

Preparing for the future: informing practice to achieve successful early childhood education for Indigenous students

(Presentation by Penny Tripcony, QUT, 28 October 2005.)

.... the education of the child shall be directed to:

- (a) *The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;*
- (b) *The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;*
- (c) *The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own;*
- (d) *The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;*
- (e) *The development of respect for the natural environment.*

(Article 29, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, entered into force 2 September 1990.)

1. Preamble

It is often claimed that *our children are our future*, yet in the whirlwind pace of contemporary Western society with its focus on a developing global society and economy, there is little to suggest that this claim is taken seriously. Through the media, we learn daily of child abuse, teenage crime and violence, juvenile substance abuse, and increased rates of youth suicide. Our schools are attempting to deal with absenteeism; and in some instances unacceptable student behaviour. In addition many Indigenous students are failing to achieve adequate levels of literacy and numeracy competence.

I believe that like canaries in coal-mines, children are reacting to elements in their environment. What is happening to our children is an indicator for our society. We need to reflect on priorities and redefine goals and directions. It is our place - as concerned adults, professionals, parents, carers and community members - to urge our leaders to provide the means to effect change.

From both media reports and research, it is evident that these matters relate to some groups of young people more than others - that the incidence of abuse, crime, violence, educational underachievement, etc, correlates, I believe, with the degree of vulnerability of particular groups, for example, those from low socio-economic areas, etc. Of these, Indigenous Australians (particularly Aboriginal children and youth) are the most vulnerable and consequently, the most affected.

2. Introduction

In this presentation, it is intended to draw on key findings from research and position papers prepared through the Queensland Indigenous Education Consultative Body

during the period 2001 to 2004; and, within the context of expressed views of Queensland's Indigenous communities and educators, as well as current Commonwealth and State policies and strategies, to examine the challenges and tensions for the planning and delivery of relevant school programs for Indigenous children and young people.

3. The Queensland Indigenous Education Consultative Body (QIECB)

The QIECB was established in July 2000 to provide advice to the State Minister for Education and the Commonwealth Minister responsible for Education concerning the implications for Queensland's Indigenous students and communities, of:

- national and state priorities and strategic directions;
- implementation of the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP), 1989* and the *National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, 2000-2004*; and
- emergent issues at regional, state and national levels.

Membership comprises fourteen Indigenous Australians - representative of Queensland's government and non-government preschool and school systems, vocational and tertiary education sectors, regional Indigenous communities and the Queensland Teachers' Union. All members are appointees of the Queensland Minister for Education and the Arts.

Many of you will know that Indigenous education consultative groups were established nationally and in some states - including Queensland - as early as 1976; and marked the beginning of Indigenous input to education policies, strategies and their delivery within schools and education institutions. The work of the National Aboriginal Education Committee and Indigenous education consultative groups in states and territories also led to the development in 1989, by the Commonwealth government, of the *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy*, the first goal of which aims *To establish effective arrangements for the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in educational decision-making.*

4. QIECB research projects

With knowledge of past practices, and within the context national and state directions for Indigenous education, the QIECB strategic plan 2000-2001 was developed, and a series of research projects designed to focus on:

- *Completion of twelve years of schooling, or its equivalent;*
- *Preschooling experiences;*
- *Teacher education;*
- *Standard Australian English and languages;*
- *Community capacity building; and*
- *Accountability (inclusive assessment, monitoring and reporting)*

Subsequently, in response to concerns expressed by Indigenous parents, community members and educators, an additional project designed to investigate *the sustainability (based on current operations) of independent Indigenous community kindergartens and preschools*, was undertaken.

The purpose of research projects was to examine relevant policies and strategies, as well as key issues and current practices of inclusivity, in schools and education systems and processes, of Indigenous learners from diverse geographic and community settings. This approach was adopted to ensure balanced representation in the QIECB's advice to State and Commonwealth Ministers for Education.

Methodologies adopted were both qualitative and quantitative, and included literature reviews, data collection, interviews and focus group discussions with school staff; Indigenous teachers, administrators, education workers, parents/carers, community members, and students (where appropriate) in a total of 82 government and non-government preschools, schools, education institutions, education systems an authorities, and other relevant government agencies. From sites visited, researchers were required also to prepare case studies of good practice within their specific areas of research.

5. Findings

Findings from the studies of relevance to this presentation are reproduced below from respective reports.

