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Controversial and Difficult Issues in Aboriginal Teacher Education — Some Western Educators' Views of Aboriginal Teacher Training

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Introduction

The interviews and discussions which are the main focus of this paper were conducted with five experienced teachers involved with Aboriginal education in remote rural schools in the Northern Territory — the minimum experience being five continuous years and the most being 15 years. Although the teachers have had greater experience working in the southern regions of the Northern Territory, many have experience in the Top End, interstate or overseas experience in indigenous and special education. As all of the teachers are stationed in the Northern Territory and all are currently teaching or supporting teachers in remote Aboriginal schools, the discussions regarding Aboriginal teacher training specifically concerned courses offered by Batchelor College and predominantly by the Remote Access Teacher Education Course (RATE).

In such a small teaching service as that of the Northern Territory, people can be identified by their experience and first names; so all the names of those interviewed have been omitted to focus upon the principles of what the teachers said rather than on who they were.

All those interviewed, although possessing vast experience of Aboriginal education are non-Aboriginal people. Unfortunately, I could not

successfully interview Aboriginal teachers themselves over the telephone (a particularly culturally specific apparatus) and due to work commitments was unable to meet them in person. Therefore, the reader is advised to remain aware of the possible cultural bias resulting from this fact.

Nevertheless what arose from discussing the controversial issues of Aboriginal teacher education from a Western teacher's point of view is, I believe, of interest in itself. Especially when much emphasis is placed on team-teaching in remote schools. To balance this, a discussion of the controversial issues of Aboriginal teacher education from an Aboriginal teacher's point of view would need to be undertaken.

The majority of Batchelor College students continue to be mature-aged people who have significant life and employment experiences and who maintain many of their traditional languages, relationships, practices and obligations. They live in community situations which do not equip them to easily make the transition to higher education and training. This is partly because of the grossly inadequate or non-existent secondary education provisions that have resulted in low levels of study and basic skills. It is also because of the narrowing, but still wide gulf between the communities' social and cultural values and aspirations and the routines and orientations of education and higher education (Stanton, 1994a: 147).

The following five interviews with experienced remote school teachers, administrators and support staff highlight some of the difficult and controversial issues associated with Aboriginal teacher education as delivered by Batchelor College predominantly with regard to schools in Central Australia; however, in addition most have had experience in the Northern Regions of the Territory.

Interviews

Interview One

The high attrition rate of graduates is a real concern. The number of Aboriginal teachers remaining in the system compared to the number of enrolments and/or graduations seems to indicate a breakdown somewhere. In my experience there is a high incidence of stress due to the difficulties in separating the school and the home domain which in turn impacts upon the professional role of the teacher. A recent stress management project to support Aboriginal teachers experiencing stress largely focused upon the rights of the individual rather than incorporating the responsibilities of the profession. Most graduates seem to have little sustainable skill due to scant attention being given to core curriculum of the system within which the graduate works. This causes conflict, as graduates are still expected to pass probation.

It seems to me that the teaching student is the main focus of all Batchelor College courses rather than the children whom one day will be taught by the teacher. Therefore, courses are modified to suit the individual. As a result many courses actually fail to meet the needs of the children the graduate is expected to teach. Courses often bend to individuals; however, unless there is a community interest or school need, it is not appropriate to meet the individual's need over the community's educational aspirations. In turn this can lead to a conflict situation when the community's aspiration of an English-only school is not reflected in the Batchelor College philosophy of two-way schooling.

The Batchelor College and government political agenda is confusing for the educational stakeholders within a community. Students and graduates are the prime focus of Batchelor College; therefore, when in a class, the children become secondary to the needs of the students or graduates themselves. It would be more appropriate to negotiate the course content in line with the community aspirations for the school.

Research methods regarding community-based action research need to be better than they are because questions are often heavily weighted and subject to getting the answer that the answerer thinks the questioner wants. It becomes difficult then, for the

student or graduate, to get an objective view. Any research needs to more effectively reflect the community's educational aspirations rather than a political agenda.

