

## **“MAKING CHILDREN STRONG”: INDIGENOUS CULTURAL BELIEFS, VALUES AND CULTURAL PRACTICE.**

### **Role of school ?**

Culture is commonly understood to be the “shared, learned system of values, beliefs and attitudes that shapes and influences the perceptions and behaviour” of a group of people ie culture provides underlying principals that build a “mental blueprint” or “mental code” for how to live your life. Culture provides the foundation for identity.

In turn, cultural practice (the way culture is lived and expressed in languages) reinforces cultural values and beliefs. Ceremony, language and rituals are critical to the survival of cultures (and religions) over time because the way we behave affects the way we feel and perceive ourselves, each other and our world.

The strongest and longest surviving cultures are those that have sustainable underlying cultural beliefs and values that can be used to guide the adaption of cultural practices to changing conditions and demands.

For example in relatively recent times the worlds most successful migrants to other cultures have been the Chinese, Indian and Jewish people. Their own insistence (sometimes as a reaction to exclusion) that they retain their own cultural identity gives them a sense of safety and strength. This provides the confidence necessary to risk change and creates an effective springboard for gaining real economic and even political power in their adopted countries.

Indigenous Australians have the longest surviving cultures the world has ever known: over 400 different cultures with different Law and different languages lasting tens of thousands of years. Considering the cultural history of the rest of the world (including what is happening now) this longevity is absolutely extraordinary.

As an outside observer perhaps what is most marked and impressive is the sustainability of their spiritual beliefs (eg the connectedness of all) on which their values (eg respect for self, each other, and country) and cultural practices are based. From a very early age children are taught not only their relationships to everything but also their RESPONSIBILITIES to everything.

Meaning and purpose in life does not have to be discovered. Your very existence is meaningful because of how you and your actions affect the whole. Your purpose is to contribute to the wellbeing of the whole.

“.....Children are born and grow up understanding that they are part of an all connected system (land, animals, plants, family, people) that they have responsibility even as children to hold together and keep strong.....”

If responsibility is so profoundly shared then power is also distributed in very different ways to other cultures. In other cultures the hierarchal and overwhelmingly patriarchal nature of power distribution inevitably leads to power struggles within groups. Only some individuals or groups are seen to have any real or effective responsibility for the groups welfare or resources (and usually nobody has truly accountable responsibility for what happens to the environment!)

The highly sophisticated ways of viewing health and wellbeing (holistically), resolving conflict (eg restorative justice, mediation, methods of shared concern and social support), and understanding the environment (the connectedness of all) of Indigenous cultures have only very recently started to be understood, appreciated and used by the rest of the world.

During their history Australia's Indigenous cultures have adapted cultural practices to cope with enormous changes in climate (the last ice age finished about 10,000 years ago), the geophysical nature of the continent (separation of Tasmania from the mainland), changing availability of food, the European invasion, etc etc.

**However it is impossible for Indigenous people to continue to make constructive changes to cultural practice in response to a changing social environment if their cultural beliefs and values (reinforced by language, ceremony and ritual) are undermined, distorted or lost.**

Their need for a safe, strong place (identity) from which to choose how they adjust to a changing world is no different to other Australians. There is growing concern by many Indigenous people about emerging distortions to traditional cultural practices and values that are undermining wellbeing and being passed on to children eg the growing lack of respect for Elders, the changed power dynamics between men and women; the concept of sharing and supporting each other which is now often distorted to "humbug"; the distortion of payback from a ritualised means of "explaining" ("like your coroner's court") and restoring balance, to revenge. (Revenge that may be contaminated by misdirected anger and fuelled by frustration, helplessness and alcohol); the shortening of the initiation process which compromises its power to be psychologically transformative etc etc.

These distortions of cultural practice (behaviour) result from loss of connection to underlying cultural values. They are not just destructive of culture but extremely destructive of individuals and communities because they change how people see themselves. They change their identities.

