

## **Some magic bullets for education**

Noel Pearson

*The Weekend Australian*

27–28 March, 2010

Sometimes I just cannot understand how governments think when it comes to setting indigenous policies.

Two of the five goals that all Australian governments are now striving to close the gap on indigenous disadvantage concern education.

It is probably useful to distil a complex policy agenda down to a handful of key goals, because some of these dashboard indicators can capture whether or not progress is being made across a broad policy range and gaps are closing.

But I have problems with the policy reasoning underpinning the two educational goals.

First the goal of doubling the year 12 completion rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is strange. Of course secondary school completion rates are important, but in a strategic sense there are other more fundamental prerequisite policy goals which, if solved, will automatically result in higher year 12 completion rates.

The strategically important goal is closing the gap on literacy and numeracy achievement by indigenous students. You solve this problem, you solve the year 12 completion rate problem.

There is a strategically important prerequisite to closing the gap on literacy and numeracy, and that is school readiness and attendance. You can't close the gap on literacy and numeracy unless you first close the gap on school readiness and attendance.

So if I were the policy-maker, I would establish school readiness and attendance as the target goal. And I would set a very brief timeframe for achieving it. School attendance is not rocket science: surely governments and indigenous communities can close this gap in short order.

The good thing about school readiness and attendance is that it is a tangible, actionable goal. What is needed to be done is clear. The benefits and flow-on effects of achieving school readiness and attendance are plain and palpable. Governments, educators and communities can't hide behind the elusiveness of a goal such as year 12 completions, which really describes the desirable outcome rather than a strategic goal.

You can hold people accountable for performance on school readiness and attendance in ways that you cannot hold people to account for an outcome such as year 12 completion rates.

Bureaucrats, politicians and communities are therefore let off the performance hook. They can say they're working on lifting year 12 completions while doing nothing decisive on school attendance and readiness.

In some policy areas there are such things as magic bullets. These are things that are so fundamental to overall success that if you focus on them and do your best to succeed with them, then they affect everything else you are trying to do, and they have a flow-on effect on other good things that need to occur.

Too often government policy-makers put their energies into the full range of things that need to occur, without understanding that if they got the magic bullet right, this would have beneficial effects across the full range. By failing to see the magic bullet, they make policies that purport to address the full range and they wonder why their policy intentions never work out.

When it comes to indigenous education, the two most obvious magic bullets are school readiness and attendance, and getting the teaching of literacy and numeracy right.

Which brings me to my problem with a second education-related goal set by the Council of Australian Governments. They have established the goal of halving the gap in indigenous reading, writing and numeracy within a decade.

In many ways this is an obscene goal. It accepts a level of educational under-achievement that is unnecessary and avoidable. It condemns indigenous children to educational failure when better outcomes are achievable.

Given the social injustice that flows from educational under-achievement - low employment rates, higher rates of poverty, higher rates of social problems, higher imprisonment rates, poorer health and, ultimately, lower life expectancy - you would think that Australian governments committed to closing the gap on indigenous disadvantage would not adopt any policies that were needlessly low in their expectations.

And yet, this is what they have done.

Have the politicians and senior policy-makers deliberately sold out the future of so many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children? Or is this a mistake based on incorrect policy thinking and design?

I think it is the latter. Let me explain why the goal of halving the gap in reading, writing and numeracy within 10 years is a terribly low expectation and accepting of educational failure.

First, let us assume that school attendance and readiness have been resolved in a school community. Second, the school should then be expected to deliver an effective instructional program that is proven to work to enable

all children to master reading, writing and numeracy at the primary level.

If the school delivered a program of effective instruction starting in kindergarten, then by the time the first group of children who have received effective instruction reach the end of primary school, all students in the community should be up to the benchmarks. Give yourself a decade and you should be able to close the gap.

I can hear all the “buts”.

However, there is no excuse for not expecting the gap to close within 10 years.

Let me draw the analogy between swimming and reading.

There are proven methods for teaching the techniques of swimming so that when children must cross the river they will not drown. Across the country there are thousands of people who are certified swimming teachers able to teach the necessary techniques to all children who attend their classes.

Imagine that the Australian governments faced a gap in swimming achievement between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and other Australian children.

Imagine that all indigenous children could be taught to swim within a certain period of time, but our governments established a goal of only halving the gap within that time?

In other words, imagine if governments accepted that half of the children were to be allowed to drown unnecessarily when they needed to swim across the river to a better life?

And the analogy of drowning is by no means overwrought. If you don't learn to read, write and count, then your life is more likely than not destined to be nasty, brutish and short. Illiteracy and innumeracy are akin to drowning.

So why is this allowed to happen? After all, there are proven methods of teaching children to read, write and count. There are methods of effective instruction that can work for all students, not just a proportion of them. So the absence of effective instructional programs is not the problem.

After all, there are fully funded schools with teachers and equipment. Yes, there are deficiencies and neglectful situations in indigenous communities but if poor educational services received the kind of magic bullet focus that I refer to, Australia has the capacity to solve this problem in short order.

We are presently spending \$15 billion under the Building the Education Revolution program that ought to solve the under-servicing problems outright.

So provided that we have children in their seats, and provided that the schools are required to deliver an effective instructional program that is proven to teach reading, writing and numeracy to the children, then there is no reason why we could not close the gap within a decade.

But if you want this happen you have to first focus on the magic bullet of school attendance and readiness.

When in January last year, Mick Dodson made school attendance a particular focus of his tenure as Australian of the Year for 2009, I fully supported his aim and called for governments, schools and indigenous communities to aim to fix the problem in the shortest order.

No governments rallied to the call. Yes, everyone's beavering away on various strategies and making traditional efforts, but nobody IS working as if fixing school attendance fixes the drowning problem.

A year later and the revolution on school readiness and attendance is yet to begin.

As for reading, writing and numeracy, the problem is akin to a situation where too many swimming teachers do not actually know how to teach swimming. They were not taught to teach swimming techniques in their teacher education. Their ability to teach an effective instructional program is highly variable.

If governments want to close the gap on reading, writing and numeracy within a decade, then they will need to mandate a focus on effective instruction as a magic bullet. You get the instruction right, you get the literacy and numeracy right.

Politicians and education bureaucrats understand that literacy and numeracy are fundamental. The problem is they do not understand that it is the effective instruction of literacy and numeracy that is the bullet.

As Bill Clinton might have said, it's the instruction, stupid!

*Noel Pearson is the director of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership.*