

# Indigenous Education 1991–2000: Documents, Outcomes and Governments

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There is often a disparity in Indigenous Affairs between many documents, such as policies, reports and legislation, and outcomes. This article explores this difference through analysing the policy area of Indigenous education during the period of 1991 to 2000. I examine three key documents relating to Indigenous education. These are the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy*, the *Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act (Cth)* and the report of the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody*. I then analyse the abysmal outcomes of Indigenous education over this period, including educational access, educational attainment, school attendance and reading benchmarks. I argue that the substantial educational disadvantage experienced by Indigenous people is in stark contrast to the goals, policies and objectives contained in the numerous documents on Indigenous education. I then explore the role of governments in contributing to this disparity between documents and outcomes in Indigenous education, including their failure to acknowledge the history of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations, their lack of commitment to address Indigenous educational disadvantage, their failure to recognise self-determination and the lack of cooperation between governments to address Indigenous educational disadvantage.

■ **Keywords:** Indigenous education, Indigenous Affairs

A key concern with Indigenous Affairs in Australia is the disparity between many documents, including policies, reports and legislation, and outcomes. To illustrate this concern, I examine the policy area of Indigenous education. In the first section, I analyse three key documents, which argued for the need to address Indigenous educational disadvantage. In the second section, I examine a range of measurements of Indigenous educational outcomes and discuss the performances of these measurements during the period 1991 to 2000. This period was selected as all three documents had been developed by 1991 and two of the documents aimed to address Indigenous educational disadvantage by 2000. However, the education measurements clearly illustrate that Indigenous educational outcomes were at appalling, and often worsening, levels throughout this period. There are a range of interrelating factors that have caused this disparity between documents and outcomes, including the role of governments, racism, the role of schools, community alienation and intergenerational disadvantage (Beresford & Gray, 2012; Partington & Beresford, 2012). In the third section, I analyse one of these factors, the role of governments, in contributing to the significant disconnection between the documents and the outcomes for Indigenous education.

## Documents

Between 1989 and 1991, three key documents were developed in the policy area of Australian Indigenous education. These documents were the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy* (1989), the *Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act (Cth)* (1991) and the report of the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (1991). All three documents were developed by either the Commonwealth government or by government-appointed bodies, and were supported by all Australian governments. The first document specifically focused on Indigenous education while the second and third documents covered a broad range of policy areas in Indigenous Affairs. All three stated that Indigenous peoples experienced educational disadvantage and argued that this disadvantage needed to be addressed. The first and second documents argued that this should occur by 2001. The first

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and third documents also developed a number of goals and recommendations concerning Indigenous education.

The first document was the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy* (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1989). This was the first national document regarding Indigenous education. It was developed by a committee appointed by the Commonwealth educational bureaucracy and endorsed by all Commonwealth, State and Territory governments. The *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy* (1989) argued that one of the 'foundations of the policy' was 'to achieve broad equity between Aboriginal people and other Australians in access, participation and outcomes in all forms of education by the turn of the century' (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1989, pp. 6–7). The document also developed 21 goals for Indigenous education, covering areas such as the involvement of Indigenous people in education governance, access, participation and outcomes (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1989, pp. 14–15; see Beresford, 2012, p. 114). The *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy* (1989) was a very influential document as it was the foundation for a number of subsequent documents developed over the next decade that also focused on Indigenous education (Bourke, Burden, & Moore, 1996; Christensen & Lilley, 1997; Commonwealth of Australia, 2000; Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1993, 1994; Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2000; Ministerial Council for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1995, 2000).

The second document was the *Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act (Cth)* (1991) (CAR Act). This legislation was unanimously passed by the Commonwealth Parliament. As with the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy* (1989), the CAR Act stated the need to address Indigenous educational inequality by 2001. The CAR Act implemented a 10-year reconciliation process that aimed to reconcile Indigenous and non-Indigenous people by the end of 2000, in time for the centenary of Australian federation in 2001. One of the key goals of the CAR Act was to foster a national commitment to address Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage in a range of socio-economic areas, including education, health and housing (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act, 1991, pp. 3–4). This goal was further reiterated throughout the process by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR), the body created by the legislation to oversee the reconciliation process (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 1993; Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 1998; Gunstone, 2009). CAR developed programs, including educating the wider Australian community and developing partnerships with government and business, to address Indigenous educational disadvantage (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 2000, pp. 36–37, 62).

