

The Ngali Dhiirrali Project*

* Ngali Dhiirrali means "The two of us will learn/will teach" in the Gamillaroi language

DEVELOPING POTENTIAL IN ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

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INTRODUCTION

In north-west New South Wales the Catholic Diocese of Armidale has introduced during 1998 a program (funded by DEETYA) in which the 'Can Do' approach has been taken to Aboriginal talent development. Deficit thinking approaches have dominated Aboriginal education in the past, whereas this program, which involves identifying Aboriginal students who exhibit talent and/or potential talent in a wide range of fields, is focusing upon what the Aboriginal students can do, not what they cannot.

THE DEFICIT THINKING PARADIGM

As Valencia (1997, p.x) explains, "the deficit thinking paradigm, as a whole, posits that students who fail in school do so because of alleged internal deficiencies (such as cognitive and/or motivational limitations) or shortcomings socially linked to the youngster - such as familial deficits and dysfunctions". Valencia's view of deficit thinking is that it is "tantamount to 'blaming the victim'" (p.x). It is easy to slip into this frame of mind, especially if factors such as institutionalised discrimination (Eckermann, 1982; Valencia, 1997) are ignored. Far too many Aboriginal youngsters of great potential are underachieving. Adopting the deficit thinking model will not help those youngsters who are virtually on the springboard to realising their potential. Finding out what talents and potentials young Aboriginal people possess and then taking those strengths and developing them in an environment that is mutually respectful and positive is the essence of the 'Can Do' model.

GIFTEDNESS VS TALENTS, A PIPELINE IN NEED OF CLEARING!

The view that Gagne (1991) has developed regarding gifts and talents is most useful

when considering the dilemma of under achievement. Gagne contends that we are all born with a set of basic abilities and some with specific gifts. These gifts will only develop into specific talents if the appropriate catalysts are present. Gagne labelled as key factors: the family and school environment, intrapersonal factors, motivation, interests and attitudes and identification models.

Braggett (1998) simplified this model somewhat, labelling the catalyst factors as the internal environment and the external environment. Both descriptions, though, provide an excellent way of viewing the development of observed talents or performance from inherited gifts (abilities and aptitudes).

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We would contend that the catalyst component of the process of talent development can be viewed as the limiting factor for many Aboriginal students, for whom this pipeline that leads to observed talent is too often blocked. The 'Can Do' approach to the education of gifted Aboriginal children has been designed to help provide the internal and external catalysts necessary to unblock the talent pipeline.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

While the programs that will be described below are certainly gifted and talented in concept, the terms 'gifted and talented' have been replaced in all program descriptions with the term 'talent development', for the following reasons.

- The egalitarian nature of Aboriginal culture (Eckermann, personal communication, June 1998) has been counted as one of the factors that cause the more able Aboriginal students to 'hide' rather than show out. It is part of the term 'shaming' that is often used by Aboriginal children to describe their shyness and reluctance to show out in a group. The term 'talent development' does not so obviously single out identified students as being especially different.
- Many of the identified children could be termed underachievers. To use the terms gifted and talented with these children would be a mistake, as it could lead not only to internal pressures (as in above point) but also to external pressures from program observers, who may be making judgements from a limited knowledge base.
- Using the terms gifted and talented in these programs is only asking to become targets for detractors who may be well schooled in the deficit model. Other detractors may well come from the group who oppose gifted and talented programs generally (Davis and Rimm, 1994).

THE PROGRAM: THE NGALI DHIIRALI PROJECT

The Armidale Diocesan talent development program for Indigenous students

The Armidale Catholic Schools Office program was initiated and is headed by Di Brown (Special Needs Adviser), with Sharon Cooke (Aboriginal Education Officer) as joint project coordinators.

The program is designed to provide potentially talented Indigenous students with strong in-school support and enrichment activities via in-school mentors who are teachers and / or Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEA's), many participating schools having both. Further, a variety of enrichment activities such as camps, a mentoring program involving Aboriginal mentors and excursions are built into the program. The whole program is accented with a strong cultural input.

The key aspects of this program are as follows:

- All schools were asked to identify in-school mentors from staff members. These people needed to display a genuine interest in Aboriginal education. These teachers were given a half day release per week, to work with Aboriginal students who were identified as having potential and/or observable talents.

