

## Critics from Left and Right can't stomach Aurukun school model's successes

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- THE AUSTRALIAN
- JUNE 18, 2016



Aurukun

There is nothing of which I am surer than the success of the teachers and students of the Cape York Academy since we entered into a schools partnership with the Queensland Department of Education in 2010 in the small country town of Coen and the once again, reluctant, headline-grabbing community of Aurukun. There are no people of whom I am prouder, particularly the children of Aurukun's Koolkan campus.

Unlike other Queensland students, these Koolkan kids have all of the odds stacked against them. They bring a heavy burden of trauma and disability to their first day of preparatory schooling.

When data on cognitive tests of these children was presented to the review of Aurukun school, one reviewer made the obvious point Koolkan should really be a special school. Such is the extent to which these children's brains and bodies are affected by that environment. Some kids avoid the worst, but most do not escape its toll.

Yet these students prevail because their teachers are committed, skilful and tenacious. They prevail because the Direct Instruction program is most suited to their needs and gives them

the chance to learn when other methods do not. Children who bring deficits to the classroom need all of the building blocks, piece by piece, step by step, to become literate and numerate. If they don't get taken step by step up the learning staircase then they comprise the 25 per cent of almost every Australian classroom that never really becomes literate and numerate through their school education. What is the proportion in indigenous classrooms? More like 75 per cent. These kids are condemned if you don't provide them a step-by-step learning staircase.

So how, in the space of one week last month, did the whole debate about youth violence and carjacking in Aurukun turn into an interrogation of the Koolkan school? If this school is a pride and joy, how did it become the scapegoat for Aurukun's endemic law and order problems? After all, visitors consistently remarked how the school seemed like an oasis in a troubled community — a safe environment compared with the strife down in the village.

My view of Aurukun — as it is of my community — is that it is a place where too many adults behave badly and the children are not to blame. If you provide a good school, children will behave well.

Yet the whole spotlight last month shone on the children and their school rather than on the adults, the families, the community leadership or lack thereof, the absent policing and strange police strategies such as allowing "fair fights" and failing to intervene. Instead, the one thing that this community has got going for it — the children are succeeding against great odds — is denied and their progress is trashed.

Twenty-five per cent of Koolkan's children are at the lowest level of cognitive measure — 70. Another 40 per cent are borderline. Almost no child is above 100. On top of this, measures of social and emotional problems are through the roof compared with other Queensland and Australian children. This isn't just the normal profile of disadvantage, it is the profile of traumatic experiences.

When I say these children are succeeding against the odds, this is what I mean. Take a child who is 11 Her actual cognitive age tests as eight years, yet she performs at a reading age of nine. She is succeeding against the odds. She will learn to read notwithstanding the great gap between her and the average Queensland student.

Take another nine-year-old. His cognitive age is six. He has rheumatic heart disease that condemns him to heart failure in his 30s or 40s if he does not receive consistent medical treatment for the rest of his life. Yet he is reading at age eight level and is closing the gap because he attends school more than 90 per cent of the time. If he keeps getting a good education and has good support with managing his condition, he has a chance of a fulfilling life.

These children are never going to win the NAPLAN Olympics. But they are surely winning the Special Olympics. Their courage and performance are absolutely heroic, given their starting point.

But what does the Australian Education Union say about the performance of kids carrying such heavy lead in their knapsacks? It derides their achievement because it compares apples with oranges, and scoffs that children with special needs are not performing as well as children from leafy green suburbs. These so-called champions of social justice have no idea.

But, shamefully, the success of these kids has been turned into a political scapegoat for the failures of the state and community.

Juvenile carjacking, lawlessness and disorder suddenly disappeared from the conversation as Direct Instruction and the Cape York Academy became the source of the problems.

A flood of lurid media reporting ensued. The haters jumped out of the blocks. Most egregious was Chris Sarra's Stronger Smarter Institute, which used to be responsible for Koolkan before the CYA, and it was an Augean stable. An evaluation of Sarra's program found it had zero impact on attendance and literacy and numeracy attainment. Just the other week the Productivity Commission confirmed this conclusion.

