

“DECOMPLEXING COMPLEXITIES”
FACTS VERSUS FICTION?
OR
REALITY VERSUS MYTHS?

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Abstract

This paper outlines the complexities associated with educational service delivery in remote communities. It attempts to “decomplex” or simplify some of these identified complexities and differentiate between truisms and widespread perceptions about Indigenous societies. It highlights major influences affecting quality service delivery and successful outcomes in remote communities. Several strategies, hard hitting at times, are suggested to address some of these issues. It has been compiled with Tricia and I seizing the opportunity to demonstrate literary licence or irregularity with English language usage. This is a writer’s freedom.

We often hear it quoted that Indigenous Education, especially in remote areas, is complex. This is not surprising seeing the world today delights in complexifying the simplest situations.

We are not denying that many cultural issues must be considered and incorporated by the educational practioner when carefully designing highly interesting and relevant curriculum.

Even the most astute educator, with the most motivating programmes and hands-on, real life learning’s, battles the odds in remote communities.

Let's look at some of the issues confronting the remote community educator and impacting on the educational development and social, emotional and physical well-being of remote Indigenous students.

A glaring problem exists with the issue of non-attendance. Teachers are constantly facing an uphill battle in an effort to convince parents, custodians and Community members about the importance of education. Education is the key to true empowerment, real life choices, professional choices, professional opportunities and global thinking. It is the very mortar that moulds, shapes and cements the next generation and future directions for Indigenous Australians.

Recently, Yirara College attempted to establish a secondary education facility at Mt Liebig. Despite numerous community meetings and politician's input, the majority of parents failed to send their kids to school. As a result, the service is being discontinued.

Indigenous Communities relish their sporting carnivals, community meetings, gospel singing, cultural ceremonies and family gatherings. Whilst these often provide cultural replenishment, spiritual bonding and plain, simple enjoyment or recreational pleasure, they often eat into the precious, formal learning times required for strong literacy and numeracy skill development.

These cultural priorities can frustrate the most enthusiastic and enlightened teacher and interrupt or even jeopardize the most thoughtfully designed and focused programme. Tricia is currently involved in discussions with NT DEET to enact that sporting carnivals be held during the school holidays rather than precious school time.

Another challenge facing the remote school educator is the designing of effective strategies to overcome the "Welfare Mentality," which, unfortunately, is embedded and entrenched in many remote Indigenous Communities. One must keep chip, chip, chipping away in the short term with the hope that someone, somewhere can become an instrumental catalyst for change in the long term. An essential "mind-shift" must occur and be maintained in a move away from and eradication of the "Welfare Mentality."

When the mail plane flies in on a Wednesday at Mount Liebig the students comment "Here comes the money plane"!!!!

I ask you "Is this Welfare Mentality"?

All these outlined factors have provided an ideal haven, perfect climate and breeding ground for the metamorphosis of the “Hand holder.” The “Hand holder” is the latest demographic, sociological and cultural predator, who preys on the vulnerability of those less fortunate or minority groups. Paternalistic and patronizing attitudes and behaviors propel and dominate this savior and his or her perception that he or she is so necessary for the salvation of the minority group. Remote Communities provide the idyllic playing field for the “Hand holder,” safely isolated and obscured from the peripheral vision of the public microscope.

Unfortunately, many teachers consciously or subconsciously complement or support the “Hand holder” through operational practices.

Research studies, e.g. Marion Colville, New South Wales, provide evidence or hard data which support the argument that many teachers teach with lower performance expectations of Indigenous students. Tricia has heard teachers state, “What can these kids learn? They’re only bush kids” or “They’ll never leave the Community so what does a higher education matter.” These factors, combined with many Communities’ lack of value or emphasis on the importance of education and the absence of positive role models, make for a lethal cocktail.

Tricia once asked a Year 5 class at an Alice Springs mainstream school about their career aspirations. Every Indigenous student in the class (Of which there were many) responded that they wanted to work with CDEP. Tricia told them that she would ask the same question at the end of the year and if their responses were the same, then she had failed them as a teacher.

The fact that students live in a communal environment and speak English-as-a-Second Language is often equated with a lack of need for global thinking and a lack of academic ability or capacity. Language should not be seen as a barrier to a learner’s intelligence or potential.

“How can we all work together to improve the educational plight of remote client groups?”

“How, then, can we turn this situation around so that Indigenous peoples can compete in the professional stakes?”

“Can we? Is it Fact or Fiction, Reality or Myth?”

We believe we can “Decomplex these Complexities.” We can dilute them, design them down, unfold layers and expose and focus on the core or heart of the issue or complexity.

Some “Decomplexing Strategies” may include:-

Perceiving and interacting with all clients as equals

Equity and equality are words that are often bandied around and politically correct but how often are they effectively demonstrated?