The third document was the final report of the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (RCIADIC) (Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, 1991). This RCIADIC report detailed the findings of a Royal Commission, established in 1987 by the Hawke Commonwealth Labor government to investigate the deaths in custody of 99 Indigenous people. Like the CAR Act, the RCIADIC report was concerned with a broad range of issues regarding Indigenous Affairs. The RCIADIC report contained 339 recommendations, including a number that focussed on addressing Indigenous educational disadvantage. These recommendations on Indigenous education, numbers 289 to 299, which came under the heading 'Educating for the Future', covered areas such as the participation of Indigenous peoples and communities in education, governance, curriculum, teacher training and Indigenous employment in education (Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, 1991). All of these education-related recommendations were endorsed by the Commonwealth government (Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, 1991). The RCIADIC report also referred to the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy* (1989) several times in outlining its recommendations on Indigenous education, particularly in relation to Indigenous governance (Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, 1991).

In addition to these three major documents, there were a number of other documents produced during the 1991–2000 decade that also addressed Indigenous education. These documents supported and extended the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy* (1989). The documents included the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy* (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1993), the *National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People* (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1994), *A National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples: 1996–2002* (Ministerial Council for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1995), *Factors affecting performance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at Australian universities: A case study* (Bourke et al., 1996), *The road forward? Alternative assessment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at the tertiary level* (Christensen & Lilley, 1997), *Better practice in school attendance: Improving the school attendance of Indigenous students* (Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2000), *Report of MCEETYA Taskforce on Indigenous Education* (Ministerial Council for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2000) and *The National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2000–2004* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2000). As with the three major documents developed between 1989 and 1991, these documents all strongly focused on the need to address the educational disadvantage suffered by Indigenous people.

The documents contained similar goals and recommendations to the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy* (1989) (Bourke et al., 1996; Christensen & Lilley, 1997; Commonwealth of Australia, 2000; Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1993, 1994; Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2000; Ministerial Council for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1995, 2000). These documents were also developed by the Commonwealth government bureaucracy or government-appointed bodies and most were endorsed by governments. This illustrates that Commonwealth, State and Territory governments generally supported in principle the goals and strategies of the documents. However, as discussed later, these governments often did not implement the recommendations contained in these documents.

## Outcomes

There are a number of measurements of educational outcomes. These include: educational access; level of educational attainment; school attendance; reading benchmarks; and retention rates. During the period 1991 to 2000, there were some isolated examples of Indigenous educational outcomes improving in some of these measurements. However, the significant majority of these measurements illustrate that Indigenous educational conditions stagnated or worsened during this period, both in absolute terms and in comparison with non-Indigenous educational outcomes and international Indigenous peoples educational conditions.

In examining these measurements, I utilise both statistics from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and literature on Indigenous educational disadvantage. While there are limitations with ABS census data, including determining Indigenous populations, lack of reliable data, statistical analysis and consistent statistical approaches, and using social measurements in different cultural settings, this data is 'the only comprehensive means to assess changes in Indigenous socio-economic status over time and to compare the relative socio-economic status of Indigenous and other Australians' (Altman & Hunter, 2003, pp. 1–3; see also Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2000, p. 12; Neill, 2002, pp. 67–68).

One measurement of educational outcomes is the enrolments of students in the preschool, primary, secondary and tertiary education sectors. In all these sectors, the numbers of Indigenous students increased significantly in the 1991 to 2000 period. The numbers of Indigenous pre-school students increased by 18% from 10,000 in 1996 to 11,800 in 2000 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003a, p. 303). The numbers of Indigenous primary school students increased by 60.7% from 49,114 in 1991 to 78,943 in 2001 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003a, pp. 318–319). The numbers of Indigenous secondary students increased by 57.8% from 23,135 in 1991 to 36,522

**TABLE 1**

Enrolments of Indigenous students in Preschool, Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Education Sectors, 1991–2001

	1991	2001	% increase
Preschool	10,000 (1996)	11,800	18
Primary	49,114	78,943	60.7
Secondary	23,135	36,522	57.8
VET	37,800	78,100	107
Higher education	4,807	7,342	53

in 2001 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003a, pp. 318–319). The number of Indigenous Vocational Education and Training (VET) students increased by 107% from 37,800 in 1995 to 78,100 in 2001 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003a, pp. 319–320). The number of Indigenous higher education students increased by 53% from 4,807 in 1991 to 7,342 in 2001 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003a, p. 321). See Table 1.

