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ABORIGINAL STUDENTS PERCEPTIONS OF THE 'WORLD OF WORK' AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TEACHING OF WORK/CAREER EDUCATION

Di Russell

INTRODUCTION

As part of my work this year I was required to undertake an evaluation project. I decided to combine some of my concerns about the appropriateness for Aboriginal students of some of the ways in which state education curriculum priorities are implemented with one of my focus curriculum areas, namely Work Education.

In South Australia the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (AEP) is seen as the overarching Aboriginal Education Policy. However, most Aboriginal students in South Australia and all state schools are required to address mandatory curriculum as set out in the "Educating for the 21st Century" (1990), the curriculum policy document.

Work Education (equivalent to Career Education in many states), R-12, is a new curriculum area for South Australian state schools. Aspects of it have long been taught in secondary schools, but now it is mandatory for state schools to include Work Skills and Understandings across the curriculum, R-12, along with eight other skills and understandings.

"Aboriginal people look to education as a means of moving out of poverty and welfare dependency enabling them to earn more through employment or enterprise and to manage the development of their communities." (DEET, 1989: 9) Given this, Work Education is very important for the Aboriginal students in our schools.

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I am concerned that support materials are appropriate for all students in all schools. An important aspect of this, and any subsequent implementation, depends on teachers, fully understanding that not all students start at the same point in relation to any curriculum area that is deeply imbedded in society, and if you think about it carefully enough, what curriculum area isn't? In addition, even among groups of people often incorrectly regarded as being homogeneous, there is still a great deal of variety associated attitudes and values.

I was pretty sure that, as far as Aboriginal students are concerned, their languages and cultures, and the systemic biases that have precluded members of their communities from participating in the work force in the same way as other Australians, are sure to have given them a different perspective on the 'world of work'.

Most teachers either don't find the time, or don't perceive the need, for building in a pre-assessment/evaluation of what students already know, how they perceive themselves in relation to that knowledge, what values are attached to this knowledge, and on what experiences it is based or was acquired. I wanted to provide teachers with evidence of the need to do this.

HOW I COLLECTED THE DATA

I devised a questionnaire (see Appendix 1) which could be used in an interview or class situation. Having approached the principals of the schools I knew I would have the opportunity of visiting during the year, I liaised with the Aboriginal Education Resource Teachers and Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs) who assisted me by setting up interviews with Aboriginal students.

I had anticipated that the AEWs would prefer to sit in on the interviews, as I was a stranger in each of the communities. However, once I had discussed with them the purpose of the project and given them a copy of the questions I would be asking the students, they were happy to leave me alone with the students. They briefed the groups of students as they took them out of their classes.

Apart from one group of senior secondary students that I talked to as a class, I interviewed groups of two or three students together. The students appeared comfortable with this process, in fact, they often prompted each other was interested that in this situation there was very little 'copying' of answers.

Three of the four schools at which I interviewed students are parts of communities that fit three of the NEAC categories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Society based on 'access to schooling' (Hughes, 1981). One Aboriginal school is part of a traditionally oriented community in the north-west of the state. The other Aboriginal school is part of a rural community living in a reserve situation in the far west of the state. The high school has a relatively large enrolment of Aboriginal students who belong to an urban community that is geographically and economically embedded in the non-indigenous society of an industrial city.

The other school, an Area school, is part of a community that doesn't really fit any of these categories because the Aboriginal people in and around the town are not embedded economically in non-indigenous society. In fact, just as in more isolated Aboriginal communities, the only employment available to Aboriginal people is that provided by the government to support the Aboriginal population.

I decided not to interview non-Aboriginal students and compare responses because I was more interested in illustrating the diversity of perceptions among Aboriginal students, thereby reinforcing the need for teachers to respect each Aboriginal student as an individual. Collective assumptions lead to incorrect and damaging stereotypes, and racial prejudice.

ANALYSING THE DATA

In analysing the data I have looked for trends rather than any statistical significance as the latter would hardly be valid given the relatively small sample of students (32) that I interviewed. I have divided the students into two age groups on the basis of their year level at school. Junior secondary students are those in years 8 and 9, whereas senior students are currently in years 10 and 11.

