The Role of Education Systems in Indigenous Childhood Development

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Key Messages

- Background:

  o Improvement needed in the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander's education outcomes.

  o Poor emotional and physical health outcomes are evident from the systemic and exclusionary practices of current education policy.

- Implications:

  o Systemic and entrenched policy perpetuate the effects of racism.

  o Attempts to address the shortfall in Indigenous educational outcomes to date have perpetuated rather than dispelled stereotypes.

  o The lack of indigenous perspectives within the educational curriculum exacerbates marginalization.

- Recommendations:

  o Supportive education policies, such as teacher training and policy revision can assist in altering the experience of Indigenous Australian students at school, to prevent disengagement.

  o Giving Indigenous students to opportunity to develop their individual and cultural identities has been shown to have an insulating effect on the incidence of racism.

The Role of Education Systems in Indigenous Childhood Development

Background

Indigenous education in Australia has long been a source of contention, where systemic biases and assumptions have shaped the policies and practices that impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan" is one such policy framework that, while aimed at improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students, has been critiqued for perpetuating negative stereotypes and deficit discourses (Hogarth 2017). This writing will explore the effects of these biases, drawing on research that highlights the profound impacts of racism on the emotional and physical well-being effects, and educational experiences of Indigenous children.

Racism is a pervasive force that influences every aspect of Indigenous children's lives, particularly in education. The systemic discrimination and assimilatory processes that these children face in schools contributes to feelings of alienation and a lack of belonging, which are further exacerbated by a curriculum that often fails to reflect their cultural heritage (Moodie et al., 2019). This lack of representation marginalises Indigenous students within the educational system, leading to diminished self-esteem and internalised racism (Shay et al., 2023). The psychological toll of racism on Indigenous children is significant, manifesting in mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and trauma (Kairuz et al., 2021). These experiences are not isolated incidents but are deeply embedded in societal structures, affecting Indigenous children's access to equal opportunities in education and beyond.

Research has consistently shown that racism has severe mental and physical health implications for Indigenous children. The study conducted by Shepherd et al., (2017) focused on

Indigenous children aged 5-10, using data from the "Footprints in Time" longitudinal study. The findings in this study revealed that both direct and vicarious experiences of racism were strongly associated with poor mental health outcomes, including a higher risk of clinically significant emotional and behavioral difficulties. Moreover, racism was linked to physical health issues such as sleep difficulties, obesity, and asthma (Kairuz et al., 2021; Shepherd et al., 2017). These health problems were exacerbated by persistent exposure to racism, highlighting the need for policy interventions that address these disparities.

Similarly, the Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC) explored the effects of racism on the health and well-being of Indigenous Australian children. The study confirmed that exposure to racism is a significant predictor of poor mental and physical health outcomes, even when controlling for socioeconomic and environmental factors (Macedo et al., 2019b). The research underscores the pervasive and harmful effects of racism on Indigenous children, emphasizing the need for systemic changes to address these disparities.

Amidst the negative impacts of racism, a strong and positive ethnic-racial identity (ERI) has been identified as a crucial protective factor for Indigenous children. The study conducted by Macedo et al. (2019a) examined how Ethnic Racial Identity (ERI) can buffer the adverse effects of racism on the social and emotional well-being of Aboriginal Australian children. It has been found that children with a strong sense of belonging to their ethnic group and positive attitudes towards their identity exhibited greater resilience against the harmful impacts of racism (Shay et al., 2023). This protective effect became more pronounced as children grew older, suggesting that fostering a strong ERI early on is essential for long-term mental health. Schools and educational policies that fail to acknowledge and nurture Indigenous identities risk perpetuating the negative effects of racism (Macedo et al., 2019a; Moodie et al., 2019; Shay et al., 2023).

While the construct of identity is addressed within school curriculums for non-indigenous children (Shay et al., 2023), education systems should prioritise identity affirmation and cultural expression, creating spaces where Indigenous students can thrive.

