Transitioning Indigenous Students to Western Schooling: A culturally Responsive Program

Thelma Perso; Pam Kenyon; Neila Darrough

Centre of Child Development and Education, Menzies School of Health Research; St John’s College Darwin; St John’s College Darwin

Provide full correspondence details here including e-mail for the corresponding author

Dr Thelma Perso: Menzies School of Health Research, 20 Catterthun St, Winnellie, Darwin, NT 0811
Thelma.perso@menzies.edu.au

Ms Pam Kenyon: St John’s College, Stuart Highway, Darwin, NT
Pam.kenyon@nt.catholic.edu.au

Ms Neila Darrough: St John’s College, Stuart Highway, Darwin, NT
neila.darrough@bethanyhurstville.catholic.edu.au

Provide short biographical notes on all contributors here.

**Dr Thelma Perso** has over 30 years in Education; eighteen as a classroom teacher and in school leadership positions in Western Australia. She followed this with a move into Government as K-12 Senior Mathematics consultant with the Department of Education and Training in W.A. In more recent years she has held positions as Executive Director Literacy and Numeracy Taskforce, Northern Territory Department of Education and Training, Executive Director Schools, Central Australia, Northern Territory Department of Education and Training, and Executive Director Curriculum, Department of Education, Training and the Arts, Queensland. Thelma is currently on secondment from NTDET with the Centre for Child Development and Education, Menzies School of Health Research.

**Ms Pam Kenyon** currently holds the position of Assistant Deputy Principal, Pastoral Care at St John’s College in Darwin. Pam started her career as a Health and Physical Education teacher in Western Australia, working in a school with over 2 000 students from a broad range of cultural, linguistic and SES backgrounds. She then moved to Fiji and taught in an international school with a similar student cohort. Pam returned to Australia two years ago and was appointed to St John’s College where her talent, popularity and ease with students was noted and quickly resulted in her current promotional position.

**Ms Neila Darrough** has spent 30 years in Catholic education in Primary and Secondary Schools, teaching a range of subjects including, Mathematics, PDHPE, Religious Education and Social Science. She has experience in a range of school leadership positions including year coordinator, administration coordinator, pastoral care coordinator, mathematics coordinator and deputy principal. Her studies include post graduate work in religious education, pastoral care and she holds a Masters degree in Educational Leadership. Neila is passionate about supporting all students to reach their full potential through connecting quality pastoral care to good pedagogy. She recently spend six months as Deputy principal at St John’s College in Darwin.
Transitioning Indigenous Students to Western Schooling: A culturally Responsive Program

St John’s College in Darwin Northern Territory is arguably one of the most complex schools in Australia. Not only does it comprise a number of challenging settings including a boarding facility, a middle school, and a senior College, it also draws on a student cohort that includes students from four states and territories, aged from 11 to 17, from urban and remote homes, with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, a broad range of social and health issues, and a complex and wide variety of student educational experiences, including school readiness. In addition there are international students from Asia, Africa and the Pacific region. Transitioning the boarding students into the demands of Western schooling as part of the Catholic Education system, in an urban environment, is challenging. One school leader at this school has had significant success using culturally responsive schooling approaches. Whilst this school leader may not have explicitly labelled her approach as being ‘culturally responsive’, describing her methods against researched characteristics of culturally responsive teachers indicates that the success has resulted from the personal beliefs, values and ethics underpinning her work, from her knowledge of the students, and from the support she has had from the school leadership team. This paper describes her capabilities and personal values, the development and implementation of the transition program, and the resulting successes.

Keywords: cultural competence, Indigenous education

Background:
The students attending St John’s College in Darwin come from a range of backgrounds. Those in the boarding school in particular come from locations across the northern half of Australia from Western Australia, Northern Territory and Queensland, and from Central Australia. In addition, there are some international students. Many are from remote communities (approximately 40%) whilst others come from homes in urban
locations. The life experiences of the students are broad and wide-ranging including different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Some students speak as many as five different Indigenous languages and Aboriginal English, but not Standard Australian English which is the language of instruction at the college. They bring a variety of health issues including conductive hearing loss, chronic disease and mental/emotional trauma. Personal hygiene issues including scabies, head-lice, boils, and tooth cavities are ‘normal’ for many students; more than 75% of the boarding population have one or more of these conditions at the start of the school year. Moreover, social health issues such as participation in smoking, alcoholism, petrol-sniffing and drug-taking are widespread. In addition, issues relating to a lack of familiarity with Western forms of schooling including the use of time in organising learning and its impact on access, and a sense of what is appropriate and inappropriate to wear in a school setting, result in a student cohort that provides an, at times overwhelming challenge for any school and its teachers.

