



**Whole of Community
Engagement**
Initiative

**Thriving at the intersection:
Indigenous education leaders**

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Introduction

In this presentation, we want to establish that the WCE education leaders:

1. have long lived at, and suffered the tensions and dilemmas of, the intersection of mainstream and Indigenous cultures;
2. have negotiated the tensions with success, are advantaged by that, and in doing so have become model Indigenous intercultural citizens;
3. that their 'resolution' of what are contemporary citizenship tensions can be critical to remote Indigenous futures; and
4. that the wider recognition of their achievement can make a significant contribution to the social sustainability of Australian society into the future.



Disincentives to remote Indigenous schooling and further education

- * The WCE initiative has identified many well known factors influencing remote Indigenous students' aspiration to, engagement and participation in, and outcomes from, school and further education. They include:
- * remoteness, lack of English use at home and literacy out of schooling, lack of school regard for local histories, stories and culture (language, kinship, social norms, disciplines etc), lack of jobs to aspire to as reason for schooling, challenge of moving away for FE (incl. needing English, cost of housing, loneliness).



Discursive disincentives

Other factors contribute to a powerful discourse that presents education as being contrary to Aboriginal culture and identity and not in its best interests. They include:

- * Memories of the historic role of education in assimilation, and the denial of language and family connection, added to continuing failure to teach local histories and culture; plus wider resentment at the NTER
- * 1991 Royal Commission ‘double bind’, which concluded that education and culture are mutually exclusive



Discursive disincentives

- * A recent representation of the cultural interface in remote schools perpetuates the discourse of cultural difference. They are said to be:
‘learning sites where local adults and adults from places that are geographically and socially **dramatically different** come together to teach and learn. The student cohort is overwhelmingly local, and their histories, experiences and languages are distinct from those of the non-local staff. The experience and expectations of schooling, teaching and this interface of local staff, students and families is generally **profoundly different** from that of the visiting staff.’ (Guenther et al., nd, *Red Dirt Curriculum*: 104)
- * This is in part true, but these several elements combine in a powerful discourse that colours the relationship in schools and makes it uninviting, foreign and dangerous to culture and identity. The WCE has found that this is part of the local social dynamics swirling around schooling.



Underlying everyday interculturality

- * Another factor is interculturality. Going on at the same time as, and underneath, the reality and discourse of cultural difference and culture vs. education, the school cultural interface is much more complex than has been thought.
- * It is a borderlands, a contact zone, where *individuals* of all ages, generations and personalities, from different cultures and languages (e.g. 'mainstream' is many, and local clans), meet and interact across their differences; it is *individuals* (not cultures) who communicate, interpret their cultural values, and each others' meanings with more or less accuracy, laugh or cry about misunderstandings, find common ground, become friends and colleagues, family members, etc etc, in all possible human diversity.



Everyday interculturality

- * So, the school interface is not only a barrier that separates, but also a site of relationship, connection across difference, sharing, and finding commonality that brings together (at the same time as it separates)
- * At the same time, the discourse of difference and contradiction continues, producing a profusion of mixed messages for students, teachers and parents; school becomes a site of miscommunication, half understanding, and frustration without seeming solution
- * This is an amalgam of factors of bewildering complexity; it confuses, poses dilemmas and deeply troubles remote students' desire to engage in education
- * And strangely, these critical dynamics go on somehow unnoticed, unconsidered, even hidden by the focus on the interface as all about cultural difference, so not taken into account



The WCE Indigenous education leaders



L to R: Dean Yibarbuk (squatting), Simon Fisher (rear), Geoffrey Shannon (with bag), Elizabeth Katarinja (rear), Djuwalpi Marika, Jimmy Langdon (rear), Valda Shannon (rear), Rosemary Gundjarranbuy



WCE Indigenous education leaders have:

- * ... battled with the material obstacles (eg \$, loneliness), lived through the imposed identity tensions, survived the discourse and felt its effects (in resentment, frustration, anger), negotiated the social pressures that education attracts (e.g. as not culturally senior) and seen through the confusion (come to clarity); Tension of the false dichotomy of culture and education, and the paradox of recognition and equality
- * ... been able to negotiate the complexity—held all the factors involved in suspension (like Chinese juggling plates);
- * ... prevailed, and are as a result able to express their cultural heritage as they like, while still being educated, employed in mainstream organisations, working at the interface; this is a huge intellectual and emotional achievement; and
- * ... gained release from the tensions associated with the discourse.
- * But they have taken on added pressures from people less skilled



Advocates for intercultural bothness

These leaders are also unanimous in their advocacy for an intercultural ‘bothness’ in education. They both *do* culture and education, and *advocate for* both. That is:

1. greater community control of local affairs (ie a more equal balance of power, without hint of separatism); **with**
2. governmental action in schooling to support the continuance and wellbeing of their cultural heritage (as the foundation of all other learning); **and**
3. dedicated programs to ensure that their children become literate in English, and numerate (indicating more general engagement with mainstream education).
4. These imply ‘intercultural bothness’—being different from other Australians as Indigenous, **but also** the same as them as citizens—and they lead to the fourth key need: training to assist all Indigenous people to understand and be able to negotiate intercultural bothness with as much agency as possible.



The WCE education leaders: Mr Shannon (left)

- Early education at Ali Curung
- Later education at Kormilda, then Alice Springs, including identity challenges and Elders' responses
- Teacher training and further study
- Advocacy/actions to progress education
- Other civic activity



The importance of these leaders to the Indigenous community

- * They have succeeded in the apparent paradox of being different and equal, by becoming increasingly confidently culturally particular, and being equally competent in mainstream society.
- * By their example and their advocacy, they fatally undermine the fear that education is contrary to culture (this is sometimes exaggerated in identity politics, and is often a debilitating factor in aspiration and engagement, and so participation in further education; we have seen this in the WCE project).
- * By their example and advocacy, they contribute to the opening up of opinion in their communities to the idea that culture and education can be mutually supportive, rather than mutually exclusive as has been the case for generations.
- * These changes can be the beginning of the end for the discourse, and hopefully, *via responsive teacher training and mentoring*, the beginning of better Indigenous engagement with education.



Nationally important as model intercultural citizens

The leaders are part of wider complexity that includes:

- * the nearly 400 year long Western political drive for social justice for minority groups;
- * the 60 year long human rights revolution that enhances the status of minority identities, the right to express them, and expectation of their accommodation by state and society;
- * the similar era of globalisation and superdiversity that means that everyone will have one or more special properties (identities) they want and expect to be protected;

This is potentially troubling for national social cohesion if groups form separate enclaves; to be socially sustainable, all citizens must learn to accommodate and live across their differences with all others



Nationally important as model intercultural citizens

- * That is, all citizens must become intercultural citizens, which is exactly what the WCE leaders are. They have the sensibility, the capacity for paradox, the intercultural negotiation skills; they are exemplars.
- * And they advocate for an education that is a model of the intercultural education that every citizen needs; some of this is being developed in WCE schools (e.g Galiwin'ku).



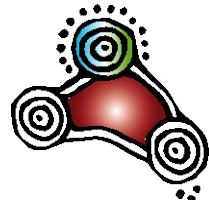
How to use their model to build...

- * Key is that all the leaders we have dealt with were trained in the 80s when systems were more responsive to community peoples needs ...
- * David point re community development approach to recover some of the earlier, and to respect the local complexity ... needing some sort of framework, some logic within which to work??





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