Which way? What happens when embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in schools meets the professional standards for teachers and an accountability matrix?

John Davis
Indigenous Education Leadership Institute

Sharon Grose
Indigenous Education Leadership Institute
The Australian government, under the leadership of Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd has embarked on an education revolution. The most recent announcements relate to providing additional funding in return for greater transparency and accountability from schools, to ensure equity and equality of opportunity for all students. He said:

We are concerned that (there is) a group of communities, a group of young Australians who are in grave danger of being left behind. (Rudd 2008)

In Australia a political malaise has existed which has allowed a mist to surround the reality of educational outcomes. The government’s concern is well founded; currently Australia’s educational outcomes are closely linked to postcode. While there has been some improvement, the overall reality is that Indigenous students have been and are being left behind.

If the Australian government’s education revolution is to achieve anything it will need to ensure quality outcomes for Australia’s Indigenous children, outcomes which would be considered quality education outcomes for any Australian child. Quality education means an education standard that enables Indigenous students to participate meaningfully in Australian and other societies well beyond their respective communities.

The question is how to move forward from the political rhetoric of greater transparency and accountability from schools to making improvements in Indigenous student outcomes a reality.

This paper discusses factors which are critical to transforming the educational landscape, moving from the rhetoric to a different reality and illustrates how the process of strengthening Indigenous cultural practice and identity in an urban secondary school setting in South East Queensland can support teachers, students and the community.

**Accountability and responsibility for improving indigenous student outcomes**
The Australian government’s focus on accountability is welcomed and long overdue. In 2004 the NSW Review of Aboriginal Education identified that improvement in Indigenous student outcomes requires accountability from those charged with responsibility.

As noted by Amosa and well known by those working in Indigenous education both in Australia and elsewhere:

   Public discourse in Australia around public education…frequently relies on deficit accounts that attribute blame on disadvantaged groups (Amosa et al 2007).

In the Australian context, for disadvantaged groups read Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and low socio-economic communities.

The MACER (Ministerial Advisory Committee for Educational Renewal) Report on Indigenous Education, 2003, reiterates the key message that significant learning gains for Indigenous students can and will be achieved by insisting that accountabilities for improved Indigenous student outcomes are attended to by all who work in schools, as well as other officers who work in the system and provides a framework for assisting teacher professional development (Sarra, 2003).

**Professional standards for teachers**

Research findings show that the greatest source of variance that can make a difference to improving student learning outcomes is the teacher (Hattie, 2003).

To that end, from a national perspective, Australian Governments have attempted to codify and classify and hopefully invigorate the education standards and expectations. This is a significant next step from which each state and territory through its teacher registration process has set clearer guidelines for teacher expectations and delivery. The Professional Standards for Teachers (PST) are Queensland’s response and are
inextricably linked to registration for new and beginning teachers and are used as a reflective tool for early career and experienced teachers.

The standards are recognition of the positional power teachers have in the shaping and delivery of educational programs. As the key drivers of curriculum they are the biggest factor in shaping student learning, especially for Indigenous students.

**High expectations: how do teachers contribute to student success or otherwise?**

For too long, we as an educational community have sought to disassociate ourselves from the problem. The challenges are explained away as not of our making, as teachers, but created elsewhere outside schools or classrooms and beyond the reach of educational programs.

Significant research (Amosa et al, 2007; Sarra, 2005; Bishop 2007) shows a different reality underpinning outcomes for Indigenous students. Teacher expectations, their expectations of students and themselves, impact on student outcomes. In the case of Indigenous students, this phenomenon is underpinned at best by ignorance about what Indigenous children in schools can achieve, or by beliefs that the learning capacity of Indigenous children is somehow inferior to that of other students, or a culture of failure and externalising blame that it seems that it is not worth the effort needed to improve student performance.

The capacity exists within the teaching fraternity to turn the tide of poor student performance. Intrinsically it’s linked to expectations, high expectations of ourselves, involved in education and what we do and higher expectations of the cohorts of Indigenous young people we deal with in our various educational settings.

