

Impact of programs such as the Wesley College Bunuba/Walmajarri unit in terms of changing understandings of Indigenous ways of knowing by non-Indigenous students

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2011

Executive Summary



Artist: *Kaylene Marr, Bunuba Woman*

Title

The impact of an Indigenous program at Wesley College

The impact on students of programs such as the Primary Years programme (PYP) Indigenous Bunuba/Walmajarri Unit of Inquiry within the **trans-disciplinary** theme 'How we express ourselves' and with the central idea of 'we discover more when we reflect upon other ways of knowing'

Research Question

How effective are programs such as the Wesley College Year 4 PYP Bunuba/Walmajarri unit in terms of changing understandings of Indigenous ways of knowing by non-Indigenous students.

Objectives

- To determine the impact of the Indigenous Unit on Year 4 Wesley College students' knowledge of Indigenous ways of knowing and being, with particular reference to the development of international mindedness and the attributes of the International Baccalaureate Learner Profile
- To produce and test a set of simple and effective metrics that could be used to evaluate a program for improved Indigenous intercultural competence

Introduction

Many educators within Australian Schools are becoming aware of the need to address the imbalance in the content of humanities or integrated studies curriculum in relation to Indigenous studies within our primary and secondary schools. Over the past few years, attempts have been made by various state education bodies to create focussed curriculum documentation in this area.

Education plays a crucial role in the reconciliation process. This is acknowledged in the Declaration of Reconciliation constructed by the Council of Aboriginal Reconciliation, 1999:

"We at Reconciliation Australia ... believe that education plays a crucial role in the reconciliation process ... and educational aspects of reconciliation must go hand in hand with a strategic and determined effort to give substance to the word through tangible outcomes which make reconciliation a reality in our communities, workplaces, institutions and organisations" ¹.

Education for Intercultural awareness was also supported by the COAG meeting in 2008 that produced the Melbourne Declaration. The 2008 Melbourne Declaration makes specific reference in Goal 2 to producing 'Active and informed citizens' (that)...

- *understand and acknowledge the value of Indigenous cultures and possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians²*

This reflects an Australian Federal Government commitment to 'close the gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Following on from the Melbourne Declaration, the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (ACARA)'s work on the Australian Curriculum aims to produce a curriculum that will 'equip all young Australians with the essential skills, knowledge and capabilities to thrive and compete in a globalised world and information rich workplaces of the current century'. On behalf of the Australian Government, the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) define the word 'intercultural' as 'cooperative and positive interaction between people of different cultural traditions at both the individual and institutional level, which lead to tolerance and mutual

¹ Rays S and Chaney F; Reconciliation: a theory in practice: A response to "A Rationale for Reconciliation" by John D'Arcy May; Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, National Strategy to Promote Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Rights p.1 www.reconciliation.org.au accessed on 24 October 2010

² Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, December 2008 p. 9 http://www.curriculum.edu.au/verve/resources/National_Declaration_on_the_Educational_Goals_for_Young_Australians.pdf accessed 29 April 2011

respect³. The Australian Curriculum gives special attention to three cross-curriculum priorities including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures.

Project Overview

One question is ‘How do we best work with non-Indigenous students to foster a genuine understanding and action-based approach to Indigenous education that can translate to positive attitudes by non-Indigenous students and teachers of Indigenous ways of knowing and being?’ This evaluation was an attempt to determine the effectiveness of the Wesley College Bunuba/Walmajarri unit in terms of changing understandings of Indigenous ways of knowing by non-Indigenous students, through the use of survey tools and an analysis of products and records produced by students and teachers during the four years this programme has operated.

Teachers acknowledged in previous research on this unit that improvement in understanding of Indigenous ways of knowing and being may be attributed to the presence of the primary resource – the Indigenous Leader(s) themselves. This was supported by the results of a research project undertaken in 2009 and 2010 that investigated the impact of the unit on the teachers involved.⁴ This current research focussed on the impact of the Year 4 PYP Bunuba/Walmajarri unit in terms of changing understandings of Indigenous ways of knowing by non-Indigenous students.

