Positive educational responses to Indigenous student mobility ☆

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ABSTRACT

Engaging positively with the mobility of Indigenous students has been the centre of a 5-year action research project in Queensland, Australia. Drawing on responses developed for other marginalised mobile populations, and with consideration for the extent of mobility amongst many Indigenous people in Australia, this paper focuses on the professional development of teachers to understand the needs of highly mobile Indigenous students. The paper outlines the introduction of a key support role within the school, a Mobility Support Teacher (MST). The role and the programme are reviewed in the context of a recent renewed commitment to 'needs based funding' in schools in Australia. Taking a critical view of the funding arrangements for Australian schools, it is argued that mobile Indigenous students, as an underserved population, require significant ongoing support.

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1. Overview

This paper firstly reviews the range of international responses to mobility apparent in the literature, noting the significant absence of responses focussing on mobile Indigenous populations. After outlining the project's action research methodology, the paper turns to a discussion of the responses developed over the life of the project, including the employment of a dedicated teacher resource – the Mobility Support Teacher (MST). Interview data are presented to explore the ways in which the MST roles support mobile students and their families, teachers and school leaders. The paper concludes with an acknowledgement of the need for ongoing resourcing of the activities described, but notes the difficulty of sustaining such work in the context of current neo-liberal paradigms.

2. Coming to grips with mobility

The mobility of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples is an extremely complex matter, embedded in a history of colonisation, racism and marginalisation, with socio-cultural and socio-economic effects still being played out today. In Australia, as in other nations, one aspect of colonisation was the effort by early governments, through legislation and administration, to control the mobility of the Indigenous peoples whose often nomadic lifestyles were 'at odds' with the colonisers' notions of civilisation and economic development (Gray, 2004; Prout, 2008). While these control mechanisms no longer exist, the marginalisation of Indigenous mobility continues through public policy that fails to accommodate the lived realities of this group of people.

The low level of educational achievement by mobile students of non-dominant and Indigenous backgrounds is a significant issue across a range of countries including Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States, New Zealand and

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Australia (Aman, 2008; Beesley, Moore, & Gopalani, 2010; Bull & Gilbert, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Gutiérrez, 2006; Kiddle, 2000). In Australia, research shows that many Indigenous students make a different start to formal schooling as a result of lower access to pre-school and to educational resources. Compounded by frequent extended absences and multiple school changes this can lead to, potentially, low self-esteem and self-efficacy which, in turn, diminish the chances of academic success (Bortoli & Thomson, 2010). Traditionally, governments respond to this challenge through the provision of programmes that lie outside the mainstream of school funding and actions.

Connell (1993, 1994, 2009) has written extensively over a lengthy period about the schooling of children in poverty and overcoming inequalities in education. While acknowledging that genuine education reform is a challenging policy space, she identifies a number of flaws in the ways governments have approached this vexed issue. Central to Connell's concerns is the reliance of governments on compensatory programmes that target marginalised students by 'grafting something onto' a system, usually through separate funding grants (Connell, 1994). She argues that the product of such practices creates a 'false map' of the problem – providing a set of assumptions that drive policy but which are, at best, questionable and, at worst, 'profoundly misleading' (Connell, 1994, p. 130). Although it could be argued that much has changed since Connell made these original observations, it would appear that, in Australia, by all measures available, Indigenous students, and in particular mobile Indigenous students, are not well served by our school systems (McGaw, 2009).

3. Methodology

In this paper, we outline responses to Indigenous student mobility as specifically developed over a 5-year (2006–2010) collaborative critical action research project in Queensland, Australia. The collaborative partnership, involving three regional Queensland school communities – referred to here as 'Riverside North', 'Riverside West' and 'Riverside East' – had its roots in 2004, when the then-Principal of 'Riverside North State School' became involved with researchers from James Cook University. The researchers, at that time, were conducting an investigation into the educational disengagement of young people in a regional North Australian city (Hill & Dawes, 2005). One of the central findings to emerge from this investigation was that student mobility in the primary school years was a common experience of the disengaged young people who had participated in the research. This finding prompted both the Principal and the researchers to further investigate mobility as an educational issue.

The research partners drew upon critical action research as a methodological framework in order to create a communicative space in which practitioners and researchers could come together to make decisions, take action and collaboratively inquire into their own practices, and the conditions under which they practice (Carr & Kemmis, 2009; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). One of the primary objectives of the project under discussion here was to develop a detailed understanding of Indigenous student mobility – informed by the systematic collection of school-based data about the nature of Indigenous students' movement.

Ethics approval from James Cook University and approval from the Department of Education and Training to conduct research in Queensland State Schools was sought and gained. The original approvals, obtained in 2006, were extended and updated in 2008 to conform to the requirements of the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research-2007* (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2007), and to recognise the participation of an Indigenous mentor. Subsequent to the granting of ethics approval, collaboration with a range of stakeholders from the three regional Queensland school communities, 'Riverside North', 'Riverside West' and 'Riverside East', was undertaken. An action research group, including Principals, MSTs, Indigenous Education Workers and the research team was established. This group met regularly – as per a critical action research approach – to plan responses in light of new understandings about the nature of mobility and potential intervention points.

A range of evidence was gathered throughout the project in order to guide the provision of targeted professional development for teachers. This included data drawn from interviews and focus groups with teachers and Principals, consultation with Indigenous community members, observations of classroom practice, and the collection and analysis of statistical data. Through the action research process, a range of Indigenous stakeholders, including an Indigenous mentor and the regional Indigenous Schooling Support Unit, were actively involved in framing the professional development to reconstitute the educational space in ways that reflect an understanding of the 'cultural interface' (Nakata, 2007b) and a move to shared responsibility for actions.

A range of professional development events and opportunities – as facilitated by the research team – were made available to classroom teachers and other non-teaching staff in the project schools to support their efforts to engage, in meaningful ways, with mobile students. These included, for example: whole school presentations of quantitative data identifying the extent of mobility and the profile of mobile students (obtained from micro-analysis of school enrolment data); whole school workshops on identifying the needs of mobile students, with a focus on mobile Indigenous students; whole school presentations on pedagogical approaches, such as explicit teaching; whole school workshops focussing on Cultural Awareness and educational practice at the 'cultural interface'. A range of activities was also conducted with smaller groups of key staff members, including: briefings to administration and reception staff; workshops and seminars for MSTs covering a range of issues crucial in the conduct of their work and curriculum planning with a cross-school group of teachers.