



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.

THE ROLE OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH IN ABORIGINAL EDUCATION

A-K ECKERMANN
D. ROBERTS
G. KAPLAN

Paper presented to the World Indigenous People's Education conference, Wollongong December 1993



INTRODUCTION

Every act of science is a political act.
(Guba and Lincoln 1989:118)

In the past researchers have been carrying out such political acts in the firm belief that if we study something long enough, with sufficient disciplines and controls, then we will find "reality" and "truth", then we will carry out studies which have scientific merit, which will contribute to the growing body of knowledge about how societies work. But research is generally carried out by fairly powerful people on those less powerful. In the process the powerless frequently become even more powerless because, as Guba and Lincoln (1989:125) argue:

Science, by asking only certain questions maintains (or reinforces) the status quo; it asks those questions that have been formulated by its own theories, and never takes account of the emic [outsider] formulations of its "subjects". We would argue that conventional science is as a

result a force for disenfranchisement and disempowerment, for maintaining the status quo.

There is some justification for Guba and Lincoln's (1989) accusation when we consider the huge amount of research carried out among Aboriginal communities. Twenty years of research into indigenous health problems has not significantly altered Aboriginal health status. Similarly research into Aboriginal education has not significantly improved Aboriginal children's life chances at school and beyond.

Thus the Royal commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCADIC) and the National Aboriginal Health Strategy (NAHS) argue:

Only 50% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (compared with 90% of the population as a whole have access to preschool education...[In 1986] the Aboriginal Education Task Force found that 13% of the compulsory age group were not enrolled in schooling. (RCASIC 1991, 43 and 40)...Only 9% of Aboriginals have post secondary qualifications compared with 30% of all Australians...)
(NAHS 1989: 26)

Given the huge amounts of funds dedicated to education and health programs based on research carried out in these areas, it is timely to ask whether research has asked the right questions,

or whether by amassing “facts” rather than understanding, it has maintained the status quo.

Such questioning has led us to the current Minimbah project. In this paper we would like to share with you some background on Minimbah Preschool, and how we came to develop a collaborative action research project to explore some of those aspects which, we believe, have disadvantaged Aboriginal children in mainstream schools. The underlying concepts and philosophies of collaborative research will be explored as well as some related pitfalls.

MINIMBAH PRESCHOOL

Minimbah Preschool is an Aboriginal school which, from 1963 to 1989 was run by the Save The Children’s Fund in order to improve the educational chances of Aboriginal children who live on the adjacent reserve.

In the past Minimbah was directed by a non-Aboriginal teacher supported by Aboriginal “assistants”. In 1989 the school was handed over to an Aboriginal Management Committee; it mostly employs Aboriginal staff - the director plus one other teacher as well as an administrative assistant, a handyman, a nutritional worker and five Aboriginal Education Workers. Part-time non-Aboriginal staff is employed for specific purposes e.g. running the new literary nest.

The school caters for 64 children.

Minimbah, then, can be described as an Aboriginal “culturally safe” environment. We (Eckermann et al 1992) adapted the concept of cultural safety from Ramsey (1990) and have argued that:

Cultural safety...is the need to be recognised within the [education] system and to be assured that the system reflects something of you - of your culture, your language, your customs, attitudes, beliefs and preferred ways of doing things. (Eckermann et al 1992:215)

One of our major teaching and research interests is the influence of culture on education. Progressively, over the past 10-15 years, educationalists have come to realise that a cultural difference model of education means much more than demonstrating an appreciation for cultural variations in curriculum design and classroom organisation. Such a model of education must also meet the cognitive differences which children bring to the classroom. Such cognitive differences are based in culture and formed, in the first instance, by primary socialisation (see Eckermann 1994). Consequently, if we are to understand the preferred ways in which children learn, interact, are motivated and communicate, then we, as teachers, must understand much more about the socialisation practices which predispose children towards such preferences.

Further our work has convinced us that one of the major stumbling blocks in many Aboriginal children’s successful participation and achievement in education is intensive and prolonged culture shock engendered by conflict between the values, traditions, language, customs and routines of their homes and those of mainstream schools (see Eckermann 1992,1994).

Minimbah, then, is the perfect setting in which to learn about those aspects of interaction between children and children, and children and teachers, which make this school culturally safe.

Our approach has been to film all groups of children at the school for a minimum of one week at various points of their activities. These ‘uncut’ videos are then reviewed by us to pin-point particular segments of interactions which could well be considered “unacceptable” within the mainstream system. These segments are then edited out and reviewed in workshop sessions to determine whether actions are really “unacceptable” in terms of Aboriginal parent’s and teacher’s perceptions. If they are not considered problematic, we discuss why we believe they might be considered to be so within a non-Aboriginal setting.