Teachers have an important job to do as educators. They should perceive all students as equals, as a common client group, with existential individuality and diversity contained within. Operational practices should reflect true equality at all times e.g. distribution of questions, incorporation of interests with no allowance for “put downs.”

Establishing meaningful and realistic rules and routines

All societies throughout the world have rules and routines for their social well-being. At a micro graphical level, it is crucial for teachers and students to negotiate these and constantly reinforce them in the classroom. Indigenous students DO respond to established rules and routines, contrary to some commonly held or misinformed opinions or beliefs. In fact, they look for them or directional guidance.

Some student/teacher, classroom negotiated rules that have evolved at Yirara College, Kintore (Walungurru) and Mt Liebig (Watiyawanu) include:-

Come to school

Use manners

Listen carefully

Talk nicely

Work together

Share together

Always try your best

Take pride in your work

Show mutual respect

Speak English at school

No put downs

No pitjuri

No “I want, I want, I want

The emphasis is on positive terminology. However, it is sometimes difficult not to write some rules in the negative.

Any student, or adult for that matter, regardless of race, culture or creed, needs boundaries. Without them, we are creating chaos. Rules and routines must be firmly established and adhered to for social order and harmonious relationships. Reflect on remote communities. “Is this happening or is the situation out of control?”

Capitalizing on educational/language opportunities and the importance of English

A teacher should always encourage and expect students to question and converse in sentences. Indigenous students will opt for the monosyllabic approach if a teacher does not expect more e.g. rubber, ruler, water. Again, reinforce high expectations and insist upon full language delivery e.g. “May I have the rubber please?” Expect students to speak in sentences. With perseverance, they become the pattern or norm and an integral part of the classroom routine. Students do it automatically.

English is the globally accepted language and the internationally recognized common means of communication. Approximately 80% of countries throughout the world are teaching students English-as-a-Second Language. One must not demean or devalue the importance of the first language. The first language must be maintained and/or revived for survival. However, students must be given every opportunity to develop a command of English.

Indigenous students do go to airports, eateries, supermarkets and entertainment venues. Try asking for directions or information at Sydney Airport in Luritja, Warlpiri, Pitjatjantjara or Arrernte and see how far you will get? Try ordering from a menu in language. To fully participate, they need to use English. We learn English by using it.

Achieving outcomes and high performance expectations

This has been mentioned previously. Indigenous students must be aware of what is expected of them and the purpose of their learning tasks. They must see the relevance of their learning and how it fits into the big picture of real life.

An excellent strategy to reinforce and understand outcomes and expectations is the visual “Learning Journey.” The “Learning Journey” takes the form of a large wall mural. It is divided into weeks for the term.

The expected outcomes for the term are clearly displayed after the last week. They are written, by the students, on pictures associated with the Unit of Work e.g. for a Cooking Programme, they can be written on students' drawings of ingredients or equipment. Each week, individual students paste their work on the "Learning Journey." They track their progress throughout the term and tick off the outcomes as they are achieved.

Accountability is paramount to the achievement of educational, performance and financial outcomes.

Tricia cites cases in which up to ten Indigenous teachers in training received a Bachelor of Education degree after one year of training. These teachers in training received three years recognition of prior learning. RPL should be individually determined not a blanket recognition. This situation is outrageous and it is perpetuating and promoting a class of teachers who are ill-equipped to teach. They are simply not being trained to standard. It is setting them up for failure, placing our indigenous students in the hands of inferior trained teachers and creating a gap between those teachers who gained their degrees after four years of university study. Another reality is that many Indigenous students have dropped out of secondary school before they under-take teacher training. They are coming in behind the eight ball. Fast tracking their studies is not the way to go. Concerted effort and support to ensure genuine out-comes and qualifications based on meritorious performance is crucial.

Extending global thinking

Indigenous students are very community minded. They often think "community" and "community only. The world starts and finishes at their community. They become mentally locked in. Many teachers remark that the students will never leave their communities. They often use this rationalization as a cop out when it comes to the explicit teaching of important curriculum areas. Tricia chooses to provide maximum educational opportunities so that students are equipped to have real options and make informed decisions in life. She plants the seed that they can work in Alice Springs, Darwin, Melbourne, Sydney or overseas. They have these choices if given the opportunities to pursue them.

Tricia has recently returned from a tour of the United States. She told the students about her travel plans prior to her holidays. They all wanted to go with her. Tricia told them that they could go on such a holiday one day if they continue to go to school, get a steady job and save their money. Indigenous people can achieve these goals.

An interesting exercise is to think about a particular community and investigate its global connections. Think about the store, the clinic, the houses, the motor vehicles, the clothes they wear etc. Then make State/Territory, national and international connections or links. One will

soon realize that Communities could not function today without such external input.

Many students living in remote communities have access to computers, television, radios and Pay TV. Such telecommunication and technical devices have further exposed or linked the most remote client to the outside world.

