

Submission on the draft Indigenous Education Action Plan 2010–2014

Dr Zane Ma Rhea

Faculty of Education, Monash University

Introduction

The Faculty of Education, Monash University, implemented an Indigenous Partnership Strategy in 2004¹. Our vision statement:

The Faculty of Education is committed to building respectful and equal partnerships with Indigenous communities, working together to create a culturally safe environment where educators, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, will make significant contribution to the field of Indigenous education in teaching and research. By developing culturally appropriate partnerships, positive role models and through the preservation and maintenance of Indigenous lifeways in the Australian education system, the partnerships will support the economic and social sustainability of Indigenous communities and the development of the faculty as a national and international leader in the field of Indigenous education teaching and research.

The IEAP provides a critical framework for the work we undertake in educating our pre-service teachers about Indigenous Education. We have a focus on improving education services to Indigenous people in mainstream schooling and, in addition to the Indigenous focus in our general units, we also offer specialised units of study in the Primary and Secondary programs. We also have a Masters level unit of study and an emerging evidence based research culture involving academics, Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators, and schools. In addition, we offer remote placement opportunities to our students and have bursaries available for aspiring Indigenous teachers.

We have a strong commitment to the partnership approach to our work and also to growing our Indigenous academic and professional staff.

What was your first impression of the draft IEAP when you read it?

The draft IEAP is a thorough document that provides a clear framework for consolidating and improving Commonwealth, State and local provision of education services to Indigenous students. The commitment to partnership with Indigenous people, the evidence-based approach, and the clear identification of ‘focus schools’ are the strength of this document.

What questions, issues or concerns did the draft IEAP raise for you?

p. 9, Paragraph 3: Engagement and Connection

Having community members and Indigenous education workers in the classroom does not automatically lead to improving the teaching and learning environment for the students. Indigenous education workers need much better training and development for their role in the classroom. Teachers need to have the skills to focus the work of Indigenous education workers on classroom learning on student needs and to support Indigenous staff to have the necessary skills and knowledge to support student learning (for example, developing individual lesson plans for students, curriculum materials and teaching approaches together).

¹ The full version of the Indigenous Partnership Strategy 2009-2011 can be downloaded at <http://www.education.monash.edu.au/indigenous-ed/docs/faculty-indigenous-partnership-strategy2009-2011.pdf>

Following on from this at p.10, Point 16: There is a critical need for the development of a national award for clear conditions and expectations about the role and capacity development of Indigenous education staff who are not teacher trained. The expectations placed on Indigenous education workers vary between States (even the nomenclature varies by State) and they are often caught between teaching, pastoral care and advocacy both in and out of the classroom.

p. 10, Point 17: Reporting education activity back to parents and grandparents

Recent experiences of reporting back in a remote community to parents and grandparents about their children's scholastic achievements reinforced to me that this is no easy task. The consultation process, arising from a clear partnership agreement, raised many questions across the range of issues flagged by the developmental domains of the AEDI (in particular the revolving door of poor housing, poor health and poor school attendance that the coordinated approach in this IEAP seeks to tackle).

Of particular issue for this new IEAP, families do not yet have the necessary skills or confidence to engage with the NAPLAN results. The challenge for this aspirational 'reporting to families' will be to ensure that reporting to families is done using a capacity building framework in order to enable parents to more actively engage in supporting the academic development of their children.

p.11, Paragraph 3: Attendance

These data need to be disaggregated as they are misleading. These figures are closer to the metropolitan (and in some cases rural) experience but hide the serious problem of attendance in many rural, remote and very remote locations.

Two issues seem to recur in my experience in these more remote locations: First, because many Indigenous children in these remote communities do not get exposure to the culture of school before they get to school, they are starting at zero in their first year.

Schools, Indigenous children and their families commonly hold the view that three days a week is good attendance for an Indigenous student. In explaining to parents that if a child misses 2 days per week over 5 years of schooling this amounts to 2 years of missed school, and that means their child will be 2 year levels below their non-Indigenous peers by Year 5, it becomes clear that they will always be below the expected level for their age if they miss school.

As families begin to understand the NAPLAN system, they are also starting to ask questions about the generally poor education levels of their children and this will help make the argument for going to school every day.

The second issue that might be worth considering is that in many remote and very remote locations, the students are kept occupied with sporting and other out of classroom activities. I have had many parents and grandparents complain that they send their children to school to learn, as they themselves were required to do, and they seem to spend all their time on excursions and colouring in. Unfortunately, it is often difficult to refute these claims and they rightly ask why they should send their children to school to do these sorts of things when what they want them to learn is the read and write in English and to become proficient in Maths so that they can take up leadership roles so urgently needed in many communities.

p. 12, Point 22: Developing an evidence based attendance strategy

Understanding why Indigenous students are not coming to school will be important before implementing an attendance campaign. It would be easy to get swamped with the very pressing reported issues to the point of giving up, as many schools have done in the past.

But I have found that it is not so much these reported issues, complex and difficult as they are. Instead, it seems that Indigenous children will choose to go to school if they feel they are learning something from their teachers and they are able to take pride in their successes with their families. There will be strong links here to teacher quality and the capacity of the school to develop working real culturally safe partnerships with the Indigenous families and, in particular, the children.

p.13, Paragraph 3, Dot points 2 and 3: Literacy and Numeracy

Providing support for teachers to develop their professional skills in the teaching of literacy and numeracy to Indigenous children will be a key factor in ensuring the success of this IEAP. Teachers are the key.

