A Will and A Way—saving millions and lives

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Introduction

The most powerful remedy for poverty and marginalisation of any human population is education. In third world development projects women and children are educated as the frontline offensive against poverty and vulnerability the world over. First world societies, by comparison are in the much sought after position of having high levels of education, which result in high employment and the resultant effect of an expendable income capable of supporting a welfare system and increased personal leisure time which leads to social stability and optimal conditions for good population health.

An action research project is applying the principal of improving secondary educational outcomes for Indigenous and marginalised rural secondary school students, as a way of boosting community employment and economic participation, which ultimately leads to improved individual and community health.

The studies

A research project funded by the NSW Office of Women was conducted in regional NSW in the latter half of 2004. This project aimed to assist secondary school teachers at a large public secondary college to engage with their Indigenous students to provide them with the skill, knowledge and means to gain better educational outcomes. The study was instigated on the basis that proportionately few Indigenous Year 12 leavers were taking up university studies upon leaving school, resulting in an exclusively mature aged population of local Indigenous tertiary students.[1] This research established the grounds for a more comprehensive study conducted in 2005 and 2006, funded by The Rowan Nicks Russell Drysdale Fellowship in Indigenous health and welfare. This study explored the myriad reasons why students who indicate a Will to participate in the workforce are unsuccessful in finding the Way, in some cases, despite every indication they are able to make the transition.

Project methodology

The research was designed as a hybrid micro-ethnography and participatory action research. Micro-ethnography is the study of narrowly-defined cultural groupings[2] and this study concentrated on the sociology of meaning through close field observation of socio-cultural phenomena occurring amongst the senior school students of a school. Typically, the ethnographer focused on their school community, selecting informants who were known to be participants in a broad range of activities in the community. Such informants lead to identification of other informants representative of the community, using chain sampling to obtain a saturation of informants in all empirical areas of investigation. Informants were interviewed multiple times, using information from previous informants to elicit clarification and deeper responses upon re-interview. This process intended to reveal common cultural understandings related to the phenomena under study. These subjective but collective understandings on a subject are often interpreted to be more significant than objective data.[3] It should be noted that ethnography may be approached as a descriptive rather than analytic endeavour.

Participatory action research has emerged in recent years as a significant methodology for intervention, development and change within communities and groups. Participatory action research (PAR) is research which involves all relevant parties in actively examining together current action (which they experience as problematic) in order to change and improve it.[4] They do this by critically reflecting on the historical, political, cultural, economic, geographic and other contexts, which make sense of it. Participatory action research is action that is researched, changed and re-researched, within the research process by the researcher and the participants. It aims to be active co-research, by and for

those to be helped and tries to be a genuinely democratic or non-coercive process whereby those to be helped, determine the purposes and outcomes of their own inquiry.

The study entailed the researcher embedding into the socio-cultural context of the students in school to observe, interview and participate with the respondents in order to discover the issues being faced by them from the social, familial, and academic perspectives in order to assist the students to develop skills and methods to overcome the barriers to successful transfer to the world of work.

Findings of first research cycle

During 2005 the researcher was given responsibility for a group of 10 Year 11 students who had returned to school after failing to gain or maintain work. None of these students wanted to be at school or had the intention of undertaking the requirements for being successful academically or in any other school pursuit. They had been given an ultimatum by their parents that if they were not working they were also not 'lying around on the couch at home'[5] and therefore they were compelled to return to school. School for these students was only about socialising. They held strong convictions that they would not understand subject content and were therefore academically excluded. They believed they were discriminated against by most teachers because of their reputation as 'trouble makers'. Subsequently these students were not interested in participating in lessons and were invariably disruptive in class. Within two weeks of the commencement of the school year they had all been excluded from at least one class and three had been banned from attending more than three classes. This placed them in the dubious position of not being able to gain any academic qualification if they did stay at school.

