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A Meaningful Exchange: The Benefits of Aboriginal community participation in the NSW HSC Aboriginal Studies course.

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For Aboriginal students, the involvement of Aboriginal community members in schools has long been seen as a contributing factor in valuing and promoting their Aboriginality and identity. Whilst non-Aboriginal students are given opportunities to interact with Aboriginal people within schools, for many, it could be their first contact with an Aboriginal person. An important aspect of the NSW HSC Aboriginal Studies course is the links it provides to Aboriginal communities. This paper focuses exclusively on an element of a larger investigation into the benefits of the NSW HSC Aboriginal Studies course for Aboriginal students. Results presented here relate specifically to a research question into the strengths and limitations of the Aboriginal Studies course. Interviews were undertaken in three NSW Department of Education and Training secondary schools, located in rural, north coast, and south coast areas of NSW. A total of 36 participants: 22 senior secondary students who were undertaking the HSC Aboriginal Studies course, 18 Aboriginal students and 4 non-Aboriginal students, Aboriginal Education Assistants ($n = 3$), teachers of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course ($n = 5$), and Principals ($n = 3$) and Aboriginal parents ($n = 3$) of students undertaking Aboriginal Studies were involved in individual interviews. Participants were asked, "What do you see as the strengths of the Aboriginal Studies course?" Across responses a significant finding was the benefits derived for all involved in Aboriginal Studies; students, teachers, parents and the community, from the continued involvement of Aboriginal community, both in and outside of the classroom. Hence, the participation of Aboriginal communities goes much further; it has become a meaningful exchange of knowledge and experiences, engaging students and teachers in the lives of Aboriginal people.

Introduction

Aboriginal Studies programs in schools have always had a major focus on the formation of positive relationships between the school and the Aboriginal community, relationships that are based on mutual respect and understanding; a two-way process that acknowledges that Aboriginal Studies is teaching *with* Aboriginal people rather than *about* them (Craven in Partington, 1998). In achieving syllabus outcomes of the NSW Higher School Certificate (HSC) Aboriginal Studies course considerable participation of the Aboriginal community is vital (NSW Board of Studies, 1999), in particular during the Research and Inquiry Methods of the course when students undertake a major project that requires input from Aboriginal people. This could be, for many Aboriginal people, their first positive experience with the education system while for some non-Aboriginal students an introduction and opportunity to interact with the Aboriginal community (Board of Studies NSW, 1998, p. 36).

In an attempt to identify the ideal situation for schools to work collaboratively with Aboriginal communities this paper focuses exclusively on an element of a larger investigation into the benefits of the NSW HSC Aboriginal Studies course and the importance of Aboriginal community members actively engaged in Aboriginal Studies classes. What was revealed in this study is that for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students there was an opportunity to reinforce the learning that had taken place in the classroom with those Elders

or other Aboriginal community members who they came into contact with. It became, for the majority of the students, “better learning” as it was “real” and “hands-on”. Both groups could see the importance of authentic cultural experiences. In contrast but not surprisingly, Aboriginal students felt more strongly about the connections made with the community, seeing it as a means of strengthening their cultural ties with the Aboriginal people in their community. With many Aboriginal students experiencing ‘a loss of culture’ due most often to the breakdown in Aboriginal families and communities and more importantly the loss of the teaching process passed on by Aboriginal Elders (Board of Studies NSW, 2001:4; MCEETYA, 2000:14; Wray, 2006). There was also an indication that for Aboriginal students their identity was valued in turn raising self-esteem and confidence, providing cultural affirmation and pride, this was linked to the teacher’s efforts in establishing community networks and their role in the successful implementation of Aboriginal Studies (Board of Studies NSW, 2008, p. 4-5).

What is HSC Aboriginal Studies?

