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Analysis of the Aboriginal Education Policy (New South Wales Department of School Education, 1996)

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theory and liberalism (Hatton and Elliot, 1998). Although the following statement was written in response to the *Social Justice Strategy 1994-1998* (Queensland Department of Education, 1994 in Hatton and Elliot, 1998: 75), it also reflects the assumptions made by the NSW DSE in the *AEP*:

Introduction

The *Aboriginal Education Policy (AEP)* (New South Wales Department of School Education [NSWDSE], 1996) attempts to create a holistic approach to Aboriginal education for all students. This is done through emphasis on Aboriginal community involvement and incorporating Aboriginal content and perspectives in all stages of schooling. The policy is based on principles which express Aboriginal students' entitlement to the opportunities and understandings which come from education (NSW DSE, 1996: 8). The assumptions and values of the NSW DSE are shown by the emphasis placed on particular aspects of Aboriginal education. The practical implications of this policy are that teachers need to become more aware of Indigenous issues, and develop empathy for the past and continuing effects of colonisation.

The *AEP* is informed by various theories of social justice. The NSW DSE's conception of social justice is not explicitly outlined in the policy, but the assumptions made in the policy show that it was influenced by the Rawlsian

the document unambiguously represents the provision of education as a matter of social justice. Education is seen as a significant social resource that must be distributed amongst, and for the benefit of, all students . . . The idea is that we cannot allow a social resource, such as education, to serve only the interests of privileged sectors of our society

The idea of education as a significant social resource is represented throughout the *AEP* by comments from the various contributors and the *Goals, Outcomes and Performance Strategies*. Education is seen by the policy contributors as a significant resource, not only for employment and health, but also in the process of reconciliation and wider community understanding. This concept is expressed by Ken Boston, Director General of Education, who says 'this policy becomes an important tool for achieving reconciliation with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians' (NSW DSE, 1996: 2).

The references made in the *AEP* to the distribution of financial resources also demonstrate Rawls' theory of *maximin* (Hatton and Elliot, 1998). Throughout the *AEP*, the

NSW DSE proposes budget priorities for students P-12. The importance placed on the distribution of financial resources is illustrated by the fact that the first *Performance Strategy* in the policy is 'Increasing access to pre-school education through budget priorities and priority placements' (NSW DSE, 1996: 10). The NSW DSE has acknowledged that budgeting priorities and financial resources are not the only solution to the inequity of educational outcomes. There needs to be a knowledge of how to utilise the resources, which can be developed through educating DSE staff and collaborating with communities.

The liberalist influence on the *AEP* is shown through the assumptions made about the role education plays in constructing the individual (Hatton and Elliot, 1998). In a School Manual entitled *The Values We Teach* (NSW DSE, 1988: 1-2), the NSW DSE states that Public schools:

aim to inculcate and develop in ... students ... those educational, personal, social and civic values which are shared by the great majority of Australians ... while being sensitive to the specific values of the various groups which make up the community.

Linda Burney, President of the New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc (NSW AECG Inc), says that 'Aboriginal studies for all students will make a major contribution to the wider community understanding of Indigenous issues' (NSW DSE, 1996: 3). This assumes that what is learned in schools is more powerful than other attitudes which prevail within the 'wider community'.

The *Rationale* says that the *AEP* (NSW DSE, 1996: 7) 'reflects the views and values of Aboriginal people on education'. This statement is supported by the collaboration between the NSW DSE and the NSW AECG Inc., which was an integral part of the development of this policy. The policy also calls for the continued support and involvement of the NSW AECG Inc. and Aboriginal community members in the

development, delivery and evaluation of educational services (NSW DSE, 1996). The NSW AECG Inc, and the Director-General of School Education insist that the participation of Aboriginal communities is 'essential to achieving equitable outcomes' (NSW DSE, 1996: 3), although only the NSW AECG Inc. describes the partnership between the NSW DSE and Aboriginal communities as equal. Aboriginal community involvement is crucial to the success of the *Aboriginal Education Policy* because 'our theories of Indigenous education are developed... within a context in which Indigenous people are relatively powerless' (McConaghy, 2000: 141).

The *AEP* repeatedly calls for the collaboration between the NSW DSE and Aboriginal community members. There are problems associated with this, not least of which are the attitudes of some DSE staff and Aboriginal community members. Rose Guywanga (1991: 29) describes a staff meeting between Yolngu (Aboriginal) and Balanda (White) teachers which was called by the Yolngu teachers. She says that some of the Balanda teachers demonstrated a lack of interest in the meeting and insinuated that 'Yolngu curriculum was not "real" school, or "real" learning'. Teachers need to see the value of the contributions made by Aboriginal community members. Problems may also arise from the negative experiences which Aboriginal community members may have had while they were at school. Some community members may never have attended school. The NSW DSE has also acknowledged this possibility and has included as an *Outcome* 'Aboriginal people are empowered to become active partners' (NSW DSE, 1996: 14). The *Performance Strategies* for achieving this *Outcome* are through providing Aboriginal community members with information and providing for their involvement in decision-making. This, however, does not address other issues which are raised by Guywanga (1991) and McConaghy (2000). Guywanga (1991) says that Aboriginal staff and community members may be alienated by the organisational

