Premier’s University of Wollongong Early Childhood Scholarship

Strategies to engage Aboriginal children, schools, families and communities in areas of Canada and Australia, with a focus on school readiness programs

Rebecca Langdon

Muswellbrook South Public School

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Introduction

As a primary school teacher I have always been inspired by young children’s enthusiasm for life and that look of expectation as a child enters ‘big school’, and their journey, not just with learning, but also with life in general. They are keen to play, meet new friends and to learn. They want to belong and be part of the class, school and be a ‘big person’. With every possible chance they love to showcase to their parents and family members what they can do at school, where their bag hangs on the hook and where their classroom is located. School is an exciting place and to be part of it with your child is part of connecting, understanding and engaging not just with the school, but with the child.

Having worked extensively, particularly in the past 10 years with young children and early childhood learning in Aboriginal settings, as well as collaborating with teachers and parents, I have observed the impacts of these years on an Aboriginal child’s future. These students are in their foundation years physically, emotionally and socially. The quality of a school readiness program depends upon its purpose and the quality and quantity of the strategies that engage, support and connect with a child, parent, family and the community.

Background

I have led a diverse group of schools over the last 10 years. I have had opportunities to learn, engage and understand the needs of my students, staff, families and communities. I firmly believe that, to be a strong practitioner, the key is to be an active listener, give respect to earn respect, learn your trade and create and develop partnerships and relationships in all sectors of your role as school principal and teacher.

In 2013, I began the school year in an interesting secondment as an acting Executive Principal of a NSW government educational strategy which was the first to be delivered in Australia, Connected Communities. It is delivered across 15 state schools within the NSW Department of Education and Communities and is designed to complement the work of the Ministerial Taskforce on Aboriginal Affairs. The strategy and the 15 public school sites act as community hubs that deliver a range of services from birth, through school, to further training and employment and involving various government departments such as Health, Police, Family and Community Services.

My appointment into this new position equipped me to gather strong evidence and knowledge for my Australian leg of my western NSW study. The experiences I had first hand as a practitioner developing and creating strategies to engage Aboriginal children, schools, families and communities within a school setting that had a DEC Preschool, provided me with an understanding and an approach to begin my Dubbo and Wellington research section of the study.

Study Focus

Strategies to engage Aboriginal children, schools, families and communities in areas of Canada and Australia, with a focus on school readiness programs.

The Journey - Study Research

My study research began in Dubbo and Wellington in Western NSW. These geographical locations were included in my tour because of the extensive work that had been accomplished by the Department of Education and Communities Early Years Team located in Dubbo, Western NSW regional office (prior to the DEC realignment). This area was also selected because of its diverse and complex communities with high populations of Aboriginal people identified as in need of support and development in early learning centres and associated Health support agencies.

As part of my study I also looked at data from the Australian Early Development Index and case study research in regards to health, unemployment, housing, education, social, emotional and generational issues that would assist/hinder the development of the Aboriginal child within these locations and where I could draw comparisons to the areas of my nominated Canadian research study tour.

Australia

Arriving in Dubbo - My first interview both online and through other sources was with Mrs Tracey Simpson now retired from the DEC; she had held the position of Director Community Partnerships and Early Years in Dubbo, Western Region NSW. We discussed the complexities and programs that are implemented in Western Region preschools and early learning centres.

I was informed that the Western NSW DEC team delivered outstanding support services across the region where the purpose was to improve learning centres for all students and their families, support the teaching and learning cycle of the Early Years Learning Framework and support rural and remote communities to engage their children in play, social interaction and thus encourage learning for school readiness.

