Did DI do it? Response to a rejoinder

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Abstract

Guenther and Osborne's (2020) article 'Did DI do it?' raises concerns about the outcomes of a programme designed to improve literacy for First Nations students in remote schools. A critique of the article challenges the methods and findings. In this response, the authors respond to the criticism.

As authors of the paper entitled 'Did DI do it? The impact of a programme designed to improve literacy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in remote schools', we are pleased to be able to respond to a rejoinder on the paper. These opportunities are important for research accountability and for scholarly debates to be conducted on important issues that emerge from research. And in education there are few more important issues than research that explores Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

Over the last decade we have researched and written extensively on what is commonly referred to as 'remote' education for First Nations communities, and much of our work is published in this journal, where we have critiqued the purpose of education (Guenther and Bat, 2013), what aspiration and success look like (Osborne and Guenther, 2013), and have challenged the deficit discourses of disadvantage (Guenther et al., 2013). We have also reported research that shows what can work well in remote education (Guenther et al., 2015), and we have challenged common sense assumptions, such as the link between attendance and academic performance (Guenther, 2013). We have reported on evidence that considers the role of school leadership (Guenther and Osborne, 2018), and the role that boarding plays for remote students (Osborne et al., 2018). We have often been challenged on our theory and findings and while there is plenty of room for debate, the value of high quality peer reviewed research, including that published in the *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, is fundamentally important for informing policy, improving practice and contesting assumptions.

One of the reasons we wrote this paper and conducted the research for it, was because there was no peer reviewed evidence on the topic of Direct Instruction (whether Big DI or little DI) relating to its use in remote parts of Australia. What we did find were a handful of non-peer reviewed evaluation reports, which seemed to be ambivalent at best about the outcomes of Direct Instruction. For example, the report on the *Evaluation of the Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy (CYAAA) Initiative* (ACER, 2013), which included an assessment of Direct Instruction among other elements concluded: 'It is not possible to conclude from the available test data whether or not the CYAAA Initiative has had an impact on the rate of student learning compared with other students' (p. 32). The University of Melbourne Centre for Program Evaluation, report on the evaluation of the Flexible Literacy for Remote Schools Program (FLRPSP) by Dawson et al. (2018), while more positive makes obfuscating statements like this:

> With the addition of 2017 NAPLAN results, steady improvements in NAPLAN were observed, particularly for reading, writing and spelling. Although not statistically significant, program schools demonstrated stronger progress compared to control schools in Writing and Spelling. (p. 94)

This is misleading. The lack of statistical significance means that one cannot say there are steady improvements. The lack of statistical significance is confirmed earlier in the report where the following statement appears on p. 76:

> 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 $t(284) = -1.25$, $p < 0.01$

A quick look at the series of figures on the next page shows these results in graphical form, but the problem is that the difference for spelling appears to be negative. This is hardly a convincing endorsement of the effectiveness of the Programme. One of the 'extenuating factors' that the Report describes is attendance, which it suggests is a reason for the lower than

expected results. This maybe so, but what if attendance (or truancy) is an outcome of the programme? In our assessment we considered this possibility and were keen to see if there was any difference between non-DI and DI schools in this regard.

The main critique of our work in the rejoinder is about methodology and in particular the selection of pre-intervention and post-intervention data. We used the same post-intervention period as the 2018 evaluation report (2015–2017) so we could see whether our results mirrored or diverged from the results obtained in the evaluation. We called this the 'post-intervention' period because the intervention commenced in Term 1 of 2015. The influence of the programme should therefore be felt by the first collection of NAPLAN data in Term 2 of 2015, and one could reasonably expect that after three years there would be sustained gains which would justify the continuation of the programme.

Where our methodology differed from the Evaluation's is in our use of school-level data, rather than student level data. We also compared results pre- and post-intervention, which the Evaluation report did not do. Our use of school-level data is justified on the basis of the programme being delivered to schools—it was called the Flexible Literacy for Remote Primary *Schools* Programme and was designed to impact literacy for the whole school.