The real issue should be what the children get out of the teacher and whether the children's interests are paramount, rather than those of the student or graduate.

Interview Two

Aboriginal teacher education as conducted at Batchelor College has two main foci:

- to build up personal skill
- to teach people how to be teachers.

In my opinion it is trying to do too much. Teachers achieve a Stage Four or Five level education themselves and are expected to teach Stage One or Two. They really need to be further ahead than that. They need to understand where a concept fits into Stage Six before they can effectively teach at Stage Two. Like all teachers, Aboriginal teachers need to understand the overall picture.

The entrance standard needs to be higher. To achieve this, full-time residential or community-based adult education programs need to be established and should be undertaken to at least Stage Eight prior to enrolling in teacher education courses. We need to increase our expectations of what Aboriginal people can achieve. Bridging and access courses are fine, but are not suitable to be included in teacher education courses. It makes it very difficult for teachers to learn something themselves one day and be expected to teach it the next.

Many people take on teacher education courses for self-improvement and something to do, but drop out prior to finishing or very early in their careers. This tells us two things:

- that the job is too hard given their abilities
- they were perhaps not teacher material to begin with.

The whole structure needs to be changed to allow people seeking self-improvement and personal fulfilment the means to achieve this rather than just funnelling them into teacher education courses.

Stage One of Batchelor teacher education aims the student at a basic level of Assistant Teacher, but it goes for two years part-time. It takes too long to achieve this level. The course should be more structured and responsive to the aspirations of the school and the community, rather than a politically correct ideal.

Qualified Aboriginal teachers need mentors to assist them in their classroom work, and they usually are given one for a year; however, in most cases they are denied an assistant teacher. I think this is unfair. Aboriginal teachers should have access to an assistant teacher like non-Aboriginal teachers. The mentor issue is an interesting one. It seems that on one hand the Aboriginal teacher is held up to the community by Batchelor College as the ideal and explains that they have achieved qualifications which allow them to be teachers in their own right, but at the same time appoints mentors as if to say, 'you're not quite a fully qualified teacher'. The courses let people down when they finally get to class. Presumptions are made about their ability to teach because they can speak the language and have a firm understanding of the culture. Aboriginal teachers are often under a lot of pressure to carry community relationships and interactions into the classroom and their behaviour is often dictated by the cultural conventions. It is very difficult to juggle a professional and personal role for new Aboriginal teachers and so this area should be covered in course work and if it is, I don't believe it is effective.

One of the major difficulties is that the teacher education courses do not attempt to teach ethics or professional attitudes. This can and has led to major conflict in a school situation between the rights of the child and the rights and expectations of the teacher.

Batchelor College and places like that are great places for social justice, but they are not educational institutions. Standards need to improve. Real hard core pedagogy, whether mainstream or Aboriginal, is being sacrificed for the 'social justice thing'. ESL strategies are not addressed, the promotion of good planning and evaluation techniques are not taught and there is little or no reference to the Northern Territory core curriculum. There is so much of the mechanics of teaching that is just not addressed, which begs the question, 'What do they do?'

Some of the staff are far too removed from the actualities of the classroom to effectively teach students about the mechanics of teaching. I know for a fact that some of the recently recruited staff have had limited teaching experience themselves, never mind having extensive experience in remote Aboriginal communities. Are these people really the most effective people to be dealing with the issues of cross-cultural teacher education or are they just politically correct? It casts a great deal of doubt on the quality of the teaching that goes on there.

New initiatives such as teacher administration courses put the cart before the horse. It will allow people to reach the dizzy heights of head teachers and principals without effectively teaching in a class at the nitty gritty real end of teaching. Such initiatives just avoid the issue of attaining appropriate standards. I don't necessarily expect equitable standards for non-Aboriginal graduates, given the possibly different starting points — just honesty. Because in the long-term it's just not fair to give patronising or false qualifications to someone. At the end of Stage Four teacher education, many Aboriginal teachers are just not qualified and to suggest that they are qualified enough for a community demeans the graduate and the community in the worst patronising fashion. As it stands, a Stage Four trained teacher from Batchelor College is led to believe that they are as qualified as any urban teacher, but even allowing for significant cultural factors, I doubt if they could stand alone in an urban primary school, nor would any selection panel deem them suitable. It's time the expectations with regard to the academic outcomes of all Aboriginal education were increased. Batchelor College and the courses undertaken need to engage in good sound pedagogy and stop playing political games.