The NSW HSC Aboriginal Studies course has been offered to NSW senior secondary students since 1991, a culmination of discussions between the NSW Department of Education, the NSW Board of Studies and the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc., and a vision of educating both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students about Aboriginal culture and history in Australia. Hence, Aboriginal Studies allows for issues specific to the subject to be investigated and when studied in context Aboriginal Studies provides a sound background to Aboriginal societies as living cultures, central and particularly relevant to the total Australian community (Board of Studies NSW, 1998). In turn, students are presented with a more accurate history of Australia—a history that is culturally inclusive of Aboriginal people while acknowledging that Aboriginal kinship and social structures are very complex. Aboriginal Studies also promotes respect for the integrity of all people, and emphasises understanding of spiritual, political, economic and environmental issues, while affirming that within Aboriginal societies there is a diversity of cultures (Commonwealth of Australia, 1994, p. 5). Therefore, the aim of the Aboriginal Studies course is to provide all students, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, with an understanding of and pride in cultural heritage since the beginning of the Dreaming, that is an extremely important part of Australian heritage and history (NSW Board of Studies, 1999, p. 6).

Limited Research in Aboriginal Studies

During 1997 the NSW Board of Studies undertook a major evaluation of all HSC syllabuses, including Aboriginal Studies, as an outcome of the Government’s White Paper, *Securing their Future* (McGaw, 1996). Research in the area of HSC Aboriginal Studies is limited to the above mentioned syllabus evaluation report (Board of Studies NSW, 1998) and a project undertaken by the NSW AECG Inc., relating to the declining enrolment in Aboriginal Studies (NSW AECG Inc., 2004).

A number of strengths and weaknesses of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course were identified in the Board of Studies Aboriginal Studies Syllabus Evaluation Report (Board of Studies NSW, 1998). Key strengths identified included: a) it expands students’ understanding of Aboriginal culture; b) it contributes to Reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples; c) it strengthens Aboriginal community involvement in schools; d) it is a rigorous two unit course; e) it fosters a diverse range of skills which readily transfer to the tertiary sector; and f) it provides Indigenous students with the opportunity to discuss issues

from their own perspective. Limitations identified in the NSW Board of Studies (1998) report include: a) teachers lack knowledge and therefore are reluctant to teach the course; b) the difficulty of resourcing the subject, given there was no set textbook; c) some schools are unable to offer a broad range of courses; and d) the Aboriginal Studies HSC examination is believed by some to be a literacy test and “inaccessible to the very students whose ‘history’, ‘culture’ and ‘interests’ it purports to promote” (Board of Studies NSW, 1998, p. 20). The identification of strengths and limitations of the HSC Aboriginal Studies Course has important implications for curriculum development and implementation.

Indigenous communities and educators are most concerned as to the future of Aboriginal Studies based on anecdotal information and the outcomes of the above research projects, which both identified declining enrolments in the course. Hence, this investigation is linked to the dire need to undertake Aboriginal Education research in the secondary schooling sector, particularly in relation to ascertaining the impact of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course.

The importance of involving the Aboriginal community in Aboriginal Studies programs

To enhance the learning experience of all students and promote Reconciliation through better understanding, schools and the local Aboriginal community need to develop strong relationships that are maintained through a collaborative approach. To ensure that the relationship is meaningful schools need to listen to the views of Aboriginal people and learn from the knowledges that are shared, showing respect through proper community protocols (Board of Studies NSW, 2008, p. 4; Smith, 1999:184). As Brady (1993) notes,

There are cultural rules operating in Aboriginal Communities that are very different to non-Aboriginal society. It is important to be sensitive to this. It is important to listen and learn (Brady, et al. 1993 cited in Smith, 1999, 186).

