A critical analysis of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan

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Critical Discourse Analysis

Engagement

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Abstract

The gap between the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their non-Indigenous counterparts has remained a significant issue since their introduction into the Westernised classroom in the late 1960s (Beresford, 2012; Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003; Vass, 2012). Indigenous education policy has sought to address the disparity of school-aged students’ educational outcomes. However, despite over 50 years of concerted effort to address student outcomes, very little improvement has been made. Evidence shows that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ educational outcomes are still dramatically lower than those of their non-Indigenous counterparts. That is, the data is not showing improvement; rather, a stagnant plateau is evident (Gray & Beresford, 2008).

Recent policy developed by the Federal Government looks to address the life outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by closing the gap on educational attainment, health, wellbeing and economic positioning (COAG, 2009). This study analyses the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan, henceforth referred to as the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a). In 2011, the Plan was endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). Its implementation involves the collaboration of Federal and State Governments as well as schools to execute fifty-five actions to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Rigney’s Indigenist Research Principles (1999) inform the theoretical framework in this study. Particular focus is placed on the political integrity principle within this study. This is because the Plan, being a governmental policy, is positioned as being objective and factual. The principle of political integrity addresses the struggle for self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Little research has been conducted investigating how the language and discourses of policy positions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Using Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis approach (2001b) to describe and analyse the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a), this study identifies textual features including declarative statements, classification schemes, euphemistic expressions and expressive modality.
to illustrate how policy maintains the dominant ideology and positions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

This study seeks to build awareness about policy and its discourse. In doing so, it aims to promote discussion around policy decision-making and potential policy revision. The major findings in the study show that bias is evident within the Plan despite it being represented as objective and factual. Underlying assumptions regarding the homogenous grouping of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the maintenance of the dominant ideology and the lack of recognition of the detrimental effects of past reforms and policies contribute to the bias. This in turn has an effect on the engagement and connections, and attendance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, parents and community in the school environment perpetuating the cycle of disengagement, poor attendance and low educational outcomes.
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List of Abbreviations

ACACA    Australasian Curriculum, Assessment and Certification Authorities
ACARA    Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority
AEP      National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy
AITSL    Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership
CDA      Critical Discourse Analysis
COAG     Council of Australian Governments
DEET     Department of Employment, Education and Training
ESA      Education Services Australia
IECBs    Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies
MCEECDYA Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs
MCEETYA  Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs
NAPLAN   National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
NEA      National Education Agreement
NIRA     National Indigenous Reform Agreement
OECD     Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PISA     Programme for International Student Assessment
PLP      Personalised Learning Plan
SCSEEC   Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood
Statement of Original Authorship

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

QUT Verified Signature

Signature: 

Date: 27.10.2015
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To my ever supporting husband who has had to face the concept of being ignored and accepting that our weekends together would always involve a laptop on my lap and me not always focused on the conversation. Thank you my darling but I must apologise already as the ignorance will continue for a bit longer yet.

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Thanks also to Charlotte Cottier (IPEd Accredited Editor), who provided copyediting and proofreading services according to the guidelines laid out in the university-endorsed national Guidelines for editing research theses.
One of the tensions that is consistent through a range of educational policies about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is between the need to attend to the specificities of policymaking and policy enactment and the need for awareness of the underlying assumptions and bias within policy discourse. That tension was central to this study. In this study, primary emphasis was upon the general and common elements in the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan* [the Plan] (MCEECDYA, 2011a). The general and common elements in this study refer to the factors as provided by Rein (1983) that affect the implementation of policy. They include how the goals are articulated within the policy, how the intricacies and ramifications relevant to the implementation process of the policy are addressed and finally, the scope, duration and size of the resource commitment to the policy, if applicable.

The *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan* (MCEECDYA, 2011a) was critically analysed to identify its purpose, intentions and general and common elements. In its current form, the Plan consists of six domains: 1) Readiness for School; 2) Engagement and Connections; 3) Attendance; 4) Literacy and Numeracy; 5) Leadership, Quality Teaching and Workforce Development; and 6) Pathways to Real Post-School Options. However, one immediate limitation of the study is its focus on only two domains of the Plan: Engagement and Connections, and Attendance, although a great deal in the study has considerable relevance to the other domains. Engagement and Connections as well as Attendance were selected as their implementation and interrelationship within the school setting, where students are engaging and attending school, would influence the “successfulness” of the other domains’ implementation. That is, for students’ improvement in Literacy and Numeracy and transition to the workplace to be attained, there is a need for increased engagement within the school and their learning as well as a steady attendance rate (MCEETYA, 2006).

The following section provides an overview of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy to foreground the Plan and examines the historical challenges, political context and current challenges. Strategies implemented to address
A critical analysis of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan

the issues faced and how the incorporation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice counters the disparity are identified.

1.1 CURRENT CONCERNS WITH ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER EDUCATION POLICY

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy and its purpose, intentions and general and common elements have been the highlighted subject of governmental policy for a number of decades. Federal Indigenous education policies, strategies and agendas, as well as State policies, have been developed and implemented since the 1960s when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were allowed access to state education (Beresford, 2012; Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003; Vass, 2012). Governments are recognising that despite the slow progress, “and a raft of other initiatives in Indigenous education, and Indigenous affairs more broadly, over the past decade and more, performance data across a range of sources point to little gain” (Dreise & Thomson, 2014, p. 2). Despite each one of these policies intending to address and close the gap between non-Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ outcomes, data shows very little progress is evident (Department of Education, Training & Employment, 2013; Gray & Beresford, 2008; Hughes & Hughes, 2012).

In recent years, the disparity between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their non-Indigenous counterparts has seen a shift where policy discourse uses emotive yet definitive terminology such as “failure”. The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians [Melbourne Declaration] (MCEETYA, 2008) demonstrates such arguments when it states, “Australia has failed [emphasis added] to improve educational outcomes for many Indigenous Australians and addressing this issue must be a key priority over the next decade” (p. 5). Even more recently in the Closing the Gap: Prime Minister’s Report 2014 (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2014, p. 1), Prime Minister Tony Abbott states that the Government is still “failing” [emphasis added] in too many of the objectives set within the National Indigenous Reform Agreement [NIRA] (COAG, 2008), otherwise known as Closing the Gap.

Indeed, terminology within policy has seen a shift in policy discourse. As a result, Lowe (2011) states “Governments have responded by seeking to shift the blame away from their policy failures by suggesting that schools are almost solely
accountable for systemic underachievement” (p. 14). The Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) exemplifies the Federal Government’s shift in accountability for systemic underachievement by highlighting the initiatives government and their agencies such as the Education Council (formerly known as the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood [SCSEEC]) have already implemented to address the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their non-Indigenous counterparts. Furthermore, it “reflects commitments by governments through COAG to introduce substantial structural and innovative reforms in early childhood and schooling as outlined in National Agreements between the Australian Government and State and Territory Governments” (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 4). In this instance, the term “governments” refers to both Federal government and all State and Territory governments. Figure 1.1 represents the Australian Education “architecture” from Federal to State to Systems and schools. It shows the positions of each political and/or social structure represented within education as providers to the Australian primary and secondary student population.

The six domains mentioned previously have been “identified as having the greatest impact on closing the gap” (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2012, p. 72) by government and its agencies including ACARA. The domains are broad. To address this, the domains provide strategies and actions that address factors that affect student attainment. Gray and Beresford (2008) indicate a further five key factors that influence Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student educational outcomes. They include:

- impact of colonialism including intergenerational trauma, dispossession;
- past attempts at educational “reforms” including assimilation;
- social factors including poor attendance, socio-economic position;
- sustainability of funding for reform; and
- reluctance to allow self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
These factors demonstrate aspects that not only influence students’ education, learning and achievement in school but Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s health, wellbeing and economic positioning. Further to these factors, the plethora of cultural and social issues hindering or influencing a student’s educational attainment exacerbates the complexity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. Gray and Beresford’s (2008) key factors demonstrate how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ educational outcomes are heavily influenced by historical, political, cultural and social factors. Dreise and Thomson (2014, p. 3) argue, “such cases of complexity require different responses to one-size-fits-all and top-down solutions”. For example, whilst some of these factors are presented within policies such as the Closing the Gap agenda (Council of Australian Governments [COAG], 2009), they are
often addressed singularly and as separate issues rather than being addressed holistically within the various fields including education and health. The production, distribution and consumption of texts – in this case, policy – is a component of Fairclough’s (2013a) framework for Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and further explanation is provided in section 1.4 *Understanding Discourse in this Study*. A brief discussion of the historical challenges that influence policymakers is now provided.

1.1.1 Historical challenges

Historical challenges faced by power elite include the educational differences or disadvantage between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous students. The term *power elite* refers to dominant organisations that have specific duties in governance such as Federal and State governments as well as their agencies including the Education Council and the Australian Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs Senior Officials Committee. Such challenges have been evident since the integration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students into state schools in the late 1960s (Beresford, 2012; Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003; Vass, 2012). In addition, Gray and Beresford (2008) highlight the similarities and differences between the Australian Aboriginals and the Torres Strait Islander peoples and other First Nation peoples worldwide and the strategies other governments have endeavoured to implement to address the inequality in their respective countries. In the Australian context, the colonialist education reforms including the justification for assimilation have had detrimental effects on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and have, in turn, affected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ involvement in the schooling environment (see Gray & Beresford, 2008; Partington, 1998a, 1998b; Partington & Beresford, 2012; Vass, 2012). Within this study, the term *colonialist* refers to the early British settlers who established control of Australia in 1788.

The colonialist reform of assimilation (Hasluck, 1961, p. 1)

... means in the view of all Australian governments that all Aborigines and part-Aborigines are expected eventually to attain the same manner of living as other Australians and to live as members of a single Australian community enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians.
This reform demonstrates the interconnection of the historical and political influence on education. In other words, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were to observe the customs and beliefs of the colonialists and abandon their own customs, languages and beliefs. Integration into the schooling system enabled the enactment of assimilatory reforms and properties to be imposed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Mellor and Corrigan (2004, p. 1) reiterate this by stating, “for centuries, education has been used as a tool of assimilation”. This is exemplified even today by the ongoing debate regarding the sending of remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to boarding schools versus attending community schools. The argument against such an action of sending children out of community to attend school is primarily fixed around the assimilatory properties of boarding school education and cultural loss (Pearson, 2004). Such debate draws on the political context as much as the historical context that determines a student’s engagement within the school environment. An overview of the political context is now provided.

1.1.2 Political context

Lingard, Creagh, and Vass (2012) provide an overview of government involvement in education. They detail the disharmony within the political education forum as the Federal Government has increasingly expanded its involvement within education, which “according to the Constitution, [is] a ‘residual power’ of the States and Territories” (p. 318). This disharmony is primarily based within finance and ultimately funding which, in turn, “enabled centralists to move the federal government into the management of education institutions with the use of its stronger financial situation” (Gould, 2014, para. 2). The government’s increased involvement has been exemplified in recent years. Federal Government policies, initiatives and agencies attached to the Federal Government, for example, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) and the Education Council have sought to address and improve educational inequality between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and non-Indigenous students’ educational outcomes (Lingard et al., 2012). Further exemplification of Federal Government involvement through policy follows.

In the early 2000s, Howard’s Liberal government sought to reconcile these issues through their education policy Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage (Dreise & Thomson, 2014). This was followed by the Closing the Gap agenda of the Rudd and
Gillard Labor governments (Dreise & Thomson, 2014). Each policy, including the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) sought to address the disparities prevalent in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and to improve the educational outcomes of the students. Within the Plan the gap is addressed by setting targeted goals within the six domains that align with the Closing the Gap agenda and highlights the importance of addressing these goals by setting deadlines.

The Closing the Gap agenda has brought to the forefront of policy discourse the inequality of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people’s educational attainment, health, wellbeing and economic positioning (COAG, 2009). With this agenda, addressing the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and non-Indigenous students has become paramount (Mellor & Corrigan, 2004). Currently, there is a dire need for reform and for vast improvement in the educational attainment, health, wellbeing and economic positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2014). This is particularly so for the Queensland State Government.

1.1.3 Current challenges

At present, the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is the second largest state population cohort in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). By 2020, Queensland will accommodate the largest Indigenous population in Australia (Queensland Government, 2010). Table 1.1 below provides the estimated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations by the Australian Bureau of Statistics for 2011.
The increase in population numbers is explained by the “youth bubble” evident in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. The youth bubble refers to the very high population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders under the age of 24 years “comprising 57 per cent of the Indigenous population” (Queensland Government, 2010, p. 3). For example, “Queensland’s youth population (10 to 16 year olds), will increase by 2017 … by 14 per cent for Indigenous youth” (Queensland Government, 2010, p. 3). Jackson (2008) discusses the implications of the growing number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students within the school setting. That is, “the age disparity also means that the Indigenous population has the potential to make disproportionate gains in educational attainment, by virtue of its age structure alone, rather than from any true improvement in the conditions of access to education and training” (Jackson, 2008, p. 223). In other words, there is the potential for improvement to be attributed to strategies and implementation of policy when, in fact, it may be based on simple population increase. The predicted increase has brought to the forefront for the Queensland State Government the realisation that, if issues such as the health and education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples do not improve, the ongoing costs to the Queensland economy in the future will be substantial (Altman, Biddle, & Hunter, 2009; Banks, 2003; Queensland Government, 2010).

Table 1.1
Estimated Resident Population, Indigenous Status, 30 June, 2011

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<th>Torres Strait Islander only no.</th>
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<td>669 881</td>
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</table>

Note. Adapted from Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians: June 2011, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011.

*Includes Other Territories.
1.1.4 Future implications

The ongoing costs mentioned are illustrated in the 2008 Social Justice Report where, for example, the unemployment rate of Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples aged 15–64 was almost double that of non-Indigenous peoples (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2009). The MCEETYA Taskforce on Indigenous Education in 2001 stated that “young Indigenous Australians generally seem disproportionately represented among young people who are having difficulty in successfully negotiating the transition from school to independence and active participation in their communities” (p. 3). Dreise and Thomson (2014, p. 3) state “unless educational outcomes for Indigenous young people vastly improve, then the downstream impact and cost in terms of social wellbeing, welfare, health, employment and economic sufficiency will be heavy”.

To address this, the domain, Pathways to Real Post-School Options, within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) encourages improvement of the transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from school into the workplace and further studies through collaborative approaches between government, schools and community. With the intention to increase the number of students transitioning from school to further study and employment, it anticipates that there should be reduction in future ongoing costs such as the reliance on welfare as a means of income support (MCEECDYA, 2011a). Therefore, education is important and as stated in the Closing the Gap: Prime Minister’s Report 2015 (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2015, p. 21), “the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is everybody’s business. Parents, carers, communities and governments must see themselves as partners in this crucial initiative”. Through engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and community, the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice occurs.

The interrelationship of the domains exemplifies how they are incremental and reliant on each other for improvement in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ educational outcomes. That is, the domain Pathways to Real Post-School Options is reliant on improving student attendance to gain the skills and knowledge necessary to gain a Year 12 or equivalent attainment (Attendance) and on the increased engagement of students, parents and community (Engagement and Connections) to improve student wellbeing. This in turn provides students opportunity to apply
themselves within the teaching and learning offered at school (MCEECDYA, 2011a). However, as stated and exemplified, historical, political, cultural and social factors heavily influence education that in turn affects students’ educational outcomes.

1.1.5 Inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice

The Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a), as with most recent policy, went through a consultative process where Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies (IECBs) and other leading Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators were approached to provide commentary prior to its public release. This process enabled the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice. The means for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to share their knowledge, lived experiences, ideas and traditions as well as their aspirations and struggles is what is meant by the term “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice”. This term further relates to one of Rigney’s Indigenist Research Principles (1999): privileging Indigenous voices in research. Rigney’s Principles (1999) are elaborated in the following section. It is evident that governments are now recognising that partnerships and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice within Indigenous education is a crucial factor required for success (MCEETYA, 2009).

At a school level, the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) provides opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice through the domain, Engagement and Connections. By including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice, a cultural context is provided to address the cultural “gap” of non-Indigenous educators and administrators. As Lowe (2011, p. 14) states “schools can only acquire the skills and knowledge to establish meaningful partnerships if current policies are replaced by an authentic Indigenised partnership framework that allows informed Aboriginal parents and communities to engage with the core business of schools”. Nonetheless, the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) is open for interpretation and translation and its successful implementation is reliant on how schools (re)produce and (re)distribute the policy when they translate, recontextualise and implement its strategies. To monitor the implementation of the Plan, “focus” schools were selected.

1.1.6 Introduction of focus schools

Government regulated the recontextualisation and translation of the Plan through the identification of focus schools. The NIRA (COAG, 2008) informed the domains
located within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a). COAG (2009), in response to NIRA and stated in the development of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a), selected a number of focus schools. “Focus schools are those schools with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with the greatest need and where effort should be focused to make the greatest difference” (MCEECDYA, 2011b, p. 5). According to the Plan, focus schools were then identified by State and other education sectors using a three-tier process whereby primary schools whose Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student population was 75 per cent or higher were ranked and established as potential focus schools. These schools were then considered and ranked with regard to their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ performance rankings in their National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results. Schools where 25 per cent of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student population fell below the minimum standard for reading, writing or numeracy were then further determined as potential focus schools. A final “culling” from the list of potential focus schools was then conducted where “anomalous schools” could be removed from the list and others included comprising secondary schools and those schools “identified under the Low Socio-Economic Status School Communities National Partnership and/or the Literacy and Numeracy National Partnership” (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 44). The focus schools were mandated to enact and implement at a local level and report on the Plan to the relevant government sectors over its five years prior to its final review in 2014.

This study critically analysed the general and common elements in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a). As previously discussed, two domains of the Plan are examined – Engagement and Connections, and Attendance, both discussed in Chapter 2. To do this investigation, the study drew on the principles of Indigenist research (Rigney, 1999) and Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2001b) as the basis to inform the approach to data analysis in the study.

An overview of Indigenist research as the theoretical framework that informed the study is now provided. This is followed by an overview of each of Rigney’s Indigenist Research Principles.
1.2 INDIGENIST RESEARCH

Prominent Aboriginal scholar, Lester-Irabinna Rigney is one of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander scholars including Nakata (1998) and Moreton-Robinson (2013) who advocate for Indigenist Research Methodologies. The lack of recognition of Indigenous knowledges and research methodologies, according to Rigney (1999) and Foley (2003) is due to the embedded Eurocentric context and colonial dominant power and thought of educational institutions. Rigney emphasises the need for liberatory epistemologies to challenge traditional Western epistemologies when he states, “Indigenous Peoples must look to new anti-colonial epistemologies and methodologies to construct, re-discover, and/or re-affirm their knowledge and cultures” (Rigney, 1999, p. 114). There is a need to employ an Indigenous epistemology to inform the struggle for self-determination (Rigney, 1999). Liberatory epistemologies and anti-colonial epistemologies and methodologies are understood in this thesis to be Indigenous methodologies that affirm Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing. Within this study, the Indigenist Research Principles provided by Rigney (1999) identify key assumptions in the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) and show how discourse positions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. These principles are resistance as an emancipatory imperative, political integrity, and privileging Indigenous voice. However, due to the limitations of a Masters of Research project, a major emphasis will be on the principles: Political Integrity in Indigenist Research and Resistance as an emancipatory imperative. The importance of these principles within this study is their properties to help promote discussion around policy decision-making and potential policy revision in the struggle for self-determination. These principles will be elaborated in the next section.

As an Aboriginal researcher within a Westernised academic realm, Rigney’s Indigenist Research framework provides a means to include Indigenist principles by providing “a strategy for research rather than being interpreted as a research process” (Foley, 2003, p. 47). In other words, they provide a means to identify key assumptions within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) to identify how language use positions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and to challenge the subtle issues of power and dominance evident and maintained in policy discourse. Therefore, Rigney’s Indigenist Research Principles (1999) inform the approach to data analysis. An elaboration of the research principles follows.
1.3 INDIGENIST RESEARCH PRINCIPLES

The underpinning theoretical framework, Indigenist Research, has three principles. Each principle addresses a component that reflects the struggle for self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Further to this, the principles inform the approach when analysing the data in Chapter 5.

1.3.1 Resistance as the emancipatory imperative

Firstly, there is resistance as the emancipatory imperative in Indigenist Research (Rigney, 1999). This study acknowledges the oppression of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and its effects still experienced today. “This approach rejects the dehumanizing characterisation of Indigenous peoples as the oppressed victims in need of charity by challenging the power and control that traditional research has had on knowledge over the ‘other’” (Foley, 2003, p. 48). The study critically analyses the Plan to expose how the language used maintains taken-for-granted assumptions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, that is, the process through which dominant discourse comes into being and continues to perpetuate. In other words, it involves the analysis of how power is established and maintained through policy discourse.

1.3.2 Political integrity

Secondly, Rigney speaks of political integrity in Indigenist Research (1999, p. 117). Foley (2003) states that for research to benefit the struggle faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders then an Indigenous researcher should conduct the research. Furthermore, Rigney (2006, p. 41) states, “central to Indigenist Research is that Indigenous Australians’ ideals, values and philosophies are core to the research agenda”. Self-determination is central to Rigney’s Indigenist Research Principles (1999) and within Indigenous education policy, albeit a short history, there is evidence of an increasing involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within policy production, distribution and consumption. Consultative committees, representative bodies and advisory groups, like the Indigenous Advisory Council to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet chaired by Warren Mundine, are examples of this increased involvement (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2014). However, despite this increased voice, Rigney (2002, p. 79) exerts Indigenous education policies “tell the new wave of Indigenous children and their parents that Aboriginal self-determination can
only occur within the already existing constitutional arrangements”. Therefore, in this study, there is an analysis of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) to build critical awareness of the political integrity of discourse.

1.3.3 Privileging Indigenous voice

Finally, Rigney suggests privileging Indigenous voices in Indigenist Research (1999, p. 117). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research conducted by an Aboriginal researcher provides an opportunity to give privilege to their voice. However, as Rigney (1999) explains, there is no cultural oneness among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; there is no shared rapport between groups. Brady (1992) states “Indigenist research is research which gives voice to the voiceless” (p. 106). In this study, the positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within the Plan’s (MCEECDYA, 2011a) discourse provides insight to this principle.

