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Leaders: Acting to improve outcomes for Indigenous students



Paul Hughes

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Paul has been a Primary School Teacher; an Education Officer with the Department of Aboriginal Affairs; Director of the Aboriginal Teacher Education Program and Aboriginal Studies Centre at the University of SA; Chair of the National Aboriginal Education Committee; Director of Aboriginal Education for the SA Department of Education; Director of the Yunggoendi First Nations Centre for Indigenous Education and Research at Flinders University and Dean of the Indigenous College of Education and Research at the University of South Australia.

With an honorary Doctorate from Flinders University and a Masters Degree in Education from Harvard University he is the first South Australian Aborigine to be promoted to Professor. His career has been as a teacher, leader, policy maker, consultant and researcher on Indigenous education issues world wide.

Professor Hughes has Chaired - the South Australian Aboriginal Education Advisory Committee; the National Aboriginal Education Committee; the Commonwealth Aboriginal Education Policy Taskforce; the MCEETYA Taskforce on Aboriginal Education; the DEST evaluation of the National Indigenous Education Literacy and Numeracy Strategy and the Australian Council for Educational Research Indigenous Standing Committee.

He has also served as a member of - the Commonwealth Curriculum Council; the Commonwealth Schools Commission; the Commonwealth Schools Council; the SA Centre for Lifelong Learning and the Commonwealth Ministers Strategic Thinkers Forum.

He has been awarded – membership of the Order of Australia; an Honorary Doctorate from Flinders University; the Australian College of Educators Medal in 2000 and Fellowship of the College; the UNESCO Comenius Medal on behalf of the SA Aboriginal Education Unit and an Elders Award from the Indigenous Higher Education Council.

Professor Hughes was a member of the team that produced, 'What Works? Explorations in improving outcomes for Indigenous students' and 'What Works, The Work Program'. He is also an Ambassador and consultant for the Australian Principals Association, 'Dare to Lead' program.



Gavin Khan

National Aboriginal Principals Association

Gavin Khan is currently Principal at Williamstown Primary School in South Australia's Barossa District. He is a Kookatha and Arunta Aboriginal Australian from the far North of South Australia and has been a primary teacher, an Aboriginal Education Teacher, District Aboriginal Education Resource Teacher, District Aboriginal Education Project Officer, District Aboriginal Education Support Service Manager and Principal.

Gavin is Co-chair of the National Aboriginal Principals Association which he was instrumental in establishing in 2006. He has a close association with the Australian Principals Association Professional Development Council's (APAPDC) Dare to Lead project, serving as a committee member on the Dare to Lead National Steering Committee, Kids Matter and Mind Matters National Steering Committee, Leaders Lead working group and a Reviewer for the National Museum of Australia 'Indigenous Education Series'.

He is one of the first Aboriginal principals of a mainstream school in South Australia and in 2005 was involved in carrying out an 'Open Discussion' with South Australia's Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS) employees involved with Aboriginal Education. This resulted in realignment of the structures for the education and care of Aboriginal children and students in South Australia.

Gavin has a background in classroom teaching throughout South Australia, teaching in a variety of schools and settings. He has been a passionate advocate and leader for the improvement of educational outcomes of Aboriginal children and students, building capacity and creating greater opportunities for Aboriginal teachers to move into leadership roles.



Susan Matthews

National Aboriginal Principals Association

Susan is a Wiradjuri woman living presently on Dharug land, Susan has extensive experience in education and has worked for the Department of Education and Training since 1986 in a variety of positions, ranging from Aboriginal Education Assistant, Aboriginal School Community Liaison Officer, Classroom Teacher, SEO1 Aboriginal Education Consultant servicing over 300 hundred schools within the Western Metropolitan Region, School Principal, SEO2 Aboriginal Education/Quality Teaching and more recently as the Executive Officer for the NSW AECG Inc. Susan is a Life Member of the NSW AECG Inc and is committed to raising the profile of the NSW AECG at the grass roots community level. Susan has had the privilege of holding several leadership positions on Local, Regional and State Management Committees of the AECG since first becoming a member of the Association in 1984, as well as having an opportunity on two occasions to relieve as the President of the NSW AECG Inc. Susan has brought to each of her positions a commitment and passion for improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal students both within Government and non-Government educational environments. In 2006 Susan was invited to give a Key Note Address at a UN hosted education conference in India (Values Education) "Deepening the Roots and Broadening Vision", as it related to Aboriginal Education within Australia. Susan received overwhelming support for her presentation and as a result has since been invited to present again at an International Women's Conference in India in June of 2008. Her passion, commitment, and drive are second to none. Susan takes up the challenges presented to her with professionalism, integrity, credibility and a willingness to enter into debates at senior Government levels in an effort to bring about real sustainable change in the field of Aboriginal Education and Training.

Abstract

This paper is by three educators who are Indigenous people with extensive experience in Indigenous education. They discuss the actions of school leaders needed to address the limited outcomes being achieved by the majority of Indigenous school students. A feature of this paper is the reflections of Gavin Khan and Susan Matthews on their experiences as Principals of schools with majority Aboriginal student enrolments. The paper takes the Australian Principals Association Professional Development Council - 'L5 Frame for School Leadership'- and adds an Indigenous focus to the L5 Frame from their 'Dare To Lead' project. The L5 states:

- Leadership starts from within.
- Leadership is about influencing others.
- Leadership develops a rich learning environment.
- Leadership builds professionalism and management capability.
- Leadership inspires leadership actions and aspirations in others.

Introduction

As educators who are Indigenous people we are particularly concerned about the limited outcomes being achieved by the majority of our Indigenous school students. For our community and the future of our nation as a whole, this has to change. School leaders, in particular school principals, must play a major role in addressing this situation. Our comments emanate from the Australian Principals Association Professional Development Council (APAPDC) 'L5 Frame for School Leadership', which states:

- Leadership starts from within.
- Leadership is about influencing others.

- Leadership develops a rich learning environment.
- Leadership builds professionalism and management capability.
- Leadership inspires leadership actions and aspirations in others.

APAPDC through its 'Dare To Lead' project has applied an Indigenous focus to this leadership frame. If you are a school leader with Indigenous students, you need to investigate the Indigenous L5 Frame in detail. It contains 36 key actions for school leaders and 12 specifically Indigenous situations that you will need to consider at some time.

Leadership starts from within

'Leaders committed to Indigenous perspectives must personally value and acknowledge Indigenous culture'

By this we mean that leaders must ordinarily accept that Indigenous Australia is part of the fabric of our country and as such its students have cultural values and mores that should be incorporated as a given. We expect you to have a personal commitment to improving outcomes for our students. We understand that not all people in Australia are totally sympathetic to our Indigenous community, let alone empathetic. However we would expect that educational leaders continue to explore their own feelings about racism, social justice and equity – and then act professionally in respect of their roles.

Leadership is about influencing others

'Leaders committed to Indigenous perspectives listen to, and act upon, Indigenous community input'

We understand that our community is demanding and that there is not always a confluence between what we want and what the school can ordinarily deliver. It is the responsibility of leaders from the school and our

community to agree upon what is best and achievable in a school operation. Once agreements are made, it is the responsibility of school leaders to ensure that they are communicated and negotiated with school staff, so that Indigenous education actions and outcomes become the accepted responsibility of all.

Leadership develops a rich learning environment

'Leaders committed to Indigenous perspectives actively promote contact between Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff and students'

Given that there are still great differences in lifestyles and cultures between Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff, it becomes really important that school leaders promote interaction between such staff. School staff must get to know each other to ensure that they all understand each other enough for a working relationship that has an effect on successful outcomes for Indigenous students. If all staff understand each other, it is possible to develop of a whole school curriculum that includes Indigenous perspectives.

Leadership builds professionalism and management capability

'Leaders committed to Indigenous perspectives are professional in keeping up with current Indigenous education trends, issues and plans'

If leaders are well informed, they are able to work with and encourage school staff to set performance goals and targets for personal action in their work with Indigenous students. They will ensure that school management is underpinned by values of social justice, equity and quality relationships, based on personal knowledge.

Leadership inspires leadership actions and aspirations in others

'Leaders committed to Indigenous perspectives invite Indigenous community role models into the school to motivate and challenge'

By growing individual staff and allowing our community in, leaders can personally know of, value and celebrate their achievements in Indigenous education. We are sure that when individuals, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, have personally acquired skills knowledge and confidence they can aspire further. As a result you have 'grown' both your staff and your Indigenous community. While this could still be confronting – if you as a leader have done the above – then it should not be so.

If you as a leader have not done all of the above, then you as leader will certainly fail in Indigenous education – and you deserve to.

Gavin's reflections

When I received my first appointment in 2001 as a school Principal who happened to be Aboriginal, I began to be recognised and supported. It was a time in my life that was quite uplifting and personally satisfying. With my first appointment came an understanding quite quickly that there are some schools that can only ever be described as 'crisis schools':

- student enrolment 135
- 50% Aboriginal
- category 1 (highest level socio-economic disadvantage)
- staff morale almost non-existent
- educational outcomes and attendance significantly below the rest of the state
- school vandalism amongst the highest in the state

- staff turnover quite high
- Aboriginal student suspensions quite high (violent behaviour)

Luckily for me I was related to many of my Aboriginal students, or had grown up with many of their parents. This gave me a slight advantage because there was already a level of trust with the children and the families that would not normally have been there for any new Principal. From the Aboriginal community came tremendous excitement because I was the first Principal of Aboriginal heritage that had ever been appointed to this school.

