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SYSTEMIC BIAS IN EDUCATION

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Since the early 1970s there have been many positive developments in the education of Aboriginal Australian children as well as education about Aboriginal society, past and present, for all children. We only have to look at such developments as Aboriginal Secondary Grants, Study Grants, home-school liaison, language programs, (e.g. Van Leer or the bilingual programs), family support/counselling (e.g. the Inala Family Project), Aboriginal Education Consultative groups at local, regional, state and national levels. The list of positive developments appears to be endless. Certainly teachers, schools and State Departments of Education have consulted with Aboriginal groups to develop policy statements about Aboriginal Education/Aboriginal Studies in schools. Money has been spent on employing (and sometimes training) Aboriginal teaching assistants; Aboriginal schools have received some support and in areas such as the Northern Territory and Northern Queensland, efforts are underway to decentralise education.

In a very real sense giant steps appear to have been made in Aboriginal education over the past ten years or so. If we are really honest, however, the *results* of these giant steps remain comparatively disappointing. Thus, although we know that Aboriginal children stay at schools for longer now than they did during the 1960s, the proportion who actually complete senior high school at a satisfactory level is small. For example, in the North West Region of New South Wales, only 11 Aboriginal students were enrolled in Year 12 at the beginning of 1981. See Table 1 for further information.

In that same year, 224 Aboriginal students entered high school throughout the region. If the 1981 patterns of enrolment for Year 12 persist, then only 5% of the 224 children who started high school will actually complete the program. These figures are not encouraging, particularly as non-Aboriginal students' enrolment patterns indicate that 29% of those who begin high school actually make it to Year 12.

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Table 1
N.W. Region of N.S.W.
Secondary School Aboriginal Enrolments 1981

Inspectorates	Year 7		Year 8		Year 9		Year 10		Year 11		Year 12	
	Non-Abor.	Abor.	Non-Abor.	Abor.	Non-Abor.	Abor.	Non-Abor.	Abor.	Non-Abor.	Abor.	Non-Abor.	Abor.
Armidale	350	20	315	20	329	19	296	9	140	1	136	1
Coonabarrabran	294	90	280	82	291	69	229	71	130	29	84	3
Gunnedah	428	19	430	29	420	20	323	15	110	4	88	1
Inverell	443	21	432	26	416	15	373	18	157	4	146	1
Moree	326	56	310	57	298	49	234	30	82	5	59	3
Tamworth Nth	414	7	385	13	382	15	380	10	180	1	166	0
Tamworth Sth	320	11	360	17	311	18	319	6	129	0	77	2
TOTAL	2575	224	2512	244	2447	205	2154	159	928	44	756	11

Obviously patterns will vary from region to region as well as between states. The N.W. Region is, however, an appropriate example because, as Watts (1976:5) has pointed out, the largest proportion of Aboriginal children receive their education in country areas.

A number of reasons have been put forward to explain the high attrition rate in the Aboriginal school population. I am sure you are familiar with all of them: lack of general motivation, home support and achievement motivation, negative teacher attitudes, low student self-esteem, high levels of prejudice and discrimination, poor socio-economic circumstances, inappropriate learning materials, lack of success models, poor curriculum development, value conflict, culture conflict. All of these are important factors and deserve further investigation.

One area, however, which we have sadly neglected in our analyses, has been the system itself and the biases inherent in it. My understanding of *systemic biases* comes from Savitch's (1975:8) analysis of biases in the United States' political system. He thinks:

> Systemic biases can be defined as the prerequisites necessary for access to the political system and effective performance in it...That is, the more pressure a group can muster, the better able it is to shift policies towards its objectives. Essential prerequisites for such participation are organizational and communications skills which in turn require money, commitment of personnel, a trained staff, propaganda apparatus, and the like.

If we read "educational system" instead of "political system" in Savitch's analysis, we get a pretty clear idea of the biases which in turn will affect the system's implementors' (teachers') values and attitudes.

In Australian society, like all other industrialised societies, education has become institutionalised - separated from the family and community - characterised by its own bureaucratic hierarchies of authority, status and prestige. Whom does this institution serve? There is no doubt that in our type of society it predominantly serves the middle-class who are economically and educationally powerful *because* they are aware and concerned about education. Numerous research projects have shown that children from professional backgrounds tend to achieve better in our education system than others.

Most of these educational decision-makers, then, are English speaking, of Anglo-Saxon extraction, from adequate socio-economic backgrounds, and they tend to live in large urban rather than more isolated country areas. Similarly,the system's implementors, the teachers, are mainly from this background.

