A Snapshot of Cultural Awareness and Engagement: “Ulumbarra – Gather Together” Remount

Dr Dona L. Martín, Dr Narelle Lemon, Ms Gina Pederick, Ms Mishel McMahon

College of Arts, Social Sciences and Commerce La Trobe University | Victoria 3086

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Abstract: The aim of this paper was to build a picture of how engaged local schools were with Indigenous culture. To this end we surveyed staff and students and used the data to inform a ‘Cultural Snapshot’ of local educational engagement. We found that school staff and students were quite well attuned to general knowledge facts relating to Indigenous Australians and were in sync with what they did well and they could focus more attention on. Both groups, staff and students, demonstrated a genuine interest in the aspects of Indigenous culture that had been woven into the curriculum and a keen interest in building on this work. Staff were aware of the benefits of working alongside Indigenous parents and community members outside of the school campus.

Keywords: engaged, Cultural Snapshot, demonstrated, Indigenous parents, community.

Introduction: The understanding of Indigenous culture is highly observed in the school setting. We are reminded in the curriculum documentation “the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander priority provides opportunities for all learners to deepen their knowledge of Australia by engaging with the world’s oldest continuous living cultures” (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2016, para 3). Furthermore, “this knowledge and understanding will enrich …[the students]… ability to participate positively in the ongoing development of Australia” (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2016, para 3). There is, now more than ever, awareness that Indigenous culture, especially that relevant of location one lives in, needs to be explored and addressed within the curriculum. This paper shares one way that the North Central regional town of Bendigo in the state of Victoria, Australia, approached this awareness and need.

Ulumbarra Theatre in Bendigo planned a remount of the special event that was commissioned for the opening of the theatre in early 2016. The show, called “Ulumbarra – gather together”, is dedicated to the Dja Dja Wurrung stories and songs. As part of the remounted event, it was proposed there would be two school days for schools located in Dja Dja Wurrung Country. The program, a day-long schedule, was aimed at young people from primary (Grade 3 to 6) and secondary school (years 7 to 10) and would involve morning and afternoon sessions of the performance and supporting activities exploring indigenous themes.
The main component of which was a concert “Ulumbarra – Gather Together”, dedicated to the Dja Dja Wurrung stories and songs. The concert used the platforms of music, art, dance, and storytelling to foster community pride and promote understanding of Indigenous culture. The Ulumbarra concert was supported by a series of smaller events such as a Smoking Ceremony, a Welcome to Country, and exposure to Indigenous artifacts. Approximately 2000 school children attended the program over the two-day period, with participating school communities encouraged to think more deeply about the how they engage with the local Indigenous culture and identity of Indigenous Australia. The schools that attended did so for one full day, attending the concert and then participating in related learning activities called Ulumbarra Remount.

To assist those involved in the wider Ulumbarra experience, to understand how connected members of the Bendigo education sector were with local Indigenous culture at the time of the Ulumbarra concert, the researchers developed two surveys informed by local Indigenous culture, one aimed at a teacher audience the other directed at students. The data from these surveys was used to provide a snapshot of participant knowledge and understanding of local Indigenous culture. The aim of this paper is to show how engaged a local primary school, teachers and students from grades 3 to 6, are with the Dja Dja Wurrung Country and Taungurung Country Indigenous culture.

Limitations of Study

Given the scale of participation and the aim of providing a qualitative example, data was used from one local primary school deemed representative of the wider number of participants in regard to awareness of Indigenous issues and engagement with Indigenous communities. Key issues included: how engaged participants were with local Indigenous families and communities; how well they understood the backgrounds and aspirations of Indigenous students’; how recognizable an Indigenous ‘presence’ was at the school; what provisions were in place for non-Indigenous staff to learn about Indigenous cultures in general and local Indigenous cultures in particular; and how well their school recognizes and expresses its respect for the cultures of its Indigenous students, in terms of cultural support and connectedness with peers.

The school participated in as many of the Ulumbarra activities as were possible in the full day program, given time restrictions and the occasional overlap of activities, which meant not everything could be attended. This limitation was a requirement as event organizers needed to cater to different age groups, distance between locations of learning activities and the concert venue, and so on. As the student participants were middle to upper primary school age, the researchers were also restricted in terms of opportunity to gather deeply reflective, or wordy responses, hence the use of a survey. Another limitation related to the geographic location, as a focus of the Ulumbarra work was particular to the Dja Dja Wurrung Country we wanted data gathering work to be with a participating school that was clearly situated within the Dja Dja Wurrung Country.