BUT programs need to be integrated into the general work of the teacher in the classroom. Arguably, it is not that we do not know what works, but that this knowledge has not been generally available and integrated across all jurisdictions. Piloting new approaches would seem wasteful at this stage. Evidence strongly suggests that ‘bolt-ons’, that is, piloted literacy and numeracy programs that are conducted alongside or outside the main work of teaching, particularly those funded by Commonwealth monies that exist alongside State-based approaches are **not** as successful as those programs that are integrated at a State level and are being taught by skilled teachers.

Certainly, the Commonwealth has played a vital role in ensuring that the education of Indigenous children has received attention at times when the States have not seen these issues as important but there has been at least 20 years of experimental teaching done in rural, remote and very remote schools serving Indigenous communities and in some communities the literacy and numeracy levels of the children are worse than those of their grandparents who were educated by missionaries 50 years ago. This is not an argument to simply return to the missionary way of educating but it does provide insight into the teaching and learning approaches that did succeed in educating a generation of Indigenous people.

p. 14, Points 25 and 26: Developing literacy and numeracy strategies

What the evidence tells us:

1. Diagnostics are very important. Each child should have careful attention paid to their individual learning needs. There is a habit of using a one size fits all approach to Indigenous learners. Careful diagnostics undertaken at appropriate intervals will show what the child knows. The personalised learning plans can then be calibrated correctly to each child for their literacy and numeracy needs. The teacher can then work with the other Education Support Officers and Indigenous Education Workers to establish what skills need to be reinforced and practiced and these paraprofessionals will then be working with the teacher to achieve the same goal. In schools where this occurs, the results have already been impressive. Emerging partnerships between independent schools and remote and very remote schools are also showing promise in supporting teaching staff to develop appropriate diagnostics for low achieving Indigenous students.
2. Data suggest that literacy and numeracy are best learnt in class with their teacher rather than withdrawing students (if the teacher is skilled). Some programs rely on taking the students out of class for remedial work. More detailed analysis needs to be done to ensure that this is not further delaying the academic development of these children.
3. There needs to be a positive attitude to NAPLAN and to testing generally in the school. If there is not a whole-of-school message to the students and their families, a top-down cascading ‘sponsorship’ of the ‘value of testing’ concept’, that these tests are important and that the school is wanting to build the capacity of the community to support the children in these exams, then even if the teacher is doing a great job, there is evidence to suggest that

the children won't take the tests seriously. These children need to be given the same coaching in the techniques of 'doing tests' as children in, say, independent schools are given. Again, evidence suggests that Indigenous students in independent schools do well academically and these 'high expectation' messages are consistently communicated.

4. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many of the literacy and numeracy programs currently being used are eagerly taken up by new teachers. If there are to be new programs piloted, it may be of benefit to develop one for jaded teachers who have been teaching in these communities for a long time. If disaffected, they can cause a strong 'attitudinal drag' on the enthusiasm of newer teachers. A program that re-engages and reenergises jaded teachers would be valuable.

p.15: Leadership, quality teaching and workforce development

The Faculty of Education, Monash University is ideally placed to support the IEAP to achieve its goals in this area. We are pro-actively working with Indigenous communities and schools in metropolitan, rural, remote and very remote locations across Australia to develop research and teaching partnerships. We offer accredited units of study for pre-service teachers. We also offer a specialised Masters unit in Indigenous Education that can lead to a professional or research based qualification. We are also actively developing pathways for Indigenous people to become teachers across our programs in Early Childhood, Primary, Secondary, and Sport and Outdoor Recreation.

Are there important issues that you feel have not been addressed in the draft IEAP?

Quality control is an important issue in the provision of education services to Indigenous students, particularly those programs being implemented in remote and very remote communities. It may help to wrap the IEAP in a quality assurance framework and develop a quality assurance monitoring department that can come to grips with the administrative and 'quality assurance' complexities of the problems involved.

The administration of Indigenous education, particularly in remote and very remote communities has been patchy. Training local Indigenous people (who already speak local languages and who have a good knowledge of the children and their relationships in the communities) with the skills to be Quality Assurance Officers would provide a clear demonstration of the commitment by government to work in partnership with local Indigenous people to improve education outcomes.

Indigenous children, known by multiple and changing names, while culturally appropriate has meant that numbers of children have slipped through the accounting systems. Assigning a number to each child would enable the movement of children across regions and jurisdictions with substantially less confusion and administrative error and also protect children's privacy. Lining up the NAPLAN data with school and QA data would then enable a clearer, evidence-based picture of the issues for improvement to emerge.

What do you like about the draft IEAP?

It provides a strongly coordinated framework with clear accountabilities across a very complex system of education service provision.

Conclusion

The key elements that will ensure the success of this IEAP will be:

1. That schools will be expected to develop the capacity and will to form meaningful partnerships with their Indigenous and non-Indigenous local communities;

2. That Indigenous people will be actively encouraged and supported to strengthen their involvement in the education of their children; and,
3. That teachers will be required to demonstrate the development and enhancement their professional skills in educating Indigenous students through pre-service and professional development courses, thereby ensuring that they have the capacity to create culturally safe, academically 'high expectations' teaching and learning classrooms for their Indigenous students and the knowledge of how to engage these children, and their families, in order for them to achieve their academic potential.

This will require a coordinated focus on the educational needs of each individual Indigenous child. Knowing who they are, knowing what they need, and knowing how to support each child to be successful academically will be a daunting task in a system that has been fragmented on these issues for many years.

This IEAP offers an important consolidation of thinking that will ensure that the whole system will be able to focus on the common goal of improving the educational attainment of Indigenous children.