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Children's History: Implications of Childhood Beliefs for Teachers of Aboriginal Students

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While conducting research intended to explore the underlying thoughts and assumptions held by non-Indigenous teachers and policy makers involved in Aboriginal education I dug out my first book on Australian history which had been given when I was about seven years old. Titled *Australia From the Beginning* (Pownall, 1980), the book was written for children and was not a scholarly book. It surprised me, then, to find so many of my own understandings and assumptions about Aboriginal affairs and race relations in this book despite four years of what had seemed quite liberal education in Australian history.

This realisation highlighted the way early understandings can be very hard to challenge or change. Among the theoretical work used in education which explains this difficulty is that of psychologist Howard Gardner (1991: 87) who found that people of all ages will hold onto their intuitive understandings unless forced out of them and that even the 'most powerful authorities – such as an ensemble of teachers, parents and text books – may fail to do so. Gardner goes on to argue that in any field very few people have been forced out of their intuitive understandings and truly understand what they are doing and are expert at it. The reality for most teachers working with Aboriginal students, and I include myself

here, is that despite our best intentions we are often working from assumptions about our Aboriginal students based on what we worked out as children and, in many cases, these assumptions may not be accurate or useful. The trouble with underlying assumptions and ways of understanding is that they can be very hard to identify; they are underlying after all. The following account is an attempt to unearth some of them.

Reengaging my first history book

Wiping off a little dust revealed a cover I remembered well. It has a wrap-around design to allow for two panoramic style pictures split by the book's title on the front cover and a small blurb on the back. The top picture is of dinosaurs which, along with the first chapter of the book, takes the idea of 'from the beginning' well before both Aboriginal and European settlement. The second picture is a little more interesting, depicting a parade of people set against a range of hills reminiscent of the Blue Mountains. At the head of this parade is a family of Aboriginal people, the man carrying a spear in one hand and a wallaby slung over his shoulder. Behind this family is an English officer, Philip perhaps, a sailor carrying the Union Jack, a red-coated soldier and a manacled convict. Following the soldier is what may be a free settler family. Moving onto the back page there are a couple of gold 'diggers', a shearer with some sheep, a woman with two children now in distinctly twentieth century clothing and, finally, an aviator.

Perhaps more than the text that follows, this cover illustration provides a representation of a powerful understanding of Australian history. It is an understanding which seems to reflect the public understandings of the nation's past when it was published in 1980. Significantly, Aboriginal people, while included as part of the human history of the Australian continent are not seen again after the arrival of the English. Similarly, women are present, but they are seen behind the male characters in this parade. The very form of the illustration as a parade reinforces the concept of 'history as progress'. Many histories are written around a framework of progress and this framework has long dominated the understandings of the past presented in schools. It is easy to think of the history of Australia in a progressive summary of Aborigines, convicts, pastoralists, gold, self-government, war, depression and so on. This summary ignores facts, events and people who seem irrelevant to the known outcome of the progress and development of the national story, even where such facts and events may still influence the way people privately understand both the past and the contemporary world.

Moving straight to the index of Pownall's book revealed references to Aborigines under the sub-topics of 'association with whites,' 'conflict with whites,' 'native police,' 'since 1900,' 'tribal life of' and 'working'. The index notes material about Aborigines on no fewer than 36 of the book's 126 pages. In this book Aborigines have neither been forgotten, as they seemed to have been in the formal histories up until that time (Reynolds, 1984; Stanner, 1968), nor placed as a prologue to the non-Aboriginal history, despite the cover illustration. The place and role of Aborigines in the text, though, is a little confusing. Once the book turns to the twentieth century, the first reference to Aboriginal people is in regard to access to education. The reader is informed that despite the emergence of high schools in some parts of Australia many children did not have access to even primary education. Included in this group were country children, the poor in the city and the Aboriginal children:

A few had lessons on Mission stations, but not many. Most of them lived in places where no one bothered to see they went to school. Not many white Australians worried about the dark people who had once owned the whole continent. Even those who cared thought they were a dying race and would fade out of the world like the animals and creatures which had lived in Australia in prehistoric days (p. 94).

