Premier’s Xstrata Coal Aboriginal Engagement in Education and Training Scholarship

An Identity-Centred Approach to Educational Reform in the 21st Century

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Purpose of my study tour

The purpose of my tour was to research the interconnections and corollaries between what I’ve coined an *Identity-Centred Approach* (ICA) to education and student achievement. As a proud Aboriginal man and teacher, my focus was also on exploring:

* 1. how Aboriginal Education is valorised in mainstream educational contexts.
  2. the capacity of embedded, identity-based practices, pedagogies and programs to improve student outcomes in all curriculum areas, but particularly in Mathematics, English and Science.
  3. whether a bi-cultural, ‘bi-world’, educational framework is necessary to ‘close the gap’ for Aboriginal students.

Description of my study tour

From the *deadly* sounds of the *Colly Crew* at Collarenebri Central School to the vast regions of the Navajo landscape, I visited numerous schools, educational institutions and Indigenous service providers throughout Australia, Canada and the USA. I spoke with numerous people involved in promoting Aboriginal education. Whether they were students, teachers, executives or directors, I undertook extensive and detailed interviews with people who had made quantifiable improvements for Aboriginal people in Aboriginal educational settings. That is, they demonstrated a track record of making real and sustainable improvements in Aboriginal students’ sociocultural and educational outcomes.

Findings from my Study Tour

Through working closely with Indigenous leaders in Aboriginal Education throughout Australia, Canada, Alaska and the Navajo Territories, I quickly learned that an Aboriginal people’s rightful quest for self-determination, in an educational sense at least, often translated to an unintentional and inadvertent separatist educational model in which the following was observed. Firstly, non-Aboriginal enrolments in schools situated on Aboriginal *Band*, *Mission* or *Settlement* lands were typically extremely low; and vice versa for local State schools. Band or Settlement schools in both urban and rural settings often had a differentiated, people-specific curriculum. Indigenous-themed schools were also often run autonomously, thus operating with less State-based educational determination. Another observation was that State-driven educational performance data repeatedly illustrated that while students in self-determining, *Band/Settlement* Schools were highly culturally competent, they were often lagging behind in key learning areas such as English, Science and Maths, which are key to employment and social opportunities.

Primary Finding from the Study Tour

The most concrete observations I made during my study were that identity clearly affected student attendance, engagement and performance at school. One of my most profound experiences occurred at the Native Education Centre in Vancouver, Canada. When I asked one of the Aboriginal students how his studies were going, he replied, *“it’s nice to really belong here, I feel like I can make it now”.* This boy explained that had he not come to such a pro-indigenous learning environment, he would have dropped out. Such sentiments were common throughout the Aboriginal territories, band lands, band schools, Indigenous institutions and mission sites I visited, whether at the Red Mesa School in the Navajo, the Long house in British Columbia or the Native Charter School in Alaska. The key, of course, was to unpack the elements, or perhaps the educational approach, which impacted Aboriginal students’ attendance; since without this, no productive learning of any kind could take place.

The Identity-Centred Approach (ICA); schools tackling poor attendance& poor engagement head on and succeeding

Whilst the pro-Indigenous schools studied would not have used such terminology as the ICA, there was no question that in each school showing improvements in attendance, identity-centred programs, pedagogies and practices were prolific. Where attendance figures were outstanding, for example at Sea Bird Island Community school in Canada and the *Hymba Yumba Community Hub* School in Springfield, Brisbane, the following generally took place:

1. A strong community presence at the school. Whether through specific, defined spaces on the grounds, or whether the educational facility was situated within the community precinct, strong ties between community and institution were evident.
2. Indigenous leadership and/or Indigenous management. For the most part, the schools visited were either led by an Aboriginal person, or they were run by a majority Indigenous Board.
3. A significant Aboriginal staff in the school. For example, in Alaska, the Navajo, Australia and Canada, the number was substantial.
4. Independent and/or autonomous management. This is arguably one of the most important points because it allows the institutional managers to make informed, site-specific educational decisions. In this respect, acclaimed Principal Lee Musumeci, of the Early Challis Learning Centre in Armadale, W.A, as well as Mrs Nella Nelson, district coordinator of the Aboriginal Education Unit in Victoria, B.C., were able to connect students with a vast range of services, external agencies and institutes that could not be accessed without localised management.
5. Explicit, systemic and consistent use of Indigenous artefacts, realia and culturally relevant materials was evident throughout the site. Both in the Indigenous Long House at the University British Columbia, and throughout the Seabird Island Community grounds, artefacts, culturally significant architecture and symbols were evident everywhere.

