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DISTANCE OR DIFFERENCE IN ABORIGINAL EDUCATION#

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A. INTRODUCTION

The majority of the 27,000 Aborigines in the Northern Territory live in remote communities and on cattle stations, or are grouped around some of the smaller rural towns that are scattered through the 1,347,500 square kilometres of the Northern Territory. These extremely isolated communities may vary in size from, say, one hundred to over one thousand people. There is vast climatic and geographical variation, too, between the tropical communities around the beaches that fringe the Arafura sea, and those in the desert where the harsher climate and terrain have an appeal of their own to those who live there.

To educate 7,000 Aboriginal children, the Northern Territory endeavours to maintain 43 schools in Aboriginal communities, plus another 27 which are located on pastoral properties. Apart from two residential colleges located at Alice Springs and Darwin, which cater for secondary-age Aboriginal students, all Aboriginal schools could be regarded as remote, isolated by geographical distance from the larger centres. These 70 schools present complex logistical problems to those who supply and maintain buildings, equipment and staff. However, although formidable, the problems associated with remoteness are insignificant when compared with the social, cultural and linguistic factors that create distance between these traditionally oriented Aboriginal children and our western style of education.

B. THE STARTING POINT: RECOGNITION OF DIFFERENCE

People who visit Aboriginal communities are often overwhelmed by the personal material poverty that seems to pervade settlement life. In addition, visual evidence of buildings such as hospitals, schools, stores and workshops, and of goods such as the vehicles, guitars and western clothes, together with the apparent lack of traditional artifacts may prompt visitors to assume that Aboriginal culture has wasted away and what is left is a remote settlement that

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is Aboriginal simply because of the inhabitants' skin colour and their claim to Aboriginal racial identity. However, those non-Aboriginal people who remain in Aboriginal communities and become receptive to Aborigines, begin to see beneath the veneer of non-Aboriginality. They become increasingly aware that Aboriginal culture is not much concerned with the care of material goods, but is vitally concerned with values, relationships and social organisation. Moreover, they come to know that Aboriginal culture as expressed in a particular Aboriginal language is very much alive and provides the rationale for the behaviour and events that occur in daily life; behaviour that often remains - for the unknowing onlooker - incomprehensible.

There are many features of this hunting-gathering heritage that careful observation can establish. Perhaps one of the most important features is a relatively strong present and past-continuous orientation to life. Stephen Harris (1977, p.138) contends that this present time orientation is still more real than a future view of life and strongly influences attitudes to knowledge, learning and the cash economy in ways that frequently create distance between the Aboriginal child and school. In educational terms this can mean that the importance of gaining what appears to be meaningless knowledge now, against some future need for that knowledge, is not always appreciated. This is in contrast to our own society where long term motivation is provided by a socio-economic system that has demonstrated that a better education opens doors to higher status and greater economic reward. (Some of the tensions presently being experienced in our own society are due to the fact that this is no longer always true.) Although money circulates in Aboriginal communities, Harris (1977, p.63) has pointed out that the people are still more oriented to a hunting/gathering view of life than to that of a cash economy. This means that pension, child-endowment and unemployment cheques, and I would add the wages of some workers, are still 'gathered' at the office and redistributed through the community in much the same way that the results of hunting expeditions were distributed in the past. This attitude to resources can demolish incentive to learn or work and fails to provide the socio-economic climate on which educational services (as we know them) are usually dependent for success.

Although today there are schools in most Aboriginal communities, the type and purpose of the education that can be gained at such institutions is little understood by many Aboriginal people. This could be due to the fact that traditional Aboriginal society was the ultimate in de-schooled societies. This does not mean that children and adults did not learn what they needed to know for the physical and spiritual survival of the group, but that there was no

teaching task that was the role of a few specially selected people. Ensuring that everyone gained the skills and knowledge they required was part of the obligation bestowed by relationship. All people were both teachers and learners, and education was not separated from on-going everyday life.

