



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.

BOOK REVIEW:

Whitefella School: Education and Aboriginal Resistance.
Ralph Folds. Allen & Unwin. 1987.

*Reviewed by Fay Gale

BRUTAL FACTS, INADEQUATE MODEL

The author summarises the work by saying, "This book has examined the ways in which school fails *anangu* (the Pitjantjatjara people). Indeed it is a heavily critical book listing the substantial failures which Folds sees in the education process currently operating in the various schools of the South Australian section of the Pitjantjatjara lands in the North West corner of the State. In fact it is a quite vitriolic attack on the performance of the South Australian Education Department in these schools.

According to Folds, the long-standing culture of the Pitjantjatjara is at the final point of collapse. And the cause of the crisis is sheeted home to the inadequacies and inappropriateness of the education program operating in the schools.

Folds graphically portrays the large number of concerns which most white observers on these lands share. The picture painted is certainly a grim one. The most conspicuous evidence of social problems as viewed by the outsider is that of petrol sniffing. The picture presented by Folds is one that has been frequently reported of young people, especially boys, drifting around in a dazed state with cans hanging around their necks and brain damage and death just around the corner. Sniffers lounge around outside the school, lolling on the swings in the playground, distracting the pupils inside and trying to entice younger children to join them. "How can anyone teach when the damned sniffers are out there calling out to the kids inside, throwing stones on the roof or looking through windows?"

The whole sad picture so vividly described by Folds is one of cultural confusion and jarring incongruities. The school, the white teachers, the considerable paraphernalia of our culture all portrayed in the classroom stand in stark contrast to the community in which it is set or, as Folds intimates, the community upon which it has been inflicted.

* Reprinted by courtesy of *The Adelaide Review*, June 1987.

What could be more inappropriate than the home economics unit? Here the girls spend their days in modern kitchens with an array of utensils, cocktail glasses and the like, totally alien to the housing and appliances found in the places where the girls live. At school they are being instructed into a modern middle class suburban life style complete with the latest *Vogue* magazines and *Home Beautifuls*. This is a world far removed from anything the girls are likely to experience. Folds sees this whole process as a highly dangerous one of enticing the girls into a fantasy world which will only make it more difficult for them to live in their own real world.

So Folds poses some very critical questions about the confrontation of the two cultures. He sees the school as the centre of this confrontation and denounces the inappropriateness of an education system "delivered in the desert settlements but devised and prepackaged in head office in urban Adelaide".

The substantial issues raised in this educational critique are important not only for the bi-lingual programs attempted in Pitjantjatjara lands but for education in general, and especially in areas of cultural mix, poverty or discontinuity with the middle class, urban English producers of the procedures.

There are strong and valid points to his criticisms and the sense of urgency with which he depicts the situation. In the preface to this book Sonny Flynn, Co-ordinator of the Aboriginal Task Force, strongly endorses Folds' criticisms by saying that in developing tertiary programs for Aboriginal people he daily meets "the results of an inadequate, inappropriate and alien school system."

Many readers, including several who have taught in these schools, will agree with Folds' damning criticisms and respect his bravery in speaking so forthrightly. It is not, however, surprising that Folds has received so much criticism for his statements, and the criticism has extended to anguished letters from Pitjantjatjara people themselves who understandably feel hurt and offended that an outsider should come into their lands and then publicise his negative impressions.

Angkuna Baker, a highly respected Aboriginal teacher at Indulkana, felt so upset that she wrote to the *Advertiser* with a seemingly gentle but trenchant criticism, "We are unhappy about what you have written. You have not been to Indulkana, so why are you criticising all the Aboriginal schools?"

Indeed, this is the crux of the problem. Folds has gone in as an outsider to only a few areas for a short period of time and tried to write an evaluation of the whole bi-lingual, bi-cultural program in Aboriginal schools. He has gone even further. He has assumed that the schools are the major cause of the social conflicts he perceives in those communities and furthermore that the schools can right these perceived social upheavals.

With not unknown academic rashness he applies a model developed overseas, the model of resistance, and applies it with gay abandon to the Australian situation. How much simpler it would be if such a mono-causal approach could answer even the main questions posed by Aboriginal education! But much more extensive research would have been necessary to come to grips with the complexity of issues present in these schools.

Unfortunately the limited research has meant that the book lacks both an historical perspective and a spatial dimension. He is unable to see the present situation through the eyes of communities which have made enormous adaptations and have had a long history of successful cultural adjustment. Indeed Ernabella was, by a long lead, the first school to develop fully-fledged bi-cultural programs in Australia, and this history is ignored.

He also fails to see this particular situation within the overall setting of the multiplicity of questions presented by Aboriginal education. There are similar communities where highly comparable school programs exist, yet there is no problem with petrol sniffing. There are schools where Aboriginal involvement and direction are such that issues like absenteeism no longer prevail. It is dangerous to view the Pitjantjatjara schools outside of their own historical context or as isolated from the valuable experiments going on in other Aboriginal schools. The issues are too important for such simplistic treatment.

It seems to be an inevitable but unfortunate process of scholarship that it is only when we are young, inexperienced and have relatively short term and superficial views of a situation that we are either able or brave enough to criticise substantial flaws in any established system. Later the complexity of the issues makes us much more careful in our evaluations but also more willing to acknowledge the people who help us along the way.

.....