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ABORIGINAL WORLD VIEW IN THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

* David Parish

The literature on Aboriginal education holds few references to the presence and effect of Aboriginal world view. This brief paper examines some of the literature that does address this critical element and makes a plea for all educators working in bicultural environments to gain the appropriate understandings. Where schools and educators indicate the presence of such understanding the levels of attendance and thus the effectiveness of the programs provided will probably be enhanced. Without the understanding, and even with the best will in the world, much effort will be wasted.

Christie (1987: 30) defined a *world view* as '....the ideas and beliefs which a group of people hold about its world and the people and things in it...'. Similarly, Vaszolyi (1975) considered it to be a culture's shared knowledge of '...concepts and beliefs concerning the individual, the society and the universe...'.

Harris (1979: 9-20) provided a number of definitions of *world view* as the result of his research of the literature to that time. While he accepted that a useful starting point was the definition provided by Goodenough (1963: 258), represented as Figure 1 below, he documented a number of other people's thoughts. Goldston (1972: 92-93), for example, defined *world view* as '...the way people order their experience...' while Dundes (1964: 56) preferred a simple definition such as '...discrete folk tales...' rather than Redfield's (1953: 86) suggestion that it was '...the way we see ourselves in relation to all else...'.

All of these definitions or suggestions share the common bond illustrated in Figure 1. They all indicate an interrelationship between those factors which, because they affect the way we view our own world and its component parts, produce the major influence on what we do, on how we act and how we perceive the world around us.

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In this paper the world views of all the participants in educational programs will be seen to have a significant influence on what is provided and how it is provided.

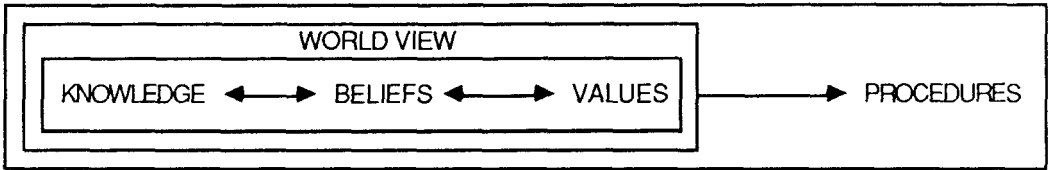


Figure 1. A conceptualisation of *world view* as defined by Goodenough (1963: 258).

A world view is omnipresent and, in defining it, Christie, in accord with Goodenough, states that while it:

...may be difficult to describe, ...it affects the way we see the physical world, our possessions, other people and ourselves...it affects the way we act, the way we think, our beliefs about right and wrong, and our emotional reaction to what happens around us...
(Christie, 1987: 30)

Nelson (1972: 99) observed that, no matter how objective and detached an observer of another culture tries to be, any understanding of world views cannot be divorced from the observer's own world view. The 'cultural spectacles' (Benedict, 1929) are very real. Children develop their world views as the product of family socialisation and education practices, but the school environment rarely reflects the world view of the Aboriginal child. Because of this, there is the potential for significant conflict which may lead to an unsatisfactory, unsatisfying and unproductive school environment.

The world views of the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples of Australia are so different that it is not uncommon to find that writers choose to compare and contrast them. While Christie M., (1985: 9) suggests that the Aboriginal world is a world of *being*, and the non-Aboriginal world is a world of *doing*, Bain (1979: 372,373) provides an alternative terminology and describes the Aboriginal world view as *interactional* and the non-Aboriginal as *transactional*.

The features of the Aboriginal *being* and *interactional* world view are frequently difficult for non-Aboriginal people

to comprehend. Hart (1981: 2) highlights some of the major aspects of this conceptual framework based on 'being' and 'interaction', by explaining that the Aboriginal world is not constrained by time or by space; that death occurs but that the spirits of the dead are ever-present; that ceremonial activities and ritual are life itself; that the re-enactments of the stories of ancient heroes actually recreate the heroes. Similarly, Coombs (1978) focusses on spiritual values to identify ways in which the Aboriginal person is essentially different from the non-Aboriginal, especially in attitudes to 'land', 'nature' and to the social obligations between persons. He stresses that the Aboriginal person:

...(is) of nature...(and this is) not just a scientific or philosophical system, but one with which and by which man must live consciously and reverently.