Rigney’s Indigenist Research Principles (1999) complemented Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA was used to analyse the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) and is now elaborated.

1.4 UNDERSTANDING DISCOURSE IN THIS STUDY

In this study, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was applied to the data. Fairclough (2001b) analysed the connection between the use of language and inequitable power relations. His intention was to highlight how influential language use is in producing, maintaining and challenging issues of power and dominance. The second reason aligns with Rigney’s Indigenist Research Principle (1999), resistance as the emancipatory imperative in Indigenist Research, where his intent was “to help increase consciousness of how language contributes to the domination of some people by others, because consciousness is the first step towards emancipation” (Fairclough, 2013c, p. 193). This approach allows understanding of how language maintains and reproduces power.

Furthermore, it enables the researcher to investigate how the use of discourse works to maintain issues of power and dominance between specific social actors and/or groups (van Dijk, 1993). For example, in this study, schools and systems are informed that the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) has been developed to address several current policies including the Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008) and that National Agreements between Federal and State government demonstrate government’s
commitment to these reforms. In this study, systems refer to the three sectors within State education being State, Catholic and Independent. As policy from government, the Plan becomes the institutionalised discourse; that is, schools and systems are restricted as to their input into its production and distribution but as consumers, henceforth referred to as readers, are active in the (re)production, (re)distribution and (re)consumption of said policy. Elaboration on dominance and issues of power occurs in Chapter 3. Discussion regarding the orders of discourse found within policy follows in Chapter 4.

A two-tier process demonstrates this. Firstly, power is established and enacted in terms of the unequal social positioning of participants. For example, focus schools are instructed in the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) that they must address all the strategies as outlined within their Strategic and Operational planning by the end of 2011. Secondly, the process looks at the “terms of unequal capacity to control how texts are produced, distributed and consumed (and hence the shapes of texts) in particular sociocultural contexts” (Fairclough, 2013a, p. 1). In this instance, the recontextualisation and translation of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) at a school level is where policy is further (re)produced and (re)distributed.

Modes of reproduction refer to the various modes of discourse that enact or legitimise dominance, to provide example (van Dijk, 1993). The study analyses the use of language, both explicit and implicit, ideologies and strategies incorporated within the Plan to address the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Wodak and Meyer (2009) further demonstrate the necessity for CDA to challenge any societal event or contexts. The Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) was initiated by the National Apology to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in 2008 by the then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd (COAG, 2009) and the struggle for reconciliation.

CDA allows the discourse-context relationship to be analysed. Fairclough’s (2013a) approach to CDA uses a three-dimensional framework, where text, discourse practices and social practices are identified. The context made up of discourse practices, where the “processes of text production, distribution and consumption” (Fairclough, 2013a, p. 2) are analysed, involves maintaining power and sharing ideology. This exemplifies reasoning for analysing the general and common elements and identifying the assumptions evident.
1.5 THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study critically analyses the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) and its underlying assumptions and bias. In doing so, the study analyses how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are positioned in the Plan. In turn, it addresses how, despite policy being objective, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s involvement and therefore means of self-determination within education is limited. Considering this, several key research questions inform this study. The primary overarching question asks:

1. What key assumptions are evident in the general and common elements of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan*?

Further investigation is required to respond to this question. The sub-questions that have emerged include:

2. How are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people positioned in the Plan’s discourse?

3. Is the Plan biased despite the representation of the Plan as objective and factual?

These questions will be addressed in Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5 and will be resolved in Chapter 6. The first question examines the assumptions within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) taken for granted by policymakers about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and community that affect a student’s educational outcome. The second question examines how policy discourse positions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Finally, the third question investigates the extent of dominance and power within the Plan’s discourse. From this insight, an alternative understanding of policy discourse is gained to redress the issues of power and dominance enacted within policy.

Thus far, the research problem of this thesis has been presented, along with the importance of understanding how the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) positions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The research questions have been enumerated. The theoretical and methodological frameworks drawn on to inform the analysis of this study have been outlined. The next section outlines how the research questions will be addressed and presents the design of the study.
1.6 THE DESIGN OF THE STUDY

This study uses Critical Discourse Analysis to examine the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan* (MCEEDYA, 2011a). The study critically analyses the Plan and its underlying assumptions and bias through the general and common elements disseminated in the Plan. Furthermore, the production, distribution and consumption of the Plan are analysed through the provision of the social context. The discourse and how it positions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is investigated.

Henry, Lingard, Rizvi and Taylor (2013) define policy analysis as “the study of what governments do, why and with what effects” (p. 35). Empirical research critically analysing policy is beneficial for a number of key stakeholders to assist in change and reform. However, as Henry et al. (2013) suggest, Government generally produces policy because of some economic, social or political factor. In other cases, the production of a policy may be due to the policy cycle, where policy is developed to build on previous policy (*incremental*) or is complementing and developed from other broader policies (*intertextual*). Therefore, the Plan (MCEEDYA, 2011a) is both incremental and intertextual in nature. That is, it builds on recommendations as provided within the *Review of Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005–2008 for the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs* (David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research, 2009).

There is little research in the critical analysis of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy as discourse (Taylor, 2004). This study provides insight to the assumptions prevalent within the Plan that has been developed to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student educational outcomes. Furthermore, the study presents how language within the Plan has been used to maintain issues of power and dominance. Within this study, the Plan (MCEEDYA, 2011a) as a primary document is critically analysed using CDA. This document is a public document made available by the Education Council on their website.

1.7 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

As discussed previously, this thesis examines the dominant beliefs inferred within the Plan (MCEEDYA, 2011a). Chapter 1 has introduced the study. It has
provided an introductory outline of the research problem, the intention of the study, the theoretical framework, methodology, the participants and the research questions.

Chapter 2 reviews the policies that have informed the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) and the six domains that set the Plan’s agenda. A table demonstrates the interrelationships between the various policies. Particular attention is paid to the historical and social context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education to foreground the current context including the experiences prior to colonisation and post-colonisation. Within this study, post-colonisation is understood as and refers to post-1788, after the colonisation of Australia, and is not used in the sense that colonisation in regards to assimilation and other practices of oppression are no longer occurring. Evidence and argument for the acknowledgement of Australian history is presented and its relevance to the formation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy, including the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a), is identified. With the historical and social context elaborated on, analysis of the Plan and two of the domains are presented and a major gap in the research literature is identified.

Chapter 3 presents the theoretical framework of the study. Rigney’s Indigenist Research Principles (1999) provide insight into the emancipatory properties of research being conducted by an Aboriginal researcher into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs. This perspective illuminates significant aspects to consider when critically analysing Indigenous education policy. The positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people challenges the political integrity of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a). The passive and active racism prevalent in Australian society considers and highlights the use of discourse to establish power and maintain oppression. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) allows for the discourse-context relationship to be analysed as well as the key assumptions evident in the general and common elements of the Plan.

In Chapter 4, CDA provides the method for the analysis of the data. The chapter also presents the social contexts that locate and define the study. It concludes with a justification of the research process and its outcomes for trustworthiness and ethical standards, thus providing the basis for the actual work of analysis that begins in Chapter 5.

The analysis of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan* (MCEECDYA, 2011a) occurs in Chapter 5. The general and common elements of the
Plan are ascertained and provided to foreground the analysis. Further analyses of the experiential, relational and expressive word choices are undertaken on the discourse. Particular focus is placed on declarative statements, expressive modality, classification schemes and euphemistic expression as well as the whole-text organisation. The positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within the Plan through analysis is also established.

In Chapter 6, recommendations and findings from the analysis are provided. The major findings from the study are presented. The contribution of the theoretical framework and the methodology employed are acknowledged. Finally, directions for future study in response to the findings of this study are considered and provided.

1.8 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, key aspects of the research have been emphasised. That is, a statement of the problem that informs the thesis has been provided. In consequence, the thesis will focus on the key assumptions evident in the general and common elements of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) and how discourse is used within policy to maintain power and dominance. The research questions guiding this focus have been stated. In the next chapter, the literature is reviewed as it relates to the concern of this study.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The previous chapter presented the central concern of this thesis, the implicit assumptions and bias of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan* [the Plan] (MCEECDYA, 2011a). It argued that policy, although virtuous in intent, has the ability to suppress Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through discourse. It then presented the research questions, the design of the study, and the structure of the thesis.

Drawing on the relevant literature and research, this chapter identifies the policies that inform the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a). It examines and critically assesses the assumptions relevant to policy with particular attention to the historical progression of Indigenous education policy. The chapter concludes by identifying a major gap in the research literature that the study seeks to address.

In 2011, the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) was endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) and released for distribution and consumption (SCSEEC, 2013b, p. 3). The Plan provides six domains to address the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students’ educational attainment and outcomes. These domains include addressing early childhood, primary and secondary education and the transition to the workplace (MCEECDYA, 2011a). The Plan is a five-year plan and to be reviewed at the end of 2014. Its purpose is to address the recommendations provided within the *Review of Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005–2008 for the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs* developed by the David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research (2009). The challenge to change the existing ideology of low educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in comparison to their non-Indigenous counterparts as “normal” and incremental improvements as “acceptable” was presented in the *Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005–2008* paper (MCEETYA, 2006). Due to the consistently changing name of the agency that has coordinated the Federal Government’s strategic planning on school education over the past several years (SCSEEC, 2012), Appendix A is provided to assist the reader in understanding and identifying the Council, presently known as the Education Council.
This chapter reviews several major aspects related to policy production, distribution and consumption. Section 2.1 analyses how and why the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) was developed by interpreting the policies and agreements that informed its domains and by establishing the national policy context. Section 2.2 analyses the historical and social context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education to situate the Plan in the current reform agenda. Finally, section 2.3 reviews research findings and recommendations relevant to two of the Plan’s domains – Engagement and Connections, and Attendance.

2.1 HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF POLICY

The Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) was part of the response from Federal Government to address the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students but, more importantly, it “sets out how governments are coming together to realise this strategic theme in relation to early childhood and school education” (SCSEEC, 2013a, p. 3). The Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a, pp. 9-26) provides national, systemic and local level actions under six domains: 1) Readiness for school; 2) Engagement and Connections; 3) Attendance; 4) Literacy and Numeracy; 5) Leadership, Quality Teaching and Workforce Development; and 6) Pathways to Real Post-School Options. Within these domains, fifty-five key actions document the strategies designed to assist in achieving the COAG targets in their reform agenda. The Closing the Gap agenda includes “halving the gap in reading, writing and numeracy by 2018, and halving the gap in Year 12 (or equivalent) attainment rates by 2020” (SCSEEC, 2013b, para. 4). The Plan, therefore, provides the means to address the gap as well as providing data for review purposes.

A number of policies and agreements between Federal and State governments have informed the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a). That is, it is the ramification of other policies demonstrating the influence of the general and common elements of policy. Its purpose is “to assist education providers to accelerate improvements in the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people” (p. 4). The overarching document that informs the Plan is the National Indigenous Reform Agreement [Closing the Gap] (COAG, 2008) that looks to address such areas as health and education to improve the livelihoods of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The National Indigenous Reform Agreement itself is informed by the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (Department
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The Plan also endeavours to provide an informed response to the review of *Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005–2008* (MCEETYA, 2006) by addressing its recommendations, further focusing the national effort to address the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Figure 2.1 below is a pictorial representation of the main policies that inform the Plan as provided within the *National Indigenous Reform Agreement* (COAG, 2008). An analysis of the relevant educational policies is necessary to understand the discourse and social practices that informed the production of the Plan and, therefore, establish the context at the time of the development of the Plan.

![Figure 2.1. The main policies that inform the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan. Taken from “National Indigenous Reform Agreement: Closing the Gap”, by Council of Australian Governments, 2008.](image)

### 2.1.1 Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians

The primary document that informs all education policy is the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* [the Melbourne Declaration] (MCEETYA, 2008). It is a ten-year plan that articulates the intentions of Australian governments for education. It has two overarching goals:
Goal 1:
Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence

Goal 2:
All young Australians become:
– successful learners
– confident and creative individuals
– active and informed citizens
(MCEETYA, 2008, p. 7)

As the primary document, it also informs the discourse practices, that is, the production, distribution and consumption of all other related policy documents. The Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008) has itself been informed by the Closing the Gap agenda. The Melbourne Declaration was produced promptly after the 2008 National Apology given by the then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd (COAG, 2009) as further demonstration of the government’s commitment to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ educational attainment, health, wellbeing and economic positioning.

Supporting the Melbourne Declaration’s (MCEETYA, 2008) two overarching goals are the Commitments to Action stated in both the Melbourne Declaration and the MCEETYA Four-Year Plan 2009–2012 (2009). There are eight Commitments to Action including the development of partnerships between governments, schools, students, parents and the broader community (Engagement and Connections); as well as developing, challenging and engaging learning environments within middle schooling where student disengagement from learning is at great risk (Attendance) (MCEETYA, 2008). Each of the actions within the MCEETYA Four-Year Plan specifically addresses improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (2009).

The Commitments to Action present how MCEETYA will address the interrelated areas as outlined in the Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008). Furthermore, the Four-Year Plan is a companion document to the Melbourne Declaration and provides further societal and discourse foregrounding, providing “some contextual information on why each area of action is important” (MCEETYA, 2009, p. 4) as well as a framework to illustrate and assist in the planning of collaborative enterprises between State and Federal governments.
Interestingly, the companion document informs the reader of the processes of discourse practice. Here, prior to addressing the actions, it provides information on the document’s layout and organisation, specifically highlighting the interconnectedness to the Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008). In doing so, it informs the reader of how the consumption of the Melbourne Declaration (2008) has informed the writers in the production of the *MCEETYA Four-Year Plan 2009–2012* (MCEETYA, 2009). However, the Melbourne Declaration and its companion document are not the only policy documents that have informed the production of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a).

The overarching goals as found in the Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008) are indeed broad and all-encompassing, and need to be to ensure Australia’s future success as a prosperous nation. The Melbourne Declaration looks to address the recognised issues and demands placed on Australian education. It acknowledges the technological advancements and the globalisation of knowledge that education providers at all levels need in order to develop the knowledge, skills and values of all young Australians in preparation for the 21st century workplace (MCEETYA, 2008). Each of these goals, in relation to their influence on the Plan’s domains (MCEECDYA, 2011a), is elaborated.

The Melbourne Declaration’s first goal to promote equity and excellence throughout Australian schools informs the Plan’s six domains (MCEECDYA, 2011a) as represented in Table 2.1 below. This goal reiterates governments’ commitment to ensure schooling is inclusive for all students and calls upon schools, parents, students and the broader community to work together in achieving this goal. Therefore, schools need to ensure that they are free from discrimination and that the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are equitable to their non-Indigenous counterparts. The Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008) states that improvement is not just providing opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to improve but that equitable outcomes are achieved (MCEETYA, 2008). This is achieved through the engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, parents and community in all aspects of school with the intention of increasing participation within the school setting.
Table 2.1
The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan and How the Key Policies Inform its Domains

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy</th>
<th>Policy strategies/targets/goals/priority domains</th>
<th>Relevance to Plan’s domains</th>
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| Melbourne Declaration 2008 (MCEETYA, 2008) | • Goal 1: Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence  
• Goal 2: All young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, [and] active and informed citizens (MCEETYA, 2008, pp. 7-8) | • Readiness for school  
• Engagement and connections  
• Attendance  
• Literacy and Numeracy  
• Leadership, quality teaching and workforce development  
• Pathways to real post-school options (MCEECDYA, 2011a, pp. 9-26) |
| National Indigenous Reform Agreement 2008 (COAG, 2008) | Targets:  
• closing the life expectancy gap within a generation;  
• halving the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade;  
• ensuring all Indigenous four-year-olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education within five years;  
• halving the gap for Indigenous students in reading, writing and numeracy within a decade;  
• halving the gap for Indigenous students in Year 12 attainment or equivalent attainment rates by 2020; and  
• halving the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade. (COAG, 2008, p. 8) | • Readiness for school  
• Literacy and Numeracy  
• Pathways to real post-school options (MCEECDYA, 2011a, pp. 9-26) |
| National Education Agreement (NEA) 2012 (COAG, 2012) | Policy directions/outcomes:  
• All children are engaged in and benefiting from schooling  
• Young people are meeting basic literacy and numeracy standards, and overall levels of literacy and numeracy achievement are improving  
• Australian students excel by international standards  
• Schooling promotes the social inclusion and reduces the educational disadvantage of children, especially Indigenous children  
• Young people make a successful transition from school to work and further study (COAG, 2012, p. 5) | • Readiness for school  
• Literacy and Numeracy  
• Pathways to real post-school options (MCEECDYA, 2011a, pp. 9-26) |
• Domain 2: School and community educational partnerships  
• Domain 3: School leadership  
• Domain 4: Quality teaching  
• Domain 5: Pathways to training, employment and higher education (MCEETYA, 2006, pp. 18-31) | • Readiness for school  
• Engagement and connections  
• Attendance  
• Leadership, quality teaching and workforce development  
• Pathways to real post-school options (MCEECDYA, 2011a, pp. 9-26) |

The second goal within the Melbourne Declaration looks to address the student as well as the potential citizen when it states, “All young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, [and] active and informed citizens” (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 7). In other words, successful learners are learners
who have the ability to maintain the motivation to reach their goals, successfully making a transition into future study or the workplace after school. Confident and creative individuals are said to be optimistic and have the ability to maintain healthy and satisfying lives. Active and informed citizens are individuals who value Australia’s democratic way of life. In relation to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student learner and schools, there is a necessity to engage these students and their parents (Engagement and Connections) to have high expectations to achieve goals (which necessitate Attendance) to work towards future goals post-school (Transition). The generalised goals of the Melbourne Declaration have required other policy documents to be produced to further articulate how the overarching goals are to be achieved.

2.1.2 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy

Despite having been endorsed in 1989, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy [AEP] (DEET, 1989) is still current in Indigenous education policy. It is a joint national policy statement between Federal and State governments but also is the foundation paper for all current policy. It establishes the need for co-operation and collaboration between Federal and State governments as well as education systems with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to address the educational needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The AEP (DEET, 1989) provides a framework for the diverse range of educational systems and institutions, despite differing philosophies and practices, to rectify the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander students. Its “overarching objective is to bring about equity in education and training outcomes for Indigenous Australians” (ACARA, 2011, p. 71). The AEP assumes that when facilitated through an articulated and strategic approach by all education systems, including pre-school, primary, secondary, tertiary and other further educational institutions, the educational progress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is likely.

The AEP (DEET, 1989) recognises that the gap between non-Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students cannot be remedied immediately but needs to be addressed through the development and implementation of long-term strategies. It provides twenty-one long-term goals that fall under four overarching
categories. They include the increased involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in educational decision-making, ensuring equitable access to educational services, achieving equitable participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in compulsory and post-compulsory schooling, as well as providing and enabling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to attain equitable educational outcomes. Overall, this policy has informed the various frameworks produced by Federal and State governments to address the disparities between non-Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, including the National Indigenous Reform Agreement (COAG, 2008) and the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a).

2.1.3 National Indigenous Reform Agreement

Informing the Melbourne Declaration document (MCEETYA, 2008) and informed by the AEP (DEET, 1989) is the National Indigenous Reform Agreement [NIRA] (COAG, 2008), otherwise known as the Closing the Gap agenda. Its purpose was to present the means of how Indigenous disadvantage, as reported in Closing the Gap in Indigenous Disadvantage: The Challenge for Australia (2009), was to be addressed by government. This document provides the six targets to address the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples being:

- close the gap in life expectancy within a generation (by 2031);
- halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five by 2018;
- ensure access to early childhood education for all Indigenous four year olds in remote communities by 2013;
- halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for children by 2018;
- halve the gap for Indigenous students in Year 12 (or equivalent) attainment rates by 2020; and

Furthermore, as stated in Closing the Gap on Indigenous Disadvantage: The Challenge for Australia (COAG, 2009, p. 4):

It is unacceptable that Australia, a successful, developed nation with a modern economy, should tolerate fundamental inequality between its Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.
COAG further demonstrates their intentions of closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples by recognising that a more holistic approach is necessary as strategies targeting a particular area of inequality will not have long-term effects and cannot gain significant improvements in isolation (COAG, 2009).

Three of the targets in Closing the Gap are specifically directed at improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and youth. Another target focuses on employment outcomes. However, as previously stated, the factors that influence Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ educational outcomes should not be addressed singularly but rather holistically and therefore, these targets look to improve the livelihoods of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

If the targets as stated within NIRA (COAG, 2008) are achieved, there will be a flow-on effect. That is, the reduction in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander infant deaths will further expand the “youth bubble” evident currently in Indigenous Australia’s population. This will then increase student population numbers, increasing the necessity for schools to aptly engage with students, parents and community as well as develop programmes to decrease disengagement and increase attendance. What this demonstrates is the potential flow-on effect from NIRA to the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a).

The targets relevant to the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) and this study within NIRA (COAG, 2008) focus on early childhood education equity; improving the reading, writing and numeracy outcomes as indicated by the NAPLAN annual assessment; and attainment of Year 12 certification or equivalent (COAG, 2008, p. 8). The targets detailed in the NIRA agenda set time frames for these goals to be achieved. However, the domains of Engagement and Connections as well as Attendance are implied within the targets set by NIRA. That is, improvement in a student’s literacy and numeracy attainment is not possible without the increased attendance of a student who is actively engaged in the teaching and learning. NIRA aligns with other key agreements that elaborate on the goals within the Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008) including the National Education Agreement (COAG, 2012).
2.1.4 National Education Agreement

The *National Education Agreement* [NEA] (COAG, 2012) acts in conjunction with the NIRA (COAG, 2008). The five goals as set by the NEA (COAG, 2012, p. 5) are as follows:

- All children are engaged in and benefiting from schooling
- Young people are meeting basic literacy and numeracy standards, and overall levels of literacy and numeracy achievement are improving
- Australian students excel by international standards
- Schooling promotes the social inclusion and reduces the educational disadvantage of children, especially Indigenous children
- Young people make a successful transition from school to work and further study

Therefore, the explicit link between the NIRA (COAG, 2008) and the NEA becomes apparent as it directs schooling to “promote[s] the social inclusion and reduce[s] the educational disadvantage of children, especially Indigenous children” (COAG, 2012, p. 5). By providing an education that is culturally and socially sensitive and inclusive, it would be anticipated that the engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students would increase (MCEECDYA, 2011a; Mellor & Corrigan, 2004). However, all of the goals set within the NEA (COAG, 2012) can be seen within the domains of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a).

