

Discussion Paper 17

Working toward a culturally reflective and relevant approach with Indigenous children in the classroom



Introduction

This discussion paper is one in a series designed to stimulate discussion and sharing of experience amongst staff in educational settings working with young people who may have experienced complex relational trauma.

Please note that throughout this paper, the words Aboriginal and Indigenous have been used interchangeably. The authors recognise that Aboriginal does not include those of Torres Strait Island descent and do not wish to exclude them from the discussion.



Education outcomes for Indigenous Children

In Australia today, Indigenous students experience poorer education outcomes than non-Indigenous students at all levels. Statistics have consistently shown that Indigenous students demonstrate lower school attendance, retention and achievement than non-Indigenous students across all age groups and in all States and Territories.¹

An overview of the current state of Indigenous education outcomes indicate that Indigenous Australians:²

- Are less likely to get a preschool education
- Are well behind in literacy and numeracy skills development before they leave primary school
- Have less access to secondary school in the communities in which they live
- Are absent from school two to three times more often than other students
- Leave school much younger
- Are less than half as likely to go through to Year 12
- Are far more likely to be doing bridging and entry programs in universities and vocational education and training institutions
- Obtain fewer and lower-level education qualifications
- Are far less likely to get a job, even when they have the same qualifications as others

1. SCRGSP, 2011

2. DEST, 2007

- Earn less income
- Have poorer housing
- Experience more and graver health problems
- Have higher mortality rates than other Australians

While it is important to acknowledge that there have been incremental improvements over the last decade, there continues to be a marked disparity between the outcomes for Indigenous students and their non-Indigenous peers. These poor educational outcomes for Indigenous students limit their post-school options and life choices, which in turn perpetuate the intergenerational cycles of social and economic disadvantage.³

There have been strong links found between higher levels of education with employment, income and health outcomes, and continuing to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students remains at the forefront of government agenda.⁴ As such, all States and Territories currently have their own respective Indigenous Education Policies being implemented that outline areas of focus, targets and means by which they aim to support improvements in educational opportunities and outcomes for Indigenous students. These policies provide important guidelines for schools and teachers and should be accessible within your own State and Territory.

Some common themes in these strategies include the need to focus on closing gaps in the rates of Indigenous students' participation, school retention, attendance at school, and levels of literacy and numeracy achievement. Provision of culturally appropriate curricula and teaching are also consistent themes, as is the need to build strong partnerships between Indigenous parents, family and community.⁵



Factors contributing to poor education outcomes for Indigenous Children

The overwhelming majority of Indigenous families today have experienced the impact of colonisation and related historical policies of assimilation. The practices of the past are perceived by Indigenous people as the underlying reasons for the level of unresolved trauma within the community.

While the early educational experiences of Indigenous children varied between and within States and Territories, the education they were provided was mostly poor, prejudiced and harmful. Before the 1940s, there was no effort to give Indigenous people access to schooling. As recently as the 1950s, the highest grade taught to Aboriginal children was Grade 3 because it was believed that these children lacked in intelligence and capability of any higher learning.⁶ Across different parts of Australia, the 'exclusion on demand' policy meant that school principals were allowed to remove an Aboriginal child from the school following an objection by either teachers or white parents to an Aboriginal presence in the classroom. This practice did not officially cease until the mid-1970s.⁷

From being denied and excluded from schools to being offered schooling in segregated Aboriginal schools to the assimilation into schools with a 'Western' world view, it is not surprising that education and educational policy is an important area of concern for Indigenous people.

3. CAF, 2007

4. SCRGSP, 2011

5. Purdie et al., 2011

6. Padbury, 1999

7. Fletcher, 1989

A publication entitled, 'Our Children, Our Future' identified the major factors that continue to impact education outcomes of Indigenous children which they grouped into the following four categories:⁸

1. Social or Community Context

Factors linked to socio-economic status such as family income, health, nutrition, housing and access to or use of mainstream services

2. Home Context

Factors linked to the home environment in which the student lives such as parental status and life experience, parenting, early childhood development and parental and family capacity to support student learning

3. School Context

Factors linked to the education system such as access to education, Indigenous teaching staff, school environment and engagement with parental, family and community. Also includes factors linked to the way in which education is delivered such as teaching approach and school curriculum

4. Student Context

Factors linked to the individual student's life experience, skill base, emotional status, behaviour, life goals and aspirations, experience of and attitude towards schools and school performance

Indigenous students are affected by factors across all four contexts. When considering these factors, it is important to take into account the cross-generational impact that historically poor educational outcomes have had, and continue to have in influencing the current generation of Indigenous students.



The Way Forward

Research has shown that in order to improve education outcomes of Indigenous students, it is necessary to take a holistic approach and address factors across the Social/Community, Home, School and Student Contexts that limit the capacity of students to engage in school and to learn.⁹

While most teachers have limited influence over the external factors of a child's social/community and home context, they can have significant influence on what happens in the school and student contexts while also taking into consideration how the social/community and home context is impacting the student's education outcomes.

