

Raising the Education Bar for Indigenous Students in Rural and Remote Australian Communities: Voices from Key Stakeholders and Newly Qualified Teachers

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ABSTRACT

There is a critical need to address education attainment for young Indigenous students in rural and remote locations of Australia. In these communities national literacy and numeracy benchmarks are much lower (Harrison, 2008), and the profound implication results in limited life-long opportunities (Jorgensen, 2012). To raise the 'education bar' for these students it is imperative that newly qualified teachers working in these locations have rich knowledge banks and specific sets of skills. The perceptions, beliefs and experiences of Indigenous education in these rural and remote areas were captured in this study which involved 26 participants. Thirteen were recent graduates from the same Bachelor of Education degree course in one Australian university, currently teaching Indigenous students in rural and remote community schools in Western Australia. The remaining thirteen involved other key stakeholders in Indigenous education in Australia, including local and national Indigenous academics, policy-makers and leaders in the field. The aim of this research was to build a holistic picture of the reported major factors that constitute high quality education for these Indigenous students. The study was qualitative and employed an in-depth structured questionnaire. The findings between the newly qualified teachers and the key stakeholders were congruent and indicate that these teachers need to raise their education expectations for Indigenous students, particularly in the areas of literacy and mathematics. The need to recognise when some areas of learning may be best taught more explicitly, rather than a reliance on inquiry based methods, was identified. Cultural and contextual knowledge and understandings, including sensitivities and diversity, living conditions, and absenteeism were also highlighted. Great importance was also placed on celebrating the children's learning and engagement at school, the need to value and implement a differentiated curriculum and establish strong relationships with the students.

Keywords: Quality Indigenous education, Rural and remote Indigenous education, Newly qualified teachers, Pre-service degree course Indigenous content

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the experiences, beliefs and understandings of newly qualified teachers, who graduated from the same course and university in Australia, working with Indigenous students in rural and remote community schools in Western Australia and key stakeholders in Indigenous education. Importantly, it is about how 'the education bar' for Indigenous students in these communities may be raised to foster a greater sense of wellbeing and life-long opportunities for employment and access to different services. Although to achieve better education outcomes for these students pre-service teachers choosing to undertake a professional experience placement in these Indigenous locations, along with new graduates, need to be well prepared. So underpinning the research was a desire for an in-depth rural and remote Indigenous education unit of work to be developed and implemented, to further support these pre-service teachers and graduates. The intention was to build a holistic overview of the contemporary nature of Indigenous education and ways of knowing and living, so that those involved gain from the knowledge and understandings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are numerous government and academic reports that discuss the significant 'gap' between the educational outcomes of Indigenous students compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts (DEEWR, 2008; MCEETYA, 2006). This is evident by the number of Indigenous students who achieve literacy and numeracy national benchmarks 20% lower than the figures for non-Indigenous students (Foley, 2007). It seems, however, that there are multiple reasons for the undesirable and substantial difference in the educational outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

One train of thought is that schools have neglected to embrace and foster the values and customs of Indigenous students and so this has resulted in their identity being considerably dampened (Reynolds, 2005). Others like Mills and Goos (2007) have suggested that racism remains strong in Australian schools and as a consequence Indigenous students may feel marginalised. They also purport that poor levels of spoken English exists amongst Indigenous students and that school retention rates are much lower when compared to the national average.

Ball and Pence (2006) and Harris (1990) assert that disparity in education outcomes between the groups may also be because of the different ways Indigenous students learn in comparison to non-Indigenous students. They argue that Indigenous students are not as comfortable learning through enquiry- based learning strategies and prefer observation, participation and repetition. This means that teachers of Indigenous students may need to consider a differentiated curriculum, which is about adapting the teaching methods and styles, along with the materials and resources, to suit the needs of learners (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000).

A further exacerbation for the lower than average national education outcomes for Indigenous students is raised by Jorgensen (2012). She highlights the matter of high absenteeism for many Indigenous students and states that there are complex reasons for non-attendance. Jorgensen reiterates that a sense of mindfulness needs to be reflected with the interface between the cultures of schooling and Indigenous communities of practice. As Harrison (2008) explains these students are expected to attend family business and this could mean being present at a funeral that may last for several weeks. Indeed, these complex factors solely or collectively may foster tensions for Indigenous students in schools.