Given that the school serves largely to perpetuate the values and attitudes of the educationally aware, that it tends to measure standards of excellence and relevance and the "ideal man" it seeks to promote in terms of its own cultural values, it is not surprising that country areas, country education and particularly Aboriginal education remain at a disadvantage.

My argument is not that country areas are necessarily exposed to disadvantaged educational facilities. I do, however, maintain that the system's *hidden curriculum* expressed in teacher placement, promotion and support in the education system seriously hampers equality of educational outcome for country children and particularly for Aboriginal children.

Before I continue, let me point out that the analysis which follows is not based on intensive research but rather on extensive informal discussions with teachers and executives in the North-West and Western Regions of New South Wales since 1977. I have been involved in developing community-based inservices for teachers, parents and liaison staff; on two occasions I have been asked to 'intervene' when racial strife has erupted at schools; I have had continuous and extensive involvement with some schools because of my role as 'consultant'; and I have been involved in organising conferences for country teachers. On the basis of these discussions I would like to propose the following to you as examples of the *hidden curriculum* which frustrates equality of education outcome for many country children and ensures that *systemic biases* will continue to place Aboriginal children at a disadvantage.

1. The proportion of first-year-out teachers in Western Region schools is extraordinarily high. There is a fairly cynical belief among student teachers that if you want to teach out west they send you to Sydney and if you come from Sydney they will send you to the other side of the black stump. I am not sure that this pattern is consciously followed; I am sure, though, that there is something wrong in our teacher placement. Every year the turnover of teachers at Western schools is high (the Public School at Bourke in 1982 is a good example). I know of a number of cases where teachers who have *wanted* Western appointments have been sent to all-white urban schools.

Further, teachers tend to stay in the West for the minimum period of time necessary either to get a promotion or to be transferred out of the area. We should ask ourselves why this is happening. Certainly first-year-out teachers need a great deal of support to overcome the culture shock many of them experience when they are first posted to the West. All teachers need incentives to ensure that they see the West as a rewarding and officially recognised teaching career. This could be done by some sort of tax rebate or annually subsidised travel to more populated areas such as Sydney. But on a very mundane level, it would be a help if teachers were assured of suitable and reasonably priced accommodation. I know of one teacher who had to live in a caravan for a year and another who paid $48 a week to live in a converted garage. These are not exceptional cases - they are 'success' stories rather than tales of woe.

To an outsider to the system, like myself, a further insidious practice appears to undermine efforts to establish the West as an area which holds as much career related prestige as coastal regions. This practice is related to executive appointments in Western schools. It *appears* that individuals who want to progress in the education system are most likely to do so if they are prepared to serve a period of time in Western schools. If we take a close look at appointments for principal, deputy principal, and subject masters (for example) I believe the evidence will indicate that only a few of these appointments have had previous experience teaching Aboriginal or isolated children. Even fewer stay on after they have done their three year 'stint'. Principals/deputies who *have*, usually end up in fairly 'easy' places, for example, the North Coast, perhaps the Blue Mountains, certainly in an educationally more central area. Because of this pattern there is a widespread belief among teachers that if you "do your time" the department will look after you; if you want promotion you have to go West, whether you hate it or not.

Teacher placement, promotion and support in the education system, then, apparently do not ensure that Aboriginal children receive the best possible education.

2. Further, pre-service training equips few teachers to teach in isolated regions. Aboriginal education in post-service training, for example, Post Graduate Diplomas, does not receive high priority with established staff. A number of factors operate to ensure that the latter, at least, remains the case. Post-Service training has to be done by means of external studies. That in itself is difficult in isolated areas. Post-Service training in Aboriginal Education does not appear to lead to promotion as, for example, courses in School

Administration. Teachers who do opt for Aboriginal Education have to contend with a good deal of peer pressure which is anti-Aboriginal. Many of my students are labelled 'Nigger lovers', told to do 'useful diplomas' and so on. New South Wales is very different from Queensland in this respect. In Queensland, of all places, teachers wishing to carry out Post-Service training in Aboriginal Studies/Aboriginal Education, may do so full time for at least one semester, while their salaries continue to be fully paid.

Because there is little support for teachers who do want to carry out further courses in Aboriginal Studies/Aboriginal Education, few teachers in Western areas will be motivated to extend their expertise in these areas through post-graduate studies.

