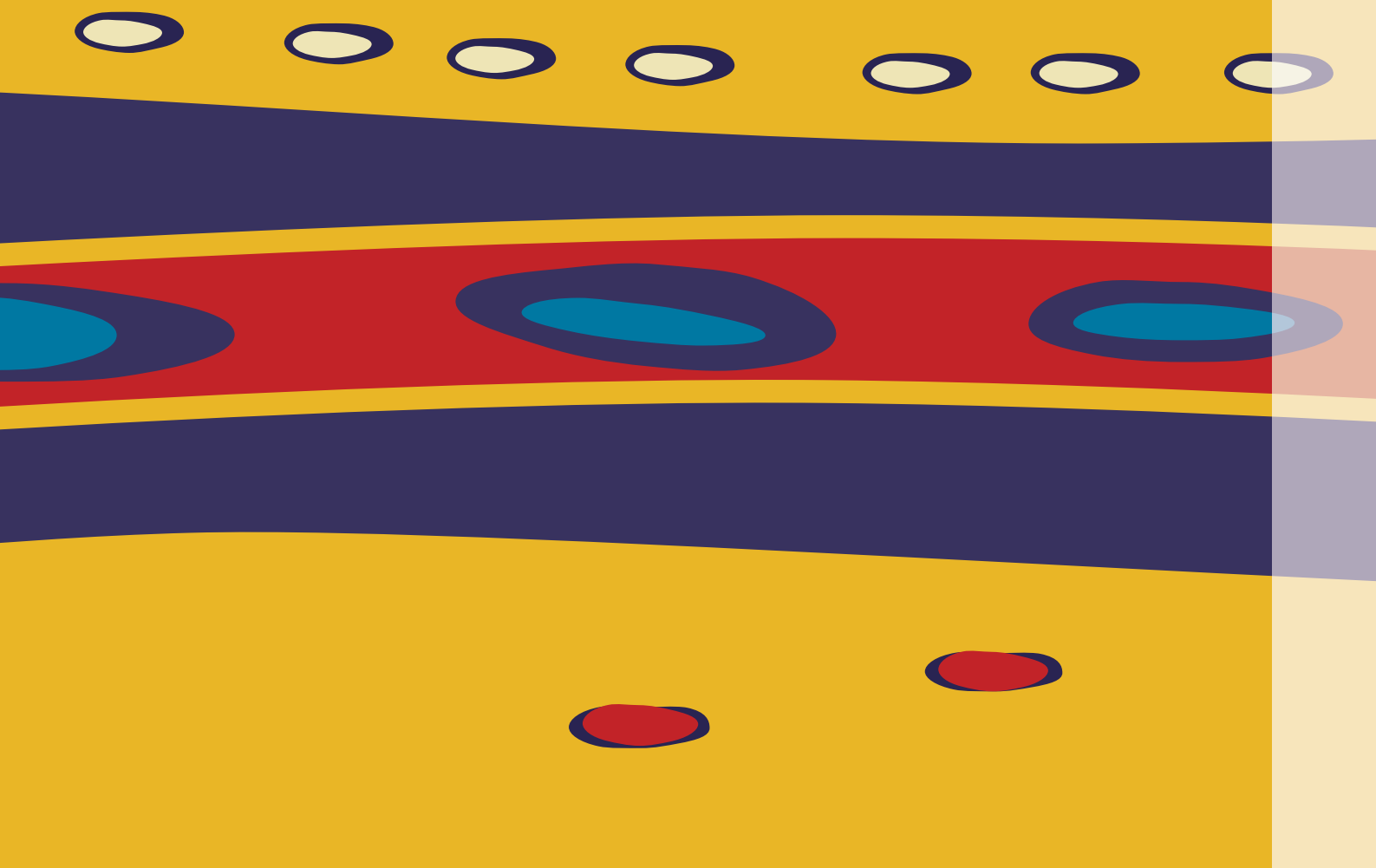


Education and Training for Indigenous Students

What has worked (and will again)

The IESIP Strategic Results Projects



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The SRP National Coordination and Evaluation Team

David McRae, Geoff Ainsworth, Jim Cumming, Paul Hughes,
Tony Mackay, Kaye Price, Mike Rowland, Joan Warhurst,
Davina Woods, Vic Zbar

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Introduction

This document is a revised and much shortened version of *What Works? Explorations in improving outcomes for Indigenous students*, a report to the Commonwealth Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs, the Hon. David Kemp MP, about the results of the non-capital Strategic Results Projects (SRPs) conducted through the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Programme (IESIP).

It has been prepared specifically as food for thought for, and consequent action by, teachers and trainers to improve education and training outcomes for Indigenous students. While there have been some marked improvements in levels of success over the past decade much remains to be done to bring those levels into line with those of the rest of the Australian community.

The SRPs have no direct precedent in this country and would be rare in international practice. They should be considered as a series of experiments on a very wide scale. There are few issues of moment which one or more of projects did not deal with, and it is of fundamental importance that they are about what people have done, not what people say should be done.

The results of the work are extremely rich in detail. (Readers who are interested in closer scrutiny are directed to the full report.) While generally confirming ideas and strategies which have now become conventional for improving achievement among Indigenous students, the SRPs have provided an opportunity for trialing a number of promising new practices and a foundation and impetus for much other work which will be of continuing value.

For these reasons, if no others, they should be seen as a major contribution to revitalising efforts to produce success in formal education and training for Indigenous peoples.

Even more to the point, the story of these projects is largely one of success. The questions of why? and how? are important for the whole Australian community, but especially for people working in education and training and for Indigenous communities. Answers to those questions make up most of the rest of this document.

But in essence, what the SRPs have told us is that if we, Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples alike, are serious about achieving improved outcomes, the results will be felt, immediately and significantly. That, above all, is why they have been important.

Like the report, this document has been prepared by a team responsible for coordinating contact between projects and describing and analysing their procedures and outcomes.



The Fundamentals

If outcomes for Indigenous students are to be improved

- they must be given respect

Self respect and respect from others is more basic to learning than any other factor. The high incidence of terms like 'self esteem', 'self-confidence' and 'pride' in the descriptions of these projects is no accident. They are starting points for becoming an effective learner, more fundamental than literacy and numeracy skills. There is much ground to be made up here.

- their culture and its relevant implications must be respected

Cultural dispossession is a terrible thing. It can reduce people to shadows, a state of near invisibility. In the situation of Indigenous students, the case is clear. Aspects of their culture must be recognised, supported and integrated in the processes of training and education, not just for their own success, but for the general quality of Australian preschools, schools and training institutions.

- they must be taught well

The full report of these projects could be read as a lengthy description of cases of good teaching practice; not especially exceptional, but applied with commitment and a determination to achieve success for all involved. Good relationships, trust, flexibility, individual concern and problem-solving, perseverance, thoughtful observation and careful investigation of 'best' teaching strategies and possibilities, knowledge of students' backgrounds: that is what good teaching is. This is what teachers can do.

- and they must attend consistently.

As these projects have demonstrated so emphatically, the business of improving outcomes is a shared task. Regular attendance and consistent participation are key ingredients by which improved outcomes will be achieved. In some cases, additional support and encouragement from school personnel, from parents and carers and from other members of communities will be essential for this to occur.

A platform for marked and significant improvement in outcomes for Indigenous students is beginning to emerge. The structural and cultural impediments are not as strong as they have been in the past.

The time for making improvement a reality is now.



What were the Strategic Results Projects?

In December 1997, the Commonwealth launched a series of Strategic Results Projects. There were two types of projects: ‘capital’ to upgrade the educational infrastructure of non-government providers; and ‘non-capital’ projects. The latter are what this document is about.

Around \$12 million was provided to State and Territory government and non-government preschool, school, and VET sectors for a range of short (one year), sharply-focused initiatives related to literacy, numeracy, vocational education and other areas of education and training delivery. Individual grants ranged in size from \$7,200 to \$650,000. Most grants (about 70 per cent) were less than \$200,000, with about one quarter under \$50,000.

Those submitting for projects were asked to address the question — **What changes to education and student support delivery practices will result in improved Indigenous student learning outcomes within a relatively short period of time?**

There were 83 SRPs, focusing on a wide range of topics (and, frequently, more than one) including:

- home to school transition
- transition from the primary to secondary years
- supporting students in the secondary years
- older students re-entering education and training
- student mobility
- building skills in early childhood education
- literacy in Standard Australian English
- Indigenous languages
- using information and communication technologies
- numeracy
- arts education
- vocational education and training (VET) in schools
- VET in Colleges, and
- training in the justice system.

They ranged in scale from small single-site operations to large systemic initiatives. Thirty-one projects operated at more than one site (approximately 320 sites across Australia in total). These sites ranged from inner urban areas of capital cities to remote outback areas. Approximately 3,800 students were directly involved.

The work was not conducted in ‘exceptional circumstances’, meaning carefully controlled and favourable situations. It was carried out in ‘normal’ preschools, schools and training institutions, under conventional conditions.

The strategies adopted could not be generally described as innovative or unusual, although, in context, they may have been both. The results were achieved by people working more intensively with strategies that are widely familiar, that could be described as conventional good practice and that are readily portable to other similar contexts.

One of the initiative’s distinctive features was that each project was required to set targets for achievement, and to establish baseline data from which results could be measured. Each project reported in these terms.

The Results

- The general objective of the SRPs was achieved. Providers of education and training did, in fact, ‘demonstrate that improving Indigenous student learning outcomes can occur in a relatively short space of time through concerted efforts’, across a very broad range of projects in varied locations and contexts.

Final performance data are available for 60 of the projects. Forty-one of these (68 per cent) achieved or exceeded their targets. Eleven (18 per cent) either achieved or exceeded one or more of their targets but not the complete set, or achieved them at one or more sites but not at one or more other sites. Project work is continuing at six of these sites, with the expectation that further gains will be made.

Eight of the 60 projects (13 per cent) did not achieve their contracted goals, but five of these achieved what they actually set out to do (eg, the development of courses, programs or teaching materials).

It is anticipated that the results of projects for which final data are not available will maintain the pattern of success described above.

- The results were achieved in areas closely aligned with national targets for Indigenous education. The major emphases were: improved attendance rates, improved grade progression and completion rates; improved rates of secondary completion and articulation to further study or training; participation and completion rates in vocational education and training; and acquisition of skills in literacy in Standard Australian English and numeracy.

Levels of achievement were evenly spread across these topics; that is, there were no particular areas of success or failure. Location factors appear to have had little impact on levels of project achievement, although there were a small number of cases reported where students at more remote sites in the same project did not achieve the same level of improvement as students at sites that were less remote.

- The project performance targets ranged in levels of ambition. The largest group, however, established benchmarks for improvement in performance or participation which were in line with local, state/territory or national rates for non-Indigenous students, reflecting the core goals of the national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy.
- There were many project outcomes unrecorded by the formal performance indicators. They are very diverse, but their dominant theme was the evident growth in self-confidence and engagement among the students involved.



The Key Factors in Success

Factors that enabled the projects to work

The people we met who worked on the projects appeared to share certain attributes. These included a capacity and willingness to solve problems as they arose on a case-by-case basis; an ability to see past the idea and the process to the person, while still remaining focused on longer term goals; a high level of attention to the interpersonal aspects of student motivation; energy, perseverance and a determination to succeed. Many were well-organised, had good skills in personal negotiation and, often but not always, a deep knowledge of their local Indigenous communities and cultures. We believe these are not unusual characteristics for people working in Indigenous education and training.

The distinctive factor they all shared was a fundamental and fixed belief in the value of what they were doing and the prospect of success.

There were two design features of the initiative that reinforced these motivations — its outcomes-focus and the availability of funding.

Many project personnel were working for the first time to targets expressed in concrete terms as performance indicators. A number found the process irksome and were suspicious about their relevance and validity.

However, the indicators were generally found to be most helpful in defining and driving the work. Project workers tried very hard to meet their established targets. Several mentioned the outcomes-focus as having been a major factor in the success of their work. The value of having clear and concrete goals and the usefulness of collecting data were widely noted by participants.

The funding made available was an ‘enabler’ — an incentive to mount projects and a condition which allowed them to proceed. Some project *per capita* costs were significant (in excess of \$7500), but a high proportion were \$2000 or less. The majority of project funds were spent on personnel costs, mainly project officer salaries and money to increase the level of teacher and education worker support to students.

It would be silly to deny the impact of the additional funding. However ways have been found to continue the work of three-quarters of the projects. The other quarter tended to be those where higher levels of individualised support were provided to students. It is relevant to point out that IESIP also provides a relatively high level of *per capita* support for the education and training of Indigenous students on a continuing basis.

Factors that provided the basis of project strategies

The strategies adopted in the project work were almost always designed in the light of three factors:

- cultural recognition, acknowledgment and support
- the development of requisite skills, and
- adequate levels of participation.



What have you learned that could be made more widely known?