However, there are several factors that reduce the significance of this improvement in educational access. First, a substantial cause of the improvement was the significant growth in the Indigenous population during this period. Between 1991 and 2001, the numbers of Indigenous people aged between 5 and 14 years (i.e., of compulsory school age) increased by 27.6% from 84,701 to 108,069 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998, p. 9; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002a, Table 101). There was, though, 'significant intercensal volatility in census counts of the Indigenous population', which is partly explained by 'changes in the propensity of persons to identify as being of Indigenous origin' (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998, p. 3). Second, the Indigenous population has a higher proportion of its population in younger aged categories than does the population of the wider community. Thus, in 2001, the overall Australian 5- to 14-year age group included a relatively high percentage of Indigenous people (4%) in that group (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002b, p. 22). These two demographic issues ensured that, despite the increase in Indigenous people accessing education, they remained underrepresented in the school sector during the 1991 to 2000 period, constituting just 2.9% of school students in 1996 and only 3.5% in 2001 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002b, p. 22). Third, the numbers of Indigenous people accessing higher education declined by 9% from around 8,000 in 1999 to around 7,300 in 2001 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003a, p. 321; Brabham, Henry, Bamblett, & Bates, 2002, p. 12). Fourth, there was a substantial underrepresentation of Indigenous male higher education students. In 2001, just 35% of all Indigenous higher education students were male compared to 45% of all higher education students being male (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003a, p. 320). Further, although access to education improved for Indigenous people during the 1991 to 2000 period, a number

**TABLE 2**

Indigenous and non-Indigenous Levels of Educational Attainment, 1991–2001

	1991	1996	2001
Indigenous	90.7	85.7	85.2
Non-Indigenous	73.6	70	65.3
Difference	17.1	15.7	19.9

of other educational measurements illustrate substantial and often increasing educational inequalities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people during this period. 'While access and participation rates are improving, equitable educational outcomes are still a long way from being achieved' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2000, p. 9).

The level of educational attainment is another measurement for ascertaining Indigenous educational outcomes. This measurement is defined as 'the proportion of the people aged 15 years and over who do not have a post-secondary educational qualification' (Gray & Auld, 2000, p. vi). As discussed above, although there was a substantial increase in the numbers of Indigenous people accessing tertiary education during the 1991 to 2000 period, the levels of educational attainment for Indigenous people continued to be strikingly lower than the levels for the wider Australian community (Gray & Auld, 2000, p. 5). In 1991, 90.7% of those Indigenous people who were aged 15 years and over had no post-secondary educational qualification compared to 73.6% of the wider community who were aged 15 years and over (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001, p. 4; Gray & Auld, 2000, p. 26). This disparity remained throughout the decade. In 1996, the level of educational attainment for Indigenous people had improved to 85.7% compared to the level for the wider community improving to 70% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001, p. 4; Gray & Auld, 2000, p. 26). Although the level of educational attainment improved more for Indigenous people than for the wider community between 1991 and 1996, the level of Indigenous educational attainment remained substantially worse than the level for the wider community. In 2001, the level of educational attainment for Indigenous people had barely improved since 1996 to 85.2% while the level of attainment for the wider community had substantially improved since 1996 to 65.3% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002a, Tables I01, I14; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001, p. 4). Over the 10-year period then, the gap between the level of educational attainment for Indigenous people and for the wider community had actually increased from 17.1 to 19.9 (see Table 2). Additionally, the levels of educational attainment varied depending upon location. 'For Indigenous persons, the likelihood of having a non-school qualification declined with increasing geographic remoteness' (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003b, p. 23). The levels of Indigenous educational attainment are also significantly poorer in Australia than in other Western countries (Neill, 2002, p. 261).