The complexity just described is compounded by the wide variety in educational experiences and resulting degree of ‘school readiness’ of students. While some students have attended a primary school in their home community, few have attended continuously resulting in the amount of full-time schooling ranging from as little as 50 days to six years.

At the commencement of the school year students bring all these experiences with them in their ‘virtual school bag’. Despite each student being unique and knowing a lot, determining ‘where to start’ in transitioning these students into the successful engagement with the life of the school can be daunting for most teachers. Teachers who have been at the school for some time continue to have difficulties in adjusting to the student cohort. Teachers new to any school find their own personal transition
challenging; arriving in a school of this nature having come from interstate or overseas – as do many of St John’s teachers – confronts new teachers with a context they may or may not be prepared for and enormous challenges in coming to terms with the demands of the school and the students.

**Cultural Responsiveness and Miss P**

*Cultural competence* is a term used to describe “the ability to understand, interact and communicate effectively and with sensitivity, with people from different cultural backgrounds. Cultural competence is a personal capability that is not necessarily innate but develops over time. A precondition is a deep awareness of one’s own identity since it involves examining one’s own biases and prejudices. A cultural competent person is able to empathise with how people from other cultures might perceive, think, interact, behave, and make judgements about their world. Consequent it has four elements: awareness, attitude, knowledge and skills”. (Northern Territory Department of Education and Training, 2010)

*Cultural responsiveness* is *demonstrated* cultural competence, that is being culturally competent is not in itself sufficient to make a difference to practice since cultural competence is merely having the knowledge and ability to respond in appropriate ways.

Miss P trained as a teacher of Health and Physical Education. She taught initially in a large secondary school of over 2 000 students, in a low SES suburb of Perth, Western Australia for nine years before relocating to Fiji. The school where she worked in Fiji for two years was an international school for students from kindergarten to Year 12. These students were from a range of different cultural, linguistic and SES backgrounds, with a large proportion being English as Second Language learners.
Students were either Indigenous Fijians, of Indian descent, from British colonial heritage or from other smaller minority groups.

Following her time in Fiji, Miss P was successful in gaining a teaching position at St John’s College in Darwin. During her initial year as a classroom teacher at the college, her capabilities, attitudes, skills, and above all her success in building positive and productive relationships with the students from all cultural backgrounds, came to the attention of the school leadership team.

Everyday behaviours by Miss P include the following: (cultural competence comments in bold)

- Miss P asks an individual student a question and waits....and waits for the answer. When a response is forthcoming she validates students by responding with statements like “I understand why you might feel that way.” **Miss P truly listens to her students and they feel cared for and valued by her as a result.**
- Miss P makes sure her office is welcoming and safe. She has posters of Indigenous role models (e.g. Liam Jurra, Cathy Freeman) around the room as well as pieces of student written work and art works. Students know that she does not repeat or pass anything on anything shared in confidence. **In an environment that is foreign to students they need a ‘shelter’ where they can feel safe and secure, a space that they can share. Miss P’s office creates that for them.**
- Miss P is discrete, making sure she never embarrasses or publicly humiliates individual students by asking personal or confronting questions in front of their peers. She empathises with students and never places them in situations that she herself wouldn’t want to be in. **A critical part of cultural competence is empathy. Miss P ‘puts herself in the shoes’ of her students and treats them with respect by recognising and understanding their fears and insecurities. She is also aware of the importance of ‘shame’ in Indigenous culture and works to ensure she does not behave in ways that contribute to this for any student.**
- Miss P uses humour in her relationships with students. She has shown she can laugh at herself, and ‘take the mickey’ out of students by teasing them in front of peers. **‘Teasing’ is frequently used form of teaching and learning for many Indigenous cultures and families.**
- Miss P takes the opportunity to visit families of boarders whenever possible. She phones them frequently, concerning both positive and negative
behaviours, or just to update them. She speaks her mind and does not use jargon or ‘double talk’. Parents trust her to tell them what they want to know about their children and about the school. Miss P shows genuine interest in her students and their lives outside school. She involves parents and values their input. She informs them about what their students are doing and what the school is doing.