Parent interviews were requested almost weekly by individual teachers or the school executive. Four boys were suspended in the first month. In week six of the school year this student group received special permission to be moved into a discrete class with the researcher primarily responsible for working with the students and three volunteer teachers who would teach Maths, English and sport. Upon discovering their likes, dislikes, motivations and frustrations, the researcher was able to devise spontaneous activities and lessons according to the attendance and mood of the group. For example most students did not arrive at school until after recess on Mondays and would routinely present tired and hungry. In order to deal with this, cooking classes were arranged for periods three and four. This enabled the early arrivals to accompany the researcher to do the shopping, offer an activity that all students were keen to participate in for two periods and provide them with a nutritious lunch. As the year progressed more students were likely to come to school early on Monday to be able to do the shopping. This enabled nutrition lessons to occur in the supermarket via label reading and supervised food selection.

Following lunch on Mondays there was an English and Maths class that generally worked well as the students were settled and well fed. Some days however, the entire group would be rowdy and disruptive. The researcher had blanket permission to remove students from school for extra curricular activities at such times. A trip to a golf driving range proved an excellent way of defusing anger and aggressive behaviour and was frequently employed in the early months. Spontaneous basketball and football games were also used to allow expression of pent up frustration or anger. These activities were always followed up with individual or group debriefing sessions. Being able to re-route the timetable to suit the mood of the group or individuals enabled two very important things. Firstly it prevented the students from clashing with authorities in the school and being subjected to punishment, which was often perceived as unfair. Secondly, it provided a mirror of group and individual behaviour, which could be examined at a more conducive time when explanations and alternative behaviours could be suggested and discussed. As the year progressed each student was encouraged to enact an alternative behavioural response to a situation and therefore experience first hand the control they could exert over any a particular situation. This slowly but surely provided an enlightened perspective for each student with personal and group behaviour improving markedly over the first six months.

A second aspect of the spontaneous curriculum was that the students were encouraged to ask for topics that interested them to be included. Some of the interesting suggestions included, why people hate George Bush, the history of handball and sex education. Into each of these lessons some aspect of

geography, history or living skills were interwoven. The sex educations lesson had an interesting genesis and finale. By mid year the group had reduced to 7 males. All of these students were sexually active. One morning they were discussing an ex-classmate who was pregnant. The question was posed, "Miss, how do you know when a chick will get pregnant?" We explored this subject for almost two weeks. They kept finding new questions; I kept searching for resources and lesson material. Eventually, I showed them a video that followed conception, fertilisation and foetal development to birth. The final comments on this topic and the video were impressive with the boys expressing relief that they were not female but also the expression of a new respect for girls in general. This was confirmed repeatedly as the interaction of the boys with the broader student body, and girls in particular, improved.

Another vital aspect of the flexible curriculum was work preparation. The students were interviewed individually and in discussion groups about the types of work that interested them. Initially they had little idea and would suggest roles such as professional basketball players and gamblers. However, when a student was showing some interest in a job, work experience in that field was arranged for them. The business was approached and the background of the student was discussed to enable any difficulties of special circumstances to be catered for prior to the student commencing the placement.

Resumes were developed with each student. Interviews were described and practiced and mock interview activities were introduced in class. Issues such as how to shake hands, introduce yourself and say hello were examined and practiced. Other things included what to wear and how to address people in business and what to take to an interview and to the work place were explored. This provided the students with confidence and important skills for their life.

Over the year these activities paid huge dividends. Of the initial 11 students, only one left school to unemployment and an uncertain future. Five transitioned into employment and have retained those positions. Two moved into apprenticeships and have retained them. Two left to employment and have changed jobs a couple of times since then but have remained predominantly employed. One returned to school in 2006 in pursuit of the HSC, but withdrew to a TAFE course that he is maintaining and doing well in. He is very keen to gain employment in the industry this course is preparing him for.

Findings of second research cycle

In 2006, the lessons from working with the Year 11 group were enlisted in a strategy to prevent the reoccurrence of the situation of the previous year. The researcher was now to work with the entire cohort of Year 10, some 326 students. The aim was to identify students who had potential to return to school post Year 10 as an option due to unsuccessful transition to the workforce. Work with the Year 11 group found students were able to articulate a well-formed vision for their future. This, without exception, included full-time participation in the work force if not professional career aspirations, findings that were confirmed in interviews with the Year 10 group in 2006.

