



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*.

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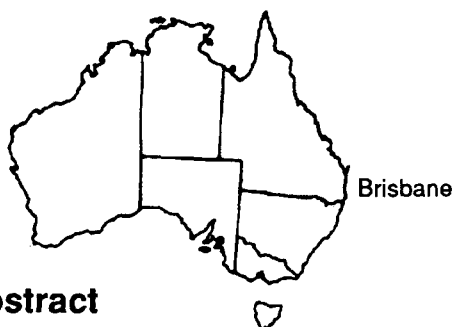


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Gender Issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Girls — Exploring Issues for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Boys

Jeannie Herbert

Department of Education, Queensland



Abstract

This Workshop paper was presented at the Ministerial Council on Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) Gender Equity Taskforce Promoting Gender Equity Conference 22-24 February 1995 held in Canberra and attended by advisers to various State/Territory governments, academics and some school-based educators, on gender issues.

Introduction

I have been asked to explore the intersection of gender, race and disadvantage. I cannot do that because I prefer not to associate the word 'disadvantage' with examining issues in the context of indigenous people. It seems to me that the term 'disadvantaged' is often used to categorise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. While there is no denying that many indigenous families are disadvantaged — by poverty, by long-term unemployment and by

racist attitudes of the wider community, they are not disadvantaged by being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander! Many teachers view indigenous people as disadvantaged because they are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander — part of the 'indigenous problem'. I prefer to examine the intersection of gender and race because I believe, in this way, participants in this workshop will gain a valuable insight into the cause of so much disadvantage. We will develop these understandings through reflecting on indigenous viewpoints.

This workshop will focus on the issues of gender and difference to determine how successfully the priority areas of *Addressing the Needs of Girls at Risk* and *Improving the Educational Outcomes of Girls who Benefit Least from Schooling* have addressed the needs of indigenous students. These are two of the eight priorities in the *National Action Plan for the Education of Girls*.

These perspectives have been obtained during the recent national consultation on gender and violence. This consultation took place in 10 school communities in rural, remote and urban locations in Queensland, New South Wales, the Northern Territory and Western Australia, across government and non-government systems and included Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal students across the P-12 range. Approximately 300 students and parents participated in the consultation. While such limited consultation

should not be seen as providing a definitive indigenous perspective, it can be seen as a representative sample.

It was argued, in a number of groups, that **gender** is not a key issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The majority of respondents identified **racism** as the major barrier to indigenous students achieving more equitable educational outcomes. Despite the overall diversity of life experiences which exist within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, it would seem that exposure to the racist attitudes of the broader community is an experience common to all groups. Even where individuals tried to ignore racist actions and comments, most agreed that such experiences do impinge upon the way in which they are able to operate within different groups:

Racism goes on all the time, miss...even when they don't say anything, **you know!** It's not so bad when it comes from other kids...if a kid calls you a racist name, you can drop 'em...doesn't stop you feeling hurt but it helps to get rid of the anger...it's when the teachers make some sarcastic comment or just gives you that look...that's when it really hits you in the guts.

While racism is directed at all indigenous people, educators need to acknowledge the special significance it has for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander girls, for as Hope Neill (cited in Gilbert and Taylor, 1991: 12) stated:

Aboriginal women are likely to be triply oppressed on the basis of class, race and gender, though for many their major struggle is still against racial oppression and its effects, both at a personal and institutional level.

The committee which examined violence in Australian schools indicated that:

The Victorian Community Relations in Education project, working in the area of racism, identified a lack of understanding of what constituted racism, as one of the main obstacles to countering its effect. The lack of knowledge of the extent of racism in schools, the perceived lack of support available to those reporting racism and a lack of will by principals and administrators to deal with reported incidents, compounded the frustration and aggression of those being victimized. (*Sticks and Stones: Report on Violence in Australian Schools*, 1994: 13).

It's not worth telling the teachers...most of the time they don't believe us 'cos we're black.