Interview Three

I have worked closely with Aboriginal teachers and assistant teachers since 1984. There has always been insufficient programming knowledge of Batchelor College graduates and students. There is an almost total lack of knowledge of the Northern Territory curriculum and little understanding of the responsibilities of a teacher.

As a mentor to graduates I consistently undertook lesson planning activities. The mentorees required additional programming from a very basic level and most had difficulties with classroom management techniques. The actual implementation of the program was often a great problem for the teachers. This had to do with the fact that they lacked confidence in the subject they were teaching. It was difficult for them perhaps to understand the concept themselves. Therefore it was almost impossible for them to teach it. This led me to believe that perhaps it would be more effective for Aboriginal teachers to specialise in subject areas or grade levels in which they were comfortable, but that does not fit with the qualification they achieve at the end of the course.

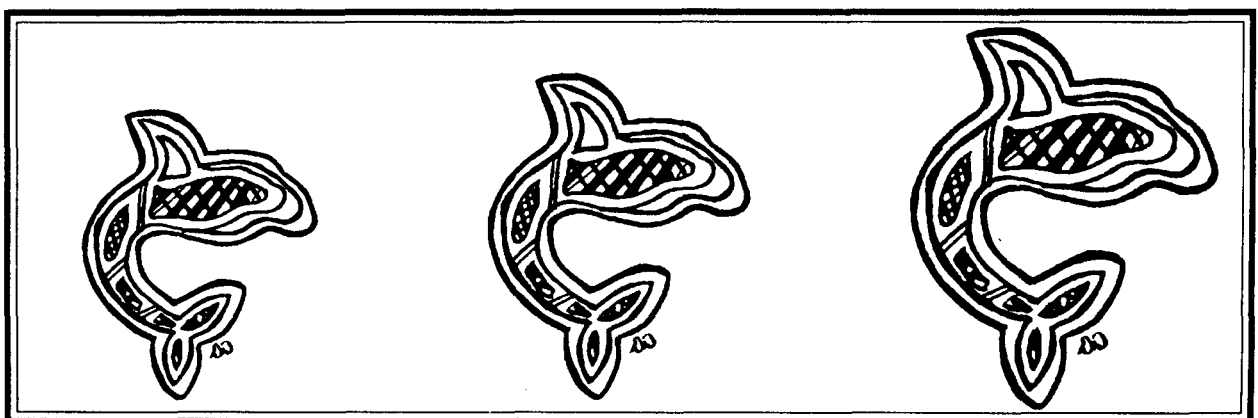
Most teachers enjoyed the physical presence of a non-Aboriginal teacher in their class. They often requested I model both classroom management techniques and lesson delivery. It became apparent that sharing responsibility was important to them and that they enjoyed the social interaction of having another teacher in the class who took a non-threatening role. Allowing Aboriginal teachers to work with an assistant teacher as non-Aboriginal teachers do, would alleviate this social dimension problem. It was also difficult for graduates to assess the levels of the children in their class, to understand where they were going in relation to their study, and to plan a course of action that would take them there.

In my experience Batchelor College teacher education courses do not equip most graduates for life in a classroom. There is no implementation of current pedagogy. Batchelor College's glossy image hides ideological clap-trap which is far removed from primary school needs. It affirms superior attitudes and pushes bright stars dependent upon their political correctness. The rhetoric is just not translated into action. Children and the teaching of them is often not

the main issue. There is a greater input into the political rights of individuals rather than the responsibilities of the teacher, mechanics of teaching and duty of care. The teacher's or student's political rights are the central issue. This is demonstrated in the right of the teacher to be supported with little accountability or responsibility for the consequences of one's actions. This can be seen in issues such as punctuality, assuming a reasonable work load and absences.

