



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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ABORIGINAL VIEWS

SCHOOLING AND IDENTITY LEVELS

* E. Willmot

Western-style schooling for Aboriginal children in New South Wales began formally in 1940. Nineteen-forty was the year in which the New South Wales Department of Education abandoned its long-standing policy of exclusion relating to Aboriginal children. Prior to this, Aboriginal children were excluded from State schools on the complaint of a white parent. From 1940 on, it could be said that Aboriginal people had achieved the right to State schooling. This is, of course, a political statement as much as an educational one. I would argue that 1940, in fact, saw the beginning of modern Aboriginal politics.

Modern Aboriginal politics, as such, began in the early 1960s when Vincent Lingiari and the Gurindji people walked off Wave Hill; that was the beginning of the land rights movement. The 1940s and the 1950s, however, saw Aboriginal people struggle for the human right of education for their children.

During the late 1960s and 1970s, many Aboriginal people spent a great deal of time criticising the very education systems which they fought so hard to become part of. Yet Aboriginal people have voted for this form of education with their feet. In 1975, according to Commonwealth Government statistics, there were 223 Aboriginal people in tertiary institutions in Australia. In 1980, there were 881, that is a 295% increase. In 1970, however, there were only 20 Aboriginal people found to be in tertiary institutions in Australia and that, believe it or not, registers by 1980 as being a 4,310% increase. Unfortunately, this does not reflect an equivalent 4,310% improvement in outcomes of schooling; this extraordinary phenomenon associated with the tertiary education is very much an Aboriginal adventure.

Changes in schooling have been much slower. For instance, if we examine the progress of Aboriginal students through Australian schools from the period 1976 to 1978, that is focussing on students

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in Year 10 of High Schools in 1976, we find that there are 2,270 such students. In 1977 in Year 11, this cohort has fallen to 717, and by 1978, entering Year 12 there were 237. (These figures are taken from the report to the National Aboriginal Education Committee on the education and employment of Torres Strait Islander Teachers in 1979 by Willmot and Mace.) The comment from that report which accompanied the Table is anything but optimistic, and I quote:

It appears unlikely that any dramatic improvement will occur in the upper level school leavers, hence the standard programs will be unlikely to contribute at a much greater rate than they are at present.

There is, however, no doubt that schooling for Aboriginal people in Australia has improved over the last two decades. This is particularly true in the primary area. However, during the mid to late '70s, the initial impetus of change seemed to have slowed down. It was almost as though some critical barrier had been reached. I might suggest that the last five years have indicated that some critical barrier to any kind of children has started to appear in secondary schools. Secondary school performance is probably one of the most contentious issues in Australian education today.

If I were to be asked where the greatest improvement in the Aboriginal child's education could occur, I would propose the middle and upper secondary areas.

Not only am I convinced that this part of secondary schooling constitutes the greatest problem at the present time for Aboriginal children, but I believe that the problems involved in that area transcend any simple solution. I believe that we must look well beyond curriculum, educational technology, or pedagogical skills. I believe that there is something fundamental and little understood which is plaguing, not only the secondary schools of Australia, but all of the schooling systems of the polygeneric societies.

I have in the past distinguished two kinds of human societies on planet earth. The first of these are indigenous societies. These are societies whose populations are made up essentially by people who may be defined as indigenous to the country in which they live. For example, countries like Japan, Nigeria, India, Britain, Germany and France.

The second form are the polygeneric societies. These societies have populations which are based on people of different origins. Usually one of the groups is indigenous, while the others are migrant

groups from elsewhere. Australia is very much one of these societies. I feel at this point that it is worthwhile defining the difference between migrant people and indigenous people. Senator Neville Bonner, at his opening address to the Macquarie History Course this year, said:

A migrant is a person whose race memories come from some other place, whose human history belongs to another place. Aboriginal people have only one racial memory, only one history, and it has always been here.

Polygeneric societies can be expected to be more complex, socially, than indigenous societies. They represent people from different languages, people who adhere to different types of social behaviour, and most importantly, they are a mix of people who have different primary identities.

