Premier’s Essential Energy Indigenous Education Scholarship

Recognising Engaging Understanding

Julie Myers

Alexandria Park Community School

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Background

Having been involved in Aboriginal education for the past thirty years and being part of a range of approaches and programs to alleviate the disparity between the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, I have learnt that a major focus has been on the acquisition of the basic skills. This is a deficit mode of operation, with the focus being on remediation. Without discounting the need for explicit instruction to ensure that Aboriginal students meet agreed standards compared with non- Aboriginal students, my belief over time has been that this concentration has enabled the development of school practices which do not recognise giftedness in Aboriginal students, and indeed have perpetuated beliefs that Aboriginal students are not capable of achieving more than an average academic standard.

Recognising the need for change in my school, I began my research several years prior to embarking on my study tour. Alexandria Park Community School’s association with Dr Graeme Chaffey (University of New England) resulted in awareness raising of all staff, and the (incomplete) training of one staff member, in the administering of the Coolabah Dynamic Assessment. This program, either side of an intervention is intended to build self efficacy in Aboriginal students. Targeted students are nine years of age or older because the test used, (Ravens Progressive Matrices) requires a certain level of cognition. Whilst I strongly support Dr Chaffey’s work, my experience and feeling was that, unless appropriate interventions are put in place from the start of schooling, Aboriginal student’s belief in themselves as effective learners is often lost within the first one or two years of schooling and quickly results in chronic underachievement, lack of motivation and in some cases, behavioural challenges. My enduring belief is that our school needs a concentration on the development of Aboriginal students’ skills as critical thinkers, problem solvers, leaders and independent learners. I saw that this could be accomplished through:

* + culturally appropriate identification tools.
	+ appropriate pedagogy which involves programs drawing on cultural knowledge and the teaching of metacognition in culturally appropriate ways, and
	+ meeting the needs of the students in ways which enhance, rather than conflict with, their obligations and place in the family and wider community

Although my study focused on identification and programs for gifted students, I saw it having an impact on the teaching and learning of all students. My study was not necessarily driven by a desire to see more Aboriginal students take up positions in selective classes (a feature of our school). However, my hope was that, with appropriate identification, support and pedagogy, Aboriginal students would acquire the necessary confidence, cognitive training and belief in themselves as learners to aspire to selective classes. If they did not, I hoped that their reasons would be based on factors other than feeling inadequately equipped.

Hawaiian International Education Conference

The four day conference afforded me the opportunity to meet and learn from Aboriginal educators from a number of countries. I attended presentations focusing on Indigenous pedagogies, with presenters Dr. Susanne Stewart (University of Ontario); Dr. Jackie Ottman and Elizabeth Cressman (University of Calgary); and Dr. Alex Wilson (University of Saskatchewan). Susanne Stewart emphasised the shifting “from psychologising to spiritualising”. She spoke of adapting a “de- colonising methodology,” and of taking on the approach of “strengths versus problem solving”- not “what’s the problem” but “find the solution.” Alex Wilson used the analogy of an iceberg to explain “what is mostly happening in Indigenous education; we often deal with the tip- what we can see. We satisfy ourselves that a bit of Aboriginal art on the walls, a few special lessons or a dance group; fulfils our obligations. However, if we are truly committed, we need to delve below- to what underpins the remainder of the iceberg and to challenge ourselves at that level. We need to look into our value systems, our philosophies and our ideologies.” The keynote speaker, native Hawaiian Ramsay Mahealini Taum, reiterated Susanne Stewart’s stance when he spoke of a non-indigenous cultural perspective being “what are the problems?” whereas an indigenous cultural perspective begins with “what are the strengths? He also described the indigenous world viewpoint of “being centred in self, not self centred.” My personal stance was suddenly challenged. Although always passionate about making a difference for Aboriginal students, and considering this country’s past treatment a sad indictment, I asked myself: Is my personal ideology and approach truly aligned to making a difference? Did my belonging to the dominant culture and viewing Aboriginal education as “a problem to be solved” make me (unconsciously) behave in certain ways and determine my actions? Would my plan to enhance programs for gifted students work if I continued to view it as “a problem” and if we, as a school community, addressed just “the tip of the iceberg?” I discussed this with Professor Paul Whitinui, from the University of Otago. He recommended I explore the work of Angus McFarlane, on culturally restorative practices. Angus McFarlane suggests, as a starting point, to plot where you plot yourself on the “inclusion continuum” (developed by Cross et al., 1989) which challenges the positioning of oneself from “culturally destructive” towards culturally proficient” and, armed with this knowledge, take the necessary steps to improve that position.

