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'We got education needs too': Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in urban areas

Despite over 70 % of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia now living in urban or regional urban areas (ABS 2006), there is limited research which highlights their issues or the issues that impact on their education outcomes. The statistics demonstrate that living in urban centres is as much part of reality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as living in a remote discrete community. This paper will explore some of the issues for urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples against a backdrop of statistics and some of the current literature. Examples will be highlighted from the South-East Queensland region to expose the need for specific education strategies and programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in this region and in other urbanised regions in Queensland and Australia.

Keywords: Aboriginal; Torres Strait Islander; Indigenous; Education; Urban; Students.

Introduction

For the purposes of this paper I have used the term urban as defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). In Queensland the ABS classifies urban as the statistical divisions of Brisbane and Moreton (which also includes Ipswich and the Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast areas, Deception Bay, Redlands, Logan, Redcliffe and Pine Rivers areas). In essence the south east Queensland area. Urban additionally includes the statistical sub divisions of Bundaberg, Gladstone, Rockhampton, Toowoomba, Mackay, Townsville and Cairns. All the other areas in Queensland are considered to be Rural.

Based on the ABS understanding of urban over 70 % of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia are now living in urban or regional urban areas (ABS 2008). The 2006 Census data indicates that 146, 400 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples or 28.3% live in Queensland (ABS 2008:2). Of the total Indigenous population in Queensland, 41 369 live in South East Queensland (ABS 2008: 34).

Other large populations of Indigenous peoples in Queensland include:

Queensland	146, 400	
Major urban populations	86, 932	
Brisbane (greater Brisbane area)	41, 369	28%
Cairns (inc. hinterland area)	18, 267	
Gold Coast	5, 675	
Rockhampton	5, 273	

Townsville	4, 982
Ipswich	4, 729
Thuringowa	3, 548
Mackay	3, 301
Mt Isa	3, 267
Caboolture	3, 028
Logan	2, 092
Bundaberg	1, 619
Toowoomba	2, 891
Hervey Bay	1, 338
Gladstone	1, 077
Cape York (all people in total)	6, 944
Torres Strait Islands (all people in total)	7, 106

(ABS 2008).

The statistics demonstrate that living in urban centres is as much part of reality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as living in a discrete Aboriginal rural, regional or isolated community or on one of the islands in the Torres Strait. Within this paper the word Indigenous will refer to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples unless stated otherwise or within a specific context.

There is no single urban Indigenous experience or identity nor is there a single urban Indigenous community in cities and regional areas. The Indigenous population in South East Queensland is a mixture of many different clans, language groups and families, with various connections to communication and traditional homelands. Multiple experiences are illustrated photographically in the work of Aird (2001). The multi-faceted nature of urban Indigenous people and communities presents researchers, planners, policy officers and government officials/workers with a range of issues and challenges. This in one of the reasons why discrete rural and remote Indigenous communities have tended to be the focus of most of the research and programs with Indigenous communities. These locations provide researchers, policy officers, government officials and politicians with a captive audience, and an easily identifiable and accessible population. Unlike rural and remote communities, identifying, accessing and working with urban Indigenous communities is much more difficult.

Indigenous Urban Identities

The House of Representatives Standing Committee of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (HRSCAA) produced a report titled *Mainly Urban* in 1992. This report was the first major report that began to articulate the plight of urban Indigenous people despite raising issues for urban peoples some of its statements are questionable. For example, the *Mainly Urban* report gives the idea that urban Indigenous people are successful products of the assimilation policies of the earlier part of this century (HRSCAA 1992). This view may contribute to a belief that Indigenous people living in urban areas are not viewed as 'real' Aborigines or Torres Strait Islanders (ibid.).

There also appears to be a view often held by members of the dominant society that those who are 'fair-skinned' are more 'white' than 'black' and therefore cannot be called Aboriginal or Indigenous people. The darker the skin the 'more Aboriginal' and closer to what is considered 'traditional'. There is a lack of understanding by the dominant culture that Aboriginality is a culture. Aboriginal people who don't fit in the frame of reference established by the dominant society fall outside the Aboriginal stereotype and are therefore are not perceived as being different culturally and requiring any specific needs that the dominant society does not require and fulfill.

A study undertaken in Brisbane to examine the issues of urban Indigenous populations, appropriate models of health care and health outcomes, questioned participants about urban Indigenous identity and Aboriginality (Ivanitz 1999). Comments from respondents included "some of them don't even look Aboriginal" and "all the blackfellas have been assimilated and people who live in a metropolitan area are not real Aborigines – they are no different than the average whitefella" (ibid.:2). In these contestations of Aboriginality (which are always on the dominant culture's terms) those Aboriginal people who are able to manage the transgressions between cultures risk being questioned about their authenticity.

