

# Both-ways Learning:

## The Development of an Indigenous Bachelor of Teaching

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*Preparation of qualified Indigenous early childhood teachers is essential to the success of community based early childhood services. This paper explains the development of a program designed to support such teachers. The Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood Services) program is unique in offering a professionally recognized teaching qualification in early childhood to Indigenous Australians. It targets mature aged people who are working in early childhood settings such as childcare centres and preschools. Many who undertake the degree have extensive professional experience but have not had access to a program which allows them to remain within their community and in employment while studying. The program has been offered at Macquarie University since 1998 and now draws students from four states. A key characteristic of the program is that it embeds "both-ways" learning, a pedagogy which recognises all participants as both teachers and learners.*

### INTRODUCTION

The Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood Services), Indigenous program (BTeach) reflects the strong commitment of Macquarie University to Indigenous Australians. The program is jointly offered by the Institute of Early Childhood (IEC) and Warawara, Department of Indigenous Studies and was developed in consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and stakeholders. The program's unique mode of delivery and content is designed to meet the needs of Indigenous Australians who are employed in early childhood settings. The first cohort of students commenced their studies in 1998. As many of these students have now graduated, their voices have become part of the professional community.

### “TEACHERS COME AND GO”

Jean is a mature aged woman from a regional city who has worked in the same service for 14 years. During that time, she has worked with 15 different teachers. Many of the teachers were very young and in their first year out of university. She feels that she has had to “teach” the teachers many things about the local community and its Indigenous people so that the program is more sensitive to children and families.

She lives alone and made sure her own children got a quality education. They are all adults now and have families of their own. Jean said, “I saw my children grow up and get themselves educated. It is my turn now. I want to get a qualification myself”.

### EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN INDIGENOUS CONTEXTS – RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

The provision of early childhood education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children has been given a high priority in terms of the social policy of successive Australian governments. *A National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples 1996-2002* produced by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training, and Youth Affairs (1995), has, as some of its priorities, that:

1. More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children will participate in pre-school and similar transition and developmental programs before entry into school.
2. Early identification and sensitive intervention strategies will be developed in response to the health and welfare needs of children in the pre-school and primary years.
3. Programs and services will affirm student identity, self-value, and capacity to succeed in early childhood education. (p. 46)

These priorities recognize that early childhood education for Indigenous children is an important social issue in Australia.

Recent government reports such as the NSW Legislative Council report entitled “Crime Prevention through Social Support” (August, 2000) also extend this argument. The second part of this report highlights the importance of “linking Aboriginal families with early childhood services. However, to do so it must overcome another inter-generational barrier: the negative experiences of many Aboriginal peoples in the public school system.” (p. 49). In this regard, we note in particular Recommendation 10:

... that the Department of Education ensure that schools with a high proportion of Aboriginal students give priority to:

- employment of Aboriginal teachers,
- emphasis in teaching aspects of the curriculum which relate to Aboriginal identity, particularly Aboriginal cultural studies,

- cross cultural training for teachers,
- increased contact with Aboriginal organizations, including regular discussions on common areas of concern.

While these recommendations are made from the context of a report related to the school sector, they equally apply to early childhood services. Hayes & Bowes (1999), for example, write that “Child care services, preschools and schools can have many positive effects on children and particularly for those living in disadvantage” (p. 197).

In addition, Hayes, Neilsen-Hewett and Warton (1999) report that the quality of care emerges as a key variable in promoting children’s cognitive and language development (p. 108). This quality can be defined in terms of “small group size, teacher training and educational activities involved in the programs” (p. 108). Hayes, Neilsen-Hewett and Warton, (1999) note further, “Better care-giver qualifications were associated with more care-giver social interaction between care-givers and children, with more cooperation and task persistence among children, and with increased involvement of children in activities” (p. 100).

These findings are particularly relevant for services that cater for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families and reinforce the need for formally qualified Indigenous staff in children’s services. In pursuing quality care for early childhood services, the importance of appropriate staff qualifications cannot be over-estimated.

The number of Indigenous people who are qualified early childhood professionals holding teaching qualifications is still quite small. The following table indicates the level of Indigenous qualified staff in NSW “identified” services when the first cohort commenced their studies in 1998. Anecdotal information suggests that the situation is similar in other states. The following table reflects the current distribution of qualified staff and the critical need for Indigenous teachers in early childhood settings.