(extracted from the final report of one project)

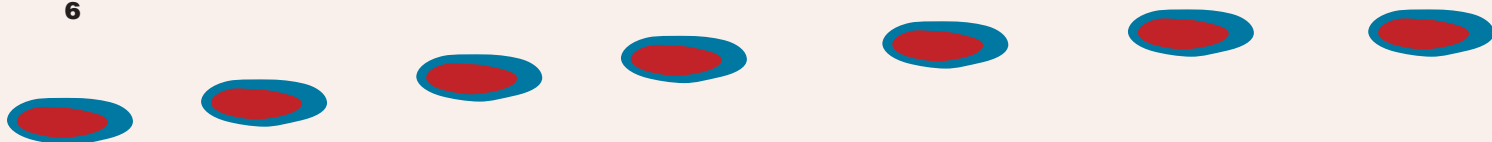
The students who were the focus for this project possess individual life stories that are highly complex. Working with them is highly rewarding, but a long-term task requiring skills of a most special nature. While we are focusing on their educational outcomes, many of the real issues these students are dealing with include staying strong in the face of: histories of major health problems and family dysfunction; negative and/or intermittent histories of schooling; poor hearing; frequent experience in dealing with grief; regular participation in ceremonies; developing appropriate behaviour both in the classroom and in a residential setting.

But for a school [in an urban context with a significant number of Indigenous students from varying locations and backgrounds] we believe the following principles of best practice are portable.

- Small class size — no more than 18 students, with consistent access to trained English as a second language and Aboriginal teachers.
- A curriculum which starts from what the students bring to the classroom, allows students to negotiate learning plans and outcomes, deliberately scaffolds student literacy learning, monitors student progress, makes explicit the worlds of dominant cultures, and celebrates and affirms the individual cultures the students bring to the classroom.
- Teaching methodology which includes sharing and negotiation, that makes literacies (Indigenous, Standard Australian English, classroom) explicit and that makes links across cultures.
- Specific outcomes for each class within a designated time frame.
- A swift, organised and personal/individual response to attendance retention issues.
- Specific specialised assistance which responds as a team (eg, community liaison, counsellor, nurse, pastoral care) to complex issues as they arise.

These are discussed in more detail below, but they should be understood in the light of two additional considerations about their relationships.

- Success **is** genuinely derived from a partnership of the parties to the educational process. Cultural support, recognition and acknowledgment can only be achieved by active and effective relationships between Indigenous communities and those who work in schools and training institutions. Both parties have a role to play. The development of requisite skills will evolve from teachers' high expectations of students and the skill and, especially, the sensitivity with which they approach their work. Support, even in limited forms from home, will aid this process. Adequate levels of participation will only be achieved by active encouragement from home and the provision of a welcoming and accepting climate in the institution.
- Holistic approaches are essential. The absence of any of the three factors above will seriously impair the likelihood of progress. For example, it is fruitless to have an excellent literacy program if students are not attending school. Equally, if students are attending, quality programs are required for progress to be achieved. The 'overlaps' in the purposes of most projects, indicated an appreciation of this fact.



Cultural recognition, acknowledgment and support

‘Cultural inclusion’ is a term often used in education and training to represent a worthy, but not very practical, aim. It is seen as an extra that you might consider after your core business is done. But respect for, and understanding of, Indigenous cultures are fundamental prerequisites for improving the levels of achievement of Indigenous students. Success begins from three points.

The establishment of good personal relationships and mutual trust

The quality and depth of cross-cultural relationships, and the establishment of mutual trust, were consistent factors in project success.

Racial harmony is hardly universal in this country, and relationships operate against a larger background of cultural misunderstandings, unmet promises and dispossession. It can also be forgotten what a personal process education and training is for all concerned.

One or more ‘bicultural figures’ appeared frequently in most successful projects. These people had a capacity to operate comfortably in both white and Indigenous societies, interpreting each to the other with the respect of members of each. They were frequently but not always Indigenous. This has continuing implications for the role and status accorded to Indigenous education workers and the selection criteria through which they are appointed.

Flexibility

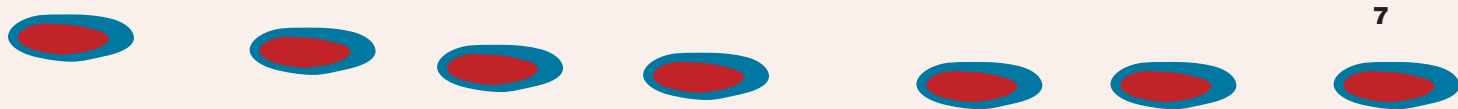
Where cultural values differ in significant ways, all parties involved need to be flexible. One of the major impediments to the success of Indigenous students is an institutional unwillingness to modify any arrangements — regarding content, teaching methods, structures, organisation or credentialling — on the basis that success must be achieved in precisely the same way, and by precisely the same means, as other students. There must be some room to move at the edges of this process.

Flexibility is a major issue in situations where Indigenous students make up a small proportion of the total student group, and where externally-devised standardised courses are taught.

It also comes to light profoundly where students’ home cultures diverge most broadly from the conventional expectations of formal education and training. This can occur in two contexts: where secondary-aged students’ past experience of schooling has been deeply unsuccessful and damaging, and where students are living in tradition-oriented communities. (These contexts may overlap, of course.) A number of project personnel designed courses and associated support processes from a knowledge of the students and in response to their needs rather than the other way around. Success was achieved through observation, empathy and taking students on their own terms — a basic tenet of successful teaching.

Many projects helped their target groups achieve success through minor modifications to conventional arrangements, for example, by the addition of a study week where students help each other prior to the examination period of a TAFE course, or by revising course requirements to tailor them more closely to the actual needs of students.

Flexibility was also evident in the inventiveness and creativity displayed in personal professional responses to the detail of issues as they arose in individual student cases. This may be the form of flexibility which has the most far-reaching consequences, and requires a level of cross-cultural awareness, as well as personal and professional empathy.



What has worked (and will again)

Localisation

The records of these projects indicate that there are many different routes to the same goals; that these routes are sometimes in apparent conflict; and that contextual factors (personnel, place and history among them) count for a great deal.

The problems of delivery of Western-style formal education and training in remote communities have been widely discussed, sometimes as a substitute for discussion of Indigenous education as a whole. But the vast majority of Australia's Indigenous people do not live in remote communities. They live in the towns and cities of the eastern sea-board and the south-west. More than half live in New South Wales and Queensland, most in urban settings (nearly 20 per cent in Sydney and Brisbane alone). They come from different family groups and may or may not have strong traditional links with the area in which they live. They may be deeply urbanised with life styles which are very similar to those of non-Indigenous Australians.

This is a caution against making unwarranted cultural assumptions, but it is also a way of stressing the importance of educators and trainers being clear about the wishes of *local* communities and soliciting advice and support which will be effective *in context*.

One of the major strengths of the SRPs was that overarching goals were established, but how those goals were reached was generally determined locally. Programs operating on prescriptive single templates are unlikely to be nearly as effective.

Some of the tactics for cultural recognition, acknowledgment and support that were used successfully include the following.

High levels of involvement by Indigenous people in the management and delivery of project work

More than two-thirds of the projects engaged Indigenous personnel to work in the projects as teachers, tutors, researchers or other education workers.

Student mentoring by Indigenous adults was a feature of about one-third of the projects. In most cases this has been cited directly as a factor in their success.

Building a community of peers, and a 'home' in the institution

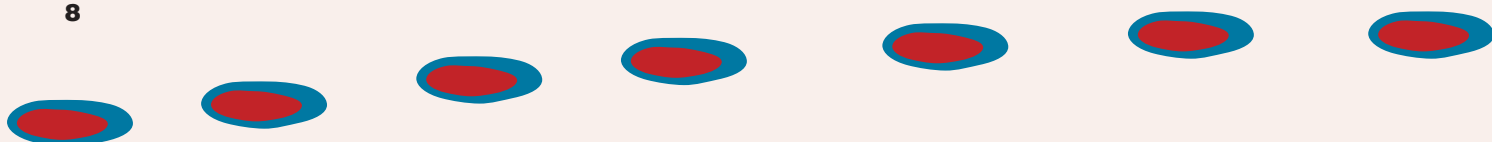
Many Indigenous students make up a small minority in their education/training institutions and can feel socially isolated as a result. More than a third of the projects took steps to reduce this sense of isolation by establishing a community of Indigenous peers: through grouping practices within an institution; by running an excursion or camping program with students from different schools; or by setting up 'companionable' electronic networks where students exchange experiences and information. These activities have been highly valued by the students involved.

In circumstances where Indigenous students are in a minority, the creation of a space where students, their parents and members of communities feel comfortable, and which is 'their own', has been frequently regarded as an essential component of a project as well as an expression of institutional commitment.

Recognising and teaching Indigenous languages

Language is a central feature of individual and socio-cultural development and identity. More than 15 per cent of Indigenous people do not speak English as their first language, and for many others Standard Australian English (SAE), in the form required by formal education and training, is a second dialect. This is a major issue, not just in more remote areas, and a variety of strategies has been used to develop effective bi-lingualism and bi-dialectalism.

One central strategy has been to define and teach differences explicitly, for example, between light Kriols and Aboriginal English on the one hand and SAE on the other.



Programs designed to promote parity of esteem between languages were also implemented, with efforts made to develop text material in relevant languages and dialectal forms of English. The maintenance or revival of Indigenous languages has also been a concern of about 15 per cent of the projects. They have served at least two purposes (if in fact they are separable): providing a cultural record as well as more purely linguistically-defined purposes. Such projects make a major contribution to maintaining and supporting cultural heritage.

Cultural reference and expression

This was an important part of many projects. Mention has already been made of the benefits of having a substantial Indigenous presence in project management and delivery — whether as staff, counsellors and mentors, or other sources of support. These people provide cultural reference points by passing on their knowledge and skills both directly and indirectly.

In several projects Elders delivered course components focused on culture and history. In six others, the collection and production of oral history or other cultural records was a major component of the project work.

More than a third of the projects produced tangible and visible results of the work done with the opportunity for audience inspection and reaction. These products, overwhelmingly, have cultural expressions as their focus: in the visual arts, dance, drama, music, videos and multimedia. Cultural reference can also be as simple as ensuring that visual displays include Indigenous items, confirming that institutions acknowledge the presence of Indigenous students.

Attention to these factors *will* produce higher levels of motivation and engagement among students.

The development of skills

What was learnt on this issue through project work accords with what is already known about good education.

A good education makes its demands clearly known. It includes efforts to ensure that what is being learned makes sense to the learner and to generate an understanding of both its utilitarian and intrinsic value. It assumes all learners can and will succeed. It provides a series of well-structured steps relevant to the competence and background knowledge of students. It provides a maximum of explicit guidance and modelling. It accommodates variation in pace, and pays special attention to those who don't get it first time. It searches for strategies to which students will respond. It includes a level of intensity and manageable challenge.

Focus

The project work again confirmed the centrality of skills in literacy in SAE to success in formal education and training, for all ages and across subject boundaries. One of the key findings of projects related to the development of numeracy, for example, was that students needed to be able to understand the nuances of SAE language, particularly in the application of prepositions.

In recognition of this fact, many of the projects increased the level of attention and time spent on the development of literacy skills. Some of the biggest challenges came from contexts where few if any of the students had English as a first language and where there were few social or economic demands for its use. But the more common need was the requirement for code-switching to modify dialectal variations of English to make it more 'correct' in school terms. The strategies adopted included acknowledging and accepting dialectal differences and teaching the variations in SAE explicitly. While it is not an easy solution, some success was reported in this area. However it is an essential alternative to describing students' everyday language use as 'bad' or 'incorrect'.



What has worked (and will again)

Content

- Increasing the cultural relevance of curricula

Many projects made efforts to improve the relevance of curricula to students' lives, interests, context and culture. These were largely, and not surprisingly, influential and generally easy to implement. In most cases, the task was getting to know students and their cultures better. In several cases, increased cultural relevance was achieved by searching, sometimes arduously, through currently-available options. In eight projects, new courses were purpose-constructed. In each case where these were taught a high level of success was achieved, re-affirming the importance of the localisation. But equal success was achieved by adapting agency-sponsored courses which were delivered at a number of sites.

Teaching practice

- Intensity

Perhaps the most telling feature of the SRPs in this area was the intensity of the work made possible by the additional funding. Smaller class sizes, work with small groups and individuals, and thoughtfully-constructed grouping practices that provided for re-entry to mainstream classes were widely employed and were reported to have a significant impact.

- Achievable steps

These practices were frequently coupled with high expectations of success, but expectations which were broken into achievable stages and that were explicitly taught. This was a characteristic, for example, of the Scaffolded Literacy approach which operated in two projects, but was a feature of many more. The competency-based approach adopted in VET modules and courses is another important example.

- Working cooperatively

Working cooperatively (as opposed to individually) in conventional classroom situations figures prominently in project reports.

- Expanding the range of media through which learning occurs and increasing its level of 'practicality'

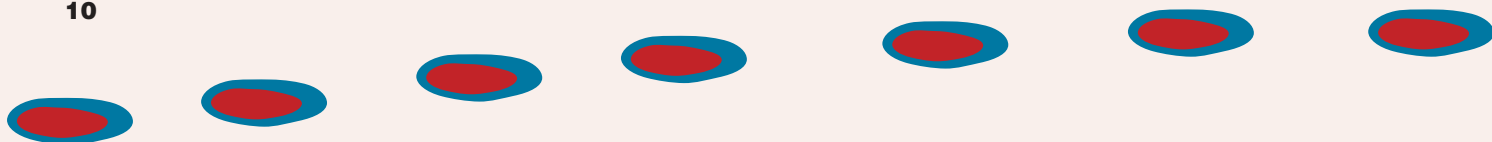
The importance of this factor was again regularly noted in terms of its contribution to student motivation and engagement (and, again, could well apply to a much wider range of general teaching practice). Examples range from taking, or being taken by, young children on bush trips to older adolescent students working on building sites. There is a strong indication that it is one of the significant issues in the introduction of the use of information technology. It is also evident that it contributes to skill development, either explicitly or implicitly.