While it may be argued within some groups that gender is not the most important issue for indigenous groups, it is obvious that some issues of gender are impacting upon girls within the education system, for as girls said:

Boys are like they are now because education has changed. Boys are influenced by what the media put out — they see a lot of violence and movies where men have power over women, men earn big money for playing football, etc. That's all they see and so they think that's how it should be for them. Boys are right into sport.

Girls are supposed to be the smart ones whose job it is to do the work. The boys tell the girls to do the work the teacher wants because they have to go off to sporting things. Teachers think like this too. When a teacher tells a boy to do something, he says 'Tell the girls to do it!'

There is always more praise for the boys' achievements in sport than there is for the girls' achievements in school work. Teachers don't see girls' sport as important as boys' sport either, so if the girls won the netball final, that would not receive as much attention, in the school, as if the boys won the football grand final.

All girls agreed with these sentiments, saying that:

...the teachers say they have our interests at heart, but their actions don't demonstrate this!

Girls also indicated a strong preference for separate classes when dealing with issues such as gender. It was suggested that:

...It is easier to talk about these things than to write about them but you often feel embarrassed about talking in front of boys...they laugh and tease you. When you are talking about something for the first time, it would be better if girls could work with a woman and boys could work with a man, because you'd feel more comfortable this way and it would give you a chance to get your feelings sorted out. After you had talked about the issues in separate groups, you could come back to your class group and talk about the things you had just learnt with the boys...in partners with a boy you picked yourself.

This request from indigenous girls, for some separation of the sexes, would seem to be supported by Recommendation 31 of the *National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* which states, in part:

That agencies and organizations providing secondary education for male Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander secondary students:

- adopt school organizational practices (such as separating male and female students for particular subjects or at particular times) which give appropriate respect to the status of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men in their communities.

A critical issue for schools attempting to address gender issues for indigenous girls is that these girls are faced with a dual struggle. On the one hand they are trying to deal with their femininity in the context of intra-cultural values and beliefs while, at the same time, trying to position themselves within a cross-cultural situation.

Other issues which impact upon the success of these priorities, in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander girls, include:

Dealing with Diversity

Consultation with girls across the P-12 range revealed considerable diversity in terms of lifestyle. According to some respondents, parents maintained a high level of control over their lives; others indicated their father dominated decision-making in their family; while others obviously enjoyed high levels of freedom and autonomy.

To cater for the needs of individuals from such complex backgrounds schools need to be highly flexible in terms of their overall operation and the thinking of all personnel who interact with students.

Valuing Difference

It was suggested that to cater for individuals is not enough. The social context is **critical** and students need to develop the capacity to understand both the group and the individual within the group. Developing such insights is an essential factor in understanding, for example, the value of peer support, from an indigenous girl's perspective. Most teachers do not appreciate the support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander girls provide for one another and their considerable influence in terms of whether or not individuals remain at school, what courses they take, etc.

The consultation revealed that, regardless of their diversity of cultural background, life experience, language, etc., most respondents had four main areas of concern in relation to gender issues. These were culture, language, relationships and personal issues. The following factors were considered significant:

1. Schools do not value indigenous cultures and languages. As culture and language are seen as key elements of a person's identity, there is a general feeling that if schools do not value these things they cannot value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (including students).
2. Teachers' obsession with process prevents them working effectively with indigenous students whose focus is people.
3. Indigenous groups value age and knowledge while many non-indigenous groups appear to value youth, physical beauty, being white, and material goods.

The desire to establish a recognised and acceptable identity, through the implementation of relevant culture and language programs, was a feature of every consultation, although it must be said that it was usually boys who were most vocal about

culture and language issues. While girls were outspoken about the need for boys to change their behaviour in terms of teasing and swearing, they tended to support what they perceived as behaviour based on aspects of 'culture'.