**Development of the Transition Program**

Prior to 2011 the College had no induction/transition program for its boarding students. These students from remote Indigenous communities commenced school and classes on day 1 of Term 1, following an extended school holiday break. Not surprisingly this proved extremely challenging for many students with the result that by the end of Term 1 the suspension rate was extremely high. Teachers complained bitterly to school leaders that the boarding students demonstrated poor behaviours in and out of class. In addition, the cost to the school of sending suspended students home was unsustainable. There was general acknowledgment that ‘something needed to be done’.

This realisation was one of the elements that triggered the creation of two new positions in the school. Two Assistant-Deputy Principals, Pastoral Care and Wellbeing were recruited to lead developments in care and well-being policies and practices in the school, one supporting the Deputy of the Middle School (Years 7-9) and the other supporting the Deputy in the Senior School (Years 10-12).

Miss P successfully won the position of Assistant Deputy Principal, Pastoral Care and Well-Being (Middle School). In making the appointment the school leadership team both recognised and acknowledged that these attributes would add value to the pastoral care of students since students would have increased access to Miss P’s time and availability. They also recognised that she would be able to share and model her skills in ways that would develop capability in ‘cultural competence’ in other staff members and hence increase their cultural responsiveness.
Term 1 in 2011 was Miss P’s first few months in her new position. As was usual practice, the boarding students commenced classes the day after they arrived at the school, having spent much of the previous day travelling from all over the country. As had previously occurred, the boarders had difficulty settling in and teachers of boarders found it difficult to manage the students’ behaviours; in one teacher’s words, “The students were feral”. Suspensions of students for misbehaviour during Term 1 were high (see Table 1). Teachers made it clear that they expected Miss P and the other Assistant Deputy (AD) to deal with the matter, and quickly.

Miss P and her senior years’ colleague met with the five Indigenous Education Workers (IEWs) on the school staff to discuss what might be done. They recognised that the issue had its roots in the transition from home to school. Moreover, for the students, it was the school that was the problem because it wasn’t like ‘home’. This in itself demonstrated great insight; there was no blame on students not being able to fit in but instead a realisation that it was the school that needed to support the students to make the expected transition into a different environment. Some might even categorise this expectation as being ethno-centric; an arrogance stemming from the belief that the Western way is the only authentic way and that ‘others’ have to fit in.

The insight by the AD’s and IEW’s came from a recognition and acknowledgement that the boarding students lived and walked in two worlds, the world of home on remote communities, and the world of school, in this case St John’s College.

Brennan (1998), states that “…schooling, for most Indigenous children and their parents, remains culturally alien. Most non-Indigenous teachers and students have little knowledge or understanding of Indigenous children’s home lives and culture and this lack of understanding is reflected in their interactions with them”. (p.159) This cultural
‘jarring’ that can occur for students from different cultural backgrounds than those of the mainstream school, has in the past been attributed to the characteristics and skills of the children themselves (Dockett et al, 2010; Snow, 2006). Leong and Bedrova (2003) maintain that school readiness is not only about the characteristics of the children, but about the capacity and capability of the school to meet the needs of the children.

(Dockett, et al 2010)

By talking to the IEWs and students, and using their own knowledge gained through relationships with students at the school, the AD’s were able to determine and document the nature of these differences. Key differences between home and school for the students occurred in non-discrete categories as follows:

**Physical and organisational environment**

Boarding students from remote Indigenous communities often lived in communal circumstances, sharing beds, cooking and washing facilities (when they exist and are functional). Organisationally they rarely use clocks or time-pieces, time being measured more in terms of relationship quality rather than as elapsed time set apart for specific activities with a ‘start’ and a ‘finish’. Students during holiday time are generally independent, coming and going as they wish, eating and sleeping when they feel the need to do so, and engaging in activities if they are meaningful and fun. By contrast, at school they needed to be able to sit in chairs and to ‘pay attention’ for extended time periods. Children and young people in Indigenous communities frequently are responsible for themselves, rarely relying on adults (especially those they don’t know) to tell them what to do

**Social environment (relationships)**

In Indigenous communities and homes learning occurs primarily through ‘teasing’ rather than explicitly being told ‘you are wrong’. In fact being told this by someone who
is not a family member can be offensive. (Malin, 1990) Children and young people come from highly-structured kinship groups where they are taught who they should and shouldn’t relate to from a very early age. They have strong family ties and responsibilities. Respect for others is earned rather than imbued through position or rank. Young people rarely defer to adults. They respond best to adults who they sense ‘genuinely care about them’. These adults provide safety for them in a cultural sense.