3. This pattern finds ready reflection in the kinds of things that happen at school. Obviously many good things are also happening, particularly in the area of DECAP. However, in terms of my understanding of what goes on, far too many Aboriginal children find their way to OA classes (often because they are discipline rather than educational problems); far too many Aboriginal children are encouraged to do 'easy' options - living skills, health and hygiene, pre-vocational programs - which lead nowhere because they do not provide entry into trades or jobs or tertiary institutions. A number of forces operate to ensure that such educational practices are maintained - unemployment is probably *the* economic problem facing the West as almost all other parts of the country. So teachers are faced with the issue of 'education for what?' Because we can't educate children towards employment prospects anymore, one school of thought opts for teaching living skills, how to survive on the dole, etc. Another school of thought argues that children need to be better equipped to handle possible jobs and be more attractive to possible employers in a shrinking market, therefore it opts for pre-vocation courses.

Both these approaches are prominent in Western areas, both will be attractive to people from poor economic backgrounds who have little knowledge of the education system and what it might offer. If we look at the distribution of Aboriginal children in schools, I believe we would see that the majority are in just such classes.

There is a further, perhaps more insidious and obviously much harder to substantiate influence: teacher expectation. Frequently Aboriginal children end up in 'slow learner' classes because teachers feel that these children are not really capable of anything else. Again there is a whole body of literature to support this assertion;

my conversations with teachers support my views that this pattern is also prevalent in the West.

Consequently the economic/social pressure exerted on teachers and educational institutions often ensures that Aboriginal children do not receive the best educational opportunities.

4. There is one further issue which, I believe, influences the effectiveness of all government institutions working with Aboriginal groups. This is the issue of *dependency*.

As applied here, the concept of dependency was first developed by O'Neil (1976) in his analysis of alcohol dependence. It has been adapted by Dowd (1981) to describe the socio-economic-psychological dependence of Aboriginal people on non-Aboriginal society and vice versa.

To summarise, there are two sides to the problems experienced by Aboriginal communities and their organisation. On the one hand, Aboriginal people are subject to poverty and all its concomitant side effects; they are controlled by non-Aboriginal domination as well as the effects of prejudice and discrimination. On the other hand, Aboriginal people are tied down by their own dependency. Obviously this dependency has been the product of 200 years of subjugation - of being told what to do. Today, it appears, many Aboriginal organisations are crippled because they still feel insecure, inefficient, incapable of making decisions. Others are hamstrung by non-Aborigines who pay lip-service to self determination/management, but don't want to relinquish the decision-making role. They fear for their own positions in bureaucratic hierarchies which are built on the premise that Aborigines *need* guidance. This is a major dilemma. Far too often Aboriginal people are tempted to ask non-Aborigines to provide, to organise, to manage.

If we consider this situation dispassionately, it is easy to see that Aboriginal people, who for so long have been told what to do, believe that they are finally in control when they demand something and some non-Aboriginal provides it. *Of course, such control is pure illusion. Dependency remains as long as Aboriginal communities do not understand the bureaucracy in which decisions are made, or how decisions they have made may be subverted by manipulation.*

A classic example of this type of manipulation by ommission rather than commission can be found in adult education.

5. There is a desperate need in all Aboriginal communities for further education - particularly adult education. We are well and truly in the era of self-management. Aboriginal Associations, Housing Co-operations, Business Co-operatives etc. are springing up all over the place. For example, Wilcannia, Goodooga, Dubbo, Gilgandra, Menindee, Peak Hill, Wellington, Bourke, Weilmoringle, Warren, to mention just a few. All of these are either funded through the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs (D.A.A.) or the Aboriginal Development Commission (A.D.C.). It is imperative that, if such ventures are to succeed, Aboriginal managers, committee members, secretaries etc. are equipped with the necessary skills to run these organisations. In more centrally located areas T.A.F.E. provides an excellent service. However, far too often programs 'lead nowhere'. That is, they are not registered, certificated courses which are recognised for entry into the Public Service, tertiary institutions or business organisation. If we are putting money into educational programs then, I believe, we are responsible for ensuring that at least a proportion of these are recognised and accredited stepping stones.

If programs of this nature, that is, in community development, management, health and welfare, etc., are to reach the people of the Western areas, they need to be *decentralised*. Visiting lecturers, on-site tutors, adequate support and facilities have to be organised. All of this takes money. Unfortunately, whenever the question of funding arises, the "State/Commonwealth responsibility" wrangle raises its ugly head and communities are caught in the middle.

In a very real sense, then, developments in adult education, I believe, perpetuate the system of Aboriginal dependence on non-Aboriginal expertise.

The issues raised in this article are not new. Watts (1981) makes a plea for a core of highly competent, specialist teachers for Aboriginal children whose rewards in the system and by the system are based on recognition of their expertise. What are we doing to meet this challenge?

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