

“Positive ways: an Indigenous say’

VICTIMS OF CRIME NT CONFERENCE

A strength-based approach – education training and care as a basis for empowering Indigenous youth

Noel Pearson on imagining

I don't know that our people's imaginations are free about the greater possibilities for our future as a people. Individuals occasionally manage to imagine a future life and path that is out of the ordinary - and they are often supported by a mother or parents or family in this. But this is rare. There is almost no imagination that is free (and ambitious) about our social future as a people. Apart from the (typical) hopeful (but half-hearted) mantra that we will one day have our own "black doctors and lawyers etc" - we don't actually start to visualize how our traditional society could again be successful in our modern predicaments, and we don't confront the challenges.

[Noel Pearson reviewing “On Equilibrium” (Penguin Books Australia, 2002) by the Canadian writer/philosopher John Ralston Saul.]

Here, Noel Pearson points out a crucial ingredient in the development of healthy people in a healthy community. Prevention of crime must be grounded in developing communities where communal, family and personal wellbeing abounds. Education and training remains a foundation stone for such wellbeing.

Family group homes – a background

The Northern Territory Christian Schools Association has developed *Family Group Homes* as a vehicle for effective participation in education, training and care. They are a strong base to enable Indigenous young people to engage and contribute in the wider society from a position of strength.

The Northern Territory Christian Schools Association has always been involved in Indigenous education. A strong vision is grounded in several key principles:

- *Access*
Every Indigenous person is entitled to levels and kinds of education and training available to other Australians. Indigenous young people should not be excluded from access to education or training by reason of remoteness, functionality, age, gender, health or any impediment.
- *Responsibility*
Every Indigenous person is entitled to have education grounded in the hopes, needs, aspirations and responsibilities of families and communities. Nurture, and therefore education, must be a function of family and community rather than a government department or a service provider. Indigenous parents should have every opportunity to establish and or choose schools to fit their children’s needs.
- *Quality*
Every Indigenous person is entitled to quality of education that is as high as for any other Australians. There must be a focus on literacy, numeracy, two-way learning and measurable outcomes. Education provision must be tied to community and vocation opportunities to equip students to take make their special contribution to the community and society in which they live.

- *Community*

Every Indigenous person is entitled to education and training as an integral part of a holistic community development. This includes adult training, employment creation and community management. (Effective education cannot exist in a vacuum. It must be a community effort supported by government and non-government agencies in a holistic way. When people in remote communities are forced to rely on a range of disparate, and therefore often inaccessible government programmes, a cycle of disempowerment inevitably continues.)

(The health of Indigenous communities, communities and individuals may be linked to the capacity to break free from welfare dependency. Very few communities have a vigorous, functional economy where money flows around the community to benefit many. Real jobs (even less skilled ones) in communities are often held by non-Indigenous people. This must change. A community managed school in the local community is not only a source of education and training but is also a local “industry” in the community that can spark growth of real jobs. Our aim must be to train young people to follow pathways leading to real jobs, increasingly available in communities.)

The family group home framework

Family group homes for Indigenous young people are a partnership between the children's parents/guardians, their local communities, house parents and staff at Marrara Christian College and Woolanin Homeland Christian College. Family group homes are “a home away from home” to enable about 150 Indigenous young people to access education and training they would otherwise be denied. Ten young people are accommodated in a home in the suburbs. In the case of Woolanin they are on the school community site. Young people are cared for by a married couple in a family environment. Strong links are forged and retained with the families and communities of these young people. Students are encouraged to be positive role models and, in that sense, leaders.

Marrara Christian College family group homes

The Marrara Christian College Family Group Home residential programme began in February 2000 following an approach by families from Bulman and Weemol communities to accommodate their young people so they could access secondary education in Darwin. After discussions with the Northern Territory planning authorities, a property was leased in one of the northern suburbs of Darwin and 14 students were enrolled. During 2000 a further four homes were rented and an additional 46 students enrolled. Subsequently the programme has continued to grow and consolidate with enrolments growing to 60 in 2001, 80 in 2002 and 90 (9 houses) in 2003 and 2004.