Early next year we hope to follow the children into mainstream schools and to again film all interactions over at least one week to cover various aspects of their activities.

Such filming will enable us to compare the children's interaction with one another and their teacher(s) in an Aboriginal environment with those they exhibit in a non-Aboriginal system. Extensive discussions with teachers and parents will enable us to pin-point much more clearly the nature and extent of the differences in interactions experienced by children in these two environments.

Film is an extremely useful tool. At the moment we are focusing on "non-Acceptable" behaviours because these will cause the children problems in mainstream schools. The majority of behaviours which have been recorded so far are, however, extraordinarily supportive. We will review the original videos again and again and discuss with Aboriginal parents and teachers the values, traditions and beliefs which underly such behaviours, how they are reinforced in the home and how they may be built upon with the mainstream education system.

Further the videos provide a rich source of comparison between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teaching styles. We believe that non-Aboriginal teachers can learn much from the culturally safe practices observed at Minimbah.

None of these plans and schemes can come true unless we collaborate in this research, in the interpretation of our materials and in the development of teaching resources to provide teachers with a greater practical understanding of cultural difference in education.

To explain how we approved this process, we will now look a little more carefully at what we mean by collaborative action research.



PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

Action research is:

A general mode of inquiry that seeks to contribute to practical concerns of people in a problematic situation and to the goals of social science within a mutually acceptable ethical framework.
(Sussman 1983:93)

Kelly (1985,132) expands on this definition by pointing out that the action research additionally enriches and increases the abilities, knowledge and skills of all participants, is performed collaboratively, and is characterised by a feedback loop. Action research consequently requires co-operative research and 'reflexivity', constant checking and monitoring and a commitment to explorations of meaning in interactions.

What, however, do we mean by co-operative or collaborative research? Traditionally research has been carried out by hardworking dedicated, highly trained and motivated 'superpersons'. Occasionally such 'superpersons' joined in a team composed of individuals with similar training, pre-established relationships and work methods from the same discipline (Boruch 1984). Less frequently such teams contained individuals who approached the area of study from different disciplines and even more rarely were such teams interdisciplinary as well as cross-cultural. These 'superpersons' were of course trained researchers or researchers in training and sometimes they hired research assistants for specific purposes - gathering of data, data processing, entry into the field, cooking, cleaning and other menial work.

Collaborative research has only become a meaningful reality in more recent work; partly, we would argue, because methodological trends have shifted away from certainty and "proof" to debating meaning and knowledge; partly the

move towards collaborative research has been based in ethics - i.e. the questioning of the concept "subject", the level of dehumanisation inherent in this concept and, no doubt, the fact that "subjects" have frequently turned against research processes over which they have no control. Further, over the last decade there has been increasing emphasis on the usefulness and relevance of research outcomes to stakeholder groups (Patton 1986; Guba and Lincoln 1985; Lincoln and Guba 1989; Patton 1991).

Collaborative inquiry or co-operative inquiry as Heron (1981:19-20) calls it, then requires:

the researcher to interact with the subject so that they do contribute directly both to hypothesis-making, to formulating the final conclusions, and to what goes on in between. This may be strong, in the sense that the subject is co-researcher and **contributes** to creative thinking at all stages. Or it may be weak, in the sense that the subject is thoroughly **informed** of the research propositions...In the complete form of this approach, not only will the subject be fully fledged co-researcher, but the researcher will also be co-subject, participating fully in the action and experience to be researched.

Such an approach would/could go a long way towards overcoming some important ethical and methodological dilemmas in qualitative research e.g. the question of the insider (Aboriginal) versus the outsider (non-Aboriginal) perspective, the question of meaning and understanding, issues related to exploitation etc. The approach is of course fairly "radical" and, we believe, quite difficult to operationalise.

Knowledge = Power. This equation is a truism which permeates all socio-economic and political situations. Research = Knowledge, therefore Research = Power. We don't believe that this extension of the equation is too far fetched. Collaborative research then implies not only a

sharing of power, but a shift of the power base from its traditional, professional/academic source.