For example, the first goal about engaging all students in schooling lends itself to the domain: Engagement and Connections. The second goal that refers to a student’s Literacy and Numeracy standards can be linked to the Literacy and Numeracy domain within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a). The third goal relates to Australia’s position within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tables. The OECD provides to governments a forum in which strategies, policies used to improve the social and economic wellbeing of all people can be shared, and governments can work collaboratively to find solutions and, ultimately, initiate social change (OECD, 2014). The fourth goal demonstrates the government’s commitment that education should be accessible and equitable for all students and validates the production of the Plan to address the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. The final goal of
students transitioning to the workplace or further study is obviously matched to the domain: Pathways to Real Post-School Options.

The five NEA goals (COAG, 2012) therefore elaborate on the goals set by the Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008) and complement the goals of the NIRA (COAG, 2008). This is further exemplified within the NEA (COAG, 2012), which states that the Agreement drives “reform directions to ‘Close the Gap’ in education outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and non-Indigenous students” (COAG, 2012, p. 3). Here the Agreement acknowledges its role in informing the government’s policies regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education reforms. Table 2.1 provides a visual representation that demonstrates the discourse practices while identifying various strategies and goals set by the key policies that inform the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a). This table identifies how each policy and/or agreement has informed the production of the Plan’s domains. It also allows for the identification of the historical and social context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy over the past decade.

Despite the numerous policies, the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is still evident (Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2013; Gray & Beresford, 2008; Hughes & Hughes, 2012). In fact, “Queensland’s progress has been slow. As a consequence the data shows a continuation, and in some cases, a widening of the gap” (Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2013, p. 5; see also Gray & Beresford, 2008; Hughes & Hughes, 2012). The Federal Government recognises that it needs a collaborative effort from all parties involved for the goals and deadlines as set within the Plan to be obtainable and achieved (MCEECDYA, 2011a). Figure 2.2 provides a conceptual overview of how the current policies have informed or are informed by the production, distribution and consumption of the Plan. However, for these to be achieved, there is also a need for all Australians to become aware of Australia’s history and the factors that have influenced current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational outcomes.
2.2 HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER EDUCATION

Up until the late 1960s, governmental policy prevented Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from entering state schools and accessing an education other than the teachings provided by missionaries (Partington & Beresford, 2012; Gray & Beresford, 2008). The “education” that is referred to is Westernised Eurocentric education such as reading and writing using standardised English. The incorporation of mathematics and history and the conventions of a classroom including expectations were denied to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
Prior to colonisation, “education [for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children] was largely informal, with learning taking place during the day to day activities of life” (Partington, 1998b, p. 28). Price (2012) states how the skills of the child was recognised and developed by community and therefore, trained in a specific role that would contribute to the group. In other words, Aboriginal communities, lands and ceremonies were the classrooms prior to the oppression and dispossession experienced with the arrival of the Europeans in 1788. For example, children who were student age prior to colonisation learnt while completing various chores and duties, through celebration and ritual, while participating and through hands-on experience rather than sitting at a desk. This means of learning and passing on tradition and knowledge was seen as primitive and discouraged through policy and action with the European colonisation of Australia.

### 2.2.1 Post - 1788

European settlement of Australia began a dominant thought in which Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders were seen as inferior. This dominance was enjoyed by European countries from as early as the 1500s as they invaded countries around the world with no regard for Indigenous populations (Ferreira, 2013). Indigenous Australians were seen as having no real culture as observed and compared to the “civilised” practices of the British which acted as the foundation for early policy to dispossess, alienate and encourage the decimation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population (Partington, 1998b). This practice and shared ideology continued until the early 1900s (Harris, 2003).

This belief was nurtured within the ideals of social Darwinism. It was generally accepted that the Indigenous Australian population would eventually die out (Bretherton & Mellor, 2006; Partington, 1998b). As relationships continued to break down and traditional lands became pastoralist grazing grounds, the Aboriginal population moved to the fringes of settlements, which caused further animosity.

By the early 1900s, “the Indigenous population [had] became a despised underclass that was regarded as a blot on society” (Partington, 1998b, p. 36). The governmental solution was to extend their powers over the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations through law and the creation of missions and reserves (State Library of Queensland, 2012). As the result of the then policies, families were forcibly...
removed from Country and in the process, separated, causing ongoing trauma to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s health and wellbeing.

Powers extended to the forced removal of children (Beresford, 2012; Bretherton & Mellor, 2006). A. O. Neville, Chief Protector of Aboriginals in Western Australia, was a prominent figure in the removal of children (McGregor, 2002). To validate the removal, Neville writes of “flea-ridden” humpies; camp conditions characterised by “fleas, germs and disease”; of unwashed clothing and bodies because of lack of running water and inadequate diets due to lack of cooking facilities (Beresford, 2012, p. 98).

These historical accounts of dispossession, forcible removal, social Darwinism and alienation supported by the then policy merely highlight why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are wary of and resistant to non-Indigenous expectations and, furthermore, explain how and why intergenerational trauma is still experienced today. That is, these observations and justifications were a mere 60 years ago. Further explanation of intergenerational trauma is provided in section 2.3.1 Engagement and Connections.

2.2.2 Changes of policy in Australia

Changes of policy in Australia towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples slowly began in the late 1960s (Beresford, 2012; Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003; Vass, 2012).

Australian governments up until the 1960s held that Aboriginal children should be offered only minimal schooling consistent with the perceptions about the limitations inherent in their race and their expected station in life at the lowest rungs of white society (Beresford, 2012, p. 87).

However, the policy of assimilation, segregation and forcible removal of children did not cease until into the 1970s. Indigenous education in Australia did not begin to see change in policy until the 1960s when the United States called an end to separate schooling (Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003). The process of desegregation in the United States encouraged the fight for recognition and rights in Australia for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. “Publicity surrounding the process of desegregation contributed to changing attitudes in Australia and State Education...
Departments gradually introduced changes” (Partington, 1998b, p. 46). The integration into State schooling of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was not without its own challenges, due to the historical and societal context, that governmental policy has been attempting to address ever since. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students did not readily accept the immersion into the Eurocentric classroom with Westernised curriculum. These challenges hindered student outcomes (Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003).

The Referendum in 1967 began challenging and changing the colonialists’ ideals about Aboriginal Australians and with the election of a Labor Government, assimilation and integration was replaced with autonomy (Partington, 1998b). After the Referendum in 1967, “the continued expectation by the government that they (Aboriginal Australians) should assimilate met with little support among Indigenous people” (Partington, 1998b, p. 48). The changing ideals led to the formation of the review process to monitor progress and increased accountability and responsibility for government.

By 1972 and the election of Whitlam’s Labor Government, Aboriginal Affairs was now of key concern. An Australian Schools Commission was established to advise government on educational disadvantage. “The Commonwealth Government also created the Aboriginal Consultative Group as a specialist advisory body. The Group had as its mission the development of aspirations for education to complement moves towards self-determination for Aboriginals” (Beresford, 2012, p. 112). The Schools Commission reported to government two years later in consultation with the Aboriginal Consultative Group (Partington, 1998b).

Despite being almost 40 years ago, it is interesting to note the report’s findings and its similarities to current policy findings. The report included six positive elements of Indigenous education, including the creation of Indigenous Education Coordinator positions, schools being established in remote and rural locations, the employment of Aboriginal teachers, the use of bilingual programmes and increase to funding to target Indigenous education. It also noted several problems including alienation from mainstream society, inability for teachers to cater for Indigenous students, the need for Australian society to value Indigenous cultures and histories and the lack of literacy skills among Indigenous students (Schools Commission, 1975). Notably, these findings indicate that many of the issues experienced today were prevalent then. An
overview of each of the Plan’s (MCEECDYA, 2011a) domains analysed within this study follows.

2.3 THE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER EDUCATION ACTION PLAN’S DOMAINS

The Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) provides six primary domains to address the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This study recognises the six domains of the Plan: 1) Readiness for School, 2) Engagement and Connections, 3) Attendance, 4) Literacy and Numeracy, 5) Leadership, quality teaching and workforce development and 6) Pathways to real post-school options. However, this study’s focus will only be on the two domains of Engagement and Connections, and Attendance. An overview of Engagement and Connections follows.

2.3.1 Engagement and Connections

As demonstrated in the previous sections, the practice of involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples into the process of producing and distributing policy, providing advice and guidance, and being involved in schooling has been a strategy used for decades (Schools Commission, 1975). The Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) also encourages the engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities into the school environment. It states that “schools and early childhood education providers that work in partnerships with families and communities can better support the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children” (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 12). This domain is multi-layered. That is, engagement and connections refers not only to teacher-parent-community relationships but also to school leaders and teachers becoming more involved in the community by attending community events and by students being engaged in learning. The Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005–2008 (MCEETYA, 2006) paper broke engagement into three dimensions where a school needs to be addressing the students’ behaviours, their personal connections within the classroom to both teachers and fellow students, as well as their application in learning. By being more culturally sensitive and aware, non-Indigenous educators may enable the development of productive networks with the wider community.

Indigenous policy has remained consistent in its reforms and strategies to address the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. In fact,
very little has changed within policy except the wording (Mellor & Corrigan, 2004). However, within the *Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005–2008* (MCEETYA, 2006) there is a recommendation for a paradigm shift from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student educational failure being the result of individual student, family and community characteristics to education systems and schools having to respond to students’ learning by developing the capacity to engage students. In other words, rather than being incidental and “bolted on” to mainstream education, Indigenous education needs to become an integral component of core business for systems and schools (MCEETYA, 2006). The Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) reiterates the importance of developing partnerships with community to ensure the school learning environment is culturally sensitive and supportive, addressing student wellbeing and in turn, improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student educational outcomes.

However, the recontextualisation and translation of policy as part of the process of consumption as well as the assumptions and positioning of policy by the reader at a school level, being the Principal and other executive administration, can result in engagement and connections becoming tokenistic. This then hinders partnerships between school and community. Gollan and Malin (2012) present the dilemma of schools’ tokenism of engaging and connecting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities through the embedding of Indigenous perspectives within their curriculum. They present teachers’ assumptions of what is engaging and connecting with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and families when they begin their paper with a letter from Tina Quitdamo (nee Couzens), a Kirraewurrung/Gundjitmara woman who writes to her son’s childcare workers. In the letter, she implores the teacher to reflect on their own assumptions and how she wants to be consulted from the beginning; she wants to work with the school. In this example, an Aboriginal mother is wanting to engage with the school and be an active member of the teaching and learning of her child. This type of engagement by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents is exemplification of the targeted outcomes of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a). However, this level of engagement is hindered due to factors such as the intergenerational trauma experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
Intergenerational trauma is trauma transferred through generations from firsthand stories of the experience by survivors to following generations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation, 2013a, 2013b). Judy Atkinson (2013) in her paper “Trauma-Informed Services and Trauma-Specific Care for Indigenous Australian Children” explains intergenerational trauma is “normalised” and embedded within community collective memories. The intergenerational trauma experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples hinders the partnerships mentioned in policy:

Any discussion of the failure to achieve better outcomes for Australian Indigenous youth must start with the impact of colonialism and racism that drove it. Dispossession, segregation and assimilation have created intergenerational disadvantage and trauma that impede educational progress among most Indigenous students. (Gray & Beresford, 2008, p. 205)

In other words, the detrimental effects of past policies and racism on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have influenced the engagement and/or disengagement of these people in the education of their children. This further explains the hesitation of Indigenous communities to engage within the school setting and the barriers that must be addressed when negotiating genuine partnerships as outlined in the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a).

Further to this, as Pascoe (2011) states, attitudes and racism within Australian society need changing as a nation before progression will be achieved. That is, active and passive racism is still experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Active racism, according to Tatum (1997, p. 11) is “blatant, intentional acts of racial bigotry and discrimination”. An example of active racism is the belief of white superiority as evidenced by the belief of the need for assimilation to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander livelihoods as voiced recently by writer and former politician, Peter Coleman (2014) on Q&A (Jones, 2014). Tatum (1997, p. 11) goes on to explain that

passive racism is more subtle and can be seen in the collusion of laughing when a racist joke is told, of letting exclusionary hiring practices go unchallenged, of accepting as appropriate the omissions of people of color from the curriculum, and of avoiding difficult race-related issues.
Pedersen, Dudgeon, Watt, and Griffiths (2006) provide example of these taken-for-granted assumptions held in Australian society “that being Indigenous entitles them to receive more welfare payments than non-Indigenous people, that the Commonwealth Government helps them make loan repayments on cars, and that Indigenous people are more likely to drink alcohol than are non-Indigenous people” (p. 86). The assumptions as provided sustain the dominant ideology and further incite active and passive racism within Australian society (Pedersen et al., 2006).

Within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a), Engagement and Connections is a two-way approach where interaction between the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and school, both in and out of the school environment, encourages authentic partnerships to be developed. The value of increased involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at all levels of educational decision-making is a means to improve educational outcomes. Furthermore, schools that actively recognise and validate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages within their learning environments support students’ wellbeing as well as their educational outcomes.

Interestingly, despite being broad in its context, the domain of Engagement and Connections has only two performance indicators stated to determine if there is a progression towards achieving its targets. The set targets within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) that would indicate performance in effectively engaging and connecting with community are, firstly, the number of focus schools that put in place, maintain and sustain a school–community partnership agreement. Secondly, the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who have Personalised Learning Plans (PLPs) developed in collaboration with students and parents. These actions are specified within the Plan under Actions 19–21. A school–community partnership agreement is an official agreement negotiated between schools, parents and the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community/communities to work together to improve the educational outcomes of their students (Western Australia Department of Education, n.d.). Complementing this initiative, PLPs involve the collaboration of parents and teachers to develop personalised learning strategies for each Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student to support improved educational outcomes that may also incorporate strategies to address health and wellbeing (What Works, n.d.)
In 2006, the *Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005–2008* paper (MCEETYA) stated that there was the need for the development of partnerships between schools and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community based on cross-cultural respect principles. These partnerships, when genuine, create highly effective schools that are productive and stimulating learning environments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The paper reaffirms that this strategy is within recent and past policy and is based on national and international research. In other words, the increase of engagement and connections with community and parents should improve attendance. A review of the literature with regard to student attendance follows.

### 2.3.2 Student attendance

Attendance at school is a crucial factor influencing a student’s educational attainment (MCEETYA, 2006). More recently, in May 2014, this has been further demonstrated with COAG including a further target to the Closing the Gap reform agenda [NIRA] (COAG, 2008). That is, to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student school attendance within five years (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2015).

Several researchers have researched the lack of or sporadic attendance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the school environment. Lowe (2011), Mellor and Corrigan (2004) as well as Gray and Partington (2012) have explored the influencing factors that impede Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student attendance, analysing the various reasons for non-attendance and disengagement. Gray and Partington (2012) state “Non-attendance at school remains perhaps the most severe manifestation of the dysfunctional relationship between school and Aboriginal students” (p. 278). In their paper “Aboriginal Non-Attendance at School: Revisiting the Debate”, Gray and Beresford (2002) acknowledge that the full extent of the truancy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is not fully documented. This is due to lack of data and substantial misunderstanding of the reasons of little to no attendance specifically related to the familial demands and overall disadvantage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth. Purdie and Buckley’s (2010) paper reviewed the programmes implemented in schools and systems to address attendance and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
Of interest, more recent policy discourse has omitted reporting the levels of truancy and has changed to reporting the levels of attendance. Gray and Partington (2012) provide several reasons for this shift to more positive political discourse when reporting outcomes. The transparency in national reporting as found on the My School (http://www.myschool.edu.au/) website and the pessimistic undertones of the word truancy are possible reasons for the change in discourse. The lack of attendance and the rejection of schooling by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students has dire effects on their transition into the workplace, limiting their potential of success in their future lives.

Another viewpoint on attendance is provided by analysing the geographical location of students. The most recent data referring to geolocation and secondary school attendance was produced in 2006 and is provided in Table 2.2. The data demonstrates how the geographical location of the student is relevant to attendance data. Nationally, there is a considerable gap when comparing Indigenous and non-Indigenous attendance. For example, in very remote communities in 2006 attendance levels were as low as 16 per cent for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Table 2.2
Secondary School Attendance<sup>a</sup> by Remoteness Area by Age, 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age in years</th>
<th>Major cities</th>
<th>Inner regional</th>
<th>Outer regional</th>
<th>Remote</th>
<th>Very remote</th>
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Note. Adapted from “School Attendance and Retention of Indigenous Australian Students,” Issues Paper No. 1 produced for the Closing the Gap Clearinghouse, by N. Purdie & S. Buckley, 2010, p. 5. “Number of persons attending school as a percentage of all persons (excluding school attendance not stated).

Attendance is incorporated within two of the NIRA targets where “all children are to be engaged in and benefiting from schooling” and where “schooling promotes the social inclusion and reduces the educational disadvantage of children, especially Indigenous children” (COAG, 2012, p. 8). According to the NEA (COAG, 2012),
improving the number of students enrolled in and attending school indicates progress towards these goals. This study analyses the strategies and directives provided in improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student attendance within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a).

The Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) suggests that by developing and maintaining a productive partnership between schools and communities, an expected outcome would be that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student engagement and wellbeing improve. However, the report *Education in Australia 2012: Five years of performance* (COAG Reform Council, 2013) states:

Year 10 students had the lowest attendance rates in all States and Territories and this has not improved since 2008…. From 2008 to 2012, attendance declined in NSW by two percentage points (to 87% in 2012) and in Tasmania by one percentage point (to 86% in 2012). [...] Students in the Northern Territory had low attendance rates and large decreases in Year 10 attendance from 2008 to 2012. In 2012, the Year 10 attendance rate in the Northern Territory was 74%, a decrease of 8 percentage points from 2008. (p. 22)

In other words, results nationwide over the past five years and since the distribution of the Plan have not seen any improvement in attendance and in fact, there is a reduction in engagement with schools by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. This data is significant to foreground the need for this study in policy.

The Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) states that student educational success is not achievable when attendance is irregular. This is exemplified in the 2008 figures provided in the Plan where the median attendance rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were over 10 per cent lower than the non-Indigenous median score. To address these rates, the Plan asserts the need for schools and systems to produce an Attendance Strategy to allow for rich data to be collected.

In the 2010 Annual Report on the Plan by MCEECDYA (2011b), a report on Queensland’s student attendance in all sectors states that “across all sectors Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student attendance is generally lower than non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students” (p. 86). In Table 2.3, adapted from ACARA for the 2010 Annual Report on the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011b), the data demonstrates that specifically in Queensland, there is a definite decline as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enter secondary schooling. Notably, the level of attendance for
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students decreases, up to five per cent, from Year 9 to Year 10 in the Independent sector and comparatively similar numbers for the other sectors (MCEECDYA, 2011b).

Table 2.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Attendance Rates Year 1–10, by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Status, by Sector, 2010 (per cent)</th>
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<td>Year Level</td>
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Within the growing literature on non-attendance, surprisingly few specific studies explore issues surrounding Aboriginal children and youth. In fact, given the well-documented disadvantage of Aboriginal youth it is remarkable that the social lives of this group are ignored. The ways in which the social environment impacts adversely on attendance and achievement at school are rarely identified (Gray & Beresford, 2002).

Research may not be providing this type of information to schools and systems but by making partnerships with community and parents, there would be an expectation that as a result, school administrators and teachers would gain an understanding of these factors including intergenerational trauma, familial
expectations and duties (MCEETYA, 2006). Literature is minimal but recognition of the varying factors, including social factors such as racism and peer pressure and cultural factors such as the transience of families are addressed in the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) through its domains and targets. As a result, schools are instructed to address these factors by producing an Attendance Strategy within their Strategic and Operational planning (MCEETYA, 2011a).

The Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) is the Federal Government’s current means to address the disparities between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and non-Indigenous students. Federal and State Governments and systems are to implement and enact a total of fifty-five actions provided. This study analyses the key assumptions evident in the general and common elements of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a). The study also analyses how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are positioned in the Plan’s discourse.

2.4 THE GAP IN THE LITERATURE

The gap in the literature indicates that although Indigenous education policy is objective and factual, key assumptions are evident that both negatively and positively position Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Existing literature looks at the various factors that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ educational outcomes but on an individual basis rather than a holistic view. That is, the factors influencing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ educational outcomes are analysed individually by researchers; however, the policy that is developed in response to the evidence is rarely considered (Taylor, 1997). Literature analysing Indigenous education policy is minimal, necessitating the primary research question: “What key assumptions are evident in the general and common elements of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan?”

The study draws on an Indigenist Research theoretical framework to inform its approach to data collection. Other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers including Nakata (1998) and Foley (2003) provide insight into the challenges of utilising an Indigenist Research theoretical framework. Nakata (1998) informs fellow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers that challenges to the dominant ideology may cause unease; consequently, an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander scholar needs to ensure that their study works within the Westernised ways of thinking.
with logical and rational argument. He furthers warns that an accumulation of facts is not enough and that the researcher needs to establish their standpoint, articulating a strong understanding of the context and their position within the argument.

The foregrounding required to understand the key assumptions evident in the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) demands knowledge of Indigenous education policies since the introduction of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students into the state schooling system and how and why those policies were deemed to “fail” in improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Furthermore, Foley (2003) states there is the need for objectivity to be maintained as the research will be subjected to great scrutiny from other researchers. These limitations need to be addressed within the study when using the theoretical framework provided by Rigney’s (1999) Indigenist Research Principles. The theoretical framework guiding the study is elaborated in the next chapter.
Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

The previous chapter addressed the first research question by reviewing and critiquing the research literature pertaining to the production, distribution and consumption of policy. Particular attention was given to the Indigenous education policies that influence and inform the domains and targets set within the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan* [the Plan] (MCEECDYA, 2011a). The historical and social context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education that foregrounds today’s current context was presented. Select domains of the Plan were elaborated to demonstrate the interconnection and interrelationships of the Plan’s domains to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ educational outcomes.