5.1 The Preschooling Experience

Data on Preschools and Early Education Centres suggests that most centres attract good numbers of Indigenous children from their areas in the remote and community areas where the options are limited an the local community encourages participation in education. All centres indicate they are catering to the local community with only small numbers of children not attending. However, for urban and more populated areas where there are more options and many services trying to attract children to their centres and programs, it is difficult to gauge the proportion of Indigenous children (compared with the total number of Indigenous children residing these areas) who participate in preschooling and early childhood education programs.

Where preschools and schools and teachers have established links or partnerships with their local communities, programs are relevant to children's social and cultural backgrounds. However, more preschools and schools need to adopt this practice to ensure that families and community members participate in the education of their children; the whole child is catered for; and that learning is based on children's understandings.

There is, however, a need to raise the overall standard of effective early childhood practices in relation to Indigenous children through improving the quality of teachers' pre-service and in-service education. During interviews and discussions, it was suggested that teachers have opportunities to share good practice through:

- forums where government and non-government early childhood representatives can meet;
- formalised networking of government and non-government preschools and centres;
- visits to preschools and centres where good practice occurs; and
- the establishment of a central body to coordinate existing early childhood resource centres.

5.2 The sustainability of independent Indigenous community kindergartens and preschools

This project highlighted the effectiveness of Indigenous community involvement. With Indigenous management committees, programs are culturally appropriate, children's attendance is more regular than indicated by attendance records for government preschools, and strong links are maintained with families and the community.

From information gathered through interviews and focus group sessions conducted with staff, parents and community members associated with sixteen independent Indigenous community kindergartens and preschools; officers of the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training; Creche and Kindergarten Association of Queensland; and the Department of Families, Youth and Community Services, key findings are:

- There is strong evidence to suggest that a whole-of-government and family approach to services is needed; particularly one that involves negotiation, consultation and collaboration directly between communities and kindergartens.
- Policies and guidelines currently in existence are not inclusive of Indigenous protocols, cultures and lifestyles. Effective, appropriate policies and guidelines need to be urgently negotiated between key stakeholders and Indigenous communities to cater for independent Indigenous community kindergartens and preschools.
- The transition for Indigenous children from early childhood centres/community kindergartens and preschools to local primary schools is largely ad hoc and lacking in process.
- Independent Indigenous community kindergartens and preschools in urban, rural and remote locations – particularly those located in isolated areas – find it difficult to recruit and maintain quality early childhood trained teachers, due to:
 - geographical isolation and the high cost of living in rural and remote areas, combined with the availability and high cost of rental accommodation;
 - little assistance with travel and relocation costs; and lower salary rates for teachers (due to absence of a Senior Teacher classification) and relief teachers than those paid to teachers employed by the state education system;
 - no continuation of superannuation between centres/services;
 - no guaranteed redundancy payments or long service leave; and no access to professional development or networking days at local schools due to lack of pupil-free days.

Overall, many of the independent Indigenous community kindergartens and preschools visited have shown commendable initiatives in creating culturally appropriate settings for Indigenous children by incorporating Indigenous content into curriculum; producing relevant curriculum resources; in some instances, introducing Indigenous language programs; and involving parents and community members in a range of centre activities. These initiatives are achieving and sustaining high levels of attendance and development of literacy, numeracy, social and emotional skills. However, in order to maintain and improve levels of achievement and remain up-to-date with current policies, strategic directions, curriculum, successful classroom practice, and cultural awareness as appropriate, staff require regular and ongoing access to professional development.

However, access to professional development and capacity building opportunities by staff and community members is limited. Current guidelines do not permit staff employed at affiliated centres to take pupil free days; financial support is available rarely to staff and community members to participate in professional development/capacity building programs; and centres' planning, programming or professional development sessions are not permitted during term time. Therefore, staff and committee members attend conferences in their own (holiday) time and often at their own expense.

Independent Indigenous community kindergartens and preschools also lack the finances, human and physical resources, to perform management tasks required of them. Often, administrative demands and expectations placed on teaching staff and (voluntary) management committees are unreasonable, given that they are required to complete licensing agreements, annual audits, stock-takes, Commonwealth IESIP funding reports, Business Activity Statements, as well as attend today-to-day accounts, enrolment fees, and employees' wages. Parents have indicated that they '*want to get back to the decision-making aspect of centres along with the cultural involvement needed*', instead of being responsible for managing a business with high pressures and demands that are costing them valuable time as volunteers.

A positive aspect to independent Aboriginal community kindergartens and preschools is that the young children depart for schooling with a positive sense of identity and strength in their cultures. This, of course, can have a negative side: transition to 'mainstream' schools can be a shock to Aboriginal children in those (many) instances where Aboriginal children are part of a minority group, and curriculum and practices are often very different to their prior experiences.