Defining an Identity-Centred Approach to educational reform

Such an approach is about recognising and valorising identity as fundamental to any person’s educational success. In this respect, my suggested approach/proposal argues the need for 1) specific research into the efficacy of identity in educational contexts 2) an identity-based framework that explicitly itemised identity-centred criteria for schools to apply Australia-wide and 3) policy and department reform so this approach can be implemented productively, systemically and equitably.

The *Hymba Yumba* Hub School; an Educational Model of Excellence

While many schools and learning institutions demonstrated many, if not all, of the aforementioned features, one school really stood out in terms of its capacity to maintain high attendance levels, productively engage students and produce outcomes on par, or above State averages. The *Hymba Yumba Community Hub*; a leading Independent school in Brisbane, Australia has been deemed a *deadly school*, due to five key features:

1. **It was Indigenous-themed, or rather *‘identity-centred’* without being labelled an Indigenous or Aboriginal School, per se. That is, it explicitly supported the identity of its students.**

In stating this, I am not suggesting that every school in Australia develop an Indigenous theme. Rather, I am saying that in almost every such school that I visited, and based on all the yarns that I had with Principals, wherever a school was recognised as the ‘Aboriginal School’, polarised views and derogatory stigmas often emerged among local community members. In such schools, there was also much less educational reciprocity, cultural reciprocity and, perhaps most poignantly, very little attendance and learning from the non-indigenous community. There was also a ubiquitous difference in governmental investment between the non-Indigenous and the Indigenous schools which only intensified resentment by the majority of the non-Indigenous populace in these regions. Sadly, the societal trend toward race-based schools is emerging in some rural and remote regions of Australia. One such school is Boggabilla Central School; in the remote North West Region of NSW.

Boggabilla Central School: A Post-Tour Case Study

While both Federal and State Education Ministers do not support race as a determinant of a State School identity, there is no question that, implicitly at least, this view is the reality in communities like Boggabilla. Mr Gavin Khan, the newly appointed Indigenous principal of the school, recently confirmed that the school is not an Aboriginal school per se. Rather, as a Connected Communities school, cultural identity of all students is supported. Further, cultural teachings are now mandated in such schools from K-12. Despite these reforms and views, the vast majority of non-Indigenous parents in the local community send their children to schools in local townships. An Identity-Centred Approach would help redress this because it would seek to validate and uplift all cultures connected to the wider community. In this respect, the premise for the NSW Department of Education’s Connected Communities strategy directly aligns with the ICA because it espouses culturally-centred pedagogy, practice and programming in schools.

1. **It has strong capacity to run autonomously, but with State support.**

By this, I do not mean that the ideal school should be an independent school rather than a State School. What I believe is that Hymba Yumba would not have all the success it has today without the principal and executive being able to make local decisions for the school. Lee Musumeci, one of Australia’s leading principals concurs, making the point that she could not have made so many positive and productive reforms in her school, were it not for the WA Education system allowing her to do so. Graham Blackley, retired principal and Stronger Smarter ambassador, also supports this, arguing that *“locally, principals must be able to make decisions with and for our local people, otherwise we effect minimal productive change”*. I strongly believe that we must enable school executive to make local decisions. Any state system that allows this to occur through initiative such as *Local Schools Local Decisions* is helping to create more equitable Aboriginal education and a better education system more generally.

1. **Location; *Hymba Yumba Community Hub* is near several feeder schools of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal backgrounds; and the location is not regarded as a low-socio-economic region.**

This is really important because it suggests that in the future, in the region around Hymba Yumba at least, the number of non-Aboriginal graduates will increase. Further, because the school is culturally-supportive and identity-centred, learning about Australia’s First Peoples will be implicit, rich and embedded throughout the school’s curriculum. The geographical position of the school has played a major part in reframing Aboriginal education in the local region, as it is situated in a predominantly middle-to-upper-class region replete with non-Indigenous teachers, doctors, nurses, lawyers, police officers etc. In this way, Aboriginal Education is being brought to the door of non-Indigenous audiences who have historically felt that such schools were either inaccessible because of location, or simply not ‘for them’. Because of the positioning of the school, Hymba Yumba also asserts a much greater influence on the socio-political socio-educational landscape of the local region.

