

AUSTRALIAN FINANCIAL REVIEW

Aurukun review is shameful and disgusting, says Noel Pearson



*Indigenous leader Noel Pearson defends the "direct instruction" pedagogy used in his group's Aboriginal schools in far north Queensland. **Brian Cassey***

by **Tim Dodd**

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It's an all too familiar story but no less important for that – violence and delinquent youths in an Aboriginal community struggling against the legacy of years of dysfunction.

The latest outbreak is in Aurukun on Cape York Peninsula. Six weeks ago the school principal was car-jacked and other teachers in the school, run by Noel Pearson's Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy, were seriously threatened.

Teachers were evacuated to Cairns, the school was temporarily closed, and the Queensland government sent in extra police to maintain order on the streets. Pearson, whose school is a critical institution in the town of 1400 people, backed the teacher evacuation.

But then Queensland Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk and Education Minister Kate Jones flew in to the remote town to see the situation for themselves and meet the mayor and local council.

That was the turning point, says Pearson. It was when the government's approach to calming the situation in Aurukun changed. Instead of being about law and order it became about the sort of education being delivered to the Aurukun kids.

"They came out of a council meeting and said they were going to do a review into the school," Mr Pearson told *AFR Weekend*. "It was a "shameful, disgusting switching of the debate".

Why is Pearson, one of Australia's most prominent indigenous leaders, so angry? It's because the teaching pedagogy known as "direct instruction" – which is the core of the school reform program for Indigenous children that Pearson leads in far north Queensland – is now at stake.

Direct instruction is a US-originated program in which the whole curriculum, and the lessons to deliver it, are carefully mapped out. Classes are divided into groups of kids who are at similar levels of achievement. It is called direct instruction because the teaching is targeted and explicit. For example, reading is taught with a strong emphasis on phonics, learning the sounds of letters and sounding them out.

This approach was introduced at Aurukun after Pearson's Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy took over the school in 2010.

"For the first time kids were learning," says Pearson. "When we took over the school almost every child was at kindergarten level reading, and that includes the year 7s."

The University of Melbourne's John Hattie, a highly regarded expert in school improvement, has studied the academic outcomes. Aurukun alone, with about 200 students, was not large enough for statistically meaningful results so Hattie included the two other schools also run by Pearson's academy which also use direct instruction. He says it has achieved results.

"What I discovered is that the kids are making about a year-and-a half of progress for a year of input. Relative to the rest of remote Aboriginal schools it's a stunning achievement," Hattie says.

But Hattie also points out it's not enough. "Noel," he says he told Pearson. "Your kids need to make three years to catch up."

Pearson says there are huge differences in the degree of progress made by children at the Aurukun school who face huge obstacles. The kids were tested for intelligence, as well as social and emotional well-being, and 30 per cent were found to be impaired in their cognitive development while another 46 per cent were assessed as borderline.

He attributes the result it to fetal alcohol syndrome, poor early nutrition and the experience of violence and years of social damage.

"These kids with a massive intellectual disability have not received any support for that gap, they have been treated as if they are healthy normal kids," Pearson says.

In spite of those barriers, he says, the children are achieving.

But Pearson has other critics. Aboriginal educator Chris Sarra, recently appointed Professor of Education at the University of Canberra and former principal of the Cherbourg State School in Queensland, says direct instruction is not the answer.

"It's an off-the-shelf remedial product which can't deliver on pursuit of excellence for Aurukun children," he says.

Sarra, who is recognised for huge improvements achieved at the Cherbourg school, runs the Stronger Smarter Institute, which is a rival in the Aboriginal education field to Pearson's Cape York-based efforts.

Sarra also says direct instruction is too expensive.

But Pearson also has strong backing. Peter Goss, currently the school education program director at the Grattan Institute, did an in-depth review of direct instruction and, based on his recommendations, the Abbott government funded a \$22 million program in 2014 to roll it out to Indigenous schools across Australia.

Goss says that direct instruction has a deep evidence base and is the best program available. He says it's not expensive, costing about \$1700 per child per year, averaged over 10 years.

"Many schools already spend \$15,000-\$20,000 per student per year, with very poor results. Direct instruction is tremendous value for money if it can be shown to work at scale in Australia," he says.

For his part Hattie says he finds Sarra's criticism strange given that Sarra uses "an explicit instruction program which is very, very similar [to direct instruction] except they don't buy the stuff from America".

Hattie wishes they would all get along. "There's not enough success out there to criticise," he says.

In the meantime Aurukun's school is still closed. The 200 children are in a temporary education program and the future of direct instruction at Aurukun is in the hands of the Queensland government's review.