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ABORIGINAL STUDENTS and SOCIAL JUSTICE

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David Wellington.

INTRODUCTION

Social justice has emerged over the past decade to ensure that all Australians have the opportunity to participate fully and effectively in creating and sharing the nation's resources. The South Australian Social Justice Strategy Unit (1989, p.7), suggests that "a sense of social justice fair and equal treatment is built into the Australian character". Social justice can be applied to all aspects of the Australian society. Health, welfare and education, to name a few.

The principles of social justice as they are applied to education are "aimed at providing the best quality education for the poorest and most educationally disadvantaged students". (Social Justice Action Plan 1991, p.12). The educationally disadvantaged groups that have been identified by the Education Department of South Australia are girls, students from non-English speaking backgrounds, Aboriginal students, students with disabilities and students in poverty.

This paper will focus on Aboriginal students as disadvantaged and critically evaluate the application of social justice principles to Aboriginal students in schools.

CULTURALLY INCLUSIVE CURRICULUM

"Education is the means by which a society passes on to each individual an understanding of culture in its many forms, at the same time, develops the capacity to contribute to the improvement of that culture through interaction with others." (Education for the 21st Century, 1990, p.3).

The central issue for education in a multicultural context is the provision of educational opportunities for students that are culturally inclusive. A culturally inclusive curriculum is a way of providing equitable access, participation and outcomes for all students. The socially just education system provides these opportunities regardless of ethnicity, gender, social and economic status, ability and geographic location.

* David Wellington submitted this paper as part of a Graduate Diploma in Education, Flinders University of South Australia.

Does the school environment provide opportunities for Aboriginal students to reach their full potential? Before this question can be answered, it is important to look at the Aboriginal culture in relation to culture, education and learning styles.

CULTURAL INFORMATION

Many Aboriginal people live in an extended family situation and as such the obligations of children may be different from that of non-Aboriginal people. It is common for Aboriginal children to have responsibilities for younger children and for household tasks during times of family illness or parents being absent.

Many Aboriginal people use Aboriginal English in their homes and "normal English" as a second language. These differences in the English cause some problems when Aboriginal people are trying to communicate outside of their community. Children may suffer a lower self esteem if their Aboriginal English is not accepted by the wider community.

The Aboriginal community has orientations to past and present which are different from non-Aboriginal communities. The emphasis for living in Aboriginal communities is of the present rather than the future. Aboriginal people view the past as being more important than the future.

Many Aboriginal people value group membership over individualisation. It is far more important for an Aboriginal child to accomplish a task as part of the group. That child may feel threatened if singled out for either praise or blame. One of the most powerful emotions for Aboriginal people is the emotion of shame. Aboriginal children may react to this emotion by refusing to talk or answer a person, walking away from a situation, or by aggressive behaviour.

Aboriginal people have a well developed sense of sharing. There is little emphasis placed on individual ownership of material and spiritual possessions. Body language is a significant means of communication for Aboriginal people. A person may drop one's head, shuffle, or smile as signs of embarrassment when in a difficult situation. An Aboriginal person who looks away when being spoken to is showing of respect to older people. Body contact such as friendly touching or jostling is acceptable within the Aboriginal culture.

It is important for the general community, as well as educators, to understand the cultural differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children. Equal treatment of all students in a particular class will

produce different outcomes for students. The Aboriginal student who fails to answer a question in front of the whole class may suffer humiliation at the request. The student's failure to answer does not mean that he/she does not know the answer. The request from a teacher in this situation, is culturally insensitive.

Cultural sensitivity means that educators apply the curriculum in the classroom in a manner that will encompass the needs of all students. In order to accomplish this goal, each teacher needs to be aware of difference in learning styles which may be culturally based. Aboriginal learning styles is pertinent to this discussion.

ABORIGINAL LEARNING STYLES

Aboriginal children learn in different ways than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Harris, (1985) suggests that learning for Aboriginal children is in two types, formal and informal. Informal learning comes through observation and imitation, personal trial and error, real life performance, persistence and repetition and successive approximation.

Observation and imitation, rather than verbal instructions is often a successful method of classroom teaching. Aboriginal elders and parents pass on cultural and tribal information in this way. Louise Hettner, classroom teacher, gives an account of a lesson in which one Aboriginal child was present. Her pottery lesson was using demonstration only, no verbal language. The task was to make a pottery coil cup. When the class was to recount their learning and make their own pottery cup, Hettner reports "the Aboriginal child was the first to finish". (The Nunga Code, 1988, p.15). Observation is a powerful learning style for Aboriginal students.

Aboriginal learning through trial and error is best described as learning through participation. Aboriginal students learn by doing. However, this is not always acceptable in the classroom situation. Participation in learning a tribal dance would be acceptable, however, for a young person to apply trial and error to learn road rules would have serious implications for personal safety.

Real life performance describes Aboriginal learning also in terms of participation. This concept suggests that all tasks that Aboriginal people undertake is a "unit". Practice for a particular event or task, is not a feature of Aboriginal culture. Each activity is completed as an end product, not a means to an end.

Successive approximation applies to learning as a 'whole' rather than in parts. Rather than learning a number of skills in particular sequence to achieve a goal or end product, Aboriginal people learn by trying to grasp a whole concept. Each time the task is attempted, Aboriginal students learn a little more.

By contrast, formal learning for Aboriginal students is often decontextualised. This refers to the content of what is learned as having little application to everyday life and survival. Formal education for Aboriginal students in areas of maths and science for example, often has little relevance to their culture. Education in these subject areas is vastly different from information which has been passed on through generations. Formal learning must be purposeful. For Aboriginal students "purposeful learning is not only a matter of confidence or of assertiveness in learning, but part of a whole cultural attitudes towards the nature and knowledge of the learning process".(Allan, 1985, p.6).

