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YELLOW BRICK ROADS IN ABORIGINAL EDUCATION:

A Central Australian critique of theories of two-way Aboriginal schooling.

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The idea of two-way education has great appeal because it holds out the promise that schools can achieve something that historically they have found extremely difficult; encompassing Aboriginal cultural maintenance while providing needed white knowledge. However, it will be argued here that while two-way theories are part of the current widely adopted rhetoric of educational change they are not practical curriculum alternatives for Aboriginalising Central Australian schools because they do not make sense in terms of real interaction between the cultures. For this reason, attractive as these two-way theories are, they are also hazardous. Their danger lies both in that they build up expectations for outcomes of Aboriginal schools and they associate these outcomes with Aboriginalisation, a process which will not be assisted by unworkable theories.

The two-way theories

If we follow two-way proponent Harris (1990), who observes the incompatibility of many areas of Aboriginal and Western knowledge there will be a compartmentalisation of the school curriculum, Aboriginal schools will have separate white and Aboriginal domains within them. McConvell (1991) disagrees claiming this model wrongly presents Aborigines as isolationist, parochial and conservative. He argues that Harris's two way is more like a blind alley in that it would produce a museum culture by artificially isolating Aboriginal culture from a changing world, thereby denying it the recognition it needs to win the hearts and minds of younger Aborigines.

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In place of compartmentalisation, McConvell sees a synthesis at the interface of the cultures which he believes has already provided skills and has great potential for the future. According to McConvell it is equal exchange of knowledge that is the 'true meaning' of two-way education and this should underpin the curriculum.

The myth of synthesis

McConvell makes much of two-way exchange between the cultures with positive potential for both sides. He employs an Aboriginal metaphor of a river meeting the tidal flow of salt water from the sea to conceptualise the interaction of the two cultures as a two-way flow of benefit to both sides. McConvell believes that synthesis is a dynamic encounter where Aboriginal and white contribute and out of this process comes something new, which is of value to both. While it is true that both cultures have taken things from each other which they consider valuable, it is debatable whether much synthesis is happening.

Aborigines have pragmatically, even enthusiastically, adopted on their own terms elements of the majority society which suit their contemporary lifestyles. For example, the use of vehicles by Aboriginal people on Central Australian Aboriginal communities is quite different from white use of vehicles. In becoming more sedentary in settlements Aborigines colonised cars to maintain their mobility, they are creatively using a white artifact to conserve their own culture. This is the essence of the interaction between the cultures and it is not characterised by two-way equal exchange of knowledge producing something of value to both cultures. Very few whites compliment Central Australian Aboriginal people for their use of vehicles, because of this very difference between mere acquisition of white knowledge and artifacts and significant transformation to render them useful to Aboriginal life styles.

The lack of white enthusiasm for this colonisation is of no account, Aborigines have not taken white things to become more white, nor to seek their approval or recognition, they have done so to survive as Aborigines in a changed world. This process of taking from the majority society demonstrates both the creativity of Aboriginal people, as McConvell observes, and also their healthy dose of conservatism and parochialism, which he denies, all qualities that have helped Aboriginal culture to survive in the face of great assimilationist pressures. These qualities of conservatism, creative acquisition and pragmatic use of particular white things and ideas do not contradict but coexist because much of what McConvell calls

synthesis is far better described as Aboriginalisation. This is the same process which occurs when the majority society acquires aspects of Aboriginal culture, usually in the arts area, in which the majority society picks what it wants in painting, artifacts, music, and the minority society produces what the majority society has recognised and will pay for. This recognition may provide the basis for commercial enterprises but it is not all positive as in the long term this colonisation strips meaning from the artifact. The majority culture takes a particular form and attributes a high value to it because of what it represents, often a spiritual dimension seen as lacking in Western material culture. In the process of commercialisation much of the cultural produce comes to lose this essence, and is reduced to the final product majority society will pay for, and this produce may even become mass produced. When they represent nothing but a means of acquiring money what will the value of these items be for Aboriginal people?