Attention to these factors *will* produce higher levels of skill development among students.

Participation

The established points at which participation is in most need of support are at school entry, and before, to shore up school-readiness and to support a smooth transition process, and during the middle secondary years when departure from formal education becomes most pronounced. It is clear, too, that participation in VET modules/courses during the secondary years can provide an important pathway to continuing education and training.

Context has an important influence on these issues. While remote communities may have high levels of mobility among students, a number report very high levels of attendance during the primary years in schools which are often defining points of community infrastructure. However, if young people wish to continue their education they are likely to need to seek it elsewhere. Access is the issue. Several projects sought to resolve this by developing new forms of provision on site.



In rural areas and cities where Indigenous students are more likely to be a minority group, the central issue is departure during the secondary years. Access, at least in terms of formal availability of enrolment, is not the issue. Several factors appear to be at work: the loss of the pastoral intimacy which is characteristic of primary schooling; students' skill levels stretched past coping and hence an ever-growing record of academic failure; an increasing incidence of confrontations about behaviour; impatience with the passive nature of much schooling, coupled with influence from peers who have already left school; encounters with more aggravated forms of racism; and a curriculum which becomes more abstract and less obviously relevant to the lives of students.

School entry

There was a relatively small number of projects related to this topic, although one was large in scale.

One project explored why Indigenous parents in three rural areas chose or chose not to send their children to preschool education centres. Participation was valued for a number of reasons. Most of those surveyed chose to enrol their children because of the good start this process provided to formal education. A second strong reason was because of the 'cultural friendliness' of the staff and the climate of the centre. Among those who chose not to send their children, by far the strongest reasons were 'cultural unfriendliness', that is, little consideration given to Aboriginal culture, few other Aboriginal children attending, and negative staff attitudes towards Aboriginal people.

This is a situation which ought to be relatively easy to remedy and the excellent results from the projects suggest that, where there is a will to improve, it is easy to do so. What works?

- The presence of Indigenous staff or assistants.
- Good communication with parents, coupled with opportunities for parent involvement in ways they find useful and enjoyable.
- Well-established personal relationships and a climate which is 'culture-friendly'.

Attendance

A large proportion of projects reported a very strong correlation between students' achievement and their consistent attendance. Common sense also suggests that attendance is the first and fundamental requirement in achieving success in education or training. Little can or will happen without it.

Most projects, understandably, demonstrated an awareness of this issue; a significant number took it as their major focus.

The most intensive efforts took what could be described as a case management approach — 'dedicated customised support' as it was described in one case. This included home visits and other forms of community liaison; an emphasis on personal contact with consistent follow-up where absence occurred; personal planning and goal-setting; some work-related studies and experiences; support with academic work; linkages (actual and/or electronic) with other students in similar situations; and counselling and mediation where problems were occurring. These projects also frequently made use of alternative settings that, for a part of the week, became a 'home' for the students involved. Success, in terms of keeping all participants involved, was rarely complete, but some impressive gains were made.

In the non-school VET area, the main initiatives have related to course provision: by simply offering courses, for example, that might be relevant to the needs and interests of prospective students; customising existing courses so that they were more effective for the target group; and/or developing (or searching out) courses to serve the same function. The highest level of success came from the second and third of these strategies.



What has worked (and will again)

In another twist on strategies created to help with attendance, mention should be made of a series of projects which have developed new forms of mobile delivery (in remote areas of NSW and, in a differing version, Queensland), taking relevant courses to where prospective students are and teaching on site. The indications are that these courses have been successful in terms of attracting and retaining students.

But consistent and regular attendance remains a major issue. It seems likely that improvements in this area must become a major concern of Indigenous communities.

Engagement

Attendance is a crucial matter; productive engagement when attending is as important.

In responding to this issue the strategy of increasing the level of contact between adults (not necessarily teachers) and young people has been widespread. This has occurred through extensive use of mentoring, but also by reducing class sizes and/or providing intensive one-to-one or small group tutoring. These strategies have evidently had some effect. The usefulness of information technology as a tool for fostering engagement has also been noted by a number of projects.

However, much of the work related to engagement reflects on the perceived alien quality of school experience. Attempts were made to modify this, especially with young adolescents, the group in which this perception is most pronounced. (These issues appear in standard form across the whole cohort of students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike.)

The strategies used have long been familiar.

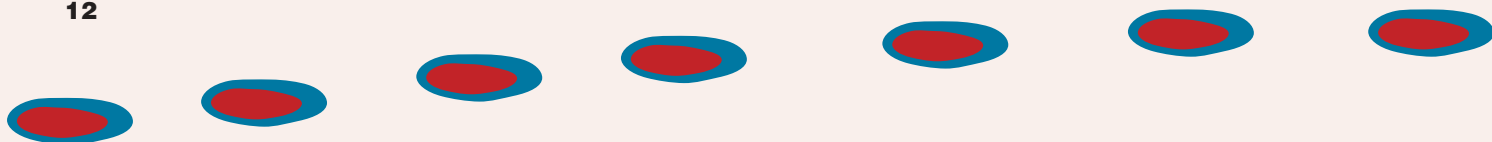
- The establishment of closer and less formal personal relationships between teachers and students. ('The opportunity to express what you think.' 'They talk to me as a person.')
- The establishment of a more informal and less regimented climate. ('They chat away and wander round, but they get things done.')
- The provision of a larger role for students in negotiation of work. ('You can have a say in what you do, create stuff that you decide.')
- Teaching so that success can be regularly and obviously achieved. Among other more prosaic and conventional activities, this can take the form of displays, performances and so on.

There was some belief that problems with conventional schooling for adolescent Indigenous students are so intractable that the solution must include providing an alternative setting ('... somewhere they can put the problems of school behind them'). The main features of these sites include those above, but as well commonly include a mix of school and work activities.

Again, this is a strategy which is applied to non-Indigenous as well as Indigenous students. However, one distinctive aspect of these settings is their emphasis on building personal support through being part of a group with a similar cultural background. This is a factor which has had an important influence in success in keeping students involved and, in some cases on track, for a return to school or to enter forms of training or work.

The results of the work of projects focused on participation were satisfactory, but don't display the leap that is evident in work related to some other areas. The unavoidable conclusion is that schools and training institutions must get help and direction on this issue from respected and authoritative members of Indigenous communities, and from the influence of encouragement and support coming from those communities operating as a whole. Where strong levels of participation were achieved, that is what has happened. One project manager put this succinctly and, we believe, accurately.

Schools should not reward Koori kids by suspension when they get into trouble at school. Rather, they should bring in a Koori task force at the critical moment and work through a special and intense mentoring program to keep that kid in school.



Strategies on Specific Topics

This section provides some summary advice and illustration drawn from the project work. In the full report the projects were grouped into three themes: Coming to 'School' with the main focus was on issues associated with participation and attendance; Building Skills; and Pathways to the Future. This sequence has been maintained here. Those themes were divided into issue-based topics. These provide the structure for what follows.

This material provides a very limited coverage of what happened. The full report provides accounts of all individual projects for which complete information was available. Again, if more detail is required, that should be the source.

Home to School Transition

The proportion of Indigenous five year-olds not in formal education (13.2 per cent) is more than twice the rate (5.9 per cent) for other young Australians. The reasons for this are partly to do with ease of access to preschool centres, but there are other reasons as well.

What the project work suggests

- As a general but not universal rule, Indigenous people value early childhood education for similar reasons non-Indigenous people do.
- Well-established personal relationships and a climate which is 'culture-friendly' will have a significant positive impact on the use of early childhood education centres by Indigenous parents/carers.
- Well-structured early childhood programs, which pay attention to the issues mentioned immediately above are likely to produce outcomes for Indigenous children which are at the same level as those for non-Indigenous children in the same or similar locations.

The projects

Three projects had a major emphasis on home-school transition.

One, a research project (see following page), was designed to improve awareness of Indigenous home-school issues among early childhood educators. The other two projects were conducted in a rural region at sites where access to preschool education is limited.

A second, system-sponsored, provided a transition to school program for Indigenous children, and a parent awareness program at ten different sites. Attendance levels were generally very high (around 90 per cent) and the rates of achievement of foundation outcomes in numeracy and literacy achieved by Indigenous children were consistent with those achieved by their non-Indigenous peers. Of the 100 students in the target group, 92 satisfied providers' expectations of readiness in literacy and numeracy for entry to Kindergarten.

This project also produced a significant increase in productive local partnerships and issues of cross-cultural awareness, and improvements in the smoothness of home-school transition. 'All 10 schools perceive this program as the most positive program they have run for Indigenous children and their families.' One of the major factors in success was the central role played by Indigenous staff.



Why Aboriginal people use early childhood education services, and why they don't

A project, conducted in three rural cities, explored reasons why Aboriginal people sent their children to preschool and why they didn't. A sample of 60 parents/carers were among those interviewed. The results from this investigation provide an excellent place to begin thinking about Indigenous education and training. The pattern is clear, and resonates with Indigenous reactions to formal schooling well beyond the early years.

Why they do

Nearly all respondents cited educational reasons for sending children to preschool: it provides a good start to education — knowledge of routines, the stimulus of learning different things and about non-Aboriginal worlds, etc. (75 per cent); the children have an opportunity to mix with children who are not members of their family or extended family (33 per cent); and they have fun there, are confident and happy (10 per cent).

Personal relationships with staff and the climate of the centre were important factors. Familiarity with the staff and ease of communication was mentioned in more than 15 per cent of the responses. Others mentioned the knowledge staff had of their children. Ten per cent commented on the welcoming and comfortable environment that centres provided.

Cultural factors were given as reasons by about 15 per cent — 'It's an Aboriginal centre'; 'It has Aboriginal staff'; 'There is a high number of other Aboriginal children'; 'There are opportunities to learn about Aboriginal culture'. Nearly half mentioned that some form of care was required because of work or other commitments. Other functional issues were mentioned such as: ease of access to transport or close at hand; the manageability of fees; and the existence of a lunch program.

Why they don't

One respondent didn't know about the early childhood education service. Several thought that the restrictions it might impose could well come later ('kids want to play not work'; 'too many rules, too much structure'). Several parents wanted to maintain their supervisory role. In other cases reasons cited included the availability of additional family support or other children to play with. In a small number of cases transport, the payment of fees or the need to access a range of (uncoordinated) services were problems.

But by far the largest incidence of reasons were cultural: little consideration given to Aboriginal culture (10 per cent); few other Aboriginal children attending; and, in one case, 'didn't want his/her children mixing with white kids'. Negative staff attitudes to Aboriginal people, coupled with consequent poor communication, were cited in about 10 per cent of responses.

The third project, located in a neighbourhood centre in a country town, provided several short courses for Indigenous parents to help them support the development of their children's literacy skills, concurrently and interactively with play groups for their children. The courses were both popular and well-patronised, and produced results. The targets for this project were very ambitious (eg, 90 per cent of the children involved satisfying education providers' literacy expectations for preschool entry from a base near zero), and yet around 80 per cent of the children did achieve the targets.

The Middle Years

The adolescence of Indigenous students is no less turbulent than that of their non-Indigenous peers, and their transition from primary to secondary schooling no less traumatic. In fact, loss rates from involvement in formal education tend to escalate from this point. Because of location factors, a higher proportion of Indigenous students is required to move from the comparative comfort of a local primary school to a more distant secondary school, making the transition between the two even more challenging.

What the project work suggests

- Experiments with middle schooling have an important place in Indigenous education, just as they do with the broader population.

The project

The single project directly on this topic ran in a school in a provincial centre recently consolidated from three separate schools. Its intentions were to improve the quality of student transition from Year 7 to Year 8, retention rates, pastoral care, academic progress and community involvement.

The secondary timetable was revised so that Year 8 groups (the first 'secondary' year) are each taught five different learning areas in the same room by two teachers. Pastoral groups have been altered to match.

Curricula for English and Society and Environment have been integrated as far as possible and the inclusion of Science is being trialed. Computing is complementing many subjects rather than standing alone. Staff responsible for different learning areas meet to discuss the students' progress and to find links between the different learning areas. Content overlaps have been removed and continuity in teaching and learning practices has been increased significantly.

Teachers have been encouraged to alter their classroom practices towards more collaborative, student-centred approaches. Graphic and written literacy teaching and learning practices have been explored, annotated and applied increasingly consistently. Primary and secondary teachers have exchanged strategies.

Year 7 students visit the secondary campus every fortnight to use the facilities and to mix with staff and students. The benefits of last year's transition work are evident in students' increased familiarity with the environment, older students and staff. Staff who worked with the students have also been able to gauge their ability and class dynamics allowing students to be grouped appropriately.

'It is evident that Aboriginal adolescents share the universal development tasks of their age group with their non-Aboriginal peers. These include the need to develop a strong sense of personal identity and self esteem. This study [focused largely on Aboriginal adolescents living in urban provincial cities and towns, the vast majority] could find no distinctive way in which they meet and deal with these tasks. To an external observer their lifestyles, world views and interests are indistinguishable from those of their peers, especially peers in the same socio-economic group.