5.3 Standard Australian English and Languages

Based on consultations and interviews with Indigenous students, community members, school administrators and staff, researchers have analysed and categorised the varieties of English language spoken by groups of Indigenous students, eg. English as a Second Language (ESL), English as a Second Dialect (ESD), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and English as a First Language (EF1). These varying forms of English language usage require different teaching approaches if competence in Standard Australian English is to be acquired.

The language background of Indigenous students can have a major impact on educational outcomes. While the majority of Indigenous people speak English as their only language at home (79.8%), a substantial proportion (12.1% or 49,764 people) speak an Indigenous language at home (ABS, 2002). In addition, it is important to note that some Indigenous

people speak many languages, including several Indigenous languages/dialects and varying forms of English.

The current situation is one of overall poor English language and literacy competence and continued loss of Indigenous language proficiency among Indigenous children and students.

Researchers cross-referenced these findings with Literacy and Numeracy Testing data, as follows:

On English literacy, for example, the Year 3 Benchmark Test Data (2000) indicate that the percentage of Indigenous children reaching the normative benchmark in reading was 81%, or 11.6% below the state average. Although Queensland scores improved considerably from 1999 (from 85.8% to 92.6%), the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children increased marginally from 11.5% to 11.6%. While it should be borne in mind that the Year 3 benchmark is a notional cut-off only, perhaps indicative of achievement of rudimentary functional decoding by the completion of Year 3 (with students in different states at different chronological ages), the data is telling. Generally speaking, Queensland Year 3 Indigenous children score better than their Northern Territory, Western Australian and South Australia counterparts, with lower exemption and absentee rates for point-in-time standardised testing. Yet the overall performance on this, and its Year 5 counterpart is not satisfactory. The gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous achievement increases by 29.5% for the Year 5 benchmark, with 54.4% of Indigenous students reaching the benchmark. Thus, while the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous performance in Queensland is less than the national average gap at Year 3, it has worsened to fall below that average by Year 5.

Researchers report that by any measure viewed, overall performance by Indigenous students is poor – from 10 to 30% below non-Indigenous performance. The reasons, of course, are complex; and in part contingent on the cultural and linguistic limitations of assessment instruments, as demonstrated in the Accountability research report.

It should be noted, however, that key variables such as gender, SES status, location and Indigenous identification and language background intersect in complex ways. This makes the interpretation of Net and Test results for groups of Indigenous students a difficult task – certainly a more sophisticated one than the current provision of statutory authority data and Education Queensland database information allows.

Researchers also noted that *As yet there has been no attempt to develop a comprehensive Queensland state Language and Literacy Policy for Indigenous students. This is in part a legacy of the past monocultural and monolingual, assimilationist tradition, and, of late, as been more a result of the lack until recent years of a template or approach to Indigenous language education.*

Despite limitations of the current assessment instruments and everyday problems in schools with interpreting and using assessment data, the gaps in Indigenous student achievement as indicated from mainstream measures of aspects of English literacy are significant, and require urgent action.

On the Year 2 Diagnostic Net, an urban Indigenous student is roughly 2 times more likely to be identified in phase A (ie. 'caught in the net') for reading and writing; with the ratio increasing to 3 or 4 times for rural and remote Indigenous students.

For the Years 3, 5 and 7 tests, rural and remote Indigenous students are roughly twice as likely to be below State averages on all four aspects of literacy measured that their urban Indigenous counterparts.

The performance data suggests that poverty and rural location are the two key factors of 'at riskness' for Indigenous student achievement. This is linked closely with EFL/ESL and ESD status. Additionally, health issues – particularly those associated with hearing status – can

be predictors of 'at riskness', especially for their impact on the development of oracy in the early years.

While the literacy outcomes for Indigenous students are considerably lower than the whole student group, and the difference between genders has been indicated as significant in its own right, the demographic factor of rurality also bears significantly on outcomes.

Researchers comment that Nonetheless the situation in the field is the result of almost two decades of unplanned and relatively uncoordinated language and literacy in Indigenous education...'

The alignment between the school and its community is important for language policies to succeed. Such an alignment includes a set of reciprocal understandings and partnerships around language and literacy; for example

- *A supportive link between community 'language ideologies' (beliefs about the power and value of language and literacy) and efforts of the school; and*
- *a link between teachers' understandings of the sociolinguistic patterns and functions within the community.*

Positive elements to the research project are evident in case studies, which record a range of strategies developed by schools for building bridges with their local communities in order to achieve success in improving Indigenous students' literacy and language proficiency.

