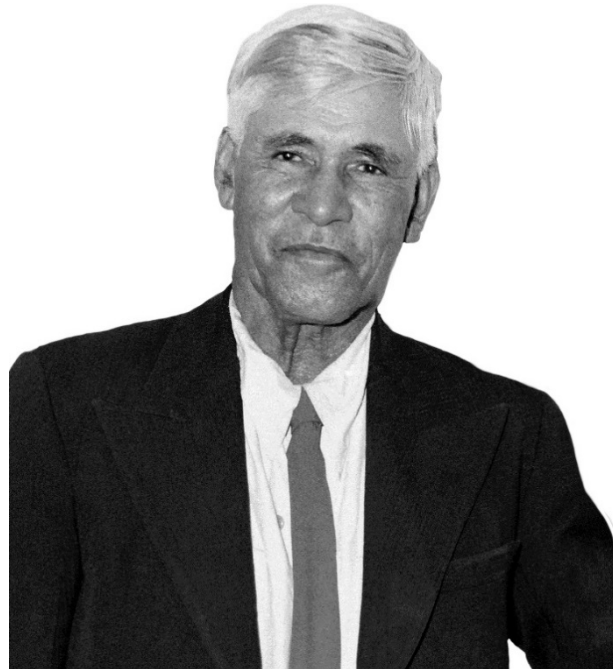


The Frank Archibald Memorial Lecture Series



2019 Lecture Notes

Teaching Indigenous Australia – Understanding our past and unlocking our future

The Hon Ken Wyatt AM MP

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University of
New England



Oorala Aboriginal Centre

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Teaching Indigenous Australia – Understanding our past and unlocking our future

The Hon Ken Wyatt AM MP

Federal Minister for Indigenous Australians

‘Kaya wanju’ – hello and welcome.

I’d like to acknowledge the traditional owners of this land where we meet tonight, the Kamilaroi and Anaiwan people, and pay my respect to their Elders, past, present and importantly tonight, emerging elders and future leaders.

Introduction

At the beginning of the Dreamtime, the earth was flat and dry and empty.

There were no trees, no rivers, no animals and no grass.

It was a dry and flat land.

One day, Goorialla, in Noongar Wargyl, the rainbow serpent woke from his sleep and set off to find his tribe.

He crossed Australia from east to west and north to south, stopping to listen for his people.

He crossed every part of the dry, flat Australia but found nothing.

The land he lay down to sleep on was not the same land he had set out to search for his people, his big, long body has cut great gouges in the land.

Goorialla lay in the sand all alone until he decided to create more life in the world...

This is the beginning of one of our most significant Dreaming stories – ‘The Rainbow Serpent’.

It tells of the creation of this great land, from a blank canvass to a rich tapestry of life, imagination and wonder.

For Indigenous Australians, the Dreaming and these tales are the start of our educational path.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have used stories, art, song and dance to pass on stories of creation, life, culture and the ways of our people down through generations for tens of thousands of years.

They are central to how we shape and understand our culture, our place and nation.

All people, when starting their educational journey, embark on a path of unknown potential.

It is the decision we make, the knowledge we acquire and accumulate – learning knowledge that we pass onto future generations.

It is the things we teach and the things we seek to understand that ultimately define where this path will lead – and the opportunities we will find on the way.

If it weren't for my education – and the opportunities that came from people investing in me, I wouldn't be standing before you today.

Some of you here tonight may have heard this story before – but it bears repeating – because it demonstrates the immense power an individual can hold in empowering a child and setting them on a path that sustains them for a lifetime.

Mrs Abernathy, my Year One teacher, saw that I was behind the other kids, because I had grown up in an isolated town that had no school. I did my schooling through correspondence.

She told me to come to school every morning at 8 o'clock, before school started, to meet her in the classroom.

She used to have a wall – a blackboard that had bricks on it and a picture of Humpty Dumpty.

On that wall, Mrs Abernathy would write a new word that I would have to learn for the day.

First she'd get me to tell her what I thought the word was and I would have to sound it out and guess the meaning.

If I was wrong, she would explain it to me.

Then she'd get me to put it into a sentence.

And after that, she'd take me through the other words on the wall that we'd already learnt in the previous days and weeks.

We did this day after day. And our wall of words grew substantially, although I always remained shy.

Mrs Abernathy was my teacher for two years.

But really she was my teacher for a lifetime.

She believed in me, supported me, and never gave up on me.

This is the value of education.

HOW CAN WE USE EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS TO REDEFINE INDIGENOUS SUCCESS?

Recently I have spoken about the need to reshape the way we approach Indigenous policy making – and this is particularly true when it comes to education.

For too long we have been treating the symptoms rather than addressing the cause.

A few weeks ago I had the opportunity to visit Yarrabah, an Indigenous community East of Cairns.