'Aboriginal adolescents do, however, have a distinctive sense of identity as Aboriginal people. The ways in which they experience and express this identity will vary greatly from individual to individual. In early puberty it may be a source of confusion and embarrassment. However, the majority of Aboriginal people work on this issue positively, their Aboriginal identity becoming a growth area of their lives which they foster and nurture, valued as a source of personal strength and self esteem' (Groome and Hamilton, 1995: xi).

Supporting Secondary Students

Some research studies show that Indigenous school students attend school about 84 per cent and non-Indigenous students about 93 per cent of the time. However this gap widens in secondary school. In Year 10, which is often the lowest point in attendance for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, Indigenous students are absent up to three times more frequently than non-Indigenous students. In addition, according to 1996 Australian Bureau of Statistics data, only 45 per cent of Indigenous students are enrolled at school at 16 years of age compared with 78 per cent of their non-Indigenous peers.

What the project work suggests

- Indigenous students' participation and achievement are likely to be improved where their culture is acknowledged and supported. One of the best ways this can be achieved is through the employment or voluntary presence of Indigenous adults in the school. This is a tangible symbol of the commitment of both the school and Indigenous community to the value of education. Such people should have well-defined roles and themselves have support and training for these roles.
- Many Indigenous students benefit from spending periods of time in Indigenous-only learning groups, that generally include cultural studies. This appears to produce gains in terms of self esteem and confidence, leading to consequent improvements in school performance. Where small numbers of Indigenous students are isolated from each other, opportunities for networking can produce similar results.
- Professional development focused on cultural awareness for non-Indigenous teachers is important in terms of their knowledge and understanding of Indigenous students and their cultures, and frequently leads to some re-shaping of teacher attitudes and more positive and productive interactions between non-Indigenous teachers and Indigenous students.
- High teacher expectations of student success and more intensive classroom support are critical factors in improving outcomes.
- There is some evidence that Indigenous students can be supported through increasing the range of learning styles and opportunities employed in the classroom.

The projects

Every one of the 11 SRPs focused on this topic began from the proposition that cultural acknowledgment and support were fundamental to making any gains for their target groups of students. In most cases this meant establishing a process, formal or informal, of developing cultural awareness among non-Indigenous teaching staff. Professional development programs were conducted on this issue in the majority of cases, but one of the most efficient ways of achieving the same goal was to employ additional Indigenous staff or to find other means of increasing the presence of Indigenous people as mentors, assistants, tutors or just someone to talk to.

A project which took place in a rural secondary school was the most ambitious in terms of numbers of Indigenous adults participating. Seven part-time Indigenous 'classroom assistants' were employed to assist with pre-teaching and in-class support for students in Year 7 and Year 9. Most of the classroom assistants were people who had left school ten or so years ago and were not in secure employment. They were initially provided with training for their role in the classroom and, as the project unfolded, they developed much larger roles in the extra-curricular life of the school.

'We are about changing attitudes to school'

[Extracted from an article about another SRP by Kathy Stone appearing in the 'Weekend Liberal', Dubbo 27&28/2/99 and re-printed here by kind permission of that paper.]

Larry Towney has been able to slash truancy rates and improve literacy skills among Aboriginal students in Narromine in an alternative schools program coordinated by Catholic Centacare.

Larry Towney is a softly spoken man who left school early. He is a trained bricklayer, loves playing his guitar and might just have pulled off the impossible — getting Aboriginal kids to stay at school.

The 48 year-old is the support teacher for a brave initiative — an Alternative School which saw Aboriginal truancy rates slashed and literacy skills soar.

The school, run by Catholic Centacare, was funded for 12 months and \$70,000 under the Federal Strategic Results program.

'We are about changing attitudes to school', said Larry.

'I was very lucky to have a mother who knew the importance of an education. I went to school and I wanted to achieve — but I didn't. I left at 15. I've told these young people they have to learn to read and write while they have the opportunity. I ask them things like "what do you want to do with your life?"'

For a program that only got under way last year the results have been stunning. In 1997 only 50 per cent of 21 Aboriginal students at Narromine High School gained the skills to move into Year 10. Last year that figure jumped to 100 per cent. School dropouts were also becoming a thing of the past. Two years ago 29 Aborigines failed to complete the educational year. By the end of last year that was down to 10.

The results speak for themselves according to Margaret Flynn of Centacare which also runs an Aboriginal education program in Trangie.

'It has been brilliant,' she said. 'It gives students better self esteem and acceptance of their Aboriginal culture — even the police have acknowledged that there has been a decrease in the number of juvenile incidents in town.'

They ...

- ... told the class to keep up the good work and made us feel good by saying that*
- ... help us work together and sort out our own problems*
- ... settle people down when they are angry or upset*
- ... made me realise I can do the work by myself*
- ... helped me fix up my mistakes.*

— Aboriginal students from a different project commenting about Aboriginal classroom assistants

According to a State-wide language and literacy test, Year 7 students made marked improvements during the project. For instance, there was a 125 per cent increase in the number of Indigenous students regarded as 'proficient' or 'high' in language skills and a 50 per cent increase in the number of Indigenous students regarded as 'proficient' in reading. As well, the number of discipline referrals fell by 48 per cent. There were also incidental benefits for the classroom assistants, many of whom have gone on to further study themselves.

A different approach was taken in another successful project. An Aboriginal School/Community Worker was employed full-time to provide support in a variety of ways to Indigenous students at secondary schools in two neighbouring rural towns. Among his many activities, the Worker acted as a mentor and resource person to Indigenous students (particularly those assessed as

being 'at risk' of leaving school or getting into trouble). He also ran an 'alternate school', for two afternoons each week, at a local Catholic Family Services agency. The 'alternate school' provided an opportunity for Indigenous students 'at risk' to work intensively on literacy and numeracy with a tutor, as well as exploring aspects of Indigenous culture.

Many of these projects involved some changes to teaching and learning practices, based on notions that changes to school structure or curriculum or style of schooling could lead to improved outcomes. In terms of learning setting, several projects ran workshops, camps or networks specifically for Indigenous students. More intensive tuition in literacy and numeracy was also typical.

One project identified 'gifted and talented' Indigenous students many of whom had been considered underachievers. The project tested an assumption that Indigenous students would perform better if more account was taken of their preferred learning styles. Two 'talent and enrichment' camps (which also included aspects of Indigenous culture) were held. Among other activities of the project, a 'virtual' mentoring program to link students with successful Indigenous adults was begun.

Another project was based in a state Independent sector agency. It sought to establish support mechanisms for Indigenous students in schools where they were in small and isolated minorities. This project operated in ten schools and has had a significant impact on a wide scale. The first step was collection of data about attendance, retention and completion levels. Then a student network was established, professional development was provided for teachers and schools were supported to provide intervention strategies for students with low literacy levels. Indigenous people were involved in the provision of Indigenous Studies courses in the schools.

Across the range of these projects, success was reported in terms of improvements in literacy and numeracy, attendance and retention. In more qualitative areas, growth in student self esteem, confidence and engagement with the culture of the school were consistently mentioned.



Returning to Education and Training

Coming back to education or training after a break, for whatever reason, is one aspect of what lifelong learning is about. It opens new life opportunities and may offer new employment options. For the Indigenous population it may be a chance to repair damaging experiences of formal education and training, and to recover and build a sense of cultural pride and self esteem.

What the project work suggests

- Programs for Indigenous students returning to study, especially for those at risk with a history of alienation from formal education processes, must follow some basic guidelines.
 - They must be built around the interests and needs that Indigenous students have a part in defining. Issues of moment to their communities are likely to play a major part in this curriculum.
 - They must operate as a medium of support for cultural identity and self esteem.
 - They must have a strong and authoritative Indigenous staffing presence, preferably known to and accepted by the community, and active participation from Elders and other influential community members.
 - They must take into account the range of relevant background issues, such as levels of literacy in English, health matters, juvenile justice issues, pressing financial demands, family problems and other personal issues. Support with these matters is vital.
 - They must have a high level of flexibility to accommodate variations in attendance and participation. This flexibility also needs to apply to student grouping. Two of the projects reported the influence of gender, age and/or skill level on the functionality of groups. It may well have been a factor in the third.

The projects

The three relevant projects shared a number of characteristics. They were designed to accord with the needs and interests of students; they had major elements of literacy in English and numeracy; they were staffed entirely or mostly by Indigenous people; they had strong contributions of various types from local community members. Two of them made use of camping, excursions and other whole group activities. Two of them provided additional support to students in terms of individual tutoring, nutrition, health and travel.

All students were engaged in accredited courses. One project included industry visits, and employment and/or further education placements in the second half of the course. All of the courses were replete with concerns related to Indigenous issues.

‘What is ... clear is that the essentials are right — community involvement and ownership, an Aboriginal curriculum framework, intense interaction between Aboriginal community people and young participants and, most importantly, the determination to target the most “at risk” youth within the community and to encourage and challenge these young people to take “the risk” and change their lives’ (Australand Investments and Co., 1999: 29).

Student Mobility

Mobility is a fact of life for some Indigenous students, is likely to remain so and should be accepted as such. It is culturally characteristic that children and young people will sometimes move between relations living in different parts of the country. Frequent movement is also characteristic of groups in the population as a whole which are struggling economically.

What the project work suggests

- Where Indigenous students are targeted, it is essential that student tracking systems be developed in consultation with, and with the agreement of, relevant Indigenous community representatives.
- To be fully effective, such systems must
 - be widescale, intersystemic and interagency
 - have a component of appropriate support.
- The type of portfolio referred to below has high potential and value for students, their teachers and their parents.

The projects

Three projects had these issues as their topic. The two larger systemic projects were related to the development of student tracking and information exchange systems, with the prospect of eventual operation on a statewide basis, coupled with provision of forms of support for mobile students. The other, based in a remote school, worked on devising useful curricular strategies for its 'reliably' mobile students.

The projects' intentions illustrate three concerns:

- to record student movements effectively
- to improve the quality of information exchange between schools, and
- to provide support which will enable students to counteract any negative effects of school mobility, through offering literacy support programs for targeted group of transient students, improving the continuity of programs offered to students, and a program of intensive numeracy and literacy tuition.

The report from one project suggested that its system 'offers an efficient and sensitive way of transferring positive, helpful information'. The process is that every time a student enrolls in or exits from a school a pro forma, developed through a workshop of interested parties, is completed and sent to the database. The entry school receives information (including the name of a contact person from the exit school) which helps with the student's transition into the school. Student details remain confidential.

Electronic Student Portfolios which will provide useful information to classroom teachers about (and by) new students are in development. These portfolios will contain a collection of up-to-date samples of student work, including: a photo of the student, with their name and year level; an example of their best handwriting; a sample of their most creative art work; a written piece that demonstrates their writing ability; and an audio recording of their best reading from their favourite text. Transferring the portfolios between schools can be done electronically or through mailing by the student or the school (with student consent).



M. is an 11-year-old girl for whom five school movements have been registered in the past six months.

13/11/98: Left a primary school in Orange (Year 5). Last day of attendance unspecified. Two possible destinations, Bourke or Bathurst. ... *was only here 2 days*

1/3/99: Re-enrolled in the original school in Orange (Year 6). Her previous school(s) is/are not registered.

18/3/99: Left the primary school to go to primary school B in the same town. ... *wasn't here long enough to assess literacy & numeracy levels*

21/4/99: Enrolled in a primary school in Bourke. Previous schools were registered as being in Penrith (2) and Bathurst (2). ... *the student said she had attended the above schools in term 1, 1999*

9/6/99: Left school in Bourke, going to Bathurst or Orange.

Literacy level: Stage 2 ... can achieve, provided easy instructions are given in turn

Numeracy level: Stage 2 ... often needs concrete situations to work things out

M.'s whereabouts are presently not registered. She may have enrolled in a school which is not connected to the database, the school she is enrolled in may not have registered the enrolment, or she may not be attending any school.



Early Childhood Education

There is considerable debate about what should happen at preschools, with some arguing for a purely play-based curriculum while others promote increases in more structured learning. At the same time, there is little dispute about the importance of the preschool in providing children with a bridge between home and school. For Indigenous students, preschool can assume an even greater importance because the bridge to be crossed may be longer and the traverse more complex. Additionally, preschool can also provide grounding in foundation skills related to literacy, numeracy and the social behaviours required at school. The demands of home-school transition can be significantly eased by appropriate preparation.

What the project work suggests

- The underlying trend in all the projects in this area has been to seek and develop new options for young children to learn foundation skills: whether by more attention to the ‘teaching moment’, through new program structures or via the employment of more ‘tools’ or strategies for direct teaching. Their work suggests that the readiness of Indigenous students for primary school can be facilitated in a variety of ways. All the methods noted were sufficiently successful to warrant further investigation.

The projects

Five projects took place in preschools and all aimed to improve the readiness for school of Indigenous students. ‘Readiness’ was defined in a variety of ways but typically related to early literacy, self esteem and ‘school-type’ behaviours. Improved attendance was also a common goal.

These projects began from the position that many Indigenous students were observed to be underachieving at school from the very beginning and that changed practices at preschool could have an effect on this situation. In this regard the impact of their work can be assessed only after students have gone on to school, thus judgements about degrees of project success are provisional. Nevertheless, most projects achieved performance targets expressed in terms of providers’ expectations for students entering primary school.