In an effort to explore what has been working well, it has been found that some of the best learning for Indigenous students is occurring in communities where the students' culture is 'respected, recognised, supported and integrated'.¹⁰ In order for this to be the case in all Australian schools, non-Indigenous teachers must learn about Indigenous Australians (past, present and future) and work to include the Indigenous community in planning and learning of the curriculum, as well as the presentation of information to all students. This is necessary because Aboriginal students enter schools from a social

8. Our Children, Our Future, 2008

9. Our Children, Our Future, 2008

10. Mc Rae et al., 2000

and cultural context that can often be quite different from the social and cultural context of the teacher. The social and cultural context includes the student's history, school experiences, knowledge, skills, relationships with peers, values, beliefs, interests, family, and language.¹¹ While such differences can make the experience of teaching and learning more complex, it is not impossible.

Therefore, one of the keys to providing successful education to Indigenous students is taking to time to provide education for the teachers themselves. Taking the time to reflect on your current knowledge about Indigenous history, the child's family and the child will commence an effort toward a culturally reflective and relevant approach, which is a key intervention in itself.



CULTURE Framework

The following framework of CULTURE is intended to encourage educators to explore how they incorporate these attributes into their school and classroom setting.



11. Sarra. 2011, Two Way Teaching and Learning.



Questions for reflection or discussion

Connection

'Connection' is explored from a number of perspectives:

- connection to culture is a key protective factor for Aboriginal children and fundamental to the development of positive identity and well-being. This is facilitated through the development of enduring connections to family, kinship, and country;
- connection through relationships between children and key adults in their life including carers, family, and school. These relationships are the primary vehicles through which the negative developmental impacts of trauma are resolved; and,
- connection to carers, family and professionals through a co-ordinated care team around the child. The care team brings together the collective knowledge, experience and skills of carers, family and professionals to contribute to meeting the best interest of the child.
 - In what ways am I connecting the child to family, kinship and country?
 - How can I help create a positive connection with the child to the school and other students?



Understanding

Having a sound understanding of Indigenous history, the child's family and the child is a key intervention in itself. Take into consideration any health, nutrition, housing and family issues that may be impacting the child's behaviour. Responses to behaviour should always stem from an understanding of what may be happening at the social/community and home context and be addressed from this level.

- What is my current knowledge about Indigenous history?
- What is my cultural awareness and competency?
- What is my experience and opinion on the challenges facing our Indigenous population?
- Have I considered any issues stemming from the child's social/community and home context (health, nutrition, housing and family issues) that may be impacting their behaviour?



Listening

In Aboriginal culture there is a special quality in listening to one another in contemplative – reciprocal relationships. Listening to what the child is trying to tell you may come through listening to their words and behaviour. Also listen to what their family and community may want to tell you about their child.

- Do I understand Indigenous ways of being, knowing, communicating and learning (as being different to non-Indigenous)?
- What additional stressors might the child have brought with them to school today and how can I support them through these in the classroom?
- What is the meaning behind the child's behaviour and what is it trying to tell me?



Teaching

Due to the developmental history and poor school attendance of many Indigenous children, there may be a need to assess where they are functioning developmentally as opposed to chronologically. We need to be targeting the teaching of Indigenous children in a developmentally appropriate manner while also exploring how the content of the curriculum could be made culturally relevant.

- What are the possible barriers in teaching? Where are they functioning at developmentally? Any health issues? Hearing or sight issues?
- What should be my teaching approach for Indigenous students? Do I incorporate storytelling, music, rhythms or practical, hands on examples to get the message across?
- Is the curriculum meaningful, relevant and challenging?
- Do I explain why the content of the lesson is really important?



Unique

Indigenous children are diverse and not homogenous. They do not all speak the same language nor live in the same region thus one must avoid the one size fits all approach commonly applied in education. It is important for us to have an understanding of who they are culturally, where they are from and to whom they belong.

- How is their culture respected, recognised, supported and integrated in the curriculum?
- How can I celebrate the uniqueness of the Indigenous students in my class?
- Do I offer individualised instruction, or at least am responsive to individual differences? And do I have a high expectation of all children?
- How am I working from a strengths based approach in my teaching?



Relationship

Relationship is fundamental to work with Indigenous children. The experience of appropriate, supportive adult-child relational exchanges is instrumental to supporting these children. Building a relationship with their family and supportive network is also crucial in working with the 'whole' child.

- How could this opportunity be used to improve the student's relationships with adults?
- Could this session be used to improve the student's understanding of trust, care and support?
- How can relationships developed during the session be maintained over time and across different settings at school?
- How am I building a relationship with the child's family and community?



Environment

Safe, secure and calming environments contribute to children's optimal learning and development. In addition to this, environments that provoke a sense of belonging, acceptance and understanding can assist Indigenous children to feel welcomed and respected.

- Have I considered whether my school/classroom environment is safe, welcoming and respectful for Indigenous children?
- How am I promoting a climate for Indigenous students and families, and promote a sense of belonging within the school?
- Is there a sensory calming space within the classroom for the child to go to if they need to?



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