

Visions of hope for teacher education: An evaluation of a preservice teacher enhancement program in Aboriginal Studies through university and government collaboration

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ABSTRACT: The new Federal Government, in its latest policy statement on Indigenous affairs (FAHCSIA, 2009) has acknowledged the crisis in Aboriginal education. In particular the new policy direction emphasises the need to address the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous outcomes. The overwhelming nature of the evidence on the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous educational outcomes, has led the present government to conclude that the elimination of these gaps is a key strategy in addressing the inequalities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia (FAHCSIA, 2009). A review of Aboriginal education in NSW undertaken by NSW Department of Education and Training, and the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group in 2004 had reached a very similar conclusion. Seventy one recommendations arose from this review. Recommendation 14 suggested a pilot [program] specifically focused preservice training of a group of students for appointment as teachers to locations with high Aboriginal populations (DET, 2004, p 192). The strong commitment of the NSW Department of Education and Training to improvement of Aboriginal students outcomes resulted in NSW DET developing and implementing the Enhanced Teacher Training Scholarship Program (ETTSP). The program includes two units in Aboriginal education, an immersion experience with a community or government agency in a community with a significant Aboriginal population, and an internship of a minimum of six weeks to be undertaken in a school with a significant Aboriginal enrolment, and an Aboriginal mentor throughout the entire enhanced training. The ETTSP is now in its third year of implementation. The purpose of this research was to evaluate the effectiveness of this program in preparing teachers to work in schools with Aboriginal students. Since the commencement of the program in 2006, 51 scholarships have been awarded to selected final year teacher education students across a number of universities to undertake enhanced pre-service training prior to their appointment to schools with significant Aboriginal student enrolments. The first 20 participants took up their teaching appointments in schools with Aboriginal students from January 2008, 75% in rural locations. At the completion of their first year of fulltime teaching, the initial cohort of teachers were surveyed and interviewed to explore the impact of the program across four key areas community engagement, pedagogy, ability to incorporate Aboriginal Studies into the curriculum and general efficacy. The paper reports on positive outcomes achieved by the program in all four areas and suggests recommendations related to different components and modes of implementation.

Introduction

Over the past three decades there has been increasing recognition of difficulties experienced by Aboriginal students within Australian education systems. In response to these continuing educational outcome gaps, the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET), in conjunction with the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG), conducted an extensive review of Aboriginal education in NSW government schools in 2003 and 2004.¹ The report produced by this review revealed significant concerns about the outcomes being achieved by Aboriginal students in DET schools. While it was quite properly noted that *many Aboriginal students achieve outstanding results*, these were clearly overshadowed by the finding that *average measures of performance indicate a significant gap between Aboriginal students and their non-Aboriginal peers*².

The overwhelming nature of this evidence on the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educational outcomes has led the present Australian Government to conclude that the elimination of these gaps is a key strategy in addressing the inequalities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians that remain a legacy of the failures of the past.³ This strategy supports the conclusions reached five years earlier in the NSW review of Aboriginal education. In addressing this gap a key recommendation of this review by DET and the AECG was to develop a proposal for a pilot pre-service teacher education program that provided enhanced preparation for teaching Aboriginal students and was linked to scholarships.⁴ In response to this recommendation the NSW DET in consultation with interested groups and AECG designed the Enhanced Teacher Training Program (ETTP) which was initiated in 2006.

Cooperation between DET and the universities began in January 2006 when the Department's Strategic Planning and Workforce Capability Unit (SPWCU) invited representatives from the Education faculties of all NSW and ACT universities to a briefing on the Department's response to the 2004 review and the implications for teacher training in Aboriginal education. An invitation was extended to the universities to submit proposals for the development and delivery of a pilot *enhanced teacher training program* that would augment the standard undergraduate training so that graduate teachers would be better prepared for initial appointment to schools with significant Aboriginal enrolments. The program would offer scholarships to selected students.

Four universities submitted proposals and, after considering all proposals, the submission from the School of Education (NSW) Australian Catholic University (ACU) was accepted as the successful tender. ACU developed this tender into a Pilot program which commenced in 2007 with twenty students selected by DET and drawn from four universities. DET undertook to pay Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) fees associated with two enhanced training units, a training allowance and an allowance to assist with community engagement and professional internship experiences. Those offered scholarships were also given a guarantee of permanent employment with DET at the completion of their training.