WORDS THAT 'GO WITH' THE WORD 'WORK'

Many of the students, regardless of their command of English, had problems with this word association exercise. Perhaps this was a reflection of their attitude and understanding of the term itself, for Christie believes that:

"the language and culture of English speaking Aboriginal people is still distinctively Aboriginal....that Aboriginal people in cities and country towns still maintain a distinctive Aboriginal lifestyle in the face of almost overwhelming pressure acting against them." (1987:51)

And according to Malcolm:

"The distinction which Europeans make between life and work does not exist in Aboriginal society." (Christie, 1987:21)

Because I didn't ask students why they associated certain words or phrases with the word 'work', I have had to interpret their responses as best I could. Appendix II shows how I have grouped the responses.

There were some striking differences between the responses given by junior and senior secondary students. Almost 40% of the senior secondary responses appear to be school related. The rest were either generally vocationally related or person related, in almost equal proportions. Only one of the 48 responses related to a specific type of work. This pattern was common to both groups of senior secondary students.

In comparison, 50% of the responses from the junior secondary students related to specific vocations or vocational skills. A much smaller group of responses (23%) were school related, some of these being value judgements. Others, mostly those social or person related, seem to represent the antithesis of work. Only two responses were general vocational related. One student associated 'work' with having to 'go away' from the community.

'Football' was mentioned by two junior secondary students, one from an Aboriginal school and the other from the high school. In the latter

case this could mean paid employment, whereas in the former it is more likely to be associated with community 'business'. I mention this particular example of the different use of the same word because it illustrates how important it is for teachers to listen for the context in which language is used. Aboriginal languages, including Pidgins and creoles, differ from English in phonological and grammatical structures; the ways in which they are used to fulfil social and communicative functions; and the ways in which they divide up and reinforce the universe of meaning (Christie, 1987). Therefore, an Aboriginal child may fail to "hear" what the teacher intends or what the white majority hear. An Aboriginal child's dialect may predispose him to decode the sounds he hears in a particular way (Rogers, 1980). Therefore teachers may need to modify their own language to avoid misinterpretation and misunderstanding.

WHO SHOULD DO WHAT KIND OF WORK

Students were asked to say whether they thought certain types of work should be done by women or men or whether they could be done by either. The general trends in the responses are summarised below and illustrated in the graph. The data can be found in Appendix III.

Mainly Women's work:	washing clothes
Women's work or either:	cooking shopping nursing typing
Either can do it:	working in a shop operating a computer driving a car teaching
Men's work or either:	gardening farm work pilot driving a truck fixing cars and trucks
Mainly Men's work:	sailing fishing hunting

The opinions of both male and female students were remarkably similar. Only in the case of fishing was there any apparent significance in the difference in responses - more males thought that fishing was men's work whereas more females thought that either could do it. There were greater differences in responses when these were broken down according to the level of schooling and type of school the students attended.

In particular, among the senior secondary students:

- all felt very strongly that both men and women could be teachers;
- those from the urban high schools agreed that men should do the sailing but that either could work in a shop;
- none of the area school felt that driving a car was the prerogative of men;
- they were evenly divided on whether men or both men and women should drive a truck.

Among the junior secondary students there appeared to be a significant difference in some of the perceptions of roles between the students at the high school and those at the Aboriginal schools. Students in the Aboriginal schools felt strongly that cooking was definitely women's work and gardening men's work, comparatively few students believing that both men and women should do either of them. The students from the two Aboriginal schools disagreed on who should drive a car, do the shopping or operate a computer. Those in the north-west felt that men should drive the cars and operate the computers whereas those in the west believed that either could do both of these. In the west shopping is women's work, but in the north-west either can do it, although it is more likely to be done by women. In comparison, students at the high school believed that both men and women could do the cooking, gardening, sailing, shopping, typing, operating a computer and flying aeroplanes and they were evenly divided on whether only men should drive the trucks and only women do the washing, or whether both could do them.

These views of the students are likely to reflect the attitudes and values of the community in which the students live, the students' own work experiences and those of family and community members, and/or more traditional lifestyles lived by family members, both past and present. They are certainly likely to influence students' career aspirations. Therefore I asked students about the work they do now and what they would like to do when they leave school. I related this to the employment pattern of their immediate family members.

THE KIND OF WORK STUDENTS NOW DO

There was very little difference between the responses of students from the different types of schools. Despite the fact that no students felt men should wash clothes, some of the male students did in fact do this as one of their household responsibilities. This means there is a difference between work that Aboriginal people actually do and the roles these Aboriginal students ascribe to males and females. The data I collected indicates that students will do whatever work around the house that is necessary according to their own family situation. Both male and female secondary students, whatever their age, do a variety of housework tasks, shopping and child minding.