During the year Aboriginal Education Assistants, teachers, tutors, parents, the researcher and some community people have identified Year 10 students who were struggling with school and referred them to the program. However, the largest cohort came from students referring themselves, as the program had become known and trusted. Indeed the work had increased so much that an assistant was employed in term three to help with students wanting to gain work or prepare for work after leaving school.

The program commenced the year with a pledge signing ceremony, which was an activity borrowed from the Beacon Foundation. All Year 10 students were informed that there would be a significant effort directed toward ensuring that they were prepared to take up employment or studies of their choice after Year 10. The business community confirmed they would support the program and provide work experience, placements, advice and mentoring when required and inform the school of work opportunities as they became available. The students were then asked to sign a pledge stating that by March of 2007 they would be pursuing further studies at school or secondary providers, be undertaking training via traineeship or apprenticeship or in full-time employment. Every Year 10 student signed the pledge board that is displayed in the school hall. The Beacon Foundation have

found this to be an extremely powerful strategy and students have resisted leaving school because of it.[6]

Since the commencement of 2006, some 177 students have been assisted via the program. with gender and Indigenousness being fairly evenly spread with the exception of non-Indigenous girls of who there were only two.

Total	Total male	Indigenous male	Total female	Indigenous female
177	115 (65%)	57 (49.5%)	62 (35%)	60 (97%)

Many students accessed the program to obtain help seeking casual out-of-school-hours employment (49%). Others are looking to leave school and are looking for full-time employment. However there are numerous other reasons that bring the students to the program's attention. These include looking for work experience, unsatisfactory living arrangements, relationship problems, substance abuse problems, the need to gain identification documentation such as birth certificates and bank accounts, seeking scholarships and difficulties with school work, teachers and other students. In assisting the students with such issues, the researcher has found a professional health background invaluable.

By October 2006, fifty-three young people had been assisted into casual work and a further 12 had been guided in securing full-time employment. A further forty-three Year 10 students had self-identified as requiring assistance to gain employment as they left school at the end of the year. In order to accommodate this businesses were canvassed and work experience arranged for these students during Term 4.

The program's success has also attracted requests from the community to assist young people into employment positions. However, this disclosed a common difficulty. While it appeared to be relatively easy to move a student from school to work effectively with solid outcomes for both the student and the workplace, once a youth had been unemployed for more than three months it became progressively more difficult. Of seven young people seeking help to find work who had already left school, only one maintained his employment for longer than one month. This young man had only been out of school for six weeks. All the others had been unemployed for more than three months and had either resigned, been terminated or had been injured within a month of starting work. Several of them failed to maintain positions in three consecutive attempts at work. The reasons for not being able to sustain work were reported as:

- not enough money for the effort

- work is too hard (physical labour)

- work is too boring

- days are too long

- injury or sickness prevents work (did not return to work when recovered)

- work interrupts social interests and other engagements

- can not get out of bed early enough

- sports events (participant and spectator) cause work absences (including late night TV)

- other workers don't like me (unconfirmed by work place).

Next stage

Over the coming final term for the school year every effort will be made to assist the Year 10 school leavers obtain sustainable employment. At this stage they are identified and have been interviewed with their parents/caregivers to determine the type of work they prefer or that would be most

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appropriate for them. The term will be used to match students to employment positions utilising work experience placement and casual employment positions. In this way it is hoped that few, if any, students will return to school next year because of failure to transfer to the work force.

A concerted effort will be put into visiting students and workplaces and trouble shooting issues as they arise. Sometimes employers need strategies for managing very young people as they negotiate the process of maturation in the adult world. Sometimes the student needs explanation as to how the working world functions and how they fit in and contribute to it.

