

BOOK REVIEWS

Australian Indigenous Education Foundation Compendium of Best Practice for Achieving Successful Outcomes with Indigenous Students in Australian Boarding Schools

Australian Indigenous Education Foundation, Surry Hills, New South Wales, 2015, ISBN 9780646932743

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The Australian Indigenous Education Foundation (AIEF) was established in 2007 to provide scholarship support to Indigenous students at some of Australia's leading independent boarding schools. The AIEF currently funds 469 scholarship students from 230 communities across Australia (Rushton, 2015) and enjoys a very high level of political, corporate and philanthropic support. The *AIEF Compendium of best practice for achieving successful outcomes with Indigenous students in Australian boarding schools* was released in May 2015 with significant media coverage. It is a document which sets out to articulate what has worked best in the education of Indigenous students in the AIEF's 50 or so partner schools.

The AIEF Profile

Any person tasked with reviewing the Compendium does so in the knowledge that it has the imprimatur of Australian Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, the 'Prime Minister for Indigenous Affairs.' This may not seem to be problematic, however the Compendium also enjoys the wholehearted support of a number of Australia's most prominent and influential Indigenous leaders. Marcia Langton is unequivocal in her support: 'This compendium is an essential and powerful tool for all of us engaged in reaching parity in Indigenous education outcomes' (Compendium, back cover). Noel Pearson is similarly supportive, stating that 'boarding school programs like AIEF are a crucial part of the education solution for our people' (Pearson, 2014). The introduction to the Compendium is co-signed by Andrew Penfold AM, Executive Director of the AIEF and Warren Mundine who chairs the AIEF and who also chairs the Prime Minister's National Indigenous Advisory Council, while the list of AIEF patrons, directors and ambassadors reveals a veritable who's who of Australia's corporate and business elite. Coupled with strong and regular support in the national daily newspaper, *The Australian*,

it is clear that the AIEF and the Compendium enjoy an exceptionally high level of support.

Indigenous Students and Boarding Schools

Boarding schools have long been a feature of the Indigenous education landscape throughout regional and remote Australia. Noel Pearson, one of the strongest advocates of education at 'quality' boarding schools is a product of an AIEF partner school and a fierce critic of the perceived poor quality of the secondary education offered to many Indigenous students in their home communities (Pearson, 2011). Indeed, in many of Australia's remote communities secondary education provision is limited or nonexistent. Communities such as Coen and Pormpuraaw in Cape York and the outer island communities of the Torres Strait are places where education finishes at the end of primary school. Children must transition to boarding school in order to participate in secondary education. The 2014 Review of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory (Wilson, 2014) recommended the winding back of remote secondary education and the move of students into a range of boarding schools and facilities both in the Territory and interstate. In remote Indigenous communities in Western Australia and South Australia, the transition to boarding is the only option which permits access to comprehensive secondary education. It is in this context of a focus on the desire of government to promote boarding as the preferred option for Indigenous students that the Compendium takes on a heightened degree of importance.

In and Out of Scope

The key to any objective review of the Compendium and the contribution it makes to the body of knowledge around Indigenous education in Australia is an assessment of its scope and it is here that those who have put the

Compendium together have been quite precise in articulating where the notion of best practice can be applied.

Given the obvious complexities of the Indigenous education space, especially when it comes to the transition to boarding school, it is clear that the Compendium is very limited in its scope. Early on the Compendium states quite clearly that it is 'not a formal academic research paper, it does not present first-hand the views of Indigenous students and their parents and it is not relevant to Indigenous only schools and boarding programs, particularly those operating in remote Australia'. The relevant schools are independent, have day and boarding students, are metropolitan and have a majority non-Indigenous cohort. In short they are, almost without exception, Australia's elite independent schools.

The students selected for participation in AIEF programs and who are the subject of the Compendium's best practice must have their Indigenous heritage verified (one would assume that this is not a problem with students from remote communities) and be identified as students most likely to succeed. According to the Compendium, those most likely to succeed will have a strong level of parental support, exhibit a high degree of enthusiasm and aspiration, have a history of good behaviour and be actively engaged in a number of extra-curricular activities, one of which they will excel in. Rather tellingly, the Compendium also speaks to a positive, subjective and intuitive response to the application on the part of school staff responsible for Indigenous student enrolment.

In terms of how success is defined, the Compendium is precise and unambiguous. 'For the purpose of this Compendium and its research, a successful student outcome is defined as: Year 12 completion and transition to a sustainable career.' Year 12 completion is the holy grail of Indigenous education. The AIEF claims a Year 12 completion rate of 93%, a figure which perhaps explains the unquestioning support of the AIEF in corporate and political circles while those charged with the education of children who are not eligible for inclusion in AIEF programs are a little more circumspect.