Learning in such Aboriginal societies occurred, and continues to occur, largely through what we regard as the informal strategies of observation, imitation, personal trial and error, real-life performance rather than practice in contrived settings, and through mastering context-specific skills (Harris, 1977). The formal, largely verbal strategies in the teaching and learning styles of urban, middle-class Australia are not in evidence in traditionally oriented Aboriginal communities.

This non-verbal nature of Aboriginal learning contexts does not mean that Aboriginal people don't talk to each other or pass on information by verbal means. The vast store of traditional knowledge which we loosely label 'oral tradition' has been passed on in this way. However, the emphasis on verbalised learning processes, particularly the range and styles of questions, which are both so much part of the techniques of school education are not familiar learning strategies in Aboriginal communities. Aboriginal children when placed in classrooms are faced with a language gap. Those teachers who are not Aboriginal use a different language. They also use verbal teaching styles and different interpersonal communication styles that create distance between the children and education. It is really rather like throwing them into the deep end of the language 'pool' and hoping they can all swim - even with their hands tied behind their backs.

Culture, however, not only affects how people learn but what they learn. John Harris (1979, p.143) summarized many of the cultural factors that influence the contexts of learning:

An Aboriginal child entering school has, in common with all children, already started to develop cognitively. The adult community has already influenced the child's cognitive level development so that he has begun, albeit at a very elementary level, to comprehend himself and the world about him in terms of the world view of the community in which he is growing up. As the child matures, learning to label and order his experiences, it is inevitable that his cognitive development will be very strongly influenced by an Aboriginal system of knowledge.

Harris goes on to say:

This is the base upon which later cognitive development and learning will build irrespective of what is attempted by the school. If it is ignored it is doubtful whether the school will play a significant part in the cognitive development of the Aboriginal child. If the school fails to recognise the importance of the child's previous cognitive development, the cognitive structures he has acquired and the Aboriginal system of knowledge which provides the context in which his cognitive development has occurred, it is unlikely that the school will succeed in assisting the child to acquire Western concepts and skills.

(Harris, 1979)

So far I have mentioned five elements of the cultural distance between Aboriginal children and schools:

- . present time orientation;
- . non-verbal learning styles;
- . different rules of interpersonal communication;
- . different first language of white teachers and their students;
- . different environmental knowledge base for early cognitive development.

But there are other factors that create barriers between Aboriginal children and school learning as well. They range from such things as poor school attendance, to problems caused by chronic health disorders, especially ear infections. They are all compounded by the fact that non-Aboriginal teachers are usually not specially trained for their task and frequently do not stay long enough in Aboriginal communities to overcome their own ethnocentricity and so become effective teachers of Aboriginal children. All this does not deny that Aboriginal children share behavioural universals with all other children: they are intelligent, they respond to personal warmth, they have pride in a job well done and so on. However, if we, as educators, are to respond to these universal characteristics we must continually remember that, although in many ways Aboriginal children are like all children everywhere, in many other ways they are different. They grow up with a distinctly Aboriginal linguistic, social, cultural and cognitive orientation to life which they bring with them into the classroom and which we, as educators, cannot ignore.

C. THE DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES

During the first half of this century, missions operating in the Northern Territory displayed a concern for the school education of Aboriginal children. It was not until 1950, however, that the Commonwealth Government entered the field. During this period Australia adopted a policy of assimilation for Aboriginal people. This policy - which is still influential - aimed at ensuring that:

all Aborigines and part-Aborigines will attain the same manner of living as other Australians and live as members of a single Australian community enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians.

(The Minister for Territories, 1963 - quoted in Watts and Gallacher, 1964, p.33)

This policy stimulated the development of an educational program that overlooked the special aspects of the cognitive, social and emotional development of the Aboriginal child and so created barriers between the children and education. Even teachers who questioned such an approach felt helpless to break down these barriers for without a sound knowledge of the local Aboriginal language, or access to a group of Aboriginal adults who had some inkling of the goals of an institutionalised educational program, it was impossible to really know where to find starting points for what could become a meaningful educational program. Although some Aboriginality was added to the school program by the inclusion of Aboriginal dance and traditional arts, in general the program was designed to ignore not only the language and the knowledge that the children brought with them to the classroom, but also the values inherent in the Aboriginal culture itself. In line with the assimilation policy of the day, the program was designed to educate Aboriginal children away from their Aboriginal heritage and into a place in the dominant society that many of them had no desire to fill.