It is particularly important that consultation is meaningful and provides for local Aboriginal community people the opportunity to feel that they have made a valuable contribution, not only to curriculum but also for teachers to learn more about how they can further develop their teaching skills and strategies in relation to teaching Aboriginal students and Aboriginal issues (Board of Studies NSW, 2008, p. 4-5). Schools also need to be aware that, as a direct result of past policies and practices, that many Aboriginal people identify with more than one community, through imposed dispossession and relocation their local Aboriginal community needs to be viewed as a diverse community (Board of Studies NSW, 2008, p. 8; Ah Sam & Ackland, 2005; Parbury, 2005, p. 13). For as Groome (2002) states,

The challenge to the systems, schools and teachers is to be open to hear Indigenous voices and to work with their local communities to provide an education which is locally appropriate and relevant (Groome in Bourke, et al, 2002, p. 186).

In saying this it is important to remember that a local Aboriginal Elder or community member can provide concrete experiences that many texts cannot so teachers should not rely solely on texts relating to Aboriginal history and culture, which in most cases, can only provide a national overview (Board of Studies NSW, 2008, p. 14).

The importance of Aboriginal community participation in schools and more specifically in Aboriginal Studies has major benefits for all involved; students, teachers, schools, parents, Aboriginal communities and the wider community. It goes beyond reading and writing and the research associated with the course for as this student states,

Research in [Aboriginal Studies] can prove to be a little more challenging as it encourages students...to move away from the library and into the community, which is often a new and sometime daunting experience. As a student taking Aboriginal Studies you really have to get out in the community and speak to the real keepers of the knowledge, Aboriginal Australians (non-Aboriginal student, Major Projects display launch, 2000).

Aims

This paper focuses exclusively on an element of a larger investigation that explored the impacts of the NSW HSC Aboriginal Studies course on Aboriginal students' self-concept. Overall, the study had four aims but for clarification this paper focuses on Aim 2 of the study which was to:

Identify Aboriginal students' perceptions of the strengths and limitations of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course in order to identify potential new directions for educational policy and strengthening curriculum.

Due to the limited research undertaken about the HSC Aboriginal Studies course a research question was posed to further examine the strengths and limitations of the course. In addition, an opportunity to also compare and contrast the views of multiple stakeholders at the school level, to identify what they perceive to be the strengths and limitations of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course.

Research Question 2.1: Strengths and limitations

What do Indigenous students, non-Indigenous students, teachers, Principals, and Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEAs) perceive as the strengths and limitations of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course?

Method

An ethnographic interview approach was chosen for as an Aboriginal researcher, I believe that interviews replicate the narrative and story-telling traditions of Aboriginal communities in Australia. This in turn provided opportunities to examine the multiple interpretations of reality held by Aboriginal students and their school learning environment in relation to their response to the Aboriginal Studies curriculum (Fetterman, 1998, p. 2). This approach allowed me the opportunity to experience unique situations and unique individuals within the culture of the secondary school but more importantly allowing the Aboriginal participants to feel comfortable and safe.

Permission to undertake the study was sought from the University of Western Sydney (UWS) Human Ethics Committee and the NSW Department of Education and Training (NSW DET) Strategic Research Directorate. When permission was obtained, a letter of request was sent to school Principals to seek their participation in an in-depth interview and provide access to potential participants. School permission and parental authorization was

gained before interviews were undertaken. Potential students for interview were identified by the teacher of Aboriginal Studies and the Aboriginal Education Assistant (AEA).

Four semi-structured in-depth interview schedules were developed that addressed the aims and research questions of the study, one each for: (a) Students undertaking the HSC Aboriginal Studies Course; (b) Indigenous students not undertaking the course; (c) Teachers/Principals/AEAs; and (d) Parents of students undertaking Aboriginal Studies.