This chapter presents the Indigenist Research theoretical framework (Rigney, 1999) to provide a theoretical basis from which to address the research questions. It provides a lens through which to gain powerful insights into policy production, distribution and consumption and the positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for research purposes.

3.1 INDIGENOUS RESEARCH

Rigney (1999) explains that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities have grown resistant to conventional Westernised research practices and their colonialist position on Indigenous ways of knowing and values, and therefore, should seek research and its designs to assist in their challenge for self-determination and liberation from oppression. Rigney continues by stating that it is essential for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to have a working knowledge of the common epistemologies so that they can make an educated decision as to how these research approaches may benefit their communities. Brady (1997) emphasises that “to implement research methodologies and practices which are culturally appropriate to Indigenous people is one aspect of self-determination” (p. 416). Smith (1999) speaks about the importance of decolonising methodologies in setting a new agenda for Indigenous research. Saunders, West, and Usher elaborate on this issue in their paper “Applying Indigenist Research Methodologies in Health Research: Experiences in the
Borderlands” (2010), explaining the turmoil as an Aboriginal researcher to acknowledge both Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of knowing and traditional values. In their paper “Indigenous Research Reform Agenda 2: Rethinking Research Methodologies”, Henry et al. (2002) highlight how more frequently these days readily recognised Westernised researchers are personalising research methodologies and how this practice could be beneficial for the acceptance of Indigenous methodologies. Rigney’s Indigenist Research Principles (1999) were deemed most appropriate to address the issues within this study.

Indigenous researchers both nationally and internationally are setting a new agenda for Indigenous research and it is within these realms that this study applies the Indigenist principles as articulated by Rigney (1999). Henry et al. (2002) refer to Rigney as arguing “strongly for the development of Indigenous research methodologies to ensure the achievement of Indigenous intellectual sovereignty within research projects involving Indigenous people and their interests and concerns” (p. 3). Furthermore, they provide advice about the ideal of reconceptualising research methodologies by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, suggesting that it would not only generate new information, but also provide new understanding from a different perspective. For example,

Using research methods that are culturally relevant and safe can be difficult when academia claims that valid and rigorous research can only be produced through the dominant ways of knowing, quantitative study, and the silencing nature of positivism. (West, Stewart, Foster, & Usher, 2012, p. 1582)

In his paper “Indigenist Research and Aboriginal Australia” (2006), Rigney referred to the speech given by Lionel Quartermaine, who at the time of the 2003 Indigenous Researchers Forum was the Acting Chairperson of the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), that outlined the issues that are needed for reform within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research. The issues that he deemed as essential to be addressed included such things as:

- research that is framed by the researcher’s priorities and interests rather than the needs of Indigenous communities;
- the reduction of Indigenous ownership of Indigenous knowledge and intellectual property;
• the lack of ongoing consultation, negotiation, and involvement of Indigenous communities in the design, facilitation, and publication of research;
• inappropriate research methodologies and ethical research processes; and
• the need for effective, appropriate and culturally sensitive research in relation to ethics and protocols. (p. 35)

Rigney (2006) highlights the developments in qualitative methodologies and the acceptance from the academic world of multiple methodologies and how these changes have enabled Indigenist research to develop. Rigney’s Indigenist Research Principles (1999), as a theoretical framework, provide to an Aboriginal researcher insight into the emancipatory properties of conducting research that is relevant to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander struggle for self-determination, as well as allowing an opportunity to provide voice from an Aboriginal perspective. The Principles will now be addressed.

### 3.2 INDIGENIST RESEARCH PRINCIPLES

The Indigenist Research Principles developed by Rigney (1999) are related to Nakata’s Indigenous Standpoint Theory (1998) and inform Moreton-Robinson’s Feminist Australian Indigenous women’s standpoint theory (2013). The Principles’ adaptability to other Indigenous methodologies highlight their relevance for an Aboriginal neophyte researcher and their influence on Indigenist research as a whole. However, it is important to note as Rigney (2006) states “there is no one essentialized Indigenist research epistemology and ontology” (p. 41). It is for these reasons that within this study, the three Indigenist Research Principles as described by Rigney (1999) are addressed.

The three principles are:

• involvement in resistance as the emancipatory imperative in Indigenist research;
• political integrity in Indigenist research; and
• giving privilege to Indigenous voices in Indigenist research (Rigney, 1999, p. 116; Rigney, 2006, p. 42).

Figure 3.1 demonstrates how each of these principles is separate and yet interrelated, supporting the other. Each one will now be elaborated.
3.2.1 Involvement in resistance as the emancipatory imperative in Indigenist research

Rigney (1999) describes this principle as

research that seeks to uncover and protest the continuing forms of oppression confronting Indigenous Australians. Moreover, it is research that attempts to support the personal, community, cultural, and political struggles of Indigenous Australians to carve out a way of being for ourselves in Australia in which there can be healing from past oppressions and cultural freedom in the future. (p. 117)

As an Aboriginal researcher it is necessary that the research problem and research questions address how and to what extent, through policy reform and implementation, issues of power and domination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are established and maintained within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) and specifically, within the domains of Engagement and Connections, and Attendance. There is also a need to identify how the power and domination occurs and how it is resisted by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. By drawing upon and using Indigenist research to challenge the oppression of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, this study analyses and critiques a current policy, namely the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan* [the Plan] (MCEECDYA, 2011a). A key
objective within the domains of Engagement and Connections, and Attendance, is to collaborate with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The Plan informs schools and systems on how to achieve this. It suggests that this is best approached through the forming of a school–community partnership agreement.

Power can be established and maintained in numerous ways including through discourse. Therefore, this study seeks to identify the key assumptions evident in the Plan’s domains of Engagement and Connections, and Attendance (MCEECDYA, 2011a). This allows for reflection on policy discourse, which in turn provides opportunity to address how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are positioned within policy through the general and common elements.

Foley (2003) states how this approach challenges the traditional views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as victims of oppression and in need of charity. “This is research undertaken as part of Indigenous Australia’s struggle for recognition and self-determination, to research the survival and celebration of Indigenous Australia’s resistance struggle, to uncover and stop the continuing forms of oppression against Indigenous Australia” (Foley, 2003, p. 48). Gaining an equitable education is a means for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to fight in the struggle for self-determination. The Plan is represented as objective and factual and has been produced with the objective to improve the educational outcomes of these students through the increased engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in its production.

This principle, involvement in resistance, assists the researcher in defining the purpose for conducting a critical analysis of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) and to observe resistance of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples through their involvement or lack of representation within policy production, distribution and consumption. The principle also allows the researcher to identify actions prescribed to encourage community engagement with schools. With partnerships being a key fundamental strategy described within the Plan for Federal and State Governments as well as systems, this interaction or lack thereof is of key importance within the study. The key assumptions and the fifty-five key actions as determined within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a), and how they position Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, are analysed. The principle provides a means to address the engagement and/or lack of engagement by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within the
decision-making process in education. Potentially it will inform others on the barriers faced in the struggle for self-determination and how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are positioned in the Plan despite its representation as objective and factual.

### 3.2.2 Political integrity in Indigenist research

It is important that research about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples advocates for and defends Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights and addresses the historical and societal issues of the past by presenting an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective. Brady (1997) wrote about the political and social tension evident in Australia and the need to break down the cultural divide between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous society. She indicated this was due to the lack of understanding of cultural histories and cultures. A key component of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) is the engagement and connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with non-Indigenous peoples to work collaboratively to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ educational outcomes through increased involvement and therefore, improved attendance. Through this interaction, the *Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005–2008* (MCEETYA, 2006) indicates a better understanding and appreciation of traditional knowledge, histories, cultures and languages should be achieved.

Key to this principle, political integrity in Indigenist research, is the need for the research to assist in the struggle for self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Rigney (1999) states:

> Indigenous Australians have to set their own political agenda for liberation. To the extent that research contributes to that agenda, it must be undertaken by Indigenous Australians. There must be a social link between research and the political struggle of our communities. This link needs to be in and through those Indigenous Australians who are simultaneously engaged in research and the Indigenous struggle. (p. 117)

Rigney (1999) recognises how these statements could be misconstrued to state that non-Indigenous researchers should not or could not adequately be researching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs and present their findings appropriately. However, he reaffirms the position that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers have a personal responsibility to community as well as the academic realm.
within their research that informs and supports the struggle. Foley (2003) reinforces Rigney’s findings when he recognises the contributions of non-Indigenous researchers in the struggle for equality and the need for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers to also contribute.

Rigney (2002) has critiqued the political integrity of past and present Indigenous education policy in his own research as he advocates for a treaty to build Indigenous capacity. He finds that policy is limited by the current government frameworks of jurisdiction. He encourages the formation of a treaty regarding Indigenous education by stating: “… the text and subtext of past and present policies fail to move beyond access and equity. They are void of issues of control, Indigenous jurisdiction, sovereignty, self-government, nationhood, agreements, and treaties” (p. 79). Therefore, Indigenous education policy limits the ability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have significant voice in its production, distribution and consumption other than the ability to contribute through the consultation process. In other words, Rigney (2002) questions the sincerity of engagement and connection within policy production and the consultation process.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have faced many struggles to gain some control or voice in education as a whole (Rigney, 2002). Smith (1999) emphasises the significance of community contribution to the research questions asked by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researcher. This is in contrast to the approach taken by the non-Indigenous researcher’s perspective. Furthermore, Foley (2003) encourages Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers to take control of research into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs; to redress the struggle. By analysing the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a), the extent to which it argues for or against the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and by identifying key assumptions evident in the Plan, an alternative viewpoint on the processes of policy and its discourse is offered from an Aboriginal researcher’s perspective.

Research conducted by an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researcher provides an opportunity for self-determination and enables them to address the political agenda (Rigney, 1999). “Indigenist research by Indigenous Australians takes the research into the heart of the Indigenous struggle” (Rigney, 1999, p. 117). The researcher is then responsible within their study to the Indigenous community as a whole to contribute to the political agenda and the struggle for self-determination. The
study highlights how policy influences the contribution or lack of contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within education. That is, it examines the engagement and connections that are or are not developed, maintained and sustained with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in policy production, distribution and consumption that are likely to improve student attainment including improved attendance.

3.2.3 Giving privilege to Indigenous voices in Indigenist research

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research conducted by an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researcher provides an opportunity to give privilege to their voice. However, as Rigney (1999) explains, there is no cultural oneness among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; there is no shared rapport between groups. “Nor am I suggesting that the minds of Indigenous researchers are free of colonial hegemony (colonial internalisation) or that being Indigenous will better represent us” (Rigney, 1999, p. 118). That is, there are a great many differences between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples including knowledges, cultural practices and beliefs, to name a few. Furthermore, being Indigenous does not necessarily make Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander researchers better positioned to speak for the community as a whole.

Foley (2003) brings to the researcher’s attention the limitations of this principle including its possibilities for bias. That is, that by providing opportunity for Indigenous voice to be highlighted in the research there is the likelihood that other more predominant voices, such as the colonialists, are given less attention. Furthermore, if the researcher is directly responsible to the community, the outcomes from the research may be influenced through the social positioning of the researcher and those being researched. Further to this discussion, Foley (2003, p. 48) states “unless objectivity is maintained the Indigenous researcher could easily fall prey to criticism […] in the negative aspects of western discourse in Indigenous research”. In other words, Indigenist principles and Indigenous methodologies are subject to heavy criticism by the Eurocentric disciplines (Henry et al., 2002).

Brady (1992) best summarises Rigney’s principle of giving privilege to Indigenous voice when she states “Indigenist research is research which gives voice to the voiceless” (p. 106). Rigney (2006) explains how the Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander researcher is accountable to the community and suggests it is more appropriate from a social and political point of view that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples talk through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers. Smith (1999) supports this sentiment, encouraging the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researcher to retell our stories as the centre of the research. This opposes the examples provided by the Westernised researcher which can often skew stories to meet their own agenda when re-told from their point of view.

More recently, the Australian Government is seeking to build and increase engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in decision-making and policy production through extensive consultancy (Close the Gap Campaign Steering Committee, 2015); that is, to provide opportunity to give privilege to Indigenous voice in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs. This practice was further encouraged within all three levels of education by Federal and State Governments, systems and schools within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a). The release of the Australian Curriculum provided an opportunity to schools and systems to engage and connect with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. Within the three-dimensional framework of the curriculum is the cross-curriculum priority, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, which ensures that Indigenous perspectives be embedded within the teaching and learning of the classroom (ACARA, n.d.).

This study looks to address the processes of recontextualisation and translation of policy. It analyses the impact of the Plan on improving the engagement and connections with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, parents and community as well as the attendance strategies implemented and reported on. However, no participants were included in this study. Instead, the Plan and its relevant documents were critically analysed to determine to what extent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice was used in its production and how policy discourse positions the people to encourage or discourage engagement and connection in the production, distribution and/or consumption phases.

As Saunders et al. (2010) state “making the decision to adopt an Indigenist approach is not easy especially when it counters the dominant view and ways of doing research” (p. 4). To counter the potential criticism from within the academic realm, within this study, the Indigenist principles inform the approach to analysing data in...
conjunction with Fairclough’s (2001b) approach of critically analysing discourse. In the next chapter, this methodology is elaborated.

3.3 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, the theoretical framework using Rigney’s Indigenist Research Principles (1999) was described and elaborated. The interrelationship of the Principles and their relevance to the study were provided. The necessity of using an Indigenous framework within this study was established. The next chapter discusses the methodological approach used to analyse the data and its compatibility with Rigney’s Indigenous framework.
Chapter 4: Methodology

The previous chapter addressed the theoretical framework to inform the study. Particular attention was given to the Indigenist Research Principles provided by Rigney (1999) with a particular emphasis on political integrity. The necessity for research to challenge the oppression of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by challenging dominant views was highlighted.

This chapter presents the methodological framework, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), used in the study. It provides a lens through which to critique and analyse the discourse used within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) so as to gain powerful insights. The first section discusses CDA, the orders of discourse, and policy discourse; section 4.2 looks at recontextualisation of policy; sections 4.3 and 4.4 overview CDA and how it is understood and used in this study, while section 4.5 looks at how bias is addressed in the study. Subsequent sections discuss data collection strategies, including the use of policy documents, and the procedure and timeline of the study. Finally, ethical issues are examined.

4.1 DISCOURSE: ORDERS OF DISCOURSE

Discourse is in all social activities whether written or spoken, verbal or non-verbal or a combination of any means of communication and as a result, becomes a form of social practice (Fairclough, 2001b). In other words, rather than being an external component to society, language is a fundamental part of society and its means to communicate. Furthermore, language is integral to every social practice where social processes have been established and organise the ways in which people interact. This in turn demonstrates how language is socially conditioned. That is, the means by which we communicate with other participants, from here on referred to as social actors, are dependent on the social position of the individual/s. These factors highlight the cognitive processes that transpire as social actors engage in discourse/s and lead to the social order that is set, where interaction and language is determined by one’s social positioning. This process is otherwise known as the orders of discourse.

Orders of discourse, a term originally used by Foucault (1971), is defined by Fairclough (2001a, p. 232) as “a social structuring of semiotic difference, a particular
social ordering of relationships amongst different ways of making meaning”. In other words, the internal relations, being the semiotic and linguistic factors demonstrated within a text, are combined with the external factors, being the social positioning of the individuals as well as their knowledge, attitudes and beliefs, which influences the text’s recontextualisation and enactment (Taylor, 2004). This is demonstrated in social practices.

A number of factors influence social practices. The initial phase involves recognising the social actors whose social positioning dictates how they participate within the discourse and informs their use of language. Another component of social practice is the means of communication. These are otherwise known as instruments and include both written and spoken texts. Spoken texts, as multimodal means of communicating, also include the use of non-verbal gestures and body language. The context in which the communication is occurring, that is the time and place, as well as the values and ideologies held by the individual or the group also determine the order of discourse. Although singularly they are very different elements within social practice, together they allow for understanding of context and recognise the social structure as well as allow the social actors to participate in the discourse appropriately or even challenge and resist dominance and issues of power. As Fairclough (2001a, p. 234) states “there is a sense in which each ‘internalizes’ the others without being reducible to them”. That is, the cognitive actions and processes social actors partake in situate themselves in the orders of discourse. An example of the orders of discourse found within the Australian education “architecture” follows.

Fairclough (2001b) explains that an order of discourse also demonstrates the social order within a social institution. Within the Australian educational context the relationships between Federal and State Ministers of Education, Ministers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Advisory Groups, to name a few, demonstrate the social order within that social institution. For example, discourse between the Federal Minister of Education and members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Advisory Group when discussing the impact of policy will incorporate specific discourse in relation to policy but also, social positioning and issues of power would be evident in this social practice. When the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Advisory Group addresses community with regard to the impact of policy, a different discourse is used that may include Aboriginal English
or Kriol. The social order is demonstrated through discourse including language use as well as gestures and body language.

In CDA, the cognitive processes and social order of readers of policy play an important role. Fairclough (2001b) explains how the orders of discourse can be broken up into categories of social practice including being part of a job or identity. For example, the consultative process between Government and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Advisory Group members would be influenced by the roles the individuals have within their job or position. Moreover, in relation to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, their role within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs and community will also influence their social positioning and social order. The discourse is governed by the social structures and positioning within that practice. Foucault (1971, p. 8) exemplifies this when he states “we know perfectly well that we are not free to say just anything”. As individuals, our own knowledge and ideologies inform our discourse but social conventions determine our interaction within various social practices.

Fairclough (2000) summarises the orders of discourse and their shifting domains as “very much open systems, and their value analytically is in allowing a focus on the shifting nature of and boundaries between discursive practices” (p. 167). In other words, discourse changes in relation to the social practice. CDA analyses the discursive and social practices that maintain the levels of society. Through the analysis of policy discourse, the shared ideologies with regard to addressing the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their non-Indigenous counterparts are analysed.

CDA provides opportunities for the political integrity of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) to be analysed as to how it positions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and to what extent it is arguing for or against the people. The discourse of the Plan, whilst being objective and factual, demonstrates the social order. Through the use of CDA and the analysis of policy discourse the researcher is able to gain an understanding of how power elites (those that benefit most from the current social order) may or may not have a vested interest in the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous students not being resolved. An overview of policy discourse follows.
4.1.1 Policy discourse

Fairclough (2013b) states that “policy making is widely recognised as having a ‘problem-solution’ character” (p. 183). Policies since the 1960s regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education have constantly offered solutions (Partington, 1998b). As stated previously, the low educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students became apparent with their introduction into State schooling (Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003; Vass, 2012). The Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) provides solutions to education providers to address the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their non-Indigenous counterparts.

When conducting the analysis of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a), critiquing of the general and common elements of policy was necessary. “The study of political institutions and everyday life and decision-making in organisations has become a major new focus of CDA” (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 17). In this study, the shared ideologies of governments, systems and schools through the use of policy discourse were analysed. The recontextualisation of policy and policy dilution are addressed below.

4.2 RECONTEXTUALISATION OF POLICY

Bernstein and Solomon (1999) state that the filtering of text through the various levels of education from Federal policymaking to the school/classroom setting means the original text may differ greatly when it is cited at schools. The various levels found within the education paradigm allow for constant recontextualisation of the text to the perceived need of each institution. This is even encouraged by government when they state that the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) will need to be applied to varying schooling environments and, therefore, needs to be flexible. The key actions of the two domains, Engagement and Connections, and Attendance, were analysed against the Plan in the original form as intended.

Bernstein and Solomon’s (1999) work on cultural production, reproduction and change further assists in the analysis of policy “where there is a purposeful intention to initiate, modify, develop or change knowledge, conduct or practice by someone or something which already possesses, or has access to, the necessary resources and the means of evaluating the acquisition” (Bernstein & Solomon, 1999, p. 267). The Federal Government, in this instance, recommended the changing of attitudes and
ideologies in the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in all three levels of education provision – including Federal and State Government and other systems such as Catholic and Independent authorities and within the school environment – to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student educational outcomes. That is, within the Plan, government and other key stakeholders including systems and schools, as well as philanthropists and vocational education providers to name a few, are to work collaboratively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community to address the inequitable educational outcomes of these students.

Specific to this study, CDA is used to analyse how the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) addresses the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students to provide opportunity for equitable outcomes, which encourages an analysis of the political integrity of the Plan. Using CDA, the study demonstrates how policy discourse influences the historical and social context and challenges the current shared ideology, which strengthens the struggle for self-determination and invites resistance as an emancipatory imperative. The next section describes CDA as it pertains to this study.

4.3 CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS: AN OVERVIEW

Paltridge defines CDA as follows:

CDA explores the connections between the use of language and the social and political contexts in which it occurs. It explores issues such as gender, ethnicity, cultural difference, ideology and identity and how these are both constructed and reflected in texts. It also investigates ways in which language constructs and is constructed by social relationships (2013, p. 89).

In other words, CDA demonstrates how language is used to position people and how issues of power and dominance are established and maintained within texts. In doing so, it analyses the discursive practices used to develop a shared ideology and social context. Blommaert and Bulcaen (2000) further elaborate on Paltridge’s work by stating that discourse conditions the social setting and plays an important part within society. “CDA is therefore not interested in investigating a linguistic unit per se but in studying social phenomena which are necessarily complex and thus require a multi-disciplinary and multi-methodical approach” (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 2). CDA is therefore multifaceted (van Dijk, 1993). It looks at several dimensions within discourse including analyses of texts and conversations, the use of non-verbal texts
including gesture and expressions, as well as “the properties of ‘naturally occurring’ language use by real language users” (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 2). In fact, Fairclough (2001b) believes that CDA as a research methodology should be used in conjunction with other methods. In this study, Rigney’s Indigenist Research Principles (1999) inform the use of CDA.

As a result of CDA’s adaptability and flexibility as a methodological approach, there are many types of CDA supported by a group of discourse scholars including Teun van Dijk, Norman Fairclough, Gunther Kress, Theo van Leeuwen and Ruth Wodak (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Van Dijk (1993) explains how each of these scholars has an individual approach to CDA to address the varying data, yet all demonstrate the shared attributes of CDA including the “processes of hegemony and changes in hegemony” (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000, p. 449). In this study, hegemony is defined as the influence a dominant group has over others. Specific to this study, hegemony is the influence that power elites have over Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Therefore, the processes of hegemony encourage investigation of the means employed by the power elite to sustain and maintain power and the changes in hegemony indicate the resistance by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to encourage change.

