



# The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

In 2022 *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* transitioned to fully Open Access and this article is available for use under the license conditions below.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

## THE MULTICULTURAL CONTEXT: CHALLENGING THE DOMINANT CULTURE

*The following is an article which first appeared in the Bernard Van Leer Foundation Newsletter, No. 45, January 1987. It has been reproduced in this issue of The Aboriginal Child at School, because the nature of the relationship between the dominant and minority cultures and languages is fundamental for education and schooling in Australia, and one which must be established not just at the national level but particularly at the individual school/community level. This article reports on the United States' developments in establishing the nature of the relationships among different ethnic and cultural groups.*

Early this century, writer Walter Lippmann observed that

The great social adventure of America is no longer the conquest of the wilderness but the absorption of fifty different peoples.

Decades later John F. Kennedy told his fellow Americans: "We are a nation of immigrants". But for many ethnic and cultural groups in the United States today, such liberal rhetoric is meaningless. Indigenous peoples - American Indians, native Alaskans, long-settled Hispanic communities - and more recent immigrants of Hispanic origin, Blacks and other ethnic minorities, have suffered economic exploitation and acute discrimination. These external pressures create a sense of cultural and linguistic inferiority which many disadvantaged minority families pass on to their children.

Three Foundation-supported projects in the United States are working with minority communities to try to restore cultural identity and self-confidence. At the recent meeting of American projects in Boston, staff from these projects discussed the lessons and implications of their work. They were Lary Schaefer and Darlene Bifelt, of 'Cross-cultural learning for young families in Alaska', a project of the University of Alaska; Maria Chavez and Mela Leger, of the 'Hispanic family education programme' of the College of Education, University of New Mexico; and Lois Antoine and Winona Sample of 'Early Childhood services for urbanised American Indians', a project of the Denver Indian Circle, Inc. The interview was conducted by Mary Fillmore and Bruce Astrein.

*Lary:*

Alaska has more than 200 Indian and Eskimo villages, all of which are being highly pressured by social and economic change. The women in our project have identified three major issues. First, in 1991, the protection of the Alaska Native Lands Settlement Act will run out. Stock and land reserved for indigenous people will become available for sale, and there is a great fear that much will be sold off to non-natives. The second issue is the changing nature of Alaskan native culture. I suspect that 90 per cent of the cultural knowledge of many native communities resides in ten per cent of the population - the elders, most of whom will be dead in another ten years. We are looking at a radical new definition of native culture. Determining who will make that definition is a major cultural crisis. My feeling is that it has to be people like the participants in the Alaska project - trained and knowledgeable young women - who are going to be the new leaders and definers of what native culture is.

The third issue they have identified is changing roles and functions of native women and families. There are whole new types of family structures, even though the traditional values and kinship structures are still there. Related to that is the separation of men and women, not only in Alaska but nationwide. The women are taking the lead in going to school. Eighty per cent of all native graduates from the University of Alaska are women. Our project is 100 per cent women. Nearly all the 125 students in the field programme are women.

*Lois:*

Our programme is different because we work with children. Many Indians who are now parents were raised in boarding schools run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs to 'civilize' them. There were ten children in our family, and eight of us were in school at once. Some people even came and camped outside the school to be near their children, but the authorities discouraged that. When my father and mother were in school, they were punished for speaking their own language and later, as adults, for participating in traditional events. They were trying to turn us into 'white' Indians. It didn't work, and by the 'forties there was a reversal.

The impact has been tremendous: we have lost nurturing skills and our ability to cope as families. In the social services, you see a lot of people giving their children up because they don't want to take care of them. We have a pre-school with a home-based programme, in which we work with people who perhaps have no other

alternative. The social services have probably given up on them. In the 1950s, the Bureau of Indian Affairs decided that the only way Indians could become self-supporting was to ship them off to cities like Denver, Chicago, Oakland and Los Angeles. They were sent in large numbers, but they couldn't cope with city living because they were unprepared. It was a disaster, but some were strong enough and survived.

In the pre-school, we make our curriculum relevant to the children. There are mainly Navajo and Sioux people in the City of Denver. Many were resettled there in the 'fifties. Others arrived recently. Last year we had two little Navajo girls who couldn't speak English, and it was really a challenge to us. By the end of the year, they could speak English and the mother was even despairing because they no longer spoke Navajo at home.

*Maria:*

We are in an urban setting in Albuquerque, and we're facing many of the same things as the other projects: people moving in from rural settings, who need different coping skills. They can no longer rely on their extended families. Our community is about 3,800 residents in a larger urban setting of about 700,000. Ours is one of the lowest income settings in the whole city: there are very few stores, little access to services and very poor transportation. There is a lot of drug abuse, trafficking and violence. We have a lot of latchkey children and abused children.

For clarification, we are dealing with two populations. First are the Hispanic families who have been in New Mexico for generations; they were also punished for using their language, and have lost it. They have assimilated into the Anglo culture. The other population is from a daily influx of people coming in from Mexico, many undocumented workers who have a different sense of what being Hispanic is all about. They come in with a beautiful command of their language. One group makes fun of the other due to the language barrier. The first group wants to retain the language and they want their children to speak it - but they no longer speak it themselves. The immigrants want their children to learn English because it is a way up the economic ladder. There are also conflicts because of women's roles. Traditionally, the father takes care of the woman until she marries, and then the husband takes over. Women are trying to break out of that whole system.

