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Addressing Issues of Equity and Access in the Delivery of Arts Education to Aboriginal Students

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The over-riding objective of an Aboriginal Education Policy should be to achieve equity between Aboriginal people and other Australians in participation at all stages of education by the turn of the century. Education opportunities must be available to Aboriginal people regardless of where they live and in a manner that is appropriate to the diverse cultural and social situations in which they live. It is therefore essential to ensure access for Aboriginal children and adults to school and tertiary education, to ensure that Aboriginal communities are able to influence the way in which education is provided, and to ensure that it reflects their social and cultural values (Hughes Report, 1987: 17).

Introduction

Current research suggests that two themes, equity and reconciliation, overshadow all other issues in Aboriginal education. Educational participation and non-participation are further identified as equity issues. Because Aboriginal students do not participate in institutionalised education to the extent of others the NREATIP Reference Group sets, as Goal 11, the achieving of '... the participation of all Aboriginal children in compulsory schooling' (NREATIP Reference Group, 1994: 2, 5).

The Hughes Report of 1987 describes Aboriginal people as the most educationally disadvantaged in Australia. Wilkinson (1987) adds that, up until that year, Aborigines numbered six times the national average unemployed and earned, when employed, only half the average income of other Australians. In 1986, 45.5 per cent of Darwin Aborigines were not 'looking for work', that is, not in the labour force, and 12.9 per cent, rising for one community to 30 per cent, were unemployed (Walton, 1993a: 56).

Aboriginal people continue to place a high priority on education but, despite years of protest for changes to be made, nationally they continue to face considerable barriers to accessing its equitable delivery. Such barriers include racial discrimination, which exacerbates educational disadvantage. Aboriginal people in communities are often geographically isolated and suffer in

consequence of a lack of co-ordination among their educational service providers. Walton (1993a: 69) comments that, while the mainstream apparently feels justified in withholding adequate educational services from Aboriginal people who choose to move back to their Homelands, '... non Aboriginal families on isolated cattle stations expect and receive educational services'.

Aboriginal people also are socially and culturally alienated in communities and in school. The majority suffer economic disadvantage and poor living standards which impede their completion of schooling. Then, when short term affirmative action is taken to address this economic disadvantage it is viewed by the mainstream as '... Aborigines getting "our" money.' Harris suggests that, if Aboriginal people were paid the rent the mainstream owes to use **their** land, '[W]ith those funds they can do what they like: it's their money by right' (Harris, 1995: 32).

One way Aboriginal people suggest they might make their education more engaging, appropriate and equitable and, at the same time challenge and access the mainstream's advantage, is by raising the profile of their culture, through education in their arts (Smith, 1992). In recent years Aboriginal people have consistently made names for themselves in the mainstream both as sports people and as visual and performing artists. Probably more than any other work area the arts industry employs Aboriginal people, on their own terms, in work which gives esteem to their culture and satisfaction in process and product. As Brokensha and Tonks (1986: 5) add, West-centric arts '... are not as widely translated into the sorts of deeper group and personal experiences suggested by our Aboriginal paradigm'.

Thus the importance of Aboriginal participation in Arts education, in utilising traditional

Aboriginal education methodology, in the maintenance and evolution of their traditional arts forms, as a significant influence in the evolution of Australian arts, in giving access and equity to Aboriginal arts and their creators in skilled deployment outside and within mainstream arts activities, cannot be over-emphasised. Of course for this to happen issues of access and equity within the delivery of arts education need to be addressed even though, as Harrison (1994: 8) says, 'the challenge to achieve true access and equity is an enormous one'.

Some of these issues are identified and considered in the discussion which follows.

The Arts Across Diverse Cultural Settings

The arts might be defined, across cultures, as the aesthetic reflection of their worldview, offering culturally informed participants opportunities to pleasurably experience the logic of artistic events, for, '... if our material needs identify us as natural beings, our recreational, aesthetic and spiritual wants identify us culturally' (Smith, 1993).

