



Rundle: anatomy of a beat-up on Aboriginal literacy

[Guy Rundle](#) | Jul 11, 2014

The Australian is tearing down a straw-man in its stories on Aboriginal education this week. Time for a Rundle reality check.

“Aboriginal kids shouldn’t have English lessons” says academic, in a Justine Ferrari [article](#) in the *Oz*. Forehead-clutch. Curse. Oh no. What ammunition has some dweeby academic given these lunatics now?

None, as it turned out. The story was a complete beat-up, and a rather mendacious one. In *The Conversation*, Stewart Riddle, an education academic at USQ, had written [a piece](#) about “Direct Instruction” — the cultish Noel Pearson-championed educational style that Education Minister Christopher Pyne wants to roll out to all Aboriginal schools, and then to all primary education.

Riddle asked a simple question. Does an all-DI system deliver a genuinely better education for Aboriginal students, or does it simply “teach to the test” — in this case NAPLAN scores for the community in question — leaving the student with little long-term gain in terms of language mastery?

To be fair, Riddle didn’t do himself any favours, putting in a couple of modish paragraphs about whether “literacy” should be a goal at all, and comparing the DI roll-out to — jaysus — the “stolen generations”. These paras — designed, one suspects to curry favour in the humanities academy — were, in fact contradicted by the article, which clearly sought to find the best strategies for Aboriginal students to get the most out of their education.

But it was enough for Ferrari to get a beat-up going, with an utterly false headline, suggesting that he believed that Aboriginal kids in communities that don’t use English as a first language, should not be taught English at all.



Cue a quote from Noel Pearson, progenitor of the all-DI program (whose results have been extremely disappointing, more of which next week), and Henderson Warren Mundine, fast

emerging as the nation's crotchety uncle, who can be called up for a rent-a-quote at a moment's notice.

Following on from Ferrari's article, she's spun out a follow-up, and the *Oz* has contributed a thundering editorial riding over an article that simply suggested that remote-area Aboriginal students would be ill-served by a one-dimensional measure of what literacy is. If you can cough up the answers to DI-branded tests, but you haven't mastered spoken English — which may be a third or fourth language in your community — then the Pearson education revolution won't have been much bloody use to you. It won't have given you the greater autonomy or access to wider society that is sought from it.

The beat-up, and the pile-on, on a single article occurs precisely because DI isn't getting the runs on the board. The all-DI approach that Pearson championed, with his characteristically sunstruck Lutheran enthusiasm, for a mode of education that is stupefyingly boring for teacher and student alike, has already been quietly abandoned. But even the DI-focused approach is failing *in comparison to the educational models that Pearson has criticised*.

So, in the Stalin-lite style, rather than examine the evidence and have a rethink, efforts must be redoubled and enemies annihilated. The programme not working? Extend it to all schools. Critics pointing out its flaws? Label them as people who don't want Aboriginal kids to learn English. The DI enthusiasm has nothing to do with Aboriginal kids' best interests: it's about waging ideological war in the classroom, with students as collateral damage.