Even allowing for the fact that this is a book written for children, the 'storybook' tone of Pownall's text is a little disconcerting. This was a genuine attempt to describe and explain some of the disadvantages Aboriginal people have experienced in Australia, but it did not include an apparent political agenda or objective. When analysed carefully, however, it is possible to detect a set of underlying paternalistic assumptions in that the education of Aborigines seems to require the interest of white people. This is an important assumption to recognise as it is one that many people involved in education share today. I certainly did as I began teaching. It seemed obvious that my Aboriginal students would be much better off if only we could get them to come to school more often. They might be better off, but in focussing on how 'we' could get them to attend 'our' schools at least two things happen: the education of Aboriginal students is automatically racialised; and issues like what Aboriginal people in different communities actually want from schools and education may not even be considered.

The next time Aboriginal people appear in Pownall's narrative is set in the period between the two world wars. The reader is again told of disadvantage and discrimination but in a way which creates a sense of distance:

More Aborigines lived in the north than in other parts of Australia. Those on Government Reserves hunted and fished, drew pictures on bark or on the walls of caves, taught their children the ways of their ancestors, and the places made sacred in the Dreamtime.

Many others lived on cattle stations and worked as stock hands. They were given food to eat, but sometimes not enough for everyone in the family,

and clothes to wear. These were sometimes taken back if the Aborigines were leaving the station even for a short time. They did not receive wages.

Aborigines who worked in towns were paid less than white workers, and their children were not educated. If Aborigines broke the white people's law, police sometimes hunted them down in the bush, chained them by the neck and made them walk long distances to be tried in the courts. Some white Australians in the south believed the Aborigines were treated badly. They said more should be done to help them: that those who wished to live in the old tribal way should do so on special Reserves. Others should be assimilated and live like white Australians.

But even the kindest white people thought it was better that part-Aboriginal children should be taken from their parents and brought up by the Government (pp. 94-95).

This passage provides a clear sense that Aboriginal people have been wronged, or at least treated unfairly, but with an equal sense of distance. The unfair treatment experienced by Aboriginal people happened far off in the 'north', which takes on an almost mystical quality where many Aborigines are still living a traditional, 'real' lifestyle. In Pownall's account of twentieth century history, Aboriginal people are absent from the story of southern Australia. While the index of this book includes a list of references to Aborigines since 1900, all of these references relate to Aborigines in northern and central Australia. Non-Aboriginal history is still presented as largely separate. This understanding from the 1970s and 1980s is still common. It is an understanding which allows people to quite genuinely and honestly say that they 'want the money to go to the *real* Aborigines' as they simply do not believe that Aboriginal people and communities exist in the southern part of the continent.

The text creates a separation between the actors in the story and the author and her readers. Aboriginal experience is accepted as a part of the national story yet it seems to have happened somewhere else, a place removed from the experience, interest and responsibility of most

Australians. This process was seen again in the 1990s in the public debate over a formal government apology to the stolen generations where Prime Minister Howard has sought to separate the Aboriginal experience by time and by generation.

A further assumption is progressed by the final sentence in the passage reporting the thoughts of the 'kindest white people' which leaves the impression that assimilation is both the inevitable and right outcome for Aboriginal people. After all, it was what the 'kindest' white people were working for. The attitudes reported belong only to non-Indigenous people. There is not even a glimpse of the determination to survive as a people that has been a feature of many Aboriginal communities throughout their association with non-Aboriginal people (see for example Read, 1988).

Towards the end of the book, Pownall devotes three pages to changes 'to the Aboriginal people' from the late 1960s into the 1970s (pp. 118-120). In this section Aboriginal people are finally presented as participating in their own affairs with the protest of the Gurindji people at Wattie Creek being given particular prominence. Indeed the reader is told that:

Aborigines also began to act for themselves. They formed groups to work for things they wanted: work, decent houses, more education for their children. They also wanted land rights, the right to some of the land their people once owned (p. 118).



The reader is also told of more Aborigines going to school and even to university, of Albert Namatjira who is the 'first of his race to paint with western people's colours and brushes' and of Aboriginal people working for the Government and Councils in towns and settlements. The picture presented by Pownall is not entirely rosy, though, and poor living conditions, malnutrition and difficult relations with the police are all noted. She concludes her report on Aboriginal Australia with:

Aborigines still live in poor conditions in many parts of Australia. Things are better than they were, however. And people are working to make them better still (p. 120).