Despite the importance placed on the value of education the Federal Government admits that disadvantages remain between Indigenous and non-Indigenous outcomes across the education sector and that unacceptable gaps exist (DEEWR, 2008). In an effort to address the systemic challenges that plague Indigenous education (DEEWR, 2008), teachers need to be competent in their knowledge and understanding about how best to teach Indigenous students. This involves specific knowledge and skills about how Indigenous students may learn more effectively, and more importantly, discussing attitudes and expectations in relation to 'raising the education bar' for Indigenous students. A high number of the teachers in remote Indigenous communities are recent graduates (Zevenbergen, Grootenboer & Niesche, 2009). These teachers are mostly from white, middle class, urban backgrounds and often they have had little or no interaction with people of other ethnicities and social class (Allard & Santoro, 2004). Moyle (2005) adds to this concern by stating that university courses also do not adequately prepare pre-service teachers to effectively teach Indigenous students. She comments that there is insufficient preparation about Indigenous ways of living, knowing and understanding.

It appears that pre-service teachers need specialist pedagogical skills to teach Indigenous students (Hooley, 2009). For example, Hooley suggests that they need further training in explicit teaching skills, especially in the field of literacy. As Mellor and Corrigan (2004) indicate explicit teaching involves directing student attention toward a specific learning goal in a structured learning environment. It involves modelling, explicitly explaining the task including every logical step and 'thinking aloud' by the teacher. They believe it is a process whereby the teacher communicates openly their meta-cognitive thinking to the class. Hooley (2009) contends that this measure may also assist in improving the dire literacy outcomes in Indigenous communities.

In addition to explicit teaching, some believe pre-service teachers need more Indigenous cultural awareness, such as training in Indigenous norms, morals, history, preferred communication styles, and an understanding of Indigenous communities in their teaching course (DEEWR, 2008; Foley, 2007; Mellor & Corrigan, 2004). The need to incorporate more Indigenous capital into pre-service teacher courses in Australia is of great importance if we are going to improve the systemic problems that plague Indigenous education in Australia (Mills & Goos, 2007). If pre-service teachers are trained with a higher level of contextually specific cultural capital, this breaks down the barriers between the teacher and learner, and hence, the relationship begins to form (Mellor & Corrigan, 2004). As Hooley (2009) stresses the student-teacher relationship is critical for learning and engagement, and especially for building trust with Indigenous students.

Unfortunately shame and embarrassment can be unintentionally inflicted by teachers on Indigenous students, and as Harrison (2008) asserts this may be triggered when students feel signalled out, or when they speak out. As Christie, (1993) reminds us this type of behaviour can be considered as being smart by others students and therefore not culturally appropriate. Munns (1998, p.181) talks about shame for Indigenous students being viewed as a 'loss of face', particularly by their peers and so they shy away from responding to questions and even doing their work.

Pre-service teachers also need the practical information one needs to function effectively in a remote community (Moyle, 2005). Pre-service teachers are not typically prepared to live in such communities and this may partly explain why the teacher turnover in remote Indigenous communities is so high (Zevenbergen, Grootenboer & Niesche, 2009). The literature indicates that universities must do more to equip pre-service teachers with the skills to effectively function in remote Indigenous communities. With these skills in their toolkit, they may be more able to promote a welcoming, nurturing and challenging educational environment for Indigenous students.

METHOD

The 26 participants in the research were all involved in Indigenous education. Thirteen of these were recent graduates from the same Bachelor of Education course and university, who were teaching in rural and remote Indigenous community schools. The other thirteen participants were key stakeholders in Indigenous education including academics and policy makers, and local and national Indigenous people. The study was qualitative and employed an in-depth structured questionnaire. The choice for this type of questionnaire was determined because of the need to gain rich information and understandings about what respondents believed to be critical pedagogical areas to further enhance the standard of education for these Indigenous students. The data from the questionnaires were analysed thematically to identify main and sub themes concerning the teachers' and key stakeholders' knowledge and understandings about Indigenous cultural norms, curriculum and pedagogy.

