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The Yes Minister Factor: Policy and Practice in Indigenous Research.

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Gary Partington Edith Cowan University

Ken Wyatt, Education Department of Western Australia

John Godfrey, Edith Cowan University

Abstract: In this paper, the expectations of policies in Indigenous education will be critically analysed from the viewpoint of feasibility of implementation, both as research projects and as school programs. Recent federal government policies as expressed in such reports as the National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy initiative and A National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (1996 – 2002) are driving developments in Indigenous education in Australia at present. The potential for effective implementation of the recommendations of these reports will be considered along with an examination of the implications for the conduct of research into the process and products of implementation.

Introduction

Schools throughout Australia have been unable to achieve the same levels of success with Indigenous students as they have with other students. The statistics constitute a record of ongoing failure by schools to bring about changes that give Indigenous students the same opportunities in later life that other students experience.

The data for Western Australia indicate much poorer outcomes for Indigenous students than for non-Indigenous students. Retention data indicate that only 16.4% of Aboriginal students enrolled in Year 8 (the first year of secondary education) completed Year 12. This compares most unfavourably with non-Aboriginal students, 60.6% of whom completed Year 12. Attendance also is lower for Aboriginal students: they attend primary school 84% of the time compared with 93% of the time for non-Aboriginal students. Secondary attendance rates are 81% and 92% respectively (Education Department of Western Australia, 1998).

Monitoring Standards in Education (MSE) data for Western Australia paint a similar picture. Only 37% of Aboriginal students met or exceeded Level 4 requirements compared with 83% of all Year 10 students. Results for English and Writing were better, with 75% (compared to 91%) meeting or exceeding requirements for reading skills and 84% (compared to 97%) for writing skills (Education Department of Western Australia, 1998).

Results for Indigenous students in measures of literacy and numeracy continually demonstrate that Indigenous students are behind the rest of the population in their attainments, yet, as numerous reports have identified, competence in standard Australian English and in numeracy are essential if Indigenous students are to succeed at school and beyond (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 1998; House of Representative Select Committee on Aboriginal Education, 1985; Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 1995; National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, 1994).

Although it has been argued that the current emphasis on functional literacy and numeracy is designed to limit the development of critical literacy (Cummins, 1995), among Indigenous students there seems little alternative but to promote functional literacy in the first instance: At present, given the low rates of literacy and numeracy, a large proportion of Indigenous students are unable to engage effectively in the political, social and economic discourse of society and are condemned to remain an underclass of powerless, unemployable clients of the welfare system.

In the survey of English literacy skills: Indigenous students were 3-4 grade levels below non-Indigenous students and those students performing at a low level are by year 5 no better than they were at year 3. The gap in literacy that is present at year 3 has widened by year 5 and those who are behind fall further behind with each year (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 1998).

Since 1973, there have been many inquiries into schooling for Indigenous students in an effort to improve success rates. All of these inquiries, however, failed to make an appreciable difference to the outcomes achieved by Indigenous students. In evaluating the process of seeking to remedy the problems besetting Indigenous education, it is tempting to conclude that, in the style of Sir Humphrey in the *Yes Minister* series, the agendas of the political masters are derailed. It could be argued that the improvements that have occurred have taken place in spite of, rather than because of, the schools. However, the failure of schools is not from want of trying. Since Indigenous students gained access to State education in the 1950s, there have been extensive efforts to improve their achievement but high dropout rates, high suspension and exclusion rates, and ongoing poor results in most of the indicators of success at school have continued for at least 30 years.

More recent efforts at change acknowledge the difficulties that have been experienced during that period. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy (NAEP) incorporated the following goal:

"To enable Aboriginal attainment of skills to the same standard as other Australian students throughout the compulsory schooling years" (Department of Employment Education and Training, 1989, p.3).

This goal, like many others in the policy, has proven difficult to achieve. On all measures, Indigenous students are less likely to succeed compared with other students. Increasingly, government agencies are developing increasingly specific policies to address the key issues in Indigenous education.