The story told of the 1970s is one of the Government and white Australia working with Aboriginal Australia and supporting them to make their own decisions and make their own way. It is a story that reflected the rising tide of Aboriginal self-determination in the late 1970s, when it was written, but one where the paternalistic idea that non-Aboriginal assistance was still an absolute necessity is still very strong.

Pownall's work was ahead of its time. Even in with its liberal and sympathetic interpretation, however, one can still detect underlying assumptions on ideas like how success is defined. All the 'improvements' Pownall describes can be interpreted as Aborigines becoming more like non-Aboriginal people; basically as the success of assimilation. While some of the protests such as Wattie Creek and the Tent Embassy are reported there is no indication of the militancy in Aboriginal thought seen in the writing of Aboriginal authors such as Kevin Gilbert and Oodgeroo Noonuccal, which Mudrooroo artfully described as an attempt to reclaim some dignity in response to the 'policy of assimilation [that] attempted to merge a dark minority - the remnants of the victims of a brutal colonisation - into Anglo-Celtic life and culture without questioning the right to do so' (1997: 14).

Implications

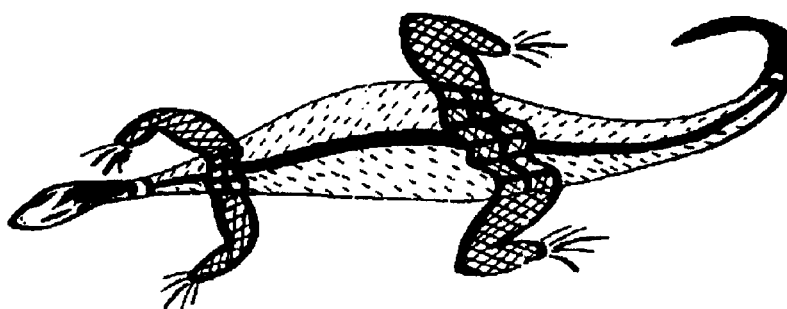
Expecting Pownall to show all of this in such a short general history would be unfair. More

importantly, expecting any historical work to show this in the 1970s is probably unrealistic. This critique is written with the benefit of a further twenty years of scholarship and debate. The point here, though, is not to criticise Pownall's work, but to identify some of the assumptions underpinning it; assumptions that both reflected and informed public knowledge and ways of understanding a time during which many who are now teaching were growing up and coming to understand the world around them.

It is as public history that Pownall's work is important here. The underlying assumptions found in her work better reflect, and had greater influence upon, the public understandings of Aboriginal people and their history than the more radical scholarly work being produced at the same time by historians like Henry Reynolds (1981), Peter Read (1988) and Richard Broome (1982) and certainly had more influence than work by Aboriginal writers outside the academy. This is reflected in the explanation given by Commissioner Johnston on the decision to include a chapter of the history of European domination of Aboriginal people in the national report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody:

not because the chapter adds to what is known but because what is known is known to historians and Aboriginal people; it is little known to non-Aboriginal people and it is a principal thesis of this report that it must become more known (quoted in Board of Studies, 1997: 4).

When we look carefully, Johnston's position can be taken further on at least two points. First, we can see that when non-Aboriginal people have not known anything substantial about the history of Aboriginal people in various parts of Australia that they have created simple, often all-encompassing explanations. Second, these alternative explanations are held too strongly. It is much easier to fit new information into existing ways of understanding than developing whole new ways of understanding, even if it means deforming the new information.



This has certainly been my experience and even though I have 'known' much of what Johnston would like to have known through my undergraduate reading, for a long time that knowledge has been couched in ways of understanding the world that I had developed as a child. Putting it another way, it did not really matter what I knew, when I arrived at my first teaching position I still believed ideas such as the completion of assimilation in the southern parts of Australia. It was only on getting out into the community around my school that I finally threw off this belief.

The personal experience related here is not unique, it is completely in line with the way psychologists such as Gardner (1991) tell us the mind works. The implication is that non-Aboriginal people working with Aboriginal students need to go beyond simply improving their knowledge and also examine the basis to their beliefs and assumptions.

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