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Title: Success of the Aboriginal Education and Training Policy (2008) for the (then) NSW Department of Education and Training (now NSW Department of Education and Communities)

Tutor's Name:

The reconciliation movement in Australia towards the Aboriginal and Torres Islanders began with the 1967 referendum securing 90 percent approval of the non-aboriginal Australians in repealing the clauses of Australian Constitution that had been discriminatory against the Aboriginal community. The landmark referendum granted full citizenship status to the aboriginals of Australia following their right to vote being legislated by the Commonwealth in 1962 and by all states in 1965.

However, despite constitutional equity the aboriginal community was faced with persistent social and economic disparity in employment, income and education. In our study, we shall analyse the effort of the Department of Education and Training (DET), New South Wales in a holistic approach to address the educational disadvantage of the aboriginals in the state. The approach was personified with the flagship program of DET NSW called Aboriginal Education and Training Program (AETP), 2008 aimed at bridging the educational gap between aboriginal and non-aboriginal community of Australia by 2012. This critical study is reflective of the appropriateness of AETP with respect to its objective and its impact on the principal stakeholders associated with the program.

Although the intent of DET NSW is welcome, our study attempts to evaluate the aims of AETP and how far it has succeeded in attaining its goals.

Our analysis covers the aims and strategies of the AETP approach, linking it with the historical context of racism against the Aboriginals by the European settlers. The essay will highlight racism as the underlying reason for the disparity of academic achievements between aboriginal and non-aboriginal communities of Australia. However, in spite of reconciliatory policy of DET NSW, the question remains how much it could achieve in improving the access of education to the indigenous students. The reason for impediments in achieving the targeted equity in education are analysed along with its impact on the major stakeholders of the program.

One of the most important commitments of Department of Education and Communities, New South Wales towards strengthening the education system of the Aboriginal community was affirmed as, ‘by 2012, Aboriginal student outcomes will match or better outcomes of the broader student population’ (NSW DET *AETP* 2008). By recognizing the Aboriginal culture (Muecke,

1992) and custodianship, NSW DET proposed to augment delivery of Aboriginal languages programs and improve their academic status in partnership with communities. By ensuring a smooth passage from education to employment for the Aboriginal students with provision of required trainings with respect to their workforce planning, career development, professional development and mentoring, the New South Wales government contemplated to implement the much anticipated Aboriginal Human Resource Development Plan. The development measures were taken in consultation with the Aboriginal communities aiming for their capacity building and introducing useful academic courses for the Aboriginal students in accordance with the community profiles. The TAFE NSW teachers responsible for implementing the education and training programs were made aware of the high priority attached with the Aboriginal development agenda. Actions were taken for the staff associated with the program to realize the criticality of the situation and the need for the Aboriginal students to imbibe a culturally appropriate education, toeing with the official line of NSW DET *AETP* 2008 declaration. In this context, including Aboriginal education in key leadership and professional development programs had been a landmark policy measure by DET NSW in shaping a futuristic bi-cultural work practices in the state.

As backup measures to this policy a number of developmental strategies were adopted such as introducing personalized learning plans for the Aboriginal students with help of the teachers, parents, caregivers and fellow students along with employment opportunities aligned with TAFE courses for Certificate III and above. To motivate the indigenous students and their caretakers in enrolling themselves to the DET programs, the department made provisions to celebrate the achievements of the Aboriginal students in collaboration with their community. Efforts were made to identify and give incentives to the schools in celebrating the students' achievements and cutting suspension rates for the Aboriginal pupils. The entire motivational model was monitored through technology driven School Measurement, Assessment and Reporting Toolkit (SMART).

The Aboriginal Education and Training Policy (2008) were chalked out on the basis of the Aboriginal Education Review, where 400 locations across New South Wales were studied involving 4,000 students, parents and teachers. The research was conducted jointly the DET

NSW and NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc. (AEGC) (Greenwood, Frigo & Hughes, 2002) and was instrumental in framing the policies of NSW Aboriginal Education and Training Policy (2008).

However, despite commendable efforts by DET NSW and the consistent statewide approach towards their welfare in education (as well as in other spheres) the Aboriginal community is still faced with considerable gap to a fair, just and equitable society.

Historical context is testimony to their disadvantaged status which started since James Cook encountered the 'natives' on 29th April 1770. It set off a systematic pattern of victimizing them through 'white' discourses (Bourke, 1998) depicting them as intertwined with nature and jungle and as subspecies of human (Spickard, 2005). In nineteenth century their depiction transformed to being primitive humanity (Yengoyan, 2001). They had been consistently portrayed as semi animal, noble savages, sub-humans etc.

Even in the twentieth century, the Australian Aboriginals were the portrayal of imaginary world of aliens by the 'white' intellectuals. Until 1950s, systematic direct discrimination (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) against Aboriginal people was ubiquitous in Australia. The Aboriginal children were restricted from joining mainstream schools by the state laws and parent's of the non-aboriginal students.

However, the federal Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (Fredrickson, 2002) made it unlawful for any person to discriminate on racial and ethnic grounds. Nonetheless, there were alleged attempts by the state acts to encourage covert racism through some controversial laws, such as the Section 9 (1) of the Racial Discrimination Act 1975, where it was required for a racial victim to prove discrimination committed to him.

Through direct and indirect racial discrimination against the Aboriginals, it was found from a number of surveys that rate of absenteeism of the Aboriginal students is higher than the non-Aboriginal students, although it couldn't be ascertained that the phenomena was because of racism. Higher absenteeism and its impact on the Aboriginal students with respect to their ability to comply with the school curriculum have had cascading effect on their employment and achievements. Apart, certain issues like the criminal justice system, parent's unemployment,

cultural obligation and poor hearing have impacted the Aboriginal students on their performance in learning chain.