Education policies for Aboriginal Students must relate to their social and cultural life as well as learning styles in order to effectively address the issue of education outcomes.

ABORIGINAL EDUCATION POLICY STATEMENT

The Aboriginal Education Policy Statement has two objectives. The first relates to achieving successful educational outcomes for Aboriginal students and the second relates to the teaching of Aboriginal studies to all school children.

It is the successful educational outcomes that is the focus of this paper. The policy statement acknowledges Aboriginality and rejects the notion of racism within schools. It makes a distinction between equality and equal treatment. The equal treatment of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children within schools does not mean that equal outcomes will be the result. Acknowledgement that Aboriginal students who have been removed from traditional ways of life, bring values and perspectives that are different from non-Aboriginal people to schools. "Curriculum and management practices must acknowledge and cater for these differences". (Aboriginal Education Policy, 1990).

The policy reinforces the notion of an inclusive curriculum and further acknowledges the contribution that Aboriginal people can make to curriculum designs.

SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE CLASSROOM

It has been established that the principles of social justice have been applied to Education, and in particular to the Aboriginal Education Policy. But what of the Aboriginal child in the classroom? Is the classroom socially just?

The Aboriginal child learns in ways different from those of a non-Aboriginal child. These learning styles need to be incorporated into classroom management. Classroom management is not only the responsibility of the teacher, but of the students. The teacher has a responsibility to develop a culturally neutral environment for students. That is, an environment which does not promote the underlying tension of racism. Students have a responsibility to respond to the teacher and assist in the promotion of a suitable learning environment.

It is also the responsibility of the classroom teacher to present information to students which is culturally acceptable to their learning styles.

The principles of social justice would dictate that all students will have equal opportunities. This in practical terms, means that all children will receive the same amount of "goods and services" as each other, in a fashion which is acceptable to their culture.

The Aboriginal child at school will experience difficulties in learning and suffer an inequality in social justice terms in a number of areas. The numbers of Aboriginal children in schools is a small percentage compared to non-Aboriginal students. The very nature of the minority group will, in social justice terms, disadvantage Aboriginal students. As discussed, Aboriginal children are not singled out within their own culture. The effect of an Aboriginal child being asked to respond to a question would then pose difficulty for this Aboriginal child. The implication here is that the Aboriginal child will not be able to confidently respond to the teacher's request regardless of whether they have the correct answer. The education implication is that this Aboriginal child will suffer from social, emotional and educational perspectives

The practical application of the curriculum to the classroom setting is where the principles of social justice fall down. Aboriginal children learn by whole units rather than splitting tasks into sequential steps. The curriculum taught in schools is a logical sequence of steps used to develop particular areas of knowledge and understanding of concepts. The assessment of this material is usually at regular intervals throughout the academic year. Aboriginal students, from a cultural perspective, are not able to learn in this sequential order and are disadvantaged by the assessment process.

It would be possible for a non-Aboriginal teacher to set up a learning mechanism for Aboriginal students along the lines of observation and imitation. It would seem appropriate that a non-Aboriginal teacher would be able to demonstrate appropriate modelling for academic information and behaviour for Aboriginal students. This would allow the Aboriginal student to learn by imitating the appropriate behaviour and observing appropriate learning materials. The possible breakdown of this system would occur when an Aboriginal student had an inappropriate role model in either teacher or fellow students. This would have a negative effect on the Aboriginal student. Racist behaviour, both verbally and non-verbally, overtly and covertly, would have a most damaging effect on an Aboriginal student.

The assessment process used in school is not conducive to trial and error concepts related to Aboriginal learning.

THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

The classroom teacher may strive to provide those opportunities for Aboriginal students that are culturally acceptable. It is possible for a class of students to develop a culturally sensitive classroom with the encouragement and guidance of a teacher. Problems arise when the school environment is not culturally accepting. Social justice within the entire school then becomes an issue. Is it possible for a socially just class to exist within a socially unjust school?

If an Aboriginal child leaves a classroom where the students and teachers have been supportive, and moves to the school yard during lunchtime and receives racist messages, this will affect that child's learning. The general school environment needs to be developed along the lines of social justice. There is little point in developing skills and knowledge of teachers and students for the classroom setting if this ethos is not carried to the entire school environment.

A study of the supportive school environment was conducted by the Education Department of South Australia in 1990. The aim of this study was to identify those issues that were causing cross-cultural tension and student interaction in school. The particular findings that were pertinent to Aboriginal students state that a supportive school environment is present for Aboriginal students when:

- *Aboriginal students are visibly supported in their values at school, and when their parents are involved.*
- *That acknowledgement of Aboriginal students' coping mechanisms with harassment from non-Aboriginal students is recognised as being different. Absenteeism seems to be an indication of an unsupportive school environment*

- *Aboriginal students are better represented in leadership and extra curricular activities*
- *Aboriginal students are better represented in senior secondary schooling*
- *Aboriginal students have access to career options and subject choices*

These issues need to be addressed in order to provide a socially just environment at a school level in conjunction with addressing the issues at a classroom level.

SUMMARY

The application of social justice principles to the Aboriginal student in schools falls somewhat short. The methods of teaching, learning and assessment that have been developed for the curriculum do not include students from the Aboriginal culture. Students from Aboriginal cultures come from a range of backgrounds. "The degree of which they are influenced by traditional and contemporary culture and the degree to which this will affect the students' school performances will depend on the type of communities these students have lived in and how they identify with the values and customs of these communities." (Guider, 1991, p. 45).

Simply, these differences of the diversity of cultural background and the diversity of learning styles and the total school environment are not conducive to the development of educational outcomes for Aboriginal students.

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