- Aboriginal Education Assistants are heavily involved in all aspects of the program, playing an important role in the in-school mentoring system.
- Staff and AEA's have been exposed to six days of staff development activities, over a period of six months.
- Aboriginal students in Years 5 to 10 have been identified as having potential and/or observable talents. Gardner's (1983) Multiple Intelligences Model was used as a basis. Identification methods used included those developed by Harslett (1996) and Gibson (1997). These tools, which focused on culturally appropriate criteria, were supported by teacher nomination and the Raven's Progressive Matrices test.
- Two major camps were held. The first involved a 4 day excursion to Walgett where students experienced a wide range of enrichment activities in an environment that was strongly positive. The second 'camp' was, in fact, not a camp at all but a 4 day trip to Sydney where the students visited a range of successful Aboriginal people at their places of work and study.
- A virtual mentoring program is currently being set up (it is scheduled to run in the second half of 1999). It will involve bringing the program participants in contact with Aboriginal mentors who are good role models in every sense of the word. The medium of contact, email, will have the students working on the cutting edge of technology. The teachers will play a pivotal role in the mentoring program by supporting and monitoring the email interchanges.
- Cultural awareness was central to all aspects of the program. Day (1992) looked at successful Indigenous senior high school students in the Northern Territory and determined that one of the features of these students was their awareness and appreciation of their cultural heritage: "they identify very strongly as Aboriginal people, and are proud of their history, culture and heritage" (p.17).

With this in mind it was deemed important that a cultural base be a major part of the programs. It is especially true in the Armidale and Tamworth districts where cultural knowledge and understanding in many of the Aboriginal people is minimal.

How is the program progressing?

As of March 1999 the program is well under way, with all target areas progressing well.

- Identification has been completed, with 30 students accepted into the program.
- The six staff development days have been completed.
- School based enrichment work has been implemented with the assistance of the in-school mentors and AEA's.
- A four-day, culturally based camp has been held at Walgett in north-west New South Wales. A detailed look at this camp and its outcomes will follow.
- The Sydney excursion has been successfully completed. This trip, organised and run by Sharon Cooke and the project AEA's, was highly successful. A detailed discussion of this trip will follow.
- A pool of resources has been produced by participating teachers. These will be published and used in Aboriginal education programs across the state.

The Walgett talent development camp for Indigenous students, May 1998.

This camp was a key part of the total program for several reasons:

- It is a meeting place for all program participants. To work with Aboriginal students of similar ability, in a totally supportive environment, is a new and necessary experience for the students and the staff.
- It produced a focus for the program, bringing all participants together and generating a group feeling.
- A strong cultural input was provided in one of the significant centres of Aboriginal culture in New South Wales. The camp had a constant, but unobtrusive, cultural central theme. Local Aboriginal elders, Auntie Fay and Uncle Ted, spent a day at the camp. They told stories related to the history of the area and the Dreaming. Brother John Giacon, who has an extensive knowledge of the local language, enlightened the children with word and song. A bus tour of the local area gave all a very good insight into the local cultural sites and history.
- Activities that were specific to the identified potential talents of the participants were provided.

The ethos of the camp was built on the four foundations of respect, cultural appreciation, learning and fun. Mutual respect was pivotal in the ultimate success of the camp program. To aid in this process the students and staff co-operatively produced a camp code of conduct.

The camp structure

The camp was designed keeping in mind the specific characteristics and needs of the children.

Family groups were set up, comprising seven students, a teacher and an AEA. The family groups were arranged so that each group contained students from Year 10 to Year 5 (ages 16 to 10). Where possible, school groups were broken up so that a total new group identity could emerge. The teacher and AEA were responsible for the general well being and control of their family group over the three days. In some activities the family group participated as a unit, eg the art and Olympic games.

The family group concept has been widely accepted as being culturally appropriate (Rudnitski, Personal communication June, 1998; Eckermann, Personal communication, May, 1998; Aboriginal camp staff members).

This vertical age grouping was complemented with horizontal age groupings for several of the activities eg. computing and email usage. This allowed appropriate work standards to be used in these activities.

An Olympic Games (camp style) was used as a fun activity as well as an outlet for those students identified as having sporting talents. A series of team and individual games, such as Aboriginal football and spear throwing, were held. The family group concept was used here with great success.

Computers provided the backbone of many of the camp enrichment activities. A newspaper was produced ('The Tribal Times'), the internet and email were accessed and other fun and writing activities undertaken.

Camp outcomes

The 'Can Do' approach taken in this project was very much in evidence during this camp. The camp produced almost total success in this regard. The children 'had a go', and were overwhelmingly successful in these attempts, at all challenges presented during the course of the camp.

The student evaluations of the camp were very positive. To the key question "Overall, I found the camp...", 8 responded with excellent, 17 very good, 5 good and 0 poor. The students indicated that the cultural theme, new friends, improved confidence, art, computers and the Olympics were the most rewarding and enjoyable aspects of the program.