The educational experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are further complicated by the systemic racism embedded in Australian schools. A systematic review published by Moodie et al., (2019) examined how racism manifests in educational settings and its impact on Indigenous students. This review found that discriminatory practices and low expectations from teachers significantly hindered the academic achievement and overall educational experiences of Indigenous students. These experiences of racism also led to a downward spiral effect of lower school attendance rates and higher dropout rates, as the hostile environment created by racism made it challenging for Indigenous students to stay engaged with their education.

Moreover, racism in schools often results in Indigenous students feeling disconnected from their culture and identity. Schools that fail to acknowledge or respect Indigenous cultures exacerbate this disconnection leading to a loss of cultural pride and identity (Shay et al., 2023), while simultaneously exploring the cultures and identities of European migrants. This cultural disconnection further marginalises Indigenous students, making it difficult for them to succeed in an educational system that does not reflect their lived experiences or values.

The research outlined above highlights the urgent need for systemic reforms in Indigenous education. Policies like the "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan" (Hogarth, 2017) must move beyond superficial attempts at inclusivity and address the deep-rooted issues of racism and bias that continue to affect Indigenous students. This includes mandatory reporting of racism in schools (Moodie et al., 2019), the incorporation of Indigenous

perspectives and histories into the curriculum, and training for educators to recognise and counteract their biases. By centering Indigenous voices and identities in education, schools can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, ultimately improving their well-being and educational outcomes.

The power of words and the assumptions embedded in educational policies have a profound impact on Indigenous students' experiences and outcomes (Hogarth, 2017). To ensure that these students receive a fair and equitable education, it is essential to critically examine and reform the policies and practices that perpetuate racism and marginalisation. Only by addressing these systemic issues can we create an education system that truly supports the well-being and success of all students.

Implications

The implications of racism and its effects on indigenous children identify entrenched issues of bias and racism within educational policies and practices. The body of research underscores how these biases, often embedded in the very language and assumptions of educational frameworks, can perpetuate systemic racism, adversely affecting the educational experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (Moodie et al., 2019).

One major implication is the need for a critical examination of the language used in educational policies. Words are powerful as they shape perceptions, influence attitudes, and can either perpetuate stereotypes or challenge them (Hogarth, 2017). In the context of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan, the language used can unconsciously reinforce negative stereotypes and low expectations, which in turn can impact how Indigenous students are treated and perceived within the educational system. This can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy

where Indigenous students internalise these low expectations, affecting their self-esteem, academic performance, and overall engagement with education.

Another implication is the importance of culturally responsive education. The article suggests that the failure to incorporate Indigenous perspectives and histories into the curriculum contributes to the marginalization of Indigenous students (Macedo et al., 2019a). By not seeing their cultures and identities reflected in what they are learning, these students may feel alienated and disconnected from the education system, leading to lower attendance and higher drop out rates (Moodie et al., 2019). This disconnection can further entrench social inequalities and limit the future opportunities available to these students.

Finally, the article calls for systemic changes, including the mandatory reporting of racism in schools, to create a safer and more inclusive environment for Indigenous students. This highlights the need for educational institutions to not only acknowledge but actively combat the biases and assumptions that disadvantage Indigenous students (Hogarth, 2017). It suggests that addressing these issues at the policy level is crucial for fostering an educational environment where all students, regardless of their background, can thrive.

Recommendations

To address the adverse effects of racism on Indigenous children, schools should implement comprehensive anti-racism policies and practices. This includes establishing mandatory reporting systems for incidents of racism, providing anti-racism training for educators, and revising curricula to include Indigenous perspectives and histories. Additionally, cultural competency programs and engagement with Indigenous community members can foster a more inclusive and supportive educational environment. These measures aim to reduce the incidence of racism,

enhance Indigenous students' educational experiences, and improve their mental health and academic performance.

Supporting the development of a strong ethnic-racial identity (ERI) is another crucial strategy. Schools and communities should create programs that celebrate and affirm Indigenous identities, such as cultural events and mentorship programs with Indigenous role models. Engaging Indigenous families and communities in educational processes can reinforce cultural identity and provide additional support. By focusing on ERI, these initiatives help Indigenous students build resilience against racism, improve their self-esteem, and promote overall well-being, leading to more positive educational outcomes and a stronger sense of belonging.

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