Our project's intention is to help Hispanic families with young children become better managers of their own lives. There is strength already inherent in the culture which has not been addressed.

People are always looking at the *deficit* model - that Hispanics are lacking something which must be given to them - but we have a different approach. We want to find the strengths inherent in the family unit and build and enhance them, so they can get a better economic base, parent better, or whatever else they want to achieve. We make it a condition that parents work as volunteers in the pre-school, two every day. They bring in their strength, and they tell us how they perceive their children and how they learn best.

*Mela:*

In working with the children, I notice their individual needs, such as gross motor development. On the home visit, I ask the parents "What do you think you could do?" They come up with activities that they already do or would consider fun. It is difficult for some of the parents to see themselves as the prime educator of the child. It's a new role, especially for traditional Hispanic families who have relied on the school. In our meetings they come up with many ideas for working with the children. They may bring us something from their heritage: perhaps finger plays or little songs. More and more, they are accepting that role.

We have a written form for the parent volunteers, asking them what they did that day, their favourite activity, what they would like to do next time, and what suggestions they have. Several parents, for example, are going to help us make *pinatas* (packets of sweets). We've had a lot of festivities, such as birthdays. Some of the children are not used to *pinatas* for birthday parties: it is a sharing of customs. Also, when parents come to school, they bring the snack of that day. Sometimes it turns out to be a three-course meal. Often it's big, wonderfully-seasoned, beautiful food. The children are learning to eat it. At first they shied away but they are learning. At our social gatherings people also bring food. If you have food and the children are giving a little performance, that's a good attraction for the parents.

*Lois:*

In Denver, we have a Parents' Advisory Committee which sets directions for us, to pat us on the back and to tell us if we are doing something wrong. There's a booklet we give parents at the beginning of the year describing the staff, with our addresses, something about our education, personal things we like or don't like. We try to establish a bond with the parents. We've had

difficulty getting parents to meetings, and we think it is because some of them are struggling economically to meet their basic needs. With their permission, we are also making a list of parents to give to other parents, so there can be a relationship among them.

*Winona:*

Most people, nationally and internationally, have no concept of tribal differences. We speak of American 'Indians' and Alaskan 'natives', and that covers a tremendous gamut. It's like Europe, where people in Spain are very different from people in The Netherlands. It's very important to give everyone even weight in working with families and children, so it doesn't appear that one tribe or another is taking over. You have to be aware that there is an unconscious rivalry when people meet.

*Maria:*

Although people sometimes make fun of each other, we do try to create a sense of family in the project. It is a strength we can build on. People share language with each other, saying "We use this word in our country". There are similarities and we work with them first, then later with some of the differences. We try to make everyone feel comfortable; we might say "You're from Honduras; let's do something from there." Just as there are similarities among Indian people, so there are among us Hispanic people.

*Winona:*

The value system of all tribes is alike: the sense of non-competitiveness and sharing, or respect for elders. We start from there in any Indian group. Then we might talk about the differences; only in dress and homes and the food we eat. But we build on the strength that "I am American Indian".

*Maria:*

We all share the goal of rekindling pride in who you are. Most of our families in the Hispanic community have lost that. They need to be proud of the contributions their ancestors made to this country.

*Lois:*

The pre-schoolers used to fight to be cowboys when they played cowboys and Indians. Now they fight to be Indians. We identified which tribe each child belongs to. In fact, we look at our curricula at the start of each school year with that in mind.

*Darlene:*

In Alaska, we make sure the children know where they came from. Our languages are virtually lost. I understand mine, but I don't speak it. We also have elders come to the Centre and talk with the children about the old ways.

*Mela:*

Two grandmothers are now part of the pre-school in Albuquerque: they're wonderful. The children relate to them very well. So many of them don't have access to their own grandparents. This has had many positive effects: they work on a one-to-one basis with some of the children who need a lot of attention.

*Lois:*

An elderly man works in our pre-school, making dance costumes for the children and accompanying them to public schools and other pre-schools or ethnic fairs in churches.

*Lary:*

One thing we have tried to do is not to focus on families and children, but to deal with the broader issues. Dealing with the primary causes is the most difficult way to approach it, but even dealing with the tertiary causes should be based on insight about the primary ones. Making the connection among those levels of causes is what I sometimes find difficult.

*Maria:*

As people who are working in bicultural programmes, we need to have a vision to prepare the market to receive the people we are working with.

Lary:

My philosophy is different. I used to believe that you can prepare institutions to handle minority workers, but now I think that the Western technological society is an unstoppable force. If minority people are to survive in this world, they must learn of the terms of that world. Otherwise they will always be in ghettos, on reservations unable to leave, because they lack the minimum basic requirements of the greater structure.