Fundamental to wellbeing is a strong identity. Identity acts like an internal rule book, a guide to your own behaviour, your expectations of yourself and others. Your identity also sets limits on what you will take from others and defines your relationship to others and your environment.

In the school situation there is usually a feeling by teachers that they must accept anything that is explained to them as "cultural" no matter how destructive or disruptive the consequences may be. For most Non-indigenous teachers in most situations it is not appropriate to offer opinions about what is a traditional, distorted or recent cultural value or practice. However it is entirely appropriate and essential that you respectfully question practices that appear to you to be undermining the children's welfare or learning.

Be genuinely respectful and use verbal and particularly nonverbal language and tone of voice that suggests a real need to understand (rather than implied judgement). A polite enquiry as to how you find it difficult to understand how a particular practice would have allowed survival over so long may not receive an answer (more likely silence and turning away) but it can trigger questioning and discussion in the community particularly if you actually ask "What do the old people say?" It can also give people "permission" and the confidence to voice their own confusion and speak out about their own concerns.

This questioning of apparently destructive behaviour is becoming urgent as the present generation of Elders die. Government policies and increasing access to western media make it very difficult to

stop disruption and distortions of traditional cultural practice. This in turn undermines and distorts traditional cultural values.

Indigenous people want to enjoy much of Western culture. If they can have control of how cultural practices adapt and change while keeping and using traditional beliefs and values as their guide then Indigenous culture will not only survive and thrive but it has much to teach the rest of us too.

By supporting Indigenous children to stay in touch with their traditional beliefs and values, (particularly the connectedness of all, responsibility to and respect for self, each other and country) schools can play a vital role in helping Indigenous people do what they have done more successfully than any other culture on earth: adapt cultural practice to changing conditions in ways that keep them strong.

(Note: For specific strategies on how to do this see the following strategies)

Louise Samways . 2007

### **Building a Strong Identity: Strategies for Whole School and Classroom**

In traditional culture learning occurred in a continuous process as needed. Teaching beliefs, values and cultural practices involving ceremony, rituals and language blended into a seamless whole. The learning process continuously reinforcing itself as people lived their daily lives. Learning and knowledge were extremely highly valued and seen as a life long process.

Compare this with the way we teach in schools where learning is seen as a separate activity compartmentalised into different areas and subjects. Language and cultural programs are also overwhelmingly distinct and separate. (It is worth remembering that while Indigenous cultures considered teaching all children from a very early age essential, and gave them extraordinary responsibility and autonomy, our Western cultures have only considered education important for all children for little over one hundred years).

The problem of transferring learning into different contexts is a huge problem even in mainstream schools with no cultural differences, (as a former teacher I never ceased to be amazed how even the best maths students could be completely lost using the same skills in the science lab or trying to map the school!)

It is therefore not surprising that the underlying values of respect and responsibility taught at home and in the stories and activities of cultural programs do not necessarily automatically transfer into behaviour and attitudes towards “white fella learning”.

**To reinforce the strengths of Indigenous culture and help promote the strong sense of Identity that is the foundation of wellbeing:**

- Constantly make the connection for children between a desired behaviour at school and their own cultural values (eg respect and responsibility) and practice (eg listening to teacher, working hard and persisting).
- Relate right behaviour at school back to cultural moral stories and ask Indigenous staff and community to create stories in language displaying right behaviour in school situation.
- Ask **Indigenous** staff to **specifically teach** how skills or values learnt on bush trips are relevant to school situation eg If the boys had to take responsibility for sharing the kangaroo meat and looking after everyone, how does that mean they treat the women and girls at school? If catching the perentie involved digging for an hour in stifling heat what qualities were required that are also needed at school?
- Create word lists (and talk about the words in Language and English) that **describe** and **define** their identity and how they **feel** when they **behave** in ways that are **true to that identity**. By realising that right behaviour makes you “feel good inside” it becomes **self reinforcing**. This is much more effective than external reinforcement and is the **key to sustainable behaviour change**.

Louise Samways 2007

[louise@louisesamways.com.au](mailto:louise@louisesamways.com.au)