The work of Bishop and Sarra supports principals and teachers to examine and challenge their assumptions and beliefs about Indigenous students, to reject deficit theorising and reflect on their professional practice in order to develop better classroom relationships with Indigenous students and improve outcomes.
The professional challenge for classroom teachers and their support infrastructure is to reflect inwards and evaluate the effectiveness of their own teaching practice and ask what it is that they are doing or not doing as a teacher that contributes to Indigenous student failure and not hold Indigenous communities culpable for failing to engage with schools and to attribute student failure as a consequence of the complex social and cultural context of these communities (Sarra, 2005).

Understanding ourselves, our motives, who we are and reflect on how we do education, is more powerful than the continual pathologising and theorizing over factors which are beyond our control. Holding the mirror to ourselves and our practices is what is essential in building strong learning cultures across the country.

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives**

A major part of building stronger relationships and thus better outcomes for learning is the involvement of community within the teaching and learning environment.

Infusing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in the teaching and learning spaces of non-Indigenous pedagogical exchange is the next step for Indigenous education pathways in Murriland and with the most recent National Curriculum agenda, across Australia. The shift is on and needs to be mandated and implemented successfully to engage meaningfully with Indigenous curriculum and pedagogy and embedding Indigenous identity.

Identity is the telling factor of educational isolation, when people don’t feel consulted or a part of a process, they walk away. Aboriginal and Torres Strait identities have been, for too long, isolated through dominant western modes of teaching and learning. There exists a plethora of Indigenous curriculum but little traction for infusion into curriculum. Two way education and processes address this issue.
Two way education: applying the professional standards for teachers in an Indigenous context

Two way processes include the Indigenous voice and reason in educational settings. The *Ganma Theory* in Yolngu country (Arnhem Land, Northern Territory, Australia) illustrates the concept in the following way; *Ganma* is a metaphor for the vortex created by the river of waters from the land meeting the river of waters from the sea, as explained by Yuniupingu:

in order to know about the unknown (Western knowledge) you have to go through an educational process, but with the two-way process the emphasis is made on traditional education more than contemporary…I find it interesting that through learning your own traditional knowledge you can learn more about the unknown.” (Yunipingu 1989).

In essence two way education is a dialogue and continual reflection process where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators establish more positive and powerful tools of engagement for students and community.

Two way processes ensure a level of community engagement which enables a culture of infusion and interaction with the teaching and learning space for the benefit of all involved. Two way processes apply equally in urban, regional and rural settings as well as remote communities such as Yolngu country.

Community involvement in curriculum planning and development, valuing the social and cultural context of the learner and acknowledging the power that exists in Indigenous communities goes some way to moving schools from the traditional silo, separate institute of power and control to laying the foundations for community hubs of learning which value and promote life long learning for all.
This co-creation of power creates a symbiotic relationship where both world views are valued, teachers alongside community, bringing powerful expertise to the learning environment, which, when harnessed effectively provides the space for meaningful engagement.

**Bringing it all together: The Knowledge House**

*Teachers who don’t have the knowledge come and find out what they don’t know…They come and we invite them to come to Knowledge House…*

Belinda Wilson (Community Education Counsellor, CEC).

(spaces) where there is high social capital there is a high education(al) performance (Putnam 2000, p300), known as third cultural spaces.

The *Knowledge House* at Logan City, South East Queensland is an example of the third cultural space in an urban context. It is a valued and recognized space for cultural infusion. It exists as a powerful process for community, school staff and students to access to promote and bring to life the ideal of life long learning.

Knowledge House does this in reality by the processes it has embedded. Central to this process is the notion of multiple perspectives for complex challenges, sitting and yarning with people to get the best forward traction.