The arts grow and evolve like language, in the context of their surroundings (Pritchett, 1985: 84), providing individuals and groups with a cultural identity, extending the security and shared meaning of their culture to the people within it. Its lack is not just devastating for the individual but for all within the community (Australian Federal Government Office of Multicultural Affairs, 1989: 141). As students experience the Arts of other cultures they become increasingly aware of the bonds of commonality in human experience and the people of other cultures begin to have meaning (Eldridge, 1985: 20-21).

Thus increased familiarity with both our own and others' cultural arts processes and products should lead us to a heightened sensitivity, awareness and understanding of all arts, positively affecting our cross-cultural arts appreciation. Consequently opportunities to experience a wide range of cross-cultural arts events should be fundamental to all arts education programs.

Aboriginal people worry that many concepts they regard as critical through oral instruction are disregarded in mainstream arts education, with its focus on scripted literacy. Predominantly oral cultures remain protectively closer to their creators. Oral cultures tend to be contained and private, not embracing interference. Ownership of knowledge may be the property of a select few or even of an individual. There are many protocols to be taught as essential in the maintenance of their own traditions and, thus, their cultural identities. Literacy, once introduced to orally transmitted arts education processes, has the potential to destroy the fabric of the uniquely creative essence of its evolution (Smith, 1993: 8).

Nevertheless formalised literacy is fundamental in the creating, recording and re-creating of Western high arts, and West-centric viewers often mistakenly perceive that the oral traditions of other arts, particularly their performing arts, indicate less sophistication or evolution, equating literacy with the 'superiority' of its own arts forms. Christie (1991: 19) records how Milingimbi school council and community recently questioned, for the first time, with the advent of their Aboriginalised education processes, the value of literacy, which *balanda*[1] educators take for granted in the hidden curriculum of assimilation.

Of course the mainstream, as the empowered majority may choose not to bother to accommodate

[1] Non-Aboriginal person

cross-cultural communication, particularly as it is manifested through arts education. Competition, another feature of mainstream education, pits individual artist against artist, a practice alien to the community co-operation which is a feature of arts-related activities in traditional Aboriginal settings.

There is always a danger that measures put in place to maintain the traditional or cultural values of indigenous peoples may be so insular and protective that people and their arts are not recognised as living, evolving and adapting. Aboriginal people say they wish to own the maintenance and development of their cultural and artistic destinies, not to retain some kind of archival museum culture, which has no place in a changing society (Gertsakis, 1994: 36-37). At the same time they recognise the need to provide their children with those arts skills and understandings of the mainstream which allow them to thrive and progress as identifiably proud cultural communities within the greater Australian community:

> ... we must look at the arts not only as cultural maintenance but as cultural cross-learning, of teaching through culture (Enoch, 1993: 40).

The West-centric curriculum which is manifested in the new nationally recognised Statements and Profiles has attempted to embrace the needs of indigenous people. However, by its very categorisation of the curriculum into twelve discrete key learning areas, it denies a fundamental of Aboriginal living and education. The arts are integral and inextricable components of the Aboriginal worldview. Brokensha and Tonks (1986: 4) suggest that Aboriginal society might be '... a benchmark society where art and cultural life are inextricably intertwined'.

So, despite the diversity of the cultures which are generically acknowledged as Aboriginal, the arts are not recognised as they are in the West-centric worldview, as discreet disciplines. There may be no single word for 'music' or 'drama' or even 'dance' in many Aboriginal languages. In fact it is more likely that all will be viewed as integral to the cycle of activities which take place either in ceremony or in everyday living:

> ... the interconnectedness of the arts and Aboriginal cultures and the idea that drama, music, visual art and dance are all the same thing anyway (Enoch 1993: 40).

