An educational experience that supports children to develop a strong self-identity is fundamental in establishing positive attitudes to self, as an individual and as a learner, and in developing future attitudes to schooling...'.

A characteristic of discussions about Indigenous education in Australia is that certain fundamental truths keep being discovered or affirmed. However, as long as the disparity in educational outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students remains, it is essential that these verified are restated and re-energised. The 2003 report (see below) indicated that important 'enabling' aspects included leadership, attendance and engagement; good teaching; and Indigenous presence in the school. These key factors take many shapes. At Kempsby, in NSW, almost half of the five-year-old Indigenous children failed school readiness testing and did not have the verbal language and listening skills needed to learn to read, according to the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation. (SMH, 14/5/10). The issue was addressed by testing hearing, devising exercises for phonemic awareness and working with elders.

In the Tanami region of Central Australia, a three-year partnership between the Central Land Council and World Vision Australia has led to the Warpiri Education and Training Trust Early Childhood Program for children aged 0-5 (www.clc.org.au). Aboriginal people are trained as childcare workers, and some of the funding comes from mining royalties. At the Royal Far West School in Manly, NSW, teachers were offered online coaching, workshop training, workplace mentoring and academic expertise under the Quality Teaching Indigenous Project (SMH, 12/5/10). Dr Nina Burridge, who assessed the project, said, 'You can't achieve anything without bringing the Aboriginal community with you'. As the national Indigenous education project Dare to Lead has always advocated, leadership and quality teaching and working with community are fundamental to success at every level of schooling, including the earliest.

References


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Hiring . . . and Firing

PRINCIPALS of government schools invariably state that the two things that would most enhance their effectiveness are greater control over staffing, and greater freedom to use the resources at their disposal.

There are two aspects to staffing, the first of which is greater influence over staff appointments, or 'hiring'. In turn, there are two aspects to appointing staff; selecting the right person to fit with the principal's strategic vision for the school, and freedom from bureaucratic, rigid staffing processes. Government principals envy principals from other sectors who can act quickly to secure a desired appointee. The second aspect of staffing is dealing with poorly performing staff, or 'firing'. By consensus, this process is 'too long and complex' in government systems (SMH, 25/5/10). Recently it has been announced that principals in the ACT will have enhanced powers to hire and fire teachers, along with greater power to more flexibly manage staffing budgets (ABC News, 20/5/10). The degree to which this freedom will eventuate is unclear, with union opposition firming. Compromise or 'watering down' is likely. However, hiring and firing is more complex than some would believe, involving, for example, the issue of performance appraisal, and it is soon to be more so with the introduction of national certification of teachers at various mandatory and optional levels. Autonomy is also more than hiring and firing and encompasses flexibility in how positions are crafted and in the creative use of teaching and learning approaches, resources, buildings and facilities. A 'cookie cutter' approach tied to student numbers will not suit all contexts. Attracting quality teachers to challenging schools will remain difficult. If greater autonomy for government school principals is to occur, then this must be accompanied by suitable selection, preparation and support processes and the freedom to act outside present constraints on decision-making. If not, then all we will see is principals' managerial responsibilities increasing at the expense of their leadership, and principals are already overloaded. New models of school leadership may be needed. Finally, it is a myth that non-government principals are autonomous. All principals are accountable in various ways. What is required is agreement over what aspects of school accountability should be 'tight' and which aspects can be more 'loose' (Wack, 1978), with the betterment of students as the ultimate aim.

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Digital Technology: Servant or Master?

SCHOOL students have long misused mobile phone text messaging to bully and harass their peers. And with the arrival of easy-to-use camera applications, the recording of sickening episodes of school yard violence became even more commonplace. In addition, the ability to immediately post footage on the internet has enabled bullies to attain anti-hero status, before a global and not merely local audience. Put bluntly, mobile phones and the internet have geometrically increased the incentive for social deviance. But what of the implications of this technology for teachers? For the US high school science instructor who attacked a 13-year-old 'without excuse' (Deseret Morning News (USA), 16/5/10) and the 'stressed' British teacher who bludgeoned a 14-year-old with a 3kg dumbbell (Evening Times (UK), 24/5/10), it is undoubtedly just that some miscue are being exposed via students' mobile phones. There is never an excuse for assault. But we're perhaps seeing a second, darker wave of technology abuse among students — and teachers — that threatens to make the digital age a teacher's master and not its servant, both in and out of the classroom. For example, how many students, armed with mobile phone cameras, can now wrongly 'frame' dislikable teachers for a few harsh disciplinary words taken out of context? And what of life outside the classroom? A Victorian teacher's mobile phone — bearing graphic sexual images of herself and her partner — fell into the hands of students, who then circulated the pictures among their peers (Herald Sun, 15/5/10). Alarmed, the students were not suspended. Earlier, in a conservative Queensland town, two teachers 'raunchy' photos were accused from a legitimate social networking website and published on the front page of a local newspaper (Warwick Daily News, 15/3/10). The teachers were suspended, but reinstated when found not to have violated codes of conduct. Importantly, the ruling upheld teachers' rights...
to access social networking sites. But two lessons remain clear. For students, parents and the media, respect the privacy of teachers outside the classroom. For teachers, be prudent when publishing personal material on the internet. For better or for worse, digital technology has now permanently blurred the private and public spheres.

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**Attendance: Whose Responsibility?**

THERE is an ongoing debate across the world in addressing the issue of student attendance. Just whose responsibility is it - the school’s or the parents’?

Schools in the USA now face a federal mandate to produce an average attendance rate of 93% or face the consequences. In an effort to avoid state intervention, Marion County developed a method of putting the parents of chronic truants in jail for the weekend, with positive results. In Hamilton County, parents are required to do community service or pay fines if their children truant (WDEF.com (USA) 20/5/10). In California a recently passed Senate bill enables parents to be sent to jail for up to a year for failing to get their kids to school. State Senator Mark Leno claims it’s actually a public safety measure as children who don’t attend school regularly or drop out early are more likely to turn to crime (Washington Post, http://voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/parents/california-considers-jailing-9.html).

Other drastic measures used to reduce truancy include American judges ordering chronic truants to wear electronic tracking devices in an effort to reengage students with the education system (PI Newswire, USA, 21/1/10).

The Federal Government in Australia has introduced a pilot program of withholding welfare payments for families whose children truant consistently (Albert and Logan News, 23/9/09). In Australia, schools themselves are implementing a variety of strategies, including the use of family responsibility agreements, as in the Northern Territory (Australian Teacher, March 2010) and in Queensland one school has introduced a reward scheme for students who improve their attendance.

The latter is just one strategy of a variety of approaches that this school has introduced. One of these is the employment of a truancy officer. Funding for this has been made available through the Federal Government’s Low Socio-economic Status School Communities National Partnership scheme (Brisbane-times.com.au, 19/5/10).

What is clear is that no single isolated strategy on its own is more effective than schools, parents and communities working together to help young people in schools. This will need a creative and flexible approach.

No matter whose responsibility it is, or how it is achieved, that we need to get it right!

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