I spent a great deal of time getting acquainted with the community both inside and outside of the school. I listened to the families and took notice of what they were saying about the school, what their beliefs, concerns and hopes were for their children and the school. I did the same with the staff and found out as much as I could about the culture of the school, their fears, aspirations, passions and ideas. I then introduced structures, policies, practices and plans that would help formulate and achieve our vision. We developed strategic plans and priorities, setting targets and agreed upon a common path to our future.

Throughout this process I made very clear what my expectations were of staff, students and families. Amongst staff I challenged long-held beliefs about pedagogy and introduced processes to investigate and adopt new pedagogy. Their view was that a majority of students in the school had learning disorders or disabilities. In my view this was a cop-out. If we were to really be about educational outcomes, then the language of the day had to be about high expectations, skilled teachers and target setting based on knowing where the students were and where they needed to be. This ultimately tied into the construct of staff beginning to personalise the learning of all students

within their classes. Teachers found this quite challenging as it was a process for them of examining their own misconstrued beliefs and in some cases fears of Aboriginal Peoples.

We allocated a significant amount of the school resources to training and development for staff and parents and employed local Aboriginal people as support staff. I particularly included parents in the training and development to educate them so that we began a process of shared responsibility in terms of teaching children.

To address Indigenous student health and social problems, I met with interagency groups to develop partnerships within health and social work agencies to implement school-based programs that would assist these students in their learning. I expected teachers to consult with their individual students' parents to develop a clearer understanding of how health issues were impacting on their students' learning. This was not something that had been previously tried within a school like ours.

If I was going to succeed as an educational leader, then it was up to me to ensure that what I was changing within my school had cultural integrity. I thought – you white fellas have tried it your way and failed – so now it was up to me as an inexperienced Aboriginal Principal to bring the Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing to the forefront.

Susan's reflections

From my perspective there are some aspects of the L5 Framework that need further unpacking within the role of a school principal who is Aboriginal. Let me paint the picture and then explore some of the transformational change that I wanted to create within a small mainstream school in a rural community situated within western NSW:

- student population of 250 students – 98% Aboriginal
- new school Principal (Aboriginal) – first appointment
- no other school executive staff appointed
- 15 of staff were first-year out teachers
- attendance rates – 60%
- school suspensions – 40% (extreme violent and aggressive behaviour towards students and staff)
- educational outcomes – 50% lower than that of the rest of the state.

I was an educator who understood curriculum, teaching and learning and about how kids learn, as had principals before me. However, I also had knowledge and understandings from my lived experiences. I had to think how to use my Aboriginality within my own cultural leadership framework. This for me was a dynamic and complex set of values, beliefs, ways of thinking, styles of communication and ways of interacting more broadly with the Aboriginal community and the students than had been done before.

Building a team of educators (primarily non-Aboriginal) that had high expectations around student success who could work and function together under the leadership of an Aboriginal principal was the order of the day. We aimed at building the resilience of the student population by providing them with real choices and experiences that allowed them to see that our school was a safe place to be where learning was valued.

There was a need to think outside of the square and put the needs of students at the very heart of what needed to be different in this school:

- Aboriginal student identity needed to be nurtured, accepted and valued
- contextualised learning

- sense of community/school belonging
- parent/community ownership of education
- Aboriginal ways of knowing, doing and learning

While it was hard to accept, the fact was that the older students had disengaged with the school and it would be difficult to turn this around. But, I had a chance to reinvent education with a prior to school experience for our littlies with an experience that was not based on conformity or the acquisition of academic skills, but more about them understanding their place and role within a school setting. I wanted to use the knowledge they already had as a springboard for further engagement when they entered their first formal year of schooling. So was born the reception grade of schooling.

Consultative processes were undertaken and there was great staff, community and parent support for the initiative. However questions asked where:

- You can't just put in place a new grade of schooling. My reply – why not?
- What is the curriculum going to be? My reply – one based on the students own cultural lived and experience knowledge of what they already know.
- What assessment strategies are going to be put in place? My reply – attendance rates, no suspensions, happy to be at school, understanding of routines and expectations around appropriate behaviours and engaged in the daily activities of the school.
- There is no Departmental policy on a reception grade of schooling. My reply – we will make one.

I did begin the class, based on the L5 Framework – 'Leadership starts from within, leadership is about influencing others, and leadership develops a rich learning environment'. It only ran for a 12-month period before I was forced to end it.

Was this because I was a first-time principal or because I was an Aboriginal principal that tried to put in place something that was so totally different and built upon my beliefs as an Aboriginal person? Can we as Aboriginal principals be allowed to use our own cultural knowledge about leadership, teaching and learning and more importantly Aboriginal ways of learning, to reinvent education within a school environment with a predominately Aboriginal population?