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Did DI do it? The impact of a programme designed to improve literacy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in remote schools

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Abstract

Over the 10 years of 'Closing the Gap', several interventions designed to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have been trialled. In 2014 the Australian Government announced the 'Flexible Literacy for Remote Primary Schools Programme' (FLFRPSP) which was designed primarily to improve the literacy outcomes of students in remote schools with mostly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The programme, using Direct Instruction (DI) or Explicit Direct Instruction, was extended to 2019 with more than $30 million invested. By 2017, 34 remote schools were participating in the Northern Territory, Queensland and Western Australia. This paper analyses My School data for 25 'very remote' FLFRPSP schools with more than 80% Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students. It considers Year 3 and 5 NAPLAN reading results and attendance rates for participating and non-participating primary schools in the 3 years before the programme's implementation and compares them with results since. Findings show that, compared to very remote schools without FLFRPSP, the programme has not improved students' literacy abilities and results. Attendance rates for intervention schools have declined faster than for non-intervention schools. The paper questions the ethics of policy implementation and the role of evidence as a tool for accountability.

Introduction

In 2013, the Australian Government committed $22 million to 'Flexible literacy learning for remote primary schools' (Australian Government, 2014). The policy document argued that 'Literacy levels in remote primary schools are below those in other areas. Some schools have overcome this problem by adopting flexible teaching methods, such as the Direct Instruction (DI) method in Cape York' (Liberal Party of Australia & National Party of Australia, 2013, p. 12). This translated into the Flexible Literacy for Remote Primary Schools Programme (FLFRPSP) which was funded to $23.8 million between 2014 and 2017, a further $4.1 million to 2018 and an additional $2.8 million to 2019. Good To Great Schools Australia (https://goodtogreatschools.org.au/) was contracted to manage the programme. The programme had two aims: to 'increase teacher pedagogical skills in teaching literacy in particular through the use of Direct Instruction or Explicit Instruction, and; improve literacy results for students in participating schools' (Australian Government, 2014). Our purpose in this paper is to investigate the second aim to determine whether this has been achieved. Two evaluation reports about the programme were released (Dawson *et al*., 2017, 2018), and these reports were the basis for extending the programme beyond the initial funding period. The Dawson *et al*.'s reports discuss attendance as a factor contributing to lower achievement levels. In our analysis, we view attendance as one indication of student engagement in learning (Briggs, 2017) or 'participation' in education, as suggested by the Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia (ACARA, 2015). We wanted to know whether FLFRPSP schools were associated with changes in attendance and changes in academic performance. National Assessment Program-Literacy and Numeracy scores (NAPLAN) were the programme's identified measure of literacy outcomes.

Literature

Defining 'remote' schools

'Remoteness' is a geographical construct based on the metropolitan as the centre (Guenther *et al*., 2015). More specifically, remoteness structures are used in statistical geography to delineate geographic locations on the bases of their distance from and 'relative access to services'

(Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). The My School website (ACARA, 2019) applies this remoteness structure to describe schools as Metropolitan, Inner Regional, Outer Regional, Remote and Very Remote. In this paper we discuss the impact of the FLFRPSP in Very Remote schools.

Factors that contribute to better outcomes in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools?

A systematic review on outcomes for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students published by Guenther *et al.* (2019) sheds some light on factors that contribute to better outcomes in peer reviewed literature published between 2006 and 2017. The review found little evidence that programmatic approaches made a positive difference—the one exception being the ABRACADABRA (Wolgemuth *et al.*, 2013) programme, which demonstrated increased phonological awareness. There were programmes that could demonstrate success generally, but not in remote community schools, for example the National Accelerated Literacy Program (Tyler *et al.*, 2009). However, there was a lack of published peer reviewed evidence on many programmes that have been implemented in recent years—programmes such as *Reading to Learn*, *Learning to Read*, *MultiLIT*, *Quicksmart*, and *Stronger Smarter* were not mentioned in the peer reviewed literature the authors examined. The review did find studies that demonstrated positive outcomes. Student safety, health and wellbeing were considered important for success. Parent and community involvement was another key factor (e.g. Etherington, 2006; Fluckiger *et al.*, 2012). Local employment in schools was another factor, as was locally appropriate curriculum and pedagogies and engagement in learning.