FINDINGS

Newly Qualified Teachers

Culture

This study found that all graduate teachers had very little or no knowledge of Indigenous culture before relocating to the rural or remote community. Of these teachers 40% reported that their limited knowledge about Indigenous ways resulted from holidaying in these areas. A further 40% stated that their knowledge of Indigenous culture came from the media, and the other 20% commented that they gained some understanding of Indigenous ways through their school studies.

As one newly qualified teacher stated:

I have never lived in a community where there have been Indigenous people. The only experience I have had is from visiting family in a town in New South Wales where Indigenous people are a problem. #1

Another graduate teacher commented:

Through my internship I was able to develop awareness and knowledge and I felt happy to stay and work in the community. Before my internship, my knowledge was not a lot. I knew the general Aboriginal history, but knew little of community culture today. #5

In consideration of things about living with Indigenous populations that would have been useful to know more about before moving to their current location, 75% of the teachers named Indigenous cultural norms. As one teacher said:

The concept of time is an important aspect of understanding about how things work but it is really different here because the values in the community are different to what I'm use to. The people can be quite transient here and sometimes if students don't turn up it's not necessarily something you or somebody else has done because it might be a family issue. For example, sometimes they have to go to funerals, which are often out of the community and so families can be away for weeks. #6

Another teacher commented about the importance of being respectful of Indigenous ways of dressing. She said:

In some communities it is not appropriate for women to expose their thighs so a good idea is to wear board shorts, especially when you go swimming. #10

The remaining 25% talked about how it would have been helpful for them to know about the living conditions in remote and rural Indigenous communities. As one teacher reported:

The physical state of the community did give me a shock, there is rubbish everywhere, run down and dirty looking houses and cars, tattered looking camp dogs, bikes and prams left on the side of the road. For me I find it hard to deal with the way the people look after their belongings out here, which is not very well. #5

Curriculum and Pedagogy

In relation to newly qualified teachers' perceptions of learning issues specific to the location 80% stated that the area of literacy was the greatest concern. The following quotations from several of these teachers highlight the literacy challenge that they encountered.

In my kinder-prep class it is a big issue that the kids are coming to school with minimal English. It is very daunting at the beginning of the year, thinking that I needed to start from scratch with just about everything. How to hold a book, count, write their name, go to the toilet, sit on the mat properly, the meaning of yes and no and every other English word! #5

Literacy is a major problem. Many don't have letter/sound awareness. Some parents may speak a fair bit of Aboriginal English, so the students do too. Also parents and families are fairly uneducated so home readers are rarely done or brought back to school. #1

For 20% of the graduate teachers absenteeism was a dilemma in terms of learning issues for the students they were teaching in the rural and remote locations. The nature of this issue is shown below in a vignette:

Students in my school are not made to attend school and because of this, at least half of the students in my class have an attendance average of below 40%. Their learning is way behind the majority of students of their age. Most of my students, who do come to school, are learning at a very low level. #4

In relation to Indigenous students' learning one teacher said:

Sometimes students will just get up and walk around the room. It is not necessarily because they are bored or upset. These people in general are active and like to get up and about. They like to see what is going on and watch a lot. #6

When the graduates were asked about what pedagogical understandings and skills they applied to their teaching context when they first arrived 87% reported the focus was on Aboriginal related literacy and numeracy teaching strategies. The remaining 13% stated that they implemented authoritative behaviour management. As one teacher commented:

With the Aboriginal families in the school it is handy to know which students are related. Some boys can get quite rough and have a punch up, and one time I went over to stop it and one of the older Aboriginal boys said to me, "Nah miss leave em, dah brothers." Sometimes the teachers just let them sort things out for themselves because they have ways of doing this that are different to how we would deal with it. This is where it is useful to have Aboriginal aides in the school. Families are very strong within this community. You have to stay firm and strict at all times but often it is still chaotic no matter how good a teacher you are. #1

Other teachers said:

It's really important not to single kids out because this is a sense of embarrassment for them and even shame. You have to give them lots of positive feedback and also let them know of your high behaviour expectations. As a teacher you need to have a strong relationship with the students and help them to have a strong sense of self and connection to their community. #3

You have to be firm but fair it's all about being direct and following things through. #6

Although, the teachers reported that their pedagogical needs with Indigenous students had changed with time. Eighty-seven per cent commented that during their teaching period in the Indigenous location their work now focused more on the explicit teaching of literacy, numeracy and talking. The other 13% stated that their priority after a period of time concerned differentiation of the curriculum.