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| No. of “identified”* services  | 30  |
| No. of “mainstream”# services  | 23  |
| No. of Employed Indigenous Staff in both service types                                 | 183 |
| No. of Employed Indigenous Staff in both service types holding Teaching Qualifications | 4   |

\* “Identified” means those services offering enrolment preference to Indigenous children

# Included here are services funded by DEST to promote access for Indigenous children

It is clear from government reviews and from academic research that increased numbers of Indigenous teachers, including teachers in early childhood settings, will have positive outcomes for Indigenous children, families and communities.

### **EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER EDUCATION FOR INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS**

In the 1970's and 80's, Indigenous people in Australia who wished to study in early childhood teacher education programs studied mainstream courses with mixed success. Cultural misunderstandings and insensitivities about student backgrounds and learning styles predominated. Staff at the IEC, then within the Sydney College of Advanced Education, became concerned about the difficulties faced by Indigenous students. A Rural Aboriginal Program provided support as lecturing staff were allocated to travel to support students in their home communities. Although some students were successful, many others found it difficult to complete their qualification. Subsequently, within Macquarie University, a focussed effort to develop a culturally responsive degree in consultation with Indigenous communities resulted in the evolution of the BTeach program.

### **CONSULTATION PROCESSES**

Recognising the value of qualified Indigenous early childhood teachers led the University to undertake a period of development and consultation involving various Indigenous groups as well as other teacher education providers in order to develop a program suitable for Indigenous Australians. This consultation established the original conception, development and on-going operations of the program.

The Institute Advisory Board assisted in the University's understanding of the need for such a program while the IEC and Warawara developed preliminary proposals. Indigenous students who were currently enrolled at the University were consulted during the development phase of the program.

Consultations were held with a wide-range of external groups representing both Indigenous and non-Indigenous stakeholders. These included the Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Sector Advisory Group, NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc., industrial unions and the Department of Community Services (the licensing authority for preschools and long day centres in NSW). Tertiary colleagues from other institutions with wide experience in Indigenous teacher education were also consulted in program development. In the Northern Territory, this included Batchelor College, Northern Territory University and Northern Territory Department of Education. In New South Wales, this involved the University of Western Sydney, and the Australian Catholic University, Sydney.

The resulting Macquarie degree has national significance because it is community based, allowing individual students to remain living and employed in their home community while studying.

### **PROGRAM TEACHING STRATEGIES AND PEDAGOGICAL ISSUES**

The BTeach has been developed to cater for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Australians already working in the early childhood field. Indigenous staff in early childhood settings tend to be "unqualified" in a formal educational sense but have

advanced interactive skills with children within their own cultural context as well as extensive experience in services and with children in a group setting. It may also have been some time since they have been involved in the formal education environment, so their study skills for tertiary education need to be supported.

The mode of delivery targets this group. It incorporates periods of block teaching on campus allowing students to remain in employment within their home communities while studying. It also permits students with heavy commitments to families, work and community to have short "time out" periods on campus to complete study activities. The Commonwealth Department of Employment funds the "backfilling of wages" to enable employers to pay casual staff to replace students in the workplace while they are attending block teaching periods.

The program aims to use teaching strategies sensitive to Indigenous Australian learning styles with an awareness of the differing cultural contexts of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander peoples. Indigenous students generally work best in groups with other Indigenous students, as this tends to empower them to confront the system and promote more sensitive pedagogies.

The teaching and learning strategies of the program are also carefully adapted to meet the needs of students who have extensive vocational skills while building their confidence and skills for academic study. The BTeach begins "slowly" with a lighter study load early in the program while incorporating courses which build on the academic skills of individual students.

Students in this program also have a range of supports available to them. For example, university staff support students through field visits to their communities as well as phone and web based contact. Additional support for students is also available through a one- to-one mentor within their home community funded by the Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ATAS). All of these supports have strengthened the students' overall success rate in the program.

The provision of education for Indigenous Australians is an on-going balancing act of accessing and participating in education at a rate commensurate with other Australians without losing themselves, or losing their cultural perspectives, through their educational experience. This is a critical dilemma when education provisions reflect a majority ideology and value system, making it difficult for Indigenous students to maintain their cultural perspectives. This conflict happens for individuals in the midst of many forces for change and development inherent in the educational process. Harris (1990) suggested that a solution to the dilemma was to provide a "two-ways" or "both-ways" approach, where Indigenous cultures and traditions are valued and incorporated into the educational context. Philosophically, the Macquarie program is committed to this "both-ways" pedagogy, in which both the staff and student populations explore and exchange cultural perspectives through the teaching and learning environment.