School work featured prominently, and some students had to be prompted by me, or another student in their group, to think of other work that they regularly did. Very few students mentioned any type of work outside the home. The only examples given included helping with sport, working in the local garage and grading.

CAREER ASPIRATIONS

Senior secondary students had very little problem articulating their career aspirations. Some were even able to give alternatives. Career choices of the nine female students included:

- Aboriginal Health/Welfare worker (2)
- Child Care Worker (2)
- Kindergarten/Early Childhood Teacher (3)
- Social Worker, Physical Education Teacher, Model and Chef.

All but one of the four senior secondary male students wanted to undertake some kind of trade. The other student wanted to become a nurse.

The junior secondary students had much less idea about possible careers. Most of the students from the high school had not given it any thought, although they did intend to stay at school until the end of year 12. The responses of most of the students from the two Aboriginal schools appear to be heavily coloured by jobs that are likely to be available in their own community, or specific skills they are currently learning at school. For example, all of the boys at one school who are learning how to fix go-carts wanted to be mechanics.

By far the majority of all students wished to work locally. Some realised that they may have to leave the community to further their studies, but most wished to return. Where possible they were choosing to study in the local community as well.

All the senior secondary students had aspirations at least equal to the employment positions family members now hold. Most were significantly greater. Their ambitions were realistic in terms of employment opportunities available, and they all had a fairly good idea where they could undertake further training for these, and where they would be able to find such employment. However, these students were not necessarily matching their aspirations to their current performance at school. This was particularly true of the senior secondary students at the high school. They were aware that in order to pursue their chosen careers they would need to undertake further study, but, although they were attending school, they were not succeeding.

WHY PEOPLE WANT TO WORK

Except for the junior secondary students in the two Aboriginal schools, more than half of each group gave 'earning money' as their first reason for people wanting to work. One year 11 student from the far west community where all males who are able are required to work said, "I have to work. I can't get money by having a baby."

Although by no means as common a reason, the family and helping people featured next. Then came wanting to learn and pursue further education. Others responses included having something to do to prevent people getting bored, a chance to use their skills, and the opportunity for people to prove their worth or pursue an interest. One senior secondary student thought work provided the opportunity to 'meet people' and one of the junior secondary students felt, work enabled you to 'go places'. Details of their responses are included in Appendix IV.

SOCIAL REALITIES - A DISCUSSION

It is evident that Aboriginal students want to work, both in their own communities and in wider society. But what is the reality of them achieving these ambitions? However much we may wish to deny it, Australia is a 'class' society. As James says:

"There are many factors which contribute to the type of job young people will select - social class, ethnicity, age gender, and education are all major influences....Stratified bands of opportunity, differential access to resources such as education, and limited social interactions may restrict social and occupational movement." (1991:45)

Those who have income, prestige, education and power can achieve more of the same. Not only do different people have different lifestyles, they also have different life chances, each life chance determined by and in turn determining another. For example, education, employment and income are closely linked as both the causes and consequences of the continuing poverty of Aboriginal children (Choo, 1990). In 1972 Fay Gale concluded from her research data that:

"Aborigines are living demographically on the level of economic life in an under-developed country within the socio-economic structure of a developed country."(p. 210)

I don't believe things have changed much since then.

Students need to be made aware of these relationships, especially those between education and work. They may then be more motivated to stay at school longer, and to succeed.

From an Aboriginal point of view, the schools have failed in other ways. They have failed to prepare children to compete on an equal footing in Australian society, or even to take over the skilled occupations in their own communities, or the leadership in traditional matters (Coombs et al, 1983).

But education alone cannot be blamed. As Choo (1990 p. 30) points out:

"The discrimination against Aborigines in the employment market actively discourages many young people from pursuing a better education."

Even when Aboriginal young people succeed at senior secondary school, and even post-school education, they are faced with lack of employment opportunities in many of their communities (Finn, 1991). My own research confirms that many of them are reluctant to leave their communities, even for further education. Therefore it is important that educational programs offered in schools are compatible with community and economic projects.