*Knowledge House is deadly because we have a great team, we are strong and student focused. Our circles are strong. Our jarjums see this, they show it in student DURITHUNGA, we carry it out to our wider community, they see it and we share it, all based on our process, good process…not silo education…circle education.*

Belinda Wilson (CEC).

The creation of these unique spaces for dialogue is shown well by the process of DURITHUNGA. DURITHUNGA is Yugambeh language meaning growth, and
DURITHUNGA represents a growth, a collective of identities dealing with and advocating for better outcomes in Indigenous education, we hold DURITHUNGA forums as students, staff and community.

*Knowledge house is about culturally appropriate process and academically sound education programs.*

Amanda Stewart (Teacher in Charge of Indigenous education)

The Knowledge House is built on the principle that western models and strategies, ways of doing aren’t the only answer. Remembering the power of Indigenous culture and identity, rich with survival skills and strong connections to kin and country, allow us to celebrate who we are as Indigenous people and where we’re from. Effective teaching and learning processes need to encapsulate this perspective, a point of view that isn’t from the dominant Migloo hegemony.

As a reflective, best practice model teachers and designers of learning spaces need to look inwards to project outwardly curriculum and pedagogical exchanges which are deeper learning experiences of and about Indigenous peoples.

*To not have any allusions, be open and transparent is liberating, challenging and different. To be in a space of not knowing is to go beyond your teaching ego – I am the core, it’s free falling, letting go, a valuable space to be…*

*Teachers, all educators have to be open to entering the space… Processes like Knowledge House provide a bridge from the space of not knowing and opens the door to a whole other layer of education, Community infusion, deep learning, sensing and feeling – deep understanding.*

Steve Allen (Teacher)
There are reflective tools and processes that have developed from Indigenous standpoints which non-Indigenous teachers can use to build a better picture and shape clearer learning of and about Indigenous Australians.

The Holistic Planner is based on the research shared by Ernie Grant as a Djirrabal man from Tully in Murriland. The process is based on his text, ‘My Land, My Tracks’ and forms a framework for unpacking Indigenous issues, developing program plans and resources. When breaking down particular focus topics.

_Uncle Ernie’s Framework is a way our knowledge and ways of doing can impact in the classroom. It's a way for all jarjums and staff, Indigenous and non-Indigenous to look at issues and run processes based on Indigenous perspectives._

_I’ve learnt this more with the implementation of the notion of teaching Traditional Games in schools.. Uncle Ernie’s frame goes a long way to filtering and forcing an Indigenous perspective into the Physical Education program._

_Petah Hegarty (CEC)_

As a planning and reflective tool it provides a powerful space for meaningful integration of Indigenous topic areas, there are recognisable elements that connect with and relate to each other; relationships, language, culture, land, place, time.

The Holistic planner allows a space for deep reflection, breaking the old mould of teacher as expert to teacher as facilitator and learner as well. The framework provides a source of other ways of doing and being a part of education.

The Djirrabal learning tool is a strengths based lens. The focus, the power in the process is this world view, how topics, units of work, major studies can be based on these principles, understood and shared from a unique perspective. There is a flipside to the strength based approach, Munyarl mythology.
Munyarl mythology refers to *stereotypes and irrational behaviors about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people*. It is a Badjalung word that means gammin or "pretend…pack of lies." (Craven 1999, p44).

The evolution of Munyarl mythology has led to the development of such *attitudes as apathy, lack of understanding, racism, discrimination, prejudice and exclusion* (Craven 1999, p44). Breaking down these stereotypes and negative images of identity is at the core of creating quality and equitable teaching spaces.

Craven believes that the perpetuation of Munyarl Mythology can be overcome in Australia (Craven 1999, p62). Teachers can effectively critique sources; critically examine and deconstruct, enabling educators to empower the teaching and learning space. Again it is a process of filtration and understanding that can break down the barriers asserted against and toward Aboriginality through ignorance.

We can help Indigenous students in the classroom feel proud, young, black and deadly, this education spreads to other cultures, breaks down barriers. Quality curriculum has the potential to break down barriers between students and teachers.

