



Lighting the FIRE of reconciliation

Annie Facchinetti

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My invitation to everyone is that in your everyday power, in your work place with your regular authority, with your everyday resources, turn your mind occasionally to what you can do, for the benefit of all Aboriginal people
Prof Michael McDaniel, Wiradjuri Man

It is often difficult to find meaningful and genuine ways to embed appropriate activities and attitudes into a school's culture that recognise the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) communities to our past, present and future. While the cross-curriculum priority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures in the Australian Curriculum attempts to do this, many of the connections made in the subject elaborations have been criticised for being tenuous or forced. For example, the Year 6 mathematics elaboration, "investigating the use of rotation and symmetry in the diagrammatic representations of kinship relationships of Central and Western Desert people," (ACARA), makes a somewhat questionable link to the Geometric Reasoning strand that may not be easy for our largely east coast population to relate to, or for teachers to find credible and usable information about.

This is not to say that developing an appreciation of the contributions of and issues faced by Indigenous Australians is not a worthy aim, but to be successful ATSI perspectives need to become an integral and rational part of how schools approach their daily work.

To address this incredibly complex problem, Vicki Clark, Coordinator of the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry in Melbourne, conceived a solution that on the surface is brilliantly simple: the FIRE Carriers project, or Friends Igniting Reconciliation through Education. Initiated between 2008 and 2009, the FIRE Carriers initiative was kindled by Clark's desire to find a way to continue the work of reconciliation in our schools and to support the Opening the Doors Foundation, an organisation dedicated to tackling educational disadvantage experienced by ATSI families. Clark's passion for the cause did not blind her to the challenges. "We wanted to reenergise schools without burdening them with more everyday business," she explains.

A descendent of the Mutthi Mutthi people from southwest New South Wales herself, Clark's astute approach had immediate appeal for schools. With the support of a staff member from Open Doors, Clark initially hosted a reconciliation breakfast to which schools were invited for the project launch. A similar event was then held for the principals of the Sandhurst Diocese, resulting in every one of the Catholic schools in the area agreeing to be FIRE Carrier schools. Along with the 50-plus Sandhurst schools, the program now boasts 20 primary schools from Melbourne's northeast zone, and a further 13 secondary schools across Melbourne as members.

The process to become a FIRE Carrier school is not arduous. Two years ago, Our Lady Help of Christians Primary principal Chris Ray



and I attended an afternoon commissioning ceremony, which began with a welcome to Country. Aboriginal representatives warmed their hands on a flame around which we all stood and then placed their hands on the cheeks of the attendees one-by-one in a symbolic gesture representing both igniting reconciliation, and passing on the flame of responsibility. Each new FIRE Carrier was presented with a badge, while schools were given a stained glass and wood artwork to display in their foyers as a tangible symbol of the commitment to the cause.

The student representatives chosen to be FIRE Carriers at Our Lady's last year were similarly commissioned at a school-based ceremony. Clark stresses that student FIRE Carrier leaders should be seen as part of the school's everyday events. For example, the students chosen as FIRE Carrier leaders could be announced at the same time as the school captains. Our FIRE Carrier leaders met regularly through the year, and initiated a number of projects, including a 'Bring a book, buy a book' event that raised funds for the Opening the Doors Foundation.

This social justice element is one that has particular appeal both to schools who are trying to instill a sense of community and empathy in their students, and for the students who feel they can make a genuine difference in the lives of fellow Australians. One of the unique aspects of the program is that schools have a certain amount of freedom to implement initiatives in a way that best fits with their existing culture and procedures. This gives the FIRE Carrier leaders not just a title, but the ability to discuss issues and

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consider solutions that they can then carry out.

According to Clark, teachers have embraced the project too, largely because involvement is easy to integrate within the school's existing activities. "It's laid a solid foundation and a local connection. The core of the covenant is spirituality, cultural recognition and practical reconciliation – all doable things," Clark says. Examples of activities that FIRE Carriers might initiate in a school include raising the Aboriginal flag at assembly, acknowledging at the start of community events the traditional custodians of the land where the school is located, and celebrating significant dates in our shared history.

Each year, the new FIRE Carrier leaders attend a special day to induct them into their roles. The 2014 event that the new FIRE Carriers from Our Lady's attended was designed to give the students a greater appreciation of ATSI culture, as well as inspiration about what they wanted to achieve in their new roles. Prior to attending, each school was given a small square canvas incorporating part of an Indigenous-inspired pattern. FIRE Carrier leaders had to create an artwork that represented their school's understanding of and commitment to reconciliation on their allocated piece.

