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Teaching to Difference: Working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students in Urban Schools

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Introduction

The following paper was presented to a group of teachers, curriculum advisers, school support centre personnel and review officers at a one day conference organised by the Metropolitan West Region of the Queensland Department of Education. The time allocated for this session was 35 minutes. I therefore decided to focus on what I consider to be the two major barriers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student participation in schooling: recognition and valuing by teachers of children's identity and language. For other factors contributing to children's participation, such as curriculum relevance, parent/community involvement in decision-making, I provided participants with handouts which I had developed during the past four years or so.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to bring to the notice of educators the major barriers to learning experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, particularly those who undertake their schooling in urban and rural locations. The Social Justice Strategy of the Queensland Department of Education (QDE) promotes the notion of curriculum which is inclusive of all students; that is, males and females, students with disabilities, those who are geographically isolated, and those from differing cultural backgrounds. To effectively offer a curriculum within urban schools which is inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, the two most important factors to be taken into consideration are those of recognition and valuing of the cultural identity/background, and of home language of these students.

'Curriculum' Defined

For the purposes of this discussion, I have adopted the definition of curriculum as what happens through schooling in those interactions involving administrators, teachers, students, parents and/or community members which influence all aspects of student development. Such interactions occur both inside and outside the classroom and may be either planned or unplanned.

Interactions which take place within planned learning experiences and programs of study are affected by the perspectives, knowledge and experiences of those who are participating and these can either inhibit or enhance student learning. In addition, interactions which take place in unplanned and/or informal contexts also impact on student learning. For some students the impact on learning of these interactions may be more influential than those which occur within planned contexts.

Inclusive Curriculum

QDE's Social Justice Strategy states:

> Teachers and other educators provide an inclusive curriculum when they:
> - identify and address barriers that limit students' opportunities, participation and benefits from schooling
> - include, value and use as a basis for learning, the perspectives, contributions and experience of the full range of social and cultural groups by acknowledging diversity both within and among these groups
> - develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes and processes necessary to:
>   — question how disadvantage has developed and is maintained within social structures
>   — challenge rather than accept social injustice
>   — empower people to participate as equals.

Curriculum inclusivity is also a component of all National Learning Area Statements.

Including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students

To develop strategies which may remove barriers facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, educators need to be aware of:

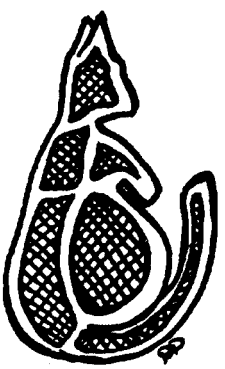
a) What students bring to school:
- identity – differing and diverse cultural backgrounds
- values and ideas
- patterns of language use
- responsibility and independence developed and expected within their home and community
- self-esteem (usually lower within school situation)
- perspectives on the purposes and meaning of schools, often influenced by parents'/carers' experiences of schooling and authority, based on past policies and practices relating to Aboriginal/Torres Strait people
- socio-economic status

b) Factors within schools:
- curriculum relevance
- teacher expectations
- pedagogy.

Recent consultations with ten total school communities (teaching and non-teaching staff, students, parents) undertaken in five states as part of a national curriculum project confirm that the two areas of concern, particularly in urban/rural situations, are those of identity and home language (Aboriginal English).

Students and parents expressed concern that there was little recognition by teachers, and school staff generally, of Aboriginality nor was there acceptance of the use of Aboriginal English as a legitimate form of communication. Some of the teachers, on the other hand, viewed Aboriginality in terms of certain physical characteristics, thus omitted the cultural backgrounds of some students when planning learning experiences. Aboriginal English, for many teachers, was taken as an 'incorrect' use of English language.

It is unfortunate that these issues are not addressed in teacher preservice education programs, and are seldom included in inservice programs, because the recognition and valuing of student's identity and culture is the foundation upon which to build satisfying and rewarding classroom practice.



Recognising the Identity and Cultural Backgrounds of Urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students

Aboriginal people are not always initially recognisable if the observer relies upon physical characteristics as indicators. The stereotypical image that most teachers have can rarely be applied, particularly in urban and rural locations. Some Aboriginal people are short, some tall, some dark, some fair, some have curly hair, some straight hair, etc.: what does matter is behaviour and language, how and by whom one is reared – one's cultural background. This has led Aboriginal people to write, e.g.:

> Being Aboriginal is not the color of your skin or how broad your nose is. It is a spiritual feeling, an identity you know in your heart. It is a unique feeling that is difficult for a non-Aboriginal to fully understand ... (Burney *et al.*, 1982).

Aboriginal people who have not met one another previously, usually recognise one another; and it does not take long to confirm the initial recognition by establishing family connections, area of origin, and place within the Aboriginal community networks that are strong throughout Queensland and throughout Australia.