This process is not cost free to the minority society as it is to the majority society. Majority society can afford to have some of its ideas and goods Aboriginalised without being threatened in any way by this process; though it may feel exasperated by the way Aborigines refuse to accept the ideology of materialism along with the goods it is in no danger of being undermined by this resistance. But Aboriginal society is more vulnerable and it is increasingly difficult for Aboriginal people to ignore the majority society, harsher forms of assimilation having given way to more powerful seduction. Although Aborigines may not be actively seeking change, they live in a world which is inevitably changing very rapidly indeed.

The older Aboriginal generations, the grandparents and parents in Central Australian communities, many of whom have lived part of their lives in the bush, or at least had parents who were brought up there, may maintain their culture in the face of this pressure. It is the present generation who are particularly vulnerable, the generation who believe in supernatural etiology of disease and dreaming trails but who also watch television. They are often the first to spend all their lives on a settlement and although they still have their traditional beliefs, they are losing many of the means of expression of those beliefs.

Although I have argued that much of what might be seen as synthesis is colonisation by either society of aspects of the other, there are some areas where synthesis can be seen. Aboriginal rock music is one of these; it is a form of music which owes allegiance to both cultures and is valued by many in both. But it also points to the dangers of this process for the vulnerable generation, who are enthusiastic listeners of this music, and the different effects on the two societies. We still have our classical music but will the younger Aboriginal generation still have

theirs? Whether synthesis provides all the answers for this youngest generation and whether it should provide a basis for their education as proposed by McConvell is far from clear. Harris's proposed compartmentalisation, for all its shortcomings and these will be dealt with later, is a response to the dilemma of the vulnerability of this youngest generation, the future of Aboriginal people who may lose their dreaming. It is a dilemma summed up nicely by the imagery of a river when it meets the sea; the sea water incorporates that of the river with little difficulty, but the river water is irrevocably dissipated.

A two-way curriculum based on equal exchange?

Just how practical would equal two-way exchange of knowledge between black and white be? Such an exchange raises questions about the equivalence of knowledge between a small minority group, who place a high value on their own knowledge, and the majority society, whose knowledge and ideas are constantly pounding into Aboriginal lives, where some are attractive, but many are unwelcome.

Aboriginal people have never had to pay for white knowledge through exchange or in any other way and it is unlikely they ever would. Far from offering their own knowledge, or anything else, as part of a two-way exchange, Central Australian Aboriginal people often expect that they should be paid for learning white knowledge. They would consider it ridiculous to be offered some gem of white knowledge as part of a two-way exchange. This is not misguided since the relative value of exchange of knowledge to the participants ultimately depends on control and this overwhelmingly lies with the dominant society. It is because of this that 'equal' exchange between Aboriginal people and the majority society tends to be illusory in the long term. Synthesis of minority culture knowledge, for example medicinal knowledge, may appear to represent equal exchange but ultimately the rewards go to those who control the end product and that has not been the minority society.

There is an awareness among Aboriginal people of the need to hold onto their own knowledge and that it is this ownership and control, which is usually lost in dealings with the majority society, that is important. One Aboriginal response to the idea of two-way exchange is to seek exchange for white knowledge that is not freely available in the public arena and therefore can be controlled and would be valuable to the individual who acquired it. When Wali Wanungmurru (1988) was writing his paper cited in McConvell about the Yolgnu concept of

Dhawurpunaramirri ('deciding what knowledge must be saved and what can be given and taken') he asked me. "What is your secret knowledge?" On replying that I could think of none he pressed me again "Surely there is something?" Again I could offer nothing.

The notion of equality between the cultures is idealistic, it is a concept which has enormous appeal to all those who would like to see the two cultures on an equal footing. Aboriginal people may well have taught McConvell the 'true meaning' of two-way education but in every society there is a difference between the aspirations of a people and their social reality. Equal exchange of knowledge between the cultures is not part of the fabric of that social reality; it is not based on any equivalence that presently exists. Even in the remotest community the direction of change is overwhelmingly towards less equality of exchange, not more. Schools cannot reverse this; there is no level playing field for equal exchange now and there is never going to be one. Nor will a rhetoric of equality change that; applied to unequals it produces even greater inequality. If Harris has over emphasised status and down played the adaptative function of Aboriginal culture, McConvell has surely exaggerated both the practice and possibilities of equal two-way exchange. His complaint that domain separation rules out an equal two-way exchange of knowledge is quite correct but on a practical level how much interest is there in this? McConvell fails to see that, for Aboriginal society, the acquisition of white knowledge cannot be a cooperative shared venture of equal two-way exchange with the majority society. Instead, it is fraught with conflict, arising from the tension between immense pressure to adapt to white society and its institutions while attempting to remain the same. This conflict will not go away by pretending it does not exist and any theory of curriculum change which ignores it will not play a significant role in Aboriginal education.

