



What Works. The Work Program

Improving outcomes for Indigenous students

Merredin Senior High School, Western Australia

Partnership and student engagement

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The context

Merredin is a regional centre on the Great Eastern Highway, about 300 kilometres east of Perth and about halfway between Perth and Kalgoorlie. It is central to the Western Australian wheatbelt but has a population of fewer than 3000, a number that has fallen in recent years due to drought and the loss of a number of government agencies from the town.

Merredin Senior High School has over 300 students and about 7% are Aboriginal. Students come from a variety of smaller towns in the district and there is also a residential hostel for those from further afield.

David Mattin is a Deputy Principal at the school. He taught at Hollywood SHS in Perth before moving to Merredin as Head of Learning Technology and Enterprise five years ago. In the last year, he became a Deputy Principal. He discusses the school's orientation.

Merredin is heavily focused as a whole school on a change of pedagogy towards a teaching and learning style that is relevant, hands-on and integrated. We've got a target Year 9 group, for instance, and often at that age they're lost to school if it's all chalk and talk. So we try to make sure that when they have to write a report it's of a real, hands-on experience they've had. And we find this is particularly relevant to Aboriginal students. If, for instance, they've been on an information-gathering walk with an Elder then that's an appropriate subject to write a report about.



David Mattin

Partnership with community

Kath Ward is a Deputy Principal. She talks about the way the school has involved the Aboriginal community in planning.

Back in 2001, we began work to involve the Aboriginal community specifically, and it filtered back to the students as well.

We started with some key questions that we addressed with the Aboriginal community and the teaching staff. They were about where we were at with Aboriginal education at that time, what's good about schools for young people today, and what's bad. In other words, what are the issues that we need to address?

The support from the Aboriginal Liaison Officer at the District Office was important, and so were the Aboriginal mentors from the local schools, who are all big supporters of education. They were able to work at the ground level and bring in Elders as well.

The first couple of meetings weren't held at the school but at the District Office and we had a diversity of people coming, ranging from Elders to Aboriginal people who had no connection with the school whatsoever. Teachers and the Aboriginal community met in separate groups in the first meeting before coming together. There were definitely more Aboriginal people there than staff members and we really brainstormed and discussed the issues. The third meeting was all about 'what do we actually want to do to make a difference?' So we'd been through working out where we were at and now we were talking about what should be done and what we wanted to change.



Kath Ward

So we ended up with a fairly basic plan that was based on the things that the Aboriginal community felt would be useful. One was about improved literacy, for instance, and there was also a view that there wasn't enough Aboriginal Studies happening in the schools. That was actually quite an eye opener for me. I was Head of English at the time and I knew we included quite a lot of Aboriginal perspectives, but I also knew that we didn't stand on a mountain and shout that out to the world. So we learned something about communicating what we actually do at school.

But avenues were marked out where we could improve. So we then had a basic plan, which we took to the Aboriginal students as well. We actually got all the students together and told them about it and asked them the same sort of key questions: What is school like for you? What could it be like? What would you like us to do? And the kids generally agreed with what was on the plan.

At that time we tried to make the plan as concrete as possible and write down who was in charge of doing what and by when. So at the end of 2002 we were able to look at the plans again and see how it had gone. Lots of things had changed for the better.

Issues still come up from time to time, like in any school, and there's sometimes friction and the need for reconciliation. We work hard to handle that.

The Marlak Mereny and Koorin (Bush Foods and Medicines) Project

David continues:

There was an old Grow Tunnel at the school but it wasn't covered and wasn't really being used. I was Head of Technology and Enterprise and we thought we could see a way to get it up and running. Within a term we did that, drawing in the expertise of Landcare Centres, Merredin Action Group, the Department of Agriculture and Aboriginal leaders from the town. We put up a proposal to the Department of Education and Training and the Avon Catchment Council and we were successful. The Grow Tunnel opened in March 2004.

It's been very exciting. I suppose I didn't expect it to take off in this way, but it has, because of the variety of people who've come on board. That includes the Society and Environment and English teachers putting their hands up. We've also involved our students at educational risk and those doing the Year 11 and 12 bridging course, as well as primary school students, so it's promoted the transition link.



Alison Woodman

But the keys have been the involvement of Aboriginal adults, the fact that it's tied in to our Aboriginal Education Operational Plan and the support of our Principal, Alison Woodman.

The project aims to grow a variety of local trees, shrubs and native food and medicines for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in Merredin. The aspirational goal is to grow 50% native foods and 50% local plant species. All activities are educational in nature, with an emphasis on retention of local knowledge and culture related to the local flora.

Long term objectives include developing training opportunities, promoting the retention of Aboriginal students through the secondary years and promoting culturally inclusive programs.

