

An Indigenous Community Learning Centre to Promote a Culture of Learning

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Abstract

This paper describes a project which focuses on the development of a 'schooled' culture of learning in an inner city Indigenous community. The project is a collaboration between an urban Indigenous community in Sydney, the school that serves children from this community, and academics in the local University. The collaboration aims to promote an intergenerational and community based approach to fostering a 'schooled' culture of learning among the Indigenous members of the community. This paper reports on some of the research from the literature that will inform the way the project will be conducted and framed.

Introduction

The authors of this paper are University lecturers who are currently involved in a community based action research project in an inner city school community in Sydney. The community has a significant Indigenous population, many of whom experience significant social and economic disadvantages. This project draws on the recognition of the effects of intergenerational and community involvement in increasing Indigenous people's engagement with learning. It is based on a partnership between a school which serves the children of the community, the adult Indigenous community members and the local University where the researchers are located.

In order to conduct this research, existing literature on school – family - community partnership programs has been examined for examples and principles of good practice. In this paper we examine some of the findings from this literature and cite some relevant policies and recommendations from similar initiatives that support partnership arrangements for promoting learning. We also examine some literature on university and school/ community collaboration that can support our reflection on our own role as university academics researching in community settings. We then give an overview of the project. Finally, we report on some of the challenges that are involved in moving forward with the project and where the project sits at present.

School – family – community partnerships

The value of cooperation between the school, family and the community in improving Indigenous students' literacy and numeracy is supported by the National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (NIELNS) 2000-2004. Working Together for Indigenous Youth: A National Framework (WTIY) that is part of the initiative from NIELNS emphasises working in partnerships, particularly with local community and businesses. The Minister for Education, Science and Training has announced further funding for an Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Programme (2004) that builds on initiatives that have worked under the NIELNS and WTIY framework, and puts further effort into preparing and supporting children for formal schooling, and improving

retention rates in high schools (Nelson, 2004a). A “whole of school strategy” has also been identified as a strategy for improving educational outcomes for Indigenous people. In his media release, the Minister announced, “[t]he Whole of School Strategy comprises two main elements: \$62.5 million for submission-based funding for projects to promote parent and school partnerships, and up to \$37.8 million for the continuation of homework centres, with an increased emphasis on local partnerships with schools and communities” (Nelson, 2004b). The need for a partnership between the schools, family and community are evident in research on schooling generally, but particularly so in relation to Indigenous education. In his study of Indigenous adults returning to school, Howard (2002) says that:

Indigenous education is an area where blame and failure often proliferate. Teachers blame parents for not making their children come to school. Parents blame teachers for not teaching in a way so their children want to come to school. Students blame teachers for not being interested. All feel a failure and often respond to each other from a sense of defensive inadequacy (p8).

The comments made by the people Howard (2002) interviewed confirm that family support was “the most important motivation” for those who stayed at school, and difficulties that others had in the home were one of the most significant sources of difficulties for them in school (pp8-9). Those who left school early, mentioned regret and low confidence as consequences.

School retention rates of Indigenous students are historically very low, and even now, they are significantly lower rates compared to the non-Indigenous population:

Figure 1: School retention rates of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students

	In 2002, stayed in schooling till:		
	year 10	year 11	year 12
Indigenous	83.0%	53.6%	36.4%
non-Indigenous	98.0%	86.2%	73.3%

(Commonwealth Government 2000 School Census, cited in Commonwealth Government of Australia, 2001:1)

Given the significance of family support in motivating Indigenous students to stay in school, the idea of partnership between schools and families make sense.

There are many related terms used to describe “partnerships” that are established between schools and the parents of the school students and/or the broader community in which the school is located. Some of the terms that can be used in surveying the literature are:

- family literacy;
- family math(s);
- home-school/ school – community partnerships; and
- intergenerational literacy/ learning.

The goals of these partnerships can range from a parent’s role in helping their own children with reading, to whole communities taking a role in strengthening the school within their community. Weinstein (1998), Dodd and Konzal (2002) and Cairney and Ruge (1998) provide useful overviews of different types of partnerships that have

developed in North America and Australia. O'Connor's book (1993) on a British initiative for connecting school aged people with older people, provides a number of case studies, including community schools which have been set up with an Open Door Policy that encouraged older adults to enrol. Weinstein categorises four different types of goals of family and intergenerational literacy programs: a) using parental involvement to improve their children's achievements; b) improving reading practices of young children or another identified group of learners; and c) enabling adults to develop a critical understanding of schooling, leading to networking and advocacy; and d) reconnecting the generations (1998, pp 2-3). These need not be mutually exclusive goals, and the many examples cited in Weinstein, and Cairney and Ruge address more than one of these goals.