In 1964, Watts and Gallacher made an in-depth study of Aboriginal education and their report resulted in programs of education that, through streaming of children in the upper-primary schools and introduction of residential colleges, allowed more Aboriginal children to gain better access to Western education. Throughout the Territory there was significant improvement in both the organisation of schools and in the development of more relevant curricula. And, most encouraging of all, Watts and Gallacher saw quite clearly that

Aboriginal education required teachers with special qualities and qualifications. Inclusion of Teaching English as a Second Language and Aboriginal Studies courses were recommended as part of the training teachers who were to work in the Northern Territory should receive. (Also, although the report makes little mention of Aboriginal teachers, it was during this period that there was a gradual development of programs to train teaching assistants, and the groundwork was laid for the development of an Aboriginal Teacher-training establishment.)

The Watts and Gallacher report dwelt on, in particular, the linguistic, social and cultural background of Aboriginal children and stated, quite forcibly, that programs designed for these children must implement the recognition of difference if meaningful educational outcomes were to be achieved. However, although Watts and Gallacher acknowledged the educational and psychological advantage of using the child's first language, they felt the practical problems were too great and they did not at that time recommend such an approach. Aboriginal children continued to be schooled in a system designed for children who spoke another language and had begun to conceptualise their world in ways that were vastly different from their own, and so many barriers to effective learning remained.

It was not until 1973, with the introduction of bilingual education, that there was any far-reaching change in the system. The report *Bilingual Education in Schools in Aboriginal Communities in the Northern Territory*, prepared by Watts, McGrath and Tandy, provided guidance for the introduction of the mother tongue, as well as English, as media of instruction.¹ Such a move allowed for the increased professional involvement of Aboriginal staff, and so reduced several of the major barriers between the Aboriginal child and school education. Initially, the emphasis for those of us working in bilingual programs was on developing vernacular reading schemes. In the early years of Bilingual Education the staff in these remote communities had not only to prepare and print books, but to develop

¹ This report outlined two approaches to Bilingual education. Only Model I programs which allow the child to gain literacy in the vernacular before gaining literacy in English have been developed to this time. Presently programs are operating in twelve languages in fifteen schools, with another five schools in preparation. As these programs have been established in larger Aboriginal schools, nearly half the Aboriginal children from traditionally-oriented communities are receiving their education in both their mother tongue and English. These bilingual programs are presently undergoing accreditation by the Department of Education.

workable literacy programs both for the children and for the Aboriginal teachers who would teach the children.

Because of the demands of the literacy programs during those early years, little work had taken place in other curriculum areas. It began to dawn on teachers that, now that the language the children spoke was one of the official media of instruction of the school, the gulf that had existed between the conceptual world of the Aboriginal child and the learning experiences provided for him could be overcome, and moving from the known to the unknown could become a reality in Aboriginal education. (See J.Harris, 1979). In practical terms this means that we can now acknowledge that, for example, the effective starting point for mathematical studies for Aboriginal children is not in the number strand, but in the area of what we call space. This does not mean that we translate our terminology of space into their language (which, in the early days of bilingual education, sometimes occurred) but we begin with the child's perceptions of space, which he talks about in his own language, and build on this foundation to develop other mathematical ideas. Such understandings about the use of Aboriginal knowledge in school education are still very new, and it will take time before these tentative initiatives can be formalized into programs in each subject area in the various languages that are used as media of instruction in the Northern Territory.