Our choice of schools classified as 'Very Remote' with greater than 80% First Nations enrolments is based on our previous work (cited earlier) which has consistently shown that students in these schools are more likely to struggle with schooling, speak a traditional language or creole before English, be more likely to disengage and not attend, and be more likely to bring different ontological, epistemological and axiological positions to school. These positions are quite different from those held by non-Indigenous or non-local teachers. In these schools about 97% of the enrolments are First Nations students, compared to about 25% for those Very Remote schools with up to 80% First Nations enrolments. The impact of any intervention in these schools is most likely to be unambiguously experienced by First Nations students. Our comparison schools were similar, with very high proportions of First Nations enrolments and all located in regions classified by My School as Very Remote. We are acutely aware of local contextual factors that may influence the impact of an intervention but the claim of Good to Great Schools which managed the FLRPSP is 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.)

We would therefore expect the Programme to have the most powerful effect in the schools we have used in our sample. And no doubt the intention behind the policy was to make a difference. To clarify though, our intention was not to evaluate the FLRPSP, rather as stated in the article: 'We wanted to know whether FLRPSP schools were associated with changes in attendance and changes in academic performance'. Further we made it clear that: 'In this paper we discuss the impact of the FLRPSP in Very Remote schools'. We deliberately focused on Direct Instruction and not Explicit Direct Instruction (EDI) because the sample of EDI schools was too small to be able to make any statistically significant assessment of changes. There are of course limitations with any methodology—including those not stated in the FLRPSP evaluation—but in our study we have acknowledged those limitations in some detail.

The critique that our study did not explore the reasons for attendance changes, or take account of local contextual factors is fair. We relied on My School data for this study, which was self-funded and did not have resources to delve more deeply into this important issue. However, our previous work (some of which we cited earlier) has considered this and we would encourage readers to explore the findings of our work with the Remote Education Systems project funded through the Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation for a thorough examination of the range of contextual issues that affect remote First Nations engagement in schooling (see also Guenther *et al.*, 2016). We invite readers to engage with the dozens of peer reviewed publications we have developed through various collaborations over the last decade which centre the distinct and unique contexts of language, community, geographies, histories and cultures across very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and schools (e.g. Burton and Osborne, 2014; Minutjukur et al., 2014; Osborne et al., 2014). This work seeks to privilege First Nations voices, narratives, scholarship and knowledges, and underpins our description of a post-positivist methodological approach. DI is not designed to be responsive to cultural or contextual diversity. The programme is narrow and singular in its claims to improve literacy outcomes as demonstrated by NAPLAN results and therefore criticism that the study does not account for contextual diversity or include qualitative data is problematic. Testing the effectiveness of DI in overseas or other contexts is not the focus of this study, as was the case with the work cited in the rejoinder by Stockard *et al.* (2018). Our study uses publicly available data sets to test claims that a significant government investment into English language instruction in very remote Aboriginal schools through the FLRPSP would improve outcomes as measured by NAPLAN scores. In summary, the evidence clearly shows that this investment *didn't* do it.

In conclusion we would make two points that are important findings of our study. The first relates to the ethics of policy implementation, particularly as it affects some of the most marginalised people in Australia. If programmes cannot demonstrate a benefit to their targets—remote First Nations students in this case—then research that demonstrates the potential harm caused, must be taken seriously. We are confident that the results of our study demonstrate unequivocally that at best, the FLRPSP has done nothing to improve outcomes for remote First Nations schools and their students, compared to schools that had no intervention. At worst, the Programme has potentially resulted in further marginalisation and disengagement of young people from schooling in remote communities. The second point relates to the important role of falsification in research. Many research projects are interested in finding out 'what works' or generalising findings so that benefits in one location or at one time can be transferred to another. What falsification does is create a space to consider what went wrong, to dispel myths, and to challenge 'Normative Truth Statements' (Guenther and Falk, 2019) so that we can all learn from mistakes and not repeat them in the future. We recognise the contention of our findings, which may go against the tide of research and which might seem to contradict normative truth. But these contentious research findings are incredibly valuable for teachers, educational policy makers, school leaders and community members, because they help us all to

think more carefully about 'common sense' solutions, which may not hold true in all educational circumstances.

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John Guenther is a researcher with 20 years' experience working in overlapping fields of social inquiry, typically in areas related to education and training, and its intersections with mental health and wellbeing, justice, employment, child protection and welfare. In the last 10 years he has more intentionally focussed on issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote parts of Australia. He led the Remote Education Systems project under the CRC for Remote Economic Participation (2011–2016) and is currently the Research Leader for Education and Training with the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, based in Darwin, Northern Territory. John is a leading academic in the field of remote education and has published widely on his findings, often under the banner of 'Red Dirt Thinking'.

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