A two-way curriculum in one-way schools ?

The danger of two-way theories lies not just in their potential to heighten expectations for outcomes of Aboriginal schools but also in their association of these two-way outcomes with the process of Aboriginal people running their own schools. In the long term it may be against these two-way outcomes that Aboriginalisation will be judged; Aborigines may be expected to achieve what many decades of schooling run by the majority society has generally failed to achieve.

It is fashionable to believe that as Aboriginalisation of schools will render them more Aboriginal they will be more able to be two way. This is a safe

assumption since there are few Aboriginalised schools and fewer studies of them. This assumption largely exists at the level of rhetoric and is rarely questioned, indeed it is regarded as not ideologically sound to do so. Nevertheless, it is essential to ask whether or not these two-way theories are workable in real Aboriginal schools. Since much will depend on the roles of Aboriginal teachers in two-way schools it is important to examine their present roles. The way in which Aboriginal people have adapted to schools must be taken into account if attempts to reform the curriculum in Central Australian Aboriginal schools are to be successful.

School as an institution is alien in many ways to Aboriginal people in remote Central Australian Aboriginal communities, many of these ways are difficult to change or even compromise. For example, school cuts across the family structure which is the heart of Aboriginal society and deals with the white administrative unit, the 'community'. But is there a workable alternative? Schools will always be at the interface of the cultures, the majority society and their educational bureaucracies which oversee schools (and also fund them) are not going to go away because they are Aboriginalised at the chalkface.

One of the pedagogic strategies recommended by Harris in his two-way school model involves teaching Western skills as roles which can be adopted but are not ends in themselves. Role playing is described as a way of learning white skills without undermining Aboriginal culture because the values behind the skills are not internalised. Role playing is also a way of working within institutions without being changed since the worker does not believe in the values behind the role. This is what many Central Australian Aboriginal people in remote communities have done when they work in schools. The behaviour of role play is a necessary adaptive response by Aboriginal people to institutions which are embedded in the social relationships of the majority society. When Aboriginal people work in schools in this way, often those held by whites to be critical to Aboriginal cultural maintenance, a kind of pantomime ensues in which Aborigines role play and whites complain about the quality of the performance. In terms of Aboriginalisation the complaint is also about the gap between rhetoric and performance.

The adaptive behaviour of role play has limitations. A white man in a West Australian Aboriginal community who had been through Aboriginal Law and knows the language and some of the rituals of Aboriginal ceremonial business told me he would like, very much, to believe in the Dreaming but could not. Being unable to do so he felt he could never really be the same as Aboriginal people who went through Aboriginal Law. For him it was quite a different experience, much

as he wanted to be the same as Aboriginal, people he could not internalise the basic ideology. It is the same for many Aboriginal people who work in schools. Role play does not mean acceptance and internalisation of the basic ideology, such as the notion that every child in a school (including those beyond the teacher's own family group) are entitled to equal attention in the classroom.

There may be Aboriginal communities with more exposure to the majority culture where working in school is no longer a role play. However this is not necessarily a function of teacher training. Role playing has got nothing to do with skills, it has nothing to do with capability, but everything to do with the cultural context of learning and using knowledge, just as whites must also role play in many Aboriginal contexts, no matter what knowledge or skills they possess. Aborigines have no problem learning and using skills which have a practical benefit in their contemporary lifestyles, but schools are not, in general, part of that lifestyle. There are problems with the adaptive behaviour of role play and improving its quality alone will not necessarily resolve them, training will not in itself produce more effective schools. Role play depends upon an audience and much of the audience of Aboriginalisation, together with its ideology, is external to Central Australian communities. When the process of Aboriginalisation is complete and much of this audience disappears the role play may suffer. It is likely to do so because, despite McConvell's assumption of the internalisation of a white world view by Aboriginal people working in schools, this may not exist.