1. **This school practises the educational philosophy of High Expectations.**

In alignment with Dr Chris Sarra’s educational theory, the Hymba Yumba curriculum is not ‘dumbed down’ in any way, but is enhanced by Aboriginal perspectives, pedagogies and educational research. Additional culturally-specific material is use to enhance school learning programs, whilst upholding the school philosophy of high expectations. The ethos and practice are also supported by top-down policy and strong school leadership. In this way, students become educated according to both mainstream and Aboriginal education systems.

1. **It embraced all members of the Aboriginal community in explicit ways, and promoted Aboriginality within the context of being Australian.**

Students, parents and community members of any background could attend this school without feeling ‘out of place’. The school has a clear open-door policy for students of all backgrounds. It is neither a culture-specific nor identity-specific school, but embraces and celebrates the histories of all students.

Factors inhibiting attendance, engagement and performance

As I visited more and more *‘Native Schools’* in Canada and Alaska, I realised that recurrent challenges to improved attendance and engagement were common to most. Despite the apparent ‘deadly’ appearance of the schools, there were several underlying issues that needed to be understood, particularly given that Australian educational systems are currently undergoing such radical structural reforms.

**The common challenges observed in foreign Native Schools were:**

* + Schools were often geographically segregated from wider society.
  + Because of the autonomous structure of the Band system, many Native Canadian students were reticent to engage in the wider world, whether socially or economically. This was partly because most, if not all, key services are available on the Band lands or on lands close by.
  + The establishment of a partially differentiated curriculum. In some of the Native Schools, the HSC equivalent, known as a Dogwood, was not administered. In many Native Schools, high school curricula focused on vocational education and training. Cultural curricula were also embedded throughout all levels of schooling. Sadly, because of these factors, schools with a predominant enrolment of Aboriginal students typically faced the stigma of being Aboriginal, low achieving and vocationally-streamed.

**The most common challenges in Australian schools with a high percentage of Aboriginal students (90%+) were:**

* + Extra curricula, or ‘bolted on’ sports and arts programs, employed as a panacea for poor engagement and attendance.
  + low or non-existent Aboriginal Teacher representation. In this respect, there was a cultural incongruence between school teachers and the students. Three examples are Collarenebri Central School, Boggabilla Central School and Yirara College.
  + Limited inter-school plans to cater for transience. For millennia, transient practices have been commonplace among Aboriginal Australians. Despite this, there is little being done to work together to adapt to this cultural practice so that educational opportunities are not diminished for Aboriginal learners.
  + Offering high achieving Aboriginal students scholarships to elite urban schools away from country. In my opinion, this practice removes important educational role models and infers that the “other” educational system is somehow superior.

This is something that must be redressed. As Dr Chris Sarra’s work quickly taught me; we must play the educational game using mainstream tools, rather than creating a new subset of them; we just need to play more productively with them, to make our deadly learners stronger and smarter, and prepared for the 21st Century world.

Exploring Engagement and Scholastic Achievement

In most if not all of the schools I visited the extent to which students engage in learning directly correlated with the degree to which they could access key identity markers. This could be in the form of physical items or it could refer to the teacher as a primary exemplar of identity. Whichever the case, students’ identities were clearly enhanced, and thus their success in education improved, when identity-reflective symbols, pedagogies, programs, realia, cultural resources and representation were embedded.

Furthermore, wherever there was a high number of high quality Aboriginal teachers and leaders in schools, attendance and engagement generally improved. The need for more deadly high quality teachers cannot be stressed enough. Teachers are no doubt models of identity and excellence. In support of Prof. Buckskin’s and the South Australian University’s MATSITI (More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Initiative), more must be done to generate more deadly teachers in this country. Unfortunately, most Australian schools with high Indigenous populations have extremely limited numbers of Aboriginal staff. Given that the Quality Teaching model is underpinned by longitudinal research showing that teachers are the most fundamental resource, this is particularly alarming.

