



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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Sport and Aboriginal Culture in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands

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Background

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how sport has come to co-exist with Aboriginal culture, and the changes that have been forthcoming from this union over the years. To assist in collating some data on this subject, a survey was conducted with a number of teachers (12) in the 'Lands' schools [see Appendix] and the results were compared to what little literature was available on this particular topic.

The 'Lands' schools refer to the ten Education Department schools that are located on the edge of the Gibson Desert region of Western Australia—bounded on the east by the Northern Territory and South Australia and the north by the Kimberley region.

The outcome of the survey and consequent research into this particular area, will hopefully provide some enlightenment on a topic which has a number of ramifications for both inside and outside the classroom.

Introduction

Working as a teacher/principal in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands for some three years has given me an ideal situation in which to view Aboriginal culture. Although there are a number of interesting facets to this relationship, it is the games or sport that the community participates in which seems to receive little attention. Sport can provide an avenue for a

minority culture to earn respect and admiration from the rest of society. Within remote Aboriginal communities in the interior of Western Australia, sport is extremely popular and important in bringing together extended families and breaking down the distance or isolation factor that plays a major role here in the desert.

Not only is the remoteness a factor to contend with, but a distinctive lack of sporting facilities, poor health, poor housing, students leaving school at an early age, unemployment and occasional violence within communities also affects the stature of Aboriginal culture within the Lands. The notion of sport — in an organised sense — has been fully accepted by Aboriginal culture in the Lands region, and is utilised by the people as a way of overcoming the hurdles that are often experienced in remote communities.

From the survey and literature studied on this topic (Salter, 1967; Edwards, 1992; Markey, 1994; Tatz, 1995), there seem to be three main areas characteristic of Aboriginal culture and its relationship with sport. These include the types of sport played, competitiveness, and the players involved.

Types of Sport

With regard to the survey conducted in the Lands schools, a number of sports were listed as being played by the people in the community. These included football, basketball, cricket, softball, various ball games and swimming (in those communities with a swimming pool). The sport played the most was football (70%), followed by basketball (30%).

Peter Markey (1994) conducted interviews with Aboriginal high school graduates on the relationship between sport and success in education. The data collected during the interviews are consistent with the findings from the Lands survey. As Markey states:

all of the informants preferred group oriented activities [sic] Aboriginal people are attracted to activities that are more physical contact games and field oriented (Markey, 1994: 31).

During games of football and basketball, Aboriginal people often modify the rules to make them more simplistic and understood by players of all ages. For instance, a mark in football is awarded to a player who 'two-touches' the football and 'holding-the-ball' or 'dropping-the-ball' is very rare in competition. Umpires are also an uncommon sight on the playing field — players usually preferring to officiate their own game. One reason for this may be because umpires have been known to be chased off the field with spears following some questionable decisions!

Participation

From the survey, it was found that participation of students in sporting activities ranged from 50% for the category of 60-80% of students to 42% in the category of 80-100% of students. Of those who participate in sport, the boys seemed to show more interest than girls — 83% compared to 17%. Michael Salter (1967) in his study on the 'Games and Pastimes of the Australian Aboriginal' also noted that participation in sporting activities was near maximum and anyone who wanted to participate was more than welcome. During sporting carnivals in the desert, all ages are invited to participate in a variety of activities — although they seldom need encouragement to do so.

Competitiveness

Whilst teaching Aboriginal students in the Lands, the competitiveness of the players during sporting activities has become apparent. This is not only restricted to the school grounds — the same principle applies to the wider community.

Contrary to their culture, Aboriginal people seem to use the sporting arena as a means towards more competitive ends. Whereas individual accomplishment is not accepted in Aboriginal culture (emphasis is more on sharing), on the sporting field it is seen as more appropriate and is more common. Markey

confirms this by reporting that:

although there is a strong tendency for Aboriginal people to avoid standing out from others in competitions, sport does provide opportunities for them to be individually competitive (Markey, 1994: 33).

The survey conducted found that of the talented sportsboys/girls in the class, 70% tended to 'show off' their abilities, compared to the 30% who preferred to stay in the background. Once again, it appears that sport allows individuals to stand out from the crowd, even though these individuals come from a culture where this is not appropriate.

Also, it was found that 83% of teachers believed that the students in their class were more competitive in activities, rather than playing just for fun. This is in contrast to Salter's (1967) study where he found the games that Aboriginal people participated in were played simply for enjoyment. The movement — from Salter's 1967 study to this day — seems to be more towards a competitive sporting edge than the 'friendlier' approach to activities. Markey goes on to state that:

apparently Aboriginal people have managed to move from playing for intrinsic rewards and seeking challenging situations, to one which is more involved with extrinsic rewards (Markey, 1994: 10).

During those competitions held by Aboriginal people that do not have an external reward, it is not uncommon to hear the losing side say, 'no trophy ... no trophy' to their more successful counterparts. It seems that the notion of 'playing for fun' or intrinsic values has been replaced by a more competitive streak and a 'playing to win' attitude.

