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Imagine the Future by Learning from the Past

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Thankyou very much.

Let me start as I should by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land here.

It's great to be here, and I'm glad you're here to hear about our story because I love to talk about it.

From the outset can I challenge this forum immediately to acknowledge the ancient integrity of traditional Aboriginal communities, and we've heard some great stories about the value that exists there from Dick (Estens).

It's a very ancient tradition and a very successful one, broken only by the forces of colonisation and capitalist modernity. I do this to challenge the notion that all Aboriginal communities are basket cases.

I'm challenging this notion today – where the Federal Government has to threaten to withhold petrol to get people to wash their children's faces.

Rather I am seeking to remind us there's a store of knowledge and wisdom which should not be ignored.

Cherbourg School is an Aboriginal community school, its about 300km north-west of Brisbane. And Cherbourg itself was formally a mission where Aboriginal people from as far north as Cooktown and as far west as Quilpie were rounded up and plonked and taught to be less Aboriginal.

On my arrival at Cherbourg School in August 1998, I discovered a school in chaos. And it was a school in which two status quo existed.

There was a white status quo and a black status quo. And both were colluding with each other. This sense of collusion I talk about was subscribing to a negative perception – in the same way I have seen in many other Aboriginal schools throughout Australia.

A very negative perception of what being Aboriginal was.

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The white status quo that I talk about – it was one in which teachers got their pay and were left largely unchallenged; getting very poor results but left unattended because the mindset was “This is how Aboriginal schools were”.

There was also a black status quo in which: “Yeah, our children are failing in the community but we can always blame the school for that.”

Many of the non-indigenous teachers that were on staff or in the staff I inherited had been there for years, and they were the type of people who would say: “We love being at the school, we love the children.” And they would say: “My life has been transformed as a result of being in an Aboriginal community.”

And that’s all a very nice and romantic story. But the tragedy however is that nothing about the lives of the children had been transformed.

And this is what we were responsible for.

The sense of collusion I speak about was being reflected in a range of ways. Children were being failed miserably, student behaviour was extremely poor and being tolerated – children literally running up and down on top of the two-storey buildings.

The grounds were a mess from litter on the weekends and vandalism. School attendance was extremely poor and being tolerated.

Many Aboriginal parents would send their children to nearby Murgon because they thought that Cherbourg School offered a watered-down curriculum or some type of community curriculum when in fact this wasn’t necessarily the case – we were supposed to, as a state school, offer a regular curriculum and regular program but what we did offer was watered-down expectations of what the children could achieve.

Retention of children for the entire school day was extremely poor, and being tolerated.

I would visit classrooms in the morning and I might see 12 students there. And by the end of the day if I visited the same classroom there might be three or four children because the rest had cruised home after lunch.

The next day I might come in and there might be 12 to 14 children, but eight of those were different from the children I saw the day before.

Retention of children into high school was exceptionally poor. And a good friend of mine did some research into a recent 30-year period, and what he found was that of 4260 children who had left Cherbourg School in Grade 7 to go to Murgon High School – of all of those children, they survived at Murgon High School for an average of nine months.

So in other words, they weren't even getting to the end of Grade 8.

And as principal of the school, I was not prepared to tolerate such failure, and as an Aboriginal person, I was certainly not prepared to tolerate such failure.

On questioning staff about the extent of our school's failure, they would say to me: "There's a lot of social complexities here. There are many cultural complexities, the parents don't value education, children don't value education, and the community is not supporting the school."

On every occasion, when we looked for answers about why were failing so abysmally, it was the students or the community that were getting the blame.

At no stage did we scrutinise such dismal performances and ask: "What is it that **we** are doing that is contributing to this underachievement?"

And to me, this was crucial, because you see clearly we had very little control and influence on the external forces or cultural context in which the school was surrounded. We did however have control over our own, and the things that happened inside the school.

And if under our control, we developed and embraced within our school a culture and a society of dismal failure, then clearly that's what we were destined to return.