arrangements within the school system such as timetables and committee structures. Although the *AEP* (NSW DSE, 1996: 8) says that 'Aboriginal communities are entitled to negotiate decisions that affect their children's schooling' the National Conference on Adult Aboriginal Learning (1988: 6) pointed out that the difficult task is not persuading Aboriginal students to attend school, it is trying to 'persuade the whites to stop and learn about what their [Aboriginal] world view has to say ... and what learning their way really means'. This is supported by the findings of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (Johnston, 1991: 336, in Gool and Patton, 1998: 2) who said that 'school-based education systems have historically been unwilling or unable to accommodate many of the values, attitudes, codes and institutions of Aboriginal society'.

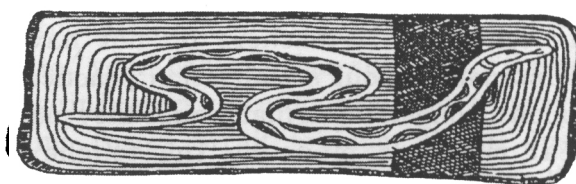
The *AEP* is also informed by the assumption that it is important to recognise and provide for traditional Aboriginal Languages and Aboriginal English. Simpson, Munns and Clancy (1999: 5) say that recognising Aboriginal English in the classroom can help relationships develop between teachers and students for whom this is their home language. Poor relationships with teachers is considered an important factor in Aboriginal students' lack of educational success (Tesse and Polesel, 1996, in Gool and Patton, 1998: 2). An understanding of Aboriginal English can assist positive classroom interactions between teachers and students, and can also assist students' concept development (Simpson, Munns and Clancy, 1999). The *AEP* supports:

'Teaching and resourcing of Aboriginal languages as part of the Languages Other Than English key learning area' but this view is not shared by the Commonwealth, who do not recognise Aboriginal students as requiring ESL funding and support (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, 1997, in Healey, 1998: 37).

An understanding of Aboriginal English, and its non-verbal aspects, can also lead to raised teacher expectations. McConaghy (2000: 141) says that:

many Indigenous children are not provided with challenging learning experiences because they have been [individually] categorised as 'unachieving' or 'incapable' when the child is very capable.

One of the *Goals for Aboriginal Education* (NSW DSE, 1996) states that 'Curriculum, teaching and assessment programs will be challenging and culturally appropriate'. This *Goal* shows that these issues have been acknowledged, but the *AEP* does not suggest practical advice for classroom teachers. Malin (1994: 141) wrote an article based on her 'study of urban Aboriginal children at home and school, in Adelaide'. In this study she observed that the interactions between Aboriginal families and young children allowed these children to become less dependant on adult authority and guidance and more reliant on their own observations. In the article 'Why is life so hard for Aboriginal students in urban classrooms?', Malin describes the interactions



of one teacher with her multicultural class, which included three children (Naomi, Jason and Terry) whose parents were both Aboriginal. The teacher often commented that Naomi appeared 'to be in a dream' (Malin, 1994: 144), though Malin's analysis of Naomi's classroom behaviour showed she was observing other students and their interactions with the teacher. As a result of these observations Naomi was more aware of routines and how to complete tasks than the 'top' students. Although Keeffe (1992) warns against using 'culture lists', which McConaghy (2000: 144) says can lead to 'binaries' or 'cultural dualism', it is important to be aware of certain cultural practices which may affect learning and classroom interactions. Ignorance of certain socialisation differences between Naomi, Jason

and Terry and the other students in the class led the teacher in Malin's article (1994) to assess them as slow learners; therefore their Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978, in McInerney and McInerney, 1998) was not extended. Malin wrote that:

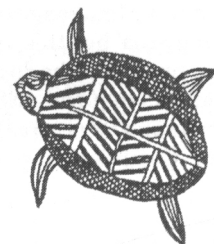
their different dialects and ways of using language meant that she [the teacher] missed many of their correct academic responses to her questions ... she resorted to simplistic, racial stereotyping in her efforts to rationalise what was happening and retaliate with discriminately harsh censure' (1994: 152).

The attitude of the school staff, including ancillary and administrative, towards Aboriginal students is crucial to a supportive learning environment which enables students to succeed. Herbert (1995) has pointed out that Aboriginal students are often subjected to racist comments from non-teaching staff, such as grounds-keepers and canteen attendants. Gool and Patton (1998: 2) say that 'Aboriginal students' lack of attendance at school also gives rise to concern and indicates a lack of identity or connection with formal state schools.' If teachers do not have understanding about socialisation practices common amongst Aboriginal groups they may repeat mistakes made by the teachers described in the articles by Malin (1994) and Simpson, Munns, and Clancy (1999). The *AEP* has specified that teachers must design culturally appropriate teaching programs and assessment strategies, but has not mentioned discipline. Disciplinary practices are important as they can negatively impact on students' academic and emotional development. While some understanding of cultural practices is helpful McConaghy (2000: 150) suggests that respect for the student as an individual is 'an important starting point for teachers'.