Plans for the future applications of this study tour: Where to next?

From my study tour, I propose that we rethink how schools in remote Aboriginal communities can be reframed as identity-centred learning environments. This was based on a Hermannsburg Elder explaining to me that *‘We are at one with our lands, and we need to find a way to keep our young ones here, on Country; and we need to make sure they can get work that gives them a sense of pride and purpose in life’*. Self-determination and education are hermetically bound. In remote Aboriginal communities particularly, the school must function as a positive and productive conduit between the two educational spheres. I also believe that schools with very high Aboriginal enrolments must generally become overt identity-centres or identity-hubs where curriculum and learning are driven by Aboriginal-themes, Aboriginal leadership, pedagogies and culture-specific programs. The practices associated with an ICA are thus no different in remote regions, it’s just that the Aboriginal culture in such regions predominates, and in many cases is the homogenous culture. As such, it needs to be reflected in all aspects of education within the region. The key, I believe, is gaining the support of governments and educational systems so that educational policy clearly aligns with grassroots efforts to reconfigure education to suit cultural identities.

Where the Identify-Centred Approach/proposal fits for isolated and remote regions:

I advocate for a reassessment of how identity is authentically practised in educational settings. I recommend the design of an identity-centred framework that can enhance educational outcomes, strengthen self-determination capacities, maintain high expectations and support local educational practises within and Australia curriculum context.

**For all areas other than completely remote regions:**

I propose that neither ‘settlement country’ i.e. mission country nor low-socio economic urbanised regions be the geographic location of Identity-centred schools. Despite the undertone of this idea, the aim is not to diminish Aboriginal Australians’ right to self-determination, but rather to allow an identity space that better fosters the learning of two educational worlds, i.e. Aboriginal and mainstream education, so that all participants gain even deeper educational experiences as Australians. I advocate this particularly for secondary schools.

Summary of key educational institutions visited.

As part of the Premier’s Xstrata Coal Aboriginal Engagement in Education and Training Scholarship, I investigated a number of Indigenous educational institutions to better understand the role and impact identity has in schools, particularly schools recognised as predominantly Indigenous.

**Collarenebri Central School, Collarenebri.**

Collarenebri Central School is set in a small, rural and isolated community on the western edge of the New England region. It is located 75km north east of Walgett and 142km west of Moree. The school is relatively small, with an enrolment of approximately 125. More than 80 percent of students are Aboriginal. The Principal is Mr Robert Malcome.

**Cabbage Tree Island Public School**

Cabbage Tree Island Public School is located at the eastern end of Cabbage Tree Island Aboriginal community, 22km south of Ballina. The school has a total enrolment of 40 Aboriginal students from preschool age to Year 6. The majority of the staff is Aboriginal, including the principal. These educators are important for providing a culturally relevant curriculum and links to the community. The island has a rich cultural history that has been part of the school since it was established in 1893. Partnerships with the local community and other service providers are extremely important and quality teaching is the school’s core business.

**Challis Early Childhood Education Centre.**

The Challis Cluster encompasses Challis Early Childhood Education Centre (ECEC) and Challis Primary School (CPS). Challis Early Childhood Education Centre is an independent school providing education for children from Kindergarten to Year 2. ECEC focuses on developing literacy, numeracy and social skills. Challis Primary School is an independent school providing a balanced educational program for children from Year 3 to Year 7. Challis Parenting and Early Learning Centre located on the premises is an integrated and comprehensive multi-agency school and community resource focused on early learning and family support. The school is a model of interagency collaboration and is being developed as a hub of service delivery. The principal is Mrs Lee Musumeci.

**Yirara College of the Finke River Mission, Alice Springs**

Yirara College of the Finke River Mission is a boarding school for Indigenous students 12 years and older from remote communities. All students board at the College during the school terms. Yirara operates under the auspices of Finke River Mission which is the mission arm of the Lutheran Church in Central Australia. Yirara is located 7km south of Alice Springs. It was funded specifically for traditionally oriented Aboriginal students residing in isolated communities throughout remote central Australia.

