

# Scaling up success in majority Indigenous schools

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This is an edited transcript of Noel Pearson’s speech at The Centre for Independent Studies event ‘Scaling up success in majority Indigenous schools’ in Sydney on 18 May 2021. The video of the event can be viewed [here](#).

I want to say one very brief thing about evidence: we need no more evidence about what works. The evidence has been well known about what works for children’s reading, numeracy and learning generally. It is just that there has been a concerted effort to impede the known and very effective means by which children could learn in Australian schools, and it is the disadvantaged that have suffered the most. There’s been an evidence revolution over the last 10 years ever since John Hattie’s Visible Learning, but it is more than 10 years later, and we’re not acting on the evidence, and the evidence in relation to teacher-led instruction is 50 years old.

Aboriginal children are no different from other human children. They have the same capacity and they have the same learning mechanism of other human students; there’s nothing *sui generis* about Indigenous children. They’re humans. If they’re taught with effective pedagogy, they will learn. So those who say we need more evidence to prove what’s effective with Indigenous education, I think are almost making a racial distinction. The distinctions that are valid concern context – social community context; we have to take them into account. Kids coming from poverty, kids with bad hearing, kids coming from homes without books and with illiterate parents. These are all important contextual questions that bear on the capacity of kids to learn, but the fundamental mechanism for learning is human.

That’s why I believe that Indigenous education will not be fixed up until we get education fixed up for all students, particularly disadvantaged ones. The important point that is lost about direct and explicit instruction is that they are non-categorical approaches to learning and teaching. We don’t distinguish between human learners. What we will make efforts to do is address the social context from which these kids come and the cultural context in which they live. These are all very legitimate things to take into account, but don’t tell me that the evidence for effective instruction does not apply to Indigenous learners.

Let me tell you about our program in Cape York. We’re in partnership with the Queensland Department of Education in relation to two small primary schools. We have a six ‘C’ curriculum program, the first being Class, and we teach literacy, numeracy and science through Direct Instruction and explicit instruction – that is, teacher-led instruction.

The teaching of the DISTAR method of literacy was in many Australian schools 45 years ago, and I’ve come across many Australian teachers of that generation who taught DISTAR, the early generation Direct Instruction program, to Australian kids in many, many schools across the country. We could have got it right had we continued teacher-led instruction in literacy and numeracy

starting in the 1970s, but the progressive educationalists pursuing the dream of John Dewey and Lev Vygotsky and all of the social constructivists in education who opposed Direct Instruction, won the day across Australian schools.

My grandfather and father were literate in both their traditional language and English, far above the powers of their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. I wondered why, and I started to understand this debate about the ‘reading wars’ between those who favoured explicit teaching of phonics and phonemic awareness. And those who said that children should be taught by teachers who see themselves as ‘guides by the side’, who are going to immerse these children in literature and books and somehow they’re going to learn the mechanics of reading. I sided with Professor Kevin Wheldall from the MultiLit program at Macquarie University. I said, he’s on the right side of this debate, let’s get Kevin up to Cape York and have a trial of his method with our children.

Prior to that, I had been with the social constructivists. I assumed that official educators knew what they were doing. But it was the reading wars in the 2000s that opened my eyes to this debate, and of course Kevin opened our eyes to what the kids can achieve in Cape York if they’re led by good teachers. All of a sudden the light started switching on with our children. Two years into our trial with MultiLit in Cape York, Kevin told us there’s an ancestor program: it’s called Direct Instruction. So we went to the United States and said to the inventor of Direct Instruction, Siegfried Engelmann at his National Institute for Direct Instruction, that we wanted to do DI in our schools, and we’ve been doing it ever since.

DI is just good teaching, where teachers teach first and ask questions later. The operating principle of DI articulated by Engelmann is this: If the student has not learned, the teacher has not taught. The responsibility for the child’s learning rests with the teacher, and the obligation of teachers is to adopt effective methods that are established in the evidence.

Let me tell you about DI. You do five lessons with the children – explicit



teacher-led instruction with appropriate revisiting of the material for spaced practice. The program is based on mastery. We aim for the kids to master the materials and we administer a mastery test every five lessons. They don’t proceed to the next bit of learning until they have a 90%-plus success in the mastery test. Direct Instruction is not old-style rote learning; there’s a lot of practice. If you want to move learning from short-term memory to long, you’ve got to revisit the material.

But the ingenious design of Direct Instruction is that it introduces examples to the kids so that the inductive logic that’s built into the lesson is learned by the child, and, once they’ve mastered the logic, the kid is then in a position to work out what the rule is and then to generalise the rule to new examples. So it’s a process of learning from examples, learning the rule, and then being in a position to generalise the rule to novel examples.

DI does not take up the whole day. We have a Club program, art, music. We have a strong belief in instrumental music for the kids. We teach kids in a stage band to learn to read music and to play instruments for a school stage band. We want our children when they enter high school to have the option to pursue music, and we have uncompromising ambitions for the children, because we know some of them are going to be passionate about pursuing musical careers and if we don’t do it in primary school, they will never have the chance in high school.