Three other universities --- Charles Sturt University (CSU), the University of Western Sydney (UWS) and the University of Wollongong (UoW) that had also submitted proposals for the program became involved in its implementation, however the initial acceptance by DET of the ACU proposal made this proposal the basic template for the ETTP. This template was modified to suit the different university contexts and needs of students, however, the original ACU proposal remained the basis for the development and implementation of the ETTP in 2008 and 2009. The principal components of the ACU proposal were:

- Two additional units in Aboriginal education to be undertaken to supplement the core unit in Aboriginal perspectives that was already compulsory for Primary Education students at ACU;
- A two-week immersion experience to be undertaken with a community or government agency working in a community with a significant Aboriginal population;
- Mentoring throughout the entire enhanced training by Aboriginal mentors recruited from the existing Aboriginal teacher training programs at ACU;
- A full day training program in the mentoring process for both the mentors and the mentees;
- An additional internship/practice teaching experience of a minimum of six weeks in a school with a significant Aboriginal enrolment; and
- Ongoing monitoring to evaluate the impact of the enhanced training on the early career service of the participants after graduation and appointment.

The proposal was consistent with the Professional Teaching Standards Framework developed by the NSW Institute of Teachers and designed to enhance elements of the *Professional Knowledge, Practice* and *Professional Commitment*, specifically in regard to Aboriginal education of graduate teachers at the beginning of their careers.

A formal review and evaluation of the ETTP commenced in June 2008 when an agreement was reached between DET and a team of researchers from ACU to complete a joint assessment of

its impact on participants. There had previously been some ongoing, informal evaluation during the delivery of the first year of the pilot but the ACU-DET research project was intended to be more structured, more comprehensive and more summative.

Methodology

Participants

This report focuses on the impact of the enhanced training with the twenty participants from the first cohort of the program who were appointed to permanent teaching positions in DET schools at the beginning of the 2008 school year.⁵

Procedures

The evaluation was designed to explore a range of data relating to the twenty participants throughout their enhanced training and into their first year of teaching. Three distinct sets of data were collected within three distinct timeframes:

- During the enhancement program
- Post program but prior to beginning their appointment
- During the first year of their teaching appointment

Data analysis

Data from all three periods of data collection were analysed jointly to determine the impact of the program. The analysis focused on determining the effectiveness of the program across three key areas. These key areas incorporated the critical elements of the enhanced training program as well as the outcomes requested by the DET to be explored in the evaluation. The three key focus areas of the analysis are:

- Engagement with Aboriginal communities
- Appropriate pedagogy and classroom management skills
- Incorporation of Aboriginal perspectives across the curriculum

Findings

Specifically, the data was analysed to determine the extent to which the program influenced the participants' knowledge, skills and attitudes in the three key focus areas above. This analysis provided significant evidence not only about the impact of the ETTP on the participants in the pilot program but also about the ideal structure and content of teacher training programs for Aboriginal education in Australia.

Engagement with Aboriginal communities

Successful engagement with Aboriginal families and communities has long been recognised as crucial to improving educational outcomes for Aboriginal students. This was acknowledged in Mellor and Corrigan's review of contemporary research which concluded that the establishment of effective school-community relationships depended on teachers learning about Aboriginal communities including variations in language use, values and educational aspirations. Moreover, the research emphasises that mutual trust is crucial for ensuring reciprocity between schools and communities.⁶

The need for training to prepare teachers for working in the Aboriginal community was also highlighted in the Senate's *Katu Kalpa* Report of 2000 which found that cross cultural communication skills were a major issue for beginning teachers and noted the problems arising from teachers who had only limited prior contact with Aboriginal people.⁷ This issue was also highlighted by Bourke, Rigby & Burden who were alarmed that teachers received very little, if any, cross-cultural training and, as a result, found it difficult to participate in community activities or communicate effectively with Aboriginal students and their families.⁸

Aware of the importance of community engagement and the documented shortcomings of conventional training, all of the universities involved in the initial delivery of the ETTP made training for community engagement a major priority in their enhanced training programs.

Interviews with participants and their principals indicated very positive responses relating to the impact of the program on participants' skills in engaging with the community, as well as very positive attitudes towards community engagement. The actual responses of the participants suggest that they also perceive themselves to be much more confident in relating to Aboriginal students and community members than their more experienced colleagues or than what would appear to be the case with most other beginning teachers. Interviews with principals supported these self perceptions with several principals commenting favourably on the *strong cultural awareness*, the ability to *talk constructively with parents*, and *high-level communication skills* of these newly appointed teachers.⁹

In general the analysis of data in relation to participant's capacity to engage with the community indicated that the ETTP was of immense benefit to the participants by improving their awareness, attitudes and skills in engaging with the Aboriginal community --- the essential first step in implementing the Aboriginal Education policy and improving outcomes for Aboriginal students. All the major strategies used in the program contributed to this positive outcome for participants though more still needs to be done to improve their understanding of and capacity for working in a holistic way through a cooperative inter agency approach.