Hawaiian Charter Schools

My most rewarding experience was at Kanu o ka Aina New Century Public Charter School, in Waimea on the Big Island. The school is one of several educational initiatives supported by Kanu o ka Aina Learning Ohana (KALO), a group of local leaders, educators and community supporters whose mission, short term, is the revitalisation of Hawaiian culture and language. The ultimate goal is the creation of sustainable Hawaiian communities through education, with “Aloha” (love and affection). The spirit of Aloha permeates the school and is evident in its treatment of guests, as well as the relationships amongst all members of the school community. The principal, Pat Bergin, had arranged for a staff member Ka'iulani Pahi'o to show us around, arrange for us to observe the students at work and talk to staff. Among the staff is Anthony “Joe” Fraser, an Australian Aboriginal man who is employed by KALO to, amongst other duties, “measure, document and disseminate the impact of Hawaiian- focused education on native student performance.” Kanu o ka Aina is the State’s first fully accredited Hawaiian- focused charter school. My host showed me many projects in which students had been part of the decision making process. For example, elementary students had been challenged to find a product to protect magnificent recycled timber posts supporting the interior of part of the building. Through research from several perspectives, including environmental and economic, the students decided on coconut oil. The expertise of community was employed and the students learnt the process of extraction. The oiling of the posts was a community effort, with the students oiling to the height they could reach, and caregivers and community doing the higher work.

The high school students were preparing for Makahiki, a traditional Hawaiian event, and were involved in one of many projects for the day, including the building of the hungi, sourcing the meat supply and the preparation of the vegetables. Stalls were to be set up to sell their produce. Once again, it was the students who had driven the whole process. Through my observations and conversations, I concluded that I was not going to leave the school with identification tools or a set of recommended resources: rather, I came to the realisation that I was approaching this from the wrong perspective. I voiced this to my hosts and Pat Bergin affirmed my view, stating that “At Kanu o ka Aina we begin with the assumption that all students have gifts. We do not value a particular gift over another. We set up the educational environment to nurture these gifts through our everyday approach to education.” This approach is culturally driven, academically rigorous, uses an interdisciplinary focus and is tailored to native learning styles and multiple intelligences. The incorporation of technology and multi-age groupings are features. The school strives for personal and collective excellence and does not view school as separate to the whole being.

During my day at Kanu o ka Aina, I had opportunity to discuss some of my findings and thoughts following the conference. I recounted Alex Wilson’s iceberg analogy and the need for greater depth and exploration of what impacts on educational outcomes for Aboriginal students. Joe Fraser described his own research into the factors to which Alex Wilson alluded - those “hidden factors below the tip of the iceberg.” Joe generously shared his own (and colleague K.K. Hewett’s) research, which concludes that “an education approach which addresses the issues at the level of philosophy (or higher positions) has an effective chance of achieving long term, sustainable outcomes. It is proposed that programs which only address the areas of andragogy, curriculum or communication have lesser chance of sustained success.”

In their article *How to Develop a ‘Both-ways System of Education* (Fraser and Hewett 2010), a hierarchy of educational influences is put forward, with communication and curriculum (the transference of information to meet syllabus outcomes and mandated topics) being positioned on the bottom, as having the least educational impact. Alternatively, they propose that an awareness of, and consequent attention to, epistemology has the most impact. Epistemology is “the abstract force that directs our understanding of the world and the development of knowledge within specific cultural groups. It provides the parameters of…our reality; how the world is created; where we come from, how we relate to each other, whether our focus is on people or tasks, these are all components of epistemology” and inform our cultural values. These values, in turn, shape our identity and ideology. The article leads to the raising of questions: How does our own epistemology and the way that it informs our beliefs, values and ideologies impact on our classroom practices? Do we have an awareness and desire to take into account the different world views of our students, and in particular our Aboriginal students?

Canada

The first place I visited in Canada was Winnipeg. I had read several papers which struck a chord, written by Kevin Lamoureux, an Education lecturer at the University of Winnipeg. Kevin invited me to sit in on his lecture on Aboriginal education, one of a series which Education students at the university must undertake as part of their training. Kevin spoke of the need, when educating Aboriginal students, to take into consideration, the influences of traditional culture and current culture, to which he gave equal importance. He identified language, the collectivist world view and wellness through narrative (cultural and moral teachings through stories) as important features of traditional heritage and, indeed, as school-wide assets if recognised and utilised. “Culture and perspective”, he explained, ‘are bound up in our stories.” He identified current culture as having equal influence on Aboriginal students; with aspects such as poverty, forced minority and the effects of removal from families creating barriers to potential. Kevin spoke of “poverty as a culture” and its influences, including disengagement from the larger society and its institutions and the setting up and use of local “institutions”. Thus, “the education of the streets” may be seen as more meaningful to the students than school. My experiences in Aboriginal education have shown me the effects of the poverty cycle on health, education and employment opportunity but I had not considered poverty as a distinct “culture”. Kevin also spoke of “otherness”, a term he used to describe the attitudes brought about by the experience of being in a racial minority. He explained that the feeling of “otherness” sometimes leads those who are not part of the dominant culture to behave in certain ways, not to connect or engage. The challenge for the educator, Kevin believes, is to understand this position and find ways for the connection to come about. He believes that schools were once used as “a weapon” and now should be “places of healing”, proposing that the three pillars of Aboriginal education should be

* + a relevant, dynamic and flexible curriculum,
	+ parental involvement , and
	+ extra-curricular programming which creates a sense of belonging.

Kevin introduced me to Kevin Jones, a First Nations man who runs the WASAC program, which supports remote Manatoban First Nations communities with educational and extra-curricular programs, both within the communities, and in Winnipeg (these are for high school aged students who have chosen to leave their communities for further education.)

Still in pursuit of information on giftedness, I asked whether students who chose to leave their communities did so because certain gifts or talents were recognised and they were encouraged to leave to have the opportunity to nurture them. Both men denied the case and Kevin Lamoureaux explained that “the language of giftedness is alien to Indigenous peoples because it suggests an elitist and self centred point of view.” I was reminded of Ramsay Mahealini Taum’s description of the Indigenous paradigm being “centred on self, not self centred” and realised that I had not taken this view into account.

Vancouver Island

Professor Lorna Williams, is Lil’wat from the St’at’yem’c First Nation and runs the Indigenous Knowledge course in the Faculty of Education at the University of Victoria. I was fortunate to hear her speak at the ACER Indigenous Education conference in Darwin in 2011 on Aboriginal ways of knowing and wanted to reengage with her to gather more information on her views on Aboriginal education in general, and giftedness in particular. I reiterated what Kevin Lamoureux had said about the Indigenous view of giftedness. And Lorna agreed with him but added “in First Nations communities, giftedness is recognised but it’s not revered.” Once again, the notion of collective rather than individual benefit was implied. Lorna William engages her Education students in a range of rich tasks which immerse them in an Aboriginal pedagogical approach and which reinforce Aboriginal identity, knowledge and values. One such experience was engaging students, faculty, local carvers and community members in the creation of a Thunderbird/Whale Protection (Totem) Pole which now stands in the foyer of a building in the university. She described the discomfort most students felt at not being given assessment criteria or other familiar support mechanisms. Students learnt, over time, the principles of Lil’wat teaching and learning, including (amongst others) collective responsibility, development of relationships, watchful listening, Cwelelep (being in a place of dissonance, uncertainty in anticipation of new learning) and \*A7xekcal (how teachers help us to locate the infinite capacity we all have as learners, developing one’s own personal gifts and expertise in a holistic, respectful and balanced manner). Through the creation of the totem pole, talents emerged of which students themselves were unaware. The result is a magnificent structure. Through these experiences, Lorna Williams develops a platform for an Indigenous approach that the Education students can take with them into schools on completion of their training. Putting students into positions of “forced minority” also gave them insight into the way Aboriginal students may feel in classrooms. I was reminded of the approach of Kanu o ka Aina New Century Public Charter School in Hawaii, where the principles the students at the University of Victoria are experiencing are being put into practice.

