

Challenges and Opportunities in Australian Indigenous Education

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When I became Australian of the Year in January 2009 I said I wanted to talk about the protection of the rights and human dignity of all Australians. I said that sometimes we don't speak up or act because we think a problem is too hard or that it will somehow go away. I said I believe that we're better than that.

What I said was that I would like to see every Australian child next Australia Day geared up for the start of the 2010 school year. And I said I wanted to be confident that those children were going to get the best education this country can give them. I want it for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and I want it for other children who are not getting it now because of where they live, because of poverty and because we've failed them. The fact that many of our children are not getting the best education is something none of us should tolerate – or dismiss as inevitable or too hard to fix.

Every child deserves a good education and a country as prosperous as Australia should be able to provide it – and yet we still don't do it. Education is something we've let slide miserably in recent decades. We've failed a lot of children in that time. And many of those children – a disproportionate number – are Indigenous children. We've been failing them for a lot longer.

What I'm saying is that we need to invest in the children and their teachers – the human capital, as people like to say these days – as well as the physical infrastructure. Buildings and roads and computer technology and gymnasiums and science labs are essential to any kind of education revolution. But they're worth nothing without people to occupy them, operate them, teach and learn in them. The education revolution begins and ends with people: teaching them,

giving them skills; and, with those skills, the confidence and wherewithal to do their very best for themselves and their communities.

We need more investment in teachers and in their professional development so that we can reasonably expect them to be good teachers; so more good students will grow up wanting to be teachers; and more teachers will believe in the worth of their vocation and in the potential of every child they teach. We need investment in curriculum development. For a start we need curricula that teachers, students and parents can understand, school reports they can understand. That's surely a bare minimum. We need good minds and common sense brought to bear on it – not education theory or bureaucratic fashion. We need curricula that will fit students for fulfilling, useful lives and give them all at least a roughly equal chance at happiness.

It never was an easy task – but the shame is not in failing, it's in not trying as hard or as intelligently as we can. May I also say we should be giving every Australian child a chance to learn about this country's Indigenous history and culture – it is the oldest surviving culture in the world and, as the Prime Minister says, it's a culture all Australians can take great pride in.

I say, let's begin with education: I think we can all agree that a good education is a right and that all Australian children have that right. I think we can all agree that in bestowing knowledge, skills, opportunity and a chance at happiness and self-sufficiency, education also bestows dignity. And all agree, I think, that this right and this dignity are a good deal more than symbolic – they have profound practical effects.

I would like to tell you about a history lesson at Majura Primary School in Canberra. While Canberra is the capital city of Australia, it is a very modest city. Or, at least – it is very modest in size. It has a population of just over 340,000 people. Its surrounds are largely rural, with a number of national parks and a fair bit of bush land.

One day earlier this year, the children of Grade 5 at Majura Primary School went for a bush walk. When they returned to school they discovered that Grade 4 had taken over their classroom. They were told that the desks, the blackboard, their bags and books no longer belonged to them.

The Grade 5 students, confident of what was theirs, asked for it back. The Grade 4 students refused: it all belonged to them now. Not only did they refuse to give the classroom back and the other stuff, but the Grade 5 children were told to stand aside – to stand on the fringes of the classroom – as they now had no right to stand anywhere else. And the teachers supported this.

The Grade 5 students became upset, then angry. They insisted: 'Give us our classroom back'. The other students didn't budge. The anger of the Grade 5s

turned to bewilderment and a sense of helplessness. Everything had been turned upside down. Grade 4 seemed to be settling in to stay.

Sound familiar? Like the famous ‘blue eyes’ experiment that taught students in the US how rapid and devastating institutionalised racial prejudice can be, the colonisation of the Grade 5 classroom at Majura Primary School produced an almost immediate and sharply felt response of injustice and marginalisation in the dispossessed students. The classroom colonisation lesson has the critical experiential dimension of learning that we so often fail to include when teaching our children. It is not just a matter of sparking the imagination and breathing life into the dull facts of text books. It is about an educational experience that reaches and realigns the perspectives and preconceptions that surround and influence our understanding and our ability to learn.

