

## EDUCATION HORIZONS

Hidden treasures: recognising the value of Indigenous Educators

By Michael Winkler

An Aboriginal child has a sudden drop in school attendance. The behavioral issues of another Aboriginal child need investigation, with possible links to a negative change in the home environment. The school librarian wants advice on the purchase of Indigenous-themed readers. Sorry Day is approaching and no appropriate school assembly has been arranged.

To use a catchphrase from a popular 1980s movie: who you gonna call?

In many schools, the answer to each question is the Indigenous Educator. It is one of the most diverse roles in Australian schools, but the status that the job is afforded does not necessarily reflect this. Further complicating matters, most Indigenous Educators are employed specifically to provide classroom support. Because they are assigned a variety of other tasks, they are regularly taken away from the classroom.

It is just over 50 years since Australia's first Aboriginal Teaching Assistant was appointed in the Northern Territory. South Australia followed suit in 1969. Queensland appointed its first Indigenous Educator at Cherbourg in 1972, and Victoria, New South Wales and Western Australia created similar roles by 1974.

These educators are called different things in different places: Indigenous Education Workers (QLD and ACT), Aboriginal Education Assistants (NSW), Koorie Educators (Vic), Aboriginal Education Workers (SA and Tas), Aboriginal Assistant Teachers (NT), Aboriginal and Islander Education Workers (NT), and Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (WA). The category also encompasses specialist roles including Home School Liaison Officers (NSW) and Aboriginal Literacy Teachers (WA). For the purposes of this article the generic term Indigenous Educator (IE) will be used.

According to recent figures (2005) there are 2178 IEs employed in Australian schools. Questions surrounding the status given to IEs and the effectiveness of the way in which their role is structured were the focus of a recent forum run jointly by national Indigenous education project Dare to Lead and non-profit research organization Dusseldorp Skills Forum.

IEs are Indigenous Australians employed in schools that have high enrolments of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. They provide student, community, and teacher support. Often IEs are among the longest-serving members of staff. They are usually recruited locally, thus providing a natural link to the community; they have an ingrained and deep concern for the success of their students; they possess an expansive knowledge of the parent and local community; they offer innovative approaches to school programs; and they are knowledgeable of aboriginal culture and customs.

Nick Yates, a project officer with Dusseldorp Skills Forum, undertook research into the role of IEs. “Our conclusion was that, despite on-going frustrations, IEs continue to play a highly important and positive role in the educational experiences of Indigenous students,” Mr Yates says. “In fact, information gathered from Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program education providers in 2005 found that ensuring Indigenous presence, involvement, and influence in schools is one of the best ways to improve Indigenous students’ outcomes.

“The same research found that where there were strong links between the school, parents and communities, and where students and parents felt comfortable, Indigenous students were much more likely to succeed. IEs are crucial to achieving these goals.”

Mr Yates believes that key issues of training, networking and work relationships need to be addressed. “There is a mismatch between the skills required to be a successful IE and the types of training provided,” he says. “Successful approaches to this mismatch may include the provision of training opportunities in such areas as conflict resolution, time management, effective communication, information technology, basic book keeping skills, and literacy and numeracy pedagogy.

“The lack of major networking opportunities for IEs limits their ability to effectively share information and knowledge that may provide creative and dynamic solutions to many of the complex problems that face Indigenous students. Closer relationships and increased understanding between IEs, school principals and mainstream staff are crucial.”

Michelle Appleton is an Aboriginal Education Worker at Maitland Area School in South Australia where about 15 per cent of the 325 students are Indigenous. “When it comes to leadership as an AEW, a lot of us haven’t had a lot of formal education,” she says. “For me personally, I get intimidated by leadership. For me to go into the principal’s office to talk to him was a huge step. It was like crossing a line. Sometimes an AIEW like myself will find it very difficult to get over that barrier of perception that the principal is at a different level.

“To me, the most important part of the job is making sure the links between school, parents, agencies and the community are there. People talk about the importance of improving numeracy and literacy, but if there is no link between the school and the community then you won’t get the Aboriginal kids into school to do that learning. That is why I think that linking work is the most important thing I do.”

One of the keys to the effectiveness of IEs is, evidently, having a receptive and collaborative school principal. “From an Aboriginal viewpoint, leadership is about passion, credibility and the wisdom and courage to make a real difference,” says Susan Mathews, Vice-President of the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group. “Principals alone can’t make the difference; they are part of a collective team, and a key part of that team is their IEs.

“Being a school leader is not about self-gratification. Being a school leader is about moving forward, learning from the community, acknowledging that sometimes we have been wrong and looking to change the things that need changing. We have to acknowledge that we need to do things differently.

“We have to harness the resources that exist in our schools, and one of the most valuable resources is the IE. Principals can allow their own self-importance to get in the way – to think that they are the educated ones, with the piece of paper, and they need to do the job alone. There is nothing that will bring you undone more quickly in an Aboriginal community than that reliance on your own self-importance.”

At Balga Senior High School just north of Perth, Aboriginal students making the transition to secondary school (Year 8s) are met by Aboriginal and Islander Education Officer Martin Seelander. “I think that the (IE) role is essential,” Mr Seelander says. “The links that we provide to community, the way we can liaise with different people, it’s very important for the students and for the school. Of course, you need a principal who will listen to you. If the principal is not on side, nothing will work, but I am glad that I have a great relationship with the principal and we can put in place programs to help the kids.”

The support of principals is consistently identified as a key factor in determining the effectiveness of the IE. Nick Yates points out that, despite detailed role descriptions being provided by relevant State and Territory bodies, the role will often be determined by a number of local and regional concerns. “This leaves their jobs highly open to interpretation by one of any number of competing interests including students, parents, community leaders and elders, principals, teachers, government departments, and unions (educational and otherwise). As IEs are employed in mostly ‘support’ functions, and because they lack any real authority or leverage within the education system, they can become quickly burdened by a range of tasks so vast and complex their work is often negatively affected.”

Other important factors identified include the need for training that complements the skills and knowledge already acquired by IEs; improved pay and career structure; and more reliable and sustained funding than the current model, where most positions are funded on an annual basis, making forward planning difficult for schools and providing little job security for IEs.

With educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students still lagging behind those of non-Indigenous students, the importance of strong Indigenous role models in schools assisting students in a multiplicity of ways cannot be underestimated. While IEs might be low on the educational ladder in terms of pay and conditions, they can play a critical role in critical areas such as Indigenous student engagement, retention, attendance and academic outcomes.

*More information:*

*Dusseldorp Skills Forum* [www.dsf.org.au](http://www.dsf.org.au)

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