*\* The numeral 7 is used as a letter to represent a particular sound in the St’at’yem’c language because there is no corresponding sound / letter in English.*

Xwulqw’selu (Koksilah) Elementary School’s goal is to “increase First Nation’s cultural knowledge and Hul’q’umi’num use for students and staff in every classroom and throughout the school.” Personal goals for the students were to “Respect yourself, your fellow people and this world” Hul’q’umi’num is the local language, taught by a local elder once a day to all students in the school. The school prides itself on being a “safety net” for students whose home lives can be chaotic and dysfunctional and for providing experiences and opportunities which revive, protect and enhance the development of identity in the students. In responding to my inquiry about programs for gifted and talented students, it was explained that there was enormous prestige in being part of the school’s dance group, which entered local competitions and was held in high regard. Other programs included the teaching of drumming and “Family Friday”, an invitation for community to educate the students in traditional pursuits such as smoking fish, the recognition and use of medicinal plants and Cowichan knitting. The doctrine of the public speaking program, Loud and Proud- speak loudly, look at your audience, speak clearly, CARE, highlighted and reaffirmed the importance, in Aboriginal teaching and learning of encouraging a deeply emotional connection to learning and relationships within school settings.

Conclusion

Before I left Hawaii for Canada, I was reasonably sure that I would not find the first of what I had set out to find; identification tools. I had hoped to locate, perhaps, something resembling the Harslett’s Scales for Rating the Behavioural Characteristics of Academically Gifted Aboriginal Students (Harslett 1999) with a stronger focus on what Indigenous communities would consider the elements of giftedness. Through what I learnt at the conference and at the schools I visited, I realised that I was approaching the whole idea of giftedness from the wrong perspective. In addition, I had preconceived ideas about programs for gifted Aboriginal students and believed I may come across something, for example, like Professor At Costa’s *Habits of the Mind*, but describing culturally appropriate activities for Aboriginal students. What I came to realise was that such programs did not exist and had they, they would most likely represent a simplistic and shallow attempt at authentically bringing out the potential of Aboriginal students and would still be chipping away at “the tip of the iceberg”.

However, I also came to the realisation that there are many things being attempted in N.S.W. schools which touch on what I now believe is a way forward in nurturing the full potential of Aboriginal students. The 8-ways framework, which is being used effectively at schools such as Delroy High School in Dubbo and Campbelltown East P.S, in South West Sydney, offers a cross cultural structure and pedagogical approach to support Quality Teaching in classrooms. In particular, a combination of the elements making up Intellectual Quality and Significance(from the NSW Quality Teaching Model), combine to offer a way forward in meeting the needs of gifted Aboriginal students.

 Alexandria Park has, in the past, been involved in Bemel Gardoo project, the purpose of which is embedding Aboriginal cultural content and local knowledge into curriculum. The school’s most outstanding product was an Eora canoe. The project was an example, in our context, of what is proving to be so successful in Kanu o ka Aina Charter School. That is, it was culturally appropriate, multidisciplinary and tailored to Aboriginal learning styles. It offered great opportunity for higher order thinking in a purposeful way. Similarly, at the University of Victoria, Lorna William’s approach has the same purpose and effect. I believe that such projects should be “mainstreamed” and become a regular part of what happens in classrooms. The approach allows for all Australian students to learn, in an intellectually challenging and authentic way, about contemporary and tradition Aboriginal Australia .The dilemma for most teachers is to reconcile syllabus requirements with what is regarded as “extras “. However, traditional Indigenous practices and principles such as sustainability, land and water conservation , respect and care for self, community and the interrelationship of all living things are now viewed as global responsibilities and are already key features of several syllabuses. It would not require a huge change to incorporate Aboriginal epistemology, knowledge and approaches into what is already set down. This approach meets the needs of students in ways which enhance, rather than conflict with, their obligations and place in the family and wider community.

My study tour afforded me a great opportunity to realise that the elements I was looking for already exist within our system but need to be enhanced and approached from a different perspective. I need to adapt an Indigenous approach of “what are the strengths, rather than what are the problems?” and to challenge my own value systems and ideologies to understand better their impact on all Aboriginal students in classrooms. The next part of my journey is to raise my own and my colleagues, awareness of Indigenous principles and epistemology, incorporate these into classroom practice and in doing so, go beyond “the tip of the iceberg.”