Reference No. 101

Summarising: Schwab (1998), *Educational ‘failure’ and educational ‘success’ in an Aboriginal community*
Responsibility for the preparation of this research summary rests with the authors of the MCEETYA report *Education, Training and Indigenous Futures: CAEPR Policy Research 1990–2007* and not the original author(s) of the summarised material.

Title of Research:
Educational ‘failure’ and educational ‘success’ in an Aboriginal community.

Research Publication:

Name of Researcher(s):
R.G. Schwab

Time period:
1997

Geographic location:
Maningrida, north central Arnhem Land (NT)

Methodology:
The findings of this study are based upon extensive fieldwork undertaken across the outstation communities surrounding Maningrida. The fieldwork involved interviews with community members, students and teachers. At the time of the study (1997) the Maningrida hub school and outstation or homeland education centres employed 60 staff and had enrolments of 557 students.

Aims:
The paper aims to describe the understandings that Indigenous people, in a remote but relatively large community, hold for Western education and identify factors which influence those understandings.

Selected findings and insights:
The paper argues that many of the theoretical approaches to educational failure among Indigenous students are problematic in that they are based — to greater or lesser degrees — on factors such as: being deprived of the necessary skills to engage in schooling; (readiness) due to health-related problems or lack of prior experiences; there being no ‘cultural ‘match’ with the processes of education; or that the expected educational outcomes are well and truly beyond Indigenous students.

In contrast, the paper highlights that the daily engagement of Indigenous people with Western education is influenced by four cultural themes, which may in turn be significant determinants of or ways of conceiving what might be regarded as ‘educational failure’:

- **personal autonomy** - which relates not only to Indigenous adults but also children. As a result children will assert their own authority regarding school attendance and level of participation. It will also influence behaviour at school.

- **shame**, involving notions of embarrassment, shyness and respect and an overall feeling of being uncomfortable within a traditional school. Personal autonomy becomes a way of withdrawing either physically or intellectually from learning;
• sharing, or rather 'demand sharing' in regard to school supplies, time, vehicles and access to facilities (which are seen as community resources) among kin with those involved with schooling such as Indigenous teachers, school council members and other staff, can impact on the overall operation of the school, creating tension between school and community expectations; and

• Acting as caretakers, the Indigenous community is becoming increasingly responsible for local institutions but still does not appear to have a sufficiently major role to play in the provision of education or to a degree to which it aspires.

This research shows that Indigenous people in this remote community take hold of those aspects of Western education which suit their purposes and ignore other aspects. They expect education to develop or provide:

• cultural competence — the ability for Indigenous young people to be able to operate effectively in the non-Indigenous world;

• cultural maintenance — through the inclusion in the school curriculum of Indigenous knowledge and technologies;

• material resources — either directly through nutrition programs or transport through school vehicles or indirectly through employment opportunities;

• social resources — through the provision of music programs, computing and excursion, by providing integrated services such as health and dental services, and acting in a mediating capacity for conflict resolution.

The paper also details a range of policy options to increase student participation, retention and community involvement and these are described below.

Educational implications:

This paper provides guidance to those responsible for schooling in remote Australia and particularly the development of curricula and teaching strategies suitable for Indigenous education. The study emphasises the importance of schooling as it relates not only to the usual outcomes such as literacy and numeracy but also the function it can play in the maintenance of Indigenous knowledge and language by their inclusion within the curriculum. That is, the paper sees schooling as having both an educative and a cultural role and if it accepts such a role then the nature of the curriculum and pedagogy will require adaptation. The benefit of such an approach is creating a more relevant educational experience for students and increased motivation to remain in schooling.

The paper also highlights the importance of developing a learning community which will bring together students, family and other community members in building the overall capacity of the community. Central to such a development is the school working closely with Indigenous community members.
Relevance:

Introductory Topic: Culture, Community and Family Life

Domain 2: School and Community Educational Partnerships
- Complexity and diversity of communities
- Cross-cultural relationship between school and community
- Cross-cultural understanding of purposes and value of education

Domain 3: School Leadership
- Responsiveness to social and cultural context of students

Domain 4: Quality Teaching
- Significance of curriculum
- Cultural understanding

Domain 5: Pathways to training, employment and higher education
- The challenge for pathways to training, employment and higher education
- Student aspirations and key transition points

Related papers: