Being Aboriginal: Some Inter-Cultural Communication Challenges for Career Development Practitioners from my Life Experiences

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Introduction

These days when I ring my mum to say hi she usually asks me “Which ‘big-time’ people have you been meeting with this week?” To some extent I guess in my current role there is the need to meet with the so-called, and sometimes self-confessed ‘big time’ people. I have to say though there have been many times when I have thought to myself “If there wasn’t so much change that needed to occur in Indigenous education, I would be working happily as a career and guidance counselor in a high school, getting close to what is ‘real’ in the world, working closely with kids who are ready to fly, kids who are trying to find their place in the world, kids who are hurting, and kids who are just dropping by to say hi.” And who knows? Once I have done my bit to change the tide of low expectation of Indigenous children in schools in Australia, maybe I might just go back to a job that I came to love so much.
In this article I want to offer you some insights from the inside, as one who was an Aboriginal child, an Aboriginal student, teacher, guidance counselor and professional educator. Let me reflect then on the challenges that might flow from my story, to you as my career and guidance colleagues, as fellow educators, and as strong allies in the effort to truly change the tide of low expectation of Indigenous children in our country.

**Being an Aboriginal child**

I am the youngest of ten children. Being the youngest of 10 has its challenges. It is not actually true that I was spoilt, but I certainly did have to work my ‘emotional mojo’ to get my what I wanted around the place! My mother is a strong Aboriginal woman, and on her side my grandmother and great grandparents were descendants of the Gurang Gurang people from north of Bundaberg. My grandfather and his people were descendants of the Taribelang Bunda people who lived in an around where Bundaberg is now located. My father was a proud Italian who came to this country in the fifties in search of work. My siblings and I take great pride in our Italian origins, yet our lifestyles and development were considerably more ‘Aboriginal’. Fortunately for us there seemed to be many similarities between ‘Aboriginal’ and ‘Italian’ ways of being. Unfortunately we had very little intimate knowledge of my father’s people. The reinforcement from inside our home was the first place at which I embraced and celebrated the notion of ‘being Aboriginal’.

**Some school experiences of being Aboriginal**

I started grade one in 1972 at East Bundaberg State School. School wasn’t too bad but I clearly remember days being called ‘black coon’, ‘black nigger’, ‘black boong’, and ‘black chocolate’, all of which carried the negative connotation that being Aboriginal was something inferior. There were also times when being Aboriginal was outlined as something inferior in a more direct way. For instance, I recall my older brother and sister speaking of a teacher they had who once said in front of the entire primary class, and in reference to them, ‘Tomorrow I am going to bring a big bath tub and wash these Aboriginal kids because they stink!’ One cannot help wondering what the entire class, against the background of such comments, learned about Aborigines that day. And what did my older brother and sister learn about being Aboriginal on that day?

I recall very clearly, in early primary school, the formal lessons we had about ‘Aborigines’. On reflection it was quite an unnerving experience. The teacher with textbook in hand would say, ‘The Aborigines lived in gunyahs and ate snakes and goannas!’ All the white children in the classroom would screw their faces up and say ‘Ooooh Yuck!!’ and then turn to look at my brother and me. Later we would go out and collect things to make a gunyah. When the gunyah was complete other children would say ‘I suppose you will want to sleep here tonight hey?’ The strange thing for me was that I knew I was Aboriginal, but this stuff that we were learning about just wasn’t me! In fact it wasn’t anybody that I knew in my family. I did, however, have a sense that it was maybe the people who had come before my grandparents.

My reflections on high school made me realise that while I didn’t necessarily see myself as an academic achiever, many teachers probably never saw me as an academic achiever. I recall in senior school a teacher handing my test papers back to me saying to the whole class, ‘Sarra got 75%! It must have been an easy test!’ At the time we laughed, thinking it was funny.
Beneath the comedy though was the real message that said, ‘I don’t really believe you can achieve 75% or better’. Somehow, without even knowing, I was thinking that I should be pleased if I got 75%, and that I should not realistically hope to achieve higher than that. The reality was that I would achieve just over 50% on most of my tests, because I came to believe that was what I could do as a young Aboriginal boy and that was my place.

In some ways it didn’t seem all negative though. My brother and I were embraced as good young boys and great rugby league players, but hardly any teacher acknowledged or nurtured within us any academic potential. In fact I remember only one teacher who pushed me to work harder, and acknowledged my efforts with the grades of a high academic achiever. Most others just saw us and graded us as average or below average academic achievers, and we just went along unquestioningly and maintained our place.