At a deeper level, it is an approach to education that recognises that our perspectives, our attitudes, our understanding, our ability and desire to learn, are all shaped, not only by our access to information and instruction: they are profoundly shaped by our personal experience, our social context and that of our family and community. Just as non-Indigenous children at Majura bring to school background ideas and feelings about the history of Australia and its settlement, so, at a broader level, Indigenous children bring with them certain ideas, feelings and expectations about the formal education system. Within Indigenous families there is a living memory of education as an instrument of disempowerment: dismantling languages, cultures and traditions.

We all come to school from somewhere. Where we come from, what we believe, what we believe about ourselves, significantly – predictably – affects our performance at school. Effective education must have meaning in terms of children’s background. It must connect with their real-life experience, the social context and cultural values of their family and community. This critical dimension is often absent in the schooling of Indigenous children in Australia. The central challenge, in my view, is to create an education system and school environment that genuinely connects with the lives of Indigenous peoples.

In Australia the marked difference between the lives of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is known as ‘the gap’, and it exists in virtually every aspect of existence. Indigenous infant and young-child mortality is two to three times higher than for all Australian infants and children. Our life expectancy is from 17 to 11 years less than other Australians. Our rate of imprisonment is 37 per cent higher. Our rate of employment is 24 per cent lower. In relation to education, 38 per cent fewer Indigenous students complete secondary schooling. Performance in reading, writing and numeracy

is substantially lower, and the differential in this performance has remained unchanged for over a decade.

Closing the Gap on Indigenous Disadvantage is a central commitment of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). Under a national reform agreement, the federal, state and territory governments have identified six objectives:

- closing the life expectancy gap within a generation
- halving the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade
- ensuring all Indigenous four-years-olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education within five years
- halving the gap for Indigenous students in reading, writing and numeracy within a decade
- halving the gap for Indigenous students in Year 12 attainment or equivalent attainment rates by 2020
- halving the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade.

To achieve these objectives, seven building blocks have been identified:

- early childhood
- schooling
- health
- economic participation
- healthy homes
- safe communities
- governance and leadership.

Under the COAG agreement we have: objectives, targets, strategic platforms, building blocks, headline indicators and strategic areas; multifaceted inputs, outcomes and outputs; identified roles and responsibilities.

No doubt such things are necessary for the macromanagement of public policy. And the terminology comes with the territory – but it is language very distant from the reality of the lives of Indigenous Australians. It speaks of another kind of gap. I am not simply carping about words. It goes deeper. In my view, this language expresses both a perspective and an approach, where the human dynamics and substance of the issues to be tackled become subordinate to their external description and measurement. The education of

our children is predominantly described and assessed in functional, managerial terms: strategic targets, performance indicators, core competencies and levels of attainment.

Take the example of school attendance rates. Measureable improvements in rates of school attendance seem to absorb greater energy than examining Indigenous expectations and experiences when actually attending school. Put bluntly, the issue sometimes seems to be converted from increasing genuine participation to simply getting more bums on seats.

In Australia stringent means have recently been employed to increase school attendance. The idea of making welfare payments to Indigenous people conditional on their children's attendance at school was first introduced under the previous Australian Government's intervention in the Northern Territory in 2007. The intervention was designed to reduce child abuse and encourage 'responsible behaviour and better parenting'. All welfare recipients living in 'prescribed areas' on Aboriginal land – roughly 650,000 hectares, with a population of some 45,000 Aboriginal men, women and children – were subject to income management. A presumption of inadequacy and delinquency was applied geographically, in a form of indirect racial discrimination.

While described by the government as a 'special measure', the operation of the Racial Discrimination Act (RDA) was suspended to ensure that this, and other pre-emptive government measures, could take effect. The government was expected to introduce a Bill into the parliament during the November 2009 sittings, but debate on the Bill will not occur until Parliament resumes in 2010. With the need to go through committee processes, we are likely not to see a change in the law and a reinstatement of the RDA until some time in March [This was the state of play when this speech was given in November 2009]. And there is no guarantee of that, as the government does not control the Senate, which has proven to be generally hostile towards at least some of the government's legislative initiatives.