Strategies embedded in the various programs to engage parents, families and community included:

* + Cultural mobile preschool visits- where local Aboriginal community people assist in the implementation of the pre-school.
  + Encourage play and learning involving the parent and child
  + Provide reading guides for parents with young children
  + Instil cultural pride, self-respect and self-confidence in Aboriginal children as a way to help them to become psychologically healthy adults. Through yarning, using local language and sharing local knowledge with the children to form connections.
  + Elders supporting parents and working within the community in group forums and workshops.
  + Aboriginal staff members employed to build a strong relationships among the families
  + Establish gardening programs to instil self-respect, responsibility and self- confidence with parents and children
  + Support and guide parents with access issues regarding fees, transport, waiting lists, family responsibilities
  + Develop workshops for parents on financial management, job training and making the transition from unemployment to paid work.

I travelled next to Wellington Public School –Preschool and the Wellington Aboriginal Medical Service who run an effective program linked to the school and its community. This was based on the strategies of ensuring good health and support to the families and parents.

Whilst touring Wellington PS, I visited and participated in a lovely class with many gorgeous personalities. The building was well equipped and resourced. The teacher was creating a reading time session where the children could listen and participate with the story. I asked the preschool teacher, what strategies she implements to engage parents of her students. She explained that she has ‘tried everything’ -reading groups, gardening days, cooking mornings. However, the new partnership with the Wellington Aboriginal Medical Service was seeing some improved outcomes.

I spoke to the Aboriginal School Learning Support Officers and it was evident that it is imperative to build capacity in culture and language to connect the child and the family to community. I believe this is an important strategy to ensure students, teachers and their communities are connected and develop respect and value for families’ and children’s cultural learning. I believe from discussions with regional colleagues and the Wellington Aboriginal Medical Service that this issue may be changing into a more positive direction for this Early Learning setting.

My discussions with the Wellington Aboriginal Medical Service about their programs demonstrated an approach to health that includes the child, mother and extended family. There are various programs supporting Aboriginal families and working closely with Wellington Public School in engaging parents in the school via nutrition and healthy eating programs. They have found this is the key to removing barriers that may exist and creating good ‘yarning time’. The service and the school are jointly creating ‘bush tucker’ gardens that the parents and the community health workers are developing; these are creating improved outcomes not just in health and nutrition, but the engagement of families with their children at school.

Whilst the health team stated the impact of drugs, alcohol, domestic violence and generational unemployment are high, the collaborative effort by the team is certainly delivering improvements in these significant social issues.

Canada

I travelled across the length of Canada beginning in Vancouver, British Columbia and ending in Halifax, Nova Scotia over a 4 week period.

The research study was truly planes, trains and automobiles across an amazing, diverse and vast country. The locations I visited ranged from reservations to non-reservations, Native women’s resource centres, preschools (Mother Earth and Aboriginal Head Start Programs),Montessori schools, elementary (primary) and high schools as well significant and cutting edge research universities, such as University of Victoria, Vancouver, Concordia University, Montreal and University Laval, Quebec City.

The focus group for my study research was the First Nations people of Canada. This Aboriginal group doesn’t include Metis and Inuit people. Almost 700,000 First Nations people live in Canada (about 2 percent of the total population), comprising more than 600 communities (called bands). About 40 percent of First Nations people live on reserves. British Columbia is home to the most First Nations groups (198), while Ontario is second (126 groups). The remaining communities are spread mostly in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Alberta, Quebec and the Northwest Territories.

Canada never experienced the allout massacres that occurred with the European/Native American clashes in the USA. Nevertheless, Canada’s Aboriginal population still suffered discrimination, loss of territory and civil rights violations throughout the country’s history.

Beginning in Vancouver, British Columbia with a study day to Vancouver Island, I visited The University of Victoria and had discussions with Professor Jessica Ball, Head - School of Child and Youth Care and Dr Onowa McIvor, Head of Education. We spoke at length of the benefits, issues and strategies of the Aboriginal Head Start Programs across Canada and in particular British Columbia.

The Aboriginal Head Start (AHS) programs, which commenced in the mid 1990’s, were seen as cutting edge learning for Aboriginal children across Canada in the mid 1990’s. This was an initiative of the federal government. AHS was inspired by the Head Start movement pioneered in the United States in the 1960’s, which heralded the beginning of the modern era of early childhood intervention. The goal for the program is to make a successful transition to formal schooling and to achieve on par with less – disadvantaged peers. The age for children attending vary across the nation; however, most provinces and territories begin at 3 years of age to 5 years.

