

Indigenous education – imaging the future, the role of educators



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Abstract

Indigenous education has long been a focal point for educators. From the reviews of the mid-1980s, policy development in the late 1980s and since, Indigenous education has long challenged educators. The continued relevancy of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy, developed in 1989, demonstrates that improved outcomes in Indigenous education continues to be a goal beyond the reach of communities, education systems and governments.

This paper discusses the policies underpinning Indigenous education and the challenges that continue to face educators. The new Council of Australian Government commitments provide educators with a renewed challenge. This paper also identifies outcomes in Indigenous education and explores what some systems and communities are doing to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous people. The paper also recognises that ultimately the achievement of improved education outcomes for Indigenous people is a responsibility shared by all stakeholders and that the role of educator belongs to parents, families, communities, teachers and administrators.

I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land we stand on today and elders, past and present. As an Indigenous Australian from southern Australia, I also bring greetings from my communities.

Introduction

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Outcomes and policies in Indigenous education

Outcomes for Indigenous people have long been documented. In the 1980s our understanding of outcomes, particularly the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous achievement, was growing. The 1985 *Report on Aboriginal Education* by the House of Representative Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs, the development of the Aboriginal Employment Development Policy in 1986 and the establishment of the Aboriginal Education Policy Taskforce in 1988 helped focus our thoughts and provide direction for the decades ahead.

What little data we had available indicated that Indigenous people were not having successful experiences in education. It was this realisation that prompted the development of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP). The NATSIEP had four long-term goals:

- involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in educational decision making
- equality of access to educational services
- equality of educational participation
- equitable and appropriate educational outcomes.

Since NATSIEP, there has been a review in 1995 and various new national policies have come to light. Some of these are Indigenous-specific including:

- MCEETYA Indigenous education report
- *Directions in Australian Indigenous education 2005–2008*, which was recently re-endorsed at the MCEETYA meetings this year.

There have also been non-Indigenous policies that have supported improved Indigenous education outcomes and perspectives. Most notably the *National Goals of Schooling in the TwentyFirst Century* (1999) or the Adelaide Declaration provided a basis for many education systems to promote Indigenous education in a mainstream setting.

Schooling should be socially just, so that:

- *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have equitable access to, and opportunities in, schooling so their learning outcomes improve and, over time, match those of other students (Goal 3.3)*
- *All students understand and acknowledge the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures to Australian society and possess the knowledge, skills and understandings to contribute to, and benefit from, reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (Goal 3.4)*

And yet, despite all these policies, outcomes for Indigenous people continue to be unacceptably low. This is reflected in preschool, school and post-schooling options. For instance:

- Apparent Year 7/8–12 retention rate was 39.5% in 2005, compared to 76.6% for non-Indigenous students (*National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training*, 2005).
- Literacy and numeracy benchmark data continues to show a significant gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous achievement. For instance, as reported in the 2006 *National Report on Schooling in Australia: Preliminary Paper*, released in February 2008 and available on the Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs website, the following was reported (includes 95% confidence intervals):
National data – students achieving **reading** benchmark

- Year 3:
Indigenous: 79.7% +/- 4.3%
All students: 93% +/- 1.7%
- Year 5:
Indigenous: 66.3% +/- 4.4%
All students: 88.4% +/- 1.6%
- Year 7:
Indigenous: 63.2% +/- 3%
All students: 89.2% +/- 0.8%

National data – students achieving **writing** benchmark:

- Year 3:
Indigenous: 77.9% +/- 3.8%
All students: 93.9% +/- 1.3%
- Year 5:
Indigenous: 77% +/- 4%
All students: 93.8% +/- 1.3%
- Year 7:
Indigenous: 73.8% +/- 3.9%
All students: 92.4% +/- 1.5%

National data – students achieving **numeracy** benchmark:

- Year 3:
Indigenous: 76.2% +/- 4.3%
All students: 93% +/- 1.4%
- Year 5:
Indigenous: 66% +/- 3.8%
All students: 90.3% +/- 1.3%
- Year 7:
Indigenous: 47.5% +/- 2.9%
All students: 79.7% +/- 1.1%

The Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey 2007 stated:

There has been tacit acceptance of the non-achievement of educational standards by Aboriginal children and young people.

The resultant acceptance of this lack of education success has a cumulative effect. It is based on the belief that Aboriginal children ... will never reach their potential and if they fall behind society will protect them.

Their low level of educational success is acceptable as a normative expectation. This has to change.

Employment data shows us clearly that if we don't get it right in education and training, the results impact heavily on employment. For instance, the unemployment rate for Indigenous persons nationally was 14% in 2007, compared to 4.2% for non-Indigenous Australians (ABS Labour Force Characteristics of *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, Estimates from the Labour Force Survey 2007* released on 22 May 2008).