Culture is said to be the learned, shared experience of a group of people. Culture, it is said, gives rise to much of the idiosyncracies of human behaviour. About this matter we can be sure of only one thing and that is to be unsure of just what culture is and what it does give rise to.

There is a commonly held belief, particularly among psychologists, that culture can change, and in fact that human beings can become culturally the same as another group. This process is called acculturation. In simple terms, it means that a human being from one cultural group can, by experiencing and learning the ways of another group, become culturally indistinguishable from them, that is, become the same kind of person as the group into which he has become acculturated. I find this concept very difficult to accept, for in a lifetime, in this country of ours I have never known one Aborigine who, having been an Aborigine at some time in his life, has ever become a white Australian, nor do I know a single white Australian who, having been that at some time in his life, has ever become an Aborigine. Surely, if acculturation is such a recognisable phenomenon, I should have come across one example of it. Certainly, I have seen people change in the various elements that make up their culture, but I have never seen them become completely part of another culture.

I am not arguing that acculturation cannot take place. What I am in fact proposing is that it is not such an important concept in any case. I doubt that we can ever know much of a person's culture, but what we can know is his identity. And by that I mean the way in which others see them. Perhaps what I am defining as identity is the outward expression of culture. I do not know how

closely identity is related to values or attitudes. But what I do know, is what I am and what other people that I have come to know are, and I know them and myself by the identities that we have.

The question that I wish to address here is how these identities come about. I believe that it is a kind of recipe made up of understandable information. I have no doubt that there is a lot of information involved, and like most things about human beings, it would probably be most complex.

Like all living creatures, human beings are built to recipes; they are in fact built from information contained in the D.N.A. of each and every human cell. Every cell in a human body contains a complete set of instructions on how to make every part of the human body. The amount of information necessary to do this is something like 5 billion bits, that is, 5×10^9 . If this was written out in English, it would fill approximately a thousand volumes, each 30mm thick.

Our identity, however, is not part of that library of information. The information about our identity is contained in our brains. If we consider that the information content of a human brain is comparable to the total number of connections among the neurons, this would amount to something like 10^{14} bits of information. If written out in English, this information would fill some 20 million volumes, as many as in the world's largest libraries.

Somewhere in that massive information store within each of our heads is one part of the recipe for our identities. That is the part which we as individuals generate. That is what we see ourselves to be. The other part of our identity is written collectively, on the social, shared knowledge of all of the people who know us and more importantly, know of us.

We might consider that this recipe is written on an imaginary slate. As adults, we encode the information about who we are and what we are. Our children in their turn read it, and put together the recipe of their identities. What each generation encodes upon the slate may change from time to time, but the slate is always there to see, providing the child is in contact with his parents or with other members of his racial/culture group.

This is, at least, how identity would arise in an indigenous society, and this is the primary identity for members of an indigenous society. There would be some complications related to special

categories of people which may have developed, such things as class structure, etc. This is, nevertheless, a common slate for all to read. Not only is it the primary identity for such a society, but also it becomes a higher order identity. A French child who lives in Paris and reads on his slate the primary identity of a Parisienne, sees written onto the same slate the elements of another kind of identity, an identity which describes him as a Frenchman. And the two are very closely linked, if not the same.

In polygeneric societies, of course, this is far more complex, for there will be as many primary identities as there are different kinds of people making up the society. And, therefore, higher order identities of that nation are unlikely to be the same as any particular one of the primary identities, and if that society does have a higher order identity, it will be the product of a very complex process.

Not only will the higher order identity of that society be complex, but also will the primary identities, for in such a society, when a parent writes the slate for his child, it is not only his racial/cultural group that gets to write on the slate, but other elements of the society will also get their finger in the pie and write on his slate and, in turn, he will write upon theirs. This is the process of embedding. In fact, rather than having a set of clear primary identities each representing an element of our polygenesis, what we have become in a society like Australia, is embeddings - human beings whose pattern of identity is intimately interwoven.