Participants

The total number of participants involved in this investigation was thirty-six from three NSW state secondary schools (see Table 1 below for overview of participants). This included twenty-two (18 Aboriginal students and 4 non-Aboriginal students between the ages of 15-19 years) students who were undertaking the HSC Aboriginal Studies course. Students were identified based on their active participation in the Aboriginal Studies course and were approached, in the first instance, by the teacher of Aboriginal Studies and the Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEAs) to invite them to participate in an in-depth interview to be undertaken in their school. Parents of students undertaking the course were also identified by the teacher and the Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEAs.) Whenever possible I endeavoured to introduce myself to the students and to other Indigenous people, prior to the interviews. This enabled me to provide some background as to who I was and where I fitted in, in relation to “our mob”. This procedure was also intended to establish a rapport with the students fairly quickly. Many were interested in my relatives, and based on the names given, the area that I came from. This resulted in relationship building, a usual process for Indigenous people.

Table 1 Participants involved across the three schools

| | Regional NSW | South Coast | North Coast | TOTAL |
|-------------------------|-----------------|----------------|----------------|-------|
| Aboriginal students | 7 | 3 | 8 | 18 |
| Non-Aboriginal students | 1 | 2 | 1 | 4 |
| Teachers | 3 | 1 | 1 | 5 |
| AEAs | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| Principals | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| Parents | 1 | 0 | 2 | 3 |
| TOTAL | 14 | 8 | 14 | 36 |

Data Analysis

All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions were grouped by participants and content analysis was undertaken to identify themes and recurring patterns within the interviews clustering like themes identified by participants, firstly in the identified groups, for example, Indigenous students, non-Indigenous students, school staff, and parents. For example, what did Indigenous students say? What did non-Indigenous students say? Throughout this process I kept in mind the importance of “studying the whole text, not only in the context of what was said but also in terms of what was not said” (Minichiello et al.,

1995, p. 254). Emerging themes and issues were then more closely examined as to their relationship to the research aims.

Results

The findings related to the interview question, “*What do you see as the strengths of the Aboriginal Studies course?*” identified that the involvement of the Aboriginal community in the implementation of the Aboriginal Studies course is of great importance. A number of themes emerged within the theme of community involvement including; local Aboriginal perspectives and knowledges, hands-on approaches, alternative learning environments, field trips/excursions which incorporated comparative and cultural studies, further understanding of classroom activities and readings, extension of academic skills developed through the course, classroom teachers gaining knowledge and skills from Aboriginal community, and one of the most important aspects is that Aboriginal students have role models from their local community that they can look up to.

Students, both Aboriginal & non-Aboriginal, spoke about how talking and listening to Aboriginal community people made the learning more meaningful. There was common agreement among interviewees that excursions into the community were important experiences as they provided opportunities to reinforce the knowledge gained in class. Some students felt that they were not able to fully understand what they were reading in class until connections could be made through community visits and interaction with Aboriginal people. For both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students there was an opportunity to reinforce the learning that had taken place in the classroom through contact with Aboriginal Elders and/or other Aboriginal community members and through visits to communities outside their own. Not only were visits into the community seen to be positive learning experiences, Aboriginal guest speakers were also considered to hold much knowledge about past events, something which textbooks could not provide. Michael (Aboriginal student, Wiradjuri High) spoke about Aboriginal people putting local history into perspective.

People come and talk to us about stuff that happened around this region, people that were round for that point in time, coming in and talk to us about it. Like the Freedom Rides or something. We had someone come in about that, just talk.

Taryn (Aboriginal student, Dharumba High) expanded on this by talking about the experiences and knowledge that Elders shared in the classroom. For many students, community members visiting Aboriginal Studies classes’ assisted in the understanding of specific topics covered in texts.

Most of the stuff we read out of text books you can’t really get an understanding of until you actually experience it. Having people coming and talk to us about their experience, like Elders, helps.

Aboriginal community visits were also positioned as another learning environment, where learning became both interesting and fun, as Taryn (Aboriginal student, Dharumba High) goes on to say,

Usually when we go on excursions we go to see Koori people, Aboriginal people and they always make us laugh. Like it’s not one of them excursions where you sit there and take notes and you’re just bored out of your mind.

With our excursions, and what we do, we're always laughing and everyone's paying attention, cause it's interesting what we're learning.

