



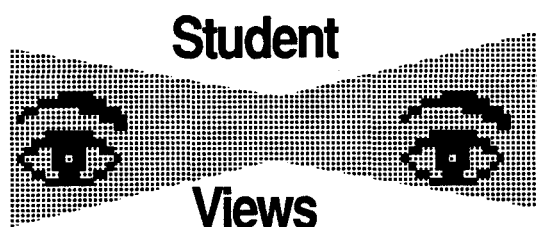
The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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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Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders and Equitable Educational Outcomes: A Focus on How School and Society Maintain Misconceptions

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Introduction

Since colonisation, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders have been compartmentalised by white society in many facets in their lives. This paper focuses on education, detailing problems faced by Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Participation of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in formal education (including post-compulsory) has been very low compared to other Australians, thus upward social mobility has not dramatically changed. In both health and welfare, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are still highly disadvantaged in society (Keen, 1988). The current federal government proclaims itself the champion of social justice and equity,

yet these issues remain at the forefront of indigenous problems. Major questions have to be asked about how Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders consider the relevance of schooling, the way they learn, how they are taught and by whom. Moreover, what is an appropriate mix of cultural preservation and education and training to 'fit in' with a capitalistic society? Is this the same for all indigenous groups in Australia, considering the diverse range of urban and rural groups?

This paper contends that cultural ignorance and the way Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders have been represented historically, including the way they are represented in the media and educational text of the present, has been the trigger of racial intolerance, encompassing the negative responses found not only in the wider community, but within educational institutions. This article provides an overall picture of these problems by enquiring about:

- equity and equal opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; and
- the very nature of teacher-education, focusing on how monolingual and monocultural orientations are still the norm in teacher-education, within a multicultural society.

Low Participation in Education

A striking problem of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders comes in the form of participation. In the compulsory years of pre-school and primary education, the figures suggest an increase. However, since 1986, the later age group of the compulsory years has shown a consistent pattern of low participation. Ten per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students had dropped out by mid-year of their Year 9. Boys tend to drop out during Years 8 and 9, with girls tending to follow one year later. There has been a small

increase in participation numbers in Years 11 and 12; however, this statistic is congruent with an overall increase of students staying on because of the present economic down-turn (Jones, 1991; Commonwealth of Australia, 1994). More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tertiary students are being trained in institutions like TAFE, than at university and over half of these TAFE students are taking lower stream courses, such as preparatory courses. The others tend to take short certificate courses. Many institutions have offered bridging type coursework to gain entry into universities.

Information from the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) shows that Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders represent just over one per cent of students enrolled at Australian universities (cited in Commonwealth of Australia, 1994). This has a direct result in the occupational sector of the labour force, with only five Aborigines in every one thousand holding a degree (Jones, 1991). Both groups have the highest percentage of unskilled workers compared to other Australians (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1991).

The rationale for low participation of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in Australian schools has several factors. Socio-economic status, poor performance, home background, racial prejudice and culturally irrelevant education are just a few (McInerney, 1992). This arguably has stemmed from colonial education, through the 'White Australia policy', the assimilation period, on to the current era of self-management. In schools, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are sometimes seen as lazy, hard to motivate, deprived and even retarded. Adults are also seen this way, following the lines of a deficit theory (Lippman, 1993). Based on the work of the anthropologist, Margaret Bain, it is clear to see how non-indigenous people may have acquired this

misconception. Bain (1979) describes the difference between indigenous and non-indigenous nations ontologically as the interactional/transactional dichotomy. She goes further by describing the interactional world as focused on communication and interaction. The transactional white world is centred on variables being controlled and manipulated (cited in Christie, 1985: 9). Christie suggests that the many groups that make up Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations demonstrate a 'meaningful behaviour' as opposed to a 'purposeful behaviour'. In other words, 'being' as opposed to 'doing'. Even though there can be differences between indigenous groups living in urban and rural areas, there is still a distinctive world-view between the two (Malin, 1994).

Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders have inherited a functional learning system developed over thousands of years, that from a western perspective appears informal and without a time/goal objective. Christie (1985) suggests that some teachers misunderstand this form of learning, by equating it with a lack of motivation. Malcolm (1982) describes the way teachers often expect Aboriginal children to respond to types of questions (direct questioning for example), that are considered culturally inappropriate by Aboriginal people (direct is seen as rude and discourteous). Other traditional cultural behaviours, such as avoidance of eye contact, silence, greater independence and what is perceived as lack of courtesy behaviours, can be misread by non-indigenous teachers (Eades, 1988; Enemburu, 1989; Malin, 1994) and the use of non-standard English is also equated with poor performance (Fesl, 1993).

These attributes, which are part of a personal identity fostered in the home environment, can be regarded as failures at school, attracting negative feedback which is communicated verbally, non-

verbally, and through the demands of behaviour. Not only do these students have greater trouble with self-esteem and identity because of negative feedback, but an absence of acceptance by non-indigenous children accelerates the problem, leading to lowered expectations, absenteeism and finally for some, early withdrawal from post-compulsory education and training (Malin, 1994). However, to suggest that this may be the only factor contributing to poor participation would be wrong. Ill health, poor nutrition, skin diseases, hearing defects, anaemia, trachoma, sick and drunk parents, hunger, clothing, racial violence and apathy all play a significant role (Thies, 1987).