An Australian of Italian descent may have quite a distinctive identity in terms of Australia, but that identity will still be different from an Italian living in Italy. The character of modern Aboriginal identity is undoubtedly different from that of distant generations.

Aboriginal identity, like that of the Italian Australian, is a recipe read from the slate of embeddedness, and this is the character of the polygeneric society. Immediately the question arises as to what is to become of primary identities in these societies? Are, in fact, the embedded identities of these societies a phenomenon of change and will they eventually give way to an ultimate higher order identity? Personally, I doubt this. I have observed a powerful higher order identity in another sister nation of polygenesis - the United States of America. And with all the power and strength of that higher identity, I find primary identities of the black American, the native American, the white American, as powerful and as embedded

as the identities of Australians. I believe that primary identities persist because the primary identity is the swaddling cloth of children; it is the coolamon and the cradle into which the newborn child is laid and in which he or she grows in strength and security. It is the way we tell our children what they are. Higher order identities are great for politicians and generals and I think of some value to overall human dignity. Higher order identity, however, is of little use to children.

When a child enters a schoolroom clothed in the security of his primary identity, he will be supported and carried to maturity if the schoolroom he enters is pervaded by that same powerful primary identity. If it is not, however, schooling will be a shattering experience.

The primary identities of younger children are more similar than those of adults, and differentiation occurs with age, and particularly in adolescence. A Queensland Aborigine once made the statement:

Until I was eight I was a child, and then
I became a blackfellow.

This kind of reality could be expected to occur somewhat earlier and more brutally in Queensland than elsewhere in Australia, but it must happen to all Aboriginal children unless the classroom they enter is occupied by people with their own primary identity, and taught by a teacher with that same primary identity.

For most Aboriginal children this is likely to be very much the exception, and certainly not the rule. When it happens to a younger child it is distressing; when it happens to an adolescent child it is destructive, and the child will react with aggression and confusion and the process of education will cease.

I believe that the comparative success of Aborigines in tertiary education is very much related to the process that I have been discussing. I certainly do not believe that tertiary educators are better teachers than secondary educators, and in particular not better than primary educators. The great advantage that the tertiary institution has is that it is one of the few places in Australia where higher order identities are promoted. By this I do not mean an ultimate Australian identity. In fact, quite the reverse. The identity promoted within tertiary institutions is a kind of international identity, the identity of scholarship and of the intellectual elite, be that

desirable or undesirable. Whether the student is an Aborigine, an Anglo-Australian, a Greek-Australian, or a Chinese-Australian, he is more likely to be able to cope with an institutional identity that is *not* the primary identity of some other group in Australia, but rather something new or something different.

I think there is something to be learned from this. I do not believe tertiary educators deliberately promote higher order identities; at least they do not promote this for the purpose of education. But I do believe that tertiary educators are racially or culturally less bound than school teachers are. School teachers tend to promote their own primary identity, and since most school teachers, at least in the immediate past, were of Anglo-Celtic origin, then this identity is unlikely to be very supportive of Aborigines or, for that matter, of the third wave of Australians.

One answer to this problem seems to be to produce a mix of teachers. This would certainly be an improvement. On its own, however, it will not be a complete solution.

