

Educational Success: A sustainable outcome for all Indigenous Australian students when teachers understand where the learning journey begins



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Abstract

The statistics for educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students continually reinforce the notion of 'failure', of a specific cohort of students who are 'not coping', of the majority of teachers at a loss concerning what to do. Overall, it is a picture of doom and gloom, clearly demonstrating that education in this country has failed to live up to its promise for all students. In this presentation, research outcomes will be used to construct a different picture, a paradigm for a better future built on a strong foundation of sustainable education outcomes for the descendants of this nation's First Peoples. The evidence presented will highlight what can happen when the learning environment is developed, nurtured, maintained and led by teachers who understand and value the importance of their role in providing a range of opportunities that will enable students to evolve into highly motivated, autonomous learners.

Introduction

In considering the theme for this conference, 'Indigenous Education: Pathways to Success', this paper will begin with an introductory discussion aimed at contextualising its focus within the overall conference theme. This introduction will provide a brief outline of the critical issues that research has revealed to be the possible causes underlying the way in which education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has been positioned within Australian education. The presenter will draw on her own research over the past two decades to reveal these issues and their impact upon the educational positioning of this nation's First Peoples. This is an essential first step in enabling

conference participants to make the connections between the realities of what has been delivered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the name of education and the educational outcomes those students have been able to acquire as a result of such education provision.

While this discussion will provide a reflective analysis of a wide range of qualitative research data, it will also include an extrapolation of relevant statistical data, which is intended to provide an additional frame through which to consider and focus upon those factors which have had the greatest impact upon the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to access and effectively participate in the educational programs offered across all levels of learning within our education systems. Making these connections between qualitative and quantitative data at the beginning of this paper is a crucial element in creating a starting point for the discussion, a lens through which participants will be able to acquire a more in-depth insight into the issues.

Hence, the introduction builds the framework through which the paper will then pursue the question 'Is success a matter of choice?' This is the key question that underlies the title of this paper, 'Educational Success: A sustainable outcome for all Indigenous Australian students when teachers understand where the learning journey begins'. Similarly, it is a critical aspect of the notion that 'Indigenous Education' can provide the 'Pathways to Success' highlighted in the conference theme. It is the question that, ultimately, at the conclusion of this conference, participants should have acquired the knowledge and understanding to

be able to answer for themselves. It is a question that, in its relevance in enabling us to engage with all learners, is quintessential to our capacity to be effective educators.

Examination of the issues

A critical component of any examination of issues in Indigenous education in this country requires some consideration of the role of government in developing, implementing and driving the overall agenda that determines the direction of Indigenous education. A brief investigation of the major reviews and reports that have been undertaken by the Australian Government since the 1990 implementation of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Education Policy will be included in this presentation. The focus in this area will be a consideration of those strategies that successive governments have implemented as a means of improving Indigenous access, participation, retention and achievement. This discussion will provide an additional lens through which to analyse the research outcomes.

In examining the issues, the focus will be on identifying those factors that, according to research, have had the greatest impact upon the access, participation, retention and success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The implications of those issues will then be critically examined in order to:

- develop a comparative overview of past and present practices
- clarify effective practice within the context of what needs to be done to overcome the long-term, compounding effects of what has been persistently perceived as 'Indigenous failure' in education.

This section of the paper will draw upon the findings of various research

projects that have been undertaken in recent years, thus providing participants with access to evidence that will inform them and enable them to:

- reflect upon previous perceptions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student achievement
- recognise, understand and accept the current reality as the essential platform upon which to build deeper insights into the reality of Indigenous educational achievement
- develop a better understanding of what needs to happen to effect the much-needed change that will create more positive attitudes toward education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and realise that such attitudinal change is critical to creating more positive mind-sets in both teachers and learners
- identify what, according to the research, it is that works for Indigenous students across the various levels of education
- determine why some strategies have been successful
- consider the messages emerging from the research and the implications such messages have for future education in Australia.

It needs to be stated that the focus in examining the issues is directly linked to research findings; hence, the discussion about those issues will reflect the individual studies being considered.