**My first trip to the career and guidance counsellor**

In year 12 I had no idea what I would do after leaving high school. At the time the other students were all busily making appointments to see the Career and Guidance Counsellor, I was left to wonder what it was all about. It didn’t seem to me like the place an Aboriginal student would go, and nobody ever said to me ‘Make sure you go and see the Guidance Officer’. Strangely enough I decided to go and check things out for myself. I remember clearly the experience. I said to him ‘So what is this all about … this QTAC stuff?’ QTAC was the Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre. By fluke I had enough Board subjects to qualify for entry into a tertiary centre. At the time of choosing my senior subjects I had no idea that one required 5 Board subjects to qualify for tertiary entry. The Guidance Officer explained the process to me. He asked me, if I could do anything I wanted, what would I do? I said I would love to be a Physical Education teacher. He said to me ‘You will never get into that course but just put it down in first place and then put these down after it’. The courses he had picked out for me were all at an Agricultural college.

In January of the following year I received, unexpectedly, an invitation to participate in an interview process in which I would be considered for special entry into college, given that I only had a Tertiary Entrance (TE) score of 750, an average score for that year, and the TE score for Physical Education was 910. The interview process was part of a program designed to get more Aboriginal teachers into the school system. At the time I probably did not fully appreciate the importance of the program but fortunately for me I was a successful applicant.

In 1985 I left home and moved to Brisbane to attend Kelvin Grove Teachers’ College (now QUT) and complete a Diploma of Teaching. I consider myself lucky to have been given such an opportunity, particularly as I was given ‘special consideration’ for entry. I approached the course with some degree of trepidation, as I could not help feeling somewhat out of my league. These feelings of inadequacy were coupled with the anxiety of being in what seemed like a foreign place, and the need to explain to lots of people why I was sitting in the same classroom as them. To make things easier for me my particular course of study was spread out over four years instead of the regular three years as it was for the ‘normal’ students. Accordingly I would start the first year on a 60% workload in order to get the feel for college life. Despite these efforts to settle me in, the college was another place that looked and felt to me like one where Aboriginal people did not go.

With the help of a great intellectual mentor Dr Gary MacLennan, I soon realized that I had been sold short by limited expectations that existed around me in school, and that I inadvertently colluded with this limited expectation. I decided to complete the Diploma in the same time as other students. This meant that for the last two years I had to work at a 120%
workload to make up for time I had lost in the first year. I completed the course in the same
time as my ‘normal’ colleagues.

While I was certainly very glad to have completed the course I couldn’t help feeling angry
and wondering how it was that I could complete high school with a TE score of 750, which
gave tertiary institutions an insight into my ‘academic ability’, yet after being given special
consideration, I performed at an academic level that was seemingly better than that worthy of
a 910 TE score. The entire college experience, albeit inadvertently, changed my life forever.

My early experiences as a ‘real’ professional educator

After several years teaching and working in other areas of education I engaged in further
study, completed a Masters and became a career and guidance counsellor. I deliberately chose
this as a career option so that, unlike when I was at school, I would guide as many Aboriginal
children as possible, to ensure they understood how to work the school system to their
advantage, and to set goals according to their own dreams and beliefs about what they could
achieve.

On my first day as a guidance counsellor in a secondary school I visited the staffrooms of
teachers to introduce myself to my new colleagues. At one staffroom a young female teacher
said to me ‘Are you the new teacher aide here?’ For me this comment registers my
Aboriginality, and sadly, her restricted understanding Aboriginal people and their place. I said
to her ‘No, I’m the new guidance counsellor!’

My response surprised her as she asked ‘Oh… are you like … a ‘real’ guidance officer?’ As I
held back the response I would have preferred to give, I said, ‘Yes.’

With continued surprise she said, ‘So you’ve been a teacher?’ Again I replied, ‘Yes’.

Finally in our exchange we established that I had many years experience in the field of
education and that I had a particular interest in Indigenous education, given my Aboriginal
heritage. Then she said to me, ‘But you’re not a “real Aboriginal” are you?’ And she placed
her arm next to mine and said, ‘Look, I’m just as dark as you!’ If I was the teacher aide I
would have fitted in to her ‘Aboriginal’ box. As I was not the teacher aide and in fact, a ‘real’
guidance officer, then somehow I didn’t fit. A tragic story hey! Not nearly as tragic as
knowing there were 280 Indigenous children in that school, all with the disastrous potential to
collude with such limited perceptions: just like I did when I was in high school.

