



What Works. The Work Program

Improving outcomes for Indigenous students

Kormilda College, Darwin

This case study was originally prepared in 2001, principally by Julianne Willis who at the time was Vice-Principal, Curriculum, of Kormilda College. It was updated in 2003, when Julianne was Deputy Principal. As such it represents a snapshot of Kormilda College in those days, through her eyes.

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This is a story about one Independent secondary college in Darwin. It is based on my experiences and perceptions over the past eight years. It is a story about the developing understandings and practices of a school in relation to Indigenous education within Australia today. I am not Indigenous and I do not claim to have any answers. This is a story of struggle and some achievements.

I will describe our school, our students and our staff as they were about 10 years ago. It is here that I will explore the problems and issues we faced in our struggle to develop an appropriate educational program for our Indigenous students. I will then describe some of the ways we worked from a whole school point of view to improve our programs. I am not sure we have found 'What Works' but I am confident we are heading in some very positive directions. We have moved from struggling to work out who we are to knowing who we are and what we are trying to achieve. We have consolidated many of our programs and further developed others. This is an excellent basis for considering fresh insights and I believe the College has new ground to explore. I am optimistic about the future.



The context

Kormilda College is a low-fee independent Christian college situated in Darwin. We offer secondary education programs for students aged 13 to 18. An educational priority of the College is to support Indigenous students to access and then be successful in secondary education. Currently there are 800 student enrolments. Of these, 240 are Indigenous students who reside in the College residences during school terms.



The College is a traditional Australian Christian Independent secondary school and the dominant student group is

Anglo-Australian. The dominant staff group is also Anglo-Australian and many come from places other than Darwin. Staffing is based on student enrolments, which are volatile. Therefore, staffing is sometimes not continuous and effective programs are not easily consolidated.

Our Indigenous students come from approximately 40 different communities across the Northern Territory. They represent approximately 11 distinct language groups. Many of our students have a strong Indigenous identity and speak more than one language as well as English. For many, English is a second language. They bring a wealth of multicultural experiences and knowledge to the College and some are willing to share these experiences with the wider community.

More about the students and their families...

The situation 10 years ago

When I arrived at the College, we used a model for Indigenous education in which we implemented specialist programs and employed specialist staff with specialist knowledge.

Everyone employed in the College was committed and working very hard to achieve improved educational outcomes for our students. The College was in an incredible growth phase, trying to demonstrate credibility to the local Darwin community while at the same time maintaining its historical loyalty to our community parents. I think it would be true to say that our intentions had enormous integrity and that we were working very hard but that we were going in different directions. We did not have a shared understanding about who we were and what we were trying to achieve. I don't believe we fully understood who our students were. We did not have the range of skills or understandings necessary to effectively engage with the issues or develop the kinds of strategies necessary to move forward.

Many of our students would leave before making any real progress. Teachers had difficulty in engaging students in learning processes. We had difficulty in communicating with our parents. Much of the time spent in classrooms was devoted to counselling or crowd control. We were not alone in this regard.

More about the situation 10 years ago...

What did we have going for us?

Some general background factors:

- The College's history. Many of our parents were once our students. Kormilda College is part of some communities' heritage and therefore parental support is strong. Being located in Darwin and being reasonably well known means that we are able to access a wide range of support and opportunities not available in small remote communities.
- A large number of Indigenous students. There is an Indigenous presence at Kormilda College that cannot be marginalised or ignored; and there are many pathways and opportunities that are available to our students due to the size of our operation and the number of Indigenous students in one place. Because of this, the College is often used as a site for health education programs. Well-known Indigenous people visit us and others come to us to offer assistance.
- Our older students act as role models for all of our students and support our younger Indigenous students to stay at school and be successful.
- Indigenous students at Kormilda College are immersed in Standard Australian English. Learning a language is much easier when you are immersed in it.
- A 'captive audience'. As residential students and as teenagers, our residential program supports consistent attendance and learning how to learn within this kind of environment.
- Access to Commonwealth funding for education programs.
- A highly dedicated and committed staff who all go beyond the call of duty.

