

‘Education is the cornerstone of self-determination’: Aboriginal community-led advocacy 1940s-1970s

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This paper takes as its focus local initiatives driven by Aboriginal peoples’ self-determining actions in challenging and reforming education systems once designed to exclude. It considers Aboriginal community advocacy, parent decision-making and the alliances between educators and other agents, from the 1940s through the 1970s, building historical case studies of the struggle over and for education. The paper draws on early-stage research for a PhD project; it maps the approach and key questions and provides a preliminary account of one case study. Overall, I seek to interrogate current conceptualisations of the many histories of Australian education and both the Indigenous and colonial political contexts on which they are based. I highlight examples of how Australia’s history of education, marked by policies and practices of exclusion and assimilation, was transformed through the actions of community. I examine the normative identities of time and place: of the student-advocate, the teacher-advocate, the community-advocate, and advocates within government authorities, examining the conditions of possibility that created these identities. In doing so, I explore the ways in which sovereignty was never ceded across Australian classrooms, developing case studies from the eastern seaboard to the west: in both Victoria and Western Australia. I aim to document the local actions and conditions that paved the way for the establishment of Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations and advocacy groups between 1957 and 1977, that allowed for meaningful partnerships in education. These partnerships were motivated by the shared aim of improving Aboriginal educational outcomes by increasing the presence and voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in progressive reform and decision-making. This paper frames settler-colonialism as shapeshifting, traversing Indigenous acts of self-determination, and aims to map a genealogy of First Nations-led interventions that progressed transformational and inclusive educational spaces.