Later, as a lecturer at a University, and to my disgust, my Indigenous colleagues and I were
asked on numerous occasions by undergraduate students about whether or not we were
qualified academics, and/or had experience as teachers in schools. Even as Principal at
Cherbourg, some people would come up to me and ask if the Principal was around. As I am
reminded of this issue through similar experiences, I realise it is an issue that white people
must address within themselves to stop perpetuating such ignorance and stupidity.

Internalisation of limited views of being Aboriginal

Sadly, and on many occasions in my educational career, I would see young Aboriginal
students try very hard to perform academically well in school, only to be subjected to taunts
from other Aboriginal peers who would say things like ‘You think you’re too good for us
now!’ or ‘You’re trying to be white!’ Sometimes hardworking Aboriginal students would be
referred to as ‘coconuts’, which is by design an attempt to insult them by suggesting that, like
a coconut, they are white on the inside and black on the outside. Sadly it seems for many Aboriginal people, that successful, hardworking, and Aboriginal are mutually exclusive terms. Sadly, in many cases, young Aboriginal people often find it much easier to run with their peers, or the community pressure, and fall back into living out the negative perception of being Aboriginal. For some this result becomes highly problematic and self-destructive.

In my PhD research I identified many of the complex and mutually reinforcing aspects of this internalization of limited self-perceptions among many Indigenous young people. The base from which it all begins is the view from mainstream Australia of what being Aboriginal is perceived to mean. The Table is taken from my thesis research:

### Table: Adjectives that Mainstream Australia uses to describe Aboriginals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adjectives</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alcoholics, Drunks, Heavy drinkers</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boongs, Coons, Niggers, Black Cunts, Abos, Porch monkeys, Blacks, Gins, Darkies, Black bastards</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Got it good, Privileged, Well kept by the government, On the gravy train</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lazy, Won’t work</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare Dependant, Dole bludgers, Handout syndrome</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressive, Violent, Troublemakers, Disrespectful</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good sportsmen/women, Good footy players</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unreliable, Can’t be trusted, Untrustworthy, Irresponsible</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dirty, Unclean, Smelly</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racist, Anti-White</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good artists, Artistic</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uneducated</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ungrateful</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good dancers</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dumb</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family oriented, Value family</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scary, Intimidating</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing people, Not materialistic, Sharing, Look after each other</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No sense of time</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thieves</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different, Different values</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheeky</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nomads, Wanderers, Drifters</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There are several obvious and reinforcing aspects of this mainstream typecasting of Indigenous people operating in Australian society: we are either hopeless, pitiable or despicable; we are either aggressive troublemakers or welfare-dependent bludgers; we are either good athletes or good artists. Our potential as human beings is limited by the perceptual boxes into which members of mainstream society routinely place us.

Some consequences flowing from limited perceptions of being Aboriginal

Far too many young Aboriginal people who are subjected to such pressure internalise a negative or limited identity -- rather than stand up, follow their dreams wherever they lead, and be successful. The consequences are many and lasting. Indigenous students are much less likely to complete their secondary schooling through to Year 12: around a third, compared with three-quarters of all Australian young people. Less than a quarter of Indigenous adults possess post-school qualifications, compared with over 40% of non-Indigenous adults. Just over 3% of students in higher education are Indigenous and almost half of these are in non-degree courses such as diplomas and certificates, compared with only 5% of non-Indigenous students.

Indigenous people report relatively high levels of stress compared with the non-Indigenous population -- with the most frequently reported stressors being the death of a family member or close friend, serious illness or disability, and inability to get a job. Census data shows that the unemployment rate of Indigenous adults is typically three to four times that of non-Indigenous adults, especially in rural areas. Indigenous young people are 17 times more likely to engage with the juvenile justice system than non-Indigenous youngsters, and much more likely to subsequently end up in adult prisons. These are all serious and life-limiting consequences of adopting negative identities of being Aboriginal in today’s Australia.