The Ministerial Council on Education Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), which had produced the *National Strategy on the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students*, in 1995 (Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 1995) extended its work in 2000 with a further report on Indigenous education (Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 2000). Consistent with a previous decision regarding the National Literacy and Numeracy Goal, Ministers

committed their Education departments to ensuring that all Indigenous children leaving primary school should be numerate and able to read, write and spell at an appropriate level, and that every Indigenous child commencing school from 1998 should achieve a minimum acceptable literacy and numeracy standard within four years (p.9). This commitment harks back to former Prime Minister Bob Hawke's claim to have 1000 Indigenous teachers by 1990: there is no certainty that pronouncements by political leaders will translate into reality at the chalkface.

One of the principal difficulties in translating policy into practice in the field of Indigenous education is complexity of the related issues. The main problem appears to be that no one is really sure what is the most important thing to focus on. There are so many factors to consider, and they are all important, that without a coordinated approach, progress will remain slow. Included in the range of issues that need to be dealt with are health, attendance and participation, community involvement, provision of Indigenous teachers and other education workers, improvement in the quality of teachers appointed to Indigenous schools, provision of appropriate curriculum, reduction of racism, development of more effective evaluation strategies and moves to overcome poverty. Each of these is a major step. To attempt all at once is a difficult proposition.

The National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (NIELNS) (Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs, 2000b), another federal initiative in Indigenous education, targets a range of issues in its approach to promoting literacy and numeracy among Indigenous children. The policy incorporates a number of key elements that have been identified as crucial to successful educational outcomes for Indigenous students. These include improving attendance, overcoming health and nutrition problems, promoting preschool experiences, getting good teachers, using effective teaching methods and effective measurement of achievement, as well as accountability for achievement (Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs, 2000a). All of these are being implemented at the same time, with the expectation that

students, parents, caregivers and Indigenous community leaders will work with education providers to help provide a welcoming classroom environment; ensure the curriculum is culturally appropriate; induct new teachers to the local culture/community; identify and support students at risk as soon as possible; increase expectations of the students; and ensure students attend school regularly (2000, p. 4).

Within this process, partnerships for change will be developed to drive the initiatives and make the changes needed for improved educational outcomes. It is intended that these partnerships will be formed among Indigenous community representatives, local industry, health providers and teachers and principals.

The strategies that have been identified are clearly relevant: They were demonstrated to be effective in schools engaged in the Strategic Results Projects conducted between 1997 and 1999 (Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs, 2000c). The 83 projects that were funded were asked to address the question, "What changes to education and student support delivery practices will result in improved Indigenous student learning outcomes within a relatively short period of time?" (Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs, 2000c, p.3). The research was carried out in 320 schools and involved approximately 3,800 students. The projects mainly involved the application of familiar strategies that could be readily utilised in other contexts. For the 60 projects that provided final performance data, 41 (68%) achieved or exceeded their targets and a further 11 (18%) partially achieved (or exceeded) their targets (p.4).

In these projects, success was achieved through good teaching and learning practices, high expectations of student achievement and persistence by educators. The factors that were considered to contribute to success included cultural inclusion, skill development for students and enhanced participation by students through more effective school entry, attendance and engagement. The report noted one common element in the successful programs:

The single factor they all shared was a fundamental and fixed belief in the value of what they were doing and the prospect of success. (The SRP National Coordination and Evaluation Team, 2000, p. 5)

Herein lies the difficulty with initiating the wholesale changes expected of schools to cater for the demands of learning in the NIELNS project. The SRP team acknowledged the role of funding in the success of the diverse projects they supported. Such funding has a diverse influence on the success of educational innovation. It provides extra resources, particularly people and time, to effect the changes; it motivates the staff to strive for success as a result of the recognition of their contribution; and it stimulates a culture of change in which success is more likely.