In Education Queensland we have this thing called the Principles of Effective Learning and Teaching. And everywhere I go I say that this is the sexiest piece of rhetoric you would want to see; I know that's a bit sad – but I just find it a bit sexy!

Because what it does, the final principle says effective learning and teaching shapes and responds to the social and cultural context of the learner.

So and other words it says that if the teacher knows more about where the child is coming from and a little bit of vice-versa, then there is greater scope for effective learning and teaching to occur.

Accordingly in schools then, if we are going to have such sexy rhetoric around, then there is incumbency on us as educators to shape and respond to a child's social and cultural context – not blame it.

And what frustrated and angered me the most about this tendency to externalise or blame forces other than our own, is that for a teacher like the ones in our school – and in many Aboriginal community schools – regardless of student outcomes, life goes on.

But children and adults with very poor literacy or very poor education – they really suffer in life. And anyone who knows anything about the Royal Commission into Deaths in Custody will know that of all those Aboriginal people who died in some form of incarceration, most were illiterate and had very limited education.

The point I'm making here is - that for some Aboriginal young people with extremely limited education, life doesn't go on.

And at this point I don't want to be seen to be overstating the pint of having a sound education. But I wouldn't like to understate it either.

One of the first things we had to do – or I had to do as the leader of the team – is actually believe that it was there to be grabbed.

When I sat down with the staff I inherited and said: “Look, I’ve spoken to the elders in this community, I’ve spoken to the children, I’ve spoken to parents here. And what they want, and what I want, is for our children to leave this school with a very positive sense of what it means to be Aboriginal, and with academic outcomes that are just as good as any other school.

“I would like Grade 7 children at our school to be just as good as the Grade 7 children who are in Brisbane or Cairns or even downtown Melbourne.”

And I said to them: “If you don’t believe it, then you have to go.”

And half the teaching staff left.

They didn’t physically get up and leave the room, but their transfer papers were on my desk in the next few weeks.

So we re-established a new team, and I had been on the phone to them before they had even come and said to them: “Look its going to be hard work, but I don’t want you to come here to rescue children – they don’t need rescuing.

“I don’t want you to come here to save them or feel sorry for them – they don’t need people to feel sorry for them. Come here to do the job you are paid to do – that is effective learning and teaching.

“That’s what I’m expecting of you.”

Some people said to me: “I’ve never met any Aboriginal people.”

I said: “I don’t care. I’m not looking for experts on Aboriginal stuff; I’ve got heaps of those people around me already. What I need is quality teachers who are prepared to get on with the job and do whatever it takes.”

We crystallised the vision and made it very clear for people. And the vision that many people around the country I think have heard for our school is - the pursuit of academic outcomes comparable to any other school in Queensland, and to develop a strong and positive sense of what it means to be Aboriginal in today's society.

We had to get the children to buy into this – and we have got them to buy into this with a catchy motto.

When we say a positive Aboriginal identity, that means “strong”. When we say academic outcomes that are comparable (to other schools), that means “smart”.

So the new motto for our school is about being Strong and Smart.

Every Friday on parade I would say to children: “When we leave school what are we going to be?” and they would say, from the bottom of their guts: “Strong and Smart”.

And the vision is designed to get them to see their Aboriginal-ness, their blackness differently, more positively, and embrace that.

I should make this very clear, that while every day in our school we celebrate being Aboriginal – not just during NAIDOC Week or anything like that – every day we celebrate being Aboriginal. And in doing this we are not rejecting other people's whiteness.

We got the kids to buy into the vision with the motto, we got them to buy in with our school song, and our school song goes like this:

*“Jingle bells, jingle bells, Cherbourg School is here.
We're young and black and deadly – come and hear us cheer.
Bring on every challenge, put us to the test.
We're from Cherbourg State School, and you know we're the best.”*

And the original version was an old football song that we used to sing when I was playing football – that's real football – in Bundaberg ... rugby league!