Some of the limiting factors associated with such a shift of power are self-explanatory - professionalism, established knowledge and language have created disciplines and bureaucracies characterised by defined rules, traditions and customs of operation. In the past there has been limited recognition of the role of the lay person, the outsider, and particularly "the subject", within these structures. But even when traditional modes of operations are questioned and the "professional" is willing to recognise the importance of community involvement and collaboration, the dilemma of what or who constitutes "the community" remains. This dilemma clearly influences the extent of involvement, because in the mainstream system we tend to work through community representatives - committees, interest groups, opinion leaders. Elsewhere we have argued that "community involvement" in Primary Health Care, at least within the Australian system, frequently re-affirms and empowers already powerful interest groups (see Eckermann and Dowd 1990). The same could be argued for participatory research in education.

Further, how, in participatory research, does the "professional", responsible to the demands of a particular system, cope with pressures of time, with demands that decisions be reached, work carried out, reports be finalised? How different (not necessarily "better" or "more") is the professional commitment and motivation to that of the "lay person"? Do both parties recognise the same process and attach the same meaning to concepts? What, for example, do they understand by control, how realistic are concepts of power sharing and partnership?

Such dilemmas may become more soluble if the emphasis changes from **involvement** to **participation and empowerment**.

It is clearly in the latter interpretation - participation as a channel for empowerment - that the principles of true participatory research find expression. Such empowerment extends independence.

This shift of power and decision-making in research has been demanded by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for some time. Their demands have been summarised by Crowley and Cruse (1992) and have been incorporated into the National Health and Medical Research Council's (1991) *Guidelines on Ethical Matters In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research*.

Basically Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups demand consultation, community involvement and clarification of issues related to ownership and publication of data before they are willing to permit any more research to be carried out in their communities. Clearly such demands reflect the process of empowerment through collaborative research where research is:

- M - meaningful and interesting**
- U - useful and practical**
- R - responsive and relevant**
- R - reflective**
- I - involving and collaborative**
- E - ethical and challenging**

Within the Minimbah project, how have the MURRIE principles been applied?

MEANINGFUL AND INTERESTING TO WHOM?

The Minimbah project, which is concerned with analysing Aboriginal children's interaction with each other and their teachers in a culturally safe (all Aboriginal) environment is, of course, of interest to any educationalist.

We know that parents are the first and, particularly form this pre-school age group, the most

important teachers (see Watts and Henry 1978); we know that there are important and significant cultural differences in the ways Aboriginal children are socialised when compared to non-Aboriginal children (see Eckermann 1980; Malin 1990). We know that when Aboriginal children enter mainstream schools they are frequently subjected to the values, traditions, communication patterns and customs of the dominant society and that, as a result, they may experience severe and prolonged culture shock (Eckermann 1992,1994) even if/when their own traditions are not consciously denigrated by such powerful people as teachers. We also know that under-education persists throughout Aboriginal Australia - many Aboriginal children continue to find the school experience frustrating, to leave school early, to gain fewer skills while in the education system, and consequently to have fewer opportunities to acquire tertiary, technical or business qualifications (RCADIC 1991; Miller 1985).

Any clues, then, that we may gain about the nature of this culture shock, and the differences in expectations in child development and behaviour between Aboriginal parents/teachers and non-Aboriginal teachers, should be a meaningful contribution to our ability to create a culturally safe environment for Aboriginal children entering mainstream schools.

But professionals (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) are not the only stake-holders in this project. Aboriginal parents have an even greater interest in their children's education. Over the many years we have worked with Aboriginal parents and children, "a good education" has always been identified by parents as one way in which their children gain " a better future". Consequently their collaboration is of utmost importance.

USEFUL AND PRACTICAL?

Over the past couple of years, the project has become useful and practical on a number of different levels.

When we began working together we were interested in developing teaching resources to familiarise non-Aboriginal teachers with those culturally appropriate and acceptable behaviours of Aboriginal children which they might consider unacceptable and consequently, which they might actively discourage. We know that such moves would increase the level of culture conflict and concomitant culture shock experienced by Aboriginal children. So, for the teaching profession, the product would be both useful and practical.

On a different level, the project has also proven useful and practical for the teachers and parents of Minimbah. By reviewing the videos and identifying segments to be cut to illustrate particular "unacceptable" behaviours, Aboriginal teachers at Minimbah have had the opportunity to assess their own teaching practice and to discuss this in workshop situations. Similarly parents have had the opportunity to assess their children's behaviour and, in workshop situations, discuss the reasons for judging some actions as acceptable, some as tolerable, others as unacceptable. They have also had the opportunity to identify strategies they use at home to discourage their children's unacceptable behaviours.

RESPONSIVE AND RELEVANT?