Experience reveals, however, that some issues have a currency, and a degree of urgency, across a variety of educational situations. The presenter will, therefore, examine such issues prior to the more in-depth consideration of individual case studies. The importance of the following issues will be included in this discussion – relationships based upon an equality of regard; willingness to develop a capacity for meaningful

engagement; building on strengths; resourcing; quality of educational programs; and commitment to building a better society for all Australians. These are issues that premise the capacity of this nation to deliver on the theme for this conference, 'Indigenous Education: Pathways to Success'. And because of their vital connection to our nation-building capacity, these are also issues that ultimately depend upon teachers to make them workable. Teachers need to know and understand these issues so that they are able to:

- relate to them
- recognise their importance in terms of their capacity to do their job well
- accept responsibility for making them work for them
- value the reciprocal nature of their role within and beyond educational settings
- demonstrate respect not only for the issues, but also for the people whose lives are so dependent upon their ability to address these issues effectively.

Case studies demonstrating the value of using research outcomes as a tool for change

In this section of the paper, case studies across various levels of education, in a diversity of geographic locations, will be used to demonstrate how education can be a tool of empowerment. Each case study will be outlined and considered individually to demonstrate the value of the research within both individual and collective contexts. It is these findings that will then be discussed in relation to their contribution in terms of enabling effective change and the implications of this for individual students and the wider society, both now and in the future.

It is through this section of the paper that the presenter will utilise research

outcomes to construct a different picture and demonstrate how some Indigenous students are making the transition through the various levels of education by traversing a range of pathways that have been designed to cater for the specific learning needs of individual students. It will be through the revelations of such successful educational practice that participants will gain some valuable insights into ways in which many Indigenous Australian students are transitioning into educational success that builds their individual capacity to make those 'life changes' that are critical to effectively engaging in the education process that is central to all of our lives and essential in equipping us to build better futures for ourselves and our families. A central focus of this picture will likely be the importance of relationships and the quality engagement, within both individual and collective settings, that identify strengths and provide valuable guidance to those with a genuine desire to know how to work with those strengths.

The case studies will be used to demonstrate how a paradigm for a better future is possible. The firm foundations are already in place and it is through heeding the outcomes of research such as those discussed in this paper that we as a nation can achieve sustainable education outcomes for the descendants of this nation's First Peoples.

It must be realised, however, that this is not simply going to happen without a concerted effort from all Australians – those who constitute the First Nations of this land and those who followed later and who now call this country theirs. The evidence presented will highlight what can happen when the learning environment is developed, nurtured, maintained and led by teachers who understand and value the importance of their role in providing a range of opportunities that will

enable students to evolve into highly motivated, autonomous learners.

The challenge of the future?

In summarising the value of research as a means of enabling participants to empower themselves for their own futures, the presenter will use the evidence of her own research to respond to the question 'Is success a matter of choice?' The research has demonstrated that, where success has been a matter of personal choice, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students across various levels of education have taken control of their lives and achieved the educational achievements that they wanted in order to take them where they want to go. Importantly, education providers need to acknowledge the learner's personal agency in defining 'success' within the parameters of their own values and beliefs systems. Effecting change in such decisions, is a matter for negotiation between the learner and the person who would seek to influence such decision making.

While the case studies were used to explore individual achievement, this summary will provide a broader overview of the research outcomes to demonstrate where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are currently positioned within our education systems. In reflecting upon the changes that have occurred in Indigenous education in recent years, the discussion will be expanded into a consideration of the implications of such change for the future of education in this country. Within that context, the question 'Is success a matter of choice?' will be used to turn the lens back onto this nation's educational providers – our institutions and the people who develop and deliver the educational services – for a final consideration of their current positioning in relation to their capacity to deliver on the promise of education for all Australian students,

including those who are descendants of our First Nations. This is the question that ultimately determines whether or not our educational providers have the capacity to meet the challenge of the future.