The teacher education courses of Batchelor College encourage a dogmatic and self-righteous view of ideal models of schooling, whether or not they meet community aspirations for the school. This is demonstrated when conflict arises due to the clash of a community's desire for English-only schooling 'like they get in town' with Batchelor philosophy of two-way schooling. There appears to be no middle ground. The actual teaching in the community schools from which the students are enrolled is not seen as a priority. No liaison with the schools or the communities actually takes place in the structure or content of the courses; therefore, often the aspirations of the graduates do not fit with the aspirations the community has for the school. The training creates unclear or mixed expectations due to lack of guidelines or community negotiation.

The standards of the courses are totally inadequate. In many cases students did not complete or attend practicums but were passed by the College. Tutors often do the work for the students and lecturers do not have recent primary school experience. They are selected to positions dependent upon their political correctness rather than primary school experience or effectiveness as teachers and role models. The staff of the College have an unwillingness to separate the professional from the personal person. Professional weaknesses, rather than being addressed and the



student or graduate benefiting from the support, are overshadowed by highlighting their personal qualities. This is all very well for self-esteem, but not for the remedy of professional weaknesses.

Due to the low standards, there is the Lowest Common Denominator factor with regard to the treatment of students. Fantastic graduates are treated the same as non-performers, giving non-performers a false impression of their abilities. This often leads to conflict in classroom and school situations.

The courses actually fail to address professional accountability. Assessment and evaluation techniques are non-existent, and this has been consistently reflected in students and graduates since I began working with them in 1984. The College is often unable or reluctant to make the hard decisions and as a result non-performers are passed as a matter of course. It promotes a false sense of self-determination without the necessary support or imparting of knowledge to allow self-determination to occur on a level playing field.

Batchelor College operates on inverted racism as opposed to affirmative action. There are very few Aboriginal people employed as lecturers or tutors. An Aboriginal man once said to me at a mentor's meeting, 'The problem with Batchelor College is that on the outside it is very dark, but crack it open and it is all white'.

Interview Four

The school becomes the total support network for all RATE students and courses. We had a visiting tutor that came once a week or a fortnight but the real support had to be given by the non-Aboriginal teachers, with no regard to the fact that they already had a full-time job teaching children and administering the school. It was just presumed that the school would assume the responsibility for the student teachers. We had seven students most of the time — once we had a dozen — and three courses running out of a small two-teacher school. It was too much work with too little support from the College. The College also failed to negotiate with the community and the school with regard to what was going on and the school was expected just to fit in with the tutor.

Our teaching program was continually disrupted through absences of our assistant teachers, and we were unable to cover their absences or able to utilise funds to support the program during absences.

The mechanics of getting people to and from town when they were required to attend the in-house course sessions were left to the school teachers. Completion of Abstudy forms, requesting and chasing tax file numbers, medical records and dates of birth were all left to the supervising teacher. There was just not enough time to support the students adequately, plan, teach and evaluate the lessons.

Cultural factors impinged upon the successful professional interaction required for the courses to be successful. The two non-Aboriginal teachers at the school were male and all the teaching students were female. Old men discussed and questioned the teachers with regard to the number of 'girl friends' they had and this led to some very difficult cross-cultural problems. At one point in time we had to request a chaperone to allow our teaching program to go ahead. At times there were more adults in the school than children.

The real problem with the course I felt was the entry level. The initial literacy level of the students necessitated extra tutorial assistance which was funded through DEET. The shop keeper, the wife of the community adviser and heaps of other non-Aboriginal people were all enlisted to support these students. We often queried what would happen to the courses had the non-Aboriginal human resources not been available. The courses assume a great deal of support will just happen without actually negotiating it with the community. We were also concerned with the standard of students' work and often wondered if it was really up to scratch.

Interview Five

The remote courses are heavily reliant upon the support of the supervising or team teacher without anyone actually asking whether or not they are willing, experienced and confident enough to undertake the role or if they have enough time on top of all the other work they have to do in a small bilingual school. The expectation is there that the whole school and

community will revolve around the teaching student. A third year RATE student arrived in the community towards the end of the year and it was just assumed that the community and program would automatically adjust to allow the intake of another student on top of the load we were already carrying in trying to support other teachers and teach children.