Literature Review

To set the scene, it is important to consider 2008 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data, which shows that of Australia’s overall population around 2.4% were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ABS, 2008a). From this group, according to ABS data (2008a), Torres Strait Islander origin...
made up some 6%, Aboriginal origin made up around 90%, and around 4% were of both Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal origin (ABS, 2008a). Further to this ABS data (2008b) shows that ‘32% of Indigenous people lived in Australia’s major cities, 43% lived in regional areas, 9% lived in remote areas and 15% lived in very remote areas’ (Perso, 2012, p. 10).

It is also important to understand that in 2009, a set of education goals designed to have Australian schooling promote equity and excellence for young Australians, known as the Melbourne Declaration was endorsed by each of state, territory and Commonwealth Minister of Education. As discussed by Perso (2012), in her detailed and focused literature review of cultural responsiveness and school education, after this date it was expected that all students were to be provided high-quality schooling free from discrimination, the opportunity to build on local cultural knowledge and experiences of Indigenous students, and were expected to work in partnership with local communities on all aspects of the schooling process. School education was directed to ensure that the learning outcomes of Indigenous students improved to match those of other students and was to contribute to a ‘socially cohesive society that respects and appreciates cultural, social and religious diversity’ (Perso, 2012, p. 6). In addition, school education was to make sure all students had opportunity to understand and acknowledge the value of Indigenous history, languages, knowledges and worldview. The intent being for students to develop the required knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, mutual respect between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (Anderson & Walter 2010, Perso, 2012). To achieve these goals, the curriculum, the knowledge and content delivery and assessment documents were further designed to address both intended and planned learning. Through the curriculum, teachers were given the foundation for pedagogical practice, the enactment of that curriculum, and this in turn was expected to determine student experiences and to build toward successful attainment of said goals (Perso, 2012). Schools were also encouraged to consider how to engage Indigenous families and communities in practices that focused on building and maintaining their unique identity. They were to invite these families and communities to become involved in the education of students. When Indigenous culture is more deeply learnt, students and staff are more able to understand how their connected, who they are, where they are from, all valuable points highlighted by Groome (1995) and endorsed by Anderson and Walter (2010).

Although culture for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people may be broadly defined, it is important to note that for this study it is determined as a mixture of ‘a body of learned beliefs, traditions, principles, and guides for behaviour that are shared among members of a particular group’, as defined by Zion and Kozleski (2005) and further expanded by Lee, Cosby, and deBaca (2007) as ‘the lens through which we look at the world; … the context within which we operate and make sense of the world and its influences on how we process learning, solve problems, and teach” as noted in the work of Perso (2012, pp. 10 and 11 respectively). Then, in direct relation to Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture it is important to understand that community, Country and Ancestors are in an equal and continuing relationship, community does not exist independently from plants, animals, skies, waterways and the spiritual world. Everything is family. With this definition in mind it
should be understood that before teachers can truly become culturally competent they need to connect with Indigenous epistemologies (knowledge systems), which require an understanding or awareness and valuing of engaging ‘with the heart as well as the mind’ (Sims, 2011, p. 12).

There is a strong understanding in 2016 schools that teachers that know their students, know student families, and are alert to student’s needs, have a greater opportunity to provide a strong place to shape each student’s expectations and aspirations, as discussed in Perso (2012). In knowing students’ cultural backgrounds and forming authentic relationships, by valuing language skills, and honoring Indigenous ways of knowing, teachers are provided clear ways to contribute to the learning program and to improve academic performances of all students (Anderson & Walter 2010, Perso, 2012). From this foundation Perso (2012) notes, we begin to understand that the school environment is more than the day-to-day organizational structure. The school environment is where we build a sense of belonging. Schools, therefore, need to consider including Aboriginal literature and artworks, flags, artifacts to convey messages that all students and all families are recognised and honoured. Teachers and staff should naturally connect with Indigenous calendars, attend Indigenous community events and acknowledge Traditional Owners of the Country where the school resides. In building partnerships that work between school, student and local Indigenous communities the school community builds trust and empowerment into their relationships and provide their students stronger opportunity to succeed (McRae, 2000, Perso, 2012).

The research presented here creates a picture of how well situated this work is in one local North Central regional Victorian area, in Australia. We provide a snapshot of how well one local school community is building these partnerships. Data demonstrates in general terms, how successful our region is at developing and implementing culturally responsive programs. How well we are traveling in the journey of building Indigenous cultural competence.