The methodology included a survey administered to the students as part of regular feedback gleaned on the unit, along with analyses of reflective 2007-2010 reports. The findings indicated that as a result of this unit students: know there is a **difference between non-Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous knowledge** (94.6 % strongly agreed/agreed); really **enjoyed** getting to know (Indigenous Leader) Annette Kogolo (94.5% strongly agreed/agreed); think their **understanding of Indigenous people has improved** after doing this unit of inquiry (92% strongly agreed/agreed); felt their **learning about indigenous ways was better** because of Annette Kogolo (89.2% strongly agreed/agreed); **understand more about Indigenous ways of knowing** (83.7% strongly agreed/agreed); felt having a Bunuba/Walmajarri Leader made their **learning about Indigenous people more real** (85.9% strongly agreed/agreed); know where to find **information about indigenous ways of knowing** that they did not know before (75% strongly agreed/agreed) and think that they now

³ Teaching for Intercultural Understanding Professional learning Program , glossary http://www.valueseducation.edu.au/verve/resources/Values_PLP_glossary_reference.pdf accessed 24 May 2011

⁴ Anderson, K. & Rome, A. (2011). *Impact of programs such as the Wesley College Bunuba/Walmajarri unit in terms of changing understandings of Indigenous ways of knowing by non-Indigenous teachers*. Wesley College Institute (submitted for publication 2011)

know more about their own culture by learning about Indigenous culture (55.4% strongly agreed/agreed). The research uncovered that there are two important aspects to this unit: the power of the story teller as well as the story itself. The stories are considered a valid form of accessing significant, if specialised, knowledge. The research also indicated that students developed in relation to the IB PYP Student Learner Profile, especially regarding the *open-minded* and *caring attributes*.

The results can be divided into two groups: those responses that relate to the child's responses to the people involved (the Indigenous Leader) and those responses that relate to the changes in the child's own understanding of what they had learnt through the unit.

The Personal Response. While 94.5% strongly agreed/agreed 'I really **enjoyed** getting to know Annette Kogolo', and 89.2% strongly agreed/agreed that '**My learning about indigenous ways** was better because of Annette Kogolo', the personal response to the presence of an Indigenous leader cannot be underestimated. One child wrote in 2010 *"[the highlight for me was] probably the moment she first walked in and everyone was just holding their breath"*

The responses relating to the impact of the Indigenous Leader were strong with over 85% students feeling that the presence of an Indigenous Leader made the learning more real as well as feeling a genuine enjoyment of the Indigenous Leader's presence. Students recorded this in reflections like the following from one male student *"My highlight of the unit was working with Annette. The reason being I learnt so much and I enjoyed it so much. It was so much fun. I learnt a lot about others, Annette and her culture. I enjoyed working with lots of different people because I got to know them. I enjoyed everything. It was all great. I loved taking Annette down to the staff room with [another student]. I really felt like I had a connection with Annette."*

This may indicate that the strength of the relationship may predispose the children to taking on board subsequent learning. The strength of the bonds formed was also noted by a parent who stated:

"He was very excited about the performance at first but then was even more excited by the activities done with Annette. He talked about how the day was fun on a different concept of time. Even though he felt sick one day, I had to bring him back because he didn't want to miss time with Annette. He talked about doing the painting and how you could "make stories with it". He also talked about "Women's Business" and "Men's Business". He was very proud when he spent time with Annette in a small group in the staff room. He seemed to have a deep respect for her."

It is clear that on the 'motivation – opportunity – capability' sequence that neuroscientists such as Prof. Graeme Jackson⁵ speak of as essential for deep learning, this personal link with the Indigenous Leader has provided motivation to learn more about Indigenous peoples. Research from the 1980s onwards also supports the power of the personal. To quote Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein, "*Narrative seems to convey its message in an inherently human dimension, a dimension that is inexorably lost in a logical exposition*"⁶. Narrative can also be used for exploratory purposes; in-depth views of the life style of a particular group or for the philosophical and methodological i.e. a basis for knowledge of individual and group experience.⁷ For those that do not have direct access to certain experiences, life comes to us in the form of stories. Story-tellers mould their own accounts, communicate information and represent their identity and host social world. While we are wise to separate the power of the story from the power of the teller – the same story told by another will have a different impact – it was thought that both aspects in this case (the story and the teller) were important in determining the overall impact of this unit.

Compared to other units of work the school community had experienced, this one was particularly focussed on the primary resource (Indigenous Leader) and her use of the oral tradition. Many teachers initially found this approach confronting. Time management had to be flexible and accommodating with each day having a focus not so much on writing, but on listening and doing. Participants talked of themselves moving into a different space and pace - that of the Indigenous Leader's; having the time to ask questions and explore concepts more fully.⁸

A caveat noted by both authors, the storyteller (Indigenous Leader) and others is that the material shared should be considered in the light of who produced it (how representative are they?), where might such stories be found (how widespread are they?) what are the consequences of the stories (is there an agenda?), how they gain popularity? and how do we/should we verify them?

Changes in Knowledge. Of interest is the fact that thought the students identified that 'there is a **difference between non-Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous knowledge**' (94.6 % strongly agreed/agreed), they felt that they did not significantly improve their understanding of their own culture (only 55% strongly agreed/agreed that they now **know more about my own**

⁵ Jackson, G: Wesley Institute Colloquium; April 6, 2011 The Chemistry of Learning: how do schools parents and education systems respond?

⁶ Gubrium JF, Holstein J A: Narrative Ethnography; Handbook of Emergent Methods; Ed Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy. The Guilford Press 2008.
<http://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/anthropology/JayGuberonNarrativeEthnography.pdf> accessed 28 April 2011

⁷ ibid

⁸ Anderson, K & Rome A; Impact of programs such as the Wesley College Bunuba/Walmajarri unit in terms of changing understandings of Indigenous ways of knowing by non-Indigenous teachers, Wesley College Institute ACE Foundation Report pg 28 (submitted for publication 2011)

culture), even though many of the activities were structured around the **trans-disciplinary** theme 'How we express ourselves'. This may be because the students were so immersed in this 'other' culture to the extent that parallels with their own were not as extensively drawn as the teachers may have thought. Some parents, however, felt that the experience did assist the children to hold a new lens to their own lives as typified by the following parental comment: *"(my child) was especially interested in the differences between our family and indigenous families – he talked more about this unit than any unit all year."*

Of the students that did feel that their knowledge of their own culture improved, the following comment was typical: *"I did learn about myself and others because I learnt about myself by finding out about the land I live on and the Indigenous people in my community."*

The students clearly identified that their understanding of **Indigenous people** had improved after doing this unit of inquiry (92% strongly agreed/agreed). In 2008 one student commented: *"I learnt stuff from an Aboriginal person in real life instead of finding it off the internet which may not be true of someone who said something 20 years ago. It was good because it was Annette's perspective and also (her family's) perspective. If Annette didn't come, we would not have learnt as much as we did."*

Changes in knowledge can be identified through the sections of the feedback that states:

I used to believe.....

Now I think.....

Such comments also link directly to the 'Knowledgeable' and 'Open Minded' aspects of the Learner Profile.

One Year 4 student commented in 2010, *"I used to believe that Aboriginals were a lot different than us – like they would have weird ceremonies etc. Now I feel they are about the same as us"*

This learning has continued since 2008 when another student commented at that time *"I used to believe that Indigenous people were totally different to us. Also they didn't have any similarities to us. I now believe Aborigines are the same as us and though we have differences we are all human beings and their culture may be different, we need to respect that"*

It is clear that students' understandings of how Indigenous people live have changed as a result of this experience. In 2008 a student commented, *"I used to believe they only lived in the desert in tents, not houses as they only eat stuff they catch. They live only in the top part*

of Australia. I now think they live everywhere. They live like normal people. They still eat animals they catch as well as food from the shops”

Of interest here is the work of Indigenous researcher Karen Martin. She identifies three main constructs and their processes: firstly, establishing through law what is known about the Entities (Entities being defined as Waterways, Animals, Plants, Climate, Skies and Spirits), secondly, establishing relations amongst Entities and thirdly, enacting ways for maintaining these relations. She subsequently identifies these as Ways of Knowing, Ways of Being and Ways of Doing.⁹ The processes linked to these constructs are stated as listening, sensing, viewing, reviewing, reading, watching, waiting, observing, exchanging, sharing, conceptualising, assessing, modelling, engaging and applying.¹⁰ From observation of classroom activities, these were the same processes as employed during the Bunuba/Walmajarri unit that had grown experientially as the unit evolved over the years. While this was problematic in some cases for those teachers trained in the non-Indigenous educational procedures that involve detailed unit planning, the children’s feedback clearly indicated that they felt they had learnt from this approach.