Theresa, from Minjungbal High, felt she was gaining a better understanding through making links between in-class texts, the community environment and experiences that Aboriginal community members shared.

We can read about situations but you just had to go into (this community) and see it for yourself what it's like there. Meet some of the people, some of the community and you really got a better understanding of it all.

Parent responses to the importance of community connections were also clear that the information that comes from books is superficial, and that that the students can learn much more through authentic experiences in the community. Robyn's (Parent Minjungbal) response indicates that the community experience is a much more important strategy than getting information from books.

But the thing is the kids are learning too what's in the books. That's where they're learning from—what's in the books. Well, a lot of it I don't believe. I reckon kids really need to learn from the (Community) experience.

For Ben (Minjungbal High) having the opportunity to go into a community outside the local one was seen to be beneficial in that it provided hands-on experiences.

I like the hands-on stuff, which is really good. We have someone that tells you what it's like and to experience it in (this community). That helps a lot because I like to see things; I understand things when I see them more than reading about it.

Non-Aboriginal students also acknowledged the benefits of hands-on experiences and meeting with Aboriginal people. Consider, for example, Larissa's response,

Hands on type thing, it's easier to pick up when you're actually doing something or when someone's showing you something, not just like writing stuff out of a book. We've been on one excursion, we went to the TAFE, and we were speaking to, can't remember his name, but it was to an Aboriginal perspective on justice and education. It was sort of like a little seminar thing during lunchtime and one period so it was pretty short, but it was pretty good, we learnt a bit from that. Just hearing it from someone that actually went through it so it's more of a personal perspective than just a text book one (Larissa Non-Aboriginal Student Dharumba High)

Natalie (Principal, Minjungbal High) spoke of another community connection, that of an ongoing relationship with an Aboriginal community outside New South Wales. Students visit the community every two years, an ongoing funding commitment made by the school. This is a major commitment made by the school and shows the importance of Aboriginal Education. This has, in turn, had positive impacts on all students undertaking Aboriginal Studies.

It goes ahead every two years and we support it particularly through funding and making sure that it happens. It's not a sort of question if it will go ahead, it's just one part of our school culture and community at Minjungbal High school that they go every two years and whatever we need to do to support it.

The visits to communities, including outside the local one, provided the chance for all students to experience and learn in a culturally rich environment. By contrast, the local community allowed highly respected Aboriginal Elders and community members the opportunity to come into classrooms to share their knowledge.

For teachers the importance of Aboriginal community involvement and participation was also important. Richard (Teacher Dharumba High) talked about the “knowledge and experience” that Aboriginal Elders bring with them into the classroom and how this should be the focus, rather than the “formal qualifications” that many seek to impose on “community teachers”.

The importance of community, this is where I think just a little bit less of the standard western style education and a little bit more of Elders or community members coming in and making their educational connection there. I just think that the system should recognise Aboriginal community members that have not taken part in formal education but still realise that traditional Aboriginal knowledge does not require a formal certificate and those people should be recognised and they should be allowed to teach in the schools whether they've gone to uni or not.

Richard (Teacher Dharumba High) goes on to acknowledge that working with Aboriginal Elders would make him a better Aboriginal Studies teacher and that as “holders of cultural knowledge” their input into the education of students undertaking Aboriginal Studies is paramount.

Because we recognise their knowledge as certainly not less important than ours and certainly there is a lot more important than ours. They are the true inheritors of the culture. They are the true teachers of the culture where they interpret the culture so I would like to see the community members come into it. They can come in and teach the kids culture. I can sit in with the kids and learn from them. That will make me a better Aboriginal Studies teacher as well. Because I teach Aboriginal Studies, I'm desperate to introduce as much cultural stuff into it but here's a different way of doing it so I haven't given it that much thought. I just support it totally, particularly if there could be community involvement

Shayne (Teacher, Wiradjuri High) also identified similar aspects in relation to involving the community in the education of students in Aboriginal Studies. One further important point he does make is that of the status and importance of teachers in the Aboriginal Studies classroom and what students should expect of that teacher.

