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Know Your Students and Where They Come From

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Acknowledgements: Written by Mathew Burt, Principal, Broome Senior High School and Stephanie Armstrong, Head of Learning Area /Co-ordinator, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education, both at Broome Senior High School in the Kimberley Region WA, as told to Richard Lobb.

Editor's note: This Rural Connections article presents perspectives from two school leaders at a senior secondary school located in Broome, in Australia's far north-west. We recognise the contentious nature of residential schooling in many countries (particularly Canada and the United States). In Australia there is a greater acceptance that residential or boarding schools do create opportunities that are sought after by many Aboriginal parents, including those in remote regions of Western Australia where students described here, come from. Broome is a regional centre for the region known as the West Kimberley, and is located about 2300km by road from Western Australia's capital city, Perth.

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The entire Broome Senior High School community has worked over many years to ensure students are afforded a holistic, high-quality education which addresses and strengthens their individual academic and wellbeing needs. In particular, Broome Senior High School's strong approach to supporting its more than 300 Aboriginal students, who come to the school from all parts of the Kimberley and from across Australia, is one example of how to cater for the individual needs of a unique cohort of students.

Broome Senior High School developed out of a Kindergarten to Year 10 district high school established in 1972. The school was divided into its primary and secondary components in 1990 and Broome High School was created. Then, in January 1994, the school was upgraded to senior high school status (Years 8-12), with 200 students. Since then, Broome Senior High School has grown to currently having over 800 students enrolled across Years 7-12. Broome Senior High School is recognised for its academic, vocational, sporting, dance and staff achievements. In 2012, the school was awarded as Western Australia's Secondary School of the Year and the school's academic results over the past five years have been strong, with ATAR achievements comparable with good schools in Perth (<https://broomeshs.wa.edu.au/our-school/our-success/>).

This success has been achieved through a focus on student outcomes. The school offers a full range of academic subjects for students in all years, along with several programs aimed to develop and/or engage the academic, social, creative, leadership and sporting talents of its students. This includes the establishment of an academic extension program for students entering high school from primary school. The school has a retention rate—from local primary schools to Year 12 completion—of 86 per cent.

In 2018, Mathew Burt was appointed as Principal, having spent much of his career in the city with a brief stint in the country. Matt was selected due to his track record with upper school curriculum and student services. By his own admission, Matt “*came to Broome with very little, or next to no understanding of Aboriginal education and the Kimberley*”. On taking up his appointment, Matt immediately focussed on better understanding Aboriginal education and the culture and students he was serving. Initially, Matt attended the Stronger Smarter Leadership Program (<https://strongersmarter.com.au/>) with several colleagues from Broome, including a close Aboriginal friend. Matt recalls the strong sense of camaraderie and the depth of relationship he felt with the group, along with being challenged to the point where he questioned his way of thinking.

Broome Senior High School has a co-located Residential College with 60 student residents from across the Kimberley. These students come from many different communities and language groups. To ensure the school could better cater for their needs, Matt, shortly after starting at the school, undertook a week-long tour across the Kimberley to gain a better understanding of the communities which students belong to and to capitalise on their strengths. Starting his road trip in the East Kimberley, Matt visited two or three communities each day, with many of the communities he visited being in very remote areas. A key takeaway from this experience was his realisation of “*how much he didn’t know and how much he had to learn... and that this journey had only just commenced*”.

One of the main purposes of the Broome Residential College is to provide students a quality secondary education in Broome and mitigate the impact of their having to leave their Country to attend boarding schools in Melbourne, Sydney, or Perth.¹ Matt acknowledges the journey for some students is still challenging, because as they move away, they are disconnected from their culture, and don’t have the opportunity to be with family as often. However, from Broome, many are still able to travel home on the weekend. Matt and the College also recognise the importance of ensuring that students are provided with regular opportunities to be with family:

It’s about being sensitive to culture and to our perceptual positioning as well; thinking about what’s going on for the student, and how they’re feeling and what their beliefs are, and not just being a school and saying, ‘these are the rules, this is what we believe, this is what we have in place and we follow’.

Celebrating the successes of all students is also important. Many of the students come to the school with very low levels of English literacy and some have a history of relatively low levels of attendance. To assist students the school has several partnerships with external providers which afford Aboriginal students access to a range of additional support programs.