While stemming from courses in the mainstream degree, courses studied in the BTeach program aim to deal specifically with Indigenous issues related to children, families and early childhood education. These issues are dealt with in a context of

broader mainstream issues. The ongoing process of curriculum development has also been adapted for hands on local interpretation. For example, early literacy resources that were developed included alphabet books reflecting Indigenous contexts; students working on a Mathematics, Science and Technology unit, created a CD ROM of early childhood experiences where learning outcomes were contextualised for Indigenous children. The CD ROM, in turn became a resource the our mainstream early childhood teaching program, thus reinforcing the both-ways pedagogy.

Particular attention has been paid to assessment tasks within the program. Group assessment tasks, particularly those completed on campus, have proved suitable to the delivery mode and popular with students. Group tasks allow students to explore the cultural perspectives of their learning and be supported by other students and staff.

In some cases students can complete up to 50% of their overall marks by completing tasks during their block teaching periods on campus. Individual components still enable traditional evaluation of understanding.

In addition, assignments have been structured into smaller segments than in other programs. Individual segments are designed to cumulate into a larger project, which allows the students to demonstrate their achievement of course aims. Another feature has been to include a strong component of oral assessment, which acknowledges the oral tradition of Indigenous Australian cultures.

### **OUTCOMES OF THE PROGRAM**

The BTeach has attracted students from across four states of Australia because of its unique delivery mode and its target of employees already working in early childhood. The first student cohort completed the five-year program at the end of 2002. A second cohort commenced in 2001, with a third cohort beginning in 2003. A pattern of intakes has been adopted permitting two cohorts at any one time.

The high quality of the Macquarie program is indicated by the strong retention and progression rate of students. The initial cohort of BTeach students progressed through the program with a high retention rate (average of 87% over three years). There will be 15 graduates who will receive their degrees in 2003. In the previous five years at Macquarie University, there had been only two Aboriginal people graduate with an early childhood teaching degree. Of those graduating in 2003, it is anticipated that a number of these will continue their university studies.

Success in this program of study has enabled many individual students to achieve in their professional lives. For example,

- Three students who were originally employed as assistants in preschools undertook regional positions promoting culturally sensitive practice in early childhood services;
- Three students have been promoted to permanent directors of their centres, one of them in a service where she has worked for 25 years; and
- Two students have been promoted to group leader positions within their services.

Participation in the degree tends to increase the 'cultural and social capital' of these students and their communities. Other members of students' families receive the message that university can be a place for them, which is reflected in two relatives of graduating students in the subsequent cohort. This also translates into a positive message about education in general, including the importance of early childhood education. Benefits of the program overall include:

- Promoting quality early childhood programs for Indigenous communities by increasing numbers of Indigenous teachers in services; and
- Enhancing the quality of early childhood for Indigenous children and their families by:
  - Increasing access for Indigenous children in all service types
  - Promoting culturally sensitive early childhood curriculum
  - Providing early childhood staff with a strong cultural identity
  - Promoting school success for Indigenous children through quality early childhood education.

## CONCLUSIONS

Macquarie University is committed to educational programs for Indigenous Australians and to on-going consultations and partnerships with Indigenous communities and groups. In 2000, recommendations from the National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education were reported to Federal Parliament. This inquiry was conducted by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. One of the findings from the Inquiry highlighted "a shortage of trained early childhood development workers in remote Indigenous communities" (p. 38) and noted that, "the only tertiary level course offering community based early childhood training is offered by Macquarie University in NSW" (p. 38).

The experience of "both-ways teaching" by staff in this program has had outcomes for all early childhood degrees at Macquarie. Planning and working with Indigenous students has deepened the understanding of staff in early childhood issues for Indigenous children and communities. Thus staff have been better able to cater for Indigenous students, but also to include Indigenous perspectives within their teaching for all students.

Current and past Indigenous students offer the program unparalleled access to opinion and experience across many Indigenous communities and settings. Contributions from these students regarding course assessment processes and unit organisation have resulted in significant program changes and unit redesign.

In an age where innovation is often translated as on-line learning or other technological development, it is empowering and satisfying to contribute to an early childhood teacher education program, which is based on community building, social justice and the promotion of enhanced understanding and opportunity.

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