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# Direct instruction turns around disadvantaged learners and schools: Noel Pearson

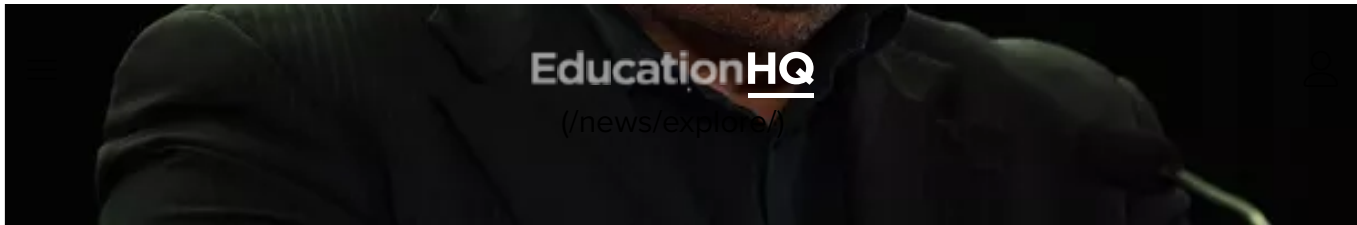


By Sarah Duggan (/author/user/17/)

Published June 15, 2021

Noel Pearson is resolute: we “need no more evidence” about what constitutes effective teaching pedagogy – we have known for 50 years what works in the classroom.





**Majority-Indigenous schools across the country can conquer the educational odds by replicating what we already know to be effective – the key being teacher-led instruction, Noel Pearson indicated.**

Speaking at a recent Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) event ‘Scaling up success in majority Indigenous schools,’ the Indigenous activist and co-chair of Good to Great Schools Australia (<https://goodtogreatschools.org.au/>) argued that “we could have got it right” for all Australian students and not just Indigenous children if those who oppose direct instruction had stood aside years ago.


“...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,” he told the audience.

A decade has passed since John Hattie’s Visible Learning research dropped, and we are still not acting on the evidence, he added.

Instead of clinging onto failed programs and policies rooted in social constructivism, majority-Indigenous schools across the country can conquer the educational odds by replicating what we already know to be effective – the key being teacher-led instruction, Pearson indicated.

“Aboriginal children are no different to other human children.

“They have the same capacity and they have the same learning mechanism as other human students, there is nothing ‘sui generis’ about Indigenous children; they are humans, if they are taught with effective pedagogy, they will learn.

“So those who say we need more evidence to prove what’s effective with Indigenous education children, I think, are almost making a racial distinction,” he said. 

(/news/explore/)

Of course, social and community context must be factored into any school improvement plan, he noted.

“We have to take [these] into account; kids coming from poverty, kids with bad hearing, kids who come from homes without books, and illiterate parents – these are all important contextual elements that bear on students’ capacity to learn, but the fundamental mechanism for learning is human.”

## Pearson's road to direct instruction

There’s a tale behind Pearson’s fierce commitment to direct instruction.

“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 ... the social constructivists in education who opposed direct instruction, won the day across Australian schools,” he began.

“It was why I wondered my father and grandfather were literate in both their traditional language and English, far above the powers of their grandchildren and great grandchildren, and I started to understand this debate about the ‘reading wars,’ about those who favoured explicit teaching of phonics and phonemic awareness, and those who said children should be taught by teachers who see themselves as ‘guides on the side’; who are going to immerse these children in literature and books and somehow they are going to learn the mechanics of reading.”

Pearson found himself siding with Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall from Macquarie University, founder and director of MultiLit (<https://multilit.com/>).

“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 it is kids can perform in Cape York if they are led by good teachers.

“All of a sudden the lights started switching on with our children...”



It was two years into Pearson's trial with MultiLit that he discovered there was an 'ancestor' program – direct instruction (DI).

(/news/explore/)

"So we went to the United States, and called upon the inventor of direct instruction, Siegfried Engelmann, at his National Institute for Direct Instruction and (said) we wanted to get DI in our schools.

"And we've been doing it ever since."

According to Pearson, DI is "just good teaching" where "teachers teach first and ask questions later".

"The operating principal of DI articulated by Engelmann is this: if the student has not learnt, the teacher has not taught.

"The responsibility of the child's learning rests with the teacher. And it's the obligation of the teacher to adopt effective methods that are established in the evidence," he clarified.