Despite the past failure of much of education, Aboriginal parents still see that education has a very important role to play. Although most Aboriginal parents want their children to 'grow up Aboriginal' they also want their children to succeed in western schooling and to perform successfully in some aspects of white culture, reducing dependency on white expertise in their own communities (Harris, 1988). In the words of two Aboriginal parents:

"What we need now is education which can teach a high level of skills but without the destruction to culture...an education which will help Yolngu succeed in the Balanda world without letting them forget their cultural identity." (Wali Wunungmurra, 1988:69-70) "We need Aboriginal teachers, managers, store keepers, lawyers and doctors - in every area of life we need to have Aboriginal people in there doing jobs for themselves..." (Chris Japangardi Poulson, 1988:68)

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TEACHING OF WORK EDUCATION

I feel that the small amount of research I have undertaken has raised a lot more issues than it has been possible to address within the scope of this paper. Some I will personally pursue at a later stage as they are of particular concern to me.

Although the information presented here specifically relates to secondary students, I am mindful that Work Education needs to be addressed at all levels of schooling. Perhaps, if this had been done successfully in the past, some of the discontinuity between Aboriginal students' perceptions of the 'world of work' and reality might not be so apparent.

A lot of time and energy is spent in many schools in trying to broaden post-school options for girls. For Aboriginal girls, in particular, it is important for the teacher to have some understanding of and value the students' perceptions of their world, and their place in it, so that this issue can be addressed sensitively. As Lo Bianco (1990) says:

"it is vital to reinforce the identity of students if we are to then ask them to go beyond it." (p. 90)

Community views are also important. Exhortations for girls to look at careers such as motor mechanics may be met with hostility within the community. Therefore it is important to consult with parents and community members about their aspirations for their children, and even involve them in the classroom in such discussions. The Aboriginal Education Workers I shared my research data with at a recent conference felt that they could and should play an important role here.

"If success is to be achieved in Aboriginal education school must become a better servant of Aboriginal aspirations for their children and a more congruent component of their own culture than at present." (Coombs et al, 1983:165)

There is a lot to be gained by actively involving parents in their child's school. One aspect, often forgotten, is that:

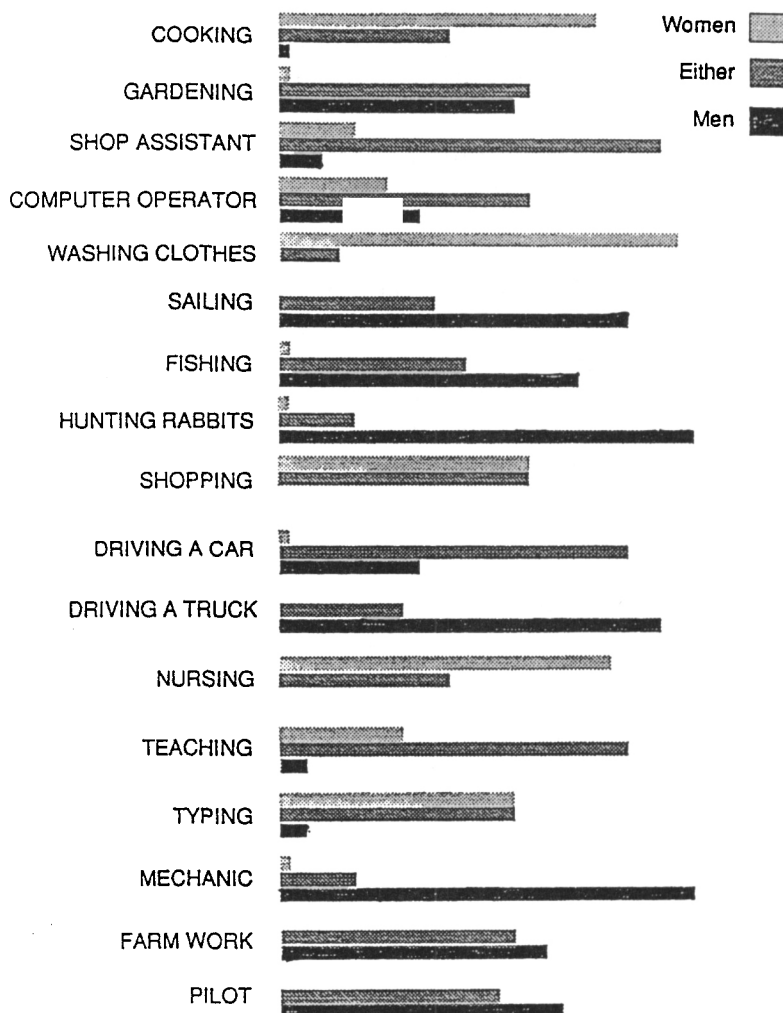
"community liaison educates the school about parents' cultural expectations of schooling. It destroys fanciful notions about what parents want. It trains the school on the inside what the outside is like." (Kalantzis et al, 1990:230)

However, it is important to remember that approaches that prove successful in one community may not necessarily be so in another.