The systematic review found little evidence for a link between attendance and academic performance in remote schools. Attendance and participation, however are linked (Cowey *et al.*, 2009; ACARA, 2015; Briggs, 2017). Reasons for non-participation are varied but as Prout Quicke and Biddle (2017) argue, they are determined as much by school or classroom factors as they are by home and individual factors. Therefore, if what happens at school discourages participation, it will likely be reflected in lower attendance rates. The need for schools to be attuned and responsive to the life-worlds of students has been increasingly argued through a range of theoretical, philosophical and pedagogical lenses including: Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings, 1999), a Funds of Knowledge approach (Moll *et al.*, 1992; Zipin, 2009) and Culturally Responsive Pedagogies (Bishop *et al.*, 2007; Castagno and Brayboy, 2008; Rigney and Hattam, 2018; Morrison *et al.*, 2019).

In more recent literature, a study by Wilson *et al.* (2018) demonstrated that success in Aboriginal first language literacy contributed positively to English language proficiency. In another systematic review on pedagogical approaches to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, Burgess *et al.* (2019) found numerous examples of good pedagogical practice but they concluded that 'we find out more about what is missing or under-researched than what was discovered or proven' (p. 15). While not focused on remote students, the study found a disconnect between practice and outcomes such that outcomes were assumed without showing a causal connection to practice.

Despite the lack of evidence for programmatic approaches, Fogarty *et al.* (2018) argue that many still pursue the literacy myth as though literacy education is a 'panacea to social troubles' (p. 190)—a kind of silver bullet. They go on to warn that 'any program or package that claims to be a one-size-fits-all approach to "fixing" Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander literacy should be treated with caution' (p. 190). Education philosopher Gert Biesta (2010) argues that education (globally) is a complex space where context is critical. As such, we cannot claim to know 'what works', only 'what worked' in the context of a specific moment, community and school context, and learning interaction.

The justification for DI and FLFRPSP

Literacy interventions have been introduced into remote schools as a response to a perceived deficit, disadvantage (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2016), disparity (Forrest, 2014) or 'gap' (Australian Government, 2019) between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and non-Indigenous students. The deficit is usually argued from a reference point of non-Indigenous and metropolitan positions (Guenther *et al.*, 2013, 2015).

Good to Great Schools Australia, which manages the FLFRPSP, promotes effective instruction as the keystone to school reform (Good To Great Schools, 2014). Effective instruction is defined in terms of 'explicit instruction', which encompasses 'Direct Instruction'. Good To Great Schools claims that

> DI is effective for any school setting and any group of students no matter their needs. However, its power is most widely recognised by schools with a large number of students below grade level or with learning difficulties, or who have special needs or English as a second language. (Good To Great Schools, n.d.)

FLFRPSP specifically targeted a large number of remote schools that were considered to be failing. Announcing the roll-out of FLFRPSP to 34 remote schools in 2014, then federal Minister for Education, Christopher Pyne stated that:

> These approaches have proven successful in early pilots and will expand the reach of Direct Instruction and Explicit Direct Instruction to other remote schools that have struggled to achieve minimum national standards for many of their students…We know that Direct Instruction and Explicit Direct Instruction teaching methods work (Pyne, 2014).

The evaluation of the FLFRPSP identified several outcome measures for different stakeholders, which were considered in its reports (Dawson *et al.*, 2017, 2018):

> Students—literacy, NAPLAN, engagement, behaviour, and wellbeing
> Teachers—pedagogical skills, engagement, attrition
> Principals—engagement, attrition
> Schools—engagement with community, all staff attrition (Dawson *et al.*, 2018, p. 14)

However, the focus for politicians was primarily on literacy achievement as noted above in the statement from Minister Pyne. In 2017, the then Minister for Education, Simon Birmingham, commented that 'The independent analysis highlights the "green shoots" coming through in the literacy skills of students that have been involved in the program' (Birmingham, 2017). Here, the Minister was referring to the initial evaluation report conducted by the University of Melbourne (Dawson *et al.*, 2017) which argued that 'There is little doubt that the program is having an impact on the literacy levels in participating

program schools' (p. 13). Two sentences later the authors state: 'Although currently NAPLAN results for Reading, Writing, Spelling, and Grammar and Punctuation show no statistically significant difference between all control and program schools, the current trajectory for future impact is a positive one' (p. 13). The lack of statistically significant difference is a marker of doubt. In their 2018 report the authors comment: 'To conclude, the evaluation findings provide general support that the FLFRPSP has improved student literacy outcomes… Overall, observed gains have demonstrated similar levels of effect as previous compatible interventions in compatible student populations' (Dawson *et al*., 2018, p. 96). These summary comments give an appearance of gain, but are somewhat confused by the evidence provided in charts which shows gain trajectories for all NAPLAN measures, similar to the control.