One project, in a rural city, aimed to improve the success rate of students when they go to school by introducing concepts of numeracy — ‘100 maths words’. It was believed that students would be more likely to succeed if they had more ‘school language’ on entry to school and that these concepts could provide a foundation structure for its development. Research was undertaken to investigate the children’s language use and to choose the 100 words, which were then taught in a wide variety of often inventive ways, through stories and work conducted in the local Aboriginal language, drama, songs and other activities.

In another an additional early childhood learning support teacher was employed to support the development of individualised programs for Aboriginal students who needed extra help in preparation for primary school. Intervention and support were also provided for students’ health (predominantly *otitis media*) and speech problems.

A third was based in two preschools, one in a country town and one in an urban location. The question ‘What changes to early childhood teaching and support services delivery practices will result in improved early literacy learning outcomes for Indigenous students within a relatively short period of time?’ was explored through action research, based on intensive observations of child activity over a period of five months. Five Aboriginal and five non-Aboriginal students were chosen at each site to provide a representative sample. On the basis of the initial observations, an individual learning plan was developed for each student. The impact of a variety of new practices were investigated. These included the use of a locally-developed literacy kit



(containing puppets, tapes and other 'tools' to develop literacy as well as reading matter), redevelopment of reading corners, an increased level of community liaison, special work on oral language and efforts to increase the 'engaged' learning time.

A project target was to have the spread of English literacy development (literate behaviours) in the groups of Aboriginal children conform with that of non-Aboriginal children. This target was either met or very closely approached. A further target was to have gains made by Aboriginal students in literacy match the gains made by non-Aboriginal students. This target was also met.

'The research points to the need for the preschool teacher to be placed more centrally with regard to literacy learning in the early childhood years in that much of their accumulated knowledge of children and their families could be used in the transition process. The historical divide between preschool and school demands bridging ... The literacy curriculum in the early years 3–8 must become seamless and ensure that children are engaged in satisfying literacy-based activities on a regular and systematic basis across that period. ... Knowledge of the "lifeworlds" of children, and strategic practices so that all children have consistent, coherent engagements with print are required to ease transition through the early years' (Hill et al, 1998: 12).



Literacy in English

The development of English literacy skills was a widespread concern among the projects. (For ease of reading, the term ‘English’ is used in the following to mean ‘Standard Australian English’ (SAE).) It appears, for example, in the reasons for the use of information technology; in components of courses for older adolescents and adults returning to education and training; in VET courses; as a means of supporting secondary students; as a primary concern for skill development in younger children; and in the discussion of the importance of being able to switch between dialects in the section on Indigenous Languages. The work conducted on numeracy suggests the importance of literacy in English to achievement in numeracy. One of the main means of support proposed for mobile students relates to literacy in English. It can be fairly said that it figured everywhere, reflecting its fundamental importance to success in both formal education and training.

What the project work suggests

- Hearing difficulties present a severe impediment to the development of literacy in English for all students, but especially for students for whom English is not a first language and whose contact with it is limited. Indigenous students in some parts of the country have an extremely high level of hearing impairment. The ramifications are far-reaching and profound. Culturally-sensitive interventions, both medical and educational, are crucial as a basic starting point for any success in formal education — with literacy in English or in any other regard.
- The value and effectiveness of curriculum materials based on the histories, experiences and knowledge of Indigenous peoples for use by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is also not a new finding. These projects have added to the stock of gradually increasing resources of this type. It must grow substantially yet.
- The procedure and findings from several of these projects strongly confirm the need for non-Indigenous teachers of Indigenous students in remote areas to base their work on a cultural understandings which are as deep and sympathetic as possible. Almost all other projects confirm that it is equally significant even when cultural differences are less marked. This is another observation which might appear overwhelmingly obvious, but there are clearly instances where it is still at issue.
- Intensive, focused and thoughtful efforts to increase English literacy levels *will* produce results. Scrutiny and suitable revision of pedagogy and teaching arrangements, resources, the use of information technology, assessment processes, community involvement and encouragement of regular attendance will all yield results without moving outside the compass of what might be considered generally effective practice.
- The Scaffolded Literacy approach is a most important avenue for exploration. The students in the two projects where it was operating ranged in age from beginning primary to older secondary students. The strategies have been generated from issues which plague Indigenous education — problems with low teacher expectations, the substitution of busy work for real achievement, behaviour management problems, variety in learning levels and styles. In these instances, one very favourable circumstance with a very high degree of development and alignment of all concerned, and at two sites with teachers working on the basis of skilled but irregular support, the impact was marked, quite sufficient to say that as the approach is refined and additional support materials become available, it will represent a most important resource for the teaching of English literacy to Indigenous students and should be adopted more widely.

Scaffolding Reading and Writing at Wiltja

The project is an accelerated reading and writing program for primary and secondary Indigenous school students from remote communities in South Australia. Coordinated by a team of researchers from the University of Canberra, the project has been implemented at two sites — the Wiltja Annexe of Woodville High School in Adelaide, and the Amata Primary School located south of Uluru. This case study is drawn from the Wiltja Annexe.

Wiltja provides three programs for Indigenous young people from the Anangu and Pitjantjatjara lands. The opportunity is provided to access urban secondary schooling, and to complete South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) courses. Students with potential for further academic development are nominated by their teachers in these remote communities, and following consultation with parents and family members, travel to Adelaide to participate. Around seventy students are enrolled in the Wiltja program at any one time. The demand for places far exceeds those that are available.

Brian Gray, with his University of Canberra colleagues Wendy Cowey and David Rose, have been developing a ‘scaffolding’ approach to literacy for more than a decade. The team’s research indicates that many of the current literacy practices in use with rural/remote Indigenous students limit their chances of success. The team found, for example, that the copying and memorising of text were common practices, and that relatively few students were able to independently read and write by the time they reached secondary school age. Many adolescents were being instructed with literacy materials designed for much younger students in the early years of schooling.

‘We have found that much of the literacy work that we do with teachers of Indigenous students is ‘counter-intuitive’... a typical response of a teacher confronted by a student who cannot do something, is to reach for something at a lower standard ... another is to reduce kids’ activity to ‘busy work’ (colouring in and so on) often as a means of maintaining order or controlling behaviour. (Researcher (R) 1)

The team has developed an approach that makes literacy development more explicit.

The approach employs a sequence of strategies that provide scaffolding support for students to read complex texts fluently and accurately, and then to use the features of literate language that they are learning to read in their own writing. (R3)

A group of five teachers worked with the research team to implement the scaffolding approach at Wiltja. Some members of the group were highly receptive.

I have been teaching Anangu students for about seven years, and have never felt particularly successful in the various schools in which I have taught in terms of literacy outcomes. After looking for some time for an alternative, I was relieved to get involved in the scaffolding approach. Other schemes that I tried, such as phonics, didn’t address the needs of fifteen year olds with reading ages of six or seven year olds. (Teacher (T) 4)

Scaffolding Reading and Writing at Wiltja

continued

One of the main changes to teachers' practice involves a significant change to their questioning technique. Rather than asking students questions that they may not be able to answer, teachers construct their questioning in ways that clarify appropriate responses before answers are sought. Initially, some teachers were sceptical about this technique.

A major point of resistance for many experienced teachers, given that it is so personally challenging, is the need to review your whole questioning technique. This was certainly the case for me, as I was concerned that by feeding answers to students I would be inhibiting independent thinking skills. Actually, this has tended to have the opposite effect, because the kids feel so much more confident, and are asking more critical questions. (T1)

Significant increases in student achievement have been measured. All students have advanced by one or more levels in reading and writing based on the national English Profiles. In the Bridging Class at Wiltja, for example, the average improvement in reading and writing was 2.5 Profile levels. In Year 8 the average improvement, in English and Science, was also about 2.5 Profile levels. (It should, perhaps, be noted that these excellent gains were made from a relatively low base.) At the same time, teachers have noted a range of student learning outcomes that are more difficult to measure, like an increased level of student engagement in their learning. Video and anecdotal evidence reflects much higher levels of student participation — especially in terms of the quality of dialogue between students and teachers as well as students themselves.

Teachers spoke at length about the importance of developing skills that are absolutely fundamental to the futures of all Indigenous students.

Teachers need to be much more honest about what they are achieving with their literacy programs. For example, you can run a phonics or some other literacy program, and make a judgement about this on a range indicators such as attendance and behaviour. However, if the kids are not really getting any closer to obtaining the learning outcomes that they really need, then it is not really all that effective. (T4)

The following comment by the school principal summarises the need to maintain a commitment to improve learning outcomes in this area.

We are maintaining literacy as a core focus, rather than taking on a range of issues. In other words, we are trying to do as well as we can in literacy, and not be distracted by other things. There is a real sense of determination here, with a view to making this approach work.

The projects

SRPs related to literacy development in English can be grouped according to purpose: supporting students with hearing impairments, developing culturally-appropriate learning materials, and skill development.

A major auditory testing program of more than 1000 students, many from remote communities but attending six schools in two urban centres and at one remote location, was conducted through one of these projects. The students were generally learners of English as a foreign language. It was coupled with an intervention process based on teacher education about relevant issues, the introduction of technological hearing support processes and a phonological

awareness program to help students 'hear' and identify sounds which they may have been previously unable to because of difficulties generated by auditory impairments during their developmental process.

A very high proportion of students (79 per cent) was found to have an educationally significant hearing disability. Forty per cent would conventionally require medical services to treat active middle ear disease and/or provide reconstructive ear surgery. Students' SAE literacy and phonological awareness levels were tested at the beginning and end of the project to measure the impact of the school-based intervention program. On spelling and reading age scores, students who satisfied the criteria for involvement improved an average of one year over the course of the project, on phonological awareness scoring they improved, again on average, '18 months'.

'A hearing impairment is not just a deprivation of sound, it is a deprivation of language' (DECS, SA 1995: 3). Where students are learning English as a second or third language or SAE as a second dialect, hearing impairment can make the task profoundly difficult.

Provision of adequate and effective resources are a significant component of literacy learning. Three projects set out to collect and record culture-based stories and/or oral histories. The reasons were consistent: the importance of recording cultural history for reasons including the development of cultural pride and identification; the need to develop a greater understanding of Indigenous history and culture among students from all backgrounds; and the value of such materials for developing literacy skills. The products of these projects differ, but in all cases they have met their purposes.

Eight projects focused very specifically on skill development. All have good success rates to report, and four are described briefly here.

The first evolved from a need to help the inexperienced teachers, who typically work in a remote region, develop an understanding of the knowledge and experiences young students bring with them to school in order to support their skill development in English. These students' first languages are exclusively Indigenous, and there had been a tendency for teachers, in the face of the failure of 'standard' classroom practices, to retreat to more rigid structures and alien content. Experienced early childhood and ESL-trained teachers were seconded to work with the teachers at nine schools, including Aboriginal Teaching Assistants (ATAs). These teams explored and described the background knowledge and experiences their students brought to school, a particular task of the ATAs, and developed a wide range of teaching strategies to test for their effectiveness.

The second project operated in a large urban secondary school that enrolls and provides boarding accommodation for students from remote areas. These students have a series of challenges: few have English as a first language, and all have to learn to accommodate the demands of very different living and school environments. Two groups of male students, younger and older, and the most limited in terms of English skills, were selected for intensive help. Each class had 18 as its maximum size and was taught by an ESL-trained specialist. The results with the younger group (aged 12–14) were impressive. The target was for 50 per cent of the students to progress at least one level of the NT ESL Outcomes Profile. Of the 13 students who were enrolled for the whole year, six students progressed at least two levels of the Profile, four students three levels and three students progressed at least four levels.

Finding a suitable curriculum for the older group (aged 15–17) proved a problem. This class had had a longer and more negative experience of school. They saw themselves, legitimately in cultural terms, as adults. Staff searched through a wide range of courses and finally found one that will be used in the future: the SA Certificate Level I and II Pathways to Work for Aboriginal People. What actually occurred was to trial a range of ideas, working from students' interests to produce a negotiated curriculum.



What has worked (and will again)

Two projects worked on ‘Scaffolded Literacy’ practices, an approach designed by Brian Gray, and distinguished by the establishment of high expectations of students, the use of carefully scaffolded age-appropriate texts and tactics of questioning which differ substantially from standard teaching practice. The central issues addressed by this approach are intensely practical: for example, shifting the focus of teaching from behaviour management, to high expectations for academic progress; moving from literacy activities which assume culturally-embedded literacy understandings and do not adequately support Indigenous students; varying ability levels in each class; irregular attendance; and students’ dependence of students on continuous one-to-one support.

One of these projects operated at two sites, an urban high school annexe which provides a different form of schooling for students from central Australia, and at the school from which some of those students may have originally come. The project team provided extensive training and support for staff at these schools on the wide range of issues surrounding the use Scaffolded Literacy. The aim was to progress targeted students one or more levels of the National English Profile within the project timeline. The results to date indicate that average improvement has been from 1.5 to more than two Profile levels over two–three school terms.

‘Scaffolded Literacy’ was also used in four classes (Years R–7) in an urban primary school which has 65 Aboriginal students among its enrolment. Again there was a major and continuing training process for the teachers concerned. In addition, a Reading Support Program from Aboriginal Parent Literacy Workers was introduced in order to establish ways that Aboriginal parents could have a recognised and valued role in the school, at the same time supporting their children’s literacy learning. The parents were employed and trained to assist with regular and consistently-structured reading sessions. The results are very promising. Of special interest is the ‘pick up’ of the least able students in the middle and older primary years.