The way in which Sarra parlayed his tenure as principal of Cherbourg school into becoming a guru of indigenous pedagogy is testament to his chutzpah. My view of Sarra's philosophy is that, yes, pride in our indigenous identity is important and good, but we should be telling our children to take pride in their work and their effort. Esteem comes from work and achievement, not identity. By all means celebrate our indigeneity, but don't fool our children that black pride alone is enough.

I told Ray Hadley on radio 2GB I have some idea of the gloom of the Garden of Gethsemane. But I am so used to the haters, the shallow grasp of the media and the coward mobs of social media that I end up philosophical. How can good things evoke such vehement opposition? If you're not making progress, no one objects.

This Aurukun crisis is an episode in which the far Right (Andrew Bolt, Warren Entsch, Mark Latham) and the far Left (Amy McQuire, New Matilda, the AEU) converge. They end up in the same position of opposition to reform.

It is also an episode in which centre-right (Warren Mundine and Indigenous Advisory Council colleague Bruce Martin) and centre-left players (Queensland's political leaders, Sarra and progressive educators) also converge against reform.

This convergence creates an unholy alliance against the radical centre. The progressive educators can't seem to accept that a program such as Direct Instruction can teach disadvantaged kids to read, because that it is what the international evidence says. Then these

disadvantaged kids, when they can read, can become leftist revolutionaries, if that is what they want to be. The AEU is just too dumb to get it, and it therefore ends up being the biggest barrier to social justice for these very kids it professes to care about. Just hopeless middle-class lefties.

Let me make three short observations about the issues that this convergence is in various ways opposed to.

First, it opposes our policy of getting remote students into city boarding schools. Sarra once called it the stolen generation. Yet you can't provide real secondary education in the bush. And even if the Queensland government reinstates some gammon secondary program in Aurukun, it will be replaying Groundhog Day.

There are 57 Aurukun kids in boarding schools today. This is the real revolution. Public education voices long opposed state school kids attending private boarding schools, and the numbers of remote students severely declined in the 1980s and 90s. The revival under our Cape York program, Andrew Penfold's Australian Indigenous Education Foundation and the Yalari program encountered much criticism. Not all students will board in the cities, and access to regional high schools is critical. However, these high schools are very poor and there is a challenge to make them worthy of the students that need them.

While the boarding school argument is largely won, this opposition has reared its head again in the current crisis at Aurukun.

Second, there is resistance to welfare reform, which has never abated since the organised opposition to Mal Brough's Northern Territory intervention on the Left conflated all reform efforts — including our work in Cape York — with punishment and imposition. Malcolm Turnbull sanctioned this mindset when he cited Sarra's nostrum that government should do things "with us and not to us".

On its surface this invocation is right, but the way it works out in practice is that it is a prescription against any reform, and a justification to retain the torpor and misery of the status quo: a status quo where the insouciance of the Right converges with the Left's "don't blame the victims" defence of passive welfare. The Aurukun crisis provided an opportunity to repudiate the critique of welfare dependency and our desperate search for reform.

Third, the Aurukun crisis enabled the opponents of Direct Instruction to show their complete aversion to judging education according to evidence. No profession is more prone to ideology than education. Sarra has never been in a Direct Instruction classroom to my knowledge. He never studied it at university.

In the past fortnight I accompanied Aurukun elders from the Family Responsibilities Commission and the shire council to visit Broadbeach State School on the Gold Coast. The elders wanted to know if the CYA at Koolkan was giving their children a "mainstream

education”. We were taken on tours of the classrooms in this amazing 800-student school about 200m from the surf.

The kids were mostly white, with some Asian Australians and a small number of indigenous students. They were being taught using the same programs as at Koolkan: Direct Instruction and Explicit Direct Instruction. The principal then took us to a presentation about the school’s improved literacy and numeracy achievements over the previous five years and especially the past two years, since adopting Direct Instruction. Broadbeach is killing it. A self-confessed average school is now a very good school, and on its way to greatness. Given it doesn’t have the burden of disability like Koolkan, these kids and their teachers are taking off with their learning.

The children and educators at Broadbeach lifted me out of the gutter after a dismal few weeks and restored my faith. We must never yield to the chicanery of the haters and obscurants because hatred of bastards like me should never prejudice the needs of desperate students such as those at Koolkan.

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