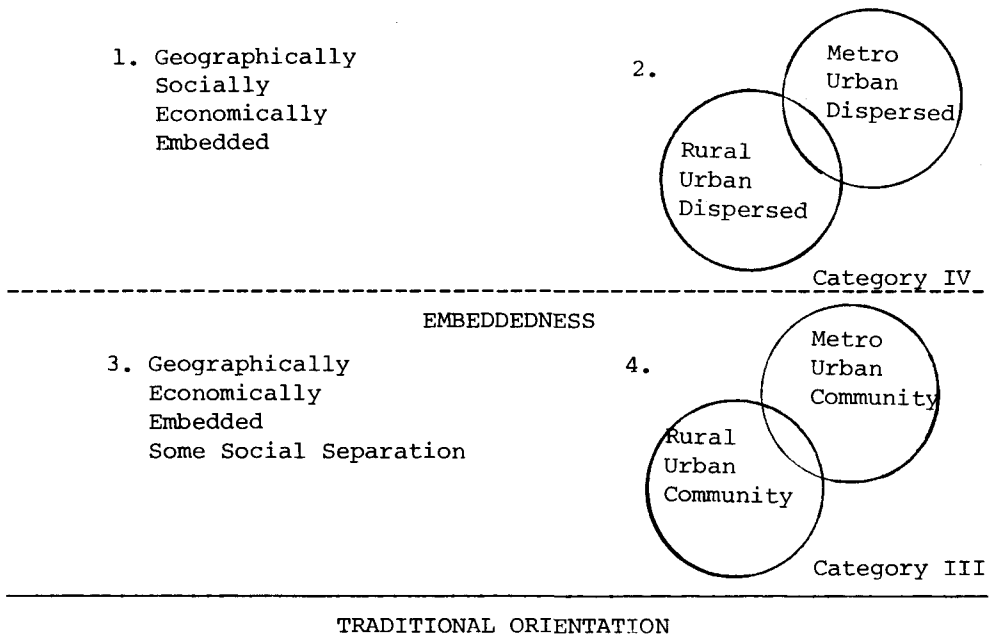
The inclusion of other groups within the teaching force will certainly make it less popular to promote specific primary identities within the classrooms of the school and perhaps this leads to a solution: a solution related to school tone. This, of course, falls very much to principals, for we are talking about the creation of higher order school identities.

Unfortunately, there is no such thing as a higher order Australian identity at this stage of identity. If there was, we would not be arguing about which of three flags we should stand under, or what our national anthem ought to be. The best that a headmaster can promote is a higher order school identity; one which is carefully constructed to accommodate all of the children who constitute the school's population. Curiously, this may contribute to a national higher order identity. This would be a tremendous challenge to headmasters - perhaps the greatest professional challenge to have ever existed in Australian education.

At this stage, I find it very difficult to see beyond the problems. For instance, if we look more closely at Aboriginal society we will find that this society exhibits differences among its members. Aborigines themselves have recognised this. The following figure is a sociological structural model taken from the N.A.E.C. submission to the Knight Inquiry in 1979, and it breaks Aboriginal society into four separate groups. This is very much the product of

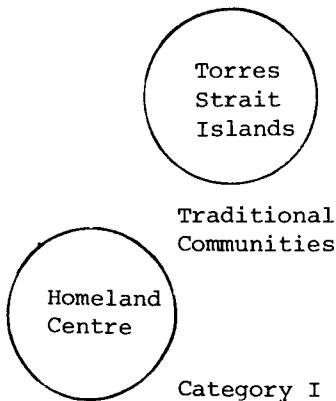
Aboriginal scholarship and it starts from the assumption that Aboriginal society is a collection of different kinds of communities. This breakdown is done on the basis of two variables, one being embeddedness.

Socio-Geographic Distribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Society



High Level of
Observance of Traditional
Institution

Low Level of
Observance of
Traditional
Institutions



Rural
Non Traditional
Communities

Category II

Geographically
Socially
Disconnected
Some Economic Connection

If the reader looks very closely at these three groups it will be plain to see that between some of them there are considerable differences, socially, economically and geographically, perhaps even culturally. We can be assured that there will be differences in primary identity between these groups. I believe that Aboriginal society, more than any other group within Australia, promotes a higher order primary identity, that is a kind of a pan-Aboriginality, but like all higher order identities it does not exclude the existence of primary identities. I would suggest that an Aboriginal teacher from one of these groups, confronted with a classroom containing all four of these groups, may have similar problems to an Anglo-Celtic Australian teacher standing in front of a class which contains all parts of the general Australian population. This seems to complicate the situation even further. A total solution may go beyond the capabilities of exceptional school principals, and we may have to look to other changes. We need to look forward to developing new models for schooling in this polygeneric society of ours.

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