On the basis of their findings, researchers' recommendations in relation to Standard Australian English and languages are framed within the context of two key rights:

- *The Right to Cultural Capital: that Indigenous children are entitled to equitable access and comparable outcomes in the attainment of English language proficiency and reading and writing competences and their affiliated knowledges as forms of mainstream cultural capital requisite for access, mobility, status, power and influence in Australian society and economy (Luke, in press; Freebody & LoBianco, 2000; Cummins, 2000).*
- *The Right to Your Own Languages: that Indigenous children are entitled to access and fluency with languages, Creoles, non-standard dialects and accents for purposes of cultural identity and social relations, community membership and political power, and to participate in the complex local societies and economies of Indigenous communities. (May, 2001; LoBianco 1987).*

6. QIECB position paper on Indigenous Early Childhood Education

Subsequent to the finalization of research studies, the Queensland Minister for Education authorized the trialing of the preschool year. Thus, the QIECB commissioned the preparation of a position paper to align research findings with the changes being implemented with these changed arrangements. This paper is available from the QIECB office.

7. Conclusion

Over a period of some decades, appropriately experienced educators have become aware that Indigenous worldviews and values differ from those of Australia's dominant culture: however, Indigenous values have neither been clearly defined nor accommodated within major Australian education statements, strategic directions, overall curriculum and pedagogy.

Although changes are currently taking place in education systems - in cooperation with Indigenous communities - to deliver programs relevant to Indigenous students

and to support all educators and students in acknowledging the value of Indigenous cultures to Australian society, we need to consider the broader challenges (posed by Buckskin) that face educators. These are:

- How can Indigenous Australian culture be employed as a means of strengthening education for Indigenous communities without confining the young members of these communities to the legacy of the past?
- How can Indigenous cultures be made the basis for the education of young Indigenous Australians, at the same time employing a curriculum and pedagogy that allows young Indigenous people to transcend it?

At the same time, however, a major tension exists. The current globalisation of capital, labour and communications (with English as the dominant language) is being received with some concern by people of non-Western cultures. Many countries have committed themselves to programs of civic education to prepare for citizenship of the new globalised society. According to Kennedy, *'A key issue in the development of such programs is the definition of the values base that should underpin them.'* He further asks, *'Is there a role for Western democratic values in non-Western countries, and how might these match with indigenous or local values to support local cultures threatened by globalisation? Or are the Western imagination and indigenous values necessarily mutually exclusive?'*

Preschools and schools, however, are in an important position in regard to easing students' tensions and guiding them through the challenges they face during their years of formal education. On one hand, schools (education generally) reflect and reproduce social values, lifestyles, etc: yet schools can also reinforce specific values and develop in students the knowledge and skills to contribute to social change and justice, hence the power of pedagogy and of curriculum. Keeffe writes of the *'...negative and positive force... of curriculum as ...something which both works on and through people...its mode of operation (viewed) as both enabling and constraining.'* He adds that *'Only such a sense of power is capable of viewing cultural change from two perspectives, those of the relatively powerful and the relatively powerless.'* (1992:8)

In order to do this, however, educators must recognise that *'many Indigenous students find the cultural assumptions of formal education puzzling, frustrating and alienating'* (Buckskin, 2002:160): that formal education focuses on the individual rather than the Indigenous emphasis on the group or collective (family, clan, community), and that these notions, and an understanding of the power relationships in society, need to be acquired and accommodated by Indigenous students in order to achieve within mainstream education.

Our recent research has confirmed that Indigenous students consistently score lower levels of proficiency on the Years 3, 5 and 7 English literacy and numeracy tests than other Australian students. (Numeracy tests are included here because Indigenous educators consider the problem to be not so much the numeracy/mathematical concepts, rather the English language in which tests are written.) This is due not only to the context of test items and forms of English language used by Indigenous students in a range of locations (outlined in findings from the *Standard Australian English and languages* and *Accountability* studies), but also to values implicit in the

language of tests. All languages relate to specific cultures, and as such, have culture-related values embedded within them.

Misunderstandings occur frequently during attempted communication between Indigenous learners (as well as families and community members) and educators; and importantly, between educators and Indigenous learners, their families and community members.

The challenge for educators is how to acquire understandings of Indigenous (and relevant other) children's cultural and language backgrounds in order to effectively use these as bases upon which to develop children's skills within dominant culture and language settings, and for real communication to occur with Indigenous families and community members.

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