Conclusion

Finally, this paper will provide a brief snapshot in time of what is currently happening in this nation in relation to the nation's capacity to deal with the cultural diversity that is a feature of our society. This discussion will be used to reflect upon the capacity of our educational providers to accept the challenge of preparing the nation for its future as a culturally diverse nation. This is a vital issue for Indigenous education, for unless this nation can transition its peoples into a harmonious, democratic society where all people are treated with respect regardless of their cultural values and beliefs, then Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students will continue to struggle to achieve their rights and ensure that their success is a matter of choice – their own choice. This is a transition that has the power to change this nation's history.

The question is 'Are our educational providers up to the challenge?' Can they provide the education that all citizens will require if success is, in fact, going to be, a matter of choice.

Indigenous education: Creating classrooms of tomorrow today



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Professor Rigney has taught in secondary schools and university teacher education courses across South Australia since 1991. Professor Lester-Irabinna Rigney is Dean of Aboriginal Education, Director of the Wilto Yerlo Centre at Adelaide University, and is one of the most influential Indigenous educationalists in Australia today. In 2009 he received an honorary United Nations award from the Australian Chapter for his work on Indigenous Education. He is on several high-profile expert committees, including the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare COAG 'Closing the Gap' Scientific Reference Group, the National Aboriginal Reference Group 25 Year Indigenous Education Plan and Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority, National Languages Curriculum Reference Group. In 2009 he completed a review of the National Indigenous Education document 'Australian Directions' for the Federal Government. Interest in Professor Rigney's work by national and international universities has seen him take up several prestigious Visiting Research Fellowships, including at Cambridge University, United Kingdom; at Fort Hare University, South Africa; and at University of British Columbia, Canada. Professor Rigney is in constant demand as a commentator on national and international Indigenous matters and has published widely on Education, Languages and Knowledge transmission. His recent 2006 co-edited book, titled *Sharing Spaces: Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Responses to Story, Country and Rights*, is the most up-to-date Australian text on Indigenous and non-Indigenous race relations and how they converge in the vulnerable, vital and contested space called 'education'.

Abstract

Engagement or participation in education is a key factor affecting the life chances of all Australians. What will this look like in the future for Indigenous children who have an overall lower level of participation in education than non-Indigenous Australians? 21st century schooling for Indigenous students in the next decade will look very different to today. This paper discusses the characteristics of curriculum, policy and pedagogy for future schooling of Indigenous children. It uses national and international literature to explore 21st century learning that seeks to revolutionise the way we educate teachers and students. It highlights that Indigenous students live in a multi-tasking, multifaceted, technology-driven, diverse, rapidly changing world which is far removed from the world faced by most of their teachers at the time they entered adulthood. 21st century learning requires new spaces that are culturally safe, coherent and consistent. They do not override Indigenous cultures, but draw upon them as a source of learning foundation on which to build new digital learning structures. They connect school, home, country and community learning in successful ways. A key purpose of the paper is to evaluate the quality of available evidence regarding strategies for improving school attendance, retention and outcomes.

Introduction

Learning through a quality education has substantial positive social and economic effects for children, including: greater academic achievement; increasing schooling interest and attendance; easing school transition; and raising the self-esteem of all children (Buckskin, Hughes, Price, Rigney, Sarra, Adams, Hayward, Teasdale, & Gregory, 2009; Barnett, 1995, 1998; Buckley, 1996). In Australia, schools maintain a

poor record in the education outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Current education policy, with good cause, is firmly fixed on closing education gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children. However, the world is moving into cyberspace through the growth of mobile devices and the digital age that signals yet more challenges for schools that are already under pressure. What is the future of Indigenous education? Can 21st century learning revolutionise the way we educate teachers and students? What advantages can we glean from digital literacy through greater access to technology? Indigenous education and its future is a sizable issue and one worthy of further exploration.

21st century schools the new challenge: are we ready?

Schools have seen a recent influx of new devices – such as the iPad, new T-Touch Tab, iPhones and Smart phones, all of which can connect to the internet over 3G mobile networks. Can these technologies develop an entirely new way of teaching and learning that is better, more successful and more affordable? Are schools ready for these new challenges? Some schools are, but most are yet to fully grasp the technological changes in the digital revolution. Professor Martin Westall reminds us that 'despite changes, schools still, by and large, look similar to the schools of the 20th and even 19th century, and that if schools are to 'maintain relevance', they must 'bridge the gap between how students will live as adults and how they learn' (2008, p. 1–2).