The current government (for now) has maintained the central imperatives of the intervention and, at the beginning of the 2009 school year, started further trials linking school attendance with welfare payments for Aboriginal parents in six Northern Territory communities. While this management system may produce a reduction in the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous attendance rates, it opens a more significant gap. A coercive approach to increasing school attendance rates confuses physical attendance with genuine participation. It reinforces the perception of Indigenous parents and their children that the education system is part and parcel of a wider system of government control over their lives. It plays into and widens the

existing social and cultural divide between Indigenous families and their local schools. It drives children into school rather than drawing them in. Most critically, it confirms the negative stereotypes held about – and held by – Indigenous people that are, in my view, one of the most significant and intimate challenges to improving the education of our children. As Charles Davidson, President of the New South Wales Aboriginal Educational Consultative Group, put it:

[We] cannot think of a single problem plaguing Aboriginal children – from alienation from school, high rates of absenteeism, enjoyment of school, significant underachievement, reduced educational and career aspirations, youth depression and suicide, conceptions about employment prospects and ability to secure rewarding productive careers – that is not traceable, at least in part – to the failure of education systems to maximise our children’s identity and self-concept as Aboriginal people. (Craven and Parente 2003)

There is a dynamic interaction between perception and performance. The way we are seen by others and the way we internalise that view has the ability to affect material outcomes. The negative effects of this vicious cycle are most clearly observed in the field of education.

The phenomenon of ‘stereotype threat’ has been demonstrated in research in the US (Singham 1998, 12). It describes the predictably lower performance of black students when taking tests where they were told the purpose of the tests was to compare their results with those of white students. When the same tests were given without the students being told that the results were for racial comparison, the performance of black students was consistently higher. The same effect was observed where women were told that the purpose of testing was to compare their results in mathematics with those of male students. It was concluded that ‘the fear that a poor performance on a test will confirm a stereotype in the mind of an examiner imposes an anxiety on the test-taker that is difficult to overcome’ (Singham 1998, 12). The anticipated expectation of lower-level performance is confirmed in practice.

Other research suggests that the perceived link between effort and the benefit in return has a direct effect on education outcomes. There is a correlation between educational effort and the strength of ‘the belief that educational effort leads to academic credentials, which in turn lead to gainful employment’ (Singham 1998, 12). Where this chain of connection is perceived to be weak, there is a lower commitment to academic effort.

In plain terms, unless you see that there is a realistic prospect of achievement leading to real employment, why bother? Significantly, this perception of a weak belief in the connection between effort in the schoolroom and employment transcends socioeconomic background. Poor educational outcomes were seen to have less to do with poverty than with the strength of racial stereotypes and expectations of success.

Quite simply, the experience of school for many Indigenous children in Australia is negative. It remains a place for the formal assessment of how far you fall short. The measureable gap in educational outcomes is preceded and produced by subtle, subjective factors – attitudes and beliefs and expectations feeding off and reinforcing low levels of self-esteem. Schools are not frequently seen as integral to Indigenous communities. Our children do not see them as an extension of their home life, but rather as entry into an alien environment that is, at best, indifferent to their culture and identity. At worst, it is antagonistic. I can think of no more powerful way to lay a strong pathway between students' homes and their school than for them to start their learning in the language they speak in their family and community.

In the Northern Territory 40 per cent of Aboriginal students speak a language other than English at home. Bilingual teaching programs have been run in the Territory since 1973. In 1999 the government announced the closure of the Bilingual Language Program. Due to the strong opposition of Aboriginal communities, they were maintained in some places, rebadged as the Two-Way Program; but their numbers actually declined substantially.

In 2005 the Minister for Education put bilingual education back on the agenda, recognising it as 'an important teaching methodology'. Then, late in 2009, she announced that all teaching in all Northern Territory schools would be compulsorily conducted in English for the first four hours of the school day. That is like your culture – that of your family and your community – being sent to the back of the school bus. In the drive to close the performance gap, the separation of the school from the family and communal environment is widened, which in turn dampens performance.