(Steve Allen, teacher)

As Amosa etal highlight in their longitudinal study, the greatest contribution can be made by teachers *who through their pedagogical frameworks and roll out of curriculum can ensure misconceptions, stereotypes and racism are addressed so that children are better informed* (Craven 1999, p62).

Yarning, taking the time to talk and share space with Indigenous people shows high levels of respect and recognition for Indigenous education and communities. The process of yarning is defined further, from a Murri perspective by Deb Bennet. The power of the process of yarning and setting circle is the symbolic time and space
reference educational institutions can show, demonstrating their value for Indigenous education.

This symbolism is of huge importance in urban centres in Australia, where a sense of malaise and laziness can exist when it comes to issues of Aboriginal involvement in education and performance. The malaise is based on a power dynamic, a percentage shift that is not felt so harshly in rural or remote settings. The power shift is in relation to the very numbers of Indigenous people that are represented in communities within urban Australia.

In the far North Queensland Community of Weipa, there is significant volume, presence and power relation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous that is shared and understood in that context. Likewise, in Weipa’s educational environment, Western Cape College, the Indigenous student cohort represent approximately half the school population.

Logan City is an urban area with a significant number of Indigenous families, however they represent only five to ten percent of the school population. In these contexts symbolism becomes an important bridging process for engaging with community. The Yarning Circle and cycles that exist within and around school sites in an urban context become a powerful reference point, we begin to instill pride as we share collectively and move forward through the dominant educational hegemony.

*This is something simple but something that breaks the silo process of Migloo business…What ever decision is made, DURITHUNGA process must be a process that is recognised and supported as a collective…Valuing and recognising the voice of many not just one.*  Belinda Wilson (CEC)

The Knowledge House is based in an area that is marred by violence. Yarning Circle processes help to bridge and develop positive social behaviors and make connections between community and schools.
Logan City is a low socio-economic, high density housing commission (public housing) area. The realities faced by families include issues of child protection, over crowding in homes, family violence and financial constraints. Students coming to school enter with this baggage, baggage based in a volatile situation. Yarning circles create a space of negotiation and talking through issues; breaking and brokering positive relationships and responsibility; responding to the social cultural context of the learner, not blaming it.

_The Yarning circle in our context provides young people with a frame to speak...It creates and invites an open spoken space – For the ‘all boy’ classes I teach in English and Studies of Society and Environment it is an important part of breaking the bravado and hype surrounding masculinity, it is a challenging and liberating experience…_

Steve Allen (Teacher)

Circles of yarning and deciphering information allows for multiple perspectives and collective sense making which underpins work in the Knowledge House. The Yarning Circle acts as a collective, multiple perspective process, a process of reliving the realities that were shared and delivered at the forefront of our way of doing and being as a people.

_The Yarning circle is awesome. It’s not like group talk, the process is something more powerful...When set and let to grow the process breaks down the classroom dynamics of teacher talk, didactic modes of expression and supplants that, breaks it down to a discussion tool that is more free and equal._

_The Yarning circle is an organic process that grows differently with each participant, each time it is set...In our classes, students lead ways of doing, they facilitate process of deep communication._

Steve Allen (Teacher)
The circle is used in all processes and practices. In classrooms students and teachers sit, meet and work in a circle. Students experience this process in action and conduct their student DURITHUNGA meetings and discussions in circles too.

You need to know your identity, you need to know who you are...Community is our vital link to our culture, it helps us to grow.

Abraham Saylor (DURITHUNGA Student Leader)

Understanding self within the context of the colonial paradigm presents some very challenging issues for Indigenous young people. However, the Indigenous heart, augmented by the will to learn and succeed, guided by community elders and leaders, provides a space for Indigenous young people to explore and celebrate their identity.

By these processes and practices our community and jarjums remember that culture is strong, they are strong and form the next part of the oldest surviving culture. It is evidence that our culture is strong no matter if we live in and around a totally Indigenous school community or one where the Indigenous population is fifty or ten percent of the school cohort.