In my opinion the real difficulty in successfully training Aboriginal teachers is that the initial education is not good enough. Therefore, a lot of time is required for the team teacher or supervisor to support the student. Batchelor College does not assume this role — and it should. The tutor and the lecturer should be the support network for the student, but I find it always depends upon the teachers taking on the responsibility on top of a full-time teaching role.

The College needs to produce a higher standard of teacher than it does. The teachers are all politically correct, but largely lack skills to run a class without a great deal of additional support. I wouldn't really mind this, but they are encouraged to believe that they are teachers in their own right, when really they are not all that well qualified. I understand that it is not realistic to expect a standard that non-Aboriginal teachers achieve after sixteen years of continuous education, but I thoroughly believe that the standard of graduate needs to be higher than it is.

There is enormous pressure placed upon supervising staff to pass student practicums with no regard to the actual performance. If the student delivers an ad hoc approach to the task or their professional responsibilities, they are still passed. This would not be tolerated if a non-Aboriginal student teacher delivered the same standard. It is not affirmative action. It sends a clear message that any standard is good enough, and that is unfair to the student.

Many of the staff of Batchelor College have not lived for any long period on communities and therefore have not had their political correctness tested every day. Their ideologies are never challenged by the realities of teaching in real-time in a real school.

What I have found and what is of concern to me is that we are unable to cover classes due to the absence of a trainee or graduate teacher. This causes great problems in our bilingual program, because effectively it means that the program ceases to function when the

trainee or graduate is away. We are unable to get a relief teacher or employ an emergency relief assistant. This causes huge problems to the bilingual program.

The Issues

Course structure

Bourke *et al.* (1993: 55) claim that:

Aboriginal higher education enrolments have increased from 617 in 1983 to 5105 in 1992. Despite the NAEC's target of 1,000 Aboriginal teachers by 1990 being reached, this has not resulted in an increase in the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in the classroom or researchers in preservice curriculum development.

This fact is reflected in Interviews 1 and 2 and is of great concern. The case studies seem to indicate that the courses which are offered to remote Aboriginal people as teacher education courses are not equipping them with the necessary skills needed for classroom survival.

Bourke *et al.* (1993: 52) detail the principles needed to be an effective teacher and outline them as a 'Charter for Teaching'. The checklist of the principles incorporates:

- values and attitudes
- approaches to content
- teaching methods
- making teaching practice explicit.

According to those experienced teachers interviewed, these principles are not successfully addressed in Aboriginal teacher education courses conducted at Batchelor College in the Northern Territory and are not being taken into Central Australian schools by the majority of Aboriginal teachers. Bourke *et al.* (1993: 53) go on to advocate that 'a solid preservice education in culturally appropriate curricula and teaching strategies must be provided' to ensure a pool of teachers suitable for Aboriginal education. In the opinions of those interviewed, the politically correct social justice issues are being addressed at the expense of imparting appropriate teaching strategies.

The principles derived from the *Occasional Paper No. 1 Dec 1992 Awards for Teaching, DEET*, as cited by Bourke *et al.* (1993: 52-53) successfully being achieved by Batchelor College appear to be:

- interest and enthusiasm for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and promoting Aboriginal studies
- an ability to communicate cross-culturally with a view to guiding and advising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- capacity to create a comfortable environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

However, on the basis of this limited research what seems to be less successful, if not failing altogether, are:

- initiatives in seeking innovative ways of teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to improve their scholarship
- background experiences in pedagogy or interest in improving teaching strategies
- an ability to stimulate learning among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- participation in research activities seeking ways to improve the learning outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

It is undeniable that Aboriginal teachers are essential for the continuation and control of Aboriginal schools by Aboriginal people but it is up to the course writers to fully equip the trainee teacher with the skills and attitudes necessary for both the teacher's survival in the classroom and the education of the children, be it in bilingual, two-way or English-only programs.