I would like to see a representative of parents and interested community members, forming links with the school to be able to come in and sit down with the students and share their stories, share their history. I'm not able to teach them everything and with just me out the front of the classroom Aboriginal Studies is going to be highly academic, content driven and skills being

rehearsed when it should be a vehicle for connecting with community and actually mentoring and using Aboriginal society as a template within the classroom.

Discussion

The results indicate that Aboriginal community involvement in the HSC Aboriginal Studies course is much more than participation and has become a true engagement between students, teachers and Aboriginal people. It becomes a place where meaningful connections are made and students gain a greater understanding of Aboriginal history, culture and knowledges outside a highly academic, content driven and skills rehearsed course. For both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, opportunities were provided to reinforce the learning that had taken place in the classroom particularly through contact with Aboriginal Elders and/or other Aboriginal community members and through visits to communities outside their own.

Across responses it is clear that support for the inclusion of the Aboriginal community in Aboriginal Studies is very important. In identifying the positive aspects of the Aboriginal Studies course participants spoke of the importance of and wish for more community guest speakers and the significance of field trips, both interstate and in the local community. These cultural excursions were viewed as “better learning” because it was “real” and “hands-on” in turn identifying the importance of and access to those who could provide answers to questions. Students were also provided with opportunities to access and learn about Aboriginal services within the community and what they offered both the Aboriginal and wider communities.

Involvement of the Aboriginal community allowed Aboriginal students to feel ‘a sense of belonging’ and non-Aboriginal students to gain links to the local community providing benefits and opportunities in and outside their community. This was further reinforced in responses from school staff and parents who also spoke about the importance of making links with Aboriginal communities as a means of providing students with opportunities to experience Aboriginal culture in another community and to seek important answers to questions about the situation of Aboriginal peoples in Australian society today. Concerns were also raised about how schools were not accessing their local community and the disadvantages that students could be experiencing in light of this. Again further investigation is needed alongside how the course is promoted, as it would seem that Aboriginal community involvement in the development of promotional strategies at this time is limited.

Conclusions

Focussing on the Aboriginal community participation aspect of a larger investigation has uncovered some interesting results and further investigations will need to be undertaken, involving more schools, students, parents and Aboriginal communities. Although the number of participants could be seen as a limitation of the study, the Aim of the research had a different purpose and in my view the identification of community involvement being a major strength of the course has allowed for some gaps to be identified in relation to future research in Aboriginal Studies.

Given the very different location of the schools and the particular students undertaking the course the importance of Aboriginal community in the implementation of the Aboriginal Studies course cannot be ignored. It is an opportunity for schools to develop stronger links with their Aboriginal community, leading to more active involvement of Aboriginal people.

What has been presented provides a limited overview of the importance of Aboriginal community involvement in the HSC Aboriginal Studies course, but for those interviewed it

is has true value and provides for students, as well as the Aboriginal community, opportunities for a meaningful exchange of life histories and experiences, and answers to questions about Aboriginal history and contemporary issues.

About the Author

Debra Wray has recently graduated with a MEd (Hons) from the University of Western Sydney. She also holds a Masters of Education (HRD) and a Diploma in Teaching (Primary). Debra is a lecturer at the Woilyungah Indigenous Centre, University of Wollongong and the coordinator of two Aboriginal Education subjects offered through the Faculty of Arts, she also works closely with the Faculty of Education in the same curriculum area. Prior to this appointment Debra was a lecturer at the Koori Centre, University of Sydney where her duties linked specifically to the teaching of Aboriginal Studies in secondary schools, which was the subject of her MEd (Hons). Her research interests include: Aboriginal Studies 7-12, with specific focus on retention rates, positive educational outcomes and effective teaching of Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal students.

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