Indigenous Languages

In 1788 there were probably about 250 Indigenous language families in Australia with more than 600 discrete languages. Today it is estimated that there are 25 languages with more than 1,000 speakers, 11 with between 500 and 100 speakers and 43 with between 100 and 500 speakers (SSABSA, 1996: 51). An unknown number still exist with a handful of speakers, but more than half of those existing two hundred years ago have disappeared forever.

One of the goals of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy is to 'develop programs to support the maintenance and continued use of Aboriginal languages'. When a workshop group at the second SRP conference was asked to explain why this should be the case, the answers were strong and immediate: cultural identification, ownership of cultural knowledge, cultural pride, connection with our land, a sense of personal empowerment and cultural connectedness. Language is fundamental to what you are, what you do, and what is important. It's one area where Indigenous kids have an advantage.

About 50,000 Australians speak an Indigenous language as their first language. For many of these people, English is sometimes a second or third language and often a foreign language. Many thousand 'top-enders' speak Kriol or Torres Strait Creole, creoles which have developed from interaction between groups who speak differing languages. Beyond that, many Aboriginal people speak a dialect of English known as Aboriginal (or Koorie or Nunga, etc.) English which has its own rules and referents.

In any of these cases the language spoken is generally not the language of school. There are two issues for educators here: how to maintain and support the existence and use of Indigenous languages and to recognise their inherent value and their importance to their users; and the challenge of developing strategies to enable users of Standard Australian English as a foreign language, as a second language or as a second dialect to develop skills in the language of mainstream power in this society.

What the project work suggests

- Only one of the projects on this topic achieved its specified targets during the 12-month span, but all achieved a great deal. This suggests two things: the challenge of working in this area, an area with limited resources and a fragile base; and the considerable impact of these efforts on the use and recovery of language skills as a fundamental cultural resource producing a very fertile student response.
- These projects are among those which indicate the productivity of effective partnerships. Progress was achieved in each case by linguists, Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers and the deep involvement of community members.
- Information technology and specifically multimedia programs and desk-top publishing provide a very useful resource for recording and teaching Indigenous languages.
- Much work remains to be done on code-switching and awareness of the nature and impact of Aboriginal English on 'school language', at school and in other aspects of mainstream Australian life.

The projects

Eight projects had these issues as their main focus.

One took place in a remote community school. Its purpose was to produce a set of ten illustrated story books in Walmajarri for student use, combining literacy acquisition, language maintenance and the development of high level skills in the use of information technology. Two others produced multimedia resources to record, teach and promote the use of two local languages —



What has worked (and will again)

'Students who have a contemporary and/or traditional Indigenous language as their first language have a right to access formal school programs in those languages for the same reasons English Language Programs are developed for students whose first language is English' (extract from a project report).

Yangkana's Message

Jarla lamparn marna ngujajangka najukurangu ngamajingu jaa ngarpungu pajipila wangkiyunganiny Walmatjarrigurnu.

Yaniny jangka marna. Kuulkarti ngajirta marnanyanta rukanyjarla ngaju — kuranga wangki. Jalarra marna yutukarralany Walmajarri wangki mirlimirlinga yangka pajirlu jurlalany jarlujanka wangki Walmajarri wangki pa purlka Wamarn kujarra palu malany ngurrawalany ngurrawalany minyartini martuwarra.

Jiljignurnu palu pirriyaniny Walmajarri jartini wangki.

Wali.

When I was a child living with my mother and father, they taught me to talk my language and to understand every word they told me.

When I went away to school I still remembered my language. I was away for a long time at a mission in Fitzroy Crossing. They never let us talk our language there, but we used to sneak away and talk where we couldn't be heard.

I taught myself to write Walmajarri. I studied the Christian songs that were written in Walmajarri. Now when the old people tell me stories, I can write them down.

There are a lot of people talking Walmajarri along the Fitzroy River and in the Great Sandy Desert. I am happy that I can speak, write and teach kids Walmajarri, so I teach our kids our language.

— Yangkana (Madeline) Laurel (1997) Preface to *Wulungarra Stories* Kadjina Community School

'Aboriginal English is a highly valued cultural identifier among Aboriginal people. It is an expression of Aboriginality and it carries subtle yet profound cultural meanings. It is "home talk", the kind of talk with which Aboriginal people feel comfortable, and is very effective at carrying Aboriginal meanings' (Cahill, 1999: 11).

Ganai and Ngarrindjeri. Oral histories, songs and stories provided by Elders and other language custodians are among the material included, but so are lexicons and language exercises, with the capacity of information technology to match visual image, word and sound usefully exploited. Both note the impact on students in terms of motivation and cultural pride.

A further project developed syllabus frameworks for two Indigenous languages, Arabana and Adnyamathanha, building on similar successful work which had been done previously for Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara; and investigated and documented motivational issues associated with the delivery of Indigenous languages.

In another, adult Aboriginal language speakers were provided with the opportunity to improve their literacy skills in their own vernacular (Arandic, Western Desert or Warlpiri languages) and English, because of a recognised need in central Australia for a higher standard of literacy in both Aboriginal languages and English for professional Aboriginal language workers. This course has subsequently been accredited by the relevant agency and is running again this (the following) year. Nine students completed the initial course. Of these, four are now working as teachers, three have other full-time jobs and one is working part-time.

In the sixth of these projects, action research was conducted on teaching practice in classrooms where bi-dialectal issues (Aboriginal English and SAE) were apparent. It focused on the professional development of teachers and Aboriginal and Islander Education Workers (AIEWs) in understanding the features of the two dialects, promoting parity of esteem between them and developing code-switching practices which would improve literacy levels.

The purpose of the final project, set in a remote community school, was to develop teaching and curriculum materials based on a recently published book which contains a number of stories about the local area and life experiences written in Kriol, the first language of the students. The students had found these stories deeply engaging. Their content provided strong links between home life and school.



Using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)

School education must make effective use of ICTs. In contemporary life, their use is becoming both normal and expected. Most employment which students will enter relies increasingly on a range of skills in its use.

Emerging research evidence suggests that, in the right circumstances, the use of ICTs can enhance the quality of teaching and learning. The benefits for distance learning are obvious. There is evidence too, that when used in conjunction with good, 'live' teaching practice, it can provide more highly focused individual support and effective intervention for some students with learning problems.

What the project work suggests

- The use of ICTs has a useful motivational impact for Indigenous students (as is likely for all students).
- Skills in their use are relatively easy to acquire, although general literacy development is significant for access. In educational terms, they are clearly a tool rather than an end in themselves.
- As a tool for developing literacy, these projects suggest that ICTs are more effective for use with primary students rather than with secondary students, although a large number of other factors could come into play: students' school histories and the differing structural organisations of the sectors among them.
- Their effectiveness is contingent on a number of factors. There must be adequate hardware for ease of access; it must work; and its use must be effectively embedded in school programs as a whole, rather than employed as an 'add-on'.

The projects

A considerable proportion of the projects used ICTs to support their work, but four were specifically dedicated to investigating its impact on the learning of Indigenous students. Two of these were multi-site projects exploring the value of using ICTs to support literacy development.

The tactics adopted by these two projects differed. Students in one spent regular periods of time withdrawn from their conventional classes to computer rooms where they worked with the software programs 'WiggleWorks' and 'LiteracyPlace', both designed to develop literacy skills. They progressed at their own pace through these programs while receiving support from Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs). At two sites in this project the ambitious target of making 1.5 years' literacy progress in less than a year was achieved by 50 per cent of the students involved. At the third, students had had more limited contact with 'school literacy' and took time (over six months in some cases) to develop the knowledge and skills to be able to use the software.

The other project provided portable computers for use by students in their conventional class work. The ways in which the computers were employed varied widely. The many project sites were widely dispersed, there was a relatively high level of technical trouble, and the structural arrangements (class mobility, multiple teachers) in secondary schools presented problems. The use of the laptops by a select group of students was obviously more difficult to embed in conventional programs. In terms of literacy development, the target group of primary students generally showed a level of improvement in tested areas. The targeted secondary students did

Computers Assisting Literacy

I am 7 and I like to go shopping.

My birthday is July and I'm in Year 1.

My favourite food is tomato soup and I like skipping.

Please could someone write back to me?

This is the text of an e-mail message sent by Jo, a Koori student in Year 1 at St Joseph's Primary School in Eden, to a group of Koori students at a primary school in Lakes Entrance. The author is one of thirteen students in Years K–6 at St Joseph's who participated in a computer-assisted literacy project. The students' involvement in e-mailing was a spin-off from the program, the main focus of which was to have them work with software programs designed to support their literacy development.

Two other primary schools participated in this program. Each school purchased hardware (computers, networking facilities and a laser printer), and two software packages.

This project came about because Kerrie Dean, the Resource Teacher at St. Joseph's, followed up a suggestion from a Koori parent interested in making greater use of technology in children's learning. The equipment was set up in the school's Resource Centre where the target group of students would attend a session for at least half an hour each day. A corner in the Centre was dedicated to photos of the students, stories they had produced and a selection of Indigenous cultural resources.

Various assessment instruments were used to assess student achievement in literacy during the program, across the areas of reading, writing and spelling, as well as talking and listening. The evidence shows that as well as having fun, Jo and her colleagues each increased his or her level of competence in a range of areas during the course of the program. Some degree of improvement was noted in each of the thirteen students who participated in the program. Additional benefits that were recorded included increases in students' motivation, self esteem, independence, confidence and computing skills.

The students became highly independent learners. They would log on and go to where they up to previously on the program. They worked at their own pace and experimented all the time with different ideas. Some of the more advanced students became tutors for their peers. For example, when they had finished their work they might assist other students with the next step in their work, or support students in their writing or spelling. Once they mastered the program, they became very confident in themselves and their capacity to help others.

The technology was highly motivating for the students. They could see the books on the screen, hear the stories through the speakers as well as record and play back their own words. Students went over and over the material until they got it right... . No matter how good a teacher you might be, this technology is really something special for children. (KD)

not. Both groups improved their ICT skills and enjoyed using the computers. More than half the teachers involved indicated that they felt the experiment had been a success.

The other two projects (multi-site, and at a single location) worked on providing access to the development of familiarity with and skills in the use of ICTs. One had highly successful results; the other was hampered by a lack of hardware, but had enough success to see the potential of more widespread use of ICTs.

Numeracy

Some commentators suggest that mathematics is an area where the differences between Indigenous and European culture and world view are most pronounced. Space, number and measurement are construed differently, while chance and data and algebra draw on concepts and their linguistic expressions which are alien. This is not to suggest that Indigenous students cannot succeed in developing understandings of Western mathematical thinking and manipulation; but it does suggest that it may be more difficult than for students where those concepts and practices are more culturally embedded. The data available suggest that this is the case. The fact that well-developed numeracy skills are one of the cornerstones of school success makes this a telling issue.

What the project work suggests

- The targets of the project most concerned with numeracy development were demanding but, as a result of intensive and inventive teaching, were generally achieved.
- There was general agreement on the significance of developing an understanding of place value as the key to further progress in number. (There were other key concepts which could have been usefully dealt with, but this was the area chosen.)
- The importance of attention to the development of students' understanding and use of the language of maths in English was also crucial. (This was also a finding from the other project which had the development of proficiency in mathematics as a priority.)

The projects

While 13 projects had numeracy development as a minor goal, two had it as their primary focus, one working on a very small scale in a remote setting.

The other was conducted by a national professional association at five widely-dispersed sites in rural and remote areas. The task was to explore varying teaching practices to improve levels of numeracy acquisition among Indigenous students.

At one of these sites two primary classes (approx. 50 per cent of whom were Indigenous students) were taught using the theory and practice of Mathematics in Context. The medium for the work was a trip to the Adelaide Show. The sub-sets of the 'topic' were People, Accommodation, Transport, Money, Time, Preparation of Camp Booklets and a reconstruction of camp experiences. This experience produced work on, among other things: collecting, recording, organising and calculating data; developing appropriate terminology; mapping, graphing and use of co-ordinates; place value; calculator use, units of distance and manipulation of these; and timetabling.

At site 2 the project teacher worked with small groups of (mostly) Year 7 and 8 students in a withdrawal program of two or three regular sessions per week. The focus was for students to develop underpinning numerical skills by encountering fundamental concepts in a range of contexts ('multiple representations').

At site 3 the project teacher had daily intensive numeracy sessions (15–30 minutes) with small groups of primary-aged students and released another teacher to work in a similar way with the secondary-aged students. There was an emphasis on underpinning place value knowledge through games, physical activity, repetition and computer use. At site 4, where most students had Standard Australian English as a second language or dialect, a teacher aide worked with small groups in a withdrawal program of two or three regular sessions per week focusing on the Number Strand and 'Time' (from the Measurement Strand) as well. Additional language support was provided for the youngest students.

Some things different

Pam Sherrard, a school-based project officer at site 5 of the project discussed above, was asked to expand on her presentation to the second SRPs conference. She notes that three things were distinctive about the program: the level and type of support provided through a teacher-Aboriginal education worker partnership; variation in grouping practices; and a different approach to the teaching of number. This is an excerpt from her discussion of the third of these activities.