The value of employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics in education facilities and schools cannot be underestimated. A valuable motivational and sensitising role would be fulfilled and benefit all preservice teachers (Bourke *et al.*, 1993: 56).

However, the academics need to be more than mere tokens to appease the politically correct agenda. They must be empowered by support systems if needed and choose themselves to be empowered — not thrust forward by a greater political force. Stanton (1994b: 18) cites Lema who claims education 'ought to be "learning how to learn" ... and that development of the ability to acquire knowledge rather than the acquisition of knowledge itself ... is what is more

important'. This brings up the old argument between **training and education**. It must be understood that the mission of RATE courses is to produce Aboriginal teachers to teach in their own communities and to achieve a recognised qualification in teacher training.

These teachers felt that a more structured course, delivering the actual mechanics of how to teach and manage a classroom and professional responsibilities would be more beneficial to the schools and the communities in which they work as well as to the individuals themselves.

Resolution

The main points that arose in all the interviews were:

- there needed to be a higher standard of graduate
- ethics, values, attitudes, methodology and teaching practice had to be much more explicit
- political correctness was actually making the job of teacher training harder and less effective.

Most made statements that corroborated Stanton's (1994a: 147) comment that the problem was exacerbated by 'the grossly inadequate or non-existent secondary education provisions that have resulted in low levels of study and basic skills'. Adult education based in the community and delivered full-time to at least a Stage 8 level would equip trainee teachers with a far better skills base from which to undertake higher or tertiary level study.

It was generally considered that more emphasis should be given to the mechanics of teaching, appropriate to the aspirations held by the community for the school. For example, if the community wanted two-way schooling, the student should be able to access the subjects appropriate to this. If the community wished their school to be English-only, then it was important that the student was equipped with the skills to achieve this end.

For the training to be effective it was felt that appropriate pedagogy and methodology should be wrested back from the confines of stifling political correctness; that there are some basic things that are just not negotiable when teaching in a class and most have to do with duty of care and professional responsibilities such as punctuality, lack of absence, preparation and delivery, and class management.

More effort should be put into teaching practice to make this the real place of learning the actual mechanics of teaching. Practice would be more effective if internships along the lines outlined by Stanton (1994b) were introduced rather than a token effort in which effort and ability are not reflected in the achievement of a grading. It would allow theory and practice to be synchronised. 'Learning is simply the process in which certain sets of information and/or skill become incorporated as part of individual thinking systems' (Stanton, 1994b: 11), therefore it is necessary for the student to learn things which will help them in their vocation as teachers. Stanton goes on to quote Moore who argues 'non-classroom settings lead to two basic forms of learning: personal growth ... and ... retention of academic and practical skill', but it must be stressed that this will only be of use if the skills and the content are sound in themselves.

During the internship which would need to be carefully planned so it was not just an 'airy-fairy' jaunt into a classroom, the eight principles of professional development outlined by Raeburn *et al.* (1993) could be effectively utilised. This would give the student a much more realistic learning experience in light of their chosen profession. Aboriginal teacher education courses at Batchelor College need to focus more on equipping the student with the skills to manage a class, plan lessons in accordance with the Northern Territory Curriculum, since that is the system most students will work in, negotiate learning outcomes with the community in which they live and (to paraphrase one of those interviewed) focus less on ideological 'clap-trap' which is far removed from school needs.

As Tucker (1992) explains in her case study (which highlights the complete inappropriateness of response and inability of an urban school to accommodate a perfectly reasonable student teacher) there needs to be a 'communal meeting point of institutions, students and communities', but this needs to be on an equitable level and the essence of affirmative action and appropriate standards are not sacrificed for the reasons of shallow political correctness. It is not a matter of doing 'things our way because that is the mark of a Western qualified teacher' (Tucker, 1992: 77), but rather a recognition that some things are necessary for a teacher regardless of race and that it is only fair that Aboriginal teachers from remote locations — like any other student teacher — are given the best

skills by which to survive, enjoy and grow in their chosen teaching career.

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