As one graduate stated many of these children have different ways of learning.

Indigenous students learn best with explicit teaching methods and structured processes rather than inquiry based ways. When I teach reading and writing the process needs to be broken into small steps to make it easier for the children to grasp. #7

One teacher mentioned that she wished she had known more about how Indigenous students learn best, because she was only knowledgeable about inquiry based methods. She said:

From a literacy perspective scaffolding methods would have been good to be told about prior to teaching in the location. Inquiry learning or student centred learning places huge demands on Indigenous students who are not familiar with traditional school settings and discourses. #2

Seventy-five per cent of the graduate teachers also reported that they were not very familiar with the Western Australian curriculum framework prior to teaching in the Indigenous location. More than half of these teachers considered they needed to be better prepared in this area of teaching and the following comments highlight this concern.

I had an understanding of the Tasmanian curriculum, which was useful for knowing and understanding the outcomes and levels. It took me a long time to get used to working with and understanding the WA curriculum. #5

I was not familiar with the WA curriculum like I was with the Tasmanian curriculum. #6

The other 13% per cent of graduate teachers mentioned that they had some understanding of the curriculum in Western Australia. As one teacher commented:

We operate under a pretty mainstream curriculum here and I didn't really know much about the content – but in fact in might be better if the actual curriculum was adapted to better meet local conditions. #13

Key Stakeholders

Culture

In this study all key stakeholders considered that the largest gap in the preparation for graduate teachers' work, in rural and remote Indigenous locations, was a lack of cultural knowledge. A number of comments highlighted the importance for these teachers to better understand the relationship of language in culture and schooling and Indigenous sensitivities, whilst 18% specifically mentioned the need to know about Indigenous learning styles.

As one key stakeholder reported:

I do think that one area that is neglected in teacher training courses is the awareness and understanding of the role of language as a part of the culture.

These Indigenous students have a very rich language, however many speak varieties that differ greatly from Standard Australian English (SAE) (for example, creole type varieties, and Aboriginal English). Often these students are viewed as speaking poor English rather than a dialect of English, or even a different language altogether. I also think the oral tradition of Indigenous culture is very important. #3

Another key stakeholder stated:

All teachers [wishing to teach in Indigenous communities] should have to undertake a compulsory period of time working in Indigenous rural and remote locations. Teachers who have never had contact with Aboriginal people will struggle to teach their children effectively, at least, early in their careers because they do not have the knowledge, relationships or cultural sensitivities necessary. #6

This latter comment was also supported by another key stakeholder who wrote:

It must be hard for teachers to go out in a rural or remote community and teach properly without even having done a brief stint in one of these locations, let alone being a newly qualified teacher, which a lot of them are. #11

When the key stakeholders were asked if there were things about living within Indigenous populations that graduates would find useful, 71% noted that practical advice about living in remote communities would be helpful. Reference was given to the profound heat in some of these locations, and housing and living conditions. The remaining 29% reiterated that Aboriginal cultural norms were important considerations to know about prior to working in these locations. Some examples provided by key stakeholders included how the community works and lives, along with their expectations of one another.

Curriculum and Pedagogy

In relation to key stakeholders' beliefs and understandings about curriculum all alluded to the importance of the differentiated curriculum, in order to cater for the different abilities of Indigenous students and their local contexts. Sixty per cent of these key stakeholders specifically reported that lived experiences and Aboriginal perspectives needed to be incorporated into formal schooling.