Cairney and Ruge (1998) conducted research in Australia on community literacy practices and schooling. Their research was driven by the concern that for some school children, the mismatch between their home and school literacy practices could have negative impacts on their school achievements. Their model of literacy is based around a social practice model of literacy that is supported by other literacy and numeracy researchers (see for example Baynham, 1995, Baker, 1998). According to Baynham (1995, p1) "[i]nvestigating literacy as practice involves investigating literacy as 'concrete human activity', not just what people do with literacy, but also what they make of what they do, the values they place on it and the ideologies that surround it." Thus, understanding family and community literacy and numeracy practices can involve a very broad range of practices, but with a view to examining locally, the types of reading materials that are present and valued, how reading and writing are valued, who are the people that read and write different types of texts, and who are the people who make decisions and manage time and money.

In a chapter on the cultural behaviours and conflicts that can contribute to Indigenous children's disengagement from learning in the school setting, West (1994) identifies aspects of a child's treatment and experiences in the home and the school that may be areas of conflict. These aspects are *equality* in terms of social equality, independence, freedom, compliance and control; *practical competence* in terms of practical ability, trust, observation skills; *communication* in terms of non-standard Australian English, silence, courtesy, eye contact; *affiliation* in terms of affiliation to peers, nurturance, help from peers; and *personal attributes* in terms of resilience and mistakes/ risk taking (West, 1994). The differences in expected and accepted behaviours between the home and school are not only seen in Indigenous children living in remote Aboriginal communities. According to Enemburu (1989, cited in Truow, 1994, p52), "children brought up within (Aboriginal) families in urban areas are still likely to be affected by child rearing characteristics of the traditional pattern." Strategies of culturally responsive pedagogy in schools are discussed in several of the chapters by Harris and Malin (1994). Case studies of communities where schools have sought to engage in productive relationships with Indigenous students are found in Gray (2000) and Rose (1999, 2004).

Promoting a 'schooled' culture of learning in a community must therefore be responsive to cultural differences between the students' school and home/ community cultures, and value and draw on the knowledge and learning of all members of the community. It must

therefore involve a process of recognising, celebrating and valuing different learning, and in particular, literacy practices. Differences in literacy practices are seen not only in relation to school versus home practices, but also in relation to different age groups, cultural groups, and situations and purposes for reading, writing and speaking within the school, home and community.

Where there is an identifiable group within the community who are socially and economically disadvantaged, some of the common forms of “partnerships” are less immediately relevant than in communities where the partnerships are aimed at addressing literacy and numeracy problems of a few children from highly educated families. For the latter, programs that are based on parents helping their children with school literacy and numeracy difficulties can be viable and effective. However, where the parents themselves have not necessarily had a positive experience of schooling, and/ or had left school at a very early age, the idea of drawing on their knowledge to help the children with their school learning is not immediately viable. In commenting on ways of discussing school experiences of Indigenous children with their parents, Ngarritjan-Kessariss (1994, p117) says, “[o]nly a small proportion of parents feel confident enough to become involved in school matters and many parents choose not to visit the school unless absolutely necessary. This is particularly true for Aboriginal parents”. A partnership that focuses only on parents helping children with their school work is also a limited form of partnership that privileges particular forms and contexts of learning. Focusing only on schooled learning carries with it a risk of devaluing other forms of learning and knowledge generation.

Because this project is about promoting a ‘schooled’ culture of learning within a disadvantaged Indigenous community, the forms of partnerships of interest are those that value and encourage different forms of learning and knowledges. The project seeks to avoid reinforcing a view that the school is the only or most important site of learning and source of learning, which would in turn discourage adults in this community from feeling included in the project. The National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (2000) reflect this concern in their recommended initiatives, including “improving attendance levels by engaging parents and the community” (p 15); “providing mentoring projects for students, using the skills and leadership of Elders and community leaders” (p19); and “putting a greater focus on ensuring culturally inclusive approaches to education planning and delivery” (p 20).

Some examples of programs and approaches that try to develop an inclusive culture of learning are cited in the literature. Weinstein cites a family literacy class where the children’s computer literacy skills are utilised to develop family web pages in which the stories of the all family members are recorded and illustrated (Hovanstein, in press, cited in Weinstein, 1998, p3). Other intergenerational learning programs where stories and memories of the elders in the community are tapped into and recorded and documented on video and other contemporary media are cited (Weinstein, 1998, p3). It is important therefore that programs are set up where all members of the community can participate in learning. Cairney and Ruge (1998) cite an Australian example of a family learning centre which helped an Aboriginal woman develop skills to help her children with their literacy,

while at the same time giving her the support and encouragement to learn how to drive and obtain a driver's licence. This example illustrates the need for initiatives identified in the National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (2000) aimed at "ensuring parents have the skills and confidence to support their children's education" (p16). That is, it cannot be assumed that Indigenous parents will have the confidence to come forward to the school to get involved in school activities simply because they wish to contribute to their children's success in school.