It is on the issue of a very limited scope that any review of the Compendium must be based. Further to this, the failure to include any reference to the experience of boarding school for any students and their families is perplexing given the stated 93% success rate of students who participate in AIEF programs. The Compendium points squarely to engagement with families as a key to best practice and while the voices of an array of anonymous headmasters, boarding staff, program staff and support staff are highlighted, no attempt is made to give Indigenous students, parents or other family members an opportunity to speak about how their experience of secondary education has been shaped by best practice. It would be logical to assume that the views of school staff would be complemented and supported by the very positive experiences of students and family members but this is not the case.

Practice, Best Practice and Good Practice

Working within this very limited scope; around 50 independent schools with Indigenous enrolments that represent around three per cent of the total school population (St John's College and Kormilda College in Darwin are obvious exceptions to this) and a cohort of around 500 Indigenous students from urban, regional and remote Australia, the Compendium presents a range of practices that appear to have worked well to support Indigenous students in structured and well-resourced settings.

At the early phase of implementing programs specific to the needs of Indigenous students, school factors around leadership, especially at the level of the Principal, the appropriate in-servicing and professional development of all staff, the development of appropriate relationships with Indigenous communities and the provision of appropriate resources are all highlighted as essential precursors to the implementation of strong and sustainable programs. At the establishment phase, this degree of planning is both common sense and good practice.

The Compendium speaks of the need for very thorough attention being paid to the practicalities of program implementation. For those new to the education of Indigenous students in the context of a boarding school there is useful practical information around the induction and orientation of students, the building of relationships with families, other students and the wider school community, the need to establish and maintain a welcoming, informed and supportive environment and the need to provide appropriate learning support. Indeed, in the area of implementation, the Compendium provides solid and proven strategies which will work to support the Indigenous students who make it through the selection process.

In the same way, the challenges that come with working with Indigenous students in boarding school environments are generally dealt with in a common sense and relatively frank manner. Distinctions are drawn between challenges that occur within the school environment and those which have their origins in students' home communities although in practice, the line between the two can often be both blurred and confused. It is here, that what is articulated as best practice often becomes quite simplistic and reflective of the fact that rigorous screening is intended to prevent the manifestation of complex and difficult behaviours which are not ameliorated through template solutions. For example, homesickness can manifest itself as poor behaviour. It is not uncommon for homesick students to misbehave in order that stressed out school staff will pull the suspension or exclusion trigger and send students home.

Conclusion

A casual observer of stories relevant to Indigenous education in our national daily, *The Australian* newspaper, might form the view that the boarding scholarship

program supported by the AIEF is the only successful pathway for Indigenous students attending secondary schools away from their home communities. The most obvious comment to be made about this Compendium is that the best practice it espouses is relevant to only a small fraction of the Indigenous secondary school aged population who must transition to boarding school if they are to successfully participate in secondary education.

The Compendium recommends very strongly that those responsible for enrolling Indigenous students do so with the very clear aim of minimizing risk. Only those students with a very high probability of success and who come from families already possessed of significant social capital are to be considered for scholarship resources. In fairness to the AIEF and to those who have compiled the Compendium it is made quite clear that there will be no positive discrimination in favour of those students most in need of the resources that the scholarship program can provide. Indeed, those most in need of the government, corporate and philanthropic resources made available to the AIEF will be those most obviously denied access. They will take their chances in the schools where what is identified as 'best practice' is not relevant and where resources are scarcest.

In their introduction to the Compendium, Andrew Penfold and Warren Mundine praise the work of the AIEF staff who worked to put the Compendium together. 'This Compendium is their gift to the nation,' they write.

Unfortunately it is a gift that will most likely be denied to those who need it most and made available to those who need it least. The Compendium provides guidance specific to particular well-resourced educational contexts and for those new to the field of Indigenous education it may provide useful and practical guidance. For those individuals and learning communities outside the scope of the Compendium the value of the best practice it espouses is at best of limited value.

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Indigenous Kids and Schooling in the Northern Territory: An Introductory Overview and Brief History of Aboriginal Education in the Northern Territory

Penny Lee, Lyn Fasoli, Lysbeth Ford, Peter Stephenson and Dennis McInerney *Batchelor Press, Northern Territory, 2014, 236pp, ISBN 9781741312881*

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Drawing upon national and international research, this book is the culmination of a research project entitled 'Building the Future for Indigenous students: The relationship of future vision, learning, and motivational profiles to school success' conducted through the Batchelor Institute. It provides an overview and brief history of Indigenous education in the Northern Territory and takes as its focus the inequity prevailing in schooling in remote Indigenous communities by contrast with elsewhere in Australia where specialist language programmes are designed to meet the particular needs of English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) learners. The authors bring to this work a wide range of experi-

ence in Indigenous education that includes bilingual education in remote Aboriginal schools, 'two way' — now 'both ways' — philosophy, linguistics, environmental health and developmental psychology. They call for greater recognition of the particularity of the Northern Territory context and greater efforts to accommodate it within mainstream schooling. For example in response to the region's unique population dynamics and language diversity where Standard Australian English (SAuE) may be a student's second, third or even fourth language, within the overall context of a political climate and funding uncertainty that threatens what few specialist services remain.