In Pearson's schools, children receive five lessons grounded in explicit and teacher-led instruction. Material is re-visited, with a 'mastery' test held at the end of every five-lesson cycle.

"They don't proceed to the next bit of learning until they have a 90 per cent-plus success in the mastery test," Pearson reported.

"And the ingenious nature of the instructional design of DI, [is] it is not old-style rote learning, there is a lot of practice.

"If you want to move learning from short-term memory to long, you've got to revisit the material ... [it's] about introducing examples to the kids so that the inductive logic that is built into the lesson is learned by the child.

"And the kid, once mastering the logic, 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."

## Early childhood literacy support

Working to bolster school readiness is another improvement domain Pearson flags as critical for disadvantaged learners.

We must go beyond play to level the playing field from the outset, he indicated.



“The key issue with early childhood programs is some academic time: 20 minutes a day, you’ve got to furnish the kids with pre-literacy academic support, because that’s not what they’re getting in [their] household,” he said.

“Their household might speak an ancestral language – they’re not going to have the natural facility with phonics and phonemes of English... so putting in 20 minutes a day with a pre-literacy program is the most crucial part of early childhood.

“Twenty minutes a day and you can make up for the lack of books in your home and you can make up for the lack of education of your parents – [it's] crucial to have an academic dimension and not just play in early childhood...”

## The Fair to Poor journey

The handle driving the Good to Great Schools agenda is ‘great teachers, effective instruction, every child.’ This three-pronged formula is, according to Pearson, exactly what a school system must be able to deliver if it’s going to advance.

“I’ve been around consultants for a very long time, and they mostly get it wrong, but tonight I’m going to tell you about the work of McKinsey and how they’ve got so much right,” he told the audience.

McKinsey & Company's 2010 report, *How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better*, looks at 20 different education systems and details the common interventions that saw schools within them shift from poor performance, to good, and from good to great. Some schools even became excellent, Pearson said.

“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 ... they continued across the performance spectrum.”

“And ... the policy interventions are different at each stage,” Pearson noted.

For schools embarking on the poor to fair journey, the expert says the research roadmap is clear.

“...It says you’ve got to get bums in the seat ... [students] have to attend. Secondly, they need a feed. Their basic needs need to be met.

“Thirdly, teachers need to be supported in those schools with prescriptive training.

“Fourthly, they need a scripted program – they don’t have great teachers ... they

need a script in front of them; that's what Singapore originally did, and all the systems that went through the poor-fair performance spectrum have had these common interventions. (/news/explore/)



"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 ... they should be unleashed."

You can view the full CIS event, including a panel discussion with education minister Alan Tudge and CIS research fellow in education policy Glenn Fahey, here (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5KYcAB4Xls&t=3013s>).



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By Sarah Duggan (/author/user/17/)

STAFF

Sarah is editor of Australian Teacher Magazine, EducationHQ and LeadershipEd.



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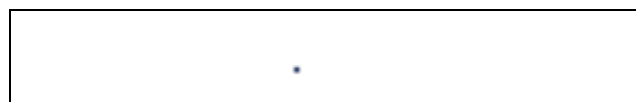


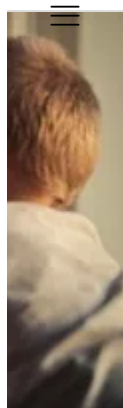
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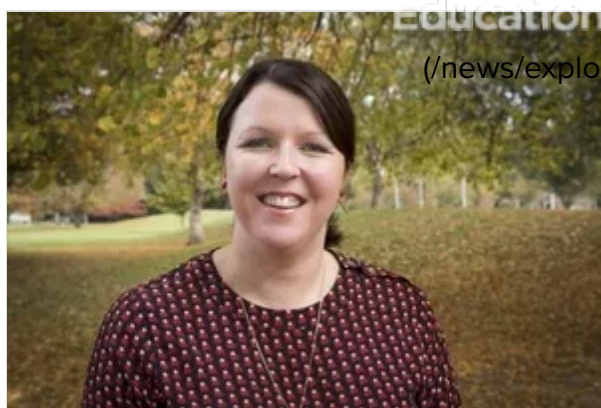




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Leaders in the education sector manage a great deal of stress at the best of times, however the current pandemic and a chronic shortage of casual teaching staff have increased the usual pressures tenfold.

(/news/self-care-for-school-leaders-your-plan-of-attack-to-better-manage-stress-...)



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