As one key stakeholder commented:

Teachers need to adapt the curriculum to suit local contexts and needs. Aboriginal children learn best when they are provided with a supportive environment based on positive relationships and mutual respect. The teachers need to have high expectations of the children and scaffold their teaching and learning programs to support the needs of the children. Teachers need to celebrate that the children are attending school rather than rousting them for being late. #6

Another key stakeholder said:

One of the problems with the way Indigenous students are currently taught is the language barrier. Many don't understand what is being asked of them. Many don't understand non Indigenous question and answer routines. May be there is not enough value on the home language for there are no bilingual programs and overall there needs to be higher expectations of Indigenous students. #10

Sixty per cent of key stakeholders reported that Indigenous students learn best when teachers build strong relationships with them, whilst the other 40% considered that the key was to have high expectations for these students. Fifty per cent of the stakeholder participants also stated that explicit teaching strategies worked best with Indigenous students, and the other 50% thought that incorporating Aboriginal perspectives into teaching methods would be helpful. In terms of the most important subject areas for meeting the needs of Indigenous students, 55% of the key stakeholders stated literacy and the remaining 45% thought that numeracy required the highest priority. Comments from one key stakeholder are as follows:

Indigenous students need sound literacy and numeracy skills. They [teachers] have low expectations and so dumbing down the curriculum is a major problem. Adapting the curriculum to

suit local contexts is another issue. We expect young inexperienced teachers to achieve major improvements when they are still learning how to teach. #6

This belief was also congruent with other stakeholders' perceptions, as noted below:

When teachers have limited or poor expectations of Indigenous students it results in them having no motivation or ambition to do well. #8

All of the systems preference non Indigenous ways of learning, and few incorporate Indigenous knowledge into their practices to make them more inclusive. #9

DISCUSSION

Culture

We know that the major aim for all teachers working in rural and remote Indigenous communities is to strive for better educational outcomes for the children. Yet this was problematic for the newly qualified teachers in this study, because they arrived at these locations having little or limited knowledge of Indigenous culture and ways of living and learning. These graduates recognised their initial lack of understanding about how these students learn best and the need for explicit teaching strategies. The key stakeholder participants in this study also asserted that a lack of cultural understanding is indicative of a wide gap in graduate teachers' knowledge, and that teacher preparation courses need to better prepare teachers to work in rural or remote Indigenous locations. If government and academic institutions are concerned about the significant 'gap' between the educational attainment of Indigenous students, compared to non-Indigenous students (DEEWR, 2008; MCEETYA, 2006), then it is important for graduate teachers working in Indigenous communities to gain sound underpinnings and effective teaching strategies.

Contemporary understandings in relation to reconciliation (MCEETYA, 2006; Reynolds, 2005) also capture the need for teachers to improve their knowledge base and skills to effectively teach Indigenous students. There is an expectation that teachers include Indigenous viewpoints on social, cultural and historical matters into the curricula. Although, many of the graduates reported that as newly qualified teachers they had little knowledge of Indigenous ways and the key stakeholder participants agreed. Batten and Batten (2011) highlight that Indigenous disadvantage continues to be a great concern in Australia and despite decades of government intervention the gap is widening. Researchers, such as Ball and Pence (2007), Foley (2007) and Harrison (2008), state very clearly that one way to lessen the gap is through high quality education programs for Indigenous students.

Pedagogy

As the current study shows pre-service teacher education courses need to emphasise the importance of working with Indigenous students' strengths and ways of knowing. The findings from this study show that graduate teachers working in rural and remote Indigenous locations require more knowledge about how these students may learn best. This was an issue for many of these graduates and key stakeholders, because they noted the learning benefits for these students when teachers included Indigenous ways of knowing and understanding. Harris (1984; 1990) and Donovan (2009) affirm that for many of these students this means a greater focus on explicit teaching methods, as opposed to enquiry based learning. This way of teaching Harris argues, means that Indigenous students learn in different ways compared to non-Indigenous students. He considers that Indigenous students are not as comfortable learning through enquiry based teaching strategies, but prefer supporting strategies that include observation, modelling, participation, and imitation, rather than listening and talking. Harris (1984) contends that

Indigenous students' learning is more immediate and not a highly conscious act or thought process. He reminds us that Indigenous students have a propensity to learn through watching, which may occur over a long period of time, before they will attempt to 'have a go' at the task. According to Harris, Indigenous students tend to learn through trial and error, which is different from teachers providing instruction through words. This way of knowing was also mentioned by some key stakeholders and a number of graduates in this study, particularly with statements about the students watching to see how things are done over and over again, rather than listening to instructions about how to complete the task.