Furthermore, the key elements in improving the capacity for engagement with the Aboriginal community were the experiential processes that were used by all participating universities requiring all participants to interact with Aboriginal people and immerse themselves in Aboriginal communities. It is clear that such strategies need to be adopted by all universities in preparing teachers to work in Aboriginal education or with other marginalised groups in Australian society.

Development of appropriate pedagogy and classroom management strategies

The principle aim of the ETTP was to prepare teachers to work effectively in schools with significant Aboriginal enrolments so that better outcomes might be achieved with Aboriginal students. As suggested in the promotional material designed by DET, the aim was to develop teachers who would *make a difference where it really counts --- working in schools with significant Aboriginal student enrolments*.¹⁰

This expectation was embedded in the original template for the program which had been submitted by ACU and accepted by DET. In accordance with the DET tender specifications, this proposed to develop the participants' knowledge and awareness of appropriate pedagogy for Aboriginal students by enhancing their:

- knowledge of program requirements and ability to design appropriate quality teaching and learning strategies;
- knowledge of learning styles and knowledge systems of Aboriginal children and the implications for program design and teaching and assessment strategies;
- knowledge of the linguistic needs of Aboriginal children;
- skills in cross cultural communication and an appreciation of Aboriginal English; and
- skills in culturally appropriate behaviour management strategies.

The evidence in the report clearly suggests that the first cohort of teachers to graduate from the ETP program have developed the knowledge and skills to adapt their classroom management strategies and approach to pedagogy so that they can comfortably and effectively teach in classrooms with significant Aboriginal enrolments. The data also strongly points to the enhanced training being a significant factor in the development of their knowledge and skills in this area. Data from principals related to improved skills in appropriate pedagogy and management also confirmed participants' perceptions of enhanced capacity in this area. Furthermore, quantitative data collected from an online survey of both ETP participants and a comparative group of beginning teachers found that the ETP participants had significantly higher means for skills in culturally appropriate strategies compared to those of the comparative group, however the small number of responses received from the comparative group suggest that these findings should be interpreted cautiously.

Moreover, there can be no doubt that the practical involvement of students in Aboriginal community activities and the emphasis on community engagement differentiated the enhancement program from the core programs of the participating universities. Consequently it must be concluded that it was this applied focus that resulted in the different, more appropriate approaches to classroom management and pedagogy for Aboriginal students that the ETP graduates are demonstrating in their classrooms.

Clearly there is a need for all parties involved in preparing teachers to work with Aboriginal students to consider ways in which they can incorporate a strong community engagement and interaction with Aboriginal people into their pre-service training and post-appointment professional development programs.

Incorporation of Aboriginal perspectives across the curriculum

The evaluation agreed on between DET and ACU in May 2008 also included in its objectives the evaluation of the program's *effectiveness in developing the beginning teachers' capacity to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives across the curriculum.*¹¹ The inclusion of this objective in the evaluation reflects the priorities of the DET's Aboriginal Education Policy which, since its introduction in 1981, has always aimed both to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal students to a level equivalent to those of their non-Aboriginal peers; and to educate all students in DET schools about Aboriginal societies, cultures and histories.

Development of the participants' curriculum knowledge and their skills in Aboriginal perspectives was never perceived by the ETP course designers as the program's main priority. Instead, the main focus and priority had always been to develop and enhance the knowledge, attitudes and skills of the participants so that they could more effectively teach Aboriginal students and assist

them to achieve better educational outcomes. This was seen to be aligned with DET's vision of a program preparing teachers *to teach effectively in locations with high Aboriginal populations, work within Aboriginal communities, and make a difference where it really counts in schools with significant Aboriginal student enrolments.*¹²

Moreover, though the use of Aboriginal perspectives across the curriculum is recognised as a potentially positive motivational influence with Aboriginal students, its impact on improving their educational outcomes has not been verified by research. Indeed it is argued by some that an excessive focus on Aboriginal perspectives with Aboriginal students may distract them from the core curriculum and potentially inhibit the level of the core educational outcomes they might attain.¹³ It could also be argued that implicit in the aims of the Aboriginal Education Policy (AEP) is a recognition that Aboriginal perspectives is actually of more benefit to non-Aboriginal students than that of Aboriginal students who already have an awareness of their history and culture.