The first step: Clarifying what we were trying to achieve

We began by clarifying our goals. After considerable discussion, we agreed that Kormilda College would

- identify the specific needs of our Indigenous students when they arrived at the College and attempt to provide open and diverse educational pathways;
- provide open and diverse educational pathways for secondary-aged Indigenous students;
- support Indigenous students to access and be successful in secondary education;
- ensure that success is measured by achievement in developing English literacy and numeracy;
- ensure that success is also measured by individuals continuing through learning pathways that lead to work or further education;
- value the individual, who they are and what they bring to the College community;
- provide a living and learning context based on values - love, dignity, trust, social justice, courage, honesty; and
- provide access to a range of support services (doctors, hospital, counsellors, vocational advisers).

Building relationships...

The next step: Developing policy

We began to reaffirm structures or programs that were working for us. We also began to develop an awareness that what we needed was a whole school strategic approach built on the achievement of these goals, firstly and very importantly through establishing relevant policy.

- Two places on the College's Governing Board are reserved for Indigenous members.
- Indigenous Education remains a priority in the College's Mission Statement.
- The Board's Employment Policy provides a basis for increasing the level of Indigenous employment.
- The Board's Professional Development Policy requires that all staff must undertake professional development in cross-cultural awareness and that all teaching staff must undertake professional development in ESL teaching methods.
- The Board's Enrolment Policy provides for open access to Kormilda College for Indigenous students from remote communities.
- In the Middle School all Indigenous classes are maintained at an average of 22 students. (Two classes are prioritised for 15 students only.)
- Strategic Plan built on IESIP and NIELNS with specific targeted outcomes for Indigenous students is being developed and implemented over a four-year period.

Subsequently, a number of principles of operation were discussed, agreed and implemented.

Read about the principles...

The third step: Translation into practice

Indigenous classes in the Middle School

Students are now grouped according to English literacy ability and their experience with Australian school education. There are three main programs. Generally,

- students who speak English as a first language are integrated into mainstream programs;
- students who speak English as a second language and who have consistent attendance backgrounds in schooling are placed in mainstream ESL programs; and

- students who speak English as a second language and who do not have consistent attendance backgrounds in schooling are placed in an Intensive ESL program.

All these programs are designed to maintain strong Indigenous identity while at the same time developing student understandings and skills in Australian secondary education programs. Students within the ESL programs become integrated into mainstream programs as they progress.

An accredited credential for every student

All educational programs at Kormilda College scaffold student learning towards the completion of accredited courses of study and work or further training. These courses include those available through Northern Territory Certificate of Education (which includes VET options) and the International Baccalaureate Diploma.

The VET programs include

- off campus: Rural Skills, Mechanics (three different courses), Music, Fashion, Construction, Maritime and Fishing, TRAC (three different courses);
- on campus: Certificate in Remote Area Local Government (level II) and Certificate in Aboriginal Preparatory Education (level II).

Read about VET developments in 2003...

Cross-cultural programs

We have conducted a variety of such programs for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. The most successful have been in areas not related to English literacy where students are working together on a project and over time develop understandings about each other. These include sporting groups, art classes and Outdoor Education Programs.

We offer Australian Indigenous Languages subjects at Years 11 and 12.

ATAS/Homework programs

Students access a specialised tutoring and homework program four evenings a week to support effective learning in the day school program.

Pastoral care

Before any child can be responsive to learning, basic needs need to be met. Feeling loved, safe and healthy is a basis for self respect, growth and being open to opportunities. If you have spent your life being abused, not eating healthy food, into drug abuse from an early age, solved problems through violence, have inappropriate models, have been raised with mixed and ambiguous values and no boundaries ... how can you focus on learning to read and write in English? Why would you?

[Read about the new Student Services Centre in 2003...](#)

[More about pastoral care...](#)

[More about other programs...](#)

The results

| | 1996 | 2000 |
|--|------|------|
| Number of Indigenous students graduating Year 12 (NTCE) | 0 | 8 |
| Number of Indigenous students completing Year 10 | 14 | 20 |
| Percentage of Indigenous students enrolled in specialist Literacy and Numeracy programs (ESL profile levels 1–3) | 60% | 55% |
| Indigenous students who consistently attended (returned for four terms out of four) | na | 84% |
| VET programs on offer | nil | 15 |
| Number of Indigenous people involved in advisory committees on a regular basis | 7 | 16 |
| Comprehensive community liaison programs | nil | 4 |

[about outcomes...](#)

[More](#)