A snapshot of family group homes 2001 to 2004 (the first quadrennium)

Over the four years 2001 – 2004 student attendance and retention have been carefully tracked and data used to adjust term dates, travel arrangements, grouping of students in houses and professional development of staff in order to secure the best possible education outcomes.

Attendance

Attendance of Indigenous students enrolled in the Family Group Home programme has consistently been between 85% and 88% as reported annually to the Commonwealth Department of Education Science and Training (DEST) as required in the NTCSA's IESIP agreement. About half of these absences were for traditional or family reasons (ceremony or funeral). This means that absences due to illness or apathy have been significantly less than 10%.

Enrolments

Over the past four years at Marrara some 288 students have been enrolled in the programme. A significant number (72) have stayed for only one term. In some cases these students had difficulty settling away from home and family and others exhibited behaviour and attitudes that were too difficult to manage in a large group home setting. The association continues to pursue the establishment of 'close care' accommodation for students such as these.

Disregarding this very transient group indicates an enrolment of some 216 students who attended for more one term. Over the period 2001 – 2004 with an average enrolment capacity of 85 students each year a total enrolment of 170 may be expected given continuous annual enrolment into Year 8 and graduation out of years 10/11/12. A total enrolment of just 216 (46 in excess of 170) indicates a high degree of stability of students over the four years.

“Apparent” retention

There is a range of methods for capturing retention in a meaningful way. The present measure used within most government (IESIP) agreements is known as 'apparent retention'. This is a simple calculation based on the number of students of a certain age or year level in one year compared with the number of students of the appropriate age and stage the following year. In this way a school can report 100% apparent retention even though an entire Year 10 cohort may include none of the Year 9 cohort from the previous year. It is our view that this measure is entirely inappropriate for reporting outcomes in Indigenous education in the NT.

Real retention at Marrara Christian College through family group homes

Real retention focuses on the actual students attending in one year and whether they are retained into the following year. Retention of students involved in the NTCSA family group homes programmes is as follows:

- Of 60 students who completed studies in 2001, 54 (90%) returned in 2002;
- Of 80 students who completed studies in 2002, 71 (89%) returned in 2003;
- Of 90 students who completed studies in 2003, 74 (82%) returned in 2004;
- Of 90 students who completed studies in 2004, 77 (86%) returned in 2005.

To summarise, of the 320 student 'end of year departures' over these four Christmas breaks, 276 students (86%) returned for the following year.

Complete years of study

Another measure of the success of family group homes may be the number of full years of study (4/4 term completions) that are achieved. Of the 340 student years over these four years some 222 (or 65%) were complete years of study. If the 72 'one term attendees' are set aside these figures improve but still indicate a significant number of students who struggle to complete four consecutive terms of study every year.

Graduations

Marrara has consistently graduated students into further education, training and employment each year. However, as it is a new and growing programme, 2005 was the first year where a 'home-grown' cohort presented for the NTCE. It should also be noted that a significant number of students have 'graduated' into other schools, into training programmes in rural and remote areas and into employment from Marrara's Years 10, 11 & 12 without completing the formal requirements of an NTCE (see destinations below).

rivals. When success is met, the desire to achieve is strengthened and I can be a shaper of the world in which I live.

Independence *"I am responsible for my decisions"*

Human beings have the capacity to make decisions, solve problems and show personal responsibility. Adults need to model, nurture, teach values and give feedback to young people who should be given opportunities to make choices without coercion.

Generosity *"I am able to give up my own comfort for the benefit of others"*

Human beings have the power to make a positive contribution to another human life. Helping others is a virtue through which young people strengthen their own sense of worthiness. Generosity is a paradox – compromising my own comfort creates deeper comfort as I align my life with that of others.

Outcomes of the family group homes programme

Family group homes both at Marrara and in Woolaning successfully

- produce consistent school participation and attendance;
- create close ties with family and community;
- help students' involvement in sport, church and culture activities;
- give students a home life with supervised study, regular sleep and healthy diet;
- keep young people at school longer;
- improve reading, writing and number;
- provide pathways to a productive and meaningful life.

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Chief Executive Officer,

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Northern Territory Christian Schools Association