Creating ‘strong and smart’ views of being Aboriginal at Cherbourg

I had to lead Cherbourg school in such a way that it would challenge the children about how they perceived their Aboriginal identity. We had to get our children to reflect on, and sometimes confront honestly, the negative perceptions that they were willingly or unwillingly colluding with. In the face of such a challenge, it was incumbent upon us to help and guide them to develop and understand a more positive perception of being Aboriginal. In a sense we had to get our children to subscribe to an alternative identity in order to break the cycles that were likely to seriously limit their potential future development. This alternative Aboriginal identity was to become the ‘Strong and Smart’ Aboriginal identity.

The next part of the challenge was for the school to become an environment that genuinely embraced a new ‘Strong and Smart’ Aboriginal identity. Our school had to be more than just a place that developed a strong and smart identity: it had to be a place that embraced a strong and smart identity; a place where strong young Aboriginal children could be.

Professor Michael Barber (2003) provides a useful matrix (see Figure) that defines the situation in which we found ourselves as a school. His matrix made it clear to us as a staff that if we were seeking transformation and improved outcomes, which we were, then we had to be bold about the reforms we were attempting, and deliver them skilfully and with high quality of execution. But despite complex challenges Cherbourg School did see a degree of
transformation. There I saw the true colours of Aboriginal children. I don’t intend here to reiterate the detail of our strategies or what we were able to achieve at Cherbourg. Three indicators will give you an idea:

- Unexplained absenteeism reduced by 94% within 18 months and real attendance at the school improved from 62% in 1999, to 93% in 2004;

- Year 2 literacy: improvements from 0% of children at expected reading levels in 1998, to 58% of children at expected reading levels just 2 years later; and

- Year 7 literacy: improvements from all children being at rock bottom on statewide diagnostic testing in 1999, to where 17 out of 21 year 7 children were identified within the state average band for literacy in 2004.

**Figure: Boldness Matrix**

(Barber, 2003)
Through the Indigenous Education Leadership Institute we are intent on spreading the strong and smart philosophy across the country. We are determined, as I indicated earlier, We WILL change the tide of low expectations of Indigenous children in schools -- not just by improving on their learning outcomes but also by transforming the schools they attend and how they relate to the families and communities they serve.

**Inter-cultural communication challenges for career development practitioners**

I invite career development practitioners, wherever you work, to join with us in that transformation. Let’s refuse to collude with a status quo that traps too many Indigenous young people in cycles that limit their potential to follow wherever their career dreams might lead them. Let’s refuse to merely generate controversy that is not backed by real changes in how we practice our profession for positive improvements in the lives of Indigenous young people.

The sexy rhetoric of our *Professional Standards* provides both guidance and challenge for your practice. In section 3.3.2a related to ethical principles for career development practitioner-client relationships for equity and diversity in your Code of Ethics, it is stated that career development practitioners should:

- Ensure that each individual’s feelings and cultural customs are respected
- Deal with each person fairly, equitably and without prejudice, respecting their values, beliefs and life-experiences and those of their families and the communities to which they belong
- Avoid all forms of discrimination
- Ensure that the services are culturally appropriate and relevant to individuals’ needs, and are valid and reliable concerning the information they provide.

Given the mainstream typecasting of ‘being Aboriginal’ that I have outlined earlier, it is likely that these desirable professional practices may represent real challenges. How do you support and develop Indigenous people in studying for and pursuing diverse career choices in environments which often reinforce negative identities? How do you do so without colluding with organizational practices that may currently limit their options and potential? How to shift the horizons of Indigenous young people to look beyond what they have directly experienced and beyond what the mainstream culture appears to value? These are not easy questions to answer. There may be some risks in taking bold approaches, but these are far outweighed by the consequences which are currently flowing from the cycle of failure to make a difference in so many lives.

The ‘competency guidelines’ of your *Professional Standards* suggest that you need to “understand the influence of culture on career and life development”. This is a big ask: I wonder how well prepared many of you feel to engage with the diversity that currently characterizes Indigenous Australia, let alone the cultural diversity that comprises the whole of our nation! In the school and community leadership programs that the Institute runs, we provide training in important aspects of the kind of ‘cultural competence’ required for successful inter-cultural communication. In our experience, this often requires considerable personal and peer-based reflection and strategizing to challenge the superficial and often manipulative patterns of communication that many Indigenous people regularly have to confront.
It’s a complex challenge I know. But it is not a challenge that is insurmountable. This is something we can do!

References