Enjoyment

There is little doubt, however, that those who do participate in sport enjoy it — of the teachers surveyed, 100% stated that the majority of students enjoyed sport. What the results do seem to prove is a trend over the years from enjoying sport as a game, to enjoying sport as a competition. Once again, this goes against Salter's (1967) findings where he believed that, like their culture, play was simple, with rewards being enjoyment and self-satisfaction.

Training

Here, training is referred to as an organised set of activities designed to improve skills and fitness relevant to a particular type of sport. Having said this, the results from the survey found that only 33% of Aboriginal people in this community spend time training for activities (1-2 hours per day), while 66% don't spend any time at all on training. These results do not include the teaching of skills inside school; they are based on after-school activities by all members of the community.

There is little doubt that the 33% noted as participating in training are more often than not the younger generation, while the adults are rarely seen training for any particular sport. It should also be noted that the majority of training consists merely of a semi-organised game of basketball or kick-to-kick football.

This distinct lack of training may be due to a lack of self-discipline prevalent in Aboriginal culture. Markey goes on to say:

most of the informants were concerned about the lack of discipline [sic] that has been linked to training for sport and education with young Aboriginals (Markey, 1994: 33).

Time

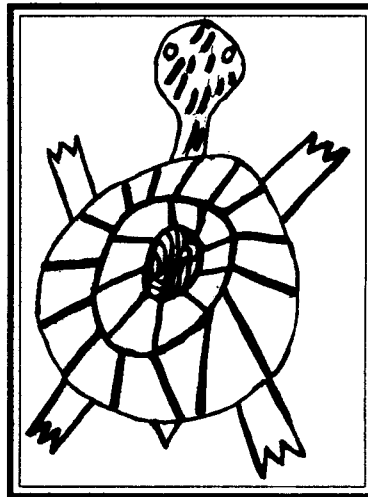
Briefly, with regard to time spent on sporting activities, the survey found that 42% of teachers believed that students spent 1-2 hours per day, while 33% said 2-3 hours, and 25% said that student spent 0-1 hours on sporting activities per day. This appears to be a fairly substantial amount of time allocated to sporting activities. One reason for this may be the lack of other activities available to a community in such a remote location. These activities could include going to the shops, playing video games and going to the cinema — or any other activity more readily available in a larger centre.

The Players

Regarding the disposition of the students or 'players' in sporting activities, teachers believed that 70% of their students with behavioural problems in the classroom seem to enjoy sport more than their classmates. This result obtained from the survey can be construed in a number of ways; however, the underlying factor is that those students who struggle in the classroom seem to have more success in sporting activities.

These students with behavioural problems are more participative, more compliant and appear to be much happier playing sport than any other activity. On this train of thought, Markey stated that:

Aboriginal students may recognise that sport ... offers a preferred process, mastery/task-based orientation with group oriented comparisons which is in contrast to a style often used in schools to achieve academic success (Markey, 1994: 19).



In other words, the learning style of the Aboriginal student is often in conflict with the teaching strategies employed in the classroom. It is here that a lot of students struggle in class and as a result, behaviour problems seem to take over. However, with sporting activities, a lot of teaching is done via copying/imitation and learning is often achieved by 'doing' — a strategy

much more successful in teaching Aboriginal students.

Regarding the number of talented sportsboys/girls in schools around the Lands, 41% of teachers reported that they had 0-2 talented individuals, while 43% noted 3-5, and 16% believed they had 6-8 talented students. This number appears to be slightly higher than a school with fewer Aboriginal students, and can be attributed to the fact that these students do spend a lot of time on sporting activities — they therefore have more opportunities to improve their sporting abilities.

Conclusion

The results of the survey and research into the literature concerning Aboriginal people and sport are very interesting and provide a topic of discussion that needs more attention. From the analysis of the data available, it seems that there has been a movement over the years from Aboriginals playing sport as a game to playing sport as a competition. More often than not, these competitions involve some sort of extrinsic reward — be it a trophy for the winning team or a medal for the best player.

This is contrary to Aboriginal culture, where activities are usually undertaken for their intrinsic value, with individual accomplishment rarely being recognised. It seems that Aboriginal people in the Lands have utilised sport as an outlet for complementing the Anglo-Saxon culture, yet also managing to keep alive their own cultural values. Sport is being used as a vehicle, with Aboriginal culture being the passenger on its way to a destination known as 'adaptation'.

References

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Appendix — Teacher Survey

- Do you consider the students in your class to be competitive, or do they tend to play 'just for fun'?

- How much time do you think your students spend in their sporting activities per day?
0-1 hour 1-2 hours 2-3 hours 4-5 hours
- Who shows the most interest in sport — boys or girls?
Boys Girls Combination
- What types of sport do your students participate in?
- What do you believe is the sport played the most?
- Do the majority of students in your class enjoy sport?
- Do your students participate in any training (skill development) for sport?
- What would be the percentage of participation (roughly) of your students in sport?
0-20% 20-40% 40-60% 60-80% 80-100%
- Do you find students with behavioural problems in the classroom enjoy sport more than others?
- Are there any talented sportsboys or girls in your class?
0-2 3-5 6-8 8-10
- Do these talented students tend to 'show off' their abilities?

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