Our square featured the Southern Cross as a symbol of Our Lady Help of Christians guiding our school on our journey and as a unifying symbol for all Australians. Drawing on the colours of the Aboriginal flag, the finished work also included two gum trees representing our local environment, Uluru as a symbol for Aboriginal spirituality, and footprints signifying our first few steps on a journey that the students hope will be long and successful. Kangaroo tracks were a final touch to show that we are sharing the journey with many others.

The completed canvasses were assembled in order to form a single larger work, unifying the intentions and commitment of all the schools present.

This activity was one of many conducted on the day to broaden the students' understanding of what it means to be a FIRE Carrier. A highlight was a message from AFL footballer and Australian of the Year Adam Goodes, who was unable to attend in person, but who recorded and sent a video on the day especially for the students. Goodes proved himself to be an excellent role model in the way that he articulated the importance of discovering his cultural heritage to his identity, in his clear anti-racism stance, and in the simple fact that he gave up his time to create a message specifically for the FIRE Carriers. Needless to say, the students were delighted to record a short thank-you video in return, a task that reinforced the sense of community and connection that the FIRE Carriers program stands for.

As a means for developing teacher



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understanding of and confidence in carrying out the FIRE Carriers' objectives, school staff are also offered the chance to attend an immersion experience at Lake Mungo. Lindy Chaplin-Holmes, a Year 1/2 teacher at Our Lady's represented the school on this year's trip.

Located in southwestern New South Wales, Lake Mungo is a dry lake that is one of a group of 17 within the Willandra Lakes World Heritage Area. It marks the junction of traditional territories belonging to the Ngiyampaa, the Paakintji and the Mutthi Mutthi tribal groups. Chaplin-Holmes volunteered for the trip because she wanted to learn more about Aboriginal culture and how she could use her knowledge in a school setting. "You can read about Aboriginal culture in a book," she says, "but you actually experience it when you are there."

Vicki Clark, as a descendent of the Mutthi Mutthi people, also accompanied the teachers. Chaplin-Holmes recalls how one of the most moving events on the tour was visiting the grave

of Clark's mother, an Elder of her tribal group. She also particularly enjoyed the opportunity to attend the welcoming ceremony for a three-day youth event in the area, which took place near the banks of the Murrumbidgee River.

Another significant experience was a visit to the Coomealla Aboriginal Health Corporation. The centre's CEO spoke about the 90 per cent Aboriginal community and their plight, and gave the group an insight into the importance of working in partnership to engage people in constructive activity.

For Chaplin-Holmes, the experiences on offer during the trip brought her knowledge of Aboriginal peoples and culture to life. "It felt like more than 360 degrees," she says. Although she is not sure at this stage how her learning will manifest itself at school, she feels inspired and motivated to want understand and contribute more. "There's lots more to be done in schools; lots more to learn," she observes, "but there's certainly things happening."

Clark, too, has already seen the difference the FIRE Carriers project is making in schools. "The impact's been amazing," she says. "It's become part of the everyday business of schools, on the agenda of what they do."

The appointment of student FIRE Carriers has also been a success. "It gives them something tangible, something to be proud of. It gives them responsibility as the keeper of knowledge and ceremony, which stays with them forever. They can take it into the workplace, families and friendships," Clark explains.

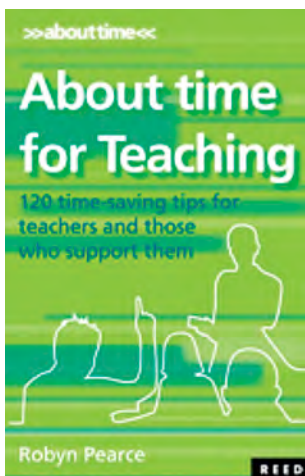
The creation of a dedicated website chronicling the history of the FIRE Carriers project that uses, as Clark describes it, "updated technology that young people are attuned to," is one of several additional activities that Clark is considering to expand the program. She also hopes to conduct an open conversation with teachers from FIRE Carrier schools to see where the project should go next.

Clark's future plans for the FIRE Carriers initiative, however, are tempered by the realities of funding. "The real issue is maintaining it, keeping schools resourced and enough Australian Catholic Ministry (ACM) resources to spread the FIRE Carriers project further." While ACM personnel actively work on the initiative, there is no separate funding and existing staff have absorbed the extra responsibilities into their workloads. Although they receive some philanthropic funding, the project is otherwise unfunded, making the achievements so far all the more remarkable.

References

Australian Curriculum, Reporting and Assessment Authority (ACARA) *Australian Curriculum – Mathematics*. Available from <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/mathematics/Curriculum/F-10>. Accessed 5 April 2014

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