For the students to come to view themselves as successful mathematicians they needed to feel in control and have ownership of their mathematics. At the beginning of the program the students were happy to complete many repetitive 'sums' rather than be challenged or think about new ideas. As long as the 'sums' were done, whether answers were copied or even wrong, they believed the maths was done. They became agitated if asked to solve a problem or to generalise an idea. They saw the sums as an end in themselves and viewed maths as a series of rote learnt facts.

While rote learning may provide immediate success, that success is usually only temporary, setting students up for failure when basic conceptual understanding is required. It also encourages the tendency for ritual learning. The aim of the teaching program was to show students that maths is about ideas as much as it is about 'sums'. The mathematics was delivered in a way that allowed the students to work through understanding rather than by rote. It was important that the students were able to verbalise their thinking and to make generalisations about how the number system worked.

It was decided at the outset that an understanding of place value would allow students to access the ideas involved in calculations, operations and number patterning. Flexible use of place value and language development became the focal points of the teaching. If place value was to be the key to accessing other ideas of number then it was essential that students understood the concepts of counting, including skip counting, and partitioning numbers.

At the beginning of the program a particular student, typical of the students in the target group, could count forwards by ones to one hundred and by twos to twenty. She could not count backwards at all. This set the beginning point of the program for this student. The aim was for her to be able to generalise that 'If I can count forwards and backwards by twos I can already add two and subtract two. I also know numbers which are two more, two greater, two less or two smaller than other numbers'. Although the student could count by twos to twenty, she could not answer such questions as: When you are counting by twos, what number do you say before twelve? What number is two more than eight?

Over a period of two months, this student received individual help in addition to coverage of the same ideas in the classroom. The extra time was spent considering terms such as 'before', 'after', 'more than', 'less than', and their relationship to counting. For example, a calculator was used to record the counting of objects by twos, and the connection between the next number on the display and adding two more to the group of objects was made explicit. The student was asked to commentate, using the words 'more than' and 'less than', on what was happening to the size of the collection of objects as the teacher removed two or added two to the group. After counting a collection of objects the student was asked to say how many were in the group as the teacher removed two or added two to the collection.

Being able to make such generalisations was most empowering for the students. Rather than believing counting by two was a process distinct from adding and subtracting two, the ability to see the relationships simplified the mathematics.

Students who are 'naturally mathematically able' make these connections for themselves and therefore view maths as making sense. 'Less mathematically able' students do not see the interrelationships and view maths as a plethora of isolated number facts. The latter group can be led to see these relationships through explicit teaching.

What has worked (and will again)

At site 5 (the subject of the preceding case study) in-class support of the learning of some Year 3 students by the project teacher was supplemented by occasional withdrawal of individuals or pairs requiring particular attention. Teaching approaches were built from the Education Department of WA's *First Steps in Mathematics* trial materials, with an emphasis on developing base ten understanding and associated number sense.

Major gains, of the order of 'two years progress' in less than 12 months, were made in every case.



Arts Education

There are two inter-related theories that underpin the projects which worked on arts education. One is that the arts constitute a way of engaging students in learning that will result in the development of generic understandings and competencies, found across the curriculum. Terms such as ‘vehicle’, ‘gateway’ and ‘bridge’ are used. The other is that the arts can play a unique role in improving learning outcomes for Indigenous students. The arts are central to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and have been used to pass on those cultures through many generations. These students need to make strong connection with their heritage. The arts are also seen as a powerful means by which students can express themselves and their identity, in order to achieve further personal and academic development. But there is a third notion at work as well, and that is that the practical emphasis in the Arts has an implicit influence on teaching practice and learners’ roles which improves student motivation and outcomes.

What the project work suggests

- The outcomes of the two projects working in this area make a strong case that engagement in the arts is likely to assist in the development of productive learning relationships and can enable students to experience success on a regular and public basis; thus, for both reasons, encouraging increased student motivation, attendance and participation.
- It is equally clear that arts education can be an important medium for development and expression of contemporary Indigenous cultural history and pride.
- Although a challenge remains, a focus on arts learning which incorporates Indigenous culture and heritage can also extend to other areas such as literacy, numeracy and employment-related competencies.

The projects

Two projects focused on arts education. One operated at four school sites, three urban, one remote, in four States/Territories, and was run by a national professional association. It set out to investigate the extent to which student involvement in arts education could support attainment of the (Mayer) Key Competencies, by trialing teaching and learning practices in arts-centred programs aimed at improving literacy and numeracy skills, and career pathways for Indigenous students.

Each site adopted a different focus and set of performance indicators. In all cases production of visual art works or performances was an important component of the project.

Site 1 focused on improving oral literacy skills for non-English-speaking background students through arts modules that had English as a second language strategies built into them. Work at site 2 sought to build language skills and career options for senior secondary students by developing an artists-in-residence program. An additional purpose was to support students in identifying with their Aboriginal heritage. At site 3 students ‘at risk’ developed career pathways through a jewellery-making program that contributed directly to results in the Year 11 South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE). (See following case study.) At site 4 the focus was on using the arts to build community links through an another artists-in-residence program to complement the existing performing arts courses in the school. Performance targets were exceeded at each site.

The other project offered a new course in music at senior level, embedded with several TAFE modules. This was trialed in five schools, two metropolitan and three in rural areas. Its goals were to provide an avenue for increased participation and success for Indigenous students and to actively encourage further community involvement. Fifty-five Aboriginal students enrolled,



Jewellery-making at Le Fevre

Adelaide's Le Fevre High School has a population of 500 students, ten per cent of whom are Indigenous. Various initiatives have been taken by the school to develop an approach to education that is more inclusive of Indigenous and other cultures in the local community. Several of these have involved the arts as a means of exploring new approaches to learning, teaching and community participation.

The SRP jewellery enterprise involved 11 Indigenous students from Years 8–11, a number of whom seemed unlikely to complete Year 11. Completion of course requirements would contribute to their SA Certificate of Education (SACE) results. Two jewellers from the local community were engaged to work with the students in the design and production of copper, aluminium and silver artefacts (eg, pendants, bracelets and brooches). An Arts teacher, Aboriginal Education Worker and other staff provided ongoing support. The Tandanya Arts Centre, the Museum of SA and local jewellers were visited.

Skills and outcomes were clarified, measured and verified in each student's 'learning log'. Students also produced portfolios containing their original vision statements, design briefs and personal reflections, as well as their final artwork. The finished pieces of jewellery have been exhibited and constitute a tangible outcome for students, which they intend to develop into an ongoing enterprise. Five students have completed Stage 1 units that will contribute to their SACE results. School attendance has increased significantly for two students, who were still struggling to remain on task in other classes.

Teachers identified improvements in student attitude, behaviour and performance that had occurred.

The jewellery class has made an enormous difference to one of my Year 8 students. While he is an able student with considerable potential, he has been very unsettled and has not been achieving well this year. Being with other Aboriginal students who are in different year levels has had a very positive impact. He has been at risk of being suspended several times, and I believe that the workshop has been instrumental in keeping him at school. It has not only modified his behaviour, but has also led to dramatic improvement in his other subjects.

The jewellery program has had such a positive impact that it will continue for another year. There was a strong affirmation by teachers and students regarding the crucial role of the Arts in the education of Indigenous students.

The arts are important for all students, but especially so for Indigenous students. ... They provide a hook for engaging students, for example, by increasing levels of attendance, motivation and achievement. It is vital that we make the connection between culture and curriculum. ... The arts constitute an excellent vehicle for this. (The school's principal)

38 students completed the SACE unit, and 52 VET modules were completed. In each of the five schools where the course ran, community involvement increased. When students, parents, and teaching/support staff were asked about what they perceived to be the main benefits gained from the course, issues such as improvements in attendance, self esteem, confidence, relationships, and knowledge about and planning for future options were cited.

Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Schools

VET in secondary schools is an area of rapid expansion. It is one way of providing potential pathways to employment or at least to the experience of work and work-related activities, such as job-searching and application processes.

What the project work suggests

- Providing Indigenous secondary students with employment-related training and/or industry specific skills can assist in encouraging student attendance and retention at school, while also providing pathways into further education and training, or employment.
- The common key elements in the design of these projects were:
 - design and delivery of courses tailored to local needs with a high degree of flexibility, mostly with the cooperation of a number of parties: schools, TAFE institutions, representatives of Indigenous communities, employers either individually or in association, municipal and other community groups;
 - provision of information about careers and ways to achieve students' goals by mapping pathways through further education or training options or directly to employment on an individual basis;
 - strong elements of cultural support, through mentoring and access to people who could function as role models and building a sense of common identity and purpose (through means such as camps and excursions); and
 - provision of workplace experience, ranging from visits to more substantial work placements. Longer work placements were generally found to be of greater value, because of the prospect of building fruitful relationships with employers.
- Location has an influence on the viability of VET in schools programs. However, even in more remote locations some ways were found of providing access to training and work experiences.
- The consistent emphasis on developing pathways for individual students countered possible criticism that alternatives lead nowhere. The effectiveness of this approach for the longer term cannot be assessed at this stage. However, given the age of the students involved and the difficulties they are likely to encounter, it is probable that they would need continuing support to realise their goals.

The projects

Ten projects explored the provision of VET in schools. They ranged in size from quite small projects (for example, providing 15 students with on- and off-the-job training) to large, multi-site projects (40+ schools across a number of state education districts). But, irrespective of their size, there was a marked consistency in the strategies they adopted to improve student attendance and retention in school-based programs. These are detailed in the 'What we learned' section below.

In most cases, courses focused on generic work skills. One project combined the generic with the specific by providing students with a taste of a range of training options so they could select a vocational pathway and associated program to pursue. Central to the project was the provision of Work Education classes for students not yet ready to undertake industry-specific training; targeted literacy and numeracy support for those with skill shortfalls relevant to their chosen career pathway; specific career development for a number of students with potential in sport; and a camp/conference for all students on developing and refining career choice and job seeking skills.



The Straight Paths Program

A group of adult Indigenous trainees in their twenties and thirties, full-time participants in a traineeship in tourism and marketing, took on the task of becoming mentors for younger Indigenous students living on the south coast of NSW.

As the program coordinator explained,

we endeavoured to establish 'a program within a program'... to make the most effective use of available resources for Indigenous people in this region.

Our objective is to focus on these students as individuals, by ensuring that they understand that (a) they are important; (b) they have a future; and (c) they can get support from us. In other words, we are endeavouring to provide special attention and encouragement to each student.

This was amplified by one of the group:

One of our aims is to help these students explore their culture in a contemporary way. Rather than dwell on the past, we're trying to make our input about careers and the world of work as relevant as possible to the 1990s. We are using a lot of exercises and activities to get their young minds thinking about what it means to be a Koori in the 1990s. In other words, we are saying that you don't have to sacrifice your Aboriginality to live and work in today's changing world. Our message is that you can have the best of both worlds, by making your life a success through work and expressing yourself as a Koori at the same time. One of the great things about this program is that, given our diverse range of trainee backgrounds and experiences, we all have something different to offer these kids ... We need to get more Koori kids into the workforce, not just as labourers or as support personnel in the government sector, but as professionals or as members of the private sector setting up their own businesses. We want to help them be able to do all these things as Aboriginal people functioning effectively in the 1990s. That's who we are and where we are going. We can't go back, we must go forward. (T8)

Other projects chose a more specific industry focus because of its relevance for prospective employment. One was designed to enable Indigenous students 'at risk' to complete modules associated with a Retail Traineeship. This course was delivered via audiographics (ie, software that allows on-line interaction between students and school sites in a 'virtual' classroom), so that students could participate even though separated by considerable distances. The use of audiographics also added a technical component to the course that, when mastered, boosted students' information technology skills and confidence.

Another provided training in areas of prospective local employment which were also of considerable interest to students. The modules offered by the training college included Farm Tractor Operation, Motor Cycle Operation, Small Motors, First Aid, Farm Welding, Stock Horses, and Sheep Handling in Yards. Attendance and completion rates of more than 90 per cent were achieved.

An important feature of many of these projects was the flexibility of both structure and delivery to support student participation and engagement within and beyond the school or TAFE college involved.

Cultural support is also a consistent feature of these projects. The use of Indigenous mentors was widespread and fundamental to four of them. The 'Straight Paths' program provided one of the most interesting and apparently successful cases of Indigenous adult trainees working with young people and talking to them directly in authentic, respected and positive ways about their



futures. The report from this project notes: 'Even those students with a history of a high level of truancy, at first mistrustful of the project leaders, have developed sufficient self-confidence to approach the team for assistance in discussing possible career options, including options they had not considered previously.'

It is clear that in a number of cases the students themselves functioned as role models or 'explorers' for their communities, breaking new ground and challenging unfounded stereotypical views of Indigenous people.

Most projects included time spent on individual goal setting, communication processes, job searching and application and participating in interviews, as well as workplace rights and responsibilities, and dealing with customers. One provided information about New Apprenticeships, TAFE courses and higher educational programs via the Internet. The project developed and trialed curriculum modules aimed at improving individual planning, choice of possible career options, gathering of information related to individual interests and so on. This proved popular with students and encouraged them to consider a range of potential career pathways.

Work placement in one form or another were central to most of these projects. At its simplest level, students made a series of visits to industries and businesses. Some projects adopted a more expansive view of work placement and students engaged in specific industry placements for a substantial period of time, as a central component of their training. This was favoured for reasons including the training having more impact and an increased chance of establishing relationships with employers.