(As an aside, I think I should mention that I have worked in two systems of Aboriginal education. I taught at Yirrkala for several years in the sixties in an English-only program and was frequently aware that, if the children themselves could not sort out the linguistic and conceptual confusion we had created for them, there was not a lot - apart from urging them to work harder - that we, as teachers, could do to help them. In the seventies I helped establish a bilingual program at Yirrkala. Although there were many real frustrations, there were also many exciting developments. Aboriginal teachers, because of the confidence engendered by being able to teach in their own language, were able to demonstrate that they could accept professional responsibility. The children were obviously able to find more meaning in the programs that we provided for them, and some parents found that they could contribute to their children's school education. My personal experiences are reflected throughout this paper, particularly in the following section where I've not only drawn on my own knowledge but have checked my experiences against those of my colleagues.)

D. SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF WESTERN SCHOOLING

It was inevitable that institutionalised educational programs, when introduced into Aboriginal communities, would create some social problems. Even in our own society schools have tended to alienate parents from the educational programs designed for their children. In Aboriginal communities the process has been even more thorough, for the schools said by their actions, "Leave it to us". They taught unfamiliar skills, such as literacy and numeracy, in a foreign language and made it clear that Aboriginal languages and knowledge had no real part in the school program. To Aboriginal parents who had little comprehension of the education system that had been thrust upon their children, schools were at times seen as agencies of alienation rather than agencies of education. (It is probably largely conformity to Aboriginal cultural values that has enabled Aboriginal children to resist the pressure non-Aboriginal teachers have put on them to change their ways, that has limited the effects of this alienation.)

Many Aboriginal parents have also become quite disillusioned with the failure of the system to achieve the results that have been claimed to be outcomes of the education process. Educators have frequently promised that, if children were sent to school, when they grew up they would be able to be teachers, doctors, carpenters, etc, just like the 'whites'. Due to a variety of economic, educational and cultural factors this has, in many cases, not been achieved. This does not deny the fact that many Aboriginal people are making worthwhile contributions as teachers, carpenters, health workers and community developers in their own communities. But they hold these jobs largely because of their Aboriginality and ability rather than their holding what we consider to be prerequisite qualifications, so that community dependence on the expertise of non-Aboriginals remains high.

Schools frequently, and often quite unknowingly, have created other problems for Aboriginal communities. When children acquire behavioural patterns that are considered to be socially acceptable, and even essential, in the eyes of members of the dominant society, problems may be created for the children themselves. For example, children who have learned to look after and retain personal belongings may be regarded as selfish when they return to their homes, where sharing is regarded as an obligation imposed by relationship. In grouping children in classrooms in ways that we consider to be educationally or administratively convenient we have frequently cut across the taboos and restraints that control social behaviour within Aboriginal groups. In addition, our institutionalised patterns

of schooling which remove children from the company of their parents for so much of each day has meant that some children have had less time to absorb the knowledge, values and attitudes that are inherent in gaining and maintaining a secure Aboriginal identity which is vital to children who must become bicultural. In a society with no formalised teaching function it has often been difficult for adults to appreciate what is happening until it is too late.

Finally, it has to be acknowledged that, although there have been some successful students and some hard working and perceptive teachers have achieved remarkable results, the majority of children have, nevertheless, failed to gain little more than minimal standards in the areas of English oracy, literacy and numeracy (Williams, 1979). They seem to have reached a plateau at about the level of Year 3 or 4 and have not progressed beyond that point. For many Aboriginal children school has made no sense at all. They have been - and in many cases still are being - schooled but not educated. They have really only acquired a set of school behaviours in much the same way as a child can gain a set of school clothes. All this school-like behaviour is frequently shed, like school clothes, as children leave the buildings. There are few bridges between home and school for the children to walk and the small amount of school knowledge gained often finds no place in the real world of life in an Aboriginal community and is soon forgotten. The absence of these bridges is not only the fault of the school system, but a whole complex set of circumstances in present day Aboriginal society - some of them insoluble. Aboriginal parents frequently ask that the school teach their children English oracy, literacy and numeracy. But they cannot understand why it is that what their children receive is not sufficient for their needs, why it has to be gained at the cost of Aboriginal knowledge and identity, nor why aspects of non-Aboriginal culture cannot be taught to their children as skills to be used as required, and not as a value system that must be utterly absorbed, with disorienting results to the recipient. If schooling of Aboriginal children is ever to be more successful, these patterns of alienation and disillusionment must be overcome.

