

**The Fourth International Conference on
Catholic Educational Leadership**

**Directions for Catholic Educational Leadership
in the 21st Century**

The Vision, Challenges and Reality

Ref: 6409

Building social and cultural capital within the Indigenous community

Paper presented by

Dr Carolyn Broadbent, Dr Maureen Boyle and Margaret Carmody

29 July – 1 August 2007-04-05

**Sofitel Wentworth Hotel
Sydney, Australia**

Contact details:

Dr Carolyn Broadbent
Australian Catholic University Canberra Campus
PO Box 256 Dickson ACT 2602
Ph: 62091134
c.broadbent@signadou.acu.edu.au

Dr Maureen Boyle
Australian Catholic University Canberra Campus
m.boyle@signadou.acu.edu.au

Margaret Carmody
Australian Catholic University Canberra Campus
PO Box 256 Dickson ACT 2602
Ph: 62091122
m.carmody@signadou.acu.edu.au

Building social and cultural capital within the Indigenous community.

Broadbent, C., Boyle, M. and Carmody, M.

Australian Catholic University, Canberra Campus, ACT.

Schooling presents both tensions and challenges for many Indigenous Australian students for although the key elements of their cultures and lifestyles may have been maintained, to varying degrees, this is not clearly acknowledged within education statements, overall curriculum and pedagogy. Recognition of the rich cultural capital that many Indigenous students bring to their schools, and efforts to enhance that of students who may have experienced less opportunity to learn about their culture, can work effectively to build strong home-school-community partnerships that strengthen student engagement in schooling and the learning process.

This paper provides details of a successful ACT Government funded initiative, the *Connecting Communities Project*, developed to support Indigenous families to assist their children's learning. This collaborative Project brought together schools, members of the Indigenous community, including adults, students, and course presenters, academic staff from Australian Catholic University, school teachers, and learning support staff. Central to the development of the Project was an awareness that working with and support from the Indigenous community was essential to its success, at both the design and implementation stages. Through a focus on the rich cultural heritage located in the local community and use of community learning spaces such as the National Gallery of Australia and Australian National Museum, the participants explored their Indigenous culture through life stories, writing, film, and the arts resulting in meaningful learning experiences that enhanced cultural affirmation and pride.

Introduction

The recent MCEETYA (2006) Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005-2008 report argues that the disparity in the educational outcomes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students should not be regarded as 'normal' nor the incremental gains as 'acceptable' (p.4). The social polarisation emanating from globalising forces and the lack of opportunity to

participate on an equal basis in the 'knowledge economies', highlights the urgency of the need to address this imbalance in learning outcomes (p.4).

Although recent years have seen an improvement in the educational outcomes of Indigenous Australians, for example, on the enrolment, participation and achievement of Indigenous students in early childhood' (MCEETYA, 2006, p.4) there is still much to be done. Despite some gains, Indigenous Australians still continue to leave school at or before Year 10 and 'far too few remain at school to complete Year 11 and Year 12, or its vocational equivalent' (p.4). Irrespective of the completion year, 'most Indigenous students leave school poorly prepared relative to their non-Indigenous counterparts' (p.4).

Considerable research has focused on the relationship between learning outcomes and their impact on health, family, and development of social capital (Stone, 2001; Schuller et al. 2004; Ferguson, 2006). Schuller et al. (2004) argue that in any analysis of outcomes it is necessary to consider the three forms of capital: human, social and identity, in order to capture the multiple processes involved. Learning, it is argued, is a process:

'whereby people build up, consciously or not, their assets in the shape of human, social, or identity capital, and then benefit from the returns on the investment in the shape of better health, stronger social networks, enhanced family life, and so on' (Schuller et al. 2004, p.12).

Sustaining individuals, especially those who might otherwise be disadvantaged, requires holistic forms of learning that assist in identity formation and growth in confidence and self-esteem. While a focus on the cognitive elements of development is important, the emotional, creative, and spiritual aspects of learning should also be encouraged. Encouraging individuals to remain motivated to learn and to value learning throughout life is not always easy and requires the provision of meaningful, relevant and diverse learning experiences to be achievable (UNESCO 1996; Vaill, 1996; Jackson, 2003).