Teasing

As the issue of teasing was raised by all groups of girls and women and by some groups of men, it would seem to be causing considerable concern. Girls pointed out that:

...We try to tell the teachers, miss, we try to tell them when the boys are teasing or hitting us, but most times they just ignore us. The boys get worse then because they know they can get away with it. We know the teachers are really busy and don't have a lot of time...but it makes it very hard. We try to put up with the teasing but when we can't take any more we just have to stand up for ourselves. When this sort of thing keeps happening, it makes us feel sad and angry, and then we can't do our best work.

Self Esteem

Many indigenous girls suffer from low self-esteem as a result of the racist and sexist attitudes to which they are exposed in the school environment. For example, girls revealed that being exposed to name-calling which includes 'coon', 'abo', 'black bitch', 'prostitute', etc. does not make them feel good about themselves.

Parents suggested that one of the reasons indigenous students exhibit low self-esteem at school, but not at home, is the result of the racial discrimination they experience within the school environment. For example, parents stated that

their children are referred to as 'coons, boongs, little black bastards, and so on' by non-teaching staff such as groundspeople, cleaners, tuckshop personnel, etc. Such behaviour is seen as a reflection of mainstream community attitudes.

In some groups, it was suggested that there is a growing tendency for white girls to date indigenous boys. Added to the effects of racist and sexist name-calling, this trend appears to be increasing the low self-esteem of some indigenous girls.

The Quality of Career Guidance

It could be argued that, in terms of the improved retention rates of Aboriginal girls in Years 11 and 12 in recent years, that schools have developed effective means of supporting indigenous girls at risk but how does this relate to learning outcomes? Unemployment statistics prove that few indigenous women enjoy permanent employment and personal observation soon reveals Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are not working in jobs which have visibility, such as checkout operators, bank tellers, etc. within the community. Why is this? Is it that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander girls, exiting the school system, do not have what employers want?

If this is the case, what implications does this have for the school in terms of:

- the usefulness of the subjects these girls are studying in Years 11 and 12, in the context of employment?
- the quality of the career guidance they receive prior to making their choices?
- the commitment or capacity of the school to empower these students in such a way that they are able to achieve realistic goals such as obtaining employment?

What is the point of students remaining in school until Year 12 if they remain unable to access further education or employment? While the value of the social aspect of schooling cannot be overlooked, was this what the *National Action Plan* Priority 3: *Improving the Educational Outcomes for Girls Who Benefit Least From Schooling* really intended?

Gender Issues Which Affect Indigenous Boys

As the issue of racism was the key issue for all indigenous students, schools need to give priority to programs which address attitudinal change, for all staff and students. As misuse of power is a critical factor in maintaining racist attitudes, it would appear that the *National Action Plan* does provide schools with strategies for dealing with the issue of racism. It would be a simple matter for schools, through consultation with indigenous parents and students, to develop appropriate anti-racist programs using key strategies provided in Priority 1: *Examining the Construction of Gender*; Priority 2: *Eliminating Sex-Based Harassment*; and Priority 3: *Improving the Educational Outcomes of Girls Who Benefit Least from Schooling*. The major obstacles would, as pointed out in the Victorian Community Relations in Education Project, appear to be ignorance and the institutional racism which ensures that principals and administrators will continue to have a 'lack of will' in dealing with racism within their school environments.

Another issue schools must address in dealing with gender issues in relation to indigenous males, is to examine the historical and social contexts of gender within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Such understandings are critical to recognising and accepting the tensions that

exist within groups, in regard to this issue. If schools are to develop meaningful cross-cultural relationships within their school communities then there has to be some empathy for what has happened to others and some understanding of the long-term effects of past policies, for example the destruction of their traditional male role has resulted in total devastation for many Aboriginal men and many communities are still trying to deal with the aftermath of that process. In Priority 3: *Improving the Educational Outcomes of Girls who Benefit Least from Schooling*; Priority 5: *Reforming the Curriculum*; Priority 6: *Improving Teaching Practice*; and Priority 7: *Broadening Work Education*, there are a number of strategies which could be used to increase awareness and understanding of cross-cultural gender issues across the whole school community. The issue of partnerships with the indigenous community would be particularly important in addressing this issue.