Westall of the *Flinders University Centre for Science Education in the 21st century* argues that 'Young people in the 21st century will spend their adult lives in a multi-tasking, multifaceted, technology-driven, diverse, rapidly

changing world which is far removed from the world faced by most of their teachers at the time they entered adulthood' (Westall, 2008). Others like Harvard educator Dr Tony Wagner claim that despite the best efforts of educators, schools are 'dangerously obsolete' and he is puzzled why even the best schools do not teach the new survival skills our children need for the future (Wagner, 2008). Wagner calls for the reinvention of schools for the 21st century for the sake of our children who need skills and knowledge to address the successes and ills inherited from the previous generation. New mobile devices and access to the internet in schools is 'becoming a magnet for students' with new scholarly debates about what 'facilities are adequate to achieve educational equality and true opportunity' (Wilhelm 2004, p. 31). The educational changes brought on by the technological revolution in the last ten years are far greater than the previous two hundred. Opportunities abound for Indigenous education in the 21st century and the potential is great for welfare reform, health care and workforce growth. Indeed, these are the right goals for public policy to pursue. However, the challenge of bringing schools with high Indigenous populations into digital learning is made complex when Australia is caught in a historical moment of trying to close basic educational gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

Current and future challenges in Indigenous education

It is not a 'natural' phenomenon when Indigenous students fail school, but a combination of poor social policy, unfair economic arrangements and an 'inclusive curricula' wilderness (Fordham & Schwab, 2007). Matters beyond the school gate need

recognition and resolution if the crisis is to be addressed. There is a current crisis in Indigenous Education (Rigney, Rigney, Hughes 1998). For example, the Productivity Commission reported nationally in 2008, 63.4 per cent of year 5 Indigenous students achieved the national minimum standard for reading compared with their non-Indigenous counterparts of 92.6 per cent (SCRGSP, 2009, 4.41). The crisis is also emphasised in the latest research that indicates that Indigenous children (Rigney, 2003; Rigney 2006; Worby & Rigney 2006; Butterworth & Candy, 1998; SCRGSP, 2009; Fordham & Schwab 2007):

- live in poverty
- suffer higher rates of child abuse and neglect
- are less likely to receive an early childhood education, especially 3–5-year-olds
- are well behind in literacy and numeracy skills
- have poorer health
- have less access to secondary school
- are less than half as likely to proceed through to Year 12.

Because the crisis in education is considerable, it could be argued that technology is a luxury, a tool inessential for basic living and survival. In his book *Digital Nation* Wilhelm (2004) counters this and argues that in the 21st century the capacity to communicate will almost certainly be a key human right where the right to telecommunicate will be as important as drinking water. This premise is predicated on the belief that 'emerging information and communications technologies are essential for individuals and communities to fulfil their life pursuits in an e-enabled world (Wilhelm, 2004, p. 30). Indigenous students must possess these 21st

century capabilities in order to participate in e-commerce and digital economies. If Indigenous Australian societies are to move forward, then schools have a responsibility not only to close the gap, but also to develop in students a deep understanding of technologies. The analytical and policy issues that arise from this poses a conundrum for current Indigenous education policy whose evidence about Indigenous populations are unreliable, not e-enabled but purely focused on closing gaps. These policy tensions need to be resolved.

21st century policy and evidence implications

It is without question that 21st century Indigenous education requires 21st century evidence and policy. However, recent research has called into question the orthodox source of evidence centrally used over the past two decades for Indigenous reform, the Australian Census administered by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Analysing the 2006 Census results, Taylor and Biddle (2008; 2010) found large discrepancies in population figures in what are called 'Indigenous Areas'. The results revealed that in many remote towns, and in many outstations, the change in the census count of Indigenous population between 2001 and 2006 was substantially deficient.