In 1994, I was required to interview, with a non-Aboriginal government official, some young men in a correctional institution. One of the young men had fair skin and did not possess a recognisably Aboriginal surname, but exhibited certain behaviours that I identified with. His initial behaviour was to position his chair against the corner of the small interview room, put his feet on the table, throw his cigarettes on the table, and assume a non-cooperative posture. The government officer asked him if he had any objection to the interview being taped, to which he responded by shrugging, and then stating 'I don't give a f...'. My position was difficult; I wanted to ask him about his Aboriginality, but did not want to do so in front of the government officer for fear of embarrassing or offending the young man. When it was my turn to ask a question, I said 'Have you had an opportunity to speak with the Aboriginal counsellor?' That question achieved an immediate reaction; there was a flicker of recognition in the eyes of the young man, he removed his feet from the table, and sat straight in his chair. His responses from that point were non-aggressive. The recognition of his identity was an important factor in effective communication.

Diana Eades has studied and written about contemporary Aboriginal people of south-eastern Queensland for a number of years, and has become recognised nationally and internationally as an authority on Aboriginal English.

In a recent publication, *Aboriginal English and the Law* (1992), Eades confirms the three parts of the Commonwealth definition:

> The accepted government definition of an Aboriginal person makes no reference to the physical characteristics of the Aboriginal person; it is based on the three factors of descent, self-identification and community acceptance of that self-identification.

In support of statements made by Aboriginal people about the continuation of Aboriginal cultures and the existence of networks, Eades (1992: 13) points out that:

> Many people mistakenly assume that if Aboriginal people have a lifestyle that seems the same of non-Aboriginal Australians and no longer speak traditional languages or follow traditional religion, ritual performances and food gathering practices, then they must have 'lost their culture' ... It is socialisation and life experiences which are of greatest relevance to communication .... Regardless of differences in lifestyle and socio-economic situation, Aboriginal people in Australia today belong to overlapping kin-based networks sharing social life, responsibilities and rights, a common history and culture and experience of racism and ethnic consciousness.

Torres Strait Islanders are also indigenous inhabitants of Australia whose cultural backgrounds are very different to those of Aboriginal people. It is important to recognise that:

- Aboriginal societies and Torres Strait Islander societies are within two distinct cultural frameworks which encompass a variety of lifestyles, beliefs, customs and languages
- there are many similarities as well as differences between and among the cultures, histories, traditional and contemporary lifestyles of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people, and
- a range of experiences, opinions, beliefs and aspirations exists among both Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people.

Recognising and valuing the identity and cultural backgrounds of students does not mean singling them out or creating situations which may be embarrassing or offensive to them. Remember that each person is an individual and also an individual within a specific family, community and cultural group.

Valuing and Building Upon the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Student's Home Language

> Teaching is most effective when there is no conflict between home and school. Conflict can be avoided if schools respect every child's mother tongue ... [which] ... embodies all his or her early life experiences and ingrained language habits .... No language should be branded as inferior (*Langwij Comes to School* 1995: 15).

Apart from English, the three main contemporary languages of Torres Strait are Meriam Mir, Kala Lagau Ya, and Torres Strait Creole (also called *Broken, Pizin, Big Thap, Blaikman,* or *Ailan Tok*). It is probable that Torres Strait Islander

students you may have in your classrooms will speak one or more of these languages at home. In such cases, consideration should be given to the fact that English is the second or third language of these students. The dialect of English used by many Aboriginal students is, however, often viewed quite differently.

It is estimated that around 93 per cent of Queensland's Aboriginal population speak different forms of English language. The English used by most of these people is not Standard English, but rather dialects of English which, according to Eades (1992: 14) 'is distinctly Aboriginal and is thus known as Aboriginal English'. Eades describes Aboriginal English as 'a distinctive range of dialects of English which reflects, maintains and continually creates Aboriginal culture and identity'.

In the past, Aboriginal English was regarded as 'lazy' or 'bad' English, and compensatory language development programs were implemented. John Dwyer was involved with replacing this practice, based on his experience with Aboriginal children at Cherbourg during the early 1970s. I offer the following from some of his writings:

> 'What name you call?' I turned to find my questioner was Norman, a six-year old Aboriginal boy, all smiling eyes and white teeth. He looks bright enough, I thought, 'what a pity he can't speak properly'.
>
> On the basis of this snippet of speech, I had already made a judgement about Norman's language development and, probably without being aware of it, I had linked this language judgement to a further one about his general ability and intelligence.
>
> If, as teachers, we see these differences as a 'problem', then our response will be to remediate and compensate, to try to stamp out and replace undesirable language. For the Aboriginal child the end result is likely to be lowered self-esteem (Dwyer, J. 1989, quoted in *Langwij Comes to School* 1995: 6-7).