**Health Environment (Personal health and hygiene)**

Living in often insanitary surroundings by Western standards, with little free-flowing water available and limited access to health services, can result in the health challenges outlined earlier in this paper. In addition, many communities are socially dysfunctional and this can result in activities aimed at escaping reality such as drug-taking, petrol sniffing and alcohol abuse. Many students are fortunate to have a bed, let alone one of their own with clean sheets.

Miss P recognised that the students needed to be explicitly taught the behaviours expected by the school and teachers. She believed that it was no wonder that the students were not meeting the teachers’ expectations when they didn’t know what the expectations were. In addition, Miss P realised that the teachers needed to know more about the students they were teaching and the ‘home worlds’ that they came from in order to better appreciate the gap that students were expected to bridge in a very short period of time, with little or no support.

Miss P initiated a discussion with the school leadership team about a possible ‘Transition program’ that would support the students to safely negotiate the transition from home to school. It was agreed that a three-day program would be developed for boarders at the start of Term 2 2011, to support their transition back to school following the Term 1 end-of-term holiday.
The IEWs suggested, and it was agreed, that the program would explicitly label the expected school behaviours as ‘St John’s Way’. By brainstorming the home conditions and behaviours with the IEWs, Miss P determined that the transition program needed to specifically address the elements in the above three categories.

A simple framework of school rules was developed for ease and consistency of reference by teachers and students. The three ‘R’s recognised that everyone has

- The right to respect
- The right to learn
- The right to be safe.

Miss P realised that these concepts would likely be foreign to many of the boarders and that the transition program would need to explicitly teach their meanings to the students in ways that recognised and valued the uniqueness of the students and their cultural identities. The ‘Home Way/St John’s Way’ approach would enable this, having both ways as a platform that valued each whilst acknowledging differences.

**Program Implementation and Cultural Responsiveness**

The three-day program was designed primarily by Miss P, and then refined in consultation with the IEWs, to address the categories and elements discussed above in culturally responsive ways. It is not the intention to describe the details of the program here, merely to highlight those aspects that particularly attended to the differences recognised and identified in the discussion above.

These key aspects are tabled below with comments about cultural responsiveness. Note that, as part of the cultural responsiveness, an interpreter was always present to support students to understand the intentions of workshops and presentations.
Table 1. Transition program elements and embedded cultural competence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Cultural Responsiveness - comment</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Who are we?</strong></td>
<td>Importance of meaningful personal relationships; acknowledging and valuing/validating this in their own cultures; Showing who they can trust, go to, feel safe with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss P and other selected school leaders and each of theIEWs, presented a powerpoint presentation describing who they were: their likes, dislikes (including favourite foods, sports, activities), family background, home location and other personal details that they wished to share</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Three R’s</strong></td>
<td>Use of visual, explicit teaching, valuing what students say and bring, demonstrating if needed, shared approach – not one persons’ opinion; use of teasing as needed; validating cooperative learning styles and visual approaches to learning, acknowledging languages differences, using IEWs to translate if needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss P presented a workshop on the 3 R’s as ‘St John’s Way’. Following a short description of each of these the students were separated into three groups which were jointly facilitated by a staff member and an IEW. Each group had three large sheets of paper, one with a picture of an ear, another with a picture of an eye, and the third with the word ‘feel’ on it. They were asked to brainstorm what each of the three R’s ‘sound like’, ‘look like’ and ‘feel like’ when they are operating in a classroom. For example, “What conversations would you expect to hear in a St John’s Way classroom?” “How would people talk</td>
<td></td>
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to each other?”