The Canadian government supports the program across the nation with significant funding and resources. The government’s aim is to address disparities in educational attainment between First Nations, Metis and Inuit children and non-Aboriginal children living in urban centres and large northern communities. Head Start programs that are run on reservations are funded and governed differently to those of urban AHS programs. On-reserve HS programs are operated by Health Canada and dovetail with other Health Canada programs, such as Brighter Futures and Child Care of the North in an effort to fill service gaps and coordinate program objectives.

The AHS programs are mandated across Canada to provide opportunities for parental involvement, reaching out to parents in a wide range of ways, enabling them to: help with children’s activities, offering parenting education and instruction in home economics and food preparation, mounting cultural events, language and literacy facilitation programs and assisting with job searches and social and health service referrals.

* + The AHS strategies that are embedded to engage parents and families across Canada vary; however there is a strong connection to a culture based program and a community-specific elaboration of six program components: culture and language;
  + education and school readiness;
  + health promotion;
  + nutrition;
  + social support; and
  + parent/family involvement.

In most communities efforts are made to employ Aboriginal staff, though they are normally in short supply.

The University of Victoria and Concordia University in Montreal have developed and recruited First Nation and Metis students, and have placed Indigenous students in Indigenous practicum sites. They offer academic mentoring, practical assistance and social support in ways that promote cultural awareness and educational success.

Through my observations the connection with the child, families and community is delivered through cultural emersion. This is enhanced by close relationships and partnerships across all AHS programs at the various locations I visited across Canada. This is achieved by the Elders working in partnership with the school and its teachers. An example of this is the AHS program Makonsag, Ottawa. Staff work regularly with Elders where they integrate Indigenous language, traditional teachings, cultural knowledge of the importance of the seasons and totems, and early childhood reading skills with First Nation resources. Parents become engaged and support their child through the school readiness program. The parents themselves learn about their own identity and culture and support their child in readiness for school. The learning of the child is facilitated through building a spiritual connection to balance academic and cultural growth. Parents support the child in the school and through support programs within the home/band. This is also evident in Nova Scotia; however, currently the province is undergoing a realignment process in their educational departments.

Both on- and off-reserve, the program operates primarily in English, although some children are exposed to one or more Indigenous languages. I observed this at Amiskwaciy Academy, Edmonton, Alberta (AHS +Yrs 9 -12 - High School) where culture is embedded in the daily drumming sessions for high schools and AHS students; the ‘Tepee’ built and erected within the school building; the ‘Pow Wow’; and the ceremonies and cultural connections ingrained within the school and its community. The smoking ceremony - ‘smudging’- is a daily routine of cleansing which heralds the beginning of learning for each site. All sites, both on- and off-reserve, see smudging as part of the day’s daily curriculum activity. Students, teachers, parents and Elders participate in smudging, the burning of sweet grass and sage to cleanse the child .I observed after the ceremony the children moved into their learning environment calm and ready for learning.

The school sites and Early Learning Centres that I visited across Canada visually acknowledge culture in all areas of the school, for example in Amiskwaciy Academy, the Elder (a spiritual woman/ man) oversees AHS program and assists the AHS class teacher to plan the classroom lessons and cultural experiences. Each provincial government funds the Elders to work within their urban school setting. In reservation schools the ‘bands’ support the AHS program and the funding is provided by Health Canada.

Across Canada the knowledge of the Elder that sits within the school and community, is a vital link to build and develop the future of the traditional culture and languages. The program has strong evidence that ensures that implementation of AHS has worth and this is demonstrated in the Early Childhood Development Initiative. The ECDI is implemented differently to its Australian counterpart in that reports are monthly and quarterly.

The AHS program demonstrated to me that the key strategies of embedding culture created engagement, built capacity among students and teachers, and made connections and partnerships with parents, children and extended families. The use of culture empowers First Nation people to become involved in the program strengthening knowledge within the school environment.