During my visit, I had joined the Remote School Attendance Strategy School Run – we drove from the local Yarrabah State School, up and down the town, picking children up for school on the way.

We pulled up at one house, where a family of children were playing in the front yard.

When one of these children realised it was time for school – he dropped to the ground – refused to move – and had to be carried to the car by his family members.

As educators and politicians – as leaders – we need to unpack ‘why’ this is the reaction to going to school.

Missing school one day per week, every year, results in 3 missed years of schooling by year 12.

Programmes such as the Remote School Attendance Strategy School Run are operating to reverse trends that have impacted on Indigenous Australians for too long.

If we don’t work to identify the ‘cause’ – we will never reverse the ‘symptoms’.

I am committed to getting more children to school – no matter where they live.

And over the past few weeks, from Yarrabah in Queensland to Groote Eylandt in the Northern Territory – I have been seeing innovative programmes that are working with Indigenous children and families to increase school attendance and participation in education.

I want us to be looking at what is working, what is already making a difference – right across this country – what can we learn from those working in community to Close the Gap when it comes to education – and take these programmes, often designed at a local level – to continue improving school attendance.

I also want us to focus on the positive and what’s working – as opposed to the negative statistics – the gap...

Imagine being a young Indigenous Australian – and having your future being regularly defined through disadvantage, disparity and underachievement.

It’s no wonder we create a sense of futility and create a mindset that we might never close the gap of attainment.

I experienced this personally when I had a teacher say to me:

“You know you would be better off leaving school and working on a farm – at least you would have a job for life. You know your people don’t do well in education”

That was the catalyst for me to defy low expectations and never allow their perception of my pathway in life.

I wasn’t accepting a stereotyped expectation of not being equal to my peers in the class room.

We need to make sure that we don’t diminish dreams through the environment and narrative that we’re setting for young Australians.

We need to make sure that everything we do supports aspiration – aspiration in education; aspiration in employment and aspiration for community.

So let’s set the scene for a young Indigenous Australian embarking on their education journey:

- What excites me is that more Indigenous Australians are now attaining a Year 12 or equivalent qualification.
- More Indigenous Australian students are staying in school longer, increasing their chances of successfully completing Year 12.
- More Indigenous Australians are studying higher level vocational education and training (VET) courses.
- More Indigenous Australians are going to university.

- And, there is virtually no gap in employment outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and other Australians who hold a bachelor's degree.
- The retention rate from Year 7/8 to Year 12 increased from 48.7% in 2011 to 60.9% in 2018.
- Under the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) the share of Indigenous students at or above minimum standards in the Years 3 and 5 reading and Years 5 and 9 numeracy increased by around 10 percentage points between 2008 and 2018.

This is educational success.

This is Indigenous success.

And this is despite Indigenous Australians being over-represented in regional and remote areas, where the barriers to accessing education and training are highest.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in remote areas can experience multiple layers of complex, compounding disadvantage, which affect the quality of their school education.

As I did when I grew up as a child in Nannine, many Indigenous Australian students must relocate to attend secondary school.

They often face cultural barriers, experience homesickness and have limited access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and support networks.

The Remote School Attendance Strategy supports 13,300 Indigenous Australian students attending 84 schools in remote and very remote Australia.

Remote School Attendance Strategy employs around 430 people (410 local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people) who work with families, students, communities and schools to encourage school attendance.

In 2019, a new Remote School Attendance Strategy model commenced that mandates community planning, local governance, flexible attendance activities, and employment and training for local staff.

The Remote School Attendance Strategy operates in the Northern Territory (40 schools), Queensland (14 schools), South Australia (14 schools), Western Australia (12 schools) and New South Wales (4 schools).

Indigenous student attendance worsens with remoteness – 63.4% in very remote areas, compared to 85.8% in inner regional areas in 2018.

However, almost one-third of Remote School Attendance Strategy schools have seen improved attendance since 2014, with a small number also experiencing static attendance.

We need to build on this – and continue to use this success to redefine how Australia views the education of Indigenous children.

Because this represents some of the earliest footprints in a student's journey.

And further down that path we're seeing improvements in tertiary education.

The number of Indigenous students enrolling for university has increased by 45 per cent since 2013 to almost 20,000 students.

Indigenous students are 31% less likely to attend university than the rest of the population – but this trend is improving.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students are most represented in Society and Culture, Health, Education and Management and Commerce fields of education.

The number of women studying STEM-related courses increased by 10.3 per cent to 110,370 in 2018, with the number of Australian women studying STEM increasing by 3.6 per cent.

However, there is still room for growth in representation in STEM related fields.