Teachers need to recognise the existence of Aboriginal English, but, rather than changing the spoken language used by Aboriginal students, demonstrate to them the importance of becoming proficient in Standard English in terms of further education, employment, personal and community advancement, etc., then to develop their practical skills in that direction. It is not unusual for people to communicate in more than one form of English. The well-known author, the late Oodgeroo Noonuccal once said, 'I speak many different languages, and most of them are English'.

It may be of interest to teachers to note that the Federal Minister for Schools, Education and Training, Mr Ross Free, 'has okayed the use of Aboriginal English [instead of or as well as Standard Australian English] in teaching Aboriginal children' ... 'The general conclusion seems to be that Aboriginal English is an effective language that has absorbed and preserves important aspects of Aboriginal culture.' (*The Australian Magazine*, April 22-23, 1995: 44). Minister Free's endorsement supports evidence presented in a recent publication by Jean Harkins (1994), entitled *Bridging Two Worlds.*

Once students know that they are valued for who they are, and for what they bring with them to the learning situation, the potential for real two-way communication between teacher and student will emerge.

Introducing Relevant Curriculum and Pedagogy

It is recognised that in developing and implementing specific strategies, schools are required to work within certain parameters, such as:

- state and regional policies and directions, e.g.
  - — curriculum specifications
  - — standardised testing
  - — behaviour management
  - — class size requirements, etc.
- and the physical environment of the school, e.g. location, size of building/rooms, open areas, which affect:
  - — number and diversity of students
  - — organisation of lessons and free time
  - — range of subjects available, etc.

Within these parameters there are ways to incorporate relevant content into curriculum and develop a pedagogy appropriate to the learning styles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Direction may be provided in these exercises by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and community members, NAEP team members and community education school counsellors.

Appendix 1 illustrates examples of issues, ways to address, and indications of effectiveness.

Appendix 2 is a short reference list related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in urban classrooms for your information.

Bibliography

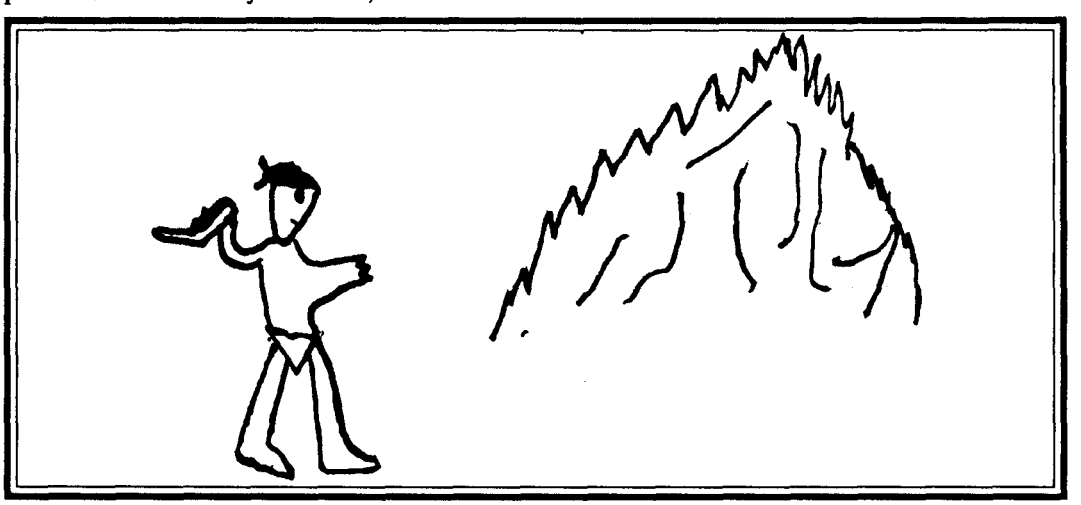
Burney, L., Lester, T. and Riley, L. (1982) *Strategies for Teaching Aboriginal Children.* Sydney: Directorate of Special Programs, NSW Department of Education.

Department of Employment, Education and Training. (1995) *Langwij Comes to School.* Canberra: AGPS.

Dwyer, J. (1989) 'Talking with Aboriginal children', in *A Sea of Talk.* PETA.

Eades, D. (1992) *Aboriginal English and the Law.* Brisbane: Queensland Law Society.

Harkins, J. (1994) *Bridging Two Worlds: Aboriginal English and Crosscultural Understanding.* St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press.



Appendix 1
Examples of Issues

Barriers that limit students' opportunities and access are identified.

Issue	Ways to Address	Indicators of Effectiveness
Students speaking Aboriginal English are excluded by the non-acceptance of their language.	The home language of student is accepted as valid, used in instruction, and Standard Australian English is introduced as a second language.	Students develop greater fluency in both dialects.