As expressed by Gulumbu Yunupingu, a school council member of Yirrkala Primary School:

We [are]... saddened by such an approach because our language comes from within the very essence of our being. It makes us who we are. That essence is sacred... Just like the English feel about their language. We Yolngu don't know how they think and they don't

know how we think about our language and our stories and our very beings. So you see the language comes from within, it's alive, we are still living, we are not dead yet. (Whitmont 2009)

I should make it abundantly clear – if there could be any doubt – that I support the objective of Indigenous children reaching national standards in reading, writing and numeracy. There should be no soft standards. In Australia, competency in English is essential. Regular attendance at school is essential. Progression to tertiary study, training and employment is the common goal. The real question is about the most effective, sustainable way to achieve these results.

To me, the answer is found in the root meaning of 'education'. The word derives from the combination of the Latin words *e* and *ducare*, meaning to lead out – to draw forth. The concentration on education as a systemic means of delivering instruction, teaching and assessing functional skills and core competencies, together with the provision of the necessary infrastructure and hardware, has obscured this fundamental meaning. This has particular significance for the education of Indigenous children. The notion of 'closing a gap' very easily slides unintentionally into the idea of compensatory schooling – that there is a deficit in our children that must be made up. Or that the languages and cultures of our peoples are part of the problem.

Our starting point must be to envisage children with intelligence, imagination, culture and values, desires and expectations for their lives. And our task is to move from that point – to lead out, draw forth and expand all those human qualities and potential. Education must first affirm who we are, before presenting the potential of who we may be. Schooling must start through building an understanding and connection with the social and cultural context into which Indigenous children are born. It must have meaning in terms of their experience, creating a confluence between their culture and experience, validating identity, building self-confidence and expanding expectations.

There are impressive signs of progress in adopting this approach. I see and hear of schools across our country – like the Majura Primary School – taking on this critical element of education, innovating and excelling in it. Majura School has Indigenous culture and history woven throughout the fabric of the school and the curriculum. There's a gallery including Indigenous art, the Horton map of Indigenous Australia and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags are all prominently displayed. These things say to the 20 Indigenous students at the school: 'Your cultures, history and past experiences and identity are recognised and valued here. You are valued here.' Equally

important, they say to the non-Indigenous students that Indigenous history, cultures, experiences and peoples are valued and worth learning about.

In rural and remote areas of Australia, things can be a lot more difficult than in the suburbs of Canberra and in other urban settings. Indigenous communities have chronic and acute housing needs; there is an endemic lack of access to standard health services, communications and other vital infrastructure. School facilities are at best basic. The turnover of teachers in remote Aboriginal communities is often measured in months rather than years. There are problems with violence, alcohol and drug abuse, child abuse and neglect, unemployment, underemployment. Serious community malaise and aimlessness.

Just as education is fundamental to improving every aspect of the lives of Indigenous children – from their health and life expectancy to their participation in the workplace – so their wellbeing in every other aspect of life impacts on their education. Tackling health, housing, violence and substance abuse across Indigenous communities – through family education and the promotion of positive parenting skills – must be linked to a shift in our approach to schooling. The school house must be repositioned to place it at the centre of Indigenous communities, inviting participation on a basis of encouragement and trust. Parents are the first teachers of their children. Their role must be recognised, respected and incorporated in the governance of schools and the delivery of education.

Community buses to collect children from home, breakfast and lunch programs run by parents, elders teaching language and culture – all promote connection. Life-long learning activities for parents, family centres, access to early childhood development and other children's services, co-located with the community school, create an environment where the formal education of Indigenous children becomes part of a wider capacity-building process.

Progress across all the fronts necessary to achieve better educational outcomes in these circumstances will be hard fought. I do not need to tell you that to speak of the problems we face as 'challenges' is to place a bit of spin on them. It is difficult to get traction on these challenges. And this difficulty gives rise to frustration and impatience. In Australia I see this impatience expressed in the linkage of welfare payments to school attendance and top-down decisions about the place of Indigenous languages – together with other approaches that attempt to shift behavioural problems and to improve educational outcomes by pre-emptive measures.