We have a Culture program to teach ancestral languages to the kids. The kids learn to speak their own language and to be literate in their own language. We have a comprehensive Community

program where we engage parents, and the first act – the first and easiest act you can get the parents engaged in – is putting money aside for their children. We have \$3 million sitting in accounts for 300 kids – their parents’ own money, their families’ own money. Because you set up the facilities for them, the parents want to put money aside for their children. They can pay for the rugby trip away or the football boots or the excursion to Cairns. We want parents to take responsibility for their children.

We have a case management system for the children to attend and we work very hard to have the highest attenders in the state of Queensland at our schools. We have a Family Responsibilities Commission that mandates parents who receive welfare from the government to send their kids to school, and our commission says to anyone that is not sending their children to school, “why should we not put a clamp on your money?” That’s what our Family Responsibilities Commission does.

We have a Civics program because we want our children to understand their identity and their responsibilities as Australians and as Indigenous people and to grapple with these questions about identity and who they are. And how they are Queenslanders in one respect and Australians in another and Cape Yorkers in another – that they have these layers of identity, and they share identities with other people. The Lutheran kids at Hopevale share identity with Bavarians in Germany.

We have a strong focus on Childhood. We understand the importance of early childhood development. The key issue with early childhood programs is that they need some academic time – 20 minutes a day.

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You've got to furnish the kids with pre-literacy academic support, because that's not what they're getting in the household. Their household might speak an ancestral language. They're not going to have the natural facility with phonics and phonemes of English. It is crucial to have an academic dimension, and not just play in the early childhood program.

On the issue of school and school system reform, I'm going to tell you about the work of the McKinsey consultancy firm and how they've got so much right. McKinsey have produced three crucially important reports over the last dozen or so years. In 2007, they identified what successful systems around the world have done in order to improve the outcomes for their countries. Three very straightforward things: one, you need great teachers; two, you have to have effective instruction; three, every child in the system has to benefit from it. Kind of 'nose on your face', but so very important to keep those three things in focus.

In 2010, they looked at systems across the world over a period of time to work out what did these systems do to advance from poor to fair, to good, to great, to excellent. Singapore was once poor, and then it became fair and then it started to become good, and then it became great, and now they're an excellent system. What they did at different stages of the spectrum was different. What you do with a poor school is different to what you do with a great school. The policy interventions are different at each stage.

The poor to fair journey says: You've got to get the kids in their seats; they've got to attend. Secondly, they need a feed; their basic needs need to be met. Thirdly, your teachers need to be supported in those schools with prescriptive training.

Fourthly, they need a scripted program. Poor schools don't have great teachers. The teachers need a script in front of them to teach. That's what Singapore originally did. And all of the systems that have gone through the poor to fair performance spectrum have had these common interventions.

Of course, if you want a school to go from great to excellent, you best step back and let them work out their own journey. There's a set of prescriptions at the high-performing end that actually mean that schools should be unleashed. So I would urge policymakers, members of the public, ministers, anybody interested in school reform to look at McKinsey (2010). The playbook is entirely there, including adjustment for context.

Finally, there's a third McKinsey report on the PISA results, where they did a massive analysis of the performance data in Oceania and Asia, looking at these great systems that have done so well. The crucial piece in that report is the balance between teacher-led instruction and inquiry learning. You've got to get the balance right. The best systems are those systems that are favouring teacher-led instruction. That's what the evidence says, and that's what high-performing systems in Southeast Asia are doing. In our programs that we design in-house at 'Good to Great Schools', we teach first and then we allow kids to conduct experiments and undertake inquiry activities.

It's proven around the world that a tectonic shift in performance can be executed in five years; five to six years is the average. How are we going to do it? We need to hit the curve and shift it rightwards so that we no longer have any poor schools. That's got to be our goal: no schools that are poor in Australia.

Hit the poor end of the spectrum and shift it rightwards so that every Australian child can put their hand up and say, "I went to a school that honoured my attendance by serving me with the teaching that I deserved as an Australian citizen".

The second thing we have to do is we've got to focus on the verb, not the noun. The 'teaching', not the 'teacher'. The thing we can change tomorrow is the teaching and if we're going to make this leap in performance over the next five years, we've got to put the spotlight squarely on the verb of teaching and we've got to act on the evidence.

Yes, evidence about context and what's effective in particular social and economic and learning disadvantaged contexts – that can be useful, but don't tell me what constitutes effective instruction is still an open question. So let's act on the evidence rather than see the future lying in building more evidence.

What do we need to do? We need to make a performance shift in five years. We need to hit the bell curve in the right places. We need to not accept that anywhere in Australia an Australian child is still attending a poor school. And that means the 250 Indigenous schools that sit down at that bottom end of the system. We can't accept that they should continue as they are. They cannot be put in that too-hard basket and left there.

The second thing we have to do is we've got to shift the coasters in the middle: the fair schools that are always fair, the good schools that are always good. The good ones are not getting great, and the fair ones are not getting good. And so we need to hit a sufficient number of those schools and show what is possible if we hit the curve in those places and force a shift to the right. And of course we leave the great to become excellent.

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*Noel Pearson has spent decades advancing reform on native title, economic development, and social policy. He is Director of Strategy of Cape York Partnership and Co-Chair of Good to Great Schools Australia. Noel has been a forceful proponent of education reform and works in partnership with government and business to advance education opportunities for Australian children.*