(Coombs, 1978: 125)

This is the world of the Aboriginal person, the world into which s/he was born by an Earth-mother. S/He came from the land, s/he is at one with the land. Bain (1979: 379) argues that the interactional world does not allow for the development of notions of quantification for it is quality not quantity that is important. The worth of the individual is dependent upon the relationships within which the individual fits and which impinge on her/him.

Christie (M., 1985: 11) and Thies (1987: 39) believe that the Aboriginal world view is based firmly on the understanding that the key to survival depends on co-operation and co-existence. They further agree that the interactional basis ensures the coherence of people, nature, land and time. Similarly, Rudder (1983) claims that Aboriginal traditional number words are used not to quantify but to indicate an awareness of the quality of the group.

The non-Aboriginal world is one in which the *individual* is the key element. Competition is the cornerstone of success (Christie, 1987: 31). In a doing and transactional world objects are able to be changed and collected. For this to occur they must have substance, form and quantity. There must be number systems to permit the quantification, there must be scientific systems to explain the substance and the form (Christie, 1987: 30).

These differences in perceptions are real and continuing and are cause for researchers to express a number of concerns. For example, Christie (1987: 32-33) is concerned that the spiritualistic base of the Aboriginal world view, one which carries little self-conscious militancy, renders the Aboriginal essentially powerless to resist the relentless onslaught of western civilisation. To Christie (1987), a corollary is that the non-Aboriginal, scientific world view, one which alienates people from the spiritual and qualitative aspects of their personality, provides these non-Aboriginal people with '...more (technical and military) power than they can handle...' (Christie, 1987: 33).

Clearly, the presence of an Aboriginal world view raises a series of issues related to the provision of educational programs by teachers and administrators who are predominately non-Aboriginal. The conceptualisation of Goodenough's (1963: 258) perception of a 'world view' as shown in Figure 1 indicates that procedures are related to, and affected by, the three major elements of the world view - knowledge, beliefs and values. These three specific aspects assume importance in both the patterns of socialisation that typify the raising of children, and in the educational processes and procedures that involve the child or are imposed upon him/her.

In his research on perceptions of education, Holm (1983: 230) compares the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal education/cultural systems. He provides detail of the ideal systems, and while differences are readily apparent, it can be seen clearly that the two ideal systems have many points of compatibility.

In the Aboriginal educational/cultural system:

...learning is conceived as natural....as spontaneous. Education is regarded as a natural transformation. Cultural mediation is not required to transform nature. Nature transforms itself. Teachers and schools for example are unnecessary...

By comparison, in the non-Aboriginal educational/cultural system:

...mediation occurs but is not dominant. Teachers are mediators who facilitate learning rather than dominating leaders. Experiential learning is important. School is integrated with community. Education has some features that resemble a natural process. Children are not forced but are encouraged to learn at their own pace and according to their interests....

Thus, while Holm notes the features of the two systems and while points of compatibility can be determined, the current reality, as indicated by Bain (1979), Christie (1987) and Thies (1987), is that educational programs are affected by the world view dichotomy which is perpetuated in most schools providing programs for Aboriginal children. Decisions on curriculum, teaching strategies and methods are usually made by the trained 'professional', largely non-Aboriginal, teachers in such schools. There is an increasing level of consultation with Aboriginal staff, but Departmental policies provide the trained teachers with the responsibility of ensuring that programs meet policy guidelines. This situation is summed up by Snowdon, (1981: 32) whose research demonstrated that:

...the formal education system...is administered by the...Department of Education...(C)urriculum is determined externally and ...is governed by the dictates of what the 'Department' sees as being appropriate...(S)chool is ethnocentrically European in the way it is administered and operated.

...(R)esponsibility for formal education rests with teachers who are agents of a Department and are not accountable as employees to the Aboriginal community...

The implications of the differing, and often competing world views must be addressed in every school providing educational programs for Aboriginal students, when considering strategies that may be used to improve attendance and performance rates. Notice must also be taken of Holm's

(1983: 232) strongly made statement that '...people in one society...should not be expected to appreciate and accept the educational forms of another society....'.

Thus, since educational programs for Aboriginal students, provided in schools Australia wide, depend upon the attendance of the students, their interaction with the school staff and their involvement in the programs provided, the presence and importance of a clear understanding of the Aboriginal world view, as discussed briefly in this paper must be recognised in all aspects of the educational process and its organisation.

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