Female students are supported through the Role Models Girl’s Academy (<https://www.girlsacademy.com.au/>). The school’s Academy incorporates targeted literacy and numeracy classes for girls that are school-funded and developed, while many of the boys receive academic and wellbeing support through the Clontarf Academy (<https://clontarf.org.au/>). The school’s Clontarf Academy includes two school-funded targeted classes. Additionally, more than 100 Aboriginal students are involved in the Follow the Dream program in partnership with the Polly Farmer Foundation (<https://pff.com.au/>) and the school has other structures and supports in place, including numerous Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEOs), a cultural centre, an Indigenous rangers program, and a themed behaviour unit.

Matt entertained the idea of amalgamating these programs, uniting them under a single budget. However, after participating in the Stronger Smarter program and visiting numerous communities he realised the individual programs catered for the different needs of his students.

¹ Editor’s note: The term “Country” is often used by Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people to describe family origins and associations with particular parts of Australia.

In particular, the support offered through these programs provides a smoother transition for students coming in from a primary school to a high school setting. The current arrangement also allows many of the students to have a say in which classroom they are allocated. Students can ‘transition’ into the pathways they want to follow later in senior school. Consequently, instead of combining programs, the school took steps to strengthen the connections between them by creating and appointing an Aboriginal Education Coordinator into a senior leadership role. The school also felt it was essential for the successful applicant to be an Aboriginal person; a person to manage the programs and ensure everyone is heading in the same direction, with an Indigenous voice – a voice, according to Matt, “*that will sit on our leadership team, be the one that’s guiding our programs and they can feel that they’re achieving*”. This has resulted in the school building even stronger links with its community.

The school appointed Stephanie Armstrong in April 2019. Stephanie has a background of over 40 years of experience in Aboriginal education and she is a proud Gamilaraay woman from New South Wales. Married with two daughters and a beloved granddaughter, Stephanie has dedicated her life to improving education for First Australian children. Stephanie has taught in a number of schools and also worked as a curriculum consultant in the Kimberley for five years in the mid-2000s. Stephanie’s co-leadership of the Weenthunga Health Network saw her being awarded for her commitment to Indigenous health at the national Indigenous Allied Health Australia awards in 2018. Stephanie also ensures staff are supported to implement the Aboriginal Cultural Standards Framework; currently being implemented in all Western Australian public schools to assist them to better support all students.

(http://www.weenthunga.com.au/news/view_article.cfm?loadref=6&id=1138 | <http://det.wa.edu.au/aboriginaleducation/detcms/navigation/aboriginal-education/>)

Stephanie was delighted to have been given the opportunity to work alongside and provide leadership to the Broome Senior High School AEIO team. She plays a key leadership role across all facets of the school and the broader education community and works regularly with Senior staff, individual teachers, heads of learning areas and the community. In her own words, the role “*relies on having the courage to speak up and to provide new knowledge and understanding*”. Stephanie understands that the creation of this key leadership position has provided the opportunity to celebrate the hard work being done and to encourage much needed change to improve the lives of Aboriginal children who attend the school. The Aboriginal Education team works with other staff members to provide individual well-being and curriculum programs. Both Stephanie and Matt acknowledge there is still a way to go, and despite all that the programs have to offer there remains a need to bring a stronger focus on culture and the understanding that Aboriginal people bring their own unique ways to learn, and that the key to this change is through Aboriginal voice.

Stephanie is currently working to create an Aboriginal Cultural Leadership Program as a core element to respond to the many diverse languages and cultures of the school’s Aboriginal community. Stephanie’s team is also working with other staff to co-design new curriculum across the science and English learning areas, and they aim to extend this across other areas over time. Underpinning this work is a strong belief in the 4 R’s: relationship, respect, responsibility and reciprocity. Stephanie and the team look forward to the new focus on culture and are currently working on upgrading the cultural meeting space at the entrance of the school which will present a visible, safe and responsive element to the work the school is undertaking.

In July 2019, Matt was selected in a group of 16 superintendents and principals from all over the world as a TED-Ed Innovative Educator. Matt undertook training and delivered a TED presentation on his experiences in the Kimberley. This work is being developed for publication and is expect to be online in the near future. Matt is looking forward to being able to share this key piece of work as it is a “*story worth sharing*”.