Links to the Learner Profile

The Caring component of the Learner Profile specifically states: They show empathy, compassion and respect towards the needs and feelings of others. They have a personal commitment to service, and act to make a positive difference to the lives of others and to the environment.¹¹

What is of interest here is the specific number of times the students mentioned ‘respect’ in their responses. In 2008 of 17 responses to the question ‘If there was one big piece of understanding, one big feeling, one big idea that happened for you because of the Bunuba/Walmajarri Unit, what would it be? Six (35%) student responses specifically mentioned ‘respect’ in relation to the Aboriginal peoples and their culture.¹²

The key themes identified in the response to ‘one big piece of understanding, one big feeling, one big idea that happened for you’ included:

Respect for Aboriginal people (6) 35%

⁹ Martin, Karen: Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing: A Theoretical Framework and Methods for Indigenous and Indigenist Re-search. In McWilliam K, Stephenson P & Thompson, G (eds) ‘Voicing Dissent’ *New Talents 21C: Next Generation Australian Studies* no76. pp203-214. <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/7182/1/7182.pdf> accessed 20 August 2010

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ IB learner profile booklet, International Baccalaureate, Cardiff, UK, January 2009 <http://www.ibo.org/programmes/profile/documents/Learnerprofileguide.pdf> accessed on 24 January 2011

¹² Anderson, K, and Camilleri C; Bunuba/Walmajarri Reports, Wesley College 2008

Aboriginals are just like us (4) 24%

Relationships are important in Aboriginal culture (3) 18%

Aboriginals are nice (1) 6%

I have learnt about differences between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals (1) 6%

Aboriginals are important (1) 6%

We should not invade their land (1) 6%

Sample responses included:

“That Aborigines care a lot about their land and their Elders (just like us).”

“That Aborigines care a lot about their land and their communities. They are just like us.”

“The Indigenous people are the same as us in many ways, although we have many differences”

“Aboriginal people are just as important as us or even more”

Parents also noted the impact on the children. In the words of one parent: *“I felt grateful that the children had been offered such an amazing and special opportunity, one they are sure to build upon. I was a little stunned how engaged and eager they were! They showed a warm respect for themselves, each other and for Annette.”*

It can also be concluded that the metric used to determine the students' response was suitable for the task and may form a model on which to determine feedback in other similar units which have as their aim improving intercultural awareness. It is worth considering that if, as suspected, the relationship between the Indigenous Leaders and the students was not strong, that the depth of learning and impact of the unit would not have been as great. Seeking responses to the extent of that very personal of relationships, that of Storyteller to listener, is thought to be essential in accurately gauging the impact of the unit.

Conclusions

The effectiveness of programs such as the Wesley College Bunuba/Walmajarri unit in terms of changing understandings of Indigenous ways of knowing by non-Indigenous children is certainly an area of interest for both educators and society at large. This investigation indicated to the authors that clearly the Bunuba/Walmajarri unit has had a positive impact on all involved. Benefits of the unit with regard to the students' experiences can be categorised into a number of areas. As a result of this unit, students:

- know there is a **difference between non-Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous knowledge** (94.6 % strongly agreed/agreed)
- really **enjoyed** getting to know Annette Kogolo (94.5% strongly agreed/agreed)
- think “my understanding of **Indigenous people** has improved after doing this unit of inquiry” (92% strongly agreed/agreed)

- **Felt their learning about indigenous ways** was better because of Annette Kogolo (89.2% strongly agreed/agreed)
- understand more about **Indigenous ways of knowing** (83.7% strongly agreed/agreed)
- felt having a Bunuba/Walmajarri Leader “made my **learning about Indigenous people more real**” (85.9% strongly agreed/agreed)
- know “where to find **information about indigenous ways of knowing** that I did not know before” (75% strongly agreed/agreed)
- think that “I now **know more about my own culture** by learning about Indigenous culture” (55.4% strongly agreed/agreed)

The objective of the Bunuba Walmajarri unit was/is: **In accordance with the vision and values of Wesley College, this project will focus on building the capacity for teachers and children to learn about Indigenous Australia in an authentic, rigorous and meaningful way.**

The Wesley College PYP Bunuba Walmajarri Unit, the central idea or enduring understanding for this unit being “**We learn more when we reflect on other ways of knowing**” has at its core the aim of doing this very thing.

Information gathered in the past and as a result of this research indicates that this objective has been met. The presence of the Indigenous leader/s, the extent of the pre-unit professional development over a number of months and the key commitment of management symbolically and through the time release of staff involved to develop and support this unit are all considered important aspects of the unit’s success, though the latter two areas were not a focus of this report.

Overall, and subject to these limitations, the findings support the efficacy of the Year 4 PYP Indigenous Bunuba/Walmajarri Unit of Inquiry within the **trans-disciplinary** theme ‘How do we express ourselves’ and with the central idea of ‘we discover more when we reflect upon other ways of knowing’.

The metric designed to assess the efficacy of this unit is one that can be adapted to similar units to assist teachers to effectively determine the impact of other cross-cultural units. The metric had at its heart two strands. The first was one of assessing changes in the knowledge base; the second was to determine the depth of the relationship formed between the storyteller and the children.

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