Nevertheless, determining the ETPP beginning teachers' capacity to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives across the curriculum was considered a worthwhile aim of the evaluation. There is some evidence to suggest that they have developed considerable skills and gained confidence in this area. Whether this can be attributed to the ETPP is more problematic than is the case with their advanced skills in community engagement and pedagogy for Aboriginal students. The impact of the ETPP on developing participants' knowledge and skills of relevant curriculum issues in relation to the AEP, however, is much less conclusive than is the evidence for its impact on their knowledge and skills of community engagement and appropriate approaches to pedagogy and classroom management for Aboriginal students.

Nevertheless, it is possible to see that, through the program's focus on community engagement, many of the students did in fact enhance their awareness of the importance of Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum and the implications of this for their teaching practice. Future enhancement programs may need to more directly address the continuing shortcomings of basic undergraduate training in this area.

Conclusion

This review and evaluation of the first year of the pilot ETPP program can only conclude that the initial program delivered by ACU, CSU and UoW in 2007 was successful in developing teachers who would *make a difference where it really counts --- working in schools with significant Aboriginal student enrolments.*¹⁴

The small group of ETPP graduates who began their teaching careers at the beginning of 2008 have clearly been well prepared for working in the general area of Aboriginal education and particularly working in schools with significant Aboriginal enrolments. As a group they appear to be more confident, competent and resilient for working in this area of education than is the norm for beginning teachers.

The pilot ETPP was particularly successful in preparing these teachers for constructive and collaborative engagement with the Aboriginal communities associated with the schools to which they were appointed. It succeeded in breaking down any apprehension that the participants

may have initially felt in working with Aboriginal students and community members and it greatly enhanced their attitudes, knowledge and cross cultural communication skills.

The skills and experience in engaging with Aboriginal communities, which most participants gained from the program, have also assisted them to develop appropriate pedagogical skills and classroom management strategies for working with Aboriginal students during their first year of teaching. In particular, evaluations from the principals of schools in which these teachers are working suggest that their competence in this area may well exceed that of the typical beginning teacher.

DET and the universities in the pilot program as well, of course, as the participants themselves must be commended for this initiative and encouraged to continue it and develop it in other ways.

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Endnotes

- 1 NSW Department of Education & Training. (2004). *The Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education. Yanigurra Muya: Ganggurrinyma Yaarri Guurulaw Yirringin.gurray* --- Freeing the Spirit: Dreaming an Equal Future. NSWDET and AECG, Sydney, Australia.
- 2 DET, 2004; 3
- 3 Department of Families and Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FAHCSIA) (2009); 12.
- 4 *Closing the Gap on Indigenous Disadvantage: The Challenge for Australia*. Canberra, Australia: Author.
- 5 DET, 2004; 192
- 6 One of the original 20 participants had resigned from DET before the commencement of the research project
- 7 S Mellor and M Corrigan (2004); 27 "The Case for Change : A Review of Contemporary Research on Indigenous Education Outcomes"
- 8 Senate Reference Committee, (2000); 117
- 9 A Bourke, (July 2000) Reassessing Evidence for Middle Paleolithic Hunting, *International Journal of Osteoarcheology, Special issue* (3-4)
- 10 NSW Department of Education & Training. (2007 – 2008). *Enhanced Teacher Training Scholarship Program Monitoring Summary --- Report*. Sydney, Australia: Author. (Internal use only --- not for wider distribution)15-16 --- available in ETPP Research Data Collection Box (RDCB) at ACU, Strathfield
- 11 NSW DET, (2007-2008).
- 12 NSW Department of Education & Training. (2008). *Aboriginal Education and Training Policy*. Sydney, Australia: Authors J Long, P Cavanagh and J Maskell. The other two aims of the evaluation were to determine the program's effectiveness in developing the teachers' capacity to (4) *engage in meaningful consultation and partnerships with Aboriginal communities and organisations following appropriate protocols*; and (5) *develop personal and teaching efficacy appropriate to teaching in schools with significant Aboriginal enrolments*.
- 13 DET (2007-2008)
- 14 G Partington, (2000), 'Empowered' but impoverished: Multiculturalism and Aboriginal education in quadrant, October 2000, pp33-43. In this respect it may be of value to research HSC outcomes in NSW by comparing the achievements of Aboriginal students undertaking the 2 unit HSC course in Aboriginal Studies with their performance in other HSC subjects and the UAI they achieve
- 15 DET, 2007-2008