Many AHS are community hubs, integrating additional methods into their own programs, streamlining children’s access to specialists (including speech language pathologists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists and dental hygienists). This program also has the potential to reduce the high rates of removal of Aboriginal children from their families and communities to government care. Over the years there has been a marked decline in the numbers of children being thus referred.

In Toronto, Montreal and Quebec the AHS program sat within neighbourhood settings such as the Toronto Native Women’s Resource Centre and Minwaashin Lodge – Women’s Resource Centre, Ottawa these centres enable a holistic and cultural learning experience for students and their families to engage with. The Elders of each community work within these settings supporting education and the cultural learning.

In Toronto, the Native Women’s Resource Centre was an extraordinary setting, located in a very large terraced house in a low socio economic area of Toronto. It not only housed a child care early learning AHS program but also incorporated other hubs to support native women within the building. There were clothing and food banks, a laundromat, therapy and wellbeing centre, counselling service, women’s health centre, neighbourhood kitchen, a women’s literacy and numeracy learning centre and a state of the art technology, video and graphic production area. This centre was well resourced and operated not-for-profit. However the AHS was still run by Canada Health with Elders assisting with the learning program for the children and community. This was a truly amazing and well-resourced centre that catered for the needs of all women and their families. The Provincial governments in these areas observed there was a greater need to place the AHS program in these settings as they felt there was a strong connection between early Indigenous learning and improving women’s wellbeing by giving them a sense of identity and pride.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the key strategies for engagement are based around culture. The strategies that I observed being implemented in AHS locations embedded the native culture within the learning. These elements throughout the AHS programs were appreciated by the Aboriginal community and are central to creating a sense of belonging for students and their parents. AHS students appeared to be better prepared to enter the regular school system after participation in the program and the inclusion of parental involvement of was also beneficial. The locations of the various AHS school and community settings for First Nation people both urban and on reservation were located low socio economic areas; despite this hurdle the engagement and progression of students were at or above their peers’ when entering school. It was evident from my research that AHS programs across Canada provided safe, supervised and stimulating environments for young children. The implementation of nutrition supplementation; cognitive stimulation; socialisation with Aboriginal peers, exposure to adult role models and Elders and exposure to the Indigenous language and spirituality are important and have made an impact for the children, families and communities.

This research study has provided me with a starting point to implement a strategy that will focus on a Cultural Wellbeing Program with five key principles of: Partnership, Personal knowledge, Protocols, Process and elements to drive and create respectful engagement that supports and protects the many paths of a child’s learning. With this approach I hope that families and communities will value a child’s learning and future. I see this strategy as embedded into DEC Preschool curriculum, possibly in other Early Learning Centres around NSW.

I would like to acknowledge and thank the University of Wollongong for its sponsorship and the opportunity; the NSW government and the support from the Department of Education and Communities.

Post Scholarship

Since completing my Premier’s scholarship study, I have presented at DEC Principals professional learning conferences in the Hunter, Maitland network of Principals. I have been invited to present a workshop at the 2014 Hunter Central Coast Network Principals conference and I have been invited to attend the WIPCE (World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education, 2014 in Honolulu.

My trip to Canada has inspired me to begin discussions with the Early Years Learning Team of the DEC to build strategies that embed culture into DEC Pre School programs.

Presentations at National, State and Regional Educational conferences and, more importantly, the developing and sharing of innovative programs to various educational colleagues, their schools and their communities have generated from my study tour.

Acknowledgement

I am a Wiradjuri woman and am recognised as such by my family, countrymen and colleagues. My cultural background has enabled me to have a deeper understanding, knowledge and insight into the department’s Aboriginal education and training policies and to ensure quality outcomes are delivered for Aboriginal people.

I would also like to acknowledge the opportunity that the scholarship has given me to enhance my contribution to Early Learning in various settings, the connections of networks across a global aspect and to further enhance strategies of cultural aspects within students, parents and the community.

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