Maria:

That's the vision I think we need to have, to fit that puzzle together, to recognize the dichotomy. There are people who can function in both cultures, but there are many who cannot. For them, we need to make a linkage.

Lois:

For us, it's also important that we are part of the Denver Indian Centre, where they have a programme for people who want to get a high school equivalent diploma, employment and training, housing and food. There is also a Headstart Programme, and housing units for the elderly. We establish the extended family like they do at the Indian Centre. We also have a network with the Denver Indian Health Board, the Children's Hospital, University of Colorado Health Science Centre, and Eagle Lodge. We try to bring together people who can help us, and maybe we can help them. We have a group called *Winyan Wasoke*, which means Strong Women, coming from the Denver Indian Health Board. We work with groups of mothers every week to build self-esteem. It's a connection we really value. Another is having parents present when the nurse comes to measure and assess a child's development. The traditional Indian manner of living is holistic, and I hope I can deal with every aspect of the child's life in our programme.

Maria:

Because of the extended family, you can affect at least 25 people when you work with one family. They in turn reach that many, and you reach a whole community. For us it has been very effective to use the help of the many Hispanic individuals and families who have made it in an institution. There are role models out there

who aren't just tokens, but who are sincerely committed to helping Hispanic families.

*Mela:*

We also have a whole network with the university, the social agencies, the maternity and infant care, and others within the city; when we need a certain kind of service, we know where to go. In our newsletter, we list some of these services in Spanish. We are also in contact with the speech and language centre, the mental health system, and dental health services.

*Maria:*

We're only one year old, and agencies which have been there for ten years or more are asking us how we have won the cooperation of the families. They're saying to us: "We have 500 pregnant teenagers and don't know how to work with them. What do you suggest?" Because of our bicultural approach, the agencies are receptive.

Our pre-school is there mainly to bring parents into the programme. We are working on a very small scale. We hope it is going to have all these tentacles and go out to the communities in the whole country. But Lary is right when he says there is a fortress out there.

*Lary:*

I'm addressing it through a frontal attack. I'm bringing in a renowned expert on American Indian law. For people like Darlene, who are interested in education, we're going to have workshops on family policy and natural resources and economic development. We're not going to try to infiltrate the fortress with kids, but to attack it full force with ladders and battering rams.

*Winona:*

It's good to get people talking about their own community and its problems, but we need to let them know about public policy, about governmental change and how they can advocate for it.

*Maria:*

We've seen that with families who are saying they want to take control of their lives. I've seen it in our board meetings, when people say "I don't think we should start it this way. I think we should do something different". It's a lot of work and a slow process. You're not going to go in a community and see it pop up like magic. It means allowing them to become, and they become by themselves.

*Darlene:*

One thing that has changed for me as a result of the programme in Alaska is being exposed to things that affect everybody. I want to continue my education so I can help people in surrounding villages, so they can lead a life that will make them happy - but not lose their identity in the process.

*Lary:*

We are trying to give the women in the programme some real options in life: whether they choose to stay at home and live a traditional lifestyle, work half-years here or there; or move to Boston and become lawyers. We want to create options not only for individuals, but also for groups of people, so that whole villages can have the tools to make the appropriate decision on their future. There are minimum requirements if people are to have real options. In some ways, it isn't true that people have all the answers within their own cultures. They don't have the answers to the forces of this Western technological society.

*Lois:*

I think I am an example of combining the traditional and the contemporary way of life. I was a Christian until about 11 years ago and became involved with traditional ways. Only three years ago I got my college education, and graduated in December of last year. My strength comes from being both traditional and Christian. Because I have a strong spiritual background, the other things have been bearable, even having four sons and six grandsons. I moved from a rural area to an urban area. I was married and got divorced. I went from being a working person to being a student. There are many transitions. Whatever women say to me, I say that if I can do it as a grandmother and an older person, so can you. We have to get our message through to parents and children that an

education is the tool that you use, but not the main tool. What you put into yourself is the main tool. Living in a white man's world, we have to understand technology and even compete with it.

*Winona:*

We are all dealing with a small group of children, but we hope the ripple effect extends to the parents, the Indian community and the non-Indian community. It's not just teaching cognitive development to thirty youngsters. The ideas and planning need to come from the community itself. We make a big mistake if we come in like the Bureau of Indian Affairs and say, "This is what's good for you. We're going to fix you and change you". We bring organizations and families to a round table like this, and we say "You meet that need, you meet that one. What needs are we not meeting, and how can we fill the gaps?" Then we can look at the larger, non-Indian community and say that the education or public health people are not doing their jobs. We can make them aware.

Somehow it works. Whatever happens with strengthening young children and their families works in the beginning. Through the years, I have had so many people come up to me and say "I started as a parent in Headstart. Do you know what I'm doing now? You'll be so happy about it. I'm director of a programme'. I go into a hospital in the emergency room, and the nurse says "Remember me? I was in Headstart'. It goes on and on. I have had literally hundreds of people come up to me and tell me how they have grown, the jobs they have, and how good they feel.

Early Childhood and Family Education Programme  
for Hispanic Families

HISPANIC FAMILY STRENGTHS