The expectation from the Strategic Results Projects was that the successes experienced should be readily extended to other school but leading edge change can be difficult to implement on a general scale, in part because of the resistance of the Sir Humphreys of the world. There is more to change than just providing funds. Establishing a culture of change is necessary. Not only do teachers need to be supported through the investment of financial support, they also must be accountable for the outcomes that occur and the projects must be sustainable in each school.

Accountability and sustainability are the two challenges. There must be a sustainable framework, but accountability often remains only as long as the team is in place. When a school's staff changes, the level of accountability for a particular project often dissipates. This is a problem especially in remote schools where it is possible for the entire staff to change from one year to the next, a consequence of their small numbers and the perception that such locations are undesirable so teachers stay for the minimum period. Incoming teachers, unfamiliar with the context and the curriculum of the school, implement their own programs and so there is no sustainability.

Bringing About Change

Change in schools has been the subject of extensive study for many years (Anyon, 1995; Aspland, Elliott, & Macpherson, 1995; Erickson, 1987; Fullan, 1993, 1999; Goodlad, 1975; Hargreaves, 1994; Hedley, Caldwell, & Millikan, 1989; Heslop, 1998; Hudspith, 1992; Joyce, 1990; Proudfoot & Baker, 1995; Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, & Ouston, 1979; Tomlinson, 1997) but the problem of overcoming the inertia of teachers and administrators who adhere to familiar — but often ineffective — strategies remains. Moving from a successful innovation to a successful systemwide application of the innovation has been elusive for educational administrators and proponents of change.

The kinds of changes that are needed for effective education for Indigenous students require more than just changes in strategies. It is insufficient to rely on individuals to effect changes. As Kagan (1992) reported, preservice and inservice teacher education achieves little in the way of change. Instead, the process must be school based and made an integral part of the school's culture of learning. In publications that chart the developing principles of teacher development and educational change, Fullan (1993; 1999) has come to the conclusion that specific strategies are of little use without a thorough understanding of the context within

which the change process is occurring, as well as knowledge of the kinds of cognitive and emotional states that participants in change experience. If change is to be implemented at multiple sites, then the process of implementation at each site must be treated as a unique and problematic occurrence. Mandating change, particularly of the complex kinds envisioned in the NIELNS program, does not mean it will occur unless there is extensive work with each school and its constituent personnel.

Change and the NIELNS Report

In one respect, the NIELNS report reflects the concerns of Fullan in relation to change. The six key elements for change identified in the NIELNS report (Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs, 2000b) encompass areas that promote student affiliation with school rather than just focusing on achievement directly. Fullan states,

I would hypothesize that the greater the emphasis on academic achievement through high stakes accountability, the greater the gap becomes between advantaged and disadvantaged students. The main reason for this is that poor performing students do not need more pressure, they need greater attachment to the school and motivation to want to learn. Pressure by itself in this situation actually demotivates poor performing students. (Fullan, 1999, p.19)

The NIELNS Elements and Change

The report identified several strategies that complement the role of the school in securing regular attendance among Indigenous students. These include gaining parent and community support for regular attendance; ensuring parents have the skills needed to assist their children with their education; allowing greater flexibility in implementing a student tracking system; utilising the skills of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workers to improve attendance levels; providing mentoring for students using the skills and leadership of Indigenous Elders and community leaders; providing structured workplace learning opportunities and school to work pathways; adopting best practice teaching methods; ensuring culturally inclusive approaches to education planning and delivery; and supporting families and parents to overcome social problems that impede effective education for children (Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs, 2000b). In the past, the principal strategy has been increased school attendance monitoring and reporting. While this remains one of the strategies, its employment, in conjunction with strategies that effectively change the environment in which Indigenous students study, should enhance Indigenous students' attendance.