> Overall, no differences were detected in overall growth on NAPLAN between control and program schools at the national level between 2015 and 2017 on NAPLAN Reading $t(272) = 0.43$, $p = 0.67$; NAPLAN Writing $t(281) = -1.30$, $p = 0.19$ or NAPLAN Grammar and Punctuation $t(284) = 0.35$, $p = 0.73$. However, significant differences were detected for NAPLAN Spelling $t(284) = -1.25$, $p < 0.01$ (Dawson *et al*., 2018, p. 75)

The latter point implies that the control schools performed better. Our examination of data is only concerned with reading; and, for reading the evaluation suggests no significant change.

The authors spend much time later in the report trying to explain why the results are not as good as might be expected. They attribute teacher turnover, poor student attendance, level of support from the community and a range of other factors that may have adverse effects. At best Minister Birmingham's claim of 'green shoots' is more about hope than it is about evidence. Against this background of justification, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs (2017) report titled *The Power of Education*, makes specific comment about Direct Instruction (DI).

> The committee has recommended that no funding beyond 30 June 2018 be provided for Direct Instruction until the Federal Government conducts a review of schools utilising the program and finds that the program is providing a proven benefit to the educational outcomes of Indigenous students as well as demonstrating that: the full Australian curriculum is being provided; the cultural safety and responsiveness of the school is not being adversely impacted; and attendance rates are not declining. (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, 2017, p. xviii)

In December 2018, federal Minister for Education, Dan Tehan, announced a further extension for the programme to 2019, arguing (still with a focus on literacy outcomes) that 'The program uses innovative teaching methods to improve literacy results' (Tehan, 2018).

Methods

Our approach in analysing data could be seen as philosophically 'post-positivist' (Lincoln *et al*., 2018) in order to present an objective and unbiased assessment based on statistical methods. However, we declare that most of our research work on remote education has been built on either qualitative and mixed methods research where interpretive and constructivist paradigms are foundational in our analysis. We are also conscious of our positions as non-Indigenous researchers, making comment on issues that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (see Osborne, 2015; Guenther *et al*., 2018). As such, we aim to be respectful and reflexive in presenting our work. In this paper, these positions are particularly important for our discussion of the findings. We are also mindful that in our analysis we are effectively privileging the hegemonic western values of English literacy and school attendance as 'normative assumptions' (Fogarty *et al*., 2015).

Schools funded by the programme in 2017

There were 34 FLFRPSP schools funded in 2017 of which 27 are classified as 'Very Remote' schools on the My School website. All these schools had more than 80% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolments. Of these, 25 were using DI and two were using Explicit Direct Instruction. Our analysis here is confined to comparing 'Very Remote' schools with a DI programme with other Very Remote schools, also with more than 80% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student enrolments—our previous analysis shows that 80% is a critical dividing line in remote schools (see Guenther, 2013). There were 120 non-intervention schools that met these criteria. The schools with greater than 80% Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander enrolments tend to be in discrete Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander communities. Those with fewer proportions of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students tend to be in very remote 'towns'. The former group of schools typically have the lowest NAPLAN scores and lowest attendance rates of all schools in Australia. Schools classified as 'Remote' on My School are more likely to be in regional towns and do not exhibit the same achievement characteristics as remote community schools.

Indicators: reading and attendance

We analysed results for the DI intervention schools in the 3-year period before the intervention began (2012–2014) and in the 3 years post intervention (2015–2017). We compared Year 3 and Year 5 NAPLAN reading results for both pre- and post-intervention schools, where these were available in any given year. We chose reading achievement as a proxy for literacy achievement as reading underpins a range of other literacy skills (Wigfield *et al*., 2016). Reading and writing achievement are key indicators of literacy achievement according to the Measurement Framework for Schooling (ACARA, 2015). Reading and writing capabilities are mutually reinforcing (Grabe and Zhang, 2016).

We also analysed attendance rates for both groups pre- and post-intervention where these were available in a given year between 2012 and 2017. While Dawson *et al*. (2017, 2018) report that attendance is a factor contributing to literacy outcomes, we take school attendance as an indicator of 'participation', as the *Measurement Framework for Schooling* (ACARA, 2015) does. As noted earlier, participation and engagement in learning at school go together (Briggs, 2017). In a separate evaluation of Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy conducted by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER, 2013) where DI was also considered, attendance was used as performance measure.