Working in groups

Current educational research has clearly indicated that students learn best when working in groups. If an educator does not encourage Indigenous students to work in groups, he or she is denying access to a proven and essential learning strategy.

Whilst Indigenous clients in remote communities may choose to stick to their familiar cultural enclave, gender or language group, the reality is that they will find themselves in situations that demand interactional skills and group co-operation.

They shop in supermarkets, attend various meetings, visit Government Departments and deal with school communities.

Cultural mores and important lore demand specific cultural observations and adherence to practices. However, most of these take place in a communal or group setting. There is not a society in the world, from any culture or race that can exist without a need to be part of a group.

“No man (generic term) is an island.”

Designing appropriate programmes and highly stimulating learning tasks that are relevant to life

Programmes must be designed that are appropriate, highly stimulating and relevant to client needs. They must develop living skills, skills that can be transferred across to real life situations.

Tricia implemented one such programme, this year, at Kintore and Mt Liebig with Western Desert Secondary age students.

Instead of selecting a book or text for the development of Literacy and Numeracy skills, recipes within a Cooking Programme became the focus. Programme Outcomes included Essential or Life Long Learning's, Writing and Mathematics with links to Reading and Viewing and Health/Physical Education. These were carefully selected from the mandated Northern Territory Curriculum Framework. All student worksheets were tailor made specifically for the programme and for the purpose of explicit teaching.

The students prepared and cooked food every Monday and Wednesday afternoon, after they had completed all core learning's.

The students cleaned up and stacked away after each session. The programme proved to be extremely popular, even though it was not a "cook up and pig out" activity. The students took their food home in containers and shared it with their families. The Cooking Programme generated a great deal of interest. Feedback from different sectors of the Community was extremely positive. The word got around. Some students suggested that they should sell the food to the Community. This idea came from their family members.

As a result, a student/teacher decision was to cook on a Wednesday morning next term and drive around at lunch time to sell the hot food throughout the community.

The Enterprise Strand from the Studies of Society and Environment Learning Area will be developed for implementation purposes. The students will budget the expenditure and profits. They have decided that all monies earned from their Enterprise project will be used for an end of Term trip to Alice Springs. They have requested to stay at a motel and swim in the pool, visit the cinema and bowling alley, eat at a restaurant and cruise around Alice Springs. Of course, they will have to plan, organize, book the venues via telephone and fax and cost the trip!

The students will discuss future career paths (already full time catering has emerged as a real and viable career option) and vocational visits will be included on the itinerary.

Pathways/VET staff from Yirara College and other personnel, like myself, have traveled to Mt Liebig and provided input throughout the term. Formal qualifications and work ethics required to pursue and achieve vocational goals were discussed.

This programme resulted from Yirara College's initiative and pilot to introduce and deliver Secondary education services to Secondary age students living in remote communities. The individual teachers, at each location, plan the programmes for their campus.

To decomplex all Complexities will take generational/ educational changes. In fact, generational/educational radical reforms may be a more accurate phraseology than generational/educational changes. Real and meaningful impact, at this stage, is embryonic and a minute piece in the future, visionary picture.

However, we must face facts.

We live in the 21st Century, the new millennium.

Indigenous peoples want the best of a non-Indigenous world. They come into contact with it all the time. Often they do not understand the sacrifices, study and work expectations, responsibilities and commitments necessary to acquire a decent education and consequent employment.

Education in Australia IS compulsory for ALL students until they are 15 years of age. Yet, a large percentage of Indigenous students under the age of 15 are openly saying “I’m not going to school. I don’t want to go to school.” Attendance at school is NOT an option, it is NOT negotiable. It is law or Government legislation.

“How many students, Indigenous or non-Indigenous, would opt for staying at home and doing whatever they like, if given an option?”

“Most of them,” we believe.

In life, we cannot do whatever we like, whatever we want. We often have to do things that we do not like doing.

Noel Pearson recently stated on television “Aboriginal people don’t need others, or the Government to “save” them. They need to be “enabled,” not “saved.”

He more recently stated that “Putting a band-aid on something that needs major surgery is not the answer”

We as Indigenous people are the only ones that can save our-selves.

Tricia Smith is currently employed as a teacher at Yirara College of the Finke River Mission in Alice Springs. She has worked for twenty years in Aboriginal education. Tricia has been employed as a principal in Victoria at remote Purnim, near the Framlingham Aboriginal Settlement and Yipirinya Independent School, Alice Springs.

Highlights of career

Selected as Keynote Speaker and Principal Representative for the Barwon –South Western Region, Victoria, alongside the then Minister for Education, Caroline Hogg to address 200 Principals and teachers on the topic, “Problems Facing Women In Education.”

Published writer of an anthology of poetry and prose titled “Life Is But A Creeping Sand Dune.” 1994

Joint winner of the NT Secondary Teacher “Discovering Democracy” Award, 2003 and Special National “Discovering Democracy” Award, 2003

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