Wodak and Meyer (2009) stress that from its development and formation as a methodology, CDA has never encouraged a specified framework or theory for analysts to follow. Nonetheless, most forms of CDA question discourse structures in specific contexts that are “deployed in the reproduction of social dominance” (van Dijk, 2001, p. 354). In this study, the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) was analysed to establish the positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the implicit expectation for them to engage and connect with school to increase student attendance by the power elite. The expectation of the power elite provides example of the processes of hegemony.

Rigney’s Indigenist Research Principles complement the analysis by providing the means for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers to challenge and resist dominance from the colonialists. Dominance and issues of power refer to the social inequality placed on an individual or group of people and this is obtained and maintained through reproduction by colonialists (van Dijk, 1993). In other words, CDA analysts in their research are advocating for social equality and justice in the very social practices that they critically investigate (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; van Dijk,
Therefore, the articulation of CDA and Rigney’s Indigenist Research Principles (1999), specifically political integrity, within this study allows for a thorough analysis of discourse that may or may not foreground the enactment, maintenance and reproduction of dominance and power in the Plan’s domains, Engagement and Connections, and Attendance.

Fairclough and Wodak (1997) summarise the principles of CDA as follows:

- CDA addresses social problems
- Power relations are discursive
- Discourse constitutes society and culture
- Discourse does ideological work
- Discourse is historical
- The link between text and society is mediated
- Discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory
- Discourse is a form of social action (van Dijk, 2001, p. 353).

The principles demonstrate the interconnectivity of Rigney’s Indigenist Research Principles (1999) and CDA. In this study it was exemplified in various ways. Firstly, the social problem is the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their non-Indigenous counterparts. The Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) has been produced to complement the various Indigenous education policies including the AEP (DEET, 1989) and NIRA (COAG, 2008) with the objective to close the gap, a shared ideological goal for equitable outcomes. Furthermore, as a policy document, the Plan encourages the collaboration of power elites with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community to improve current data outputs. The power elite within this study refers to both Federal and State Governments and their agencies including the Education Council, as well as at a local level, the executive administration within the schooling environment. It also works to mediate the past policy reforms that had detrimental effects on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and provides opportunity for Indigenous voice to be included in decision-making. Further explanation of how and why CDA is used in this study follows.

4.4 USING CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS IN THIS STUDY

For this study, CDA was deemed as the most appropriate approach for analysis of data. Circa 1983, Fairclough (2013a) began developing an analytical framework that investigated language use and its ability to maintain and sustain dominant ideology
and power. This methodology differed from the work of linguists and sociolinguists as it sought to understand how characteristics of discourse influenced societal conditions (Fairclough, 2011). Figure 4.1 depicts a broad three-stage framework when analysing text; that is, Stage 1: description of the text; Stage 2: interpretation of the relationship between the text and interaction; and Stage 3: explanation of the relationship between interaction and social context.

![Figure 4.1.](image)

Figure 4.1. Fairclough’s three-dimensional framework for Critical Discourse Analysis. Taken from “Critical Language Awareness”, by N. Fairclough, 2014.

The analysis in this study drew primarily on Stage 1: the description of the text that is concerned with the formal properties of the text. Providing a process for the identification and labelling of features in the text, this stage was useful because it served as a framework for employing specific textual values to the analysis of text. Here, analysis of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a), and the different discourse types located, required analysing and identifying the underlying assumptions and bias that position Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The specific textual values included:

- Experiential values in vocabulary and grammar
- Relational values in vocabulary and grammar
- Expressive values in vocabulary and grammar (Fairclough, 2001b).

Each value will now be explained.

*Experiential values* of words and grammar position a text within an ideological framework for readers to assist in its recontextualisation and provide a context to allow
for a common understanding and shared ideology between the power elite and the reader (Fairclough, 2001b). As defined previously, the power elite consists of and is inclusive of all governments and governmental agencies. The experiential value of the word choices used within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) was analysed to determine the ideological stance taken by the power elite. The analysis investigated the use of declarative statements to demonstrate an authoritarian position on the means to address the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their non-Indigenous counterparts.

The disconnection between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from schools is exemplification of the intergenerational trauma experienced today because of past reforms and practices (Atkinson, 2013). Nonetheless, despite the historical and social context as provided in Chapter 2, power elites establish with declarative statements in the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) that it is their expectation that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders engage with schools. In doing so, the power elite and their “dominant structures stabilize conventions and naturalize them, that is, the effects of power and ideology in the production of meaning are obscured and acquire stable and natural forms: they are taken as ‘given’” (Wodak & Meyer, 2001, p. 3). Therefore, the discourse positions the reader to assume that the Engagement and Connections, and Attendance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, parents and community within educational institutions and decision-making will improve the educational outcomes of students (MCEECDYA, 2011a).

The relational values of vocabulary establish how words have been used to create social relationships between participants (Fairclough, 2001b). Wodak and Meyer explain how discourse creates this distinction through “the discursive construction of ‘us’ and ‘them’ as the basic fundamentals of discourses of identity and difference” (Wodak & Meyer, 2001, p. 73). Within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a), the word choices made by the power elite cue the reader to the existing and changing social relationships within Australian society towards reconciliation (Reconciliation Australia, n.d.). Furthermore, as a public policy document, the Plan was investigated to highlight how word choice positions both the reader and also the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In doing so, the power elite establish the shared ideology and provide the purpose for improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
The analysis of the use of euphemistic expressions within the Plan (MCEEC, 2011a) provides the opportunity for the analysis of relational values of vocabulary. The use of euphemisms allows the power elite to avoid using negative terms (Fairclough, 2001b). For example, non-Indigenous peoples of Australia have been referred to as “Others” (MCEEC, 2011b, p. 12) and “non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander” (MCEEC, 2011b, p. 9), which would indicate respect for the “First Australians” (MCEEC, 2011a, p. 3). In the example provided, the recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Australians demonstrates the power elite’s stance on encouraging reconciliation and the breaking down of discrimination (Reconciliation Australia, n.d).

Finally, a textual feature with expressive value is a cue to how the power elite have evaluated it in terms of the perceived reality (Fairclough, 2001b). It relates to the subjects and social identities. Within texts, the producer’s expressive word choices are again significant in establishing the shared ideology. Here, classification schemes are used which provide the power elite’s means of identifying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities. Expressive modality was also investigated to determine how language is used to establish how the ideological stance within the Plan (MCEEC, 2011a) is positioned as authentic and based on statements of truth (Fairclough, 2001b). The use of terms such as will and may are examples of expressive modality (Biber, 2006). The experiential, relational and expressive textual values allow for unique characteristics of textual features to be investigated.

Specific textual features of each value were used in the study; such features included declarative statements, euphemistic expressions, classification schemes, and expressive modality. An overview of each of these textual features follows.

4.4.1 Declarative statements

Sentence structure and, in particular, the declarative statements used to convey the power elite’s ideology are relevant to the analysis of the Plan (MCEEC, 2011a). The targets and objectives for increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s Engagement and Connections with the decision-making process of education provided examples of such declarative statements. This is exemplified by one of the actions to be undertaken within the systemic level being “Education providers will strengthen school accountability and reporting to families and the community on
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes” (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 18). Here, the sectors, being the State, Catholic and Independent systems, are instructed to work with schools to ensure that the processes undertaken to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are transparent and shared with families and community.

4.4.2 Euphemistic expressions

Euphemisms are generally less direct words used as a substitute for words that have a negative connotation. Formal word choices and use of euphemisms within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) position Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, parents and community within its production, distribution and consumption. An investigation into the complexity and formality of word choices within the Plan, including the use of specific terminology when referring to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, was necessary to establish how they are positioned within the discourse. For example, within the 2010 Annual Report on the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011b), there is a footnote that states that the use of “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander” is the preferred term when referring to Australia’s First Nations people rather than the generic term of “Indigenous”.

4.4.3 Classification schemes

Classification schemes enable the power elite to divide “some aspect of reality which is built upon a particular ideological representation of the reality” (Fairclough, 2001b, p. 26). In other words, the power elite have a preoccupation with establishing an ideological stance and shared view with the reader. As a result, word choice is influenced and there is tendency to use near synonyms to establish the ideology within the text, otherwise referred to as overwording. Here, in this study, the use of synonyms and the use of overwording was analysed to ascertain the power elite’s ideological stance on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Engagement and Connections in decision-making as well as the increasing of student Attendance within the school setting.

4.4.4 Expressive modality

Modality demonstrates how the power elite see themselves as authorities to make statements on a particular subject, in this case how to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, or their evaluation of the
issue (Fairclough, 2001b). In particular, expressive modality indicates “the speaker’s authority with respect to the truth or probability of a representation of reality” (Fairclough, 2001b, p. 105). Within this study, expressive modality was analysed to indicate the means by which the power elite have established their authority and demonstrated their understanding and trustworthiness in addressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ educational attainment. Expressive modality is exemplified using modal verbs including are, may, might and probably that indicate a commitment to the truth. Such examples of expressive modality were sought from within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a).

These factors exemplify the tendency for bias to be questioned in this study. An overview of how bias was addressed in this study follows.

4.5 ADDRESSING BIAS IN THIS STUDY

CDA’s attributes and its ability to be adaptable to numerous disciplines and varying data provide reasons for some scholars to be critical of CDA. As van Dijk (1993) argues, critical discourse analysts “take an explicit socio-political stance” (p. 252). Scholars from dominant groups including male and white scholars suggest bias against the norm can be readily noted within CDA (van Dijk, 1993). However, van Dijk (1993) counters this argument stating that critical scholars cannot be neutral and that the interests or perspectives of dominant groups should not be considered as they are already positioned to attend to their own concerns, welfare, rights and interests. In other words, as an Aboriginal researcher using CDA, clearly the perspective as an Aboriginal and the sincerity to achieve equitable educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is obvious and, therefore, used to take an explicit stance on how policy discourse positions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. As a result, the dominant perspectives of the power elite are not presented in this study. Instead, the ideologies held by the power elite are challenged to improve present policy production processes and encourage reform and change to address the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their non-Indigenous counterparts. This is the standpoint of the researcher (Smith, 1999).

As van Dijk (1993) states “Critical Discourse Analysis is far from easy […] it requires true multidisciplinarity, and an account of intricate relationships between text, talk, social cognition, power, society and culture” (p. 253). Wodak (2002) implores
that language, by itself, is not powerful but is reliant on the social positioning of those in power to make it so. Furthermore, those in power, who through language maintain and sustain the inequalities, also have the power to improve societal inequalities. For these reasons, CDA presents the voice of the silenced, to emphasise and stress the power of discourse and to provide opportunity for reform and change.

The confrontational qualities on societal conditioning and the challenge of power, all attributes of CDA, interrelate and complement Rigney’s Indigenist Research Principles (1999). This is demonstrated by challenging the current societal positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as (re)enacted, maintained and (re)produced by the dominant group. Furthermore, CDA, through the analysis of discourse, allows for the political integrity of policy to be challenged.

For these reasons, a CDA approach was used to analyse the data. It provided a methodological approach to address the Plan’s (MCEECDYA, 2011a) Engagement and Connections, and Attendance domains and allows for the interrelationship of discourse and context to be defined. The study analyses policy documents rather than including participants and therefore, an elaboration of the use of documents in this study now follows.

4.6 DATA COLLECTION STRATEGIES

4.6.1 Policy Documents

“Qualitative sampling requires identification of appropriate participants, being those who can best inform the study” (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002, p. 726). In this study, no human participants were selected to provide evidence or respond to the critical analysis of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a). Instead, this study drew on several publicly available web-based documents regarding Indigenous education policy including the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) and the policies that informed its development; for example, the AEP and the Melbourne Declaration. These policies highlight the disparities between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational outcomes in comparison to their non-Indigenous counterparts and the lack of progress despite numerous policies being developed. These inequitable educational outcomes need to be addressed and therefore, the Plan was selected as it advises all three levels of education on the research and best practice to address and improve
student outcomes. The use of policy documents therefore informed the data collection strategies.

4.6.2 Archival documents

Archival documents including policy documents are a very relevant source for researchers who are investigating various aspects of social life and the means by which individuals and social groups interact with one another in the social world (Wharton, 2006). Here, the lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the detrimental effects of past policies and reforms are presented within the foregrounding of each policy document including the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) to provide explanation for the shifting paradigm. In other words, a new shared ideology on addressing the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their non-Indigenous counterparts is being developed. With the National Apology to the Stolen Generations given by the then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, an opportunity to further redress the afflictions of past reforms and policies became paramount (COAG, 2009). The educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were one of the key societal disadvantages that were to be addressed.

Archival documents provide to the researcher an insight into the significance of the policy by documenting the historical and social context of the time of production (Wharton, 2006). In this case, the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) documents the government’s shifting approach to address the educational gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their non-Indigenous counterparts through the means of a collaborative approach by all key stakeholders.

Therefore, the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) was selected as it was produced to align and provide data for the overarching goals specific to education set within the Closing the Gap agenda (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2013). The Plan, therefore, provides evidence of the social practices to address the educational inequities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Through the domains of Engagement and Connections, and Attendance, an investigation into the positioning of the reader as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was conducted.

4.7 PROCEDURE AND TIMELINE

The data collection process was informed by four stages:
Stage 1 involved the reading of an extensive range of research literature including policy documents pertaining to addressing the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their non-Indigenous counterparts and selecting relevant literature and policy documents;

Stage 2 involved the preliminary analysis to identify the general and common elements of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a);

Stage 3 involved the cross comparisons and correlations of the textual features as provided in Section 4.4 using NVivo to organise, sort and maintain the data; and

Stage 4 involved reflection on the findings.

Each stage is described in more detail to show the steps taken in the study.

4.7.1 Stage 1: Selecting the research literature

The initial process within this study was to identify the societal issue that was relevant to the researcher and that would allow for an opportunity to contribute to the struggle for self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. An extensive range of literature pertaining to the educational disadvantages of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was analysed to develop an understanding of the research and its findings on means to address the gap. Literature was sought from both a researcher’s perspective as well as government “solutions”. Particular interest developed in policy production, distribution and consumption, and therefore, the process of enactment and implementation and the filtration of policy.

Research data was sought pertaining to increasing student educational outcomes and providing reasons for disengagement and lack of attendance as well as recognising the various societal and cultural issues that influenced a student’s progression. Many of the key factors that informed the domains within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) were investigated by a diverse range of researchers, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. As a result, the analysis of the Plan was seen as beneficial to develop an understanding of policy production, its impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ educational outcomes and how discourse is used to sustain social positioning and maintain shared ideologies.

Further to this reading, Indigenous methodologies and frameworks were consulted to inform the theoretical approach to this study. Through collaborative
discussions with supervisors, CDA was suggested to complement the Indigenous framework and therefore, further reading into the particulars of CDA as a methodological approach was also undertaken. The articulation of Rigney’s Indigenist Research Principles (1999) and Fairclough’s CDA (2013a) was deemed appropriate for this study.

4.7.2 Stage 2: Identifying the general and common elements of the Plan

Commencing with the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a), a preliminary analysis was conducted to identify the general and common elements and to identify the key assumptions evident. Multiple codes and/or themes were determined. A specific emphasis was placed on the foregrounding of the document to establish its purpose and objectives as well as two domains, Engagement and Connections, and Attendance.

An in-depth fine-grained analysis to identify the core general and common elements of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) was then conducted using software. In this instance, NVivo was used to maintain the data. Further evidentiary data was collated pertaining to the use of discourse and its ability to position Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in regard to the increasing of Engagement and Connections and the improvement of Attendance.

4.7.3 Stage 3: Analysing the data

Using NVivo, cross comparisons and correlations between the general and common elements within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) were conducted. NVivo is a data management tool that “provides a workspace to help you at every stage of your project – from organising your material, through to analysis, and then sharing and reporting” (QSRInternational, n.d., para. 3). NVivo is a particularly useful tool when conducting qualitative research as it provides the tools and workspace to classify, sort and arrange information, enabling the researcher to identify themes, develop an insightful and deep understanding of the context and establish evidence-based conclusions. Within this study, NVivo was used to organise the main themes within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a). It allowed for the data to be sorted into its thematic headings to assist in the compilation of evidence to draw conclusions on how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been positioned within the texts and how key assumptions are maintained throughout the texts.
4.7.4 Stage 4: Reflecting and reporting on the findings

Upon collating all the data, reflection on the findings was necessary to adequately answer the last research question. That is, *Is the Plan biased despite the representation of the Plan as objective and factual?* Therefore, this thesis provides reflection on the analysis of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) and its benefits to and positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

4.8 ETHICS

“Ethical considerations are paramount in all research from its design to conclusion” (Fossey et al., 2002, p. 723). Prior to beginning any research, the researcher has a number of ethical issues to navigate. Queensland University of Technology, from here on referred to as QUT, advises researchers as follows:

It is important to consider the ethical implications, and ensure you are aware of your responsibilities, particularly if your project involves:

- human participation (including the use of human tissue or data)
- the use of animals for scientific purposes
- gene technology or genetically modified organisms (2014a, para. 1).

A number of procedures were adhered to according to the University’s Code of Conduct for Research and Ethics.

The proposed study itself was presented to the QUT Faculty Research Ethics Advisor (FREA). “Each faculty has appointed at least one research ethics advisor who provides confidential advice to staff and students on integrity in research [and] research ethics” (Queensland University of Technology, 2014b, para. 2). The study was reviewed by the FREA prior to conducting research to ensure that all ethical issues had been considered and addressed.

“Much social research necessitates obtaining the consent and co-operation of subjects who are to assist in investigations and of significant others in the institutions or organisations providing the research facilities” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000, p. 50). However, this study had no human participants. Instead, the study drew on public policy documents. As a result, the study was deemed negligible risk and exempt from further ethical clearance. Exemption was provided on 12 February 2015 at QUT.
Ethical considerations about the methodological approach chosen for the study were addressed. Qualitative research is critiqued by researchers for its validity and reliability. Lincoln and Guba (2007) provide researchers with four main criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. McDougall (2000, p. 722) summarises these terms as follows:

- credibility, which means that the people studied find the produced account to be true;
- applicability in the form of transferability, which may be possible if enough “thick” description is available about concepts to be able to make a reasoned judgment about the degree of transferability possible;
- dependability represents commitment to consistency; and
- confirmability relates to whether the analysis is “grounded in the data” and whether inferences based on the data are logical.

These factors need to be considered by the researcher when designing and conducting research. The addressing of each of these factors follows.

### 4.8.1 Credibility

Lincoln and Guba (2007) define credibility as “an analog to internal validity” (p. 18). In other words, as one of the criteria of trustworthiness, it guides the researcher as to the extent of interaction with the research site and participants that is needed to ensure rigor in their study. To ensure credibility, Lincoln and Guba (2007) provide six points of reference including prolonged engagement, persistent observation and triangulation of data.

With regard to analysis of documents as used in this study, the researcher needs to establish the credibility of the documents as a means to provide adequate data to answer their research questions (Wharton, 2006). Further to this, the documents need to be authentic and verifiable. In this case, all documents including the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) are downloadable from the relevant departments and agencies that produced the documents. The consideration and selection of the archival documents in this study has ensured that the Federal Government’s perspectives are provided in relation to how they perceive the Plan’s (MCEECDYA, 2011a) implementation and enactment.
4.8.2 Transferability

Transferability is defined as “an analog to external validity” (Lincoln & Guba, 2007, p. 18). This means the study and its findings need to be heavy with description to explain the context of the research. A reader should be able to read the study and make “judgments about the degree of fit or similarity” should they “wish to apply all or part of the findings elsewhere” (Lincoln & Guba, 2007, p. 19). Within this study, an analysis of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) was conducted and the transferability of its findings to other policy documents including Indigenous education policies is plausible.

4.8.3 Dependability and confirmability

Dependability is “an analog to reliability” (Lincoln & Guba, 2007, p. 18) and confirmability is “an analog to objectivity” (Lincoln & Guba, 2007, p. 18). These two criteria are exemplified through the auditing process upheld by the University’s protocols and procedures for conducting research. It requires “an external audit requiring both the establishment of an audit trail and the carrying out of an audit by a competent external, disinterested auditor” (Lincoln & Guba, 2007, p. 19).

Cohen and Crabtree (2006a) define an audit trail as “a transparent description of the research steps taken from the start of a research project to the development and reporting of findings. These are records that are kept regarding what was done in an investigation” (para.1). All raw data, data reduction and data construction form part of the researcher’s audit trail (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006a). It is important to maintain and document the process that the researcher follows to define and develop their study to ensure that the readers can identify that the study has been conducted objectively.

An external audit allows an opportunity for an external auditor to challenge the study but also to provide feedback (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006b). Feedback provided has the potential to provide new insight into the research for the researcher and, more importantly, gives the study a new perspective from another’s point of view. Cohen and Crabtree (2006b) provide both positive and negative issues of the external audit process but highlight that overall, the process of “external audits are conducted to foster the accuracy or validity of a research study” (para. 1). Such parameters maintain the ethical standards as well as the rigor of the study.
4.9 CONCLUSION

This chapter has described the research methods that were employed in the study. An overview of CDA was provided together with explanation of the orders of discourse found within institutions which establishes social order dictating social practices. The flexibility of CDA as a methodological approach provides a means to challenge the dominant ideology and advocate for social equality. The research process has been elaborated and the study’s social and educational setting has been described. The relevance of archival documents as a source for analysis and the Plan as a policy document was provided. The ethical considerations necessary when conducting the research project have been outlined. Further to this, the chapter has argued for appropriate means for assessing the value of the study. In the next chapter, CDA is applied to the Plan with particular focus on the domains, Engagement and Connections, and Attendance, and how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are positioned.
Chapter 5: Data Analysis and Discussions

The previous chapter addressed the methodological approach, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). An overview of CDA provided foregrounding of its application in this study. Orders of discourse and policy discourse were discussed. The textual features that inform the data analysis were provided. The ethical considerations including addressing bias were presented.