A significant impact on the schooling experience of Indigenous students relates to a lack of dominant cultural capital (Buckskin, 2002). Indigenous students often enter formal education and training with little of the cultural capital taken for granted by their non-Indigenous peers. Unfortunately, many Indigenous students also lack any deep understanding of their own Indigenous cultural capital and therefore 'do not value their cultural background, often because of the break up of Indigenous families and communities' (Buckskin, 2002, p.160). Supporting Indigenous families through educational initiatives that emphasise the value of

Indigenous cultural capital is therefore essential to the improvement of learning outcomes for members of the Indigenous community.

The involvement of parents and educational support in the home has long been regarded as essential to successful educational achievement. Schwab and Sutherland (2001) suggest a number of mechanisms through which emotional and intellectual encouragement might be provided: 'modelling, as in parents' and other family members' involvement in educational opportunities; high family expectations for educational participation and outcomes; family involvement in both school and classroom activities; positive discourse by parents and family members about the value of education; and assistance with homework' (p.4).

The development of effective home-school community partnerships is therefore important in supporting students' learning (Munt, 2003). Within this context, the *Connecting Communities Project* was developed to provide support for Indigenous families to assist their children's learning.

Connecting Communities Project

The *Connecting Communities Project* is an ACT Government funded project that aims to strengthen the sense of community and identity within the Indigenous community in the Canberra region. The project has emerged over several years as a direct result of collaboration between Government and non-government agencies, Australian Catholic University, other educational institutions and members of the Indigenous community, who are committed to the improvement of the social outcomes for individuals, families and communities, including members of the Indigenous community. The project is innovative in that it emerges from and uses the expertise of respected members of the Indigenous community in the collaboration and design of the various components of the activities and workshops.

This Project has been instrumental in bringing together young people and their families, the Wiradjuri Indigenous artists, learning support staff, academics from Australian Catholic University, and other respected members of the Indigenous community. The programs are underpinned by a strong belief that learning for Indigenous students and parents will be enhanced through an acknowledgement of, and respect for, Indigenous traditions and culture. A further aim is to build a supportive community of cross-generational learners for the development of specific skills, particularly in literacy and numeracy, and active participation in numerous Indigenous arts-related activities, such as dance, music, visual

arts, and traditional crafts. The inclusion of strategies and activities that promote health and wellbeing through modelling appropriate choices in regards to food and nutrition, maintaining fitness and health, and building resilience is also of importance.

The Project design aligns with the underlying principles essential to the establishment of a dynamic community of practice (Wenger et al. 2002) and acknowledges that Indigenous Australian students achieve improved outcomes when their cultural background is valued (Groome & Edwardson, 1996). As highlighted in the National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (NIELNS) 2000-2004 (Widin et al. 2004) and supported through the allocation of significant funding in the Australian Government's Whole of School Strategy for the continuation of homework centres and development of partnerships between schools and communities (Nelson, 2004), cooperation between family, school and community is an important means of improving Indigenous students' literacy and numeracy.

In 2006, the *Connecting Communities Project* was conducted in Wanniasa, a southern suburb of Canberra, which has a significant number of Indigenous families attending the local pre-school, primary and secondary schools. The project aimed to support the learning of children, young people and adults through the provision of two programs: the *What's Up? Families Learning Together* after-school program and an adult education course titled *The Three Cs (Culture, Communication and Connectedness)*.

Project Objectives

- to provide a supportive group learning environment for children, adolescents, and families who may be otherwise disadvantaged due to social, economic, or other reasons;
- to encourage positive attitudes towards learning, through the provision of friendly and secure learning spaces within community settings;
- to develop new skills, attitudes, and strategies that promote engagement, independence and confidence in learning;
- to support the learning needs of adults within the Indigenous community through a personal growth and professional development program
- to provide specialist tuition to children and adolescents situated within the most disadvantaged areas where after-school literacy and numeracy assistance might not readily be available

- to provide parents with strategies to improve their ability to assist their children's learning; and to
- improve the transition between primary and secondary schools for young people through the formation of extended networks and stronger relationships with members of the community, for example, youth workers and Indigenous education assistants.