There is no doubt that, in a small way, the project is responding to some of the problems experienced by Aboriginal children in non-Aboriginal situations. Practically and theoretically our work is shifting the emphasis in Aboriginal education from "blaming the victim" (Ryan 1976) to cultural safety. By acknowledging the validity of cultural differences in children's socialisation and by identifying strategies used in Aboriginal children's own environments which foster acceptable behaviour or discourage unacceptable ones, teachers will be able to facilitate cross-cultural teaching and learning.

REFLECTIVE AND ACCURATE?

When research is done from the "outsiders" point of view, information may be misinterpreted and distorted. In this project we are collaborating in the way the information is collected, we view the films together, we sort/categorise the material together and we discuss it with groups of teachers and parents to ensure all ideas and opinions are shared. In this way we hope that the information collected will not only be accurate, but will truly reflect the issues and concerns of Aboriginal parents and teachers.

HOW DO WE INVOLVE AND COLLABORATE WITH DIFFERENT GROUPS?

As outlined above, a number of stakeholders are presently involved in the project - the school, its management committee and teachers, the children and their parents (as well as their family groups) and last, but not least, the two non-Aboriginal participants. Through discussion, workshops, feedback on such things as conference papers, we share information and we contribute to the final product.

Hopefully we will follow some of the Minimbah children into mainstream schools and there record the nature of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal interactions at the child/child as well as the teacher/child level.

When this happens mainstream schools, their staff, students and parents will become much more directly involved in the process. Again information will be collected in collaboration with such teachers, schools and parents and, again, workshops will be organised to assist with the categorisation and interpretation of the material.



Collaboration does not, however, necessarily lead to empowerment unless some important ethical issues are resolved.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE ETHICAL CHALLENGES INVOLVED?

We believe strongly that all of the stakeholders in the project have rights as well as obligations. To protect the children's, parent's, teacher's and school's rights, we:

- (a) put up a proposal to the management committee;
- (b) held discussions with the teachers;
- (c) consulted every parent and gained written consent;
- (d) established in our negotiations, that the school, and through the school the parents would be given copies of all video tapes, as well as all papers subsequently developed. Further, if any of the videos are prepared for "public view" i.e. in the form of teaching resources, then the school and the parents will have to grant permission. Similarly any written material will be discussed with parents and teachers before they are made public;
- (e) the school, on the other hand, has also agreed that it will not make the video tapes publicly available unless the two non-Aboriginal participants are consulted.

There is, of course, no absolute guarantee that materials will not be misinterpreted or misused once they have been made public. By following the procedures outlined above we do hope, however, that these dangers are minimised.

Whenever there is talk of research and "publishing", the question of who gets what invariably

arises. In this project the Australian Research Council has funded the equipment to do the videoing and the cost of the tapes, filming and editing as well as conducting the workshops. In 1992 we paid an Aboriginal teacher to film for us on a part-time basis, and the school got a small contribution for facilitating the workshops. The same occurred in 1993.

No one, however, has been "paid" to participate nor, we believe, would they expect to be in a truly collaborative venture.

So what happens next? Do those who write papers make a great deal of money by publishing them? No - you don't get paid to write, or at least we don't. But there are other benefits for the non-Aboriginal participants - greater recognition by their peers and professions, and career development are both possible if the work is good.

What benefits accrue to the school and/or the community? The school gains access to a visual aid which it can use/develop for promotion, for professional development of its staff, for fund raising, for parent involvement. The staff and parents gain access to a much more effective way of monitoring teaching styles and children's behaviour.

Hopefully the teaching profession will gain resources which will help to train more culturally aware and sensitive teachers so that Aboriginal children's experiences in schools will prove more productive and rewarding.

We believe that this approach leads to a win-win situation in which all parties clearly appreciate the benefits of collaboration. Some of these benefits are quite accidental. For example, by reviewing the video tapes, the teachers realised that there were three children who quite systematically blocked themselves and others from participating in lessons. While previously all the teachers had become irritated with one or other of the children, none had been aware of how consistent and systematic the behaviour patterns

were. The Director subsequently held staff meetings to develop a co-ordinated approach to dealing with the behaviour problems, organised staff development through in-put from an educational psychologist and involved the parents in identifying ways and means by which such behaviours are, or should be, dealt with at home.

Such benefits will undoubtedly continue to develop as we spend more time with each other analysing the visual material and sharing our concerns.

Collaborative research can, however, also present some problems. These include: time, traditions, terminology and, to be honest, pre-conceived ideas.