Methodology

As a participatory research study, the participants, that is teachers aged 18+ years and students from Grade 3 to 6 (mean age of 8) of the same school who attended the Ulumbarra Remount programming were invited to complete a mixed methods survey as part of their learning experience. The survey was decided to support learning and continue conversations and learning opportunities back at the school. The survey questions based on much of the work of Anderson and Walter (2010) were designed to provide descriptive content, to both challenge knowledge and to educate respondents.

The following examples come from the teacher survey:

- Q 4.4 - List the names of at least one and no more than five local towns or landscape features in your area that have Indigenous names and see if you can add what these names mean?

- Q 11.1 - What language or languages do your Indigenous students speak, however limited knowledge of the language is (meaning students may only know some of the words)? Education departments around Australia now ask teachers to incorporate
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Aboriginal English in schools and classrooms with Aboriginal students. For the purpose of this survey we accept Aboriginal English as a language rather than a dialect.

The following examples come from the student survey:

• Q 4.5 Do you know any Ancestors on the Country in which you live?
• Q 4.6 List the names of at least one and no more than five local towns or landscape features, such as mountains or creeks, in your area that have Indigenous names and see if you can add what these names mean. It would be great if you could briefly add if you know any Indigenous stories about these places.

The questions demonstrate how a mixed methods research methodology, which deals with subjectively constructed outcomes, was used for this study (Creswell et al., 2003). Our aim was to identify a phenomenon - to determine how culturally aware school children and their teachers were of local Indigenous culture. To achieve this outcome data was gathered in a snapshot scenario from just one of the mainstream, average sized primary school that participated in the Ulumbarra Remount. The school selected to provide data for this study met this criteria, with all students firmly located within Dja Dja Wurrung Country, it also demonstrated an average size and makeup to schools in the Bendigo area.

Work was based on the belief that from this one small collection of data we could provide a representative understanding of how culturally engaged the wider local school community was with Indigenous culture.

The participants, 30 primary school students undertook either a student survey, specifically designed to educate as much as to determine cultural awareness. The socioeconomic details of the participants included 19 female, 11 male aged between 8 and 11 years, thus a mean age 8.82 was reported. Two students identified as Indigenous. Accompanying the students were 11 teachers (6 female, 5 male), three of whom identified as Indigenous, undertook either a staff survey, specifically designed to educate as much as to determine cultural awareness. Participants completed the surveys within three weeks of attending the full day program of Ulumbarra Remount. This work was carried out at their school as part of the post engagement of the learning experiences and concert.

Findings and discussion
We begin this section with an overview of what the staff and students knew about Australia’s Indigenous population. The surveys asked similar questions of the two cohorts. General knowledge answers are recorded here in Table 1 (actual answers ABS, 2008 a/b or Anderson & Walter 2010).

Given the age of the students, middle to upper primary and the average age of 8 years, the outcomes demonstrate a fairly accurate understanding of the demographics. The next aim was to find how well this information translates into an understanding of Indigenous culture and identity, fundamental elements to Indigenous wellbeing.

To build a picture on how well the school was working to promote equity in terms of building Indigenous cultural knowledge, acknowledging Indigenous cultures, data was used from questions designed to subtly draw out how individuals see
and engage with the Indigenous world around them. The questions worked to elicit answers that would assist us to determine how well the school works to overcome what has been described by some as a ‘cultural blindness’ (Perso 2012, p.19).

Data from the staff survey demonstrated that staff were confident that they had fairly good provisions in place for non-Indigenous staff to learn about Indigenous cultures in general and local Indigenous cultures in particular; although they felt they could always do more toward recognizing and expressing respect to particular Indigenous students. They all knew exactly that they were on Dja Dja Wurrung Country yet admitted difficulty in quickly listing names, and adding the meaning of the names, to five local towns or landscape features in their area with Indigenous titles. They also had difficulty in quickly listing five prominent Indigenous people other than prominent sports people. The teachers did however consider that they had built a recognizable Indigenous 'presence' at the school. They considered this presence was evident to all staff and guests to the school and they proudly acknowledged a continued willingness to engage in celebrations such as NAIDOC week. Through discussions that emerged in completing the survey, staff felt a need to connect more in educating students about the significance of Acknowledgment to Country by non-Traditional Owners, Welcome to Country and Smoking ceremonies.