What's Up? Program

Students, assisted by family members, program facilitators and Indigenous staff engaged in weekly literacy and numeracy tasks thus modelling a 'homework' situation where children and adults worked and learned together. All completed work was placed in individual learning portfolios. Among the variety of sessions presented to the children and their families, an outdoor investigation of locally available Bush Tucker conducted by an Indigenous staff member proved to be very popular. This was linked to the serving of a Bush Tucker afternoon tea. Students also completed art works, learned traditional dances, made Indigenous musical instruments and at the end of each program demonstrated their achievements at several one-hour public presentations. Large audiences, including Indigenous and non-Indigenous adults, as well as staff and students from pre-schools, primary and secondary schools in the Wanniasa district attended the presentations. The public profile and success of the *What's Up?* Program is now widely acknowledged in the general ACT and Indigenous community.

Evaluation of the *What's Up?* Program

The evaluative feedback received from the participants indicates a very high level of satisfaction of students, their parents/caregivers and teachers with the outcomes of the *What's Up?* Program. Parents and teachers also expressed high levels of satisfaction with the program and noted the distinct increase in the self-esteem and pride of these Indigenous students in the uniqueness of their own culture. Teachers stated that students approached their classroom tasks with more confidence and interest in the learning process and that the program clearly strengthened bonds and goodwill between students at the classroom level. This is highlighted in the following teacher's comment:

The students in the What's Up? Program were so proud of their public performances you could see it in the way they walked with new confidence back into the classrooms and the wonderful reaction and support of their classmates.

When asked about the impact of the program on students' learning, teachers' comments included:

There has been a build-up of confidence over the past year, to the point where formerly students less involved in classroom activities, now volunteer answers rather than being asked to answer.

The students always speak about the program during the week and say how much they enjoy this new learning experience. Once school ends they can hardly wait to get there!

The principals and teachers of the various schools involved in the What's Up? Programs commented on the way in which the program had encouraged Indigenous adults to participate more fully in school activities and how there was now a greater awareness of the cultural diversity within the schools and their communities.

The Three Cs (Culture, Communication, and Connectedness) Adult Education Course

This adult education course aims to provide opportunities for members of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous community to develop new knowledge and skills that will enable them to become more proactive members of their community, including engaging more confidently in the local school community. This component of the *Connecting Communities Project* focuses on the development of critical literacy and communication skills and deepening understanding of Indigenous culture. The course aims to cater for the specific learning needs of the participants through implementation of various teaching and learning strategies, including group discussion, cooperative learning groups, excursions, and use of the information and communication technologies.

Weekly four-hour sessions were conducted during school hours on the same day as the after school *What's Up? Program*. This provided the participants with easy access to both the adult course and after-school program.

Course Development

At the commencement of the *Three C's Course* the participants themselves generated the curriculum content in consultation with the program facilitators. They identified their own personal learning needs and this learner-centred approach was integral to the successful outcomes and competencies achieved. In developing the curriculum for *The Three Cs*

Course, reference was made by the facilitators to the National Reporting System (NRS) (Department Of Education Science and Training, 2006) and the competencies outlined in the NRS were built into the various learning activities. This approach ensured course participants, who may go on to complete further study in adult education or TAFE, will have some grounding in competencies that will assist them in their studies.

A highlight of the course was the use of information and communication technologies to support learning experiences in building new knowledge, and involvement in community based local educational centres and institutions. Excursions to national institutions such as the National Gallery of Australia, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), and the Australian National Botanic Gardens, proved successful in extending the learning environment and increasing the level of relevance to the learning process. Visits to other schools within the Canberra region to share experiences worked effectively to extend horizons and build community. As the course progressed, there was a marked increase in the ability of the participants to think critically and express their opinions more confidently, both orally and in writing. The enthusiasm of the participants to record events, thoughts and images in their learning journals was noticeable.

From prior experience and ongoing contact with the parents of children attending the *What's Up? Programs*, it became clear that many of the parents had experienced less than successful schooling. It was therefore important that the location and teaching and learning environment was welcoming and supportive as otherwise the risk of disengagement by the participants might become a reality. Public institutions that were relevant to Indigenous culture were specifically chosen as they allowed the participants to eat, discuss, and learn together in natural surroundings. These teaching environments were appropriate for adult learners because they were not only places of cultural interest, such as the National Museum of Australia, but also places where the participants could take their children to teach them about their culture.

Conclusion

The connections made through participation in both the *What's Up? Program* and *The Three Cs Course* have proved effective in supporting parents to assist their children's learning, to be more confident in articulating the value of their Indigenous culture and to be more aware of the availability of resources in less formal community educational settings. The *Connecting Communities Project* aims to promote a stronger appreciation of the culture and values of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as a means to effect change and enhance the

learning outcomes of members of the Indigenous education community. Both *The Three Cs Course* and the *What's Up? Families Learning Together* programs are important contributors to the building of social and cultural capital within the Indigenous community. They have successfully increased the level of participation of parents in their children's education and have supported interaction between members of the Indigenous community, teachers and the school community. This, in turn, has encouraged the children to engage more actively and confidently at school as the parental support received reinforces the value of their learning at school.

Dynamic community-based initiatives that connect families, schools, educational institutions, national institutions, and other community organisations have the potential to improve the learning outcomes of all participants and to 'build a culture where learning is valued and promoted throughout life' (Kearns, 2005, p.48). The *Connecting Communities Project* has been successful in that it has achieved common goals through an effective collaborative process in which the contributions of all participants have been valued. During this Project, the strong links established between the University and the wider community have provided leadership in the development of new and successful models of learning for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous members of the community. Through the creation of rich and authentic learning environments, including the use of community learning spaces, this Project has inspired others to become more proactive in enhancing the learning aspirations in others. Ongoing support for this innovative Project is essential if the achievements to date are to be strengthened in the future.

References

- Buckskin, P. (2002). Conflicting values in the education of Indigenous Australians. In S. Pascoe (ed.). *Values in education*, Australian College of Educators: College Year Book 2002, Canberra, Australian College of Educators.
- Ferguson, K. (2006). Social capital and children's wellbeing: a critical synthesis of the international social capital literature. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 15, pp. 2-18.
- Groome, H. & Edwardson, T. (1996). Urban Aboriginal young people and identity. Unpublished paper. In C. Marsh, (ed.) (2001), *Teaching studies of society and the environment*. 3rd edn, Frenchs Forest, NSW, Australia: Pearson Education, p.299.
- Jackson, N. (2003). 'Nurturing creativity through an imaginative curriculum', *Herdsla News*, Vol 25(3): 21-26.
- Kearns, P. (2005). *Achieving Australia as an inclusive learning society. A report on future directions for lifelong learning in Australia*. Canberra, Adult Learning Australia.

- MCEETYA (2006). Australian directions in Indigenous education 2005-2008. Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs and Curriculum Corporation, Carlton South, Victoria. Retrieved 5/3/07 from:
<http://www.mceetya.edu.au/mceetya>
- Munt, R. (2003). Building collaboration. *Stronger Families Learning Exchange Bulletin*, no.3, Winter, pp.6-8. <http://www.aifs.gov.au/sf/pubs/bull3/rm.html> (accessed 4/11/2005).
- Nelson, B. (2004). *Media release: \$2.1 billion to accelerate Indigenous education outcomes*. www.dest.gov.au/ministers/nelson/april_04/ind1050404.htm (accessed 31/01/05)
- Schuller, T., Preston, J., Hammond, C., Brassett-Grundy, A. & Bynner, J. (2004). *The benefits of learning: The impact of education on health, family life and social capital*. London, Routledge Falmer.
- Schwab, R.G. & Sutherland, D. (2001). *Building Indigenous learning communities*. Discussion paper No. 225, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, The Australian National University, Canberra.
- Stone, W. (2001). *Measuring social capital*. Research Paper no.24, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.
- UNESCO (1996). *Learning: The treasure within. Report of the commission on education for the 21st century*. Paris, UNESCO.
- Vaill, P. (1996). *Learning as a way of being*. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.
- Wenger, E., McDermott, R. & Snyder, W. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice: a guide to managing knowledge*. Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Press.
- Widin, J., Norman, H., Ndaba, A. & Yasukawa, K. (2004). An Indigenous community learning centre to promote a culture of learning. *Adult Learning Australia 44th Annual National Conference*, Glenelg, Adelaide, South Australia, 18-20 Nov.