Diverse perspectives, contributions and experiences of different social, cultural and ability groups are included and valued and used as a basis for learning.

Issue	Ways to Address	Indicators of Effectiveness
Student's perspectives, etc. are ignored and this damages self esteem and therefore lowers participation.	All curriculum areas include content which values the interests of Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people. They are actively involved in curriculum planning, implementation and evaluation.	Reduction in racist comments, incidents. Improved participation and retention of Aboriginal students and Torres Strait Islander students.

Curriculum is used as a vehicle to challenge (rather than accept) social injustice and to skill learners to participate as equals.

Issue	Ways to Address	Indicators of Effectiveness
ALL students need to become aware of injustice and to understand how it is maintained and how it can be challenged.	Providing all students with the skills they need to understand and challenge social and political structures (including the curriculum) which perpetuate injustice, e.g. identify injustice within the schools and taking collaborative action to challenge and redress.	Students can identify and understand issues of social justice and suggest and act on solutions.

Appendix 2
References for Teachers

References for further reading for teachers who wish to develop a more detailed knowledge of the issues discussed in this paper.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit, The University of Queensland. *The Aboriginal Child at School.*
The Journal has four editions per year, and contains papers from teachers, researchers, academics and sometimes students concerning different aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

Brown, Isaac (1989) *Koori English.* Victoria: State Board of Education.
Interesting comments on verbal and postural languages, including silence as a form of communication. Relates to Victorian situation.

Bourke, C., Bourke, E. and Edwards, B. (1994) *Aboriginal Australia: An Introductory Reader in Aboriginal Studies.* Brisbane: University of Queensland Press.
Specifically for Aboriginal studies, this book was produced to support Open Learning programs, and includes chapters which provide overviews on specific issues. Each chapter has a comprehensive reference list for further reading. It is a relatively inexpensive paperback edition.

Christie, M.J. (Ed.) (1987) *Aboriginal Perspectives on Experience and Learning: The Role of Language in Aboriginal Education.* Geelong: Deakin University Press.
Interesting, but Eades' work is more specific to south-east Queensland.

National Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies Project. (1995). *Resource Guide for Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies.* Melbourne: Curriculum Corporation.
Just released by Curriculum Corporation, the guide contains descriptions of 200 good examples of materials to support the full range of learning areas (P-12), as well as suggested criteria for determining appropriateness of additional materials.

Department of Employment, Education and Training. (1995). *Langwij Comes to School.* Canberra: AGPS.
Recently distributed by DEET, this A4 glossy booklet has pointers about English language programs which teachers in various locations may find useful, and a reference list.

Dwyer, L.J. (1989) 'Talking with Aboriginal children', in *Sea of Talk.* (PETA)

Dwyer, L.J. (1994) 'E says it as if 'e's God'. In *The Aboriginal Child at School,* 7(3): 28-42; 22(2): 102-111, Brisbane: University of Queensland.

Eades, Diana. (1993) *Aboriginal English.* PEN 93, Newtown: Primary English Teaching Association.

Eades, Diana (1992) *Aboriginal English and the Law.* Brisbane: Queensland Law Society.
Although pitched at the legal profession, Eades' explanations of urban Aboriginal cultures (predominantly in south-east Queensland) and use of Aboriginal English will be of interest to teachers. Of particular interest may be Eades' analysis of questions

put by non-Aboriginal people and Aboriginal responses, and the different meanings within each of these.

Harkins, Jean. (1994). *Bridging Two Worlds.* Brisbane: University of Queensland Press. The Federal Minister for Schools, Education and Training has endorsed the ideas of Jean Harkins with regard to use of Aboriginal English in classrooms.

Harris, S. and Malin, S. (Eds) (1994) *Aboriginal Kids in Urban Classrooms.* New South Wales: Social Science Press.

Keeffe, Kevin. (1992) *From the Centre to the City: Aboriginal Education, Culture and Power.* Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press. Provides interesting debate on Aboriginal cultures and identity, particularly as these relate to schools.

Malin, M. (1994) 'Why is life so hard for Aboriginal students in urban classrooms?', *The Aboriginal Child at School,* 18(1): 9-29; 22(2): 141-154, Brisbane: The University of Queensland.

Editor's Note: This paper was presented at the Metropolitan West Region of the Queensland Department of Education Social Justice Conference, Bremer Institute of TAFE, 27 May 1995.

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Call for Submissions

The Editors invite readers and subscribers to contribute material for inclusion in forthcoming editions of *The Aboriginal Child at School.* We welcome submissions such as:

- articles of 2,500 to 3,000 words on issues relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education
- short reports
- news items
- book reviews
- notices of forthcoming conferences, seminars, etc.
- reports on relevant conferences
- information about resource centres and how to access them
- resources and materials for teachers and students

All material should be sent to:

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