What we really should be concerned about is equality of educational outcomes for all students. Particularly for Aboriginal students, throughout their schooling we need to demystify society and help students make the links between school, society and the 'world of work'. Only then can they be more truly free; free to make appropriate 'work' choices.

Successful transition from school to work can help Aboriginal young people liberate themselves from the forces that currently de-power and oppress them and their families. Therefore, Work Education has the potential to play a particularly important role in the education of Aboriginal students at all levels of schooling.

WHO SHOULD DO WHAT KIND OF WORK ?



APPENDIX I

PERCEPTIONS OF THE WORLD OF WORK

1. SCHOOL TYPE: _____
2. NUMBER: _____ 3. AGE: _____
4. SEX: _____ 5. YEAR LEVEL: _____
6. NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN FAMILY: _____
7. POSITION IN FAMILY: _____
8. FAMILY WORK HISTORY:
MOTHER: _____ FATHER: _____
SISTER 1: _____ BROTHER 1: _____
SISTER 2: _____ BROTHER 2: _____
9. FIVE (5) WORDS THAT GO WITH THE "WORK".

10. WHO SHOULD DO WHAT TYPE OF WORK ? (See page 16.)
11. WHAT KIND OF WORK DO YOU DO NOW ?

12. WHAT KIND OF WORK DO YOU DO NOW ?

13. WHERE WILL YOU BE ABLE TO GET THAT KIND OF WORK ?

14. HOW LONG WILL YOU NEED TO STAY AT SCHOOL IF YOU WANT TO DO THAT KIND OF WORK ?

15. WHY DO PEOPLE WANT TO WORK ?

10. WHO SHOULD DO WHAT KIND OF WORK ?

	WOMEN	MEN	EITHER
cooking			
gardening			
working in a shop			
operating a computer			
washing clothes			
sailing			
fishing			
hunting rabbits			
shopping			
driving a car			
driving a truck			
nursing			
teaching			
typing			
fixing cars and trucks			
farm work			
flying aeroplanes			

APPENDIX II

WORDS THAT 'GO WITH' THE WORD 'WORK'

	SENIOR SECONDARY	JUNIOR SECONDARY
SCHOOL RELATED	learning spelling understanding education study lesson - think school - hard concentrate - busy listen - try hard	Tech Studies good better do it get it finished sux
PERSON RELATED	helping being useful carrying sharing cooperate people friends - family relationships	messing around fun playing share family go away
GENERAL VOCATIONAL	job money - knowledge employment - skills techniques	job
SPECIFIC VOCATIONAL	housework	fixing things garage mechanic - fix cars bank - building electrician - painting roadhouse - shop clinic - hospital cooking - cleaning clean'g rubbish. stockman Homeland

APPENDIX III

WHO SHOULD DO WHAT KIND OF WORK ?

SUMMARY - 32 STUDENTS

(16 Female, 16 Male)	F	M	F	M	F	M
	WOMEN		MEN		EITHER	
cooking	11	9	1	0	6	5
gardening	0	16	6	9	10	6
working in a shop	1	4	1	2	14	10
operating a computer	3	4	4	5	9	7
washing clothes	14	14	0	0	2	2
sailing	0	0	10	12	6	4
fishing	0	1	7	12	9	3
hunting rabbits	0	1	12	14	4	1
shopping	8	8	0	0	8	8
driving a car	0	1	4	5	12	10
driving a truck	9	0	11	13	5	3
nursing	9	12	0	0	7	4
teaching	4	4	0	2	12	10
typing	9	6	0	2	7	8
fixing cars and trucks	0	1	13	13	3	2
farm work	0	0	7	10	9	6
flying aeroplanes	0	0	9	9	7	7

APPENDIX 1V

WHY PEOPLE WANT TO WORK

	SENIOR SEC. (H.S.)	SENIOR SEC. (A.S.)	JUNIOR SEC. (H.S.)	JUNIOR SEC. (Ab.S.)	JUNIOR SEC. (An.S.)
Money	7	5	7	3	3
To learn	2			2	
Further edn.	1				
For family	1		4		
Help people					1
Use skills	2				
Meet people	1				
Like to			1	2	
Interest					1
Go places					1
Prove something					1
Something to do	2		1		

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