Issues of Equity and Access in Aboriginal Arts Education

The traditional Aboriginal worldview of education is of its lifelong, inclusive, social nature, where children acquire knowledge in the company of older family members and the community. Much learning has ritual and ceremonial connotations, some knowledge is secret, the 'equity and access' here imposed by Aboriginal people themselves. Participation is both active and passive. The role of the audience in ceremonies such as corroborees is just as significant in its own way as that of the performers. Eades (1988: 99) describes the modern context of video and television viewing in communities as a group activity with its origins in the passive participation which was a part of pre-contact Aboriginal ceremonial life, or in Christie's (1985: 51) words:

> ... only the people who have power and status take an active role. Many of the others stand back and watch ... [but] the ceremony is just as effective for them.

Other knowledge may only be gained in the cohorts of moiety, gender or language groups.

The perceived 'secrecy' of knowledge has been used on many occasions, as an excuse for non-Aboriginal people to opt out of participation in Aboriginal cultural studies, tacitly supporting a return to a more 'comfortable' assimilationist curriculum and program (Ogbu, 1978: 181), and reinforcing the present day resistance of many Aboriginal people to 'whitefella' education (Birgin, 1991: 7). In fact many areas of knowledge can be shared and children, both boys and girls, can participate in numerous performance arts activities such as song and dance. However, there may be gender related problems for girls accessing arts tools and instruments seen as belonging to the men, and it may be inappropriate for them to be taught to play these by the only people qualified, the men (Arts Training, Northern Territory, 1994: 2).

Running a predominantly mainstream curriculum in settings where mainstream people are numerically inferior seems difficult to justify. Aboriginal people typically make a real effort to accommodate mainstream skills, protocols and understandings when they have to operate with mainstream people. The reverse is less frequently the case, with the system paying only lip service to the pluralistic nature of Australian society, especially in the Northern Territory. The reality is that little acknowledgement is made of cultural alternatives, such as the inclusion of Aboriginal arts in mainstream programs. The problems associated with deciding which language group's arts should be presented is often tendered as the excuse for not presenting any!

When arts curriculum is designed for consumption by community schools, attempts may be made to involve Aboriginal expertise but constraints such as mainstream pre-occupation with deadlines — alien to the Aboriginal perception of time as cyclical and within the context of natural events rather than controlled — with budgets, and the

difficulties of organising meetings around the availability of local resource people, lead to a product that seems little better than a compromise. Those involved will need to make a number of significant attitudinal and conceptual adjustments if this is to change (Kalantsis and Cope, 1988: 56).

So the system retains the power, manifested in its centralised bureaucracy, a culture which traditionally is conservative, unable because of its organised managerial structure and account-ability to take the kinds of risks which would allow, through the release of funds, a more flexible attitude to timelines and the other constraints which currently disallow community participation in the design and implementation of appropriate curriculum (Andreoni, 1990).

Aboriginal people themselves are ready to suggest means of addressing issues of equity and access in areas such as arts education. In 1993 this writer surveyed teachers in Northern Territory schools for their Professional Arts Education Development needs (Northern Territory Education Department, 1993: 4).   Responses from Aboriginal communities were significant and included:

* empowering rural teachers to effectively implement a culturally diverse arts curriculum

* developing strategies incorporating the arts across the curriculum

* pulling in various strands of arts education appropriate to remote community schools

* encouraging self-reliant, 'friendly' support networks

* urging the valuing of Aboriginal and other significantly represented cultures' arts learning across the curriculum, in Community and urban schools.

Issues of Aboriginality in Arts Education

There needs to be recognition, particularly in mainstream educational settings, of the reasons why Aboriginal children may appear to perform differently. This is particularly critical in arts education situations. Mainstream schools may, for example, ignorantly assume that Aboriginal children are assimilated or, as Dudgeon and Oxenham (1989: 2) say of such a racist stereotype, '... you are black if you live in the bush, and white if you don't'.

Mainstream people may interpret Aboriginal student non-participation, within their mainstream worldviews, as 'not interested or lazy ...' (Christie, 1988: 12). Teachers need to remember that, in discussion situations, Aboriginal people prefer not to rush into an unfamiliar situation, but to sit back and size it up (Malin, 1988: 4). Aboriginal children, functioning from within their own worldview, often believe there is no real obligation on them to do anything if they do not wish to.

