

Abstract

My doctoral research investigates, as a non-Indigenous person how First Nations people experience school education in Australia, as a social determinant of health in the context of middle to senior years of high school. This is a crucial time when young people are determining their future, potentially making decisions that can influence their life trajectory significantly. Education access, as an 'upstream' determinant and human right, is complex and difficult, yet necessary to research. I set out to problematise an implied assumption embedded in Closing the Gap (CtG), the Indigenous health strategy promoted by the last nine Australian governments. If increasing the number of First Nations young people who complete high school or an equivalent qualification significantly contributes to levelling education and health outcomes, what specific circumstances are necessary to allow this to happen? I uncover how barriers to equity are experienced as colonising by First Nations people through the literature and, what non-Indigenous people can learn that promotes health equity through decolonising education, from First Nations authored literature.

Papers reviewed for this research suggest First Nations people have experiences at school that can seriously undermine their health and wellbeing and as such are a source of harm. Ultra-realism was employed to theorise harms that emerge from the industrial and consumer logic of modern and late capitalism, resulting in mechanisms that avoid risk to dominant groups and act to protect the economic system in increasingly complex ways. These suppress and hide the harm embedded in everyday experiences, going some way to explaining the disappointing, in most cases negative, progress on all CtG targets. As my research shows, when First Nations perspectives are consciously fore-fronted, harm can be exposed, its transitivity owned, and its inevitability challenged. Most importantly an ethics of *accountability as respect* emerges from First Nations knowledge, restoring an ontology of social relations to further challenge colonisation as anti-intelligence, driving the destruction of the social, and ecological principles of sustainable life.

My original contribution to knowledge is an analysis and investigation of the contexts in which school education can function to support Indigenous health and the mechanisms through which contemporary colonisation as an expression of neoliberalism undermine it. The thesis considers how decolonisation is understood in dialectical relationship to colonisation. When non-Indigenous practitioners engage with de-colonising dialectic in their praxis, it opens space in which structural change can occur. This is a space where First Nations peoples have the conditions and resources to assert their rights and transmit their culture including a safe transition from childhood to adult being and accompanying responsibilities.

The research process embodied my determination to learn from, respect and apply First Nations scholarship knowledge and methodology. I turned to First Nations literature for guidance with my epistemology and selection of methodology to enhance the study's authenticity and relevance of this work. I sought to transfer and add value to knowledge created by First Nations authors to establish what underlying mechanisms contribute to colonising and decolonising experiences in

school. Colonisation is foundation for racialized social harms to First Nations people, as this research attests. My interpretation was guided and supported an expert panel of First Nations people.

One outcome of my research is the configuration of a methodology where a non-Indigenous person can dialogue with and learn from scholarship and research produced by First Nations peoples. Critical realist methods involved reviewing and coding of ten articles into four dialectical perspectives. Together they highlight and help explain apparent internal contradictions in systems. For example, school education is a right and is also compulsory and is acknowledged as a positive social determinant of health and yet, it is implicated in social harms. With the wisdom, guidance and feedback I have received from Expert Panel members, I have expanded knowledge of the necessity of and capabilities for non-Indigenous agency; an alternative understanding of the health equity 'gap' and six themes in Indigenous education, assembled from First Nations scholars through their ten analysed texts. To ensure that the voice of young people was included in the study, three of the ten studies report the views of young people of which two are large quantitative studies and two include perspectives of parents and carers. Collectively the texts present a critique of the education system, its historical development and an exposition of tendencies that are harm rather than health promoting to First Nations young people. Racism and whiteness are explored as mechanisms that support and maintain colonisation, denying the reality of Indigenous sovereignty.

Indigenous education emerged in this research as a movement within the education system through which First Nations people and local knowledge systems continue to assert a past, present and future reality, resisting and challenging all forms of colonisation. Non-Indigenous people who find a place within this network have a place from which to rethink and implement a philosophy of respect through which to challenge colonising behaviour and support First Nations young people to assert their identity and position.