The stereotyping of Aboriginal people as far more cross-cultural than whites and able to readily sustain two-way education, may eventually rebound on Aboriginal teachers. In the future it will be difficult enough for Aboriginal people to present schools which are functional in an Aboriginal community but cross-cultural enough to satisfy the educational bureaucracies which fund them, without the added burden of the unrealistic expectations of the two-way theorists.

If Aboriginalised schools are to be viable, and this means owned by Aboriginal people, they will not be all things to both cultures despite the expectations of the two-way theorists. Several years ago a visitor to a remote community school who regarded it very highly for its impressive level of Aboriginal involvement complained that it did not appear to be a 'real school' since none of the staff seemed to know precisely what the school times were, these having been the subject of intense and long standing 'negotiation' between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff. The visitor saw no contradiction between her expectation of Aboriginal involvement, and her belief that a school should run strictly to a whitefella clock.

Two-way theories fail to recognise that the two-way nature of schools does not arise from either Aboriginal or white control but from the tension between both of them. Each side will say they are committed to the other, but neither has a good track record at actually achieving this. Whites have not achieved two-ways schooling and similarly, Aborigines will also have difficulty achieving it. Two wayness is a path between strongly competing demands where the level of compromise that each side makes will, ultimately, depend on contestation. Central Australian Aboriginal people in those communities which are striving to attain viable two-way schools and value the concept are aware of this and generally recognise the need for both Aboriginal and white involvement.

Deconstructing top-down theories

In looking towards a realistic future for Aboriginalised schools it is important to look behind the rhetoric of the two-way theories of Harris and McConvell, which neither convincingly express the interaction between the cultures now, nor have applicability in Central Australian Aboriginal schools. Harris's theory of separation of cooperating cultures in an Aboriginal controlled school and McConvell's belief that Aboriginal schools can provide a forum for equal exchange of knowledge make many questionable assumptions. In particular, these theories see schools as non-antagonistic arenas where equal exchange, synthesis or compartmentalisation can occur in a cooperative manner, ideas which have all the hallmarks of origins in the majority society rather than a small minority one. Both synthesis with majority society and attempts to turn school into a last bastion of defence against a tide of change equal assimilation in the long term. It is a measure of the strength of Aboriginal culture that schools neither incorporate these concepts now, nor are they likely to in the future. As Adorno (1990, 320) puts it, "society stays alive, not despite its antagonism but by means of it". Existing two-way education in Central Australia depends not merely on white or Aboriginal power but on the rare coincidence of both. It is based upon contestation which is evenly matched, producing two-way education through compromises on both sides, few of which would be made in either white or Aboriginal run schools. This two-way schooling requires considerable personal goodwill without which a balance between the cultures can not be sustained.

There are many enthusiastic proponents of both Aboriginalisation and two-way schooling. However, it is ironic that real two-way education, based as it is on the need for white and Aboriginal teachers to operate together, is at odds with much of the rhetoric and practice of Aboriginalisation.

The process whereby Aboriginal people come to play a greater role in running schools is too important to be jeopardised by theories which are impractical, no matter how popular they may be. The need for Aboriginal people to constantly deconstruct top-down theories and ideologies which attempt to define their future, but bear no relationship to practice, impedes real change which can only come from the community level. If this article assists this process of deconstruction it will have served a useful purpose. Real change will depend on Aboriginal teachers working in ways which are not just adaptive but where they have gone beyond role playing to ownership of schools and their curriculum. This will be difficult because there is presently a large gap between the kind of curriculum communities say they want and what is within their own ability to develop and sustain. Nevertheless, Aboriginal teachers will be assisted in this endeavour by realistic suggestions about curriculum models which are less alien to them and are capable of drawing on their collective and individual strengths. These models will also need to recognise the embeddedness of schools in the majority culture and their character as cross-cultural institutions at the interface of the cultures. Consideration of these factors and others will help provide a focus for supporting Aboriginal teachers since Aboriginalisation will ultimately be judged not by the rhetoric it has generated, but by the viability of the schools it transforms.

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