In contrast, in most regional towns, and in particular suburbs of major cities, the change in the count was greater than expected after considering the contribution to population change from net migration and natural increase' (Taylor & Biddle, 2008, p. v). As a consequence, they conclude, 'in many remote locations we cannot use 2006 Census counts at face value and in such places, the census is more like a sample survey of the Indigenous population that will need to be carefully adjusted to assist informed policy-making' (Taylor & Biddle, 2008, p. v).

One drawback according to Taylor and Biddle is the fact that we have no data on the characteristics of those not counted. Because of faulty census data informing Indigenous education, health and social service provision Indigenous communities fiscal settings based on such estimates have been 'commensurately undervalued over the past 35 years' so that 'services and programs provided to remote communities on the basis of official population estimates have been chronically inadequate' (2008, pp. v–vi). Such imprecision and substantial 'undercounting' give rise to issues of public policy concern. Projections for 21st century Indigenous populations and their digital needs require greater accuracy in evidence for public policy to guide fiscal settings.

The current COAG 'Closing the Gap' campaign complements the *Draft Indigenous Education Action Plan* developed by the Ministerial Council and embodies a welcomed new approach to Indigenous education. Because of its infancy, it remains to be seen if 21st century Indigenous education will be assisted favourably by other recent campaigns, including *National Curriculum*, *the Digital Revolution* and *Building the Education Revolution*. Today's Australian students represent the first generations to grow up in a world in which information and communication technologies are everywhere. While governments need to be commended for their current attention to the crisis in Indigenous education, we still have much work to do in preparing Indigenous children for the 21st century.

Indigenous knowledge, skills and attributes for tomorrow

Many views abound about what skills are needed for tomorrow's classrooms. Wagner's (2008) work examines why parents and educators alike are concerned that the majority of students

are ill-prepared for life and work in our current world, let alone the next ten years. In his book, *The Global Achievement Gap*, he outlines seven essential 21st century Survival Skills that children will need for their future:

- 1 Critical thinking and problem solving
- 2 Collaboration across networks
- 3 Agility and adaptability
- 4 Initiative and entrepreneurialism
- 5 Effective oral and written communication
- 6 Accessing and analysing information
- 7 Curiosity and imagination

Wagner informs us of the changing nature of students. Similarly, a leading US advocacy organisation Partnerships for 21st Century Learning has written a report titled *Framework for 21st century Skills* (PCS, 2009). The 21st century interdisciplinary themes include:

- a) Global awareness
- b) Learning and thinking skills
- c) Financial, economic, business and entrepreneurial literacy
- d) Civic, health and environmental literacy
- e) Information and communication technology (ICT)
- f) Life skills
- g) Modern assessment of 21st century skills

The report argues that to ensure student mastery of 21st century skills, new 21st century standards, assessments, curriculum, instruction, professional development and learning environments must be aligned to support systems that produce 21st century outcomes for today's students. These aspects are a good starting point for discussions on 21st century Indigenous education. From an Indigenous perspective,

for implementation to be applied in Australia, Indigenous interests, cultures, languages and literacy's must be explicit and sustained in the curriculum core. Other priority areas include: community engagement; access and affordability to technology; more inclusive and diverse public policy; digital and health literacy; and environmental literacy. Modern 21st century learning requires new spaces that are culturally safe, coherent and consistent. They do not override Indigenous cultures, but draw upon them as a source of learning foundation on which to build new digital learning structures. They connect school, home, country and community learning in successful ways. The future of digital technologies in Indigenous education is upon us. However, it is important to remember that Indigenous perspectives of Indigenous education in the 21st century are under-theorised in Australia. We have little knowledge of what parents of Indigenous children think about digital education or their needs and aspirations that an ICT education can provide into the 21st century. We have limited knowledge of how to integrate technology into non-English speaking Aboriginal communities. We also remain unaware of its cultural, ethical, moral and socio-political consequences.

Conclusion

Without modernising Indigenous education for the 21st century teachers face a class of students who: live in digital ghettos; are not e-enabled; whose age in web years is in single digits; and who remain a generation divided. The desires of parents for 21st century Indigenous classrooms require teachers, governments and policy makers to re-think the state of Indigenous education toward bridging any future digital divide. The time to act is now.

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