In working with adult Aboriginal learners, Sanggaran (1997, pp23-25) identifies the following strategies for teaching that were identified by his adult Aboriginal learners.

- *Use Aboriginal issues*
- *Make activities relevant to living skills*
- *Adopt a relaxed teaching approach*
- *Employ Indigenous teachers*
- *Adopt a flexible timeframe*
- *Develop achievable courses/ modules*

The principles of designing programs that are personally relevant, in a safe and negotiable environment are fundamental to good adult teaching practice. For many Indigenous adults, the idea of formal learning situations, and the language of schooling may be alienating (Harris and Merridy 1994; Sanggaran 1997). To address this, it may be necessary to have a way of demystifying the education system for the parents so they can develop a critical understanding of schooling (Weinstein, 1998, p2). Weinstein (1998, pp4-5) identifies the following characteristics of promising family and intergenerational literacy programs:

- *Planning and instruction begin with inquiry into learner's lives*
- *The program addresses needs that learners themselves define*
- *The program encourages generations to share knowledge and experience*
- *Learning communities are fostered both among learners and among practitioners*

This suggests the importance of approaching the project with an open mind, and willingness to negotiate what sort of programs will engage Indigenous members of the community. It also points to the need for a considered approach to engaging community members in planning possible programs.

Partnership between University researchers and the school community

If adult Indigenous community members are, because of their own school experiences, uncomfortable about engaging with their children's school, there is little chance that they will engage in a university research project that seeks to understand and address what these same people may view with a sense of "shame". Positioning Indigenous community members as "subjects" of scientific research would be culturally and ethically inappropriate, and also unlikely to be productive for anyone. This project is not intended to be conducted under a traditional model of academic research where the researchers have chosen the school community as a suitable site for a pre-determined research agenda. Rather, the research agenda grew out of a vision that the school and the

university could and should work collaboratively to contribute towards Indigenous community development in our common local area.

Strand et al (2003) contrasts community-based research (CBR) with traditional academic research and identifies three guiding principles:

- CBR is a collaborative enterprise between academic researchers (professors and students) and community members.
- CBR validates multiple sources of knowledge and promotes the use of multiple methods of discovery and dissemination of the knowledge produced.
- CBR has as its goal social action and social change for the purpose of achieving social justice. (p8)

They also point out that even if the research is the primary focus of the university researchers, the social action and change will be what can engage and will be the focus of the community members. Thus, they identify principles of shared worldview, goals and strategies, and mutual trust and respect between the researchers and the target community members as a prerequisite for entering into a project partnership.

In “Education, Indigenous Survival and Well-being: Emerging Ideas and Programs” (Malin and Maidment, 2003), the authors trace the concerns in Indigenous education from the late 1960s until now. They emphasise the shift that is emerging from a model of non-Indigenous educators working *for* the community to a model of the working *with* community. They view positively the emergence of programs which are “vehicles for the local development of social capital and tools for the construction of local capacity [where] Indigenous learning communities would aim to unite families, schools and communities to identify and address local needs through drawing upon local resources” (Schwab and Sutherland, 2001, cited in Malin and Maidment, 2003, pp88-89). They describe an exemplary model of the Irrkerlantye Learning Centre in Alice Springs, which evolved in response to local community needs. The Centre not only provides accredited courses for school aged learners, but provides a range of social services, advocacy support and referrals, access to computer facilities, health clinic and transportation so that community members of all ages have a reason for attending the Centre. This in turn has been found to entice younger people to access the programs in the centre. They state that “the long-term aim of the adult education courses is to provide family members with the skills and knowledge needed to fulfil their community development aspirations, which for many entail revitalising their culture and re-establishing ties with their country” (p95). Malin and Maidment cite another example where the an action researcher working with three dispersed communities started off her research by consulting and negotiating with the community members to find out: “What would Aboriginal people like to see in the education system? [and] “What would improve their quality of life?” (p97). The project resulted in the design and implementation of two accredited VET curricula: Certificate Level 3 in “Community Development Facilitation” and Certificate Level 4 in “Aboriginal Land and Leadership”.