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<tr>
<th><strong>Gunja/Cannabis</strong></th>
<th>Use of visual materials to maximise impact, visual learning styles, delivered in a factual, non-judgemental way, recognising that a large proportion of the students use alcohol and cigarettes but showing that they are not in trouble; they are just being informed. Teachers model the responsible behaviours regarding health (they may even give personal anecdotes about the effects of using these substances and poor nutrition on themselves and their family members to make it more ‘personal’ and ‘real’).</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Workshop on FORWAARD (Foundations of Rehabilitation with Aboriginal Alcohol Related Difficulties) primarily using photos and visual aids to show students the effects of alcohol on the body. Reinforcement that ‘alcohol is not ‘St John’s Way’.</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Smoking</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Workshop on FORWAARD (Foundations of Rehabilitation with Aboriginal Alcohol Related Difficulties) primarily using photos and visual aids to show students the effects of smoking on the body. Reinforcement that ‘smoking is not ‘St John’s Way’.</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Nutrition</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Many students eat a lot of ‘junk food’ at home on communities. This can be the result of poverty; junk food is generally cheaper that fruit and vegetables for example on remote communities. Students are shown the results of poor nutrition including diabetes, stunted growth, tooth decay, obesity. They might be shown the sorts of foods they can eat that are health but not expensive.</td>
<td>Use of visual materials to maximise impact, visual learning styles, delivered in a factual, non-judgemental way, recognising that a large proportion of the students use alcohol and cigarettes but showing that they are not in trouble; they are just being informed. Teachers model the responsible behaviours regarding health (they may even give personal anecdotes about the effects of using these substances and poor nutrition on themselves and their family members to make it more ‘personal’ and ‘real’).</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Tour of school/school bags/stationery</strong></th>
<th>Acknowledgement of country demonstrates a valuing and recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ownership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IEWs give boarders a tour of the whole school so they can see every room, playing field etc and get a sense of their environment. The ‘country’ belongs to the Larrakia</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Acknowledgement of country</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrates a valuing and recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ownership</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Nation and this was acknowledged at the start of the day.</td>
<td>and the importance of that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEWs give boarders a school bag with stationery including a diary, pencils and books and explain that these belong to them and that they are expected to bring them to class (‘St John’s Way’)</td>
<td>Explicit teaching of what it is expected that they bring to class and the need to take care of these things.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cyber Bullying</strong></td>
<td><strong>Non-threatening, non-judgemental use of visuals, showing by demonstrating and example.</strong></td>
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<td>Miss P shows students her facebook page on the white board. She shares things she has said on the page but reinforces that she never writes anything she would not say to someone face to face; this is not ‘St John’s Way’.</td>
<td>Examples and situations are described and/or acted/modelled so that students can visualise and empathise with the harmful effects of this communication on individuals, especially suicide rates in young people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most students use Diva Chat in their communities since it is a free download on their phones. Miss P and the school Constable (Indigenous) reinforce that it is OK to share their personal information on Diva Chat but that it is not “St John’s Way” to write something about someone else that they wouldn’t say to them face-to-face.</td>
<td><strong>Personal Health</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEWs and Miss P demonstrate to students how to make and lie in their bed (especially the use of sheets) to reduce incidence of mites and other ‘bugs’. Visual exaggeration is used i.e. placing plastic spiders, cockroaches, and insects on Miss P’s arm to demonstrate that these creatures can get onto the skin and cause sickness.</td>
<td>Visual and hands on learning is emphasised to make the possibility more ‘real’ to students. The issues are treated objectively from a health perspective rather than personally and in a judgemental way – treated as ‘cause and effect’. Separation into gender groups acknowledges the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEWs and Miss P talk about washing hair using similar <strong>IEWs</strong></td>
<td><strong>Miss P</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
demonstrations and visuals with nits, scabies, boils. Teeth-brushing is also demonstrated and reinforced with photos of tooth cavities and people with no teeth trying to chew etc.

**Sexual Health**

Students are separated into gender groups; IEWs and phys-ed/health teachers (including Miss P for girls) explain about puberty, menstruation, etc and explain the importance of showering properly and how to use soap when they shower and wash after going to the toilet.

| role of ‘men’s business’ and ‘women’s business’ that is still very much a part of remote community life. | Behaviours are modelled and acted by teachers and IEWs, again in a non-judgemental way so that students are left to make their own conclusions rather than being told that what they do at home is ‘wrong’ or ‘unhealthy’ |

The program includes fun activities including a BBQ, swimming, team games and sport activities. Part of Miss P’s personal goal was that after three days all students would know her name and she would know theirs, they would all know where to find her if they needed to talk about anything, and they would know her role. Miss P’s office is a ‘safe-haven’ for students at the school. They all know they are welcome there and that Miss P genuinely cares about them.

The program, has been held three times since it’s inception and is held at the start of each semester for all new boarders with a slightly modified version for long-time boarders. This recognises that even though students have been explicitly taught the ‘St John’s Way’ expectations, these need to be constantly reinforced and reiterated each time the boarding students transition from home to school.

**Evaluation & Discussion**
The Transition program at St John’s has proved highly successful. Suspension data (See Table 2 and Figure 1, below) indicate that the implementation of the program at the commencement of Term 2 2011 resulted in a significant reduction in student misbehaviours leading to suspension.

The transition program was also held at the commencement of Semester 2 (Term 3, 2011) and the data indicates that this reinforced the school expectations with a result that suspension figures continued to be low. This pattern has continued in 2012 following the Transition program being run at the start of each term so far this year.