This policy looks 'beyond the culture lists' (Keeffe, 1992: 100) when it considers the impact of health issues. The NSW DSE, 'In co-operation with Department of Health [desires that,] specific health issues affecting the education of Aboriginal students are addressed through DSE programs' (NSW DSE, 1996:

12). While health is not within the jurisdiction of education, its inclusion in the *AEP* shows that the NSW DSE recognises its contribution to educational success. The policy specifically addresses health issues which relate to Aboriginal students' academic achievement, such as Otitis Media (a common childhood middle ear problem) and drug use in the community, but does not mention other issues, such as suicide and family break-down, which may impact indirectly on their education through emotional distress. The lack of attention paid to *Performance Strategies* specifically targeted at emotional development shows the NSW DSE's lack of commitment to the Minister for Education and Training's statement which claims that 'particular emphasis' has been placed on children's 'emotional development' (NSW DSE, 1996: 1).

The *AEP Rationale* (NSW DSE, 1996: 7) says that students' individual 'differences must be taken into account when designing education programs'. The differences outlined include 'ethnicity; languages and culture; socio-economic circumstances; sex; geographical location and particular disabilities' (NSW DSE, 1996: 7). Gender and geographical location are not specifically addressed in the *AEP*, therefore shown to be not as high priorities as language and disabilities which are addressed with *Performance Strategies*. Aboriginal students generally attain lower Primary school literacy standards than other Australians, and Aboriginal boys perform less well than Aboriginal girls (Gilbert and Gilbert, 1997).



The *AEP* has offered no strategies for teachers to specifically help Aboriginal boys, the students who 'cluster near the bottom' of the English/literacy tables (Gilbert and Gilbert, 1997: 10). Gilbert and Gilbert (1997: 9) say that 'gender remains the key predictor of [Literacy] success [though] it is clearly affected by a range of other social and cultural factors'. Although there are separate documents which deal with the issues of gender and location the existence of the *AEP* shows that strategies targeted specifically at Aboriginal students are needed.

The Minister for Education and Training says that particular emphasis has been placed on the social and emotional development of children' (NSW DSE, 1996: 1), but has not considered the gender issues associated with emotional development. Herbert (1995: 10) says that many groups do not consider gender to be 'a key issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people'. This is contrary to the opinion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Herbert's study across rural and urban Queensland, New South Wales, The Northern Territory and Western Australia (1995). Herbert (1995: 14) says that:

Boys indicated that they would like to have more knowledge about a lot of gender issues. For example they would like to be able to discuss issues of masculinity and the construction of gender with men — preferably indigenous men.

The lack of consideration for gender issues fails to acknowledge the struggle of many Aboriginal males in the aftermath of the 'destruction of their traditional male role'. Female Indigenous students may also have low self-esteem as racist comments are compounded by sexist teasing (Herbert, 1995). Aboriginal boys have lower retention rates than girls (Gool and Patton, 1998: 2). Herbert (1995: 12) suggests that this is because of the 'support Aboriginal . . . girls provide for one another'.

The issue of location is particularly important in Aboriginal Education considering widespread misconceptions of what it means

to be 'a real Aborigine', and a lack of respect for Aboriginal people living in urban environments (Keeffe, 1992: 65; McConaghy, 2000: 145). Keeffe reports the findings of the 1985 Australian National Opinion Polls which show that "middle Australia" is permeated with what they labelled as "soft racism" towards Aboriginal people' (1992: 65). Keeffe believes teachers share many of the views of 'middle Australia'. McConaghy (2000: 141) points out that the teacher's discourse has a considerable impact on the students' learning and socialisation experiences at school. This fact was considered by the NSW DSE and NSW AECG Inc when planning the *AEP*, but was included as provisions for teacher pre- and in- service training goals to be negotiated in the future.

While Aboriginal students in urban areas are often subjected to prejudice and a lack of understanding it is their rural counterparts who achieve lower academic results. A Multilevel Assessment Program found that 'students in remote Aboriginal schools perform 3 to 7 years behind urban students of the same age in literacy and numeracy tests' (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, 1997, in Healey, 1998: 37).

The successful implementation of the *AEP* relies on teachers' understanding of Aboriginal content and perspectives, views and aspirations. This understanding will assist the process of collaboration between the NSW DSE and Aboriginal communities, which is postulated as a major factor in the pursuit of equitable educational outcomes for Aboriginal students. Understanding can be developed by teacher education which, although not adequately represented in the *AEP*, is a crucial factor in achieving the *Goals* decreed by the NSW DSE (1996).

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