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WHERE DO WE LOOK NOW? the FUTURE of RESEARCH in INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION

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Abstract

Research in Indigenous Australian education is at a dead-end. Researchers are still heading out into the field to look for new knowledge to answer old questions. The same epistemology dominates how we look, and where, while the methodology provides the researcher with a forced choice, one where either the student or the teacher is blamed for the lack of outcomes in Indigenous education. Where do we look now, and can we find something that has not been found before? The unequal historical relation that persists across Australia suggests that the process of research itself could be given as much attention as the search for quantifiable outcomes. The paper proposes that this process focus on the production of relations between schools and communities as well as on the search for knowledge.

Introduction

I was at a meeting recently when a colleague asked a confronting question for researchers in Indigenous education in Australia: If we do not look at the reasons for success and failure of Indigenous kids in schools, where do we look? He was making the observation that most research in Indigenous education is limited by its own scientific methodology and, as a consequence, researchers continue to look in the same place to produce predictable outcomes. Given the enormous amount of research that has already been conducted in Indigenous education (Mellor & Corrigan, 2004; Rigney, 1999), is it possible to find something that has not been found before? And how?

Researchers continue to think that finding the answer is a question of getting the methodology right, yet the answer has not been found in the 40 years that university people have been heading out into the field. In addition, there have been many researchers who have followed in the path of someone who has gone before them. There are well-worn tracks across Australia depending on who was looking at the time in that particular state. And just like them, researchers today come back wondering and questioning more than they did when they first went out full of hope. The research has circled around in an attempt to discover success. In the 1960s, research found that the Aboriginal child could not learn like white kids, and s/he was cognitively lacking. Current policy and practice (for example, New South Wales Department of Education and Training and New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Incorporated, 2004) have returned to comparing Indigenous student performance against the non-Indigenous standard. Nothing much has changed.

We know that nothing has changed because the new research tells us so. The researcher generally launches the project on the basis of a pathology of Indigenous education, only to find that it must be redeemed at some later stage in order to offer the reader some hope that things will get better. The best intentioned researchers are driven to tell us that things are in a bad way, as if it needed to be said again. Possibilities for redemption are magically discovered in the data, but in reality they only exist in the researcher's fantasies because the next report tells the reader that nothing has changed.

There must be another starting point. I think it was Roland Barthes who said that when we know the question, we already know the answer. And most projects start with the same question, or two sides of the same coin. What are the factors for success? What are the reasons for failure? How do researchers begin to talk about Indigenous education for teachers, for students and their parents, and for pre-service teachers outside the confines of success and failure?

This question takes on an urgency with the realisation that most teachers know nothing about, or have little to do with Indigenous people (New South Wales Department of Education and Training and New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Incorporated, 2004; Zeegers et al., 2003; Beresford, 2003; Craven, 1999). Perhaps the task then, is to educate the teachers so that they can talk and teach about Indigenous Australia and provide some sense of tolerance and harmony for students? But while cultural awareness training has been popular across Australia, the potential success of these courses must also be assessed within the context of theoretical developments over the last 20 years. For example, Foucault (1979), Derrida (1978) and Felman (1987) demonstrated that the task of seeing from another position is an impossibility. Their work suggested that a non-Aboriginal teacher would not be in a position to incorporate Indigenous perspectives in their teaching, or at least, that such perspectives would always be their own. Similarly, the researcher is blinded by his or her methodology (Harrison, 2003). But such philosophical discussions have now been set aside for the sake of demonstrating that something is being done, and research has since turned to providing concrete strategies to improve student outcomes in Indigenous education. This research has employed a range of variables, both quantitative and qualitative, yet the research and its findings have made little difference to student outcomes, and so we keep looking harder and closer, or further afield to find something that has not been found before.

Deficit practice

Continued comparisons between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student outcomes will certainly highlight the historical inequities experienced by Indigenous students at school and outside; they will exacerbate the oppositional power relation where Indigenous kids are compared against a white standard. The construction of Indigenous student outcomes has continued to follow the deficit model of 1960s where girls were compared with boys. It was then argued that girls needed to reach the same standard. However, of course, others observed that girls should not have to be the same as boys, and they should not be seen to be lacking or deficient in comparison.