**Lalme’ Iwesawtexw SeaBird Island Community**

Lalme' Iwesawtexw (Seabird Island Community School), meaning "House of Learning" in Halq'emeylem, was named after Mary Charles, a Seabird Island Band Elder. The school is run by an Aboriginal board and its mission is to provide a supportive and culturally relevant learning environment. Lalme' Iwesawtexw offers quality B.C. Curriculum for Kindergarten to Grade 12 students, fostering and promoting cultural values and the Halq'emeylem language.

**Nella Nelson: Aboriginal Nations Education Division (ANED) District Co-Ordinator B.C.**

Ms. Nelson is a member of the Tsawataineuk Band of the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation. Nella has worked for the Greater Victoria School District for the past 29 years as a high school history teacher, counsellor and district administrator for the Aboriginal Nations Education Division. Nella is a very active member in the First Nations community currently Chair of the Camosun College First Nations Advisory Board and Co-chair of the University of Victoria Faculty of Education Aboriginal Advisory Council.

**Alaskan Native Heritage Centre.**

The Alaska Native Heritage Centre, a renowned cultural centre and museum in Anchorage, is an exciting place where all people can go to expand their understanding of Alaska's Indigenous people. The Alaska Native Heritage Center offers many ways to experience Alaska's Native cultures for young and old alike. The centre organises school visits for students and runs lectures and workshops for adults.

**Rough Rock Community School in the Navajo.**

Rough Rock Community School (RRCS) was founded in 1965. The Navajo people maintain and preserve their culture and heritage through the school, and obtain a quality education.The school’s purpose is to educate, enlighten, motivate, challenge, and assist in the proper cultural rearing of our Navajo children so they can be self-respecting, respectful of others, speak and practise their language and culture, and be totally functional in Anglo-Saxon society.  
The objective of this school and the community as a whole is to teach and instil their sacred Navajo Language and way of life into each of their Navajo children.

**The Alaskan Native Cultural Charter School**

The Alaska Native Cultural Charter School builds student excellence through traditional cultural learning and is open to K-8students. The school is an option for parents seeking a unique school program and environment for their children because it incorporates active engagement with today's Alaska Native community. The school offers students a curriculum focused on Alaska Native culture and a rigorous academic program that develops academic achievement. Decision making for the school is through the [Academic Policy Committee](http://www.asdk12.org/schools/anccs/pages/apc.html) elected by parents and school staff. The curriculum for the Charter School is structured around four themes through which the essential cultural and academic knowledge of Alaskan Natives are taught. The themes are: 1) Living Place, 2) Language and Communication, 3) Culture and Expression and 4) Tribe and Community.

**Native Education College (NEC)**

The NEC Native Education College provides a culturally appropriate and supportive learning environment for Aboriginal learners, within available resources. Non-Aboriginal learners are also welcome. In pursuit of their Mission, the NEC Native Education College aims to establish the following outcomes:

* + Learners will experience a learning environment that respects and reflects the diversity of Aboriginal culture.
  + Learners get the support they need to achieve their educational goals in a way that respects their individual cultural values.
  + Learners are prepared for meaningful roles in Aboriginal communities and society in general.
  + Graduates are prepared for employment or go on to further their education.
  + Graduates receive recognition in the form of a certificate, diploma or degree.

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Hymba Yumba Community Hub School- John Davis (Principal) and staff.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander School- Philomena Downey (Principal)

Graham Blackley- retired Principal (Bairnsdale College)

EarlyChallis Childhood Centre – Lee Musumeci (Principal) and staff

Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, W.A- staff

Yirara College- Andrew Mirtschin (Principal) and staff

The Desert People’s Centre for Appropriate Technology Alice Springs- staff

**Overseas**

Alaska Native Charter School- Patsy Shaha (Principal) and staff

Lalme' Iwesawtexw: The Seabird Island Community School- Shari White (Principal) and staff

The Native Education College- Stan Parenteau (Education Coordinator) and staff

The First Nations’ Long House, University of British Columbia- Debra Martel (associate director) and staff

The Aboriginal Nations Education Division District Coordinator, B.C.-Nella Nelson and staff

The Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC), Alaska- staff

Rough Rock Community School- Jack Begay (Elder and Teacher) and staff

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