Source and sample

All data collected were obtained from My School (http://www.myschool.edu.au) and added to a database compiled in an Excel spreadsheet. Tables 1 and 2 summarise information about the

Table 1. Very Remote DI intervention schools with >80% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student enrolments

Year	DI intervention schools	DI schools with Year 3 reading results	DI schools with Year 5 reading results	DI schools with term 1 attendance record	Average enrolment
2012	25	19	16	25	95
2013	25	14	14	25	96
2014	25	15	15	25	97
2015	25	17	13	25	90
2016	25	16	13	24	84
2017	25	13	12	24	86

Table 2. Very Remote non-intervention schools with >80% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student enrolments

Year	Non-intervention schools	Non-intervention schools with Year 3 reading results	Non-intervention schools with Year 5 reading results	Non-intervention schools with term 1 attendance record	Average enrolment
2012	120	53	50	120	108
2013	118	56	54	115	111
2014	119	54	57	119	111
2015	115	53	53	112	112
2016	116	48	53	114	116
2017	118	52	53	117	114

schools that was available on My School. The fluctuation in number of non-intervention schools is due partly to changes in remoteness classifications over that period and partly due to changes in enrolments of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students, such that some schools dropped below the 80% threshold criterion for inclusion in the sample. Note also, that results for schools with five or less students who complete the NAPLAN test in a given year level, do not appear in the My School database.

The results were collated using pivot tables to summarise the averages for Year 3 and 5 reading NAPLAN scores and term 1 school attendance rates. Chi-square tests were used to assess whether the average pre- and post-intervention results were the same or different for the two groups. *t*-Tests were used to assess whether the DI post-intervention results were the same or different from the pre-intervention results.

Limitations

We acknowledge limitations with this analysis. First, we cannot say whether the DI intervention made a difference for individual students. The data we have from My School is school-level data. However, in defence of the use of data for this purpose, the intervention is a whole of (primary) school programme and is funded for schools, not for individual students.

Second, the results do not represent all DI schools or all non-intervention schools. Indeed, we are trying to compare the 'intervention' as a whole with non-intervention as a whole. Not all schools in our sample reported both pre- and post-results. We are trying to establish if there is reasonable evidence to show that there was an improvement in results relative to schools that did not receive an intervention. We are not attempting to demonstrate the extent of change, but whether or not change had occurred.

Third, because the unit of analysis is the school, smaller schools may tend to skew the results. However, smaller schools are less likely to show results on My School because data are not displayed where the number of students is small to protect student privacy. We acknowledge that the Dawson *et al.* (2017, 2018) evaluation reports use student level data in their assessment of performance. They cleaned data to remove missing points in their comparisons. At a school level we were not able to do this and while this may be seen as a shortcoming in our analysis, our intention is not to compare our results with Dawson *et al.* (2017, 2018) reports but to consider what has happened at the school level over time. The FLFRPSP was designed as a whole of school intervention and we therefore argue that changes should be measured not for individuals, but for whole schools.

Fourth, we are analysing a specific cohort of schools: those with greater than 80% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student enrolment located in areas classified by My School as Very Remote. The results presented here should not be generalised to other contexts, or outside of Australia.

Finally, our analysis relates only to NAPLAN reading as a proxy for literacy generally. This is the same approach used by ACARA in reporting time series data in its Annual Report of NAPLAN achievement (ACARA, 2018). A more thorough analysis may have yielded somewhat different data for grammar, spelling, comprehension and writing. However, based on the findings of the FLFRPSP evaluation reports (Dawson *et al.*, 2017, 2018), we doubt this would be the case. Regardless, as the results show, a concern in one area of literacy (in this case reading) should be a concern for other areas too. Reading skills work in tandem with other literacy skills such as writing (Grabe and Zhang, 2016). We acknowledge also, that NAPLAN as an indicator of performance does not necessarily accurately reflect student ability due at least in part to the lack of language and cultural contextualisation of the tests (Wigglesworth *et al.*, 2011). Nevertheless,

Table 3. Average Year 3 NAPLAN reading results for Very Remote schools with >80% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student enrolment for DI schools funded under FLFRPSP and schools not funded under FLFRPSP