And if the kids knew the original version they'd be horrified!

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What the motto did, and what the school song did, was allow us to hook the children. And it allowed me to hook staff and it allowed me to hook the community.

It allowed me to say to children: “You can’t tell me you want to be strong and smart. You can’t say to me you want to be strong and smart; young, black and deadly, and then go and act like something else.

“You can’t say to me you want to be strong and smart and then go and carry on in class, because there is nothing smart about that, there is nothing strong about that.

“You can’t say that you want to be smart and then go missing from school because you’re slack or because you want to go have a swim.”

I think perhaps if I was to reflect on one of the most important things that I did in our school, it would be to value and utilise existing resources in the school – here I’m talking about people, I’m talking about Aboriginal people that were in the school.

There was a lady in our school – Mum Ray. When I got to the school, she was a teacher aide at the school.

Inside the school gate she was a teacher’s aide. Outside the school gate she was one of the strongest, most powerful black women in the Cherbourg community.

Inside the school gate she was rendered useless – she was told to stay in the classroom and photocopy this, photocopy that, colour in these posters – she didn’t even get to choose the colours she used to colour those things in with.

And this just didn’t make sense to me – to have someone of such stature relegated to some almost insignificance.

So we said: “Mum Ray, you’re going to stop doing that and you’ll work as my ‘right hand man’.”

So we would spend the first three months cruising around visiting parents, challenging mind sets out in the community. And she was the eyes and ears for me – she would tell me who was who in the community, who I needed to go to when particular children were playing up, who I needed to stay away from, when was the right time to visit – all of those things.

As well as that I recruited and headhunted from particular family groups, indigenous people to work in our school. And we were able to do this by getting people in on CDP in partnership with the council and topping them up.

And what we did was we didn't go to the council and say we wanted CDP workers in the school, I had to give an undertaking to look after their training and establish some sort of career path.

So we set up a training structure in our school in which these guys would be released each afternoon to do their teacher education program and they worked five days a week in our school – from 9-1 they work in the classrooms, and from one o'clock onwards many of them are studying to become teachers.

So effectively what we've done is taken people off a Work for the Dole scheme and set them on a career path that will finish wherever they choose to.

It's about giving people a reason to get up in the morning, giving guys a reason to have a shave in the morning, and feel dignified and feel like they have something to offer.

One of the other things in our school that I will insist on is that I do not want to see indigenous teacher aides not acknowledged for the knowledge they bring to the school.

And I will say to teachers: "Look we're coming into the school with a big flash degree and all these kinds of things and its very useful, but what these people bring is something just as useful.

“And sometimes it will be even more useful than that flash degree you’re bringing in. You must see these people as co-teachers in the classroom, and you must acknowledge and value the information they bring to work alongside you.”

So they’re seen as co-teachers and they respond to the notion of being seen in that particular way.

We had to set about having a crack at what the solutions were instead of naming the problem all the time. And we know in schools, for a long time, that absenteeism had been a problem.

You heard about the results before, and that was just a result of setting about naming the solution.

We said: “All right, the class with the lowest number of absenteeism, let’s reward them” And that led to some dramatic changes which you heard about before. In Term Four 2004, real attendance at our school was at 93%. And that’s not too bad.

I should point out that the strategy was not just about providing extrinsic rewards like a trip to McDonalds or something like that – there was that extrinsic reward but there was also an intrinsic reward that was being offered simultaneously.

And the intrinsic reward was about getting stronger and smarter.

The extrinsic rewards that we provided at the start of this strategy we no longer provide, because there is no need to as children are starting to see the benefits of coming to school every day without having to worry about extrinsic rewards.

In our school we started an Aboriginal Studies program and the idea of this is to get children to focus on local community issues and get a better understanding. When we say strong and proud to be Aboriginal, I wanted them to confront that.