The findings from this study also indicate a need for graduate teachers to know more about the interrelationship between cultural norms and behaviour management. As Harrison (2009) states, Indigenous students are encouraged to be independent, self-reliant and to learn through their actions. His statements are supported by the findings from the current study, particularly about older Indigenous students being reasonably independent concerning daily matters and the expectation from parents is that, if needed, they will make decisions for themselves and their siblings. Harris (1984) points out that life at school for these Indigenous students is vastly different from their home ways, because at school they are monitored, the day is organised and they are disciplined by the teachers.

Curriculum

The graduate teachers and key stakeholders in this study were acutely aware of the differences in standards attained by the Indigenous students in rural and remote communities. Some newly qualified teachers made a comment about how these students were well behind with their literacy and numeracy and that they soon realised their way of teaching was not highly effective for these students. These graduate teachers, along with the key stakeholders, commented on the need to be more focused and deliberate with teaching, particularly in these curriculum areas. Donovan (2009) and Harrison (2008), also support a more explicit approach, which is popular with Indigenous students, because it helps tasks to be broken down into more manageable components. Harrison suggests that in this way Indigenous students can learn one step at a time, and this mode of learning for literacy and numeracy was a finding from the current study.

Another contributing factor for the lower educational outcomes for Indigenous students may be the high absenteeism rates. As Mellor and Corrigan (2004) state, it is obvious that if students do not attend school day after day they will not be successful. For some graduate teachers in the current study this was a real concern and an unsolved issue that needed to be addressed. The key stakeholder participants did not have the same issue, which could relate to them understanding and accepting that students may be absent for cultural reasons. Ball and Pence (2006) suggest that teachers need to understand the critical importance of engaging Indigenous students in their school work. They, along with the key stakeholders in the study, believe that this can be encouraged by considering the cultural lens of the particular community, because it is important that these children can study in an environment where their beliefs, traditions, language and cultural practices are valued and respected. As suggested by Tomlinson and Allan (2000) there is a need to value a differentiated curriculum, which modifies activities and experiences according to the context, to fully support student engagement. The need to incorporate cultural aspects and different ways of knowing and understanding were also mentioned by some newly qualified teachers as being a way of teaching they now recognise as important for the learning needs of Indigenous students.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The findings from this project highlight the critical importance for pre-service teachers, who intend to teach in rural and remote Indigenous locations, to gain rich knowledge and understandings about the composition of high quality education for Indigenous students. This could involve these pre-service teachers successfully completing a professional experience placement in a rural or remote Indigenous location. During this practicum a requirement could be for them to keep a journal of their experiences and perceptions. These perspectives may then be viewed and voiced through multiple lenses by addressing and discussing different aspects concerning living and teaching in rural and remote Indigenous locations. Encouraging conversations and sharing reflections about the importance of building trusting relationships with the children, families and community, and how best to improve educational outcomes for these Indigenous students, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy, would be other enhancements. In gaining greater insights about teaching in rural and remote Indigenous locations, graduate teachers have the opportunity to be better prepared for this teaching environment. These lived experiences and rich understandings could be documented for research and future teaching purposes and shared with other pre-service teachers and interested parties.

Another recommendation is to encourage pre-service teachers, who aspire to teaching in rural and remote Indigenous communities, to complete a purposefully designed and developed unit of work for teaching in these communities. If the content of this unit included topics about cultural contexts and differences, building trusting relationships and Indigenous ways of knowing and learning - incorporating a differentiated curriculum, behaviour management understandings, language diversity, and strategies for improving educational outcomes, then these newly qualified teachers would be more equipped to implement high quality education programs for these Indigenous students. With rich knowledge and skills in their toolkit, newly qualified teachers will be more able to demonstrate a welcoming, nurturing and engaging educational environment for these students. If we believe that it takes a village to raise a child then building strong partnerships with families and the community is essential in raising the education bar for Indigenous students.

These recommendations provide a window of opportunity for pre-service teachers choosing to teach in rural and remote Indigenous locations to gain insights into teaching and living in these communities. We know that teachers need to be knowledgeable about how best to teach Indigenous students (DEEWR, 2008), so that justice prevails and the educational outcomes of these children mirror their non-Indigenous counterparts (MCEETYA, 2006).

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