In spite of all the cultural and social factors that have created distance between Aboriginal children and the school education provided for them, a small number of children were able to make academic progress. It is this group of people, with the skills and knowledge of two cultures, who are providing much of the input into the innovative educational programs aimed at reducing distance between Aboriginal children and school education, that are currently being developed.

E. LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

1. *The Importance of First Language in the Education of Aboriginal Children*

Two interesting research projects into the effectiveness of bilingual education produced evidence of some lessening of distance between Aboriginal children and education. Murtagh (1979) when studying the Creole speaking children at Bamyili and Beswick, found that the children who had received their early education in the bilingual program at Bamyili had less interference between their two languages, Creole and English, and greater control of each separate language than did the children educated in the English-only program at Beswick.

In addition, research conducted at Milingimbi (Gale *et al*, 1980) showed quite conclusively that children educated in the bilingual program performed significantly better than those in the English-only program in a range of tests covering English oracy, literacy and numeracy. Overseas research into bilingual education for minority group children (Cummins, 1979) supports the view that it is the development and enrichment of the child's first language which will lead to cognitive gains for the child in addition to giving him greater growth in his second language. Bilingual education in the Northern Territory, up to this time, has really meant 'bi-literacy' education. The development and implementation of oral bilingual education programs into all those Aboriginal schools which, for language reasons, will never have a vernacular literacy program, appears to be another step that could be taken in achieving more meaningful education for all Aboriginal children who come to school speaking a language other than English.¹

2. *Parental Involvement in Children's Education*

To effectively draw on Aboriginal knowledge to provide learning experiences for Aboriginal children means that the patterns of

¹ The Watts, McGrath, Tandy report (1973) allowed also for the development of purely oral bilingual programs (Model 2). This encourages the use of two languages as media of instruction even though the child will gain literacy only in English. For a variety of reasons this approach to bilingual education has not been developed. Due to an increased awareness of the importance of a child's first language in his total educational experience there should be greater concern to develop these programs.

alienation of the past have to be overcome and parents (and relatives) have to become key people in the planning for and provision of educational services for their children. This is a completely new idea in most Aboriginal communities. To many Aboriginal parents, schools were there to teach foreign skills; gaining an education was not seen as developing knowledge you already partly know, but being immersed or (submerged) in another language and another system of knowledge. That education should, in fact, make sense to the recipients and capitalise on what students bring with them to school, has not been perceived by much of Aboriginal Australia.

Throughout the Northern Territory, however, an often tentative dialogue is beginning and developing as Aboriginal teachers, non-Aboriginal teachers and, in some instances parents, are meeting together to talk about how and what children should learn. Hopefully, when involvement of Aboriginal adults becomes more widespread, barriers that have been created between the Aboriginal child and school education will be removed. For, in the words of some Aboriginal adults involved in the development of ethnoscience materials:

Aboriginal people are happy to help give their children the right education. They are waiting to be asked. If European teachers find it hard then they should ask Aboriginal people for help. It is not a job to do alone - we should share it. It might be hard to start because Aboriginal parents have not been part of schools for very long and are not sure if they are really wanted.

(Quoted in McGill, 1980)

Because many teachers find difficulty in working with adults in this way, *Wangkami: A Handbook for Aboriginal Teachers Involved in Aboriginal Education* (Graham, 1981) has been prepared and is currently being trialed. It could well be that ultimate effectiveness of Aboriginal education may depend on the ability of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal adults involved in the education of Aboriginal children to establish relationships in which meaningful dialogue about school learning can occur. But we need to remember that Aboriginal culture was developed and nurtured in a 'timeless' land. Aboriginal people are not able to adopt new roles quickly. And so curriculum development that draws meaningfully on the Aboriginal system of knowledge will take time.

