

Book review

Leading and Managing Indigenous Education in the Postcolonial World

Ma Rhea, Z. (2015). *Leading and Managing Indigenous Education in the Postcolonial World*. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge.

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In this book, Ma Rheas calls for profound rethinking of the leadership and management of Indigenous education. The legacy of a colonial education system needs to be disrupted “through both revolutionary and evolutionary processes, involving multiple sites of strategically coordinated action” (p.181) if the glaring disparities in education achievements between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Australia are to be comprehensively redressed. This book however is not a manifesto, but rather a practical blueprint for change carefully crafted from the experience of a skilled academic and an education practitioner who has ‘walked the walk’ at all levels of Indigenous education in Australia. Ma Rhea also draws from her expertise as a dynamic systems analyst and change manager to systematically prosecute her case, simultaneously dissecting why initiatives fail, how initiatives can afford success, and the pitfalls of reactive decisions and ‘fixes’ can be avoided. Children are at her heart but the responsibility is squarely placed at all levels of leadership: federal, state and territory; education departments; curriculum bodies; and in schools and universities.

She presents an Indigenist orientation including both Indigenous and non-Indigenous that is built upon recognition and commitment to Indigenous rights and perspectives whether the actor be Indigenous or not, and leadership that allows space for Indigenous peoples’ presence at all levels, local initiatives, experiments, feedback, and ongoing and robust evaluations.

To move towards this rights-based orientation, the settler population requires reflection and empathy to recognise Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples are not treated equally, that injustice and privilege is not equally dispersed and crucially, that the dominant model of education in its failing to fully and unequivocally recognise the rights of Indigenous peoples to education, is simultaneously repressive of Indigenous peoples, and ergo limiting for the non-Indigenous settler population.

For educators, academics and bureaucrats involved in Indigenous education, some elements of the book will not be new. Such as the placing of Indigenous education in its historical context to explain that the knowledge of Australia’s history is imperative if replications of colonial practices are to be avoided. The most pernicious of these, she argues, is at leadership levels. Any initiatives borne of the colonial mindset that imposes itself to remedy perceived deficits in Indigenous education and Indigenous children, cannot reasonably deliver sustained improvement of education outcomes. The breadth of analysis presented throughout the book creates a holistic view of the dynamic systems at play within Indigenous education in Australia. The descriptions of how various systems and sub-systems are interrelated (positively or negatively) provide new insights to inspire and guide leaders in the field.

Ma Rhea's analysis of Indigenous education is anchored by a multiplex pyramid graphic with the community as the basis of the pyramid where argument is made for meaningful involvement of Indigenous community members within the local school – Traditional Owners, parents and caregivers of Indigenous children, and the wider community of actors and stakeholders, and a renewed call for teacher professional development as part of a system-wide workforce development program that is rights-based, Indigenist, and challenges colonial mindsets.

“Given the coercive, colonial history and evident ongoing mistrust, frustrations and misunderstandings about rights and responsibilities around the education of Indigenous children, Indigenous people are seeking more than expedient political solutions that enable short-term administrative ‘successes’ to hide enduring systemic problems” (p. 180).

Genuine partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples are requisite, but receive interrogation, for ‘partnership’ narratives are oft times used by education administrators and politicians. Partnerships enacted through a rights-based approach rather than Indigenous people as a population needing help and interventions, is a deficit approach that has failed and will continue to fail.

Schools have a vital role but their capacity to lead and manage educational change must be fully supported by collaborative engagement and alignment of Indigenous communities and government.

This book will be of value to researchers and post-graduate students engaged with Indigenous education. It will be of value to teachers, education administrators and system drivers such as bureaucrats and politicians. Ma Rhea presents a view for the future: how a post-colonial education system might be enacted. We are not there yet. At a time when education is becoming increasingly globalised, this book presents a salient reminder that the rights of Indigenous peoples and meaningful partnerships with communities must be foregrounded in all levels of delivery if globalised education is to be truly postcolonial education.