According to the Undergraduate Applications, Offers and Acceptances 2019 report published on 28 October 2019, a record number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are applying to study at university:

- Indigenous students made over 7,000 applications – an increase of 3.3 per cent on the previous year.
- Indigenous enrolment in government-funded VET programs increased from 81,915 in 2005 to 105,191 in 2015.
- For 15 to 64-year-olds, the Indigenous population participates in VET at a higher rate than the non-Indigenous population (18.7% compared with 9.3% in 2015).
- There has been steady, positive improvement in the proportion of Indigenous students enrolling in higher level VET qualifications (certificate III and above) - increasing from 38.3% in 2005 to 54% in 2015.
- We know that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander VET students in rural, regional and remote locations are participating at the same rate as other VET students from the same locations.

Let's also look at how we're defining success in Indigenous education.

It needn't be viewed through the same lens as non-Indigenous Australia – our paths may look different - but if they are working towards a life of employment and self-sustainability then they should be encouraged – and celebrated.

There was an old adage when I was training as a teacher – teach from the known to the unknown – and understand the culture of a child to enable a better outcome.

While everyone understands and learns differently in the way they access knowledge we have an obligation to build on the knowledge of their prior learning.

That is parents, as early educators, influence and shape a child's early life.

Future policy success must be framed in terms of realising an individual's potential rather than just reaching a par with average Australian outcomes.

While keeping an eye to equality of educational attainment we need to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander outcomes improve at all stages of education, we must foster a culture of excellence and high-expectations aspirations.

Not the concept of low expectation of lower levels of attainment.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATING ABOUT INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIA

I also want to use tonight as an opportunity for us to all explore the role Indigenous history and education plays in informing the direction of our nation.

Education is critical to improving Indigenous Australian life outcomes and it is essential that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students feel comfortable and supported in their school environments.

Let's talk what it means to be comfortable –

For Indigenous students, learning their own language is crucial to developing a sense of identity and fostering a sense of belonging.

As English is for Australians or the mother tongue of culturally and linguistically diverse populations.

This year marks the United Nation's Year of Indigenous Language – and throughout 2019 the Morrison Government has supported a range of activities that have helped highlight the important role Indigenous language plays within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and communities.

Language is what defines us – it's more than just a means of communication – it is what makes a culture unique and it defines our identity.

More than 250 Indigenous Australian languages were spoken on our continent at the time of European settlement in 1788.

Today, only 13 traditional Indigenous languages are still acquired by children, while another 100 or so are spoken to various degrees by older generations.

The reality is that these languages are at risk as Elders pass away.

So I ask, what makes these languages any different to those taught in our nation's classrooms?

As we preference French, Italian, Cantonese, Japanese or Spanish why don't we incorporate the rich Indigenous languages we have here in Australia?

Why aren't we seeing a greater teaching of Indigenous language in our schools, where Aboriginal children speak one or more Aboriginal languages fluently?

I have taught children in my classes who retrain their principal language but work to become as equally fluent in English.

Why don't we explore and better understand Indigenous culture through language?

As a nation we need to acknowledge the role Indigenous language can play in defining Indigenous Australia.

It should never be seen as an impediment because it devalues an important element of the child's worth as opposed to being a strength to build from.

And importantly, the role it can play in better supporting Indigenous students – improving their place and comfortability in the mainstream education system.

For all students, learning Aboriginal languages and Torres Strait Islander languages provides a distinctive means of understanding the country in which they live, including the relationship between land, the environment and people.

The ongoing and necessary reclamation and revitalisation of these languages also contribute to reconciliation.

Language is not just a fundamental element of culture and identity but also something that should be valued and embraced to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander innovation in a modern economic market.

Language is just the beginning of this conversation.

We need to challenge how our institutions have defined Indigenous Australia and the role our culture can play in educating Australians.

Truth-telling plays an important role in this.

Australia has rich histories – all are of equal importance in defining who we are as a modern nation.

I want us all to have and encourage conversation – through conversation we will become more comfortable with each other, our shared past, present and future.

Truth-telling is not a contest of histories.

It's not: us versus them – which has too often been used to frame these debates in an educational context.

Truth-telling is an acceptance that there can be shared stories around events in our nation's history.

People can form views, hold different perspectives – that is their right.

But it is also their responsibility to acknowledge those different perspectives and respect the views of others.

It is the acknowledgment that we have a past that at times can be challenging – and it's also an acknowledgment that as a nation we don't need to let these histories define us – or limit what we can achieve going forward.

It's acknowledging:

- Our pre-colonial history
- The massacres and displacement from land
- The government policies that no matter how well-meaning has caused disadvantaged across generations
- The loss of culture for Indigenous Australians

It's not about assigning guilt or blame – it's about understanding our collective and shared history.

History has many levels, however there are common threads that will always prevail.

Comfortability for Indigenous Australians won't be achieved through apportioning guilt or blame – but through acknowledgement and understanding from all.

It's about rising above the differences of our past and building upon the many great things that define us as Australians.

When we discuss Indigenous Australia and non-Indigenous Australia I say with complete certainty that we have more in common and more to celebrate than not.