There are numerous non-Indigenous people who deny the right of Indigenous people to identify as Aboriginal by labelling, dismissing and minimising. Many urban Indigenous people collectively become an 'invisible minority' as a result of the perceptions of Aboriginality, urban contexts and the distribution patterns. Despite the comments which question urban Indigenous identity, Aboriginal people living in urban areas are still asked to "give a 'welcome' or an "acknowledgement to Country" or asked "whether they know, or could they organise, a group to do traditional dancing or play the didgeridoo, or whether they could get an artist to paint a mural or display some art?" (Fredericks 2004: 30-31). Other than the observation of strict cultural protocol in terms of a welcome to Country, acknowledgement to Country or recognising Country, urban Indigenous people are often locked into a cultural paradigm that is a romanticised notion of the pre-colonial past. This continued focus on the 'traditional' cultural aspects and romanticism ignores the presence of the interweaving of many Indigenous people within a contemporary post-invasion historical context. It in effect conceals the ways that Indigenous people use and see spaces in everyday life.

Being an Indigenous student in an urban area

Indigenous Students are more likely to have an ill parent/ carer or relative.

Chronic Disease	Indigenous women compared to non-Indigenous women	Indigenous men compared to non-Indigenous men.
Cardiovascular diseases	2.2 times	3.0 times

Neoplasms (inc. Cancers)	1.6 times	1.3 times
Diseases of the Respiratory System	3.6 times	3.9 times
Diseases of the endocrine system (e.g. diabetes)	10.1 times	7.3 times

(ABS 2008)

Indigenous students will witness more early deaths and attend more funerals

Who	Women	Men
General Australian population	82 years	76.6 years
Indigenous	64.8 years	59.4 years

(ABS 2008)

Indigenous students will experience more stressors (at least 81% in urban areas will have had at least one stressor in the last 12months) (ABS 2008). Other issues they face include:

- Serious illness or disability within the family.
- Unemployment within the household – 20.1% in cities; 25.% in inner regional; 23.1% in outer regional; 19.2 % in remote; 8.3% in very remote.
- In cities Indigenous workers earn 70% of the income of non-Indigenous people.
- Household income is 62% of non-Indigenous households (this amount has decreased).
- Overcrowding
- Alcohol and drug problems
- Moving residence
- Relationship break-up
- Child going into care or onto an order.
- Someone in the family going to court or into custody – in NSW between 1997 – 2001 26.8% of the NSW population were charged with an

offence. In NSW in 2001, 1 in 5 males Indigenous were charged with a criminal offence. For Indigenous males aged 20-24 years this went up to 40%.

- Be a victim or a witness to a crime on a person.
- Lack of positive identity affirmation within many schools and broader society.
- Problematic portrayal of Indigenous people in the media.
- An Australian population that sees Indigenous people as 'out there in communities' or the 'real Indigenous people live on communities'.
- Invisibility in broader population.
- Exotic parts of culture wanted – welcome to Country and dancing.

Conclusion

The growing number of Indigenous people in urban centres is not unique to Queensland. Over the generations increasing numbers of Indigenous people across Australia have faced the difficulties and pressures of living in urban environments. Some of these were portrayed in the National Museum of Australia's recently staged exhibition focusing on urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities and cultures titled *70% Urban*. The *70% Urban* exhibition at the Gallery of First Australians, the National Museum of Australia closed on the 31 January 2008. One of the striking features of a number of works was the symbolism at play that portrayed cultural knowledge that is both secret and public within urban environments along with the visual depictions of memories and images of past policies and cultural understandings in traditional, colonial and present times.

The growing urbanisation of Indigenous peoples has also occurred in Canada, the United States and New Zealand. In Canada, the number of Indigenous people living in urban centres has grown substantially, with approximately 50% of the urban Indigenous population now living in urban centres. In response, the Government of Canada developed the *Urban Aboriginal Strategy* in an effort to respond to the needs of Canadian Aboriginal people living in key urban centres. It has additionally allocated over \$50 million for the implementation of the strategy. The Government of Canada states that, "the Urban Aboriginal Strategy is a step in the right direction to ensure that Aboriginal Canadians living in cities across Canada have greater access to the skills and experiences they need to gain access to and succeed in an urban setting" (Canadian Institute for Health Information 2003). Some of the key Canadian urban centres now have Aboriginal policies, initiatives or committees. Some of the work being undertaken overseas may offer lessons for Australian Indigenous urban populations.

As established, there are increasing numbers of Indigenous people living in urban areas. Despite this, many policy and government officers and researchers often appear to minimise or ignore plight of Indigenous urban populations. Until the dominant culture's understandings of Indigenous people and culture change we will continue to witness stereotypical and biased understandings of Australia's Indigenous people. A mindset shift is required to unlock the cultural paradigm, which constrains how Indigenous people are

understood and viewed. Only in this way can the needs of Indigenous people in urban areas be adequately addressed.

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