Other key elements in the report support the notion that the context of Indigenous education must be improved before results will occur. These elements include improvements to health, especially hearing and nutrition; preschooling for more Indigenous 3-5 year olds, with the expectation that they will be confident and competent to enter primary school; ensuring a supply of good teachers for Indigenous students; and the employment of effective teaching methods. Consistent with mainstream educational practices, the report also identifies measurement of success and accountability for results as a key element in the strategy with the purpose of "identifying where objectives are not being achieved so that timely and effective action can be taken before students' educational opportunities are irreparably damaged" (p. 38).

There is a danger that, in the absence of effective change in the environmental elements of the strategy, the simplest elements will be implemented: those that are already practised — particularly monitoring attendance and measuring student success and teacher accountability. If this were to be the case, then Fullan's hypothesis would most likely be brought to fruition. Effective change requires attention to the whole context of the Indigenous child's schooling. Fullan (1999) argues that each change situation requires reinvention of the processes needed for success. If strategies are imported from a previous change process — even one that has been successful — there is no guarantee of its success because each organisation "has its own special combination of personalities and prehistories, and 'firm-specific' realities. You can get ideas, insights and lines of thought and action, but you can never know exactly how to proceed" (Fullan, 1999).

Specific Issues for Educational Change for Indigenous Contexts

In this section only two issues will be addressed: the influence of teachers on the education of Indigenous students' schooling, and the problems that arise due to measurement of achievement.

Teachers

As a part of the blueprint for Indigenous education in Australia, Peter Buckskin stated that,

The child must be the absolute reason for your being in the classroom and, therefore, you need to take account of his or her particular background. If you do not do that, you must, as a teacher, challenge what you are doing in a classroom in the first place. (Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 2000)

Buckskin's argument is consistent with what is contained in NIELNS and with Fullan's imperatives for change. However, for many teachers, taking account of background can become an excuse for lack of success. Assumptions made about what children are and are not capable of contributes to the lack of success. The level of knowledge of students' backgrounds required for successful achievement of outcomes is beyond many teachers at present. This was illustrated in the following extract from an interview that was conducted as a part of a research project (Harrison, Partington, Godfrey, Harslett, & Richer, 1999).

One of the things they told you was don't expect to make big gains with Aboriginal kids because that just won't happen. You won't overnight teach them 'e equals mc squared'. It just will not happen. They said you will get used to the fact that eventually a child will do a correct form of 'e' on the paper or something in Year 1 and you will be ecstatic the rest of the day. It's those small gains that you really have to focus on to know that you are actually getting somewhere and that the whole thing is a whole term process. Some of these kids have come from backgrounds that are totally illiterate. Their parents didn't like school. They were hunted out of school by poor teachers or they were dealt with so severely in the behaviour side of things that they chose not to go to school at all and their relationship with the education system was so poor that the kids ... really you couldn't expect them to get in there and become a scientist, go right through to university level and become a scientist. (Unpublished interview conducted by Gary Partington).

Malin (1990; 1998) has shown the consequences of teacher interaction with Indigenous students and often the outcome is negative. It is clear that lack of knowledge of students — as Buckskin states — and the use of inappropriate strategies relative to the students' backgrounds contribute to lack of success for these students.

An alternative way of examining the issue of lack of success of Indigenous students is through an examination of the way in which they are subjected to the power of the dominant group in the classroom. Through the agency of teachers who are members of the dominant group in society in Australia, Indigenous students learn that they must conform to the expectations of that group if they wish to survive schooling. Often, students resist this pressure. As Cummins (1995, p. 199) states,

Students (and communities) do not passively accept dominant group attributions of their inferiority. Frequently, they actively resist this process of subordination through disruptive or oppositional behavior.... In many situations resistance has severe costs with respect to academic success and upward mobility, often culminating in students prematurely dropping out of school.

In their interactions with the teacher and with other students, Indigenous students are continually exposed to the coercive relations of power. The consequences are clearly evident in the rate of suspensions and poor levels of retention of Indigenous students (Gardiner, Evans, & Howell, 1995; Ministry of Education, 1993; Partington, Waugh, & Forrest, 1995).