Year 3 NAPLAN reading	DI schools	Non-intervention
Average scores 2012–2014 (pre intervention)	231.59	240.92
Average scores 2015–2017 (post intervention)	208.16	245.39
Change pre-post	−23.43	4.47

Table 4. Average Year 5 NAPLAN reading results for Very Remote schools with >80% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student enrolment for DI schools funded under FLFRPSP and schools not funded under FLFRPSP

Year 5 NAPLAN reading	DI schools	Non-intervention
Average scores 2012–2014 (pre intervention)	317.17	336.85
Average scores 2015–2017 (post intervention)	297.69	321.73
Change pre-post	−19.48	−15.12

NAPLAN is still used to benchmark schools against national standards and is the indicator used by the FLFRPSP evaluation reports (Dawson *et al*., 2017, 2018).

Findings

Year 3 reading

Table 3 compares the Year 3 Reading results for DI and non-intervention schools. We find that for the DI schools the average NAPLAN scores declined by 23.43 points while for the non-intervention schools the results increased by 4.47 points. We assessed these data using a chi-square test, which showed the average difference was not significantly different. A *t*-test (one tailed, two sample equal variance) showed that the post-intervention schools were different ($p < 0.1$) from the pre-intervention DI school scores; that is the post-intervention scores were lower than the pre-intervention scores.

Year 5 reading

Table 4 compares the Year 5 Reading results for DI and non-intervention schools. We find that for the DI schools the average NAPLAN scores declined by 19.48 points while for the non-intervention schools the results declined by 15.12 points. We assessed these data using a chi-square test, which showed the averages were not significantly different. A *t*-test (one tailed, two sample equal variance) showed that the post-intervention schools were not statistically different from the pre-intervention DI school scores.

School attendance rates

Table 5 compares term 1 attendance rates for DI and non-intervention schools. We find that for the DI schools the average attendance rate declined by 7.52% while for the non-intervention schools the results declined by 2.09%. We assessed these data using a chi-square test, which showed the average difference was significantly different ($p = 0.05$). A *t*-test (one tailed, two sample equal variance) showed that the DI post-intervention attendance results were different ($p < 0.05$) from the pre-intervention DI school attendance rates; that is the post-intervention attendance rates were significantly lower than the pre-intervention scores.

Table 5. Average term 1 school attendance rates for Very Remote schools with >80% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student enrolment for DI schools funded under FLFRPSP and schools not funded under FLFRPSP

School attendance	DI schools	Non-intervention
Average 2012–2014 (pre intervention)	68.11	69.90
Average 2015–2017 (post intervention)	60.59	67.81
Change pre-post	−7.52	−2.09

Discussion

Literacy outcomes

In terms of Year 3 and Year 5 NAPLAN scores for schools, the data show no significant difference between the DI intervention schools and those that did not receive that intervention. However, the lower post-intervention results for DI school NAPLAN scores should be of some concern as they suggest that the intervention has a potential to be associated with educational harm to at least some students. The statistically significant decline in Year 3 reading results adds weight to this concern. We can conclude from this analysis that the programme has not achieved its stated aim to 'improve literacy results' in Very Remote schools with more than 80% Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander student enrolment.

Attendance outcomes

Perhaps of greater concern is the decline in attendance rates, both within the DI school set, and compared to the non-intervention school set. Attendance is an indicator of learning engagement, particularly in remote schools (Cowey *et al*., 2009; Prout Quicke and Biddle, 2017). While we cannot definitively say that the DI intervention caused the decline and nor—from this data at least—can we say why the decline occurred. However, that it did occur in DI schools, is worrying. The original logic model represented in the 2017 evaluation report (Dawson *et al*., 2018, p. 105) had attendance at 85% as an outcome of the programme. In the revised logic model of 2018 (Dawson *et al*., 2018, p. 109) attendance is seen as a negative 'external factor'. It is possible that lower attendance is an unintended negative outcome of the programme.