In this chapter, CDA is used to analyse the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a). As Henry et al. (2013) state, policy analysis requires the analysis of “what governments do, why and with what effects” (p. 35). Therefore, a descriptive analysis of the Plan itself foregrounds the general and common elements of policy and the key assumptions evident, as well as how government is using this policy to close the gap and their reasoning. The analysis places particular focus on the experiential, relational and expressive values used; that is, the use of declarative statements and classification schemes, the use of euphemistic expressions and the use of expressive modality to sustain and maintain dominant ideologies. This analysis includes a fine-grained analysis of the domains of Engagement and Connections, and Attendance. A descriptive analysis of the Plan follows.

5.1 THE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER EDUCATION ACTION PLAN

The Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) is divided into four separate sections. The first section is an introduction that positions the Plan as a ramification of previous policy and describes the processes undertaken prior to its release. Consultation with both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Consultative bodies and educators as well as non-Indigenous education providers occurred. Further to this, the domains were informed by the Review of Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005–2008 for the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research, 2009) which stated that the factors of engagement and connections as well as attendance, to name a few, needed addressing to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ educational outcomes (MCEECDYA, 2011a). Henry et al. (2013) explain the process of building on previous policy and complementing policy as being incremental and
The Plan, therefore, is incremental and intertextual as it builds on from policy and its evaluation as well as being developed from broader policy including the NEA (COAG, 2012).

The second section further demonstrates the incremental and intertextual properties of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) where it describes the six domains in more detail and provides the goals and targets of the Plan. Further to this, it articulates the performance indicators and outcomes that assist in its evaluation. Here, the Plan demonstrates how it complements broader policies. This is exemplified by each domain’s primary outcome being derived from other policies including the NEA (COAG, 2012). For example, the initial outcome for the domain Engagement and Connections within the Plan states, “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are engaged in and benefiting from schooling” (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 13). In comparison, one of the outcomes of the NEA is “All children are engaged in and benefiting from schooling” (COAG, 2012, p. 4). Here, the all-encompassing reference to all children (COAG, 2012, p. 4) is exchanged with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 13) to ensure the Plan is specifically addressing the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Following this, section three provides the jurisdictional State priorities that provide current State approaches that will assist in the implementation of the Plan and achieving its goals and targets. Here, strategies that are State specific are provided to demonstrate how the broader policies have been addressed to date within State policy. Reference is also made to the Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies (IECBs) and their role within the national and systemic level assisting in addressing the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (MCEECDYA, 2011a).

Finally, section four provides instruction on how the Plan’s (MCEECDYA, 2011a) implementation will be monitored as well as the reporting processes required to maintain accountability and transparency. Here, the power elite establish their authoritative position as the “overseers” of the implementation. In doing so, the power elite are drawing on “the use of ideology to create coalitions” developing a “basis for harmonized action” (Rein, 1983, p. 213). In this study, the power elite include both Federal and State Governments and their governmental agencies and the reader, being those at a local level including schools and community.
The following section identifies and elaborates the general and common elements evident within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a). The positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within the policy discourse and the implications of the historical context follow in section 5.3. The concluding section of the chapter provides a fine-grained analysis of the domains of Engagement and Attendance.

5.2 ANALYTICAL DESCRIPTIONS OF THE PLAN

Foregrounded and positioned within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy context, the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) demonstrates the general and common elements (see Henry et al., 2013; Rein, 1983). That is, it articulates the goals and targets of the Plan and demonstrates its incremental and intertextual properties. Firstly, the Plan builds on previous policy demonstrating its incremental properties. It is also complementing and developed from other broader policies demonstrating its intertextual properties. For example, the Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008), the NIRA (COAG, 2008), and the AEP (DEET, 1989), to name a few, inform the Plan and its domains. In doing so, the Plan addresses the complexities and consequences of its implementation by elaborating on the goals and outcomes, stipulating actions to be executed by all three levels, being national, systemic and local. Finally, the Plan provides a definition of the funding allocation including the scope and duration. Here, funding for the implementation of the Plan is attached to Agreements and Partnerships allocated via NIRA (MCEECDYA, 2011a). Elaboration of the general and common elements of policy follows.

5.2.1 General and common elements

The general and common elements of policy are evident in the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) where it is recognised as a supporting document to assist in achieving the targets set within several Indigenous education policies including the AEP (DEET, 1989) and the Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008). Within the elements, key assumptions are evident. These include the normalisation of educational disadvantage by the debilitating effects of colonialism, racism and assimilation that have simply been ignored in official discourse (Gray & Beresford, 2008). Such issues foreground the historical and social context that positions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within the Plan. CDA allows for the particular historical and cultural
contexts relevant to the production of the Plan to be identified providing the dominant ideologies that assist in its recontextualisation and translation (Henry et al., 2013). Analysis of each of the general and common elements follows.

**Goals and targets**

The Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) represents the domains initially as a conceptual overview (see Figure 5.1) prior to elaborating on the domains and their goals and targets in the second section. The six overlaying cyclic display spaces seen within the conceptual overview represent the domains. Here, the domains demonstrate their relevance in all three recognised levels where action is required. That is,

The Plan identifies national, systemic and local level action in six priority domains that evidence shows will contribute to improved outcomes in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 5)

Expressive modality is evident in this statement. For example, the phrase *that evidence shows will contribute* (p. 5) explicitly presents the power elite’s evaluation of the
research literature available. Assertive and definitive in nature, the term will assesses the likelihood of events (Biber, 2006). Here, by using the term will, the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) assures the reader that the domains provided command improved outcomes. However, noteworthy is the ambiguity of this statement. The Plan does not provide citations to support the claim made that evidence shows will contribute (p. 5) and therefore, from an analytical perspective, lacks rigor and grounding. Moreover, it exemplifies the processes of hegemony where the reader must accept that the evidence suggested by the power elite is relevant and trustworthy (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000).

Aligned with the domains, the goals and targets of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) require further fine-grained analysis. This study focuses on the domains Engagement and Connections, and Attendance. Further elaboration of these domains and their targets, outcomes and performance indicators occurs in section 5.3.

**Ramifications and implications of policy**

As previously discussed, the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) is incremental and intertextual. Demonstrating this, the closing the gap targets (p. 4) addressed in the following excerpt are a part of the NIRA (COAG, 2008).

The Plan outlines

how MCEECDYA Ministers will work together to achieve the closing the gap targets. (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 4)

Not only does this exemplify the intertextual and incremental properties of the Plan but it also provides insight to the call for a coordinated collaboration to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ educational outcomes. Rein (1983) states that “some pleas for coordination grow out from concern for administrative efficiency” (p. 60). In other words, through collaboration, order is established where funding and human resources are streamlined ensuring that duplication of services and programmes is minimised (Henry et al., 2013). In education, the diverse services and programmes provided range from classroom teaching and curriculum to after-school sporting events to the rewarding of student participation, where attendance and engagement occurs (SCSEEC, 2013a).

The use of expressive modality is identified within the excerpt; that is, affirmative action is encouraged. Expressive modality is exemplified by such words
as will. By using expressive modality, the power elite are positioned as an authority on Indigenous education policy and addressing student educational outcomes. Biber (2006) situates the modal verb will within the category of prediction or volition. Therefore, the excerpt ratifies the power elite’s intentions to collaborate and in doing so, predicts that this assists in addressing the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their non-Indigenous counterparts. Further to this, by demonstrating its bipartisan approach, the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) encourages the reader to take a position of support with the power elite’s ideological stance of the need to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (Dreise & Thomson, 2014).

**Collaborative approach**

To further demonstrate the collaborative approach being advocated to address the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their non-Indigenous counterparts, the previous excerpt is followed by

Non-government education providers have agreed to join with governments to achieve these targets and progress actions outlined in the Plan.

(MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 4)

Annual reports are required from schools and sectors as part of tracking the progress to ensure that the services available for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are appropriate and assist in attaining the outcomes as set in the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a). In doing so, the annual reports written and collated by the Education Council ensure accountability and transparency are maintained.

Further to this, the excerpt positions the reader to support the efforts of the power elite. This is due to their commitment through COAG to take action in addressing the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their non-Indigenous counterparts (Dreise & Thomson, 2014). However, from an Aboriginal perspective, such actions again demonstrate the power elite’s resistance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination (Rigney, 1999). As Brady (1997, p. 415) states, “one of the major barriers to attaining equal status in Australia is the attitude which pervades society whereby we are still considered to be unable and incapable of achieving success”. Notably, in the excerpt, the attitude whereby there is the need for the MCEECDYA Ministers to work in collaboration to close the gaps demonstrates the
ideology presented by Brady (1997) through the omission of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the collaborative approach.

Annual reporting, progress and the value of the services being provided to address the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can be evaluated regularly. The Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) provides opportunity for the IECBs to contribute to its evaluation. The evaluative nature addresses past failures of “the experience of educational reform for Australia’s Indigenous students” (Gray & Beresford, 2008, p. 197) and provides occasion for the privileging of Indigenous voice (Rigney, 1999). The domains and their goals and targets determine what is to be evaluated within the annual reports.

**Struggle for self-determination**

Interestingly, the domain’s goals and targets of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) are not presented in the initial section but are alluded to through the provision of the purpose and the use of a conceptual diagram (see Figure 5.1). The purpose outlined in the Plan identifies that school education contributes to closing the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their non-Indigenous counterparts. For example, the Plan states that

> Governments have agreed to take urgent action to close the gap between the life outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians. (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 3)

Here, a declarative statement occurs within the excerpt to emphasise the necessity for action. A declarative statement provides information about people, events and objects (Fairclough, 2001b). In this excerpt, the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) declares that there are inconsistencies between the livelihoods of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their non-Indigenous counterparts and that this needs to be addressed.

The use of expressive modality allows for the identification of evaluative statements (Biber, 2006). For example, the use of the phrase *urgent action* (p. 3) works to emphasise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are in need of assistance. That is, they are to attain a certain undisclosed way of life determined by the dominant ideology held by power elite and that through the implementation and addressing of the targets set within the NIRA (COAG, 2008) and the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a), this goal can be achieved. This excerpt demonstrates the
assimilatory properties still held within modern Australian society. That is, despite the call for reconciliation, and the recognition of the oppressive past reforms of assimilation and dispossession, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their ways of living and being are still judged by the ideology of superiority and dominance (see Brady, 1997; Foley, 2003; Rigney, 2002).

Brady (1997, p. 421) states,

the majority of Indigenous people are endeavouring to overcome the impact of colonisation. Institutionalised colonisation in the area of education has been and remains a central focus in the struggle to retain the right to be and continue as Indigenous people.

In other words, cultural and social assumptions informed by ideology of power and dominance are made within the excerpt of the Plan that there is a need for assistance (see Fairclough, 2013a). The excerpt positions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as incapable of improving current conditions without assistance, minimising the opportunity for self-determination. Rigney’s Indigenist Research Principle, resistance as the emancipatory imperative, seeks to dispute against the positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as “oppressed victims in need of charity” (Foley, 2003, p. 48). The taken-for-granted assumptions demonstrate a binary where there is a definite distinction between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ and their non-Indigenous counterparts’ ways of living and livelihoods.

The struggle for self-determination is central to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to progress in modern Australia (Rigney, 1999). However, the definition of self-determination is often misconstrued, which has allowed “governments and those who wield power in this society to create a climate of fear and distrust of any attempts by Indigenous Australians to articulate and work towards achieving equal rights and social justice” (Brady, 1997, p. 416). The Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) demonstrates that dominance and issues of power remain in modern Australia’s dominant ideology when it states that there is an urgent need to close the gap between the life outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 3). Here, the ingrained assimilatory properties of the past, as previously mentioned, still influence decision-making and policy where success and life outcomes are measured and judged by those whose culture is contradictory to those being judged (Brady, 1997). That is, the past
reform of assimilation as defined by Hasluck (1961, p. 1) expressed the expectation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to “attain the same manner of living as other Australians”. Within the excerpt, there is an implicit statement that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have not attained the same manner of living by referring to life outcomes (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 3).

Further to this, the use of the adjective urgent determines the time frame in which this needs to be addressed and therefore, by using this term, the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) assumes the role of an authority of truth and further positions the ideological stance of the power elite. This is established by the use of a declarative statement where those in a position of power and authority (Fairclough, 2013b) are providing information. In the Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005–2008 (MCEETYA, 2006), the current educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are seen to perpetuate the “intergenerational cycles of social and economic disadvantage” (p. 4) due to the limitation of post-school options to transition into the workplace or further study. That is, the excerpt implicitly exerts that there is an obligation to address the current inequalities evident in Australian society in the imminent future through the development and implementation of policy. As Henry et al. (2013, p. 24) state, policy implicitly “reflects functionalist assumptions about the way society works, that is, that society is underpinned by a value consensus and that the various institutions in society contribute to the ongoing stability of the whole”. That is, the values or dominant ideology regarding the livelihoods of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is one that needs addressing because they are not attaining the standard of living of other Australians as defined by Hasluck (1961) regarding assimilation and, therefore, the Plan’s goals and targets address the issue of the educational outcomes of these students.

**Dominant ideology**

As an educational policy document, the role of the Plan therefore is to assist education providers to accelerate improvements in the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people.

(MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 4)

This exemplifies how declarative statements state information (Fairclough, 2013a). Unlike the previous excerpt where the primary focus was on the people as a collective group, this statement provides the Plan’s (MCEECDYA, 2011a) purpose and its
implementation within the educational context. That is, the Plan focuses on closing the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their non-Indigenous counterparts.

Within this excerpt, the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) establishes the position of authority by stating that its purpose is to assist education providers (p. 4). Whilst the Plan provides the targets, outcomes and actions for all three levels including national, systemic and local, its primary goal is to provide guidance for those at the local level, being schools, parents and community. The excerpt exemplifies Lowe’s (2011) statement on the shifting of blame for the lack of progress from policy failure to schools’ underachievement in addressing the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

As a result, the excerpt encourages the reader to align with the power elite in presuming that the lack in progress is the result of schools. Here, a presupposition is identified. Presuppositions are where information is taken as fact based on a shared ideology (Fairclough, 2013a), in other words, an implicit assumption where information is taken as a “given”. The presupposition here is that at the national and systemic level, the actions already implemented to address the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their non-Indigenous counterparts are adequate and appropriate.

Gray and Beresford (2008, p. 199) counter this when they state, “in fact, rather than the exponential growth in engagement and success expected from the substantial government expenditure on Indigenous education in the last decade, a plateau effect is now evident”. The progression in closing the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students has become stagnant and “performance data across a range of sources point to little gain or ‘mixed results’ at best” (Dreise & Thomson, 2014, p. 2) despite the initiatives implemented by the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a). While the dominant ideology is clearly expressed within the excerpt, the evidence provided by researchers such as Gray and Beresford (2008), and Dreise and Thomson (2014), to name a few, contradicts this positioning but is silenced as “rarely does the full complement of data relating to Indigenous school performance find its way into public discourse” (Gray & Beresford, 2008, p. 199). The power elite are the funding bodies for education as a whole. With the large sums of funding made available, the shifting of the blame, as
Lowe (2011) suggests, removes some accountability in the lack of or slow progress. An elaboration on funding follows.

**Funding**

Finally, the general and common element of funding looks at the sustainability of policy. The scope and duration of funding available for the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) is not provided but mentioned on a more generic scale. That is, the direct links to the reform directions in the NIRA (COAG, 2008) provided within the Plan, list the funding agreements available to resource the Plan’s implementation. This is demonstrated when the Plan states

Commitments made in these national partnerships and agreements are brought together in the Plan with a number of new and continuing complementary measures to close the gap between the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and other students. (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 4)

Here, the discourse of the Plan further positions it as a supporting document. That is, it builds on the previous work through the collaboration of *new and continuing complementary measures* (p. 4). The excerpt does not elaborate on the measures implemented. The reader, therefore, must make presuppositions about the power elite’s trustworthiness that the measures put in place, both new and continuing, are the best solutions for addressing and improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The presupposition here is based on the “taken-for-granted” assumption that the Plan is produced and distributed by government and therefore, it is factual and objective in its representation (Henry et al., 2013).

As previously mentioned, within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a), there is no indication as to the scope, duration or size of funding and again, the reader presupposes that the power elite knows, enacts and maintains appropriate protocols and processes when allocating funding to address the implementation of policy (Henry et al., 2013). The IECBs highlight how funding agreements are not specifically “tagged” as monies to assist in addressing the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their non-Indigenous counterparts (SCSEEC, 2013a). In fact, the funding agreements are listed as

the Smarter Schools – Improving Teacher Quality National Partnership, the Smarter Schools – Low Socio-economic Status School Communities National
Partnership and the Smarter Schools – Literacy and Numeracy National Partnership. (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 4) to name a few. A presupposition can be made that this funding could be misappropriated rather than focusing on the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Such a statement is found in the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan: 2012 Annual Report* (SCSEEC, 2013a), where the IECBs expressed their concern in regard to the funding not being targeted as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific. They suggest the “high need for targeted funds to have transparency and accountability to ensure the money is actually spent and goes where it is intended” (SCSEEC, 2013a, p. 65). This was because the IECBs noted in 2012 that one of the State and Territory jurisdictions spent less than 20 per cent of the allocated funding for addressing the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (SCSEEC, 2013a).

*The delivery of programmes and services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians*

The general and common elements found in policy are addressed in the initial section of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) and address the six principles provided in the NIRA (COAG, 2008) when delivering programmes and services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Therefore, as with other policies,

In implementing the actions in this Plan, government and non-government education providers will follow the six principles for the delivery of programs and services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians agreed under the *National Indigenous Reform Agreement*. (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 6)

Expressive modality is identified by the modal verb *will*. That is, the power elite have directed education providers that they *will follow the six principles* (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 6). In other words, the modal verb *will* stipulates the obligations of the reader. Specifically, the reader needs to consider the positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the implementation of the Plan.

Here, a declarative statement is evident. The Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) instructs the reader of the processes necessary in the implementation. Firstly, that the programmes and services implemented in response to the Plan contribute to closing the gap (MCEECDYA, 2011a). The full phrase, as used in the NIRA, is in fact “Close the Gap in Indigenous Disadvantage” (COAG, 2008, p. 5) which “looks to tailor investments and
interventions to bridge current disparities between Indigenous and other Australians” (Dreise & Thomson, 2014, p. 2). The use of the abbreviated phrase “closing the gap” still has negative connotations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and once again, negatively positions them as not attaining the standard of living in accordance with the dominant ideology (Brady, 1997). The six principles are priority, engagement, sustainability, access, integration and accountability (MCEECDDYA, 2011a). An overview of each of the principles follows.

**Priority principle.** As a component of the programmes and services implemented, there is a need to ensure that the involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the design and delivery occurs (MCEECDDYA, 2011a). This principle, being the first of the principles regarding the delivery of programs and services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, highlights the importance of the domain Engagement and Connections. Further to this, it complements the first major goal set within the AEP (DEET, 1989). The AEP’s first long-term goal states the need “to establish effective arrangement for the participation of Indigenous parents and community members in decisions regarding the planning, delivery and evaluation of preschool, primary and secondary education services for their children” (p. 313). In other words, policy as incremental and intertextual documents state there is to be involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the decision-making process.

Recognition of intergenerational trauma experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples because of past reforms and policies and its effects on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples became part of public discourse after the National Apology in 2008. The then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, acknowledged the need for all governments to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities “in order to rebuild the trust lost through ‘the laws and policies of successive Parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss’” (COAG, 2009, p. 23). As a result, the intergenerational trauma experienced hinders engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within the school setting where historically, schools were perceived as “vehicles for assimilation and integration” (Gray & Beresford, 2008, p. 208). This lack of trust in turn influences Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s engagement in the schooling environment. Atkinson’s (2013) research provides insight to the cyclic processes of historical trauma and its normalisation within the shared culture of communities.
Engagement principle. Rigney’s Principles (1999) align the AEP (DEET, 1989) goal and the second principle, Engagement, when providing programmes and services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with the dominant ideology of the 1980s where “access and equity” (DEET, 1989, p. 76) to education was a civic right. As a result, therefore, government was obligated to act for the benefit of all its citizens. At the time, it was implicit within the AEP that Indigenous education was to be regulated and overseen by government (Rigney, 2002). The shift in the paradigm today, calling for partnerships within Indigenous education, provides opportunity for the engagement of Indigenous peoples in a management capacity to address student educational outcomes and, as Rigney (2002) suggests, a means to work towards a treaty in the struggle for self-determination.

Engagement and Connections with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within this principle is essential. However, as noted in Review of Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005–2008 for the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research, 2009, p. 41), “the recommendations in Australian Directions are worded well, but, with respect, there is an over-reliance on non-Indigenous senior officials operating without expert guidance and input from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people”. Within this Review therefore, it highlights how the rhetoric of policy encourages Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander involvement but the reality is contradictory (David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research, 2009).

Sustainability principle. The third principle necessitates adequate funding of the programmes and services ensuring sustainability (MCEEDYA, 2011a). Gray and Beresford (2008) suggest several interacting factors that undermine the sustainability of policy, including the narrow focus of policy addressing specific problems such as absenteeism rather than being holistic in approach, as well as the lack of training to ensure teachers and school administration can sufficiently implement strategies to address the students’ needs. Financial resourcing is also of key importance as demonstrated in the general and common elements of policy. In 2001–2004, $63 million dollars in funds was dedicated to addressing the gaps between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their non-Indigenous counterparts (Gray & Beresford, 2008). However, as Brady (1997, p. 416) states “the situation will not change until Indigenous Australians have the power to articulate, enact and control the
definition of research and what constitutes needs and the methods for meeting those needs”. That is, until they attain self-determination by gaining a position of control over production and regulation of policy “rather than being the consumer of it” (Rigney, 2002, p. 79).

**Access principle.** The fourth principle considers geographical location and accessibility to the programmes and services offered (MCEEECDYA, 2011a). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples “live in a variety of settings including major urban locations (around 30 per cent), in rural towns with fewer than 10 000 inhabitants (42 per cent) and 28 per cent in remote areas” (Gray & Beresford, 2008, p. 198). As a result, Rigney (2002) highlights the importance of the input of regional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and communities into educational strategies to assist in addressing specific localised problems. Further to this, access to professional development for rural and remote schools and classroom teachers is not as readily available as for urban schools (Gray & Beresford, 2008). The *Review of Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005–2008 for the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs* (David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research, 2009) states that the professional development required to improve student educational outcomes can be provided within the school setting or at the system level.