Each of these projects used the provision of VET in schools as a medium to improve attendance and retention rates. The results are incomplete, and the causal relationship between project participation and improved attendance and retention, especially on a continuing basis, is not absolutely firm. But it would appear that the majority of these projects succeeded in doing what they set out to do. As one example: of 112 students who started this program in July 1998, 70 are continuing with the program; 30 are no longer attending but are still at school or have gone into other training courses; eight have left school; and only four have not attended school or the project programs.



Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Colleges

Participation in VET is an area of significant growth for older Indigenous adolescents and young adults. Enrolments almost doubled from 1994 to 1998. But while the participation rate is comparatively high, enrolments are skewed towards lower level and shorter courses, compared with enrolments by non-Indigenous Australians.

What the project work suggests

- The involvement of the local communities and willingness to incorporate aspects of Indigenous culture has contributed significantly to the achievement of targets in these five projects.
- Linking College-based directed learning with on-the-job training and experience can enhance motivation, attendance and learning outcomes.
- Students are more likely to engage in literacy and numeracy programs if they can see a connection to the development of industry-related competencies and pathways to genuine employment.
- There is some suggestion that the competency-based approach of VET better suits students who need some additional support by making requirements very clear and having regular staging points for success achieved and noted.

The projects

The five relevant projects were relatively small in terms of the number of students involved, ranging from 14 to 40 participants. One, in a college for Indigenous students outside a rural centre, provided an avenue for Elders to contribute to the delivery and management of courses. Another delivered a construction course in a provincial centre. Three remote area projects were very specifically designed to support Indigenous employment: in the mining industry, in the accounting area and in broadcasting.

Three of these projects focused directly on including Indigenous culture as a key component of their work. In each of these three projects, the role of the community and especially local Elders, has been important for encouraging student involvement and retention in programs, and has contributed to the motivation required to complete the course/module and gain the associated credentials.

In one of these cases, community Elders were employed to provide substantial input to accredited courses in health and aged care for young Aboriginal trainees. They were able to inform students about aged care from the perspective of the aged, and about nutritional issues, bush medicines and other aspects of local cultures. They also played an enhanced role in College management and direction-setting.

The project referred to in the brief case study that follows demonstrated that students could more readily acquire employment-related skills, as well as improved literacy and numeracy, by contributing to a process highly valued by their local community — in this case building part of a cultural centre. The project delivered a structured pre-employment course (the nationally-registered Construction Fitout and Finish (CF&F) course) to a group of 14 students who had not participated in formal education or training for some time. All students completed at least one module in the CF&F course, and 30 percent of students completed them all. The majority of those who did not complete them all gained employment during the course of the project.

At a remote site, a further project was designed to develop literacy, numeracy and other training programs for Indigenous people employed in the mining industry and the broader local

The Dreamtime Cultural Centre

Over recent years, there has been a shortage of skilled labour in the construction industry in the Rockhampton area. Supported by the local Indigenous community, the Central Queensland College of TAFE developed a partnership with the Capricornia Training Company and the Dreamtime Cultural Centre to provide 14 Indigenous students with the opportunity to complete an accredited VET course in Construction Fitout and Finish while building an Information Facility at the Cultural Centre.

This program, however, was ‘a first for TAFE in Queensland’ because it involved the students not only in directed learning, but on-the-job training and experience in a community project of considerable cultural significance.

The students were aged between 22 and 34 and had mostly completed Year 9 without further experience in education or training. Each was tested on entry to the course to determine their literacy and numeracy levels, and goals and plans for improvement were developed for each student individually. Students’ progress was mapped using log-book sheets to record the attainment of defined and recognised competencies. The project began by providing the students with some basic skills in construction and a degree of literacy and numeracy training in the college environment.

Prior to starting work at the Dreamtime Cultural Centre, the students built an amenities block at a local tennis club, and a BBQ/picnic area in a park to practise their skills and build confidence. During this phase of the project, attendance at the components of the course delivered in the college was excellent and, in fact, better than mainstream attendance rates. However, attendance at literacy and numeracy courses was not as regular, with only about half attending many classes.

Once construction started at the Dreamtime Cultural Centre, the teachers decided to explore the impact of delivering the literacy and numeracy lessons on site. The result: attendance increased markedly. By linking literacy and numeracy training to practical activity and employment-related learning outcomes, the students gained an increased appreciation of the need for these skills in the workplace.

This was accentuated by the significance of the project to the community.

Students felt that they were learning worthwhile skills that they could transport into the workplace. ... They were contributing to a worthwhile community project that they would have pride in and could feel a sense of accomplishment. (PO)

This required a new degree of flexibility from the College and its teachers.

The project presented new challenges for us. They’ve been met by adopting new strategies which can now be employed in other aspects of operations and which have been useful for non-Indigenous students as well. (T1)

community. It was soon discovered that success was dependent on a ‘holistic, cultural awareness-based approach’. A survey was devised and conducted by key Indigenous people at each of four remote sites to provide baseline data before proceeding with the training. This activity revealed the need to focus more clearly on cultural awareness as a threshold requirement for the conduct of the literacy and numeracy training, resulting in the development and trialing of a generic cross-cultural awareness program and the establishment of a peer support network. A survey of participants in the relevant workshops has produced an extremely favourable response. The cross-cultural awareness aspect of the project has also led to greater awareness of some of the changes the industry itself may need to make to increase employment opportunities for Indigenous peoples.

Training in the Justice System

A vastly disproportionate number of Indigenous young people find themselves involved with the justice system and many of these are incarcerated for periods of time. It is also widely reported that many have low levels of literacy and numeracy, poor social skills and poor self esteem. Several Recommendations of the *Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* suggest the necessity of an emphasis on education and training programs for Indigenous people while they are incarcerated. This is justified for a variety of reasons including, importantly, the need for them to be able to find positive pathways in life after release.

What the project work suggests

- The evidence available from these projects indicates that incarcerated Indigenous people welcomed and benefited from training which met their needs and which was well-embedded in aspects of their culture.
- Characteristics of successful projects included:
 - the availability of suitable nationally-accredited VET modules;
 - on-the-job (rather than classroom) training;
 - the opportunity for groups of incarcerated Indigenous people to work and learn as a group;
 - the opportunity for them to live, work and learn on Indigenous properties or on land of significance to Indigenous people rather than in a prison;
 - local Indigenous input into work and learning undertaken;
 - training in sustained blocks of time rather than ‘once a week’; and
 - trainers who have empathy with Indigenous trainees.

The projects

Most of the four projects related to this topic did not operate in a ‘school’ situation. If they did, it was a ‘school’ within a correctional institution. Most looked for innovative solutions to the challenge.

Two involved training at Certificate II level at remote or rural locations rather than inside correctional institutions. A further innovation was that training was provided in blocks which necessitated trainers spending consistent periods of time on site.

One took place primarily at a remote location (see following material), with Indigenous inmates of a large Correctional Centre. The Centre already had a program under which Indigenous inmates were able to spend part of their sentences working at sites of significance to Indigenous people. The project allowed them to receive on-the-job training in nationally-accredited VET modules at the same time. Inmates also completed a cultural awareness course, and the participation of members of the local Aboriginal community was fundamental to its operation.

The other dealt with young bailed offenders from a magistrate’s court in a rural town. These offenders have the opportunity to spend up to twelve months of their sentences at an Aboriginal-owned rural station. There, they participate in the tasks needed to operate the station. This project also provided opportunities for them to receive on-the-job training in nationally-accredited VET modules at the same time.

The performance target for both projects was to achieve 85 per cent completion of modules by participants. In both cases the target was exceeded.



Mutawintji and beyond

Mutawintji National Park is 130 km north-east of Broken Hill, NSW. It's an area of low red ranges, valleys and gorges. In an otherwise arid zone, there is permanent water and along the ridges are overhangs containing important Aboriginal rock paintings. Until they were dispossessed by Europeans, Mutawintji's traditional owners held ceremonies and meetings here. The area was a crossroads for other Aboriginal groups as well.

On 5 September 1998, the NSW government handed Mutawintji back to its traditional owners, who now manage the area jointly with the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service. Sacred sites and culturally-sensitive parts of Mutawintji are either closed to the public or open only to approved guided tours.

An IESIP project is taking place here at Mutawintji. For a couple of years already, some Aboriginal inmates of Broken Hill Correctional Centre have taken part in the Centre's 'Cultural Link' program which allows them to undertake meaningful work on Aboriginal land such as Mutawintji. This program was developed in consultation with local Elders. The IESIP project, managed by Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture, adds a training component. While they are working at Mutawintji, participants can now complete nationally-accredited VET modules.

To develop and implement a project like this takes time, and the cooperation of a many groups and agencies — in this case local Aboriginal Elders and the Mutawintji Local Aboriginal Land Council, the Mutawintji Board of Management, the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service and the NSW Department of Corrective Services. As well, it took time to attract a suitable Education Officer to oversee the project and coordinate training delivery. Careful planning and consultation have been key ingredients at all stages.

A group of about 10 inmates and one Corrections Officer spends Monday to Friday each week at Mutawintji. The Department of Corrective Services provides mobile camping facilities including a large truck and trailer, generator, marquee, tents and cooking facilities. Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture provides the required equipment and personnel for training, which is 'on the job' rather than 'in the classroom' and is at all times related to the work undertaken, ranging from fencing to building construction.

But the training is not isolated from the cultural context. Mark Sutton, one of the traditional owners of the land and a Sites Officer with the National Parks and Wildlife Service said:

We wanted to make sure the cultural component was strong, so all participants begin with a cultural introduction. ... The blokes are working to conserve and protect Aboriginal land. It's a 'caring for country' philosophy which lets them be proud of what they do and what they learn.

You give the blokes the chance to work ... to put in ... to see that if you want to be valued you've got to put in. Then they can go on and do their modules and leave here with a bit of pride. They see that you don't have to be an idiot for the rest of your life.

—Aboriginal Station Manager

We work hard but it keeps the station going. He knows what we're like ... where we come from ... he's Aboriginal too ... you can't fool him.

—Aboriginal bailed offender, talking about the Station Manager

Out here, for some of us ... it's our country. We feel okay when we're here ... like it's our place.

—Aboriginal inmate

Some Checkpoints for Improving the Level of Student Success

The outcomes of these projects confirm other data and research that there are three key focal points for further work regardless of context, each of which must be underpinned by improvements in levels of attendance.

- The establishment of good functional levels of literacy in Standard Australian English and numeracy.
- Continuing participation and engagement during the secondary years.
- Clear and accessible pathways to futures in further education, training or employment.

They are four starting points.

There is a series of other issues that should be considered by teachers or trainers working with Indigenous students, a number of which are more applicable in some contexts than others. They are not 'new' and in many cases might be considered self-evident, but neither factor limits their importance.

General

- How aware are you of your Indigenous students? How much do you know about their backgrounds, aspirations and needs?
- Are good personal relationships established between staff and the students and their families?
- Is there a degree of flexibility, responsible but considerate, applied to arrangements for students' education/training?
- Are processes in place for liaising and maintaining regular contact with members of local communities on issues related to education/training?
- In the case of students entering or exiting the school/institution, do you know where they have come from or are going to? Are arrangements in place for receiving or passing on information that would help support effective teaching and learning?
- Do you have specific targets in place for students' success and have you implemented means for their achievement?

Acknowledgment, recognition and support of Indigenous cultures

- Are provisions in place for non-Indigenous staff to learn about Indigenous cultures in general and local Indigenous cultures in particular?
- Is there a recognisable Indigenous ‘presence’ in the school or institution in terms of teaching and employed support staff, guests to the school and other support personnel?
- Does the school or institution recognise and express its respect for the cultures of its Indigenous students in ways that are acceptable to and appreciated by students and other members of local communities?
- Where they are desired by students, are arrangements in place within the school/institution or with other schools/institutions to develop a sense of cultural support and connectedness with other Indigenous peers?
- Are there opportunities for students to learn an Indigenous language or languages?

Developing skills

- Do your students have any hearing or vision impairment? Where such impairments exist, are procedures in place to help rectify or alleviate them? Have teaching processes been modified to take account of them?
- Is intensive support available for students whose skills in reading and writing Standard Australian English (SAE) and numeracy are below conventional levels?
- Are the features of SAE taught explicitly and, where relevant, its differences from students’ dialectal forms of English clearly defined and explained?
- Is regular use made of the life experiences and knowledge of students to make connections with other curricular content?
- Are teaching materials that deal with Indigenous cultures in an accurate and relevant way a conventional part of the content of the curriculum?
- Does the curriculum provide opportunities for cultural reference and expression?
- Are there consistent opportunities available for students to work cooperatively?
- Is a range of types of learning opportunities and media conventionally employed?

Attendance and participation

Where regular attendance and consistent participation are problems,

- have you worked with key members of the local community to discuss possible strategies that might change the situation?
- do you have an individual ‘case management’ process that has been developed with the help of the student, his or her parents/caregivers and the teachers/trainers concerned, that can be readily applied, and that allows for possible modifications of conventional institutional arrangements?
- are Indigenous peers, mentors or members of staff used to support individual students?
- has a plan been developed with the student(s) concerned connecting the role of education and training with any longer term aspirations they may have?

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