Any change strategy must be accompanied by changes in the way teachers interact with and relate to students in and out of the classroom. The discourse of the classroom, oppressive and dominating for Indigenous students, has to reflect the identities and self-respect of students if they are to participate fully in the culture of the classroom.

Testing

There are problems in measuring the achievement of a small minority when it is being assessed as part of a larger sample. In the case of Indigenous students, the validity of the instruments employed for assessing achievement may be questionable. Even when an instrument is normed for a specific group, the norming process can result in spurious results. For example, McGaw (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 1998) noted that there was a special Indigenous sample in the national English language skills survey. However, this sample was taken from schools that had at least five Aboriginal students in the Year 3 and Year 5 classes sampled. This implies that the performance of Indigenous students in schools where they constitute less than five students per class is not assessed. Students in these classes may be relatively advantaged or disadvantaged in the process of testing but unless the sample used for norming takes into account their performance, the test outcomes are questionable.

Another issue of concern with testing Indigenous students is the use of items that are culturally biased. Norming of an Indigenous sample can provide an overall statistic of validity that appears acceptable but there are likely to be very small subsamples within the group whose performance is well below the group mean. In particular, students from groups where English is used only infrequently, or where a dialect of English (such as Kriol) is used, may have great difficulty in succeeding on the test. The administration of one common form of a test is likely to disadvantage some groups whose profiles do not fall within the effective range of the test. Because such groups form a minority of Indigenous students across Australia but are significant in some populations such as in Western Australia and the

Northern Territory, achievement results in these states may suffer considerably relative to other states.

Matters of definition is another issue when teachers test children. The selection of children as Indigenous may be influenced by the teacher's knowledge of the students' backgrounds and if he or she is unaware of the Indigenous heritage of some children, the results may be biased as a consequence of inclusion or exclusion. McGaw (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 1998) observed that the selection of children who are Indigenous might be problematic and based on teachers' perceptions rather than any definite categorisation of students. This has implications for schools with limited numbers of Indigenous students whose physical, social and cultural characteristics conform closely to those of the non-Indigenous students around them.

A further consideration with evaluation of the achievement of Indigenous students is their relative performance. While their achievements may, at times, be well behind non-Indigenous students, contextual factors need to be taken into account in judging relative performance. For instance, on arrival at school, Indigenous students may not speak English, have no familiarity with Western socialisation practices that enhance performance at school, and have limited contact with the resources available to non-Indigenous children in Australia. As a consequence, a partial performance, relative to non-Indigenous students, may be admirable. For such judgments to be made, however, a sound knowledge of the local context of schooling is desirable and often this is not possible because of the problems of teacher turnover and limited school community interaction — problems implied by the strategies identified in the NIELNS report.

Conclusion

Government policies express the desired outcomes for Indigenous education and, especially in the case of the NIELNS report, correctly identify the strategies that must be implemented to achieve those outcomes. However, the "Yes Minister" factor has a significant influence on innovation. When those who are expected to implement the changes have reasons for not doing so, or when there are insufficient funds to make things happen, a considerable gulf can develop between what is striven for and what is actually achieved. There is a strong danger in the present circumstances of Indigenous education that the Yes Minister factor will come into force to inhibit the desirable changes expressed in the NIELNS report. To avoid this requires considerable effort in the implementation stage, to change attitudes, to foster alliances and to disseminate knowledge about appropriate strategies.

Achievement of the changes sought can be achieved but only with sustained, committed approaches that focus on attitudinal and skill changes in teachers. Short term interventions will not be successful and effective implementation of change requires long term and consistent approaches. A benefit of such approaches is that teachers will be more attuned to the cultural needs of Indigenous students and a culturally inclusive curriculum should be a corollary of the implementation of the NIELNS report. However, without adequate funding such hopes have limited tenure.

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