Collaborative research takes time - it is far easier for "researchers" to collect, analyse and write up materials than to organise workshops, focus group sessions and staff meetings at which these issues are discussed, organised and work is distributed. Researchers have been trained in research traditions - many find it easier and quicker to do the work themselves than to facilitate collaboration. Similarly community members have many different pressures on them - attending workshops, reviewing videos, discussing the pros and cons of particular actions and reactions is a drain on their energies when family and work commitments are pressing.

The terminology of education and research presents another obstacle. Researchers tend, at times, to speak the in-group language of their discipline. It's an easy, comfortable way of communicating with other researchers. It may however sound like a foreign language to those not familiar with it. Similarly Aboriginal teachers and parents speak an in-group language which can confuse and at times exclude the researcher. For example, if a mother says she "gets out the strap" if a child misbehaves does it mean she will threaten, smack or beat the child with the strap?

Further, all participants in collaborative research bring their own preconceived ideas to the process. Researchers bring their training and past experiences which will inevitably cloud their perceptions and interpretations. Community people will bring their experiences, with non-Aboriginal society, with teachers and with "researchers" to the process. These preconceived ideas will influence how much trust we will place in each others' abilities to share information, knowledge and, most importantly, responsibility.

Collaborative research, then, is as much a process of negotiation between the various participants as is a process of collecting, analysing and reviewing information.

Our collaborative project is continuing - we hope that the end result will produce

- K -knowledge which is**
- O -openly shared and consequently**
- O -outreaching to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups which is also**
- R -reliable and therefore may provide the**
- I - insight necessary to improve Aboriginal children's life chances in non-Aboriginal schools.**

REFERENCES

Boruch, 1984

Crowley, V and Cruse, S
1992 *Discussion Paper on Ethics in Aboriginal Research*. Kaurua Publications, University of South Australia.

Eckermann, A-K,
1980 Aboriginal Children's Needs. In Brown (ed.) *Children Australia*. George Allen and Unwin, Sydney.

- Eckermann, A-K
1992 *Aboriginal Children and Schools: Success or Failure? Keynote Address, C.E.O. Principal's Conference, Toowoomba.*
-
- 1994 *One Classroom, Many Cultures.* Allen and Unwin, Sydney.
- Eckermann, A-K. and Dowd, L.T.
1990 *Community participation: Hospitals Without Walls. Proceedings of the International Conference: Health For All By the Year 2000: Nurses and others. June 28-29. School of Health Science, UCCQ, Rockhampton.*
- Eckermann, A-K., Dowd, L.T., Martin, M., Nixon, L., Gray, R. and Chong, E.
1992 *Binang Gonnj: Bridging cultures in Aboriginal Health, UNE, Armidale.*
- Guba, E.G. and Lincoln.
1985 *Fourth Generation Education.* Sage, London.
- Heron, J.
1981 *Philosophical basis for a new paradigm. In Reason, P. and Rowan, J. (ed). Human Inquiry. John Wiley and Sons, Brisbane, pp. 19-35.*
- Kelly, A.
1985 *Action Research: What is it and what can it do? In R.E. Burgess (ed.). Issues in Educational Research: Qualitative Methods. The Falmer Press, London, pp. 129-151.*
- Lincoln, Y.S. and Guba, E.G.
1985 *Naturalistic Inquiry.* Sage, London.
- Malin, M.
1990 *Why Is Life So Hard for Aboriginal Students in Urban Classrooms? The Aboriginal Child at School, 18,1, pp 9-29.*
- Miller, J.
1985 *Report of the Committee of Review of Aboriginal Employment and Training Programs.* AGPS, Canberra.
- National Health and Research Council.
1991 *Guidelines On Ethical matters in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research.* NH & MRC, Canberra.
- Patton, M.Q.
1986 *Utilisation - Focuses Evaluation.* end Ed., Sage, London.
-
- 1990 *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods.* Sage, London.
- Ramsden, I.
1990 *Whakaruruhau: Cultural Safety in Nursing Education in Aotearoa. a report for the Maori Health and Nursing Ministry of Education, New Zealand.*
- Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.
1991 *National Report.* AGPS, Canberra.
- Ryan, W.
1976 *Blaming The Victim.* Vintage Books, New York.
- Sussman, G.I.
1983 *Action Research: A Sociotechnical systems perspective: In G. Morgan (ed.). Beyond Method: Strategies for Social Research. Sage, London, pp. 95-113.*
- Watts, B.H. and Henry, M.
1978 *Focus on Parent and Child: Extending the Teaching Components of Urban Aboriginal Mothers.* AGPS, Canberra.