The staff outcomes were very in tune with those of the students. Given that the staff surveys were conducted first and they did not have access to the student data, it is interesting to see that students noted they had been involved in Welcome to Country and Smoking ceremonies as part of school events but did not really understand their significance and expressed a keenness to better understand what the ceremonies were about.

When asked about the Country on which they lived 15 students confidently selected Dja Dja Wurrung Country, of which 3 were fairly sure and 2 admitted to just guessing. While a further 2 students guessed incorrectly from the list of options provided stating they were unsure of their answer. In addition, 5 students confidently knew about On Country Indigenous Ancestors and 8 knew Creator Spirit stories. Of the students who did not know about the Ancestors and Creator Spirits they all indicated an interest in finding out more.

Overall, staff and students showed a willingness to get involved, to learn. They found a need to know more about local, Indigenous surrounds, sites, names, and the like, and they found a need to further explore the meanings of Indigenous ceremonies. There was a genuine interest at both staff and student levels in building local knowledge and deeper Indigenous cultural understandings. The teachers were aware of the benefits this knowledge can have in strengthening the process of recognition of Indigenous culture and mutual pride of Indigenous Australian culture by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Staff members also felt that ‘in house’ they provided responsible, targeted assistance as and when required to not only support Indigenous students but also to ensure their educative success. They were open to building on the design of these actions to further support their Indigenous students. For example, they applauded and engaged in curriculum designed to determine all student experiences and to use these experiences to build toward success, yet perceived a need to strengthen their ability and or agility in engaging with the wider Indigenous community.
Furthermore, the outcomes from the students echo the results from the staff. Student data demonstrated a wide engagement with Indigenous Australian focused curriculum content and a keen desire to do more in this area. Experiences included sharing Indigenous cultural stories, listening to or playing Indigenous music instruments, such as the Didgeridoo or Clap sticks, learning about Indigenous Ancestors, using Indigenous art materials such as tool making or basket weaving, learning some Indigenous words, watching or performing Indigenous dance and learning about Indigenous artifacts. They were keen to learn history from an Indigenous perspective, to learn Indigenous knowledges about spirituality, managing landscape. They noted engagement with Indigenous focused activities that extended beyond the school campus, such as attending NAIDOC week, Sorry Day events and exhibitions and workshops. While the inclusion of Indigenous curriculum items was evident, they did not see the activities connecting directly with Indigenous community members or note accounts such as Indigenous parents coming onto campus and leading or participating in curriculum delivery, a disconnect worthy of unpacking in future research.

Staff data demonstrates a desire to further develop relationships in a way that must be seen to be mutually beneficial. They were alert to the benefits of having Indigenous community attend the school, to share their knowledge and they were open to the idea of building mutual understanding and trust. They were also alert of the need to take every opportunity to build on the success of their Indigenous students, through stronger school-parent, school-community partnerships. The data showed that staff wanted to better engage with Indigenous families and communities, in terms of involving the families and communities in the education of all students, however they felt that to really succeed here, they needed to work harder to build trust relationships. They felt they needed to spend more time building open, supportive communication channels in order to build strong school-campus-community partnerships. Time seemed to be the main problem, as staff demonstrated that they valued every opportunity to build a cultural link between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Indeed, the data shows that staff believed they while they were doing well in developing Indigenous cultural support and relationships, with the Indigenous community, they felt they needed a greater focus on building good personal relationships between staff, students and Indigenous families. They believed they needed to focus on liaising and maintaining regular contact with members of local Indigenous communities on issues related to education.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to build a picture of how engaged local schools were with Indigenous culture. To this end we surveyed staff and students and used the data to inform a ‘Cultural Snapshot’ of local educational engagement. We found that school staff and students were quite well attuned to general knowledge facts relating to Indigenous Australians and were in sync with what they did well and they could focus more attention on. Both groups, staff and students, demonstrated a genuine interest in the aspects of Indigenous culture that had been woven into the curriculum and a keen interest in building on this work. Staff were aware of the benefits of working alongside Indigenous parents and community members outside of the school campus. They were very keen to build a
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model where Indigenous parents and the wider Indigenous community were able to engage in the educational needs of students on campus. Staff felt the biggest problem in building the required relationships related to barriers imposed by time. They were not sure of how to overcome this but felt that activities such as the Ulumbarra Remount concert and associated activities renewed enthusiasm at all levels, and gave new opportunities to broaden discussions on possible actions for the future.

References


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