Another measurement for determining Indigenous educational outcomes is the level of school attendance of Indigenous students. The levels of school attendance for Indigenous people are generally very poor. In 2000, the *National Indigenous English literacy and numeracy strategy 2000–2004* argued that 'on average, Indigenous students miss out on up to one day of schooling every week, compared to around just three days every term for other Australian students' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2000, p. 3). The overall impact of this low level of attendance is that Indigenous students, on average, miss more than a year of both primary school and secondary school (Commonwealth of Australia, 2000, p. 3). School attendance levels also significantly affect other educational measurements including reading benchmarks and Year 12 retention rates (Neill, 2002, p. 245). A 1996 survey, the *National School English literacy survey*, measured school student's achievements in reading and writing. The survey found the 'students in the Special Indigenous Sample [this sample focused only on Indigenous students] have relatively high rates of absence from school ... and this higher rate of absence appears to be a factor in the lower literacy achievements of these students' (Australian Council for Educational Research, 1997, p. 21). In the Northern Territory, a report on Indigenous education, *Learning lessons*, argued 'in relation to Indigenous education, poor attendance is without doubt the primary cause of poor educational outcomes' (Collins, 1999, p. 141). The report found that during the 1991 to 2000 period, although the numbers of Indigenous students enrolling at schools increased as a result of population growth, the level of school attendance of Indigenous students had fallen (Collins, 1999, p. 143). The report also argued that a comparison between Indigenous student's attendance levels and those student's academic outcomes showed that the decline in Indigenous attendance levels contributed to the decline in Indigenous educational outcomes during this period (Collins, 1999, pp. 143–144). The levels of school attendance for Indigenous students are also significantly lower in rural and remote locations than in urban locations, especially at the secondary school level (Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2000, p. 12).

Reading benchmarks are another measurement of Indigenous educational outcomes. Reading benchmarks for a school year illustrate the percentage of that year meeting an appropriate level of reading. The 1996 *National School English literacy survey* revealed the disparity in literacy between Indigenous students and students from the wider community. However, the Indigenous sample was only taken from those schools that had at least five Indigenous students enrolled in both Years 3 and 5, which ensured the sample was weighted more to rural and remote educational areas (Australian Council for Educational Research, 1997, p. 225). The survey found that for Year 3 students, the reading benchmark was met by 73% of the main sample and 19% of the Special

Indigenous Sample (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997, p. 15). For Year 5 students, the reading benchmark was met by 71% of the main sample and 23% of the Special Indigenous Sample (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997, p. 15). Similarly, the writing benchmarks were obtained by 72% of the main sample and 29% of the Special Indigenous Sample of Year 3 students, and 67% of the main sample and 24% of the Special Indigenous Sample of Year 5 students (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997, p. 19). Another survey, conducted in 1999, showed a significant improvement in reading benchmarks for Indigenous students. Indigenous Year 3 students who achieved national reading benchmarks improved from 20% in 1996 to 66% in 1999 (Commonwealth Grants Commission, 2001, p. 194). However, non-Indigenous Year 3 students achieved substantially better outcomes, improving from 72 per cent in 1996 to 87% in 1999 (Commonwealth Grants Commission, 2001, p. 194). Further, the Indigenous outcomes in the 1996 and 1999 surveys cannot be compared due to different sampling between the surveys. The 1996 sample was mainly drawn from remote and rural educational areas, while the 1999 sample was obtained from all States and Territories, which could result in more focus on urban areas and less on remote and rural areas (Commonwealth Grants Commission, 2001, p. 196). In addition, Indigenous reading benchmarks were significantly worse in rural and remote educational areas. In the Northern Territory, Year 3 reading benchmarks were achieved by 72.3% of all students and 29.7% of Indigenous students (Commonwealth Grants Commission, 2001, p. 196). In Northern Territory remote communities, only 4% of 1998 Indigenous Year 5 students met the reading benchmarks (Neill, 2002, p. 250). Also, in the Northern Territory, the 1998 Year 3 reading benchmarks were obtained by 82% of non-Indigenous students, 31% of Indigenous students and 9% of students who spoke English as a second language (which likely meant they lived in remote communities) (Australian Medical Association, 2002, p. 7).

Year 12 retention rates are another measurement for ascertaining Indigenous educational outcomes. This measurement illustrates the percentage of students who successfully progress to the final year of secondary school education (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002b, p. 21). The RCIADIC report emphasised the need to improve Indigenous Year 12 retention rates when it found that just two people of the 99 people whose deaths in custody the Royal Commission investigated had completed secondary school (Johnston, 1991, p. 43). The Year 12 retention rates for Indigenous people substantially improved throughout the 1991 to 2000 period from 25% in 1993 to 36.4% in 2000 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010, p. 27; Australian Medical Association, 2002, p. 6). Despite this improvement though, there are still two significant concerns. First, there were still high numbers of Indigenous students who did not stay in secondary school until Year 12 (Ring & Brown, 2002, p. 629). Second, the retention rates for non-

Indigenous students were much higher, with a 50% rate in 1997 improving markedly to 73.3% in 2000 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010, p. 27; Ring & Brown, 2002, p. 629). These figures illustrate that Indigenous rates were not only much poorer than non-Indigenous rates, but that they also worsened during the 1991 to 2000 period compared to the non-Indigenous rates. In addition, as with other measurements, Indigenous Year 12 retention rates were much poorer for regional and especially remote areas, and have actually declined in some of these regions (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003b, p. 22; Australian Medical Association, 2002, p. 7). A 1996 Northern Territory government report found 'no evidence could be provided of any child from a rural aboriginal [sic] school going on through the government secondary system on an age for grade basis in the Northern Territory and matriculating' (Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory, 1996, p. 97). Also, the Year 10 retention rates for Indigenous peoples in the United States and Canada were respectively three times and two times higher than the Indigenous Year 10 rate in Australia (Neill, 2002, p. 261).

## Governments

Governments have significantly contributed to this disparity between documents and outcomes in Indigenous education. In this section, I will mainly examine the role of Commonwealth governments, as it is this tier that provides national leadership in Indigenous education and provides substantial funding through the states for Indigenous education. There were two Commonwealth governments during the 1991–2000 period: the Keating Labor government (1991–1996) and the Howard Liberal/National Coalition government (1996–2000). I will also explore the role of state and territory governments, as this tier of government has constitutional responsibility for education. There are a number of reasons why governments have played a significant role in this disparity between the documents and the outcomes in Indigenous education during the period from 1991–2000.

One key reason is that governments have generally failed to recognise the importance of the history of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations in Australia in relation to Indigenous education. This history, much of which continues to the present day, including invasion, colonisation, assimilation, a range of government policies, including the Protection Acts, the exclusion of Indigenous people from accessing education, stolen wages, the stolen generations, a long-standing and chronic underfunding of Indigenous socio-economic conditions, particularly in health, education and housing, and institutional and individual racism, has significantly contributed to the socio-economic disadvantage in many areas, including education, experienced by Indigenous people in the present day (Gunstone, 2009). For instance, the history of past government policies that resulted in generations of Indigenous workers not being

paid their wages has substantially contributed to contemporary Indigenous economic disadvantage (Kidd, 2006). These historical and contemporary factors presented significant obstacles to addressing Indigenous educational disadvantage by the stated deadline of 2000, as advocated by the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy* (1989) and the *Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act (Cth)* (1991). However, throughout the 1991–2000 period, rather than dealing with the legacies of this history, governments instead generally failed to recognise and address this history. For example, the Howard government failed to accept the recommendations from the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's Inquiry into the Stolen Generations to acknowledge and apologise to the stolen generations and to establish a National Compensation Fund (Gunstone, 2008; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

Another key reason is that both major political parties, the Labor Party and the Liberal/National Coalition, despite their endorsing of many of the key documents mentioned earlier, did not genuinely address Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage, including Indigenous education, during the 1991 to 2000 period.

When in office at the Commonwealth level between 1991 and 1996, the Keating Labor government failed to commit to addressing Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage. Its main focus in Indigenous Affairs during this period was on symbolism, including officially recognising the Aboriginal flag, and on a limited form of Indigenous rights, such as legislating for some recognition of native title and a narrow addressing of Indigenous self-determination through the promotion of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) (Milloo, 1998, pp. 27–29). The Labor Party maintained this focus in opposition after losing the 1996 Commonwealth election. In the 1998 election campaign, the Labor Party's policies almost exclusively focused on symbolism, such as constitutional recognition, and Indigenous rights, including native title (Australian Labor Party, 1998, pp. 8–14). However, throughout the 1990s, the Labor Party, both in government and in opposition, failed to genuinely address Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage in a range of areas, including education. In government, the Labor Party failed to commit to addressing Indigenous disadvantage when developing the Indigenous Land Corporation in 1995 and failed to support its own Indigenous Affairs Minister's proposal to tackle Indigenous disadvantage through a Centenary of Federation Infrastructure Project (Neill, 2002, pp. 16–17; Tickner, 2001, p. 45). In Opposition, the Labor Party largely did not engage in key policy debates on Indigenous socio-economic issues, including welfare dependency and family violence (Pearson, 2002). For instance, in its policies for the 1998 Commonwealth election, the Labor Party included only three policies on socio-economic disadvantage — deaths in custody, employment and health — and did not even men-

tion Indigenous education (Australian Labor Party, 1998, pp. 8–14).