As Harris (1978) says of Northeast Arnhem Land Aboriginal students:

> ... behaviour which appears 'uncooperative' or 'disobedient' or 'rebellious' is consistent and normal yolngu behaviour which is frequently expressed towards all people other than a few particular authority figures in the student's life.

Traditionally too, and with the growing cultural pride of Aboriginal people in often alien settings, children are expected to prioritise certain cere-monial cultural commitments (Anson, 1988). Because of the importance of social and ceremonial responsibilities, parents may consider a break of a few days, or weeks, in their formal

education of little consequence (Peacock, 1993:
4). For, in traditional education such interludes
were a part of the lifelong process of learning.

Mainstream arts teachers, used to structuring
programs along linear timelines, generally have
difficulty with this, making it an issue of access
and equity for Aboriginal students. One way to
circumvent such difficulties is to acknowledge
the importance of family and social responsibilities
in schools by presenting more family oriented
classroom structures, which acknowledge the
importance of family and the fact that Aboriginal
learning places people before information (Harris,
1980: 97). For '... the primacy of family
relationships appears to be the most important
factor that influences Aboriginal activities'
(Parish, 1990: 113).

The artificial age-level classrooms currently
predominating present a concept repugnant to
Aboriginal people (Coombs, 1983: 120-121). In
the arts, chronological age is not necessarily an
indicator of prowess anyway. Also, as Boggs
(1985: 2) suggests, there is evidence that a
teacher's acknowledgement of the cultural
background of minority students in a classroom
raises academic achievement in the classroom.

Ideally those teaching indigenous students should
be people from their own background and
experience, indigenous teachers (Lipka, 1990).
While it is difficult enough finding generalist
Aboriginal teachers in sufficient numbers to staff
community schools, the task of finding indigenous
teachers with the specialist skills to introduce
children effectively to both traditional and
contemporary arts concepts — essential if
Aboriginal students are going to address the needs
of both of the worlds they will live in in the twenty
first century — seems at first sight, impossible.

Some Conclusions and Recommendations

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people examining
the issues of equity needed to empower Aboriginal
people in arts and education generally, believe
these should be addressed in a number of more
affirmative ways than those operating at present.
These include the creation of more culturally-
appropriate working environments, school
programs and teaching methods with an increased
range of activities available. In Parish's (1990:
128) words there is a need to '... promote Aboriginal
ethos in school programs and organisations.'

Kevin Rogers of Ngukurr, in 1979, cited in
Coombs *et al.* (1983) embraced the whole issue in
a few words '... perhaps most important for us, we
want children to be Aboriginal — to respect and
understand their heritage ... without it we cannot
be secure'.

To such ends even non-Aboriginal teachers
working in communities require practical cultural
training by informed Aborigines, and an improved
understanding of Aboriginal school staff. In fact,
for programs to be genuinely equitable, and
consequently both-ways, there ought to be an
Aboriginal arts education component in all school
programs, both in the bush and in our towns and
cities.

So schools should not necessarily be based on the
'mainstream' with its alien and often incompatible
'world view' (Lipka, 1990: 3). For, as Walton
(1993b: 44) says:

> Inequality is at least partly a function of
> dominant/dominated group power relations,
> manifested and maintained through both
> traditional and progressive discourses.

Rather, they must belong to and be an integral part of their communities, involving the whole community in decisions regarding all aspects of education and featuring school environments adapted towards being more compatible with the students' home community. There also needs to be increased employment of teachers from their primary or home cultures who are able to communicate with families, to foster effective communication between schools and community to educate children from that culture (Parish, 1990: 12, 105). Teachers are needed, able both to teach programs with emphasis on English literacy and numeracy and, of relevance to this paper, with the local knowledge to implement Aboriginal cultural programs.

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