Findings

The use of hybrid micro-ethnography as the preferred research methodology, particularly the strategy of employing information from participants in the program to drive change and improvements, provided the opportunity to develop a depth of understanding that is a precursor to effective intervention. The validity of this approach is evident in the increased interest and incremental success of the program over its successive stages. This in itself is an indication that the study identified common cultural understandings and successful solutions to the barriers inherent in the transition for young rural people from school to work. Additionally, the action research approach ensured that the researcher's engagement in the program was ethical and proactive and contributed not only to the understandings of the issues but also to finding both short and long term solutions.

The key findings from this study provide important information about how rural communities need to plan for the near future. As the baby boomers move into retirement communities are going to find themselves in the unique position of having more employment vacancies than workers to fill them. This will move the choice about work squarely onto to future employee. Generation Y have been cited as having particular traits that will equip them well for this situation but will not necessarily reassure their predecessors. The major trait is impatience. The internet has taught them to expect immediacy and accommodate multitasking; without these elements they become bored very quickly.[7] They are adaptable, innovative, questioning and sceptical of leaders and authority. Their pet hates are details, half-truths and over-inflated promises. They have grown up in a world where they are supported and protected and have had their activity and time micromanaged for them by parents and society.[8]

There is important information here for employers and communities. Industries that have not kept up with technology, that do things by old fashion means and who do not consider the wider implications of their impacts on environment, population and society will have difficulty attracting employees.[9] Some of the trades are already feeling the squeeze from generation Xers. However, if we fail to provide the essential skills are not provided to assist all young people to join the workforce the ones who are left behind will find it increasingly difficult to compete for jobs, even in blue-collar environment.

Simultaneously, society will be moving into a period where expendable income to support a welfare system will be compromised. Centrelink already suggests that unemployment benefits as they are currently structured will not exist within 10–15 years.[10] So what will be the future for youth who falter in the current education system and fail to make the transition into the workforce? Can rural communities cope with numbers of unemployed people who cannot gain welfare support? Would it not be easier and cheaper to ensure that all school students can negotiate the skills required to gain and sustain employment now?

The costs

According to the Federal Minister for the Department of Employment and Industrial Relations, each 15 year old who leaves school to unemployment and spends approximately 35 years unemployed, cost about $4 million to support.[11] We is also well established that the chronically unemployed are highly susceptible to chronic physical ailments such as obesity, heart disease, and diabetes and also mental illnesses including depression, substance abuse and addictions and neurosis.[12] The chronically under and unemployed also constitute a large proportion of incarcerations.[13] Taking these factors into account the costs elevate alarmingly. According to The NSW Health Chief Officer's report in 2004, a long

chronic illness can cost between $3 and $7 million dollars to manage.[14] Similar costs are calculated for chronic mental ill-health, the annual report for 2000/01 from NSW's Centre for Mental Health estimating the management of just one case to be in the vicinity of $5 million dollars. The NSW Department of Correctional Services estimates servicing up to 3 repeated incarcerations to be approximately $7.5 million dollars.[15] The price in dollars from this perspective therefore can potentially lie somewhere in excess of $19.5 to $21.5 million dollars for just one unemployed and disaffected person.

There are also personal costs to the individual who may experience a degree of social, economic and educational disadvantage leading to a lack of personal fulfilment and reduced quality of life. The family and society also bear the brunt to increased support requirements and the economic impact of loss of productivity and tax revenue.

Thus, investing relatively modest amounts into keeping students at school, making the educational experience relevant and valuable for them and assisting them to negotiate the way into a sustainable position in the workforce, is a good investment; one that may save millions of dollars through preventing hardship, chronic illness, disability and early death.

Recommendations

This study clearly shows that a small investment in secondary school students has the potential to change the life outcomes of individuals and families. Rather than government departments channelling money into management, reparative and rehabilitation programs, the prevention of is circumstances that lead to poor health, notably poor education and difficulties accessing sustained employment is a more strategic investment. Such an approach could easily be co-ordinated through a bilateral agreement between health, education and justice departments, to fund similar programs similar to the one reported here, in schools demonstrating less than satisfactory outcomes for transition from school to work. Programs such as this provide support and resources for Australian school leavers to potentially become health, wealthy and wise through a successful transition to a rewarding and meaningful future through employment.

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Presenter

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