In 1996, the Howard Liberal/National Coalition won the Commonwealth election. The Howard government adopted a fundamentally different approach to Indigenous Affairs than their predecessors, the Keating government. The Howard government rejected the focus on symbolism and Indigenous rights. Indigenous leader Geoff Clark argued that 'from the outset, the Coalition government has systematically attacked Indigenous rights' (Clark, 1998, p. 5). The policy focus of the Howard government in Indigenous Affairs was rather on the addressing of Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage, a policy termed by the government as 'practical reconciliation' (Howard, 2000, pp. 88–90; Partington & Beresford, 2012, p. 45). This approach though failed to address the connections between symbolism, Indigenous rights and the addressing of Indigenous socio-economic outcomes (Naidoo, 1998, p. 142). Also, the Howard government's rhetoric regarding its commitment to 'practical reconciliation' was largely not matched by the implementation of appropriate legislation, policies and programs. In addition, the Howard government often actually developed policies and programs that worsened Indigenous socio-economic conditions. For instance, the Howard Government mainstreamed Abstudy, a program that supported Indigenous students. This change saw a decline of over 10% in Indigenous university and TAFE students between 1998/1999 and 1999/2000 (Altman & Hunter, 2003, p. v; Brabham et al., 2002, p. 12). The analysis in the previous section on Indigenous educational outcomes also illustrates that the Howard government's stated commitment to practical reconciliation did not result in improved outcomes in Indigenous education. Altman and Hunter (2003, p. v) compared Indigenous socio-economic outcomes during the Keating and Howard governments and argued that 'while practical reconciliation forms the rhetorical basis for Indigenous policy development since 1996, there is no evidence that the Howard governments have delivered better outcomes for Indigenous Australians than their predecessors'.

Both parties, when in government, focused on particular areas of Indigenous affairs. The Labor Party concentrated on symbolism and, to a much lesser extent, Indigenous rights while the Liberal/National Coalition focused on 'practical reconciliation'. However, neither party understood that the addressing of Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage in areas such as education required policies that acknowledged the importance of symbolism and Indigenous rights as well as improving Indigenous socio-economic outcomes.

Another reason why governments contributed to the disconnection between documents and outcomes in Indigenous education during the 1990s was their very limited approach to Indigenous self-determination. Indigenous peoples have long argued the need for self-determination to be addressed and recognised by

governments (Dodson, 2000). Pearson (2000a, p. 80) discussed the need for self-determination for his communities:

*Self-determination and our right to autonomy — Cape York Peninsula people must control our own representative organisations and must be free from arbitrary interference from the state and external quarters. Our regional, community and local structures — whilst having relations with government and outside agencies — must be independent and accountable to our own community.*

Indigenous self-determination is a vital component in addressing socio-economic disadvantage (Clark, 2001, p. 12; Hetzel, 2000, pp. 161–162). Indigenous socio-economic outcomes are most likely to be improved through programs and policies developed by Indigenous peoples, communities and organisations, with these programs and policies supported, both administratively and financially, by governments. However, governments at Commonwealth, State and Territory levels failed during the 1990s to recognise the importance of self-determination in addressing Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage. As discussed earlier, the Keating government narrowly approached self-determination in its promotion of ATSIC and the Howard government was steadfastly opposed to notions of Indigenous rights, including self-determination. This incapacity of governments to address self-determination and engage with Indigenous peoples regarding their education was argued by Indigenous peoples as ensuring the failure of the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy* (Beresford, 2012, p. 115). Godwell (2003, p. 11) argued that bureaucratic paternalism rather than self-determination has long been government Indigenous Affairs policy.