In my view, such measures will not drive the necessary changes. They do not build positive, responsible behaviour; in fact they remove responsibility,

increase a sense of helplessness, stigmatise and reinforce negative self-images. They compromise human rights and do not foster the human dynamics and capacity building that will drive change. Approaches primarily shaped by a concentration on objective targets and performance measurement become, insidiously, a form of management and regulation that is both destructive of Indigenous culture and the rights of our peoples. While performance indicators are an essential part of achieving and monitoring improvements in the education of our children, there is a coincident, complimentary need to construct and monitor Indigenous educational practice within a framework of rights.

In this respect I believe Australia should look to South Africa. While our countries have commonly ratified all relevant major human rights instruments, in Australia we have no express constitutional guarantee of the enjoyment of the fundamental right to education or of ancillary cultural rights affecting Indigenous education. Chapter 2 of the South African Constitution articulates a Bill of Rights. Section 29 (1) provides everyone with a right to basic education, including adult education. Section 29 (2) specifies a citizen's right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice, where it is reasonably practicable.

I do not wish to pose as an expert on the South African Constitution. Or advocate its wholesale adoption. Its provisions are adapted to the circumstances of South Africa. South Africa has 11 official languages that reflect the various cultural backgrounds of the major population groups. Indigenous Australians comprise only 2.5 per cent of our national population and, in small numbers, we speak many languages. Moreover, I am acutely aware that the mere articulation of a right does not guarantee its exercise and enjoyment in practice. But when I look at the further provisions in Section 29 (2), which deal with the effective implementation of the right to education in an official language, the section directs the state to take into account: (a) equity, (b) practicability and (c) the need to redress the results of past racially discriminatory laws and practices. The constitutional prescription of these factors throws a framework of values over any approach to the state's delivery of education. It recalls the historical context of this enterprise and clearly identifies the impact of the past as a living factor that must be directly addressed.

A framework of rights not only constrains and guides the state; it speaks directly to citizens – to the people who hold those rights. It takes us down to the community level where the real work of improving the education of our children must take place. It insists on respect for the human rights and the humanity, the cultures and values, the historical and contemporary experiences

of the parents and children that must be at the heart of improvements in Indigenous education. It takes us to the human scale and reminds us that we must always start with the engagement of young children, born into the residue of the past, but with full creative capacity to transcend it and to excel. Our greatest opportunity lies in those young children, in their energy and their aspirations. Our greatest challenge is not to fail another generation of Indigenous children.

References

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Education in Australia encompasses the sectors of early childhood education (preschool) and primary education (primary schools), followed by secondary education (high schools), tertiary education (universities and Registered Training Organisations (RTO's)). Regulation and funding of education is primarily the responsibility of the States and territories, however the Australian Government also plays a funding role. Featureâ€”Consolidated Project Report. Online learning in Australian higher education: Opportunities, challenges and transformations. Cathy Stone. University of Newcastle, Newcastle, Australia. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Australia. Abstract. Higher education is being rapidly transformed by the growth in online learning, with an increasing number of universities worldwide offering degree programs in online, distance modes of study. Australian. Inequity in Australian education has occurred in the relationship between social background, and achievement, and participation in post-compulsory schooling (McGaw, 2007).Â Many Indigenous groups in Australia aim to regain power through language and culture to influence and facilitate Indigenous knowledge systems and cultural and spiritual worldviews.Â Developments during this time of debate around equal opportunities saw solutions such as compensatory education for disadvantaged groups and a drive for equality of resources and access to curriculum assistance. This approach today is considered naïve given our understanding of the very different sociocultural experiences of students. For Indigenous communities, bilingual education has been highly valued not only because it helps children maintain Indigenous languages, but also because it provides an honoured place for Indigenous languages in the curriculum and an honoured place for Indigenous teachers. However, in the Northern Territory bilingual education has been a controversial issue since its inception in the 1970s.Â However, this multilingualism is rapidly eroding under the pressure of the poor living standards and lack of opportunities in these communities, and the pressure to learn the dominant language. Further, Australia s expenditure on early childhood education has compared poorly with other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries in 2004 Australia s expenditure on pre-primary education amounted to 0.1 per cent of GDP, compared to the OECD average of 0.5 per cent of GDP.[2].Â In Queensland and Victoria preschool education is principally delivered by community providers and regulated and funded in part by education departments.