It was only recently that DET NSW focused on promotion of schools that were willing to participate in celebration of achievements by indigenous students and relaxing the maximum absenteeism rate. The department also attempted to get tough on racism in educational layout by including initiatives by TAFE Institute, various school based programs in New South Wales and professional learning.

In analysing the appropriateness of AETP program in terms of accessibility of the Aboriginal students to education, better engaged and supported learning is likely to be reflected in their attendance, retention and academic performance. The critical factor in improving the accessibility of the indigenous people to formal education is to reach the youngest children in the community. Quality educational programs are needed to leverage their potential to the maximum. The aboriginal parents will be motivated to access education for their children if they taste success in the formal curriculum as their employment prospects are related to their compliance of the formal education. By introducing “alternative curriculum” (Harris & Malin, 1994) for the Aboriginal children, their access to quality teaching, learning skills and literacy strategies are impaired to an extent. The inclusion of applied learning and vocational training can be the options for a few, but certainly not for the entire student population of the Aboriginal community.

In any case, the success of the program, to a large extent, depends on creating an environment in the schools free of prejudice and disrespect towards the Aboriginal people. The Aboriginal parents and the students should not feel unsafe in terms of their belonging with non-Aboriginals, their cultural identity and the degree of welcoming attitude towards them. The threat to their emotional wellbeing can come from both non-Aboriginal students (and their parents) and from the teachers. If, the federal government and the department fail to address this issue of Aboriginality, it is likely to act as a major barrier to their attendance, retention and other critical criteria set by DET NSW for the success of Aboriginal education. Moreover, understanding the Aboriginal culture and values by the TAFE employees and department staff can determine the

efficiency of the programs in bringing the Aboriginal children to the state education system. Coordination and partnerships at local level can provide better support for the Aboriginal community helping to overcome cultural and linguistic barrier among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, parents and other stakeholders.

The emphasis of DET NSW had been the use of collaboration (with Aboriginal families) in spreading AETP/AETS programs, while implementing the strategies is an important catalyst for enrolment, attendance and retention of the indigenous students, helping them to build their capacities of working collectively within and outside their community. By consulting their community members and with the aid of two-way communication between department the workers and the community stakeholders, the problems of suspension and students' response to literacy drives can be solved through consensus.

The sustenance of aboriginal access to education is also determined by the factor of overt and covert racism towards them. The higher rate of suspension of aboriginal students can be attributed to their non-compliant and disruptive behaviour, sometimes instigated by covert racism and according to some; the suspension itself is fallout of direct (overt) racism.

In the school campuses the unit staff like faculty members, grade supervisors, school assistants, office managers etc exert considerable influence on the communities and inspire the stakeholders to achieve their vision regarding the Aboriginal education. It can work both ways in terms of accessibility of Aboriginal students to the TAFE schools depending on the individual outlook of the school staff. However, in most cases their influence engineer improved enrolment rate, better attendance and higher retention of Aboriginal students.

The AETP/AETS focused more on primary education for Aboriginals than otherwise. The stated policy DET NSW was pinned on the idea of the advantages lying with converting a formative mind by building the capacity of the Aboriginal children from the scratch. However, because of the remote and rural geographical location of many aboriginal households, the challenges of sustaining the educational outcomes add to the financial, social and human resource impediments the schools face. The 'cultural interface' promulgated by Professor Martin Nakata illustrates the

intercultural space between indigenous and non-indigenous people (Nakata, 2007) is a blur and separation of cultural spheres “leads to simplifications that obscure the very complexities of cultural practices in both domains”. The theory in an 8 Ways Framework advocated an intercultural approach (Yunkaporta & McGinty, 2009) in identifying an overlap between aboriginal learning process and the quality of teaching. A number studies over the years indicated the aboriginal parents placing critical importance on teachers’ interaction and expectations with their children as the foremost measure of quality teaching. The teachers that attach value in building trust and relationship with the aboriginal students and their families creates a student-teacher environment that makes the formative minds of the indigenous students feel welcome in the class and among his non-Aboriginal peers. However, there are times when the teacher cannot overcome the barriers of cultural challenges resulting in their frequent turnover. The experienced teachers shy away from working in Aboriginal schools often located in the far-off places being swapped with inexperienced and newly graduate teachers in a resulting forfeit of teaching quality. Despite the policy measures of AETP in empowering the students from the disadvantaged community, the community participation in involving the Aboriginal parents for decision making at best had been erratic. The teachers generally are involved with non-Aboriginal students and have little contact with their Aboriginal peers. Regardless of the best intentions of DET NSW the Fullan’s theory claiming ‘the process of educational reform is much more complex than has been anticipated. Even apparent successes have fundamental flaws,’ is vindicated for Australian aboriginal students.

The barriers related to the implementation of AETP program are centred on the complexity of the situation with respect to cultural differences, lack of understanding and empathy, and racial discrimination towards the aboriginal community. It can be concluded that a program like AETP is difficult to implement appropriately in isolation. An integrated approach is required with systematic flow of cultural exchanges between Aboriginals and European descendents to help understand each other better. The social and cultural exchanges will enhance mutual acceptance and respect as the cornerstone of unity and peaceful coexistence among communities. Achieving the educational parity will be much easier under such environment creating grounds for effective implementation of social welfare schemes like AETP and bringing the Aboriginal community to the economic and social mainstream of Australia.

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