Sometimes it is a tricky thing when we say being Aboriginal is about being stronger, when they’re not seeing strong stuff in the community we are surrounded by.

And so what we need to do is confront the issues – and the children do confront the issues of – alcoholism, domestic violence, child abuse and get to understand that.

And our children need to understand these things exist in our community because they are a legacy of other historical and sociological process, and that they are not legacy of being Aboriginal.

I want to talk about high expectations – and the Cherbourg community, like a lot of communities, is confronted with issues of juvenile delinquency, and it's worth making it very clear that it's not in relation to the majority of young people but rather quite a minority.

There's a handful of young people in Cherbourg – particularly boys – that create havoc in the wider community. And when young children do this, I believe there are potentially a number of things they are screaming out about.

Sometimes they're saying "I'm hungry." Sometimes they're saying "I'm angry because of what's happened to me, or "I'm confused about what's happened to me or what somebody tried to do to me last night."

Or "I need love and attention" or "I need to know what the boundaries are". And with the Strong and Smart vision in our school I believe that that's what it did – it made it very clear what the boundaries are.

Like, we had a situation where – and I think this is the case for many communities – where we have circumstances where negative behaviour is reinforced.

And we had a lady come into the community and round up all the kids who had been smashing into our school or breaking into the tuckshop, and she brought a handful of children on a trip to Melbourne, which was all high profile.

But what that said to our children - it was a bit of a kick in the guts for them - because they were saying: "Look, we're trying to be stronger and smarter and they're the ones getting the trips away – we might as

well go smash the complex and we'll get a trip to the Gold Coast or to Melbourne."

So it's useful to reflect on what such children need. And they don't need the undeliverable rhetoric of the 60s libertarianism.

It's a philosophy espoused by people who needed more to make themselves feel good whether it delivers anything on the ground or not. And it's often (espoused) by people who blow in and blow out, who aren't there day to day.

What really matters is what's deliverable on the ground instead of this pseudo-radicalism that delivers nothing.

The children that I'm talking about needed to learn that their actions had consequences other than a trip to Melbourne or a trip to the Gold Coast.

They didn't need to be classed in some blackfella's version of *Summerhill* with this lady starring as the Aboriginal answer to AS Neill. They needed Aboriginal adults who were going to be there day in and day out and not simply to use them as photo opportunities or to look good in some sexy CV.

And I would consider that my views here are somewhat conservative, not controversial. And they seek to recover and preserve the best of our indigenous past.

I'm opposed to forms of libertarianism that promise much with its talk of rights and democracy, yet deliver nothing to indigenous people who are sniffing petrol, paint and glue, and who are stealing cars and need to understand where their boundaries are.

Changing the culture of a school is a difficult process, especially in a school like ours and one in which it had to change.

And we did it with a team of ours – and I think that is the most important thing I think. We spoke with elders and parents in our community, and they wanted children to learn about their own Aboriginal history.

They wanted them to be strong.

They wanted children to have the skills and capacity to look way beyond Cherbourg for their career options.

They wanted them to be smart.

We engaged with the council. They wanted children to be proud to be from Cherbourg.

They wanted them to be strong.

They wanted children to access opportunities in society in the same way any other human being would.

They want them to be smart.

We engaged with the children. They wanted to learn more about heir old people and how it made them who they are today.

They want to be strong.

They wanted to go to high school and not get kicked down and put down or kicked in the guts by anyone there.

They want to be smart.

At Cherbourg School, we aim to nurture a positive sense of what it means to be Aboriginal in today's society.

They will be strong.

And we aim to generate good academic outcomes that are comparable to other schools around Queensland.

They will be smart.

I want to finish on the point that I brought to you, and that is believing that it is there. And I'll do this by showing you - I want you to see - I

have a presentation to show you and I want you to look in and see something about Aboriginal Australia that you've never seen before.

Because I've seen it and I see it every day, and I want to share it with you.

[Show presentation]

[Questions]