The Schooling Process

From invasion and settlement, schools have historically played a major role in assimilating Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders into a non-indigenous society. However, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders also recognise that schools serve certain purposes, and have taken on the challenge of stating how they need to be accommodated within the system (Lanhupuy, 1987). Harris (1994a) echoes this concern of urban Northern Territory Aboriginal people, by stating there is a real fear of these people losing their traditional language by the next decade. He describes the Federal Labor government's introduction of bilingual education into the Northern Territory. The program currently operates in 22 schools using 17 languages. Schmidt (1987, cited in Fesl, 1993) states how Kriol (English based Creole widely used in Northern Queensland and Torres Strait), through large governmental expenditure, is infiltrating traditional languages, due to its promotion by the Summer Institute of Linguistics.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have shown a determination to keep traditional languages, historical knowledge, and the knowledge of kin and of community law as major components of education programs that meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity while addressing formal educational processes. Bicultural education, commonly referred to as 'two-way schooling', has been seen as a way of separating the cultural domains (Harris, 1994b). Thies (1987) describes the concerns of Aborigines of the East Kimberley region of Western Australia, who want: recognition of cultural heritage by schools and the wider community; greater skill in Standard Australian English; and increased skills to aid their control over their pathways to gainful employment. However, their major concern was for greater community involvement in the way their children are educated. This involves establishing traditional identity in order to create a firm basis on which to construct further knowledge. Harris suggests that this is the crucial factor for 'two-way' schools by adding:

No matter what the origin of model of two-way schooling, the single most important strategy that will in the long run give Aboriginal people the best chance of achieving their goals will be an emphasis on teacher training which is community based (1993: 12).

Thies (1987) suggests that there is a misconception in the community that the Aborigines in this region are rejecting formal education. She suggests that they value education and see an urgent need for new skills and knowledge. Through educational initiatives such as the Deakin-Batchelor Teacher Education Program, Aboriginal teachers have called for a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pedagogy

to serve these purposes. Malin (1994) states that many Aboriginal parents consider that Aboriginal teachers are more suited to teaching Aboriginal children. However, she also states that if equality is to be gained, then the argument that every ethnic minority is best served by teachers of their respective origins, defeats the purpose of a compatible cultural pluralism in Australia.

Not everyone is persuaded that two-way education supports cultural integrity and social justice. Folds (1993) claims that two-way schooling is a simplistic and tokenistic approach that will appeal on a national level, but has little significance at the local level. He states that Aboriginal cultures will always be truly separate in some schools that are finding it hard to gain small academic outcomes for students. He reiterates that governmental policy is still marketing assimilation, without taking notice of issues of justice and equity.

Current Governmental Policy Direction

The issues raised up until now have been at the centre-point of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education policy (DEET, 1993). This document, as a result of recommendations from the Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force (1988), has been created as a joint collaborative exercise between Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders and non-indigenes of Australia. Luke *et al.* (1993: 143) suggests that the latest policy considers Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders to be a 'homogeneous group unmarked by gender and class'. This 'one people' notion does not consider the many different inclusive nations found in many regions. As a major component of the policy, multiculturalism has been included to defuse and to justify multi-ethnicity. Luke *et al.* go further by claiming that Aborigines and Torres

Strait Islanders need more than just sensitive and effective pedagogy, but a greater distribution of power with real equal opportunity.

The Australian multicultural policy arguably fits into what Gordon and Klug (1986, cited in Rizvi, 1990: 174) call the 'new' racism. The ideology of inferior to superior is superficially hidden by nationalistic unity, or in Australia, under the banner of multiculturalism. This racism can be maintained in education by the allowance of institutional racism. In schools, this can take place in the curriculum that is taught. Areas such as history, geography and cultural studies (social science area), including textbooks, media and other resources, are for the most, still inclined to an Anglo-Australian view (Hickling-Hudson and McMeniman, 1993). Pettman (1988) radically states that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history has been misguided by white researchers as proxy representatives. She argues that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander historical representations are best left to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers.

Cope (1987) argues that while school texts have come a long way from the 'old' representation of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, and even with new publications, many educators still teach from the earlier representations. As recently as 1987, Cope found the 1959 'Effective Social Studies' series was still competing well in the market. He adds that the new historical representations, within the epistemology of cultural relativism, make clear distinctions of difference between cultural groups as 'us' and 'them', preserving racial assumptions instead of cultural preservation. However, he states Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are still concerned with what is represented as truth.

Continuation of blatant untruths seems completely contradictory to accepting and celebrating

indigenous cultural wealth. Foucault (1980: 131) suggests this is inherent in the nature of power domination over minorities:

... each society has a general politics of truth ... a type of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true.

