difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous educational achievement. This structural violence that is built into the educational structure caused by unequal power consequently leads to unequal life opportunities. This report will begin by examining two main factors concerning the issues of racism that remains in Australia, then provide possible solutions, and ends with a conclusion.

2. Problems

Indigenous Australian researchers, Professor Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson (2014, p.786-787) indicates that the history of education regarding Indigenous people has been extremely negative and the educational outcomes have been quite different for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Without a doubt, the historical education policies had the intent to erase Indigenous culture and assimilate part-Indigenous people into the white Australian mainstream (Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson 2014, p.786-787). The policies and laws within the education system which are focused on the 'cultural competency' of teachers and school staff, mainly those who do not acknowledge the shared and often traumatic past of Indigenous people and their families, 'degraded Indigenous students to a liminal space where their authority as Aboriginal people remained unacknowledged' (Brown 2018). This report will discuss the exclusion of Indigenous students that is observed in Australian schools and the consequences of the disadvantage that racism brings to Indigenous peoples.

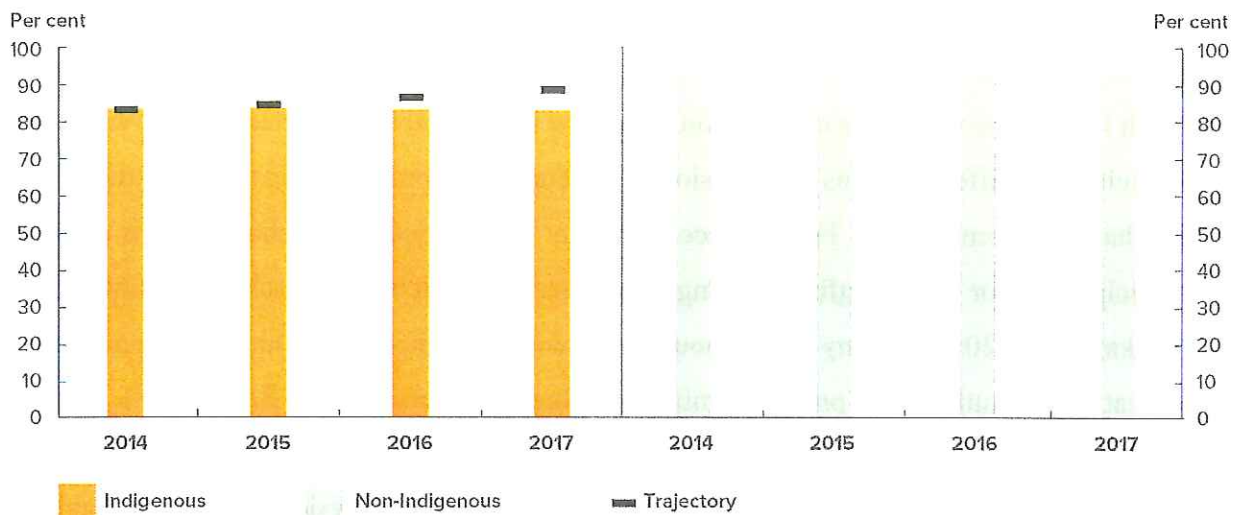
2.1 Exclusion in Schools

Professor Bodkins-Andrews (as cited in Henebery 2020) identified examples of racism in Australia, directly related to James Cook's claiming of land traditionally owned by Indigenous peoples but now known as Australia, 'a nation that has no recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in its constitution'. The first issue of racism directed at First Nations Peoples is exclusion. Different forms of exclusion can occur at many moments in the education system and can have different affects. For instance, a student is excluded from school if their attire, regular participation, or meaningful learning experience conflicts with school policy (Fahd and Venkatraman 2019). Many Indigenous children experience a cultural disconnection within education institutions that provides 'minimal cultural connections' (O'Brien 2017). University of Melbourne lecturer in Indigenous Studies program, Brown (2018) states that there is indirect violence in the Australian curriculum continuing the direct and physical violence of land theft and child removal. This indicates that this is a flawed system that racially discriminates and downgrades Indigenous peoples, maintaining a disadvantaged society.

2.2 Consequences of disadvantages for Indigenous Students

The second issue of racism is the direct consequences First Nations Peoples endure because of continuous racial injustice. Indigenous Australians' educational outcomes are linked to colonisation because education is programmatic, 'designed to produce a specific social outcome for the dominant population that it serves' (Woodroffe 2019). Moreover, there are various situations in Australian schools that are considered as racism; 'name-calling, destruction of property, taunting, insults, and even physical attacks causing death' (Ziersch et al. cited in Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson 2014). These assaults impact mental health negatively, including a 'defensive response, anti-social behaviour, psychological distress, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and anger' (Fahd and Venkatraman 2019). Due to this, Indigenous students' academic performance and attendance rates have been affected. Statistical data from the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (2018) shows the overall school attendance rate for Indigenous students between 2014 and 2017. The bar graph shows that the attendance rate of Indigenous students has remained stable but there is a gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in remote areas, with Indigenous students falling further behind non-Indigenous students. See figure 1.