The role of education in creating improved life opportunities for all people has been recognised by many. For instance, as Ken Henry, Secretary of Treasury said this year (2008):

Education can help transform social and economic opportunities, with particularly strong gains for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In a speech at the launch of Our Children Our Future Report 2008, Tom Calma Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner

when speaking about the importance of education stated:

It is fundamental to the development of human potential and to full participation in a democratic society. It is also fundamental to the full enjoyment of most other human rights: most clearly the right to work but also to health.

In the past 12 months one can argue that there has been an increased sense of urgency on the part of all governments to improve outcomes for Indigenous peoples across a range of indicators. This is best evidenced by the work of the Council of Australian Governments and the recently agreed COAG 'Closing the Gap' commitments (or targets) that include:

- to close the life-expectancy gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other Australians within a generation
- to halve the mortality gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and other children under age 5 within a decade
- to halve the gap in literacy and numeracy achievement between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and other students within a decade
- to halve the gap in employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within a decade
- to at least halve the gap in attainment at Year 12 schooling (or equivalent level) by 2020
- to provide all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 4-year-olds in remote communities with access to a quality preschool program within five years.

These targets have synergies with strategic areas of action listed under Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage (Productivity Commission), for example:

- early childhood development and growth (prenatal to 3 years)
- early school engagement and performance (preschool to year 3)
- positive childhood and transition to adulthood
- substance abuse and misuse
- functional and resilient families and communities
- effective environmental health systems
- economic participation and development.

From a Victorian context, the targets also have synergy with the Victorian Indigenous Affairs Framework (VIAF) Strategic Areas for Action that aims to:

- improve maternal health and early childhood health and development
- improve literacy and numeracy
- improve Year 12 completion or equivalent qualification and develop pathways to employment
- prevent family violence and improve justice outcomes
- improve economic development settle native title claims and address land access issues
- build Indigenous capacity.

The Commonwealth government's new Social Inclusion Agenda, that focuses on ensuring that all in our community benefit from economic and social participation, further supports improved outcomes for Indigenous people.

This new policy refocus is coupled with a recognition that the majority of Australia's Indigenous population does not reside in remote locations. The 2006 Census data showed that nationally 32% of our Indigenous population were in major cities, 21% lived in inner regional areas, 22% lived in outer regional areas, 10% lived in

remote areas and 16% lived in very remote areas.

To quote the Hon. Jenny Macklin MP, Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs in 08/09 budget papers, 'We, therefore, will not close the gap without strategies for addressing disadvantage in urban and regional centres' (p. 3, 2008).

Recent 2006 census data also helps us recognise the urgency of our task, and with the Indigenous population growing at a faster rate and being younger in age profile, we know our work in education will continue to grow in importance.

This alignment of policy development and direction provides us as educators in Indigenous education with challenges, hope and encouragement. But, at the end of the day, we need to ask ourselves, as parents, community members, teachers and administrators, what we can do differently to achieve improved outcomes in education for Indigenous peoples. We are all educators in some way; we educate our children, our families, our communities, our systems, our schools, students at our TAFEs and universities on what they can do to achieve improved outcomes in education. The remainder of this paper focuses on what some educators are doing to make a difference.

What makes a difference? Role of educators

Educators play a major role in closing the gap for Indigenous peoples. There are many types of educators in our communities. These include:

- teachers
- administrators
- Indigenous community

Parents/Families: Historically parents and families were never considered as educators. We now know this is not true. Parents are the first educators of their children and we rely on parents to model what is expected and lay the foundation for children in their later years. We also expect our parents to participate in their children's education but we need to be realistic in our expectations. Often non-Indigenous educators lament the lack of participation that Indigenous parents have in their children's education. We need however to consider that our parents may have had negative experiences in their own education which can impact on their participation levels at school. Our parents participate at the level in which they feel comfortable and many would say they actively support their children at home, listening to them read and ensuring they attend school. This type of participation may not be visible to school-based educators but is nevertheless very important in contributing to improved outcomes.

Teachers: Teachers carry the expectations of us all in improving outcomes for our children. We have heard many stories of our older people about how they were never encouraged at school, how they were never expected to achieve anything. Often these stories bordered on racism. Unfortunately we have also had teachers that have treated our children in a condescending manner, they have had low expectations of our children and therefore not allowed them to reach their full potential. We expect our teachers to be empathetic, to have high expectations and to challenge our children. We want our teachers to use data available to them through the national testing program (National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy – NAPLAN), to use data available to them through other assessment tools such as the

South Australian Spelling Test, Early Years Numeracy Interview, Running Records and range of open-ended tasks to identify our children's strengths and how they can be further supported. We expect our teachers to use this data, to share it with the students and families of students so there can be a shared partnership in developing a plan (some call it 'Individual education/learning plans') so our children can achieve their full potential.