Table 2. Suspension data, St John’s College, by Term January 2011 – June 2012.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Term 1</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term 2</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term 3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term 4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Suspensions</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Suspension data, St John’s College, by Term January 2011 – June 2012
Students learned the behaviours expected of them at St John’s through the Transition program. It is likely that the school and teachers had made assumptions that students would automatically know these behaviours. As a result, students were disciplined for behaving badly and inappropriately when in fact they had no idea that they were doing anything wrong. They had brought their ‘home-way’ behaviours with them to school which did not match the expected behaviours of the school. This resulted in a ‘clash of cultures’ with the dominant culture exerting power by suspending students and sending them home at great expense. For many homesick students this was a positive outcome and hence was unlikely to improve the situation. Once the expected behaviours were made clear and explicit however, the students responded positively.

In addition, as a result of the number of suspensions in the middle school dropping significantly, teachers are able to have greater program continuity. This supports their planning and maximises learning and teaching time for students. The reduction in suspension numbers has also resulted in major savings for the school since sending students home when they are suspending is a costly exercise, both in administration and dollars.

Anecdotal evidence from all staff indicated that following the transition program students were more settled, ready to learn, more attentive, and more respectful of each other and staff. Teachers continue to reinforce the three R’s and the ‘St John’s Way’. This simple framework has proved invaluable in ensuring that all teachers use the same approaches and the same language. For students in an unfamiliar environment, this is essential. The ‘cultural competence’ in this approach is a key factor in this success. The ‘Home-way, St John’s Way’ validates both ways as having equal status. Neither is better or superior to the other, they are just different. This validates the students and the lives they live at home, their culture, language, learning styles and day-to-day activities.
This in turn raises their self esteem and results in a more positive attitude toward learning. Engagement increases which further increases learning.

This approach also sends a strong message to families that the school is not trying to assimilate their children. The school is enabling the students be proud of their cultural heritage and to walk in both worlds.

Teachers in schools are in a powerful position, having a major role in addressing social injustice, particularly with respect to cultural inequity. Cochran-Smith (1997) maintains that teachers are active participants in a struggle for social justice and can either support or challenge current inequalities in schools. In addition, Villegas & Lucas (2002, p.23) state, that “While recognizing that white, middle class ways are most valued in society, affirming teachers understand that this status derives from the power of the white, middle class group rather than from an inherent superiority in socio-cultural attributes”.

Hence, the cultural validations provided by an explicit and publicly shared approach (‘Home-Way, St John’s Way’) that is supported and communicated in school policy, provides a powerful statement of the school ethos and values. Continual reinforcement by teachers reassures students and families that this is not lip-service but equality in action. This reinforcement also reminds teachers every day that the students are different, not deficient. It reminds teachers that the students come from a strength-base; a knowledge system that has a long history and will continue to be important for these students long after they leave school.

The suspension rate has dropped dramatically as a result of the program. Whilst other factors may have impacted on this data, it is difficult to isolate them since the school staff believe the program is the only event that was different on the normal school calendar.
Concluding Comments

This paper has outlined the successes of a program designed to address transition issues for students moving backward and forward each term from their traditional home environments to the environment of a complex Western school environment. It highlights the need for schools of the dominant culture to explicitly provide culturally responsive support during transition times, such as the start of term or semester in order to make the process as seamless as possible for students and to minimise disruption for teachers. It also reinforces the wisdom of a ‘home-way, school-way’ approach as a means of formally recognising this transition and the challenges placed on students, families and staff. This approach not only sets clear expectations for students but also alerts staff to the difficulties faced by their students in regularly confronting different cultural, linguistic and social expectations imposed by the school and in classrooms.

In addition, the paper has highlighted the vision of the school leadership team in recognising the cultural responsiveness of one teacher and providing support for her to develop the program. By describing her personal values and the approaches she uses in her day-to-day dealings and relationships with students, it is evident that the program has its roots in her personal values and in her understanding of the needs of the students and her empathy for them. Her cultural responsiveness is probably more intuitive than intellectual, and is constantly reinforced through trusting relationships and positive educational outcomes that she generates.

Programs of this type are unlikely to be successfully reproduced elsewhere in their entirety in other educational sites and settings. This is primarily due to the fact that the people and circumstances are different on every educational site. However, the approach used in the development of the program and the culturally responsive nature
of the elements of the program indicates that it is the values and cultural competence of
the individuals responsible – in particular their willingness to enact these - that can
make the difference.

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