Figure 1: Attendance rate of students



Source: (ACARA as cited in Department of the Prime Minister Cabinet 2018)

3. Solutions

Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson (2014, p.786-787) point out how little research regarding the impacts of racism on Indigenous peoples has been conducted and outline a multitude of factors that prompted this, including misunderstanding of who Indigenous Australians are. This is concerning because so far, there has been no improvement in the number of research being conducted regarding this issue. Several studies offer different coping strategies for First Nations students that can vary depending on the type of racism such as 'seeking social support, confronting the perpetrator, ignoring the racism, and minimisation', and how these responses can impact First Nations Peoples' health and well-being' (Ziersch et al. cited in Bodkin-Andrews and Carlson 2014). Another step to breakthrough the issues of racism within the education system might include the revision of the national curriculum discussed by both Non-Indigenous Australians and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders peoples. The 'intellectual and critical perspectives' carried by Indigenous peoples are not being recognised and acknowledged in history, therefore, in order to attain the development and delivery of a 'meaningful, complex and responsive curriculum', the ideologies of Indigenous people, particularly Indigenous young people, need to be valued (Gray and Beresford 2001). This report provides the following recommendations:

3.1 Implementation of Bilingual Education

Language is powerful and important for every culture of different countries around the world. This is because language is a sort of identity which is why one of the solutions to the problems previously discussed is bilingual education. In Australia, many Indigenous students living in remote areas struggle in schools because they are taught in a language that is foreign to them rather than their own (Wigglesworth and Lasagabaster 2011). This means that Indigenous students are expected to learn and understand English, but not given the opportunity to study using Indigenous languages. Studies have shown that Indigenous languages are disappearing rapidly and unless this trend is reversed, there will soon be no Indigenous languages spoken in Australia by 2050 (Wigglesworth and Lasagabaster 2011). For that reason, bilingual education should be implemented, if possible, in every educational institution to be able to maintain and advocate for Indigenous languages and most essentially, Aboriginal culture. For example, in 1974, a curriculum called The Bilingual Resource Development Unit was established at Yuendumu School to help producing Warlpiri teaching

materials. The article published in *The Conversations* written by a Senior linguistic researcher Disbray (2017), demonstrates how effective this bilingual curriculum was for the Walpiri students because they are first taught in the language they understand. Korf (2021) believes that having bilingual programs creates a pathway to which Aboriginal children will use to possibly help them live in two worlds in a balanced way. However, educators must keep in mind that English is not First Nations Peoples' first language, nor a second or third. Through this, there will be uniformity in learning for both non-Indigenous and Indigenous students. It will be beneficial for both groups; traditional knowledge and Indigenous languages will be preserved, and people will be more acquainted with First Nations Peoples' culture with the hope of white Australians finally acknowledging the First Australians as equal.

3.2 Training teachers for preparedness regarding Aboriginal Education

Every educational institution should acknowledge racism and fight it, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students being given the utmost support and opportunity to be proud of the country they are in (Bodkins-Andrews cited in Henebery 2020). Aside from this, according to Woodroffe (2019), the 'aim to have parity in learning between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students' should be prioritised so as for the teachers to have a positive influence on students. On this basis, another solution for the problem discussed is to assure that teachers are trained and fully prepared to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders students. Social studies professor, Saffold (2007) asserts that it is, however, overwhelming for many teachers to create an environment where differences are embraced, and they sometimes lack the knowledge to ensure that all their students succeed regardless of their differences. That is why educators should have proper training where they can construct solid teaching strategies to be able to provide all their students with the best learning environment. Furthermore, in a school setting, the key factor for success in education is the teacher-student relationship. This is about teachers being able to sympathise with their students and let them feel safe and valued. Unless this happens, teachers will never be sufficiently aware of Indigenous cultural knowledge, thus they are at a disadvantage when relating to and educating Indigenous students (Woodroffe 2019).

Conclusion

This report examined the causes and impacts of continuous racial discrimination within the education system towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The report has provided some analyses and evidence of inequalities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students that are clearly connected to the unequal life chances for the disadvantaged group, Indigenous peoples. This crisis has been happening through the years where Indigenous culture and history have been silenced and excluded from the national curriculum. This omission, along with a lack of research on the educational experiences of young Indigenous people causes misconceptions resulting in racism. Solutions such as bilingual education and training teachers to be prepared for teaching the young children of First Nations Peoples should be considered to improve the current situation with an aim to close the academic gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

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