Our community comes and sees this space as the first port of call before contacting the office; Jarjums come and eat, laugh, sing and play. Students see education, learning and sharing all around them. We have visitors, guests, community; other schools come and share in the process. We are a learning community within the school

Amanda Stewart (TIC, Indigenous education)

Wider circles like Community DURITHUNGA gives schools in our inner city area a chance to speak...Our people in schools don’t get the chance to speak because administration doesn’t support Indigenous education workers and teaching staff...white administration and schools don’t want to listen and commit
the time…Community DURITHUNGA means we as Indigenous educators make the time, demand the time to gather, sit yarn and take the time to listen.

Belinda Wilson (CEC)

As the experience at the Knowledge House reaffirms on a daily basis, as long as time is taken to follow the process of yarning and valuing the circle space, the cycle, the evolution of our Indigenous culture continues.

The future for our community and school is very strong

Katie Davenport (DURITHUNGA Student Leader)

TREE

I am the tree
the lean hard hungry land
the crow and eagle
sun and moon and sea
I am the sacred clay
which forms the base
the grasses vines and man
I am all things created
I am you and
you are nothing
but through me the tree
you are
and nothing comes to me
except through that one living gateway
to be free
and you are nothing yet
for all creation
earth and God and man
is nothing
until they fuse
and become a total sum of something
together fuse to consciousness of all
and every sacred part aware
alive in true affinity

Kevin Gilbert (Indigenous Australian poet)

These ways represent the way forward through the mire of Indigenous education, a multi pronged approach. First and fore mostly there must be a real and tangible actioning of teacher accountability.

Research based on understanding of educational disadvantage...have emphasized the need to move beyond the deficit approaches that effectively pathologise the problem within students (their families, their culture etc) to those which locate the problem in educational institutions, their structure, culture, curriculum... (Amosa et al 2007, p1).

The core to this process is understanding and valuing that it is the classroom, the teaching space where most success occurs. Harnessing the power that already exists within the teaching fraternity means community infusion, two way learning is easier to attain as teachers break from the ‘expert’ or silo model of education and embrace the role as facilitator of learning, creating spaces and time for dialogue with community. Here the teaching space becomes de mystified and quality teaching and learning frames can be successfully delivered in any school context, whether, urban, rural or remote.

This is not a ‘box culture’, it is living and breathing and needs to be taught and embedded in the classroom respectfully. After over 200 years of trying to
annihilate the cultures, surely we, after formally recognising past wrongs through the Apology 2008, we can right some wrongs in what and how we teach now.

Steve Allen (Teacher)

Embedding processes of learning, yarning and sharing will create an educational environment that is proud of its Indigenous heritage, not marred by munyarl mythology but one where Indigenous young people stand strong and smart in any education circles in the world.

Through the establishment of the Knowledge House the school community is stronger and smarter in their journey through life long learning, achieved by the connections to face, space and place.

Face is recognising the face, connecting to Indigenous people and building relationships. Space refers to a site, such as a physical space for the Knowledge House and allowing the space for Indigenous curriculum, identify and processes to be infused throughout the school community. Place means understanding and responding to the place from which Indigenous young people are coming.

I love my community, we are a strong community, our culture is strong…Last year we had 50 Indigenous students and families attending school (student population is 700 students), now we have over 100, coming from bad habits to go further. (Katie Davenport, DURITHUNGA Student Leader)

Armed with these different processes, working in sync with each other symbiotically, in circle, building on relationships and shared responsibilities, shaping our educational programs to respond to the social and cultural context of the learner means the teaching fraternity can create a current that will change the tide of low expectations and poor performance for Indigenous jarjums.
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*Voices from Knowledge House at Loganlea State High School*, Indigenous Education Leadership Institute, Murriland (Queensland) (DVD)

**Websites**


www.racismnoway.com.au