3. The Development of Aboriginal Teachers

The Aboriginal Teacher Education Centre now known as Batchelor College, is beginning to have a profound influence in reducing the

distance between Aboriginal children and education.¹ Aboriginal assistant-teachers and teachers are not only able to communicate fully with Aboriginal children, but are aware of their social and cultural heritage. They have knowledge of both cultures and so are able to provide more appropriate learning experiences. They also provide acceptable successful adult models for the children they teach.

In addition to the three-year course available at Batchelor, on-site courses are now offered on a rotating basis in the larger Aboriginal communities. This enables students to complete their first year of studies without leaving home and coping with the social problems created by such a move. A tutorial program is now available in small remote communities where on-site courses would not be practical.

4. Specialist Training for Non-Aboriginal Staff - the Key to a Better Future

As long ago as 1964, Watts and Gallacher made it clear that Aboriginal education was a specialist field and yet, unlike other areas of special need in our society, e.g., education of the deaf or handicapped, little has been done to ensure a supply of specially trained teachers to work in Aboriginal schools. The development of many of the initiatives I have already outlined (in addition to the development of on-site secondary education and the provision of educational services to remote outstation communities) is dependent, to a large degree, on the specialist training of non-Aboriginal staff. In the future, as Aboriginal staff take more responsibility in Aboriginal schools, the need for fewer and better trained non-Aboriginal teachers will become more crucial. It is an area that must receive urgent attention if we are to continue to look to the future in Aboriginal education.

¹ To this time 25 Aboriginal students have gained their Aboriginal Schools Teaching Certificate at the conclusion of three years of training which may have been spread over a much longer period of time. This qualification gives them permanent status in the Commonwealth Teaching Service as two-year trained teachers. Many other students have completed various stages of the program for which they receive accreditation as Assistant Teachers at appropriate levels. It is hoped that a fourth year of study will soon be available which will receive national accreditation and students will then graduate with a Diploma of Teaching.

F. CONCLUSION

The barriers between the Aboriginal child and school education are beginning to be broken down but the millenium is not about to begin. Many of the socio-economic and cultural factors referred to previously will continue to operate in Aboriginal society in the foreseeable future and are beyond the control of educators. They are hidden deep within the fabric of Aboriginal society and will continue to be resistant to rapid change. But in spite of difficulties, *Education for What?* is a question that we must continue to urge Aboriginal people to answer before school education will better meet the needs of their children. Answers to that question are not always easy to find. Programs of self-help and self-management may eventually provide some of the answers, but people involved will have to accept that the paths that will be taken by traditionally-oriented Aboriginal people are likely to be vastly different from those which enable members of the dominant society to achieve their goals.

In the meantime, those people involved in Aboriginal education must begin to conceive of educational programs that will enable Aboriginal children to find meaning and purpose in their educational experience. We must design programs that recognise difference and allow Aboriginal children to gain an education under the same educational principles as all other children do, i.e. by moving from the things they know to the things they need to learn, using language or languages that they understand. Compulsive conformity to programs designed for mainstream Australia inevitably set the stage for inequality in education for an Aboriginal child, but recognition of difference enables Aboriginal children to have access to equal educational opportunity because it allows them to use their own strengths to cope with new situations.

Finally, educators must begin to conceive of education in terms of Aboriginal survival - survival as distinctly Aboriginal, but also as effective people in a modern world. They must not try to educate people out of their heritage, for anyone who wishes to live effectively must know who he is, where he has come from, and where he is going. Aboriginal parents know that their children need English oracy, literacy and numeracy and many of the skills of the white man, but above all they know that their children need to be Aboriginal, to live with pride and dignity in a world over which they have some control. An American Indian woman in a similar situation said quite simply:

I can't predict how my children should be educated but one thing I know is if my children are proud, if my children have identity, if my children know who they are, they will be able to encounter anything in life. I think that is what education means.

(Collier, 1973, p.121)

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