A deficit practice remains the dominant paradigm in the classroom and in research methodologies, and yet it is widely recognised that there is no future in positioning either the child or the teacher within this paradigm. However, the Quality teaching model in New South Wales is doing just that, suggesting that corrective services need to be applied to teachers and their practices (New South Wales Department of Education and Training, 2003, p. 3). Are (student) teachers likely to learn better through methods directed at correcting their thinking and behaviour, and will they tolerate such endeavours? I doubt it. Rather, these policies will end up creating and developing resentment in some of the very people with whom the Department of Education is hoping to communicate. The department's perception that teachers lack the required knowledge and skills assumes that quality teaching is governed by a methodology, whilst taking no account of the epistemology underlying how teachers teach and the ways students learn.

The epistemology

Like transmission-based education, research methodologies are managed by a conception of knowledge as something that is hidden out there in the field and it is just a matter of finding it. More case studies are conducted, comprehensive data are collected, more figures are presented in order to discover something that hasn't been found before. It is assumed that researchers need to look harder or better, a scientific methodology will do the job even though Sandra Harding (1991, 1993) and Donna Haraway (1991) so clearly demonstrated that the knowledge found is always situated in and limited by the scientific methods of the researcher.

Research practice, along with learning and teaching in schools, is motivated by an epistemology that is based on the idea of knowledge as something that can be found rather than produced. In addition, of course, Western education is based on this conception of knowledge and learning. It is a question of looking for the knowledge, and being appropriately motivated in order to learn, and this may work when the object of knowledge (and learning) remains stable, unchanging and generalisable. However, what happens to the research practice (and learning) if it is assumed that knowledge is actually produced, rather than found in a book, or out there in the field?

Firstly, there would be considerable room for negotiation over starting points and pathways. Research (and the learning) would not begin with an end point, and students would not feel like there was a proper and preordained way of learning. Many would be less reticent to make mistakes when there was no prior answer to look for. They may be less inclined to feel like they had to jump through hoops to keep the white teacher happy (Harrison, 2004a). Somehow, it is easy to comfort ourselves with the illusion that students are working things out for themselves, but this is made

into an impossibility when the aims, outcomes and marking criteria are established before the kids walk into the classroom.

Many students know only too well that there is an answer there and they need to know what it is before they can participate in the classroom. They know that there is an answer already there in the mind of the teacher because they have often observed how the system works, that prior knowledge is stored and passed on to learners in its original form. Education depends on the transmission of this kind of knowledge between teacher and learner, researcher and reader.

What could happen if the research (and learning) focused on the process of producing relations, and not just on finding material ends? Martin Nakata (2004) articulates this possibility in very clear terms. He is describing how Indigenous researchers came together in Melbourne in 2001 to discuss future directions in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research agendas. At that forum, he observed:

> Quite apart from constructing policy direction, what this initial group forged was a community – a community of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people dedicated to the task of improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lives through the process of education. We have all benefited from their efforts and are part of that broadening and growing community – a community within a community, a community for a community.

While the group was motivated by future directions, it also got something out of the forum itself, a community, a set of relations between and for the people who were there at the meeting. A significant outcome was the process of being there together, something that would be hard to measure and quantify in the context of syllabus outcomes.

Marcia Langton (1993) articulates how this relation is produced through discourse. In a discussion of the production of intersubjectivity, Langton (1993, p. 81) contends that "Aboriginality" "is remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, imagination, representation and interpretation". One of the ways in which this occurs is when Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people test and adapt imagined models of each other through dialogue to find satisfactory forms of mutual recognition. Through these cross-cultural and reciprocal exchanges, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal individuals "test their own imagined models of the other, repeatedly adjusting the models as responses are processed to find some satisfactory way of comprehending the other" (Langton, 1993, p. 83). In this model, Aboriginality is produced through a partially unconscious discourse of negotiation where both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people negotiate a place in relation to each other, a place which is produced outside what either wants or intends. This place is constituted as a negotiated relation between them.