The examples suggests a need for a holistic approach when consulting with community members about meeting “learning” needs of the community, and to recognise the need for

linking the individual needs of the community members with the development aspirations of the community as a whole.

Overview of the project

The sections below give a brief outline of the initial stages of the project .

Rationale

The rationale for this project can be traced back to the involvement of two of the researchers during the establishment of the school in this community. The following educational issues were identified during this period -

- low levels of literacy and numeracy among adult Indigenous community members; and
- low school retention levels among Indigenous students.

Although literacy and numeracy are by no means a panacea for the complex socio-economic situations faced by the community, they are critical social tools for broadening people's ability to participate in the social, economic, and political arena; they are key factors in giving voice to community members in local and wider spheres on matters that affect them. Helping the community enhance their ability to negotiate and challenge the situations they are in, and challenge those social forces that continue to try to entrench inequities and infringements of rights is a first step towards redressing these issues.

The school involved in the partnership has undergone a process of reformation during the last four years. The local inner city community, a functioning, organised and vibrant community, initiated the campaign to reinvigorate the school. In its new form it has sought to build on its previous excellent work with the local indigenous community and continues to embrace an indigenous model of education (Ngarritjan-Kessarlis 1994; Malin and Maidment, 2003). The school has adopted a number of innovations to ensure that it provides appropriate and relevant programs for the local community.

The partnership with the community, the school and the University is of an ongoing nature and is believed to contribute to developing deeper mutual respect between the parties. It is also felt that by working towards promoting and supporting a culture of learning among all of the stakeholders, the voice of the community members, in particular the young people of the community will be heard, respected, and responded to. The partnership between the school and the university is driven by the tertiary institution's commitment to community capacity building. It is also a demonstration of a shared commitment to providing quality public educational opportunities. Since the commencement of the project, a formal memorandum of understanding was signed between the school and the university.

Aims:

The aims of the research component of the project are therefore to:

1. research existing models and literature on school-family-community partnership programs, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy education that is relevant for urban Indigenous communities;

2. establish and document the literacy and numeracy needs of the school community;
3. to examine productive ways in which a partnership between a University and a school/ community can contribute to community development, and in particular, promote a culture of learning among the Indigenous members of the school community.

The project is based around a community-based action research model, and is based around some preliminary assumptions about the type of roles that the participants in the research can play in the promotion of a culture of learning in the community. Firstly, we believe that any initiative for cultural change that can be embraced and sustained by a community has to respect and draw on the existing relationships and social capital within the community (Cairny and Ruge 1998; Dodd and Konzal 2002; Weinstein 1998). Secondly, while recognising that learning takes place both within and beyond formal education institutions, we believe that schools and people's experiences of schooling have a major influence on how a community views education and learning. Thirdly, learning that takes place within the formal boundaries of schools is only one aspect of a community's engagement with learning. Furthermore, it is important that the culture and values of school based learning are ones that can be understood and valued by the whole of the community, in order that the schools in a community contribute positively to the community's culture.

Concluding challenges

The literacy and numeracy needs of Indigenous school children and adults are in some respects, well documented. Equally the value of schools working in partnership with families and communities to improve the learning outcomes, not only for the school children but for the community as a whole, is supported by many case studies. However, it is also known that for people who have had poor experiences of schooling, re-engagement with anything that takes them back to those negative memories is not something that is easy or likely to happen. This is the case even if the same adults know that it is their lack of "schooled" literacy and numeracy that creates a barrier for them, and consequently for their children in engaging in further education that may open new opportunities for them and their community.

The literature shows that there are a number of good models and examples of partnerships between schools and the family/ community that work to enhance learning across generations. However, the language of schooling and education alienates those who are not fluent in it. Before working with the Indigenous community members and negotiating ways of re-engaging the community in any form of what we may understand as learning, the researchers will need to first speak to the community members to find out their aspirations for their children and community. We will need to develop a language to talk about learning and schooling that connects positively with what the community members value and aspire to. The "scaffolding literacy" method that is being promoted for teaching literacy to school children may also be worth considering in developing a language about learning and schooling with the community members in this project.

Finally, in working with any community, whatever social and political concerns that the community are involved with at the time will impact on how the project can proceed. In our project so far, there have been tragic events in the community which have focussed both focussed the community members and attracted extensive media attention. There have also been changes within the school structure which have had effects on the dynamics within the school. Some of these developments have meant that our consultation process with the community has not progressed as quickly and according to “plan”; however, a research project that genuinely respects a partnership model must take account of the impact of events and socio-political currents within the community. On the other hand working in partnership with the school and the community also means that there is a joint responsibility in the progressing the project, and being able to share strategies for overcoming some of the difficulties that arise.

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