Ethical considerations

This latter point raises a red flag about the ethics of policy decision making and implementation. The FLFRPSP was extended twice with funding totalling in excess of $30 million over 5 years. The 2018 Closing the Gap report appears to suggest that the 2017 evaluation report provides a justification for its continuation: 'An independent evaluation of the program conducted by

the University of Melbourne's Centre for Program Evaluation found that Direct Instruction and Explicit Direct Instruction teaching approaches are delivering promising improvements in literacy outcomes in most schools' (Turnbull, 2018, p. 62). It is hard to deduce this when the report states: 'NAPLAN results for Reading, Writing, Spelling, and Grammar and Punctuation show no statistically significant difference between all control and program schools…' (Dawson *et al.*, 2017, p. 13). Our concern is not that the programme has failed to achieve one of its stated aims (of improving literacy), nor that public moneys are being used for a programme that could not demonstrate its intended outcomes, but that policies are being implemented which have the demonstrated potential to harm some of the most vulnerable students in schools across Australia. We could speculate on the reasons for this ethical concern, but the main focus of this paper is not on how policy makers use (or do not use or even misuse) evidence. Rather on this point, given the evidence from our analysis and the Dawson *et al.* evaluation, we highlight a serious ethical concern which seems to have been missed both in the evaluation reports and in public commentary about DI and the FLFRPSP more generally.

Of equal concern, coming out of the two evaluations, is the ethical practice underpinning the research. We note that the evaluation presumably gained ethical clearance through the University of Melbourne and other jurisdictional departmental ethics committees, though this is not clearly stated in the report: 'CPE has collected this data with adherence to both university and jurisdictional ethical requirements and guidelines' (Dawson *et al.*, 2018, p. 16), citing an unreferenced 1999 document from the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation. Research and evaluation ethics—particularly ethical processes related to research with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples—have shifted significantly since 1999 (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2012; Australasian Evaluation Society Inc., 2013; National Health and Medical Research Council, 2018). Beyond process, research practice is increasingly concerned with ethical conduct as it affects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The ethical issues posed by any evaluation that finds elevated risks associated with programme delivery need to be taken seriously.

Flexible literacy?

Also of interest to note is the language of Flexible Literacy as noted in the policy documents cited in the Introduction and incorporated in the title of the FLFRPSP compared with the language associated with DI in the Good to Great Schools position statement: 'Direct Instruction is a form of explicit instruction that integrates a prescriptive curriculum' (Good To Great Schools, 2014, p. 27) and 'Direct Instruction (DI) is an education program of carefully sequenced and highly structured lessons…' (Good To Great Schools, 2014, p. 28). The word 'flexible' does not appear in the position statement of Good to Great Schools. Indeed, perceived problems with the 'prescriptive' nature of DI are raised several times as concerns for teachers and principals in the 2018 evaluation report (Dawson *et al.*, 2018) with one principal commenting that 'It was very prescriptive … it lends itself to a lethargic approach to teaching…' (p. 53). The potential for teacher disengagement leading to student disengagement and non-participation cannot be ignored and may explain at least some of the reason for the decline in DI school attendance rates. The *Power of Education* Report (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs, 2017), cited earlier, reflects these concerns.

Conclusions

In this paper we set out to unpack and better understand the outcomes of the Flexible Literacy for Remote Primary Schools Programme as they apply to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students in schools classified by My School as 'Very Remote'. This programme has been subject to an evaluation which covered 34 schools participating in the programme. Six of those schools used Explicit Direct Instruction and 28 used DI. Our concern was with the 25 schools with more than 80% English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD) Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander enrolments. Our previous research has demonstrated several factors that contribute to better outcomes for this group of students. We wanted to know, based on the publicly available evidence in My School, whether DI worked to achieve one of its aims—to improve literacy results.

The FLFRPSP was funded in 2014, initially as a 3-year trial but was extended twice with fewer schools, until 2019. Our analysis was only concerned with the first 3 years for which there was publicly available data on NAPLAN reading scores and attendance. While the evaluation reports, Closing the Gap statements, and ministerial media releases seemed to suggest the programme was working, a closer look at the reports cast doubt on those claims. Our analysis showed emphatically that the programme has not demonstrated improved NAPLAN reading outcomes, which in turn makes the claims of improved literacy outcomes difficult to justify. More worrying, our analysis showed that DI schools had declining attendance rates compared to schools without an intervention.

We believe there are serious ethical implications arising from these findings. First, in terms of policy implementation, the increased risk posed to students by the continued funding of the FLFRPSP in light of evidence is worrying. Second, in terms of research and evaluation ethical practice, the obfuscation of findings that show adverse results is of equal or greater concern. Third, from a pedagogical perspective there is almost no evidence that universal (one size fits all) programmatic approaches do work for remote Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students. The conclusions we draw in this paper raise questions of the accountability of funders and researchers to ensure that benefits accrue to objects of policy and that risks have been adequately mitigated, particularly where marginalised minorities are concerned.

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