One of the things that research could be doing is to focus on the research process itself. Teachers and schools are required to develop and sustain relations with the community. Herbert (2006) contends that the opposite is also true if teachers are to stay for longer periods in remote communities. While both attempt to develop and sustain such relations, something unpredictable happens in the process of trying. Unconscious relations are built (and destroyed) and the same applies to research. The research produces relations (whether planned or not) and these can be ongoing and sustainable. It will be the relation itself as much as the outcomes of the research (and the teaching) that will be discussed and valued by people long after the research is completed. The production of this unintended place outside the unequal historical relation could constitute the real benefit of ongoing and sustainable research in the future.

Proposal

One proposal could be to organise the research projects on a regional level rather than on the basis of topics or questions. For example, New South Wales could be divided into regions such as the Northern Tablelands, Wiradji, Gamiloroi, regions in Sydney and so on. Communities within these regions or groups could then identify areas of research need so that the focus of the research starts with the community rather than the school or the Department of Education. These communities could identify the key areas of research for that place, like youth, work, crime, relationships with the school.

For example, in the Northern Tablelands in New South Wales, there is a group called the "Northern Tablelands Aboriginal Elders Sovereignty Authority" as well as an elders group and Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (AECG) in many towns in the region. These groups could be consulted at the outset. This might involve outlining the origins and aims of the research, and asking people what they want us to do as part of a collaborative approach to improving Indigenous education for Indigenous children and their parents. The research focus comes from the community rather than from the outside; it needs to be in the hands of the community (Dodson, 2000; Rigney, 1999; also see Langton & Palmer, 2004, for an example of a negotiated relationship between the Larrakia and the Northern Territory Government). These research sites could be part of the one overall project in the state, or they could constitute separate projects. The same could be done for other states.

A team of researchers could work with each of these regions with the idea that they will have ongoing affiliations with the elders in these areas. The research could be ongoing and longitudinal.

These teams could include senior people as well as Indigenous doctoral students who are prepared to continue working in that region after this particular project is completed. There could be half a dozen teams established across New South Wales, and half a dozen across each of the states.

What is sustained and developed throughout the research is an ongoing and negotiated relation between the community and researchers/teachers/Departments of Education.

This proposal is based on the perception that historical relations between institutions and Indigenous communities need much work if children are to learn about reconciliation, tolerance and social justice. That is, better relations need to be developed with the community before they are modelled in schools. As it stands now, teachers are theorising in the classroom about harmony, cultural acceptance, getting along together and understanding others, while the students know that these are not practiced outside the school.

We cannot legitimately tell kids to get on with one another if the researchers cannot do the same. There was an academic who had devoted his life to Indigenous education and yet some decided that he was on the wrong track and had to be purged. They are gone now, while his work remains. Of course, student teachers continue to love what he wrote because they can read it, and it makes sense to them in the context of their (classroom) experiences (see Malin, 1997). A relation is produced between them through the assumption of communication. Perhaps we could take up Nakata's (2004) suggestion that we take all the different and varied positions into account in any new approach to research in Indigenous education.

What could motivate us all, students, teachers, parents and researchers alike, is the possibility of changing these relations, of returning to something that might be there in the future. Something sustainable. Something that offers meaning now and for the future, other than finding answers to our questions.

Conclusion

I have taken the position in this paper that research in Australian Indigenous education has been blinded by its own methodology to the extent each project continues to ask the same questions and therefore replicates similar findings. The current economic climate in Australia places further constraints on where researchers can look, and how, and therefore on what they can find. And of course, politicians and department heads are expecting immediate results from their investments in research, all of which make it difficult to talk about long-term projects that focus on outcomes which are difficult to measure. Nevertheless, I have attempted to look from another place with the assistance of Marcia Langton's theorisation of identity, along with the work of selected French poststructuralists.

I have taken the position that there could be at least two threads to any research conducted in Indigenous education. One is the historical work that is done in any community; that is, the relations that are developed through the research work that have the potential to undermine the unequal power dynamics that have developed in Australia over the past 220 years. I have suggested that these partially unconscious relations are produced while people are negotiating the work of research. This material work itself is the second thread, the report that is produced through the relation, the detritus that is so highly valued in a Western epistemology, and by the agencies that fund the researcher.

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