Boys indicated that they would like to have more knowledge about a lot of gender issues. For example, they wanted to be able to discuss issues of masculinity and the construction of gender, with men — preferably indigenous men — and they also wanted to know the legal implications of various issues, such as sexual harassment, within both the school and the work environment. They did indicate that schools should make more use of Aboriginal organisations within the local community, such as Aboriginal Legal Aid, which could provide indigenous perspectives and specific knowledge and understandings of many of these issues. Such partnerships could be critical in achieving improved educational outcomes for all indigenous students. As the *National Action Plan* provides a focus on ways to increase community awareness, improve girls' self-image and to develop a greater valuing of women and girls within society, the strategies contained throughout the document could provide a sound

basis for working with indigenous boys and their community.

The Key to Achieving More Equitable Outcomes for All Indigenous Students

In considering the responses gathered during all group consultations, indigenous people are looking for schools to provide more relevant education programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. To do this, schools will need to become more innovative in including indigenous parents and students in the decision-making processes that determine the content of such programs. There is little doubt that parents do not feel welcome in schools. This sense of exclusion is the long-term outcome of past education policies but, if education systems are serious about improving learning outcomes for all students, then the onus is on schools to take responsibility for making Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people feel valued.

The general consensus of opinion among many indigenous people is that:

Nothing will change until state and commonwealth governments make a commitment to implementing compulsory pre-service and in-service training programs in self-awareness and cross-cultural awareness for all teachers and decision makers. This could provide the catalyst which is needed to begin the process of changing community attitudes.

From a woman:

Education systems are not designed to cater for different cultures...it's all mainstream! We're not worried about 'gender' so

much...it's our way to work **together**. That's what needs to happen in schools. It can't happen until you change teacher attitudes and the only way to do that is to get serious about **training programs**. We need **every** teacher training course to include compulsory Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies...programs which run right through the whole course. Don't forget about those who are already teaching...there should be compulsory cross-cultural programs with a special focus on decision-makers!

Attitudinal change will enable schools to recognise and accept differences in the way gender impacts on the lives of male and female students from different cultures and with different needs.

Workshop Recommendations

Future Directions: Policy

- The *National Action Plan* has the potential...but acknowledged deficiencies in relation to Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.
- Pre-service and In-service training in relation to self-awareness, cross-cultural training — including decision-makers in systems.
- Real effort put into consultation at a system level, with parents, communities. Also means changing institutions to be more welcoming, less racist.

Future Directions: Practice

- Parents and Gender Equity (material to remove stereotypes of girls/women's employment options) Occupational Aspirations — resource materials for women in Aboriginal communities.

- Collaboration with Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders on Taskforce — to set up programs which fight sexism and racism together — issues of gender relations as they have been constructed in different cultures rather than focusing on Aborigines as inherently disadvantaged.
- Production of curriculum materials dealing with heritage in a more holistic view. Consultation with communities as to how histories need to be taught.
- Debate opened up with teacher education and employing agencies.
- Equality of employment: recognition and status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education workers.
- Funding and commitment at a state level (predominantly women).
- In-servicing that includes the whole school — including the non-teaching staff.

Future Directions: Research

- Teachers' knowledge, understandings, racist attitudes.
- How students form identities around issues of race (K-?).
- Importance of returning benefits of research to communities, **reporting back**, demonstrating strategies for action.
- Encourage young members of communities to participate actively in research.
- Looking to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to report on research where there is similar research.
- Include Aboriginal people in research teams, opportunities for trainee researchers, etc.



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Jeannie Herbert is an Aboriginal woman originally from Broome, Western Australia. She has over 30 years experience in education as a classroom teacher, education administrator, guidance officer and Principal. She recently carried out a DEET national project on Gender and Violence – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Issues which involved national consultation with indigenous parents and students to gather information. □

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