In light of the Labor government's economic determinism to increase national and international status in the OECD, many sectors of schooling have become infiltrated with the language of the free market, or a corporate federalism that is built on relevant competencies and vocational skill (Lingard *et al.*, 1993). Disadvantaged groups such as Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (as well as women and other ethnic groups), are targeted by the now infamous Australian Education Council reports by Finn (1991) and the follow up report of Mayer (1992). These reports suggest that post-compulsory training and skill formation enhance employment equity and create a flexible work-force. For Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, skill formation is offered as a means of greater employment equity with other Australians. Another of the architects of this agenda is Laurie Carmichael. He also equates skills with equity by stating 'If we get the basics right, equity will follow' (Carmichael, 1992, cited in Taylor and Henry, 1994: 112). Duffy (1993) suggests, however, that this narrow instrumentalism ignores skills in intercultural communication and cultural emancipation of groups such as Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.

Jones (1993) argues that the government's economic rationalism has placed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational programs in jeopardy if they do not succeed within a certain time-frame. He states that considering that these people are the most disadvantaged minority in Australia, the level of what is deemed successful

comes down to what can be achieved politically. In other words, performance indicators must allow a demonstration of quality and a positive message to appease the electorate, and moreover the elimination of embarrassment at a global level. If not, there is a possibility of losing funds. Keffe (1990), however, states that this form of performance indicator would eliminate inefficient allocations of funds, correct the lack of planning and permit a greater centralisation of staff and resources. Singh (1990), in response, argues that while programs should be conducted efficiently and effectively, these are not the appropriate indicators of what may be educationally worthwhile and significant. Wilenski (1988, cited in Singh, 1990: 105) is used by Singh to demonstrate how efficiency drives fail to guarantee the often expected outcome.

Teachers—The Key to Decreasing Racial Intolerance?

In response to the racism directed towards Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, both government rhetoric and some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative groups agree that teachers have a particular role to play. Bullivant (1981) describes how teachers are at the forefront of successful programs of greater awareness. Teachers, however, seem to be in favour of multicultural and/or antiracist methodologies, but continue to demonstrate an acceptance of anecdotal rumours based on individual attitudinal behaviour (Rizvi and Crowley, 1993).

This has been my own experience in correspondence with teachers. Some teachers develop what I see as two distinct forms of misconception. There is the methodology just mentioned, where attitudes are based on selected stories of particular

students and their families, which often inform views of mis-spent money to the detriment of 'other Australians'. Secondly, there is the anthropological view described by Sachs (1989). The total sum of indigenous culture is measured in areas such as their language, music, dance and 'ways of doing things'. This limited form of multicultural education fails to deal with fundamental racial intolerance. While this view seems most prevalent amongst student teachers, there are those who have little, to no, understanding of how to teach within a multicultural framework.

This anecdotal finding is supported by Campbell and McMeniman (1985). These authors reported that pre-service and in-service programs for teaching with cultural sensitivity is inadequate (cited in Hickling-Hudson and McMeniman, 1993: 60). Recently, Hickling-Hudson and McMeniman established that only 34 out of 57 Australian teacher education courses provided information on this issue to students. According to them, only nine institutions could be described as offering 'Education for a multicultural society' (1993: 60). These institutions offered perspectives on cultural diversity that centred on history, class, ethnicity, language(s), culture, gender equity, racial formation, stereotyping and prejudice. Pettman (1988) warns that institutions that homogenise representations of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (that identify them as a unified and undifferentiated group), will create a ghetto-ising effect, and they will be viewed as a separate entity, instead of being viewed within the whole Australian context. Cummins (1986 cited in McCarthy, 1994: 4) suggests that when minority groups are displayed in terms of historical and cultural recognition, their expectations of education are increased to those not usually found by such groups.

Conclusion

This article has essentially focussed on four parts of the problems faced by Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in issues of education. The first part of the article raised the issue of low participation rates of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in compulsory and post-compulsory education and training. In a developed, capitalistic society, such as our own, low participation in education and training ultimately maintains disadvantage, and fails to allow for greater upward social mobility. There are many reasons for such low participation that exist inside and outside the education arena. However, there has been strong research over the last two decades to promote the concept of two world views held by indigenous and non-indigenous Australians; and the inability of educational institutions, especially those in rural areas that contain community schooling, to properly understand this in ontological terms and teach accordingly. The next section elaborated on this point, by describing some of the efforts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to retain traditional links within appropriate forms of education to operate in a capitalistic society.

The next part of this review continued to look at how Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are considered by governmental policy. It was argued that, like other disadvantaged groups in society, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are categorised into a general stereotype like that of multiculturalism, that does not sufficiently take into account issues such as class, gender or location (rural or urban) of people. Society, it is argued, has also been fed a diet of misconceptions about Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders through our educational institutions, thus institutionalising untruths.

The last part offers an insight into teacher education, suggesting that teachers are the frontline of pro-active change, yet sadly, like other members of Australian society, have been kept ignorant and allowed to create negative stereotypes, not only in the curriculum they teach, but also in the way it is taught and how they may interact with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Educational institutions, government, and society in general must acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as holders of a complex collection of traditional histories and cultures; and must acknowledge that Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders live in all parts of Australia, have different needs, yet still consider white society from a very different world view. Urban and rural histories and cultures must be given the opportunity to be heard and given societal recognition for reconciliation to be honestly sought. Until then, social justice and inclusive practices will remain political rhetoric.

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