The lack of coordinated and cooperative engagement between the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments regarding Indigenous socio-economic conditions is another reason why governments have contributed to the disconnection between documents and outcomes in Indigenous education. This inability of governments to coordinate policies and programs and cooperate with each other has resulted in restrictive bureaucracy, competing programs, wasted resources and a failure to address Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage (Anderson, 1997; Pearson, 2000b, pp. 170–171). For example, in the 1990s, the Northern Territory government imposed an on-costs levy of 46.1% on Commonwealth government funds for Indigenous education, and also accessed just \$196,000 from Commonwealth government Indigenous education funding of \$38 million, because of ‘tensions’ between the Territory and Commonwealth governments (Collins, 1999, pp. 55–57). Commonwealth, State and Territory governments need to work constructively with Indigenous peoples, communities and organisations to develop coordinated and cooperative approaches to address Indigenous educational disadvantage.

Another significant reason why governments have contributed to the disparity between documents and outcomes in Indigenous education is that government responses to the numerous reports on Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage, which have often stated similar recommendations, has predominantly been to marginalise and inadequately fund the reports, rather than implement the report’s recommendations (Ring & Brown, 2003, pp. 4–5). For example, it was argued by the NSW Teachers Federation that the NSW state government abandoned its own Indigenous education policy review as the government was concerned the ‘damaging results’ of its policies would be published prior to the upcoming State election (Doherty, 2003, p. 4). Another example is the failure of successive Commonwealth, State and Territory governments to implement recommendations from the numerous documents on Indigenous education that were developed during the 1990s. A further example concerns the approach by governments and bureaucrats in the Northern Territory regarding Indigenous education, which Collins (1999, p. 47) has argued did not involve a ‘dispassionate analysis of the educational outcomes of Indigenous students ... [rather] there had been a deliberate approach of burying or “toning down” information about the poor results being achieved by Indigenous students’.

## Conclusion

Between 1989 and 1991, there were three key documents developed concerning Indigenous education. These documents were the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy* (1989), the *Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act (Cth)* (1991) and the report of the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (1991). Subsequently, a number of other documents were developed between 1991 and 2000 on Indigenous education. These documents were developed either by the Commonwealth government bureaucracy or by government-appointed bodies, and most were endorsed by Australian governments. All of these documents discussed the substantial educational disadvantage suffered by Indigenous people and advocated that this disadvantage needed to be addressed. Two of the three key documents set a deadline of 2001 to address the disadvantage. Many of the documents also clearly outlined policies, goals and recommendations regarding Indigenous education.

Despite all these documents, however, Indigenous educational disadvantage remained at abysmally poor levels throughout the 1991–2000 period. A number of educational measurements, including educational access, level of educational attainment, school attendance, reading benchmarks and Year 12 retention rates, clearly revealed the extent of Indigenous educational disadvantage and the stagnation or worsening of Indigenous educational measurements during the decade, both in absolute terms and also in comparison to the non-Indigenous wider

community and in comparison with Indigenous peoples in other countries, such as New Zealand, Canada and the United States of America.

A decade on from this 1991 to 2000 period, Indigenous people continue to suffer substantial educational disadvantage. In 2010, the Year 12 retention rates were 47.2% for Indigenous students and 79.4% for non-Indigenous students, a difference of 32.2 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010, p. 27). In 2009, Indigenous enrolments and completions of university courses was 1.53% and 0.80% respectively of all domestic enrolments and completions, while Indigenous peoples comprised 2.2% of the 15–64 post-compulsory school age group (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011, pp. 3, 11–12). In 2011, 92.9% of non-Indigenous students and 66.4% of Indigenous students achieved the Year 5 reading benchmarks, a difference of 26.7 (Fogarty & Schwab, 2012, p. 8). In 2008, the attendance rates for primary and secondary students were 87% and 78% respectively for Indigenous students and 93% and 89% respectively for non-Indigenous students, with far worse retention rates for Indigenous students in remote areas (Partington & Beresford, 2012, p. 43).

The disconnection between these appalling levels of Indigenous educational disadvantage and the numerous documents regarding Indigenous education will only be addressed through Commonwealth, State and Territory governments genuinely committing to reducing this disadvantage, acknowledging the history of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations, recognising Indigenous self-determination and providing adequate and coordinated resources to Indigenous peoples, communities and organisations to assist in addressing Indigenous educational disadvantage.

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