**Integration principle.** A coordinated effort by all stakeholders to address the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students addresses the integration principle (MCEEECDYA, 2011a). Dreise and Thomson (2014) highlight the importance of initiatives to include stronger collaboration that motivates and drives effort. The focus on the domain Engagement and Connections ensures the integration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and community in decision-making occurs (MCEEECDYA, 2011a).

**Accountability principle.** Finally, the monitoring and evaluation of the services and programmes provided ensures accountability and transparency (MCEEECDYA, 2011a). Tracking the implementation of the Plan (MCEEECDYA, 2011a) within the national, systemic and local levels enables the general and common elements to be addressed and evaluated on a regular basis. Furthermore, evidence of what works enables best practice and experiences to be shared with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (MCEEECDYA, 2011a). The positioning of Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islander people and their engagement within the decision-making process is encouraged through the Plan. An analysis of how they are positioned within the discourse follows.

5.3 POSITIONING OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE

The policy environment and the need for the implementation of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) through a description of current schooling outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students introduces the position of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The Plan recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the First Australians with their connection to land and water acknowledged. That is,

Governments across Australia recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the First Australians with one of the oldest continuing cultures in human history. They affirm the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to sustain their languages and cultures and acknowledge associations with the land and water. (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 3)

However, this is followed immediately by the recognition of the differences between the life outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous. That is,

Governments have agreed to take urgent action to close the gap between the life outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians. (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 3)

A binary is identified here (Fairclough, 2013a). By using, the term *between* there is a distinction made and therefore, there is a definitive separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from other Australians. This binary works to establish a classification scheme, that is, that *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people* are detached and separated from *other Australians*. Here, the power elite’s preoccupation to establish the need for action to address the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students isolates them from the general Australian population.

Further to this, the two excerpts allow for the retraction of a positive representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and replace it with a negative. The Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) identifies Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander people as the First Australians and therefore, given a position of reverence. This is followed immediately with the statement that the life outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people do not equal those of other Australians, which positions them lower than others.

In terms of reconciliation, the first excerpt advocates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as First Australians. The second excerpt however positions the people below their non-Indigenous counterparts in terms of livelihoods. As previously discussed, the assimilatory properties of the second statement demonstrate dominance and issues of power (Fairclough, 2013b). Bretherton and Mellor (2006) demonstrate how reconciliation is complex within the Australian context as “for many people, the term denotes the need to address a lack of positive and empathetic attitudes towards Aborigines and Aboriginal culture. For others, it refers to relationship building to promote harmony” (p. 94). In this example, the juxtaposition of the two excerpts diminishes the good intent created by the recognition.

### 5.3.1 Student population

To further establish the drive for action, a summary of current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in schools and factors relevant to the COAG targets in NIRA (COAG, 2008) is provided. That is,

In 2010, there were over 160,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school students in Australia representing just over four per cent of the student population. (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 6)

While the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student population is relatively low nationally, the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) acknowledges that within remote and community schools, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can represent 100 per cent of the school population.

Where schools in remote locations have up to 100 per cent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student population, factors other than the domains (including Engagement and Connections, and Attendance) influence student educational attainment (see Gray & Beresford, 2008). Recognition of these differences between urban, rural and remote schools is necessary to accommodate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes (Rigney, 2002). Gray and Beresford (2008) acknowledge that, through official inquiries, evidence and data regarding the issues
affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes are improving the contextual understanding of policymakers. However, these factors are not considered when allocating funding and therefore, schools in geographically isolated locations “face added burdens in sustaining good educational outcomes” (Gray & Beresford, 2008, p. 213).

5.3.2 Cultural and linguistic diversity

The cultural and linguistic diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are identified within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a). The Plan informs the reader of the gains made in recent years in some areas of English literacy and numeracy and retention to Year 12 (p. 7). Within this section, another contradiction occurs when it is stated

However, gaps remain between the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and other students with evidence from across Australia showing that the more remote the community the poorer the student outcomes. This is clear on all indicators including participation in early childhood education, literacy and numeracy, attendance, retention, and post-school transitions. (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 7)

Again, the discourse presents the power elite’s ideological stance. The consistent use of such terms as literacy and numeracy and post-school transitions establish the importance of the domains used within the Plan where their standpoint is established. The NIRA (COAG, 2008) states that “for too long remote communities have been the recipients of disjointed, ad hoc and uncoordinated actions and responses from governments at all levels” (p. 25). The comparative between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and other students presupposes that the reader shares the ideological stance that other students are inclusive of non-Indigenous students as a collective group.

Furthermore, the use of superlatives emphasises the need for action. The word choice within the phrase the more remote the community the poorer the student outcomes speaks to the extremes of the situation. That is, there is an implicit statement made by the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) on the influence of geolocation on student outcomes (Gray & Beresford, 2008). Specifically, where the school population is 100 per cent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, as shown in the previous excerpt, student outcomes are disproportionately lower than their urbanised counterparts
(MCEECDYA, 2011a). The presupposition is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who are attending school in remote and community schools are disadvantaged in comparison to those who attend regional and urban schools (Pearson, 2004). This recognised gap in student performance has a further negative impact on student self-confidence and as a result, places these students as high risk for disengaging and leaving school early (Dreise & Thomson, 2014).

5.3.3 Closing the Gap

Further reinforced in the following statement, the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 7) states

these gaps limit the career prospects and life choices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and perpetuate intergenerational disadvantage.

The gaps referred to in this excerpt relate to the “unequal opportunities to join the ‘knowledge economies’” (MCEETYA, 2006, p. 4) further demonstrating the need to address the disparities between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their non-Indigenous counterparts. In other words, a presupposition occurs where a very bleak life outcome for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students manifests. By using such terms as limit the career prospects, limit life choices and perpetuate intergenerational disadvantage when describing the potential future for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, evaluative statements are made. Expressive modality is used to drive action. Purdie and Buckley (2010) state how engaging and participating in education to improve life choices “is particularly important for Indigenous Australians who have an overall lower level of participation in education than non-Indigenous Australians” (p. 2).

The consultative process that was undertaken during the development of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) involved the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators and academics. That is,

This Plan was informed by the review and developed by a national working group of senior officials, many of whom are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. An initial draft of the Plan was circulated to Indigenous education consultative bodies in all States and Territories as well as a number of leading Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators for preliminary comment prior to public release. (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 7)
Here, euphemistic expression is identified within the discourse. Where possible, the term *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander* is used in preference to the generic term *Indigenous*. Particular emphasis provides the input that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had within the development of the Plan. This positions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators and academics as an important component of its production.

This input continues within the evaluation of the implementation of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) where IECBs are to provide feedback on the progress of the Plan in the Annual Reports. The provision for feedback from the IECBs is noteworthy, as it allows opportunity to further privilege Indigenous voice. This is one of Rigney’s Indigenist Research Principles (1999) and demonstrates the objectivity of the Plan. By providing a means for Indigenous voice to be heard, there is opportunity for public access to present the lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples addressing the “history of exploitation, suspicion, misunderstanding and prejudice” (Rigney, 1999, p. 117).

### 5.3.4 Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies

IECBs, as a component of their roles and responsibilities, hold community forums within their States and Territories and draw public opinion on the implementation of educational policy within the school setting as observed by parents and community (SCSEEC, 2013a). Therefore, those who are at the local level, that is community, provide an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective as opposed to the school, systemic or national perspective. Therefore, community voice informs the feedback contributed by the IECBs. The Annual Reports (2010-2012, and 2014), incorporate this feedback and are indicative of the Engagement and Connections and collaboration on addressing Attendance between National and State Governments and the IECBs.

The Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) positions itself within the Indigenous education policy context. It gives an overview of the policy environment and establishes the power elite’s ideological stance. That is, that there is a dire need to address the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their non-Indigenous counterparts. Finally, it introduces the domains that will improve student outcomes.
5.4 THE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER EDUCATION ACTION PLAN DOMAINS

The Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) details “a suite of agreed outcomes, targets, performance indicators and actions as the foundation of collaborative effort across Australian education providers to close the gap in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes” (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 8). Each of the domains is represented and elaborated in the Plan. This includes 1) Readiness for School; 2) Engagement and Connections; 3) Attendance; 4) Literacy and Numeracy; 5) Leadership, Quality Teaching and Workforce Development; and 6) Pathways to Real Post-School Options (MCEECDYA, 2011a). The scope of this study limits this analysis to the domains Engagement and Connections, and Attendance.

5.4.1 Engagement and Connections

The foregrounding for the Engagement and Connections domain establishes the need for action through the excessive use of declarative statements on how and why certain strategies will improve the learning outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. For example,

Schools and early childhood education providers that work in partnership with families and communities can better support the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. These partnerships can establish a collective commitment to hold high expectations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people and foster learning environments that are culturally safe and supportive. (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 12)

Expressive modality is identified. Here, the modal auxiliary verb can is used to express possibility (Biber, 2006). That is, potentially the collaboration of education providers and families and communities improves student outcomes. By engaging with and forming partnerships the learning environments will be conducive for improvement (Gray & Beresford, 2008).

School–community partnership agreements

The school–community partnership agreements, as discussed in Chapter 2, were developed because of the implementation of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) and are an example of the type of engagement that this excerpt suggests. The Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005–2008 (MCEETYA, 2006) initially suggested the development of more formalised partnerships between schools and
community. This was because “past practices of community consultation have had limited success” (p. 21). It was anticipated that formalising the partnerships would develop cross-cultural respect. Further to this, the Plan acknowledges the importance of genuine partnerships where trust and respect are established between schools and community. This is exemplified in the Engagement principle where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are to be central to the design and delivery of programmes (MCEECDYA, 2011a). The issue of building trust as the result of past reforms and policies was reiterated in the National Apology (COAG, 2009).

Further exemplification is provided with the phrase can establish a collective commitment (p. 12). The power elite exerts to the reader that through engagement with parents and community a shared dedication towards improving student outcomes is viable (MCEECDYA, 2011a). The use of can suggests the potential in positioning the power elite as an authority of what works when addressing the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Within the Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005–2008 (MCEETYA, 2006) the importance of engagement is identified “because it makes a difference to academic achievement and fosters in students a sense of belonging and self-worth” (p. 17). Here, student wellbeing is addressed and considered.

Engagement and Connections is described as a two-way approach. For example,

The involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at all levels of educational decision-making and the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander principals, teachers, education workers or community members in schools and classrooms provides strong role models and builds connections, contributing to a positive impact on educational outcomes. Similarly, non-Indigenous school leaders and staff must go beyond the classroom and school in seeking to engage with communities.
(MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 12)

Here, a paradox is identified. A paradox is where a phrase contradicts itself (Biber, 2006). While the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) advocates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be in managerial or leadership positions, it has also highlighted that the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students transitioning into university and undertaking study has been limited. In fact, at the time
of distribution there were approximately 9500 at university (MCEECDSA, 2011a, p. 7).

**Influence of the historical and social context**

As provided in Chapter 2, the historical and social context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education prevented students entering the Westernised school system until the late 1960s (Beresford, 2012; Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2003; Vass, 2012). Therefore, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been precluded from gaining such managerial and leadership positions and the current population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working at or capable of working at this level is limited (Jackson, 2008). This section relates to the Access principle whereby programmes and services are to be made physically and culturally [emphasis added] accessible to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Consequently, a presupposition is identified: that the involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at all levels of educational decision-making (p. 12) is possible, which further exacerbates the paradox. As discussed in Chapter 2, previous policy and reform implemented by past governments has greatly influenced the engagement and/or lack of engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within the education setting (Gray & Beresford, 2008). The intergenerational trauma experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people further contributes to the limited pool to draw from (Atkinson, 2013).

Furthermore, by using the definitive term all in all levels of educational decision-making (p. 12), another presupposition is identified: that there is the opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to be afforded representation at the level of Minister for Education for States and Territories. Although not listed in the excerpt, where participation is in the roles of principals, teachers, education workers or community members, the term all would suggest that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders would need to be represented within each level of educational decision-making including at a national and state level. Once again, the representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within Federal and State Government is a small pool to draw upon to be allocated such a position (Jackson, 2008). Indeed, the ideal of having Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders involved at all levels of educational decision-making (p. 12) is problematic and a visionary statement (Rigney, 2002). That is, parity must be achieved for this statement to be practical and, within
the current context, is moreover a future projection rather than an achievable goal (MCEETYA, 2006).

Expressive modality is also identified within this excerpt. Here, non-Indigenous school staff are instructed to engage with communities. This is exemplified when the Plan states non-Indigenous school leaders and staff must go beyond the classroom and school in seeking to engage with communities (p. 12). By using the modal verb must, there is an emphasis on the obligations of school leaders and staff to interact with community both in and out of school (Biber, 2006). As discussed in Chapter 2, authentic engagement requires meaningful partnerships to be established (Lowe, 2011) or otherwise, there is the potential of engagement being tokenistic as described by Gollan and Malin (2012). The actions to achieve meaningful partnerships and the expected outcomes resulting from their implementation assist in determining whether they are authentic or tokenistic.

**Outcomes, targets and performance indicators**

The listing of the outcomes, targets, performance indicators and actions to be taken from all three levels, being national, systemic and local, follows the foregrounding. Here, the Priority principle is addressed where the programs and services are to contribute to closing the gap. Declarative statements are identified to inform the reader what needs to be achieved, how to achieve these goals, how these goals will be measured for success and what each level needs to action to achieve these goals. For example,

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and communities are empowered through the promotion of their identity, culture and leadership in community partnerships with providers of early childhood and school education. (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 13)

In this expected outcome, education providers are told they are to put in place a school–community partnership agreement. That is, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity and culture is to be supported through the development of a formalised partnership between schools and community. Emotive language is used to emphasise the importance of recognising cultural diversity. In particular, the terms empowered and promotion both encourage progression and advancement. Moreover, the use of the word empowered incites the means for self-determination that Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islanders will become more confident and stronger through recognition (Rigney, 1999).

The target therefore that aligns with this outcome is

Active school–community partnership agreements in place with focus schools. (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 13)

It is interesting to note that the foregrounding of this target within the Plan suggests Engagement and Connections to be a collective commitment involving the active recognition and validation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and languages by schools. Further to this, Engagement and Connections is where the engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within schools and classrooms provides strong role models and where the involvement of principals, leaders and staff in cultural and community activities signals a valuing of cultural identity and community assets (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 12). However, the definition of a school–community partnership agreement as provided by the Western Australian Department of Education (n.d.) in Chapter 2, speaks of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, parents and schools working together to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Here, what is omitted from the definition and is therefore presupposed is that, within the negotiation, opportunities for the promotion of their [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander] identity, culture and leadership are provided through the inclusion of the school and classroom setting. Further to this, that principals and school staff are to actively engage in community activities ensuring that a two-way approach to community engagement results.

**Collaborative approach**

The performance indicators for Engagement and Connections are based on data that can be quantified. They are as follows:

- Proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students with personalised learning strategies in place.
- Proportion of focus schools with a school–community partnership agreement in place.

(MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 13)

Despite the aforementioned two-way approach necessary for authentic engagement and the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) being a collaborative effort, the measures by
which Engagement and Connections is assessed are at the local level, that is schools, only. The national collaborative actions are based on working collaboratively with other agencies within the fields of health, welfare and community services to address the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (MCEECDYA, 2011a). However, where the action is based primarily in education, the discourse and how it positions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is questionable. For example,

    The Australian Government and education providers will work together to promote the cross-cultural value of formal education in contemporary Australia to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and families. This will help to create partnerships with families to build from and strengthen their capacity to be involved in their children’s education. (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 14)

A paradox is identified in this excerpt. Here, after stating that Engagement and Connections involves the development of authentic and meaningful partnerships, the Australian Government in collaboration with education providers are to promote, that is, actively advocate their own personal judgement of the worth of formal, in other words, Westernised education to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In particular, by using the term value, the power elite are making a personal judgement on the importance of Westernised education that is to be pushed (MCEETYA, 2006). In other words, the ideological stance of the Australian Government and education providers on the worth of Eurocentric learning is to be shared.

    It is important to note the use of the word to in this excerpt. That is, the power elite who advocate for a two-way approach are stating that the action they need to engage in to foster and create partnerships is to promote the cross-cultural value of formal education in contemporary Australia to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and families. Rather than engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and families, their approach is more from a position of power and leverage, placing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at a lower position rather than as equals. This contradicts the intentions of the Integration principle when delivering programmes and services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people where it states better collaboration at all levels assists in programme and services coordination (MCEECDYA, 2011a).
Further contradiction is identified in the statement that *this will help to create partnerships*. Here the modal verb *will* indicates the power elite’s presupposition that this action inevitably provides further opportunity to collaborate in a meaningful way with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through the discourse in this excerpt is contradictory to the power elite’s objectives.

Euphemistic expression is also identified in this excerpt. *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander* people are referred to, using a more appropriate term of reference than the generic term, Indigenous. However, the use of *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander* has inadvertently become a negative connotation within the discourse as no quantifier is used. This is due to the ambiguity of the term without reference to “some”, “most” or “a few”. There is the presupposition that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as a collective group do not understand the necessity to gain an education. Further to this, the excerpt continues to patronise the education level of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders when it states that the value of education is in need of promotion *to build from and strengthen their capacity to be involved in their children’s education*. In other words, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as a whole, lack the education and ability to actively engage and assist students as they engage in learning.

Again, there is the unequal positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in comparison to their non-Indigenous counterparts.

**Accountability**

The national level action provided above is reviewed and elaborated at the local level context. The Accountability principle requires that regular and transparent review occurs (MCEECDYA, 2011a) and within the following excerpt, stipulations regarding implementation for monitoring and evaluation are evident. The three local level actions for Engagement and Connections stipulate how focus schools negotiate a *formal school–community partnership agreement*, establish *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family forums* and involve *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, teachers and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workers in the development of personalised learning strategies* (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 15).

For example, the following declarative statement states that

*Focus schools will commence negotiating a formal school–community partnership agreement between the school, families and Aboriginal and Torres*
Strait Islander community in 2011 that sets out the respective responsibilities of each party and the ways in which they will work together to create a culture of high expectations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and support improvements in their engagement, wellbeing and educational outcomes. (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 15)

While identified as a declarative statement presenting the ideological stance of the power elite, expressive modality is also identified in this excerpt. The use of the modal verb *will* demonstrates obligation to carry out the instruction. That is, *focus schools will commence negotiating a formal school–community partnership agreement* (p. 15) and further to this, there is an expectation that this action will be conducted *in 2011* (p. 15). The use of the term *negotiating* (p. 15) is interesting as while it can mean working out how to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, it also has a negative connotation where schools are needing to find a way over an obstacle.

Further to this, there is a directive through the use of the modal verb *will* for schools and families, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, that makes them accountable in the improvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ educational outcomes. The phrase *they will work together* (p. 15) places the onus on schools to not only hold themselves culpable but also families and community for the improvement of educational outcomes. This is reiterated when the action states that the school–community partnership agreement *sets out the respective responsibilities of each party* (p. 15). Once again, obligation is identified, however accountability lies with both schools and community.

The accountability being shared at a local level fulfils the recommendations made in the *Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005–2008* (MCEETYA, 2006); here, a recommendation for a shift from the “deficit view”. This is exemplified in the maintained assumptions of low expectations regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ educational potential as well as the blaming of low educational outcomes on student, family or community. Further to this, the lack of recognition of the cultural and linguistic capital that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students bring into the classroom was made. Thus, the improvement of educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students becomes core business and everyone’s business.
5.4.2 Attendance

The increased engagement by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, parents and community with schools at a local level “is a key factor in supporting regular attendance” (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 16). As stated in the Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005–2008, “attending school matters” (MCEETYA, 2006, p. 13). Within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a), the interrelationship between the domains Engagement and Connections, and Attendance is further established when it states, “attending school and engaging with learning is fundamentally important in helping young Australians to acquire the skills they need for life” (p. 16). Here, a declarative statement is made that addresses all Australian students. This seems circumspect as the primary focus of the Plan is to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and therefore, the statement is to no effect.

Within the foregrounding to the Attendance domain, the need for regular attendance to be successful in learning is provided (MCEECDYA, 2011a). The power elite informs the reader that

To succeed in this area, education providers need to develop a better understanding of the complex factors influencing attendance and gather improved data on attendance. With this information, and a better picture of what strategies are working, education providers will be in a stronger position to implement effective and sustainable measures to support the regular attendance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. (MCEECDYA, 2011, p. 16)

Declarative statements are identified in this excerpt within an advisory framework on improving student attendance. The reader is advised that there are many and diverse factors that influence attendance that need to be considered when addressing the current inconsistencies. The power elite establish authority by making this statement directly to education providers. This is exemplified where the power elite state *to succeed in this area, education providers need to develop a better understanding* (p. 16). Here they are making an implicit statement that education providers are not succeeding in improving attendance due to lacking the knowledge and data necessary to resolve the issue at present.
Addressing non-attendance

The lack of data and understanding of the factors that affect student attendance were discussed in Chapter 2 where Gray and Beresford (2002, p. 27) wrote, “there has been no consistent definition of what constitutes non-attendance for Aboriginal students and a lack of a consistent methodology for data collection”. Within the excerpt above, this very issue is discussed where education providers are instructed to become familiar with the reasons for non-attendance and therefore, gain a culturally informed perspective as to the reasons for student truancy. In doing so, the power elite state that schools will be better positioned to implement strategies that will be effective and this also addresses the Accountability principle as stipulated within the delivery of programmes and services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This is exemplified in the excerpt when it makes the future projection from an authoritative position using the modal verb will, stating education providers will be in a stronger position to implement effective and sustainable measures to support the regular attendance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (p. 16). That is, education providers will be better informed to develop a course of action to achieve better student attendance.

Expressive modality is also identified. Here the term need to insinuates that there is a drive for action. In other words, there is an obligation for education providers to gain an understanding of the influencing factors to ensure that the strategies implemented to improve attendance are informed and effective. Within this statement, there is an implicit statement that schools are not collating data that is informed and solid (MCEECDYA, 2011a).