Administrators: Administrators play important roles in setting direction, providing leadership and vision. Unfortunately our administrators can let us down. In the past they haven't had the courage to honestly review and reflect on the extent to which programs have been successful. They have been unable to stop doing what is not working out of fear of community backlash. Administrators need to consider the data before them and make informed decisions about what to support. They also need to ensure initiatives have adequate time to make improvements. Long-term disadvantage will not be solved by short-term solutions.

Indigenous community: the wider Indigenous community has a role to play in education. While we often say we need a holistic approach to address educational disadvantage, we often still work in silos. We also need to be able to support our parents and our families who are not coping so well. While some of us have enjoyed success in our chosen professions, we need to ensure we support others in our community who are still struggling. We also need to ensure we develop the capacity of others in our community to share the responsibility of advocating for improved outcomes. Too often the burden falls on a few, resulting in burn-out. Sometimes, if we're honest, we don't allow our younger people to have opportunities to lead. We need

to remind ourselves that we are not irreplaceable.

What makes a difference? Key principles

When we think about key principles that help us as educators make a difference we can summarise our actions under the following headings:

Partnerships: One group on its own finds it difficult to make a difference; it takes a community to make a difference. We need contributions from all our key stakeholders if our actions are to make a long-term sustainable difference.

Honesty: We need to communicate openly and share not only the good but also the bad. We will never be mistake-free but by pointing out what is wrong and constructively providing feedback we will ensure that our mistakes will not be repeated (learning from our mistakes).

Ownership: We need to own our actions and not seek to portion blame on others. If we demand to have a say in what is happening, we need to also 'step up to the plate' and participate actively.

Evidence based: We need to ensure we have data to inform us of the current state of play as well as to ensure we can measure our improvements.

Case study

The Grampians Region in Central Western Victoria provides an opportunity to see how educators have made a difference in Indigenous education. The profile of the region in 2006 was as follows:

- Koorie student population: 431.4
- Koorie apparent retention rate (Year 7–12): 17.6

- Average days absent for Koorie students (primary): 22.6 days
- Average days absent for Koorie students (Year 7–10): 26 days

In 2006 the Central unit for Koorie Education in the then Department of Education and Training devolved responsibility for its workers to the regions. The local Indigenous community saw this as an opportunity to formalise its relationship with the region, building on its current relationship which took place through the Regional Koorie Education Committee (RKEC). While there are eight RKECs across Victoria that have representation from Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (LAECGs), regional management and principles, Grampians RKEC has always been active, meeting quarterly and funding regional initiatives.

As a result, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was established in 2006 that sought to formalise the relationship between all parties, establishing each other's roles and responsibilities.

Another initiative in the region was the development of a submission to the Commonwealth, to be managed by the RKEC to address the unacceptably low apparent retention rate. As a result, a project was developed for the appointment of an Indigenous Pathways Coordinator that had a responsibility to develop pathways plans for all Indigenous students in the region in Years 7–12. While the Commonwealth declined to fund the project in the first instance, repeated efforts by the RKEC ensured funding was accessed for the project to operate.

So what were the outcomes of our educators efforts from these two initiatives? The MOU provided a basis for open and honest communication between all stakeholders. It was the

first and is currently the only Regional MOU in Victoria in education. It has been used by community educators to leverage more from the region, such as resources and involvement in decision making. Where processes have not progressed as they should have, the MOU has been used by parties to remind each other of their responsibilities. Particularly from a community level the MOU has ensured active involvement in decision making.

The Indigenous Pathways Coordinator Project has been successful in gaining funding for another year. A majority of students have a pathways plan and, to an extent, the initiative has been a precursor to a statewide initiative that has seen the extension of Managed Individual Pathways plans for Koorie students at risk in Years 8 and 9. Even more encouraging, the apparent Indigenous retention rate to Year 12 in the following year (2007) was 47%, an increase from the previous year. The Pathways Officer initiative has now been accompanied by an Indigenous Transitions Program delivered by the regional university that also seeks to support improved educational outcomes and transitions for Koorie students in Years 7 to 12.

In terms of the principles discussed earlier, it can be argued that both initiatives were based on these principles:

- **Partnerships:** Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators were involved.
- **Honesty:** All educators acknowledged the reality of what was happening in their region; rather than painting a glossy picture of the outcomes, it was recognised that changes needed to be made. All educators were honest enough to share the good and the bad.
- **Ownership:** Educators owned their issues; rather than waiting for

others to address poor outcomes, all parties together owned the problem and the solution.

- **Evidence based:** Data was used to inform activity, the devolution of staff to the region was used create new opportunities for collaboration. Statistical data regarding outcomes highlighted to educators issues that needed to be addressed as well as providing an opportunity to measure improvement.

Conclusion

Education is a key enabler to address disadvantage. There is a renewed focus on addressing Indigenous disadvantage a result of recent policy commitments made by Commonwealth, state and territory governments. The role of educators has never been more important in this current climate. By adhering to key principles of partnerships, honesty, ownership and being evidence based, our educators will make an important contribution towards improved educational outcomes that may be sustainable in the long term.

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