And for young Indigenous Australians, how we explore our truth, and provide the environment to foster comfortability in who they are, will be crucial to continuing to narrow the gap and ensure that all Australians are blessed with the same opportunity and potential.

This is why I am committed to delivering constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians in this term of Parliament.

It is an acknowledgment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's place in Australia.

Recognition of the world's oldest and longest continuous culture on our nation's birth certificate.

Constitutional recognition is important for the reasons we have discussed tonight – it is an acknowledgement that is long overdue – and one that will give greater hope and comfort to future generations of Indigenous Australians.

It's interesting to consider why we as a nation have struggled with the concept of constitutional recognition.

If I am brutally honest – prior to 1967 we held a special place and a privileged position in the Constitution and I can't remember reading anywhere voices of protest – but rather a deafening silence of acceptance of our position as a "race".

The first 15 years of my life precluded me from being counted as an Australian by reason of Section 127 of the Australian Constitution.

WHAT DO WE WANT THE FUTURE OF INDIGENOUS EDUCATION TO LOOK LIKE?

So how do we help build respect and understanding; and improve comfortability alongside truth-telling?

Through genuine partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities and through more effective collaboration between education providers, agencies and professions.

That is our challenge – so let's again look at what's working – let's listen to the voices of those unheard Indigenous Australians who are working to improve school attendance, teach Indigenous history and sustain our culture.

The Australian Curriculum includes the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures Cross-Curriculum Priority.

This is an important avenue for providing all Australian students the opportunity to learn about the depth, wealth and diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

However, anecdotal feedback suggests the implementation of the cross-curriculum priority is mixed.

Barriers to effective implementation include:

- limited cultural competency amongst teachers
- poor partnerships between schools and local Indigenous communities and
- an imbalance between Indigenous content and the implementation of core curriculum requirements such as English and Maths.

We readily focus attention in the curriculum on climate and climate change but not on our shared history.

There is more to be done to ensure teachers are appropriately supported to embed Indigenous Australian perspectives in their classroom practice, with a focus on improving the primary and secondary schooling experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

Our children will shape the future of this country and it is critical that all students have a fuller understanding of Australia's history that appropriately includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history.

Engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities cannot be localised to a small number of schools.

It is important that all schools across the country work to develop the capacity to engage with their local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community to ensure local cultural context is understood in classrooms and that all students have the opportunity to learn about the rich and diverse histories and cultures of all Australians.

This includes help to build a sense of identity and to foster a sense of belonging.

As a nation that is diverse in ethnicity, and for those who have built our country to what we know it today.

Let's bring Indigenous Australia into our everyday discourse.

Let's break down those barriers; locally and organically. It must be authentic and genuine – which is why I'm not going to stand here tonight and tell you how to do it.

I ask that you go out and work alongside and in partnership with the local community to ensure that the acceptance and showcasing of culture through an educational frame is done respectfully and appropriately.

Comfortability is a two-way street – we cannot lose sight of that – and it is only achieved through walking and working together, in partnership and at a pace that is accepted by all involved.

Protest, guilt and blame have no place in Australian classrooms

There are schools right across the nation doing this already and I commend them for that and encourage them to keep doing what they're doing.

The Morrison Government is absolutely committed to supporting the ongoing development of cultural capability in Australian schools.

And I'd like to pay particular credit to my colleague, the Hon Dan Tehan, Minister for Education for his commitment to supporting Indigenous students.

CONCLUSION

Tonight I've spoken about the role education can play in continuing to close the gap, empower communities and provide greater opportunities for future Australians?

These are all important things I want you to think about in coming days – how you can, through your work continue to advance these important causes.

But I also want you to think about this –

We often speak about the big picture of Indigenous Australians – the need for an Indigenous voice, the need for constitutional recognition, the need to close the gap.

More importantly how do we celebrate success and acknowledge achievement.

But what does this look like to a young Indigenous Australian?

What does it look like to a child in a community – who is at risk of becoming another statistic?

What can we do, to give greater hope to that child?

To help them overcome the barriers of deficit and low expectation in relation to education?

To help give them the education that will set them on a path to realise employment, to realise empowerment and to realise a better future for the next generation of Australians?

As we do for every Australian child. We need the same journey, the same curriculum and the same expectations.

Tonight we have discussed where we're headed – the future looks more promising than the past – but we must collectively accept responsibility and resolve to continue this work – to pave the path to a brighter future.

We all start with a blank canvass - as the Rainbow Serpent tells.

From this was born the most remarkable nation on the planet – full of a rich and diverse history – its people empowered by potential and opportunity.

This is how we must view every child as they embark on their educational journey.

Let's not limit potential because of origin or geography.

Let's resolve to shape their paths – as our nations was shaped – so their lives are rich, full and rewarding.

This is our challenge.

This is our opportunity.

Thank you