At the school level, students use the Grow Tunnel to identify with the process of collecting and growing plants, ultimately to enhance their understanding of how to preserve native habitats and arrest the extinction of presently-surviving native species and cultural pursuits. The Grow Tunnel makes a practical contribution to their environmental responsibility, while helping the wider community.

A knowledge base of local flora and related cultural heritage is being developed with the assistance of Aboriginal Education Officers and the local Aboriginal community. Field trips have been held to educate students and collect seed varieties.

These involve Aboriginal community members working in collaboration with students.



Aboriginal mentor
Mick Hayden with
students

Initially, a number of local food sources have been targeted and ways found to grow these in the Grow Tunnel. All products can be used for local revegetation or for other enterprise activities, and can potentially be sold to local farmers and landholders.

Teachers talk about the project

Julie Tiller is Head of Humanities.

We wanted to incorporate something from the Humanities learning area that involved primarily English, so we decided to teach research and reporting skills through bush tucker. The Year 8 and 9 kids were interested in what plants are found in the area and their uses for bush

foods and medicine.

There are a lot of kids at that age who are likely to say 'oh, do we have to?' when you mention reading and research, so the thinking was that if we could incorporate something that was right here in their own environment, perhaps we could reach them in other ways. So they would have to actually have a look at the plants in situ rather than just in books.

After we went on our walk down to the Merredin Reserve with Aubrey Nelson [who is also a mentor at South Merredin Primary School], looking at the plants that were actually available, we asked the kids to write reports. They were able to use the Internet and some library sources and some of them got really enthusiastic and did a lot of their own reading as well. We also tried to broaden their knowledge base by taking them to a nursery where they have a little section on bush foods. And that helped them find attractive shrubs that can be propagated in the Grow Tunnel.



Julie Tiller

My interest as an English teacher was to teach research and presentation but this was a relevant and immediate way to do it.

Leanne Meldrum is Students at Educational Risk Coordinator. She has taught in a variety of locations, both secondary and primary, since 1979 but came to her current position six years ago. She is also running a bridging course for post-compulsory students at educational risk, that can lead to further education or employment. A number of Aboriginal students take part in that course.

Part of my role is to profile students, identifying kids at risk of not achieving to their potential. They may be at risk for a short time because a grandparent has died, for instance, and they've had a lot of absences. Or they may be at risk because they had a lot of absences through their primary schooling and they've come into high school without the literacy levels expected. Sometimes, Aboriginal students might have hearing problems and we need to be aware of all those sorts of things.

So I keep a database of all students and try to assist other staff to accommodate the ones at risk. When any program is created, we try to take account of the needs of these students. And our Aboriginal mentor, Mick Hayden, and Elaine Hayden [AIEO] are also there to make sure Aboriginal students feel comfortable and get support in class.



Leanne Meldrum

One of the issues is that in the past a lot of Aboriginal students saw Year 10 as the end of their education. We're trying to help them see Years 11 and 12 as viable options. One way is to bring them in to work with the current Year 11 Bridging Course students.

Some of the 'at risk' students have been able to go down to the Grow Tunnel and help with planting out at odd times. And I have a Year 11 Aboriginal boy who's really just hanging in at school, but it's been great for him to get interested in the Grow Tunnel.

One of the non-Aboriginal Year 9 boys asked why he was doing bush tucker and Aboriginal stuff in English. So I asked him what he thought English was all about. And he said 'oh, that's reading and writing', and some of the other kids said 'but when we're reading things in English it's got to be about something'. So they came to an agreement that it was relevant to what they were doing. And, in the end, they responded really, really well.

Some of them were a bit sceptical to start with but they got into it after the walk with Aubrey. He told them about the different cultural things and some of the sceptics were the ones who were then pursuing him asking him to tell them more. 'What else happens down here at the rock in terms of Aboriginal significance?' They were hanging on his every word.

Kelly McCormack teaches Society and Environment at Years 8, 9 and 10 and Geography at Years 11 and 12. She is in her second year of teaching.

Through the Society and Environment course we've been able to include aspects of Aboriginal history and culture into our all of our programs. We try to include an Aboriginal perspective in everything.

With the Grow Tunnel, Years 8 and 9 students had already done some research in English, so in Society and Environment we wanted to engage them further and start bringing in more of the Aboriginal aspects. One thing was to design a garden, which they eventually planted. So we wanted to extend them so that they were gaining knowledge but also putting it into practice. Part of that is learning what time of year seeds germinate and when to plant.

Some kids don't see how it all links up at first, but when they have the experiences it all starts to fit, and that's when they get enthusiastic.



Kelly McCormack