Further to this, there is the suggestion that the strategies used presently are not useful when addressing student lack of attendance. This is exemplified when the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) states with this information, and a better picture of what strategies are working, education providers will be in a stronger position (p. 16). Here, a binary is identified where the current lack of attendance is being associated with education providers and not in relation to policy developed at a Federal or State level nor the guidance and assistance provided at a systemic level to address attendance. There is a definite classification of the attendance problem being at the local level (Lowe, 2011).
Additionally, this statement provides a classification scheme. Here, through discourse, it is implicitly presupposed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, as a whole, are unable to maintain regular attendance at school in comparison to their non-Indigenous counterparts. That is, education providers need *to support the regular attendance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students* (p. 16). Through the use of generalisation and the lack of a quantifier to distinguish an amount rather than the whole, it is implied that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are truant and disengaged and in need of assistance to maintain attendance. This also has negative connotations towards the parents’ and communities’ attitudes to school attendance as the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) places community within the local level as shown in the conceptual diagram (see Figure 5.1).

**Supporting regular attendance**

The interrelationship of Engagement and Connections with Attendance is provided within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) when it states that

*Increased engagement between the school, community and parents is a key factor in supporting regular attendance.* (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p.16)

A declarative statement is identified. The power elite direct the reader in the need for increased authentic and meaningful interaction and understanding at the local level if the lack of attendance is to be addressed. Once again, the power elite are positioned as an authority on improving student attendance. Here, the Engagement principle is identified whereby engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, students and community is necessitated (MCEECDYA, 2011a).

Interestingly, within the Attendance foregrounding there is mention as to the need for classroom teaching and learning to be engaging for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student to improve attendance; however, this is not addressed within the targets and/or outcomes for this domain, as will be demonstrated later in this section. The power elite state

*curriculum and pedagogy that embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural perspectives will support attendance and retention.* (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 16)

Again, a declarative statement is identified. Here, the power elite inform the reader that there is a need to consider the method and teaching practice ensuring that
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures are ingrained within the teaching and learning. This allows the curriculum to be inclusive, encouraging further engagement.

As a result of embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives, the power elite state it will support attendance and retention. That is, by using the modal verb will the reader is assured that this is best practice and directed from a position of knowing. By way of explanation, the power elite who have, as previously stated, considered the evidence and made informed decisions are sharing their judgments and knowledge with the reader.

**Outcomes, targets and performance indicators**

The intended outcomes for Attendance as provided by the power elite include the paraphrasing of a goal set within the NIRA (COAG, 2008). That is,

All compulsory school-aged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are enrolled in school and progressing through schooling at the same rate as non-Indigenous students. (MCEECDYA, 2001a, p. 17)

A paradox is identified here. Within this declarative statement, the focus is placed on enrolment and progression through schooling rather than attendance. That is, rather than focusing on engaging students in learning and therefore, improving attendance, in this excerpt the outcome is based on enrolment. In particular, the target is on increasing student numbers. However, such a statement does support the Priority principle where the programmes “and services are to contribute to closing the gap by meeting targets endorsed by COAG” (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 6).

Furthermore, in this excerpt, the term all is definitive in nature. It also implies that at present not all school-aged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are enrolled in school unlike their non-Indigenous counterparts. Here a classification scheme is used. That is, the power elite are comparing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to non-Indigenous students and therefore, further presenting and situating their ideology of the need to address the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

To further demonstrate the discrepancies and lack of alignment between the expected outcome and targets, the Plan’s goals for Attendance (MCEECDYA, 2011a) are
Chapter 5: Data Analysis and Discussions

- Attendance rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are equivalent to non-Indigenous student attendance rates.
- All compulsory school-aged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are enrolled in school.
- Increased retention rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
- Increased grade progression ratios for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 17)

Notably, within the targets there is no reference to embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives within the classroom teaching and learning that will support attendance and retention. Instead, the focus is on attendance rates, enrolment, retention and grade progression which is directly related to retention and enrolment.

**Funding**

To achieve these targets set within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a), the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA)

will dedicate National Project Funds in 2011 to further develop a better evidence base of what works in improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student attendance. The evidence base will consider a range of contextual information, including the way in which schools respond to the diverse linguistic, cultural and geographical contexts in which they operate. (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 18)

Here, there is a reference to one of the general and common elements of policy, Funding. In this instance, the strategies used by schools to address student attendance will be collated using National Project Funds. By including reference to funding, the Plan also addresses the Sustainability principle that ensures that the programme and services provided are adequately resourced to meet the COAG targets (MCEECDYA, 2011a). The use of the modal verb will articulates how funds are to be used by the power elite to produce an evidence base of what works in addressing attendance.

Further to this, MCEECDYA
will initiate work to establish mechanisms for tracking individual students (enrolment and attendance) from at least the first year of compulsory schooling to post-school destinations. (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 18)

Here, there is no reference to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students specifically. Therefore, a presupposition that this action is referring to the entire student population is undertaken. This action is derived from the recommendations made within the *Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005–2008* (MCEETYA, 2006, p. 28) where it was suggested there was a need for “ongoing tracking, monitoring and supporting Indigenous students through post-school apprenticeships, traineeships and TAFE courses and university”. Furthermore, there is no indication as to breadth of the student tracking apart from enrolment and attendance but this action looks to *post-school destinations* suggesting tracking into further study or the workplace. The presupposition made within the MCEETYA *Australian Directions in Indigenous Education* document is that such action will improve retention rates through to “post-schooling studies and employment” (MCEETYA, 2006, p. 28).

To do this, the power elite instructs Focus schools working at the local level to

- commence developing an evidence-based attendance strategy in 2011 in consultation with parents and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, which includes targets for improved attendance and reflects how the school responds to and seeks to enhance the linguistic, cultural and contextual resources that students bring to their schooling;
- publish their attendance strategy in 2012;
- evaluate and monitor the success of their attendance strategy; and
- report annually on progress towards meeting their targets.

The strategy and resources will be identified in school plans or other public documents. (MCEECDYA, 2011a, p. 18)

The accountability and transparency regarding initiatives and strategies employed by schools to address Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is apparent. These declarative statements instruct education providers, in particular, as to their responsibilities when implementing and engaging the Attendance domain. That is, the
strategies that schools develop in collaboration with parents and community are to be detailed in their Strategic and Operational planning and reported to the power elites on an annual basis.

5.5 CONCLUSION

The outcomes, targets and performance indicators for the domains are primarily declarative statements made from a position of authority. Power elites establish their ideological stance on addressing the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their non-Indigenous counterparts. Key assumptions made within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) that are evident include the presupposition that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, as a collective group, are disengaged from the school environment and not attending. Using classification schemes, a distinction of the educational differences between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other Australian students is defined. Furthermore, the Plan’s outcomes are derived from other Indigenous education policies with the Plan acting as a supporting document. Expressive modality is used extensively to further establish a position of authority on best practice when addressing the Engagement and Connections, and Attendance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Euphemistic expression shows respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; however, the terms of reference used for non-Indigenous Australians constantly interchanges and is ambiguous in nature.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

The aim of this study was to critically analyse the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan [the Plan] (MCEECDYA, 2011a). In doing so, investigation of the underlying assumptions and bias was undertaken as part of this analysis. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What key assumptions are evident in the general and common elements of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan?
2. How are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people positioned in the Plan’s discourse?
3. Is the Plan biased despite the representation of the Plan as objective and factual?

Chapter 1 discussed the current concerns regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ educational outcomes and established the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) and its domains as the primary document to inform this study. Two domains, being Engagement and Connections, and Attendance were selected as discussed in Chapter 1. The significance of these two domains and their interrelationship with the implementation of the other four domains: Readiness for School; Literacy and Numeracy; Leadership, Quality Teaching and Workforce Development; and Pathways to Real Post-School Options were established. The significance of the research questions was presented and the need for a critical analysis established.

In Chapter 2, the first research question was addressed by drawing on the relevant literature and research. The progression of past policy and its role in addressing the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was investigated. The historical and social context of Indigenous education policy demonstrates the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their non-Indigenous counterparts. The interrelationship and complementary properties of the Indigenous education policies were aligned with the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a). A descriptive analysis of the Plan’s domains focusing on Engagement and Connections, and Attendance occurred. The literature suggests that a paradigm shift from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational failure being placed on parents
and community to education systems and schools is occurring. As a result, Engagement and Connections with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and parents has become a quintessential component within the Plan to address student educational outcomes.

The analysis of the literature showed that there was a lack of research into Indigenous education policy and its influence on improving student educational outcomes. That is, while there is a substantial amount of reviews and evaluations on policy of any kind, these are supplied by third parties who have been commissioned by government and therefore, lack substantial in-depth critical analysis. As a result, the lack of literature supported the need for the analysis of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a). Hence, the study’s intention was to promote discussion around policy decision-making and potential policy revision and not to solve the disparity between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ educational outcomes and their non-Indigenous counterparts.

In Chapter 3, the theoretical framework that informed the study was described. Its value and significance for addressing the research questions was provided. Rigney’s Indigenist Research Principles (1999), in particular, Political Integrity contributed to the discussion and analysis in Chapter 5. In Chapter 4, Fairclough’s (2001b) Critical Discourse Analysis and its features were discussed and this method of analysis was used in the study. The methodological framework provided method in which to conduct the study. That is, it informed and guided the analysis of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) maintaining the context of policy analysis and socio-cultural commentary on the positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

In Chapter 5, Fairclough’s (2001b) Critical Discourse Analysis was employed to answer the second research question. The analysis and discussion referred to the social positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It included a focus on the maintenance of the dominant ideology through the use of language.

In this chapter, Chapter 6, the major findings of the study are discussed. The underlying assumptions identified in the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) that influence Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ Engagement and Connections, and Attendance within the schooling context are established. The research questions are considered and answered and the limitations of the study provided. Finally, directions
for future study to build on the findings of this study are considered. The major findings of the study are now presented.

6.1 MAJOR FINDINGS

Three major findings emerged from the analysis of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a). These included (a) the assumption about the homogenous grouping of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, (b) the maintenance of the prevalent dominant ideology within policy, and finally (c) the expectation of Engagement and Connections and increased Attendance within education without considering the detrimental effects of past policies and reforms. Each of these findings will now be discussed.

6.1.1 Homogenous grouping of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people when addressing Engagement and Connections, and Attendance

The presupposition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as a homogenous collective group was identified as one of the key assumptions in the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a). Being a governmental policy, the Plan addresses the disparity between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their non-Indigenous counterparts. The actions provided in the Plan are to be implemented by all three levels at a national, systemic and local level. However, in its present form, the Plan provides a “one size fits all” solution to be adapted at a local level. It places the onus on schools to engage with and recontextualise the Plan to be appropriate for their context. The attention on schools emphasises the crucial importance of engagement and connection with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to improve the attendance rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The factors influencing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ educational outcomes were considered; however, the geographical location and the cultural intricacies of individual groups that schools will need to navigate in their process of engaging with community are ignored. Further, the intergenerational trauma prevalent in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as the result of past policies and reforms affects their willingness to engage and connect within the school environment.
6.1.2 Maintenance of the prevalent dominant ideology that discourages Engagement and Connections, and Attendance

Another presupposition that complements the previous assumption is the maintenance of the dominant ideology of the power elite. Based within the past reforms and policies including assimilation, the belief that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are in need of assistance is still evident in modern Australian society. The Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) continues to maintain, sustain and uphold the dominant ideology using language and discourse and as a result, discourages the engagement and connections, and attendance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, parents and community. Furthermore, there is the assumption that the “deficit view” is to be replaced with genuine partnerships, therefore encouraging the improved attendance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and yet the Plan advocates for maintaining the dominant ideology through the implicit bias evident. This taken-for-granted assumption negatively positions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within a policy that is advocating for their potential achievements and life outcomes and encouraging collaboration between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with education providers.

6.1.3 Ignoring the detrimental effects of past policies and reforms that affect Engagement and Connections, and Attendance

The disregard of the underlying factors that influence Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ educational outcomes is evident in the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a). Reviews and evaluations of policy, such as the Review of Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005–2008 for the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (David Unaipon College of Indigenous Education and Research, 2009), highlight the detrimental effect of past policies and reforms on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. However, regardless, the Plan demonstrates an expectation of engagement from all stakeholders including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. That is, while evidence shows that intergenerational trauma encourages resistance from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to connect with and attend schools, the Plan advocates for schools to actively engage with community with the premise that attendance will improve as a result. There is little recognition of the trust and reconciliatory relationships that would need to be established or the time needed to develop such relationships. Once again, the onus is
placed on schools to create such partnerships with little advice or guidance on how this is to be achieved. This taken-for-granted assumption provided opportunities to assist the power elite to shift the paradigm from the failure of policy to the underachievement of schools to address the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The next section responds to the research questions that guided the study.

6.1.4 Responding to Research Questions One and Two

Drawing on the analysis and discussions of this study in Chapter 5, the research questions can now be answered.

- What key assumptions are evident in the general and common elements of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan*?

As discussed in Chapter 2 and demonstrated in Chapter 5, several underlying assumptions are evident in the Plan. In Chapter 2, there was evidence that many factors influenced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, parents and community with regard to engaging with schools and education. For example, one factor said to contribute to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ lack of attendance was their familial duties. These factors informed the domains found within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a). However, the factors as provided by Gray and Beresford (2008) were disregarded within policy. That is, factors such as the detrimental effects of past reforms such as assimilation, the impact of colonisation and intergenerational trauma, and consideration of the socio-economic positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, were not addressed within the Plan. Instead, the Plan encourages engagement and connections with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, parents and community to improve student attendance with no recognition of the struggles involved in doing so; moreover, there is a taken-for-granted assumption that it will be achieved.

- How are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people positioned in the Plan’s discourse?

The positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, parents and community within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) was identified using Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2001b). There is a taken-for-granted assumption that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are not achieving parity with their non-Indigenous counterparts. There is little or no recognition of students excelling or
achieving within the school context and if they were, this was not addressed in this policy. This omission positions all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students as underachievers and failures.

The language used in the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) instructs schools and education providers to engage with community. That is, there is need for a two-way approach positioning both schools and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community as accountable for the educational outcomes of these students. In doing so, the “deficit view”, as recognised within the *Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005–2008* (MCEETYA, 2006), which involved the accountability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student educational outcomes being placed on community, is maintained in the Plan. The maintenance of this ideology positions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as being at fault for the lack of progress.

### 6.2 ANSWERING QUESTION THREE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Research Question Three draws together the findings of Chapters 2 and 5, analysing how the underlying key assumptions and the positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through the use of language has created bias within a policy that advocates for potential achievements and improved educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

- Is the Plan biased despite the representation of the Plan as objective and factual?

This study has built on the findings of others as identified in Chapter 2. There are many factors and issues that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, parents and community in actively engaging with schools and education (see Gray & Beresford, 2008; Gray & Partington, 2012) including the detrimental effects of past policy and reforms (MCEETYA, 2006; COAG, 2009). Whilst current policy (see COAG, 2008; COAG, 2012; DEET, 1989; MCEETYA, 2008; MCEECDYA, 2011a) recognises the various factors influencing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ educational outcomes, the dominant ideology of the power elite is still evident within the discourse. Therefore, the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) is biased in representation despite being objective and factual.

In Chapter 5, using Fairclough’s (2001) Critical Discourse Analysis, the Plan’s (MCEECDYA, 2011a) use of language was analysed. Within the discourse,
declarative statements were used to demonstrate the power elite’s stance of dominance and authority. By establishing the dominant ideology, the power elite are seen as trustworthy and therefore, implicitly develop the bias evident in the Plan. The use of classification schemes enabled the identification of a binary construction where there was a definite division of an “us” and “them”. In doing so, the Plan further demonstrates a bias with regard to the representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students not achieving the expected educational outcomes as determined by the power elite.

6.2.1 Bias within the discourse of the Plan

Prior to presenting the intricate biases within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) itself, note that essentially the Plan is prejudicial in that it looks to address the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students only. In doing so, it further develops the binary between Australian Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people with the general Australian population. That is because rather than being all inclusive of low-achieving and disengaging students so that all Australians can benefit from the strategies employed, the Plan is explicit on who it is for and the reasons why. In other words, the Plan and its goals and targets are to address the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Terms of reference

As identified in Chapter 5, the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) constantly interchanges the terms of reference for non-Indigenous Australians. However, it consistently refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as such and in doing so, ensures that positive and acceptable terms of reference are maintained. In this example, it provides evidence of bias to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and not to non-Indigenous people. Whilst the Plan and its domains are addressing the disparity between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and their non-Indigenous counterparts, it maintains a binary construct explicitly highlighting the lack of educational attainment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and the poor life outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts.
Maintenance of the dominant ideology

As provided in the discussion and analysis in Chapter 5, the superiority and dominant ideology of the power elite is still informed by the ingrained assimilatory properties of past reforms. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are, in the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a), represented as people requiring assistance. The repercussions in maintaining the dominant ideology is that self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is ignored. While Indigenous researchers such as Rigney (1999), Foley (2003) and Brady (1997) implore for the right for self-determination, to allow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to take responsibility, government is reluctant to allow for self-determination (Gray & Beresford, 2008). Instead, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, parents and community are to work within the regulated systems already in place and within the parameters as set by policy and the power elite.

One size fits all

Chapter 5 demonstrates the lack of recognition of the intricate differences within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within the Plan’s (MCEECDYA, 2011a) discourse. Here, bias is demonstrated through the assumption that the Plan can be adaptable to address the needs of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. That is, the Plan is a “one size fits all” solution. The geographical location or the delicate intricacies and differences of the various groups within Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are ignored throughout the Plan. Rather than these issues informing the funding of the Plan to make it sustainable, overarching funding agreements and partnerships sustain its implementation. The contribution of the theoretical framework and the methodology are now provided.

6.3 THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK TO THE STUDY

Rigney’s Indigenist Research Principles (1999) informed and guided the approach used in this study, thus presenting an Aboriginal perspective on how policy is developed to address the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. It encouraged the questioning of how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were positioned and provided the foregrounding to evaluate if the Plan demonstrated political integrity. It allowed for the identification of how Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islanders are positioned to engage but not to actively participate in policy decision-making, limiting opportunities for self-determination.

6.4 **THE CONTRIBUTION OF CDA**

Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis provided the means to analyse the discourse of the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) and how language has been used to maintain and share the dominant ideology. It provided a guide as to the specific textual features to analyse the Plan and to question how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are positioned. By using CDA, the dominant ideology and underlying assumptions and bias were identified. CDA allowed the binary construction to be highlighted and the excessive use of declarative statements assisted in positioning the power elite as authority in addressing the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The use of expressive modality further established the power elite’s position of authority by instructing education providers and schools on the actions to implement to address the lack of student progress.

6.5 **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The contribution of this study in relation to promoting discussion around policy decision-making and potential policy revision must be considered in the context of its limitations. Within this study, the analysis and discussion involved one Indigenous education policy, being the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a). There were two reasons for this: (a) there was little to no research that focused on the Plan itself, and (b) the study fitted with the scope of a Masters of Research. Further to this, the study analysed only two of the six domains within the Plan. The study did not look at the implementation of the Plan within the local level and draw on schools’ experiences with implementing the actions within their Strategic and Operational planning. This will be addressed in the following section on recommendations.

6.6 **RECOMMENDATIONS**

A study investigating the key assumptions in the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan* (MCEECDYA, 2011a) could potentially provide an alternative perspective for power elites on the use of current data. The study also has the potential to inform policymakers on how discourse may disenchant and further displace Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from actively engaging with or
attending school. The study may also contribute to or complement existing practice and research within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy. By gaining an understanding of Indigenous education policy, in particular the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a), this study has demonstrated that greater understanding is needed with regard to how the language used in policy positions the people it is advocating for in terms of potential achievement and life outcomes. In doing so, how language is used in policy provides insight into how to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ educational outcomes through the Engagement and Connections with students, parents and community and the increased Attendance of students.

6.7 DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDY

This study has critically analysed the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a). The analysis and discussion has identified several underlying assumptions and bias prevalent within the discourse of the Plan that could potentially further disengage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, parents and community from education and schools if not addressed or considered in future policy revision. To further develop awareness on how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are positioned and the implicit assumptions prevalent in policy, the following suggestions are made for future research:

1. Further analysis of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan by incorporating a holistic study of all six domains.

In this study as discussed in Chapter 1, two of the domains within the Plan (MCEECDYA, 2011a) were addressed, being Engagement and Connections, and Attendance. While its findings are significant, a study that analyses the six domains will provide further understanding of the factors that influence Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ educational outcomes and how government is addressing their needs through policy. By conducting a holistic study of the Plan, a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying assumptions within policy will further contribute to the discussion regarding future policy decision-making.

2. A comparative study of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan, being Australia’s “solution” to addressing the educational outcomes of Australian Aboriginal students and Torres Strait Islander

In this study, focus was on the Australian Indigenous education context. The literature in Chapter 2 drew on other Indigenous researchers from New Zealand providing advice on Indigenous Research Methodologies. The fact that New Zealand has a Treaty with the Maori people, something researchers like Rigney are fighting for in Australia, provides interest. Further to this, the means in which other countries cater for their Indigenous peoples may inform Australian policy decision-making. By conducting research and analysis comparing the two policies, the similarities and differences when addressing Australian Aboriginal students and Torres Strait Islander students and Maori students’ needs will potentially provide a framework on which policymakers can draw to address the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students’ educational attainment.

3. A case study analysing the experiences of teachers, school administration and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community in the implementation and recontextualisation of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan*.

In this study, the focus was on the critical analysis of the Plan, its intricacies, goals and targets, and funding models. The experiences of those who implemented the Plan within the local level are of interest to identify the struggles, time restraints and successes of the implementation process. Through semi-structured interviews, an understanding of the challenges and successes of implementation will contribute to the discussion and provide advice to policymakers on future approaches to address the educational needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
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Appendices

Appendix A
Education Council Terminology

Figure A.1 depicts the changing terminology used for the Council that “provides a forum through which strategic policy on school education and early childhood development can be coordinated at the national level” (SCSEEC, 2012, p. 1).

Figure A.1. Changing terminology for the Education Council, 1993–present.