The senior staff all agreed that the program was highly successful, citing the following events as being significant indicators of that success:

- 30 students were nominated for the program. All arrived in Walgett, as did all teachers and AEA's. Some travelled for five hours on a bus. This is very significant when one considers the very low participation rate of Aboriginal students in general gifted and talented programs in the past (Bailey, Personal communication, June, 1998). Clearly, the Aboriginal community as a whole have supported the children's participation in the program.
- Behaviour was not a problem. During the three days only two students were spoken to about questionable behaviour and these were very minor problems. The venue owners were so impressed that they presented every student with a souvenir spoon, commenting that they were the best behaved school group in years.
- Participation in all parts of the program was total. There were no problems with 'shaming' or shyness.
- The student evaluation indicated a very strong positive response to the camp.
- The 'respect' expectation of the camp was fully adhered to. The expectation that mutual respect was to be a corner stone of the camp was established at the very beginning. This fits in very well with the 'Can Do' approach to the program. Lack of respect was just not expected and it did not occur.
- There are some early indications that at least some of the students have carried their increased confidence back to school. For example, one secondary school youngster was asked to read at Mass. In the past he and his Koori friends had consistently refused the invitation but on this occasion, just after returning from Walgett, he did accept and did a very good job, surprising many staff members.

The trip to Sydney, November 1998. Looking at successful role models.

Self belief is a key issue in the development of an individual. Aboriginal children need positive role models and further, they need to see these role models as 'normal', that is in an environment where it is totally normal to see many successful Aboriginal people going about their lives.

The Sydney excursion was designed to bring the Ngali Dhiirrali children into contact with a string of successful Aboriginal people across a wide range of vocations. They included:

- The NAISDA dancers
- James Wilson-Miller at the Powerhouse Museum.
- Students and lecturers at Macquarie University.
- Student dancers at La Perouse primary school.
- Tour manager at the Homebush Olympic site.
- Students at Sydney University.
- Australian Catholic University.

The event proved to be an outstanding success, with excursion organiser, Sharon Cooke delighted at the response of the attending AEA's and students.

OUTCOMES

- The student response was outstanding. Behaviour was faultless, this alone drawing constant praise from members of the public and venue managers. This behaviour could well be attributed to a combination of excellent organisation and the respect ethos established early on as a mainstay of the project.
- The role modelling is hoped to have long term impacts on the children. The simple fact of seeing a constant stream of competent, confident Aboriginal people who were either working in highly satisfying jobs or studying at the highest level must impact positively on these children. Some of the older children appeared to have had immediate attitude changes. One year 10 boy commented that he had changed his mind about leaving school at the end of year 10 and intended to complete the HSC and become a teacher. This followed a session at the Australian Catholic University where he heard a talk by several lecturers and Aboriginal students who were studying there. The possibility of succeeding at this level became real for him at that moment.
- The trip was a lot of fun for all involved. The fact that the role modelling experience was also a lot of fun would surely reinforce the impact of the role modelling. The fun aspect of the excursion was supported by a trip to Bondi beach where the children were given instruction by the Surf Life Saving Club and had a swim as well as an evening trip to the Manly pier.

VIRTUAL MENTORING

The use of email as a means of communicating with Aboriginal mentors was pioneered in the north west of NSW in the Anaiwan project (provided by the Department of Education and Training) and of which Graham Chaffey was project co-ordinator. This medium provides the advantages of direct access to mentors, message storage and using cutting edge technology. Further, the Anaiwan experience showed that Aboriginal students were extremely adept at using the technology and were highly motivated by its use.

As of April 1999, mentoring project co-ordinator Sharon Cooke, has all pre-planning and preparation well under way. Graham Chaffey is acting as a consultant to the project. An outline of the planned program is presented below.

- An Aboriginal mentor who fills the requirements of being an excellent role model and has access to email will be linked to one of the project students. This linkage will be based on mutual interests and abilities.
- Mentoring by email will begin in term 3 and continue until mid November.
- A staff development day will be held in term 2 to bring supporting teachers and AEA's up to speed with the program requirements and techniques.
- A coming together of mentors and mentees is planned for Tamworth in November. The two day event will consist of a series of workshops utilising mentor skills and face to face meetings between the mentors and their mentees.

CONCLUSION

The 'Can Do' approach, taken in the Ngali Dhiirrali Project, may be a means of addressing the chronic under achievement of young Aboriginal students in our schools. This model is powerfully positive and is in direct contrast to deficit thinking models. Young Aboriginal students who possess potential will be encouraged and given direction. The Ngali Dhiirrali Project provides the hope of helping many of these students turn their potential into talent.

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