



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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Section A: Reader's Response

Portrayal of Controversial and Difficult Issues in Aboriginal Teacher Education or Silent Betrayal of Expectations. A response to Paul Buckley's article (Vol. 24, No. 1).

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Despite the introductory 'rider' being provided so that readers be 'advised to remain aware of the possible cultural bias resulting' from the fact that 'those interviewed, although possessing vast experience of Aboriginal education are non-aboriginal people' (p. 26), Buckley's article is a confused and poorly articulated comment on the views of a small number of non-Aboriginal educators relating to attendant issues to implementation of the Batchelor College Teacher Education program. Buckley gets off to a poor start by not getting the name of the program correct. His Remote Access Teacher Education program is in fact known as the Remote Area Teacher Education (RATE) program and has been referred to as this for most of the last fifteen years.

Readers of this article should be able to answer some fundamentally important questions as a result of reading the article:

- What was the purpose of the writing?
- What was the audience for the writing?
- What was the purpose of the interviews?
- What procedures were adopted to ensure that the interviews as reported represented the views expressed?

- Whose interests are served by the article?

Buckley's article is silent on all of these crucial questions. The article does not provide a clear indication as to either its purpose or specific audience. This is disappointing as it would have been helpful to locate this particular product of some research activity in a wider discourse. The introductory section of the article does not provide any information as to the purpose behind the interviews that we are led to believe generated the texts that are supplied. In this regard the reader is directly confronted with the 'contents' of five interviews. No information is provided as to the nature of the framing of the interviews. It would assist the reader in ascertaining the origins of some of the language reported in several interviews and used by the writer himself, e.g. political correctness. (It would be accepted that in the event of a questionnaire being used as part of the methodology, that a copy of the questionnaire would normally be included.)

It might also have been more instructive for the readers if the context of the 'particular' study that prompted this article was elaborated on so that readers could locate the comments made in the context of the schools that these 'teachers' worked in. Even the identity/role of the interviewees is unclear as they are referred to as 'five experienced teachers', then they become 'experienced remote school teachers, administrators and support staff' and that 'most have had experience in the Northern regions of the Territory'. The writer defends the anonymous nature of his presentation style as necessary '... to focus upon the principles of what the teachers said rather than on who they are' (p.

26). This is presented as unproblematic. However, given the nature of the claims made both by the interviewees and the writer, more information should have been provided. Readers might not agree with the writer that it is entirely possible to so easily separate the speaker from the speech. There is no evidence presented by the writer to demonstrate that he engaged this small group of teachers in a rational discussion about their claims, so that he could clearly demonstrate that he tested these claims. We are presented with the claim that the interviewees are entitled to the protection afforded through anonymity. No attempt is made to protect the Batchelor College staff who while unnamed, are geographically located. Therefore these staff potentially can very easily be identified by readers with little more than scant knowledge of this teacher education program. Similarly there is no evidence that the Batchelor College students involved have been provided with any protection in this by either the writer of the article or the editorial panel of the Journal that published the article. It should be noted that all of these Indigenous educators will be known in an extensive circle of communities in the Southern region of the Northern Territory. Clearly there should be consistency in the ways that people's rights are protected and in this case both the writer and the Editorial panel must accept some responsibility for acting irresponsibly by not providing an even-handed protection to those involved. Protected by their anonymous nature, both the 'teachers' (or whatever role they fill) and the writer are able to make a set of serious allegations without being able to demonstrate that:

- what is claimed is true
- what is claimed is comprehensible
- that it is sincere
- the participants had the right to participate in these discussions.

(See Carr and Kemmis (1986) for further discussion.)

This review suggests that the article as published creates a negative and stereotypical view of Batchelor College staff and students that is neither true nor comprehensible. The issues of sincerity and participants' right to participate in this unsymmetrical discussion are left problematically unanswered because of the writer's silences on significant issues.

The writer explained that he was unable to interview any Aboriginal teachers due to work commitments (p. 26). He is silent on the mechanism he used to select the teachers interviewed or the way that these interviews were conducted although mention is made of the 'culturally specific apparatus' (p. 26) the telephone in relation to his limited explanation of non-inclusion of Aboriginal educators. The writer's obscuration of the processes he used fails to convince that this research process was not 'heavily weighted and subject to getting the answer that the answerer thinks the questioner wants' (p. 27).

With attention to the interviews, the writer reaches the following conclusion:

In the opinions of those interviewed, the politically correct social justice issues are being addressed at the expense of imparting appropriate teaching strategies

and further he identifies the need to ensure that:

...the essence of affirmative action and appropriate standards are not sacrificed for the reasons of shallow political correctness (p. 31).

Readers really do require more information about these 'teachers' if a fair and reasonable assessment is to be made about their comments. Readers should be given more information about the breadth of their experience, the specific schools that they have worked in and their work history both with Aboriginal educators and actual Batchelor College graduates. This could easily be achieved through brief but concise biographical information or portraits (but still anonymous) that gave a clear indication of not only the **experience** of the interviewees, but information that clearly would indicate their competence to make the claims that are presented for consideration. There is clearly a question of competence here that must be addressed when serious claims of both incompetence and unsuitability are made in relation to Batchelor college staff and students. Where is the information, other than the reference to length of careers, that specifically establishes the foundation for these educators to establish their own competencies, let alone comment on the competencies of their peers and colleagues (whether current, past or future) and the competencies of the group of teacher educators involved?

Buckley also fails to provide details of the interpretive framework used to identify issues

raised by this small group of 'teachers'. Instead of indicating the origins of the classificatory system that he applied Buckley introduces the readers to Bourke *et al.* (1993) and lists a suggested appropriate set of principles. No evidence is provided as to why this specific choice of principles is made or its specific relevance to the context of Batchelor College teacher education programs. The interpretive framework that then is applied stems from the imported terms of Bourke *et al.* and does not derive from either the language or terms used by the interviewees. Moreover, Buckley does not indicate the specific ways that the evidence he claims exists in the texts of the interviews relates to the conclusions that are formed.

have been provided with the opportunity to move forward. In terms of their own professional development it would have provided a learning time for each teacher if they were expected to define some of the terms that they applied in their critique of Batchelor College, etc., for example. As a result of Buckley's surface and polemical treatment of the issue of political correctness, readers are left unsure if there is a suggestion that there should be a return to times when racist, sexist, paternalistic, patronising and fascist behaviour was an unchecked element common in the culture of schools and education providers. Or is it related to perceptions of orthodoxy related to particular teaching fads? Buckley sadly lets us down because he didn't ask!!

Finding a Way Forward

The most frustrating part in reading this article is that it does not provide a way forward. Apart from the ethical issues and other concerns raised in this review, a major flaw in the methodology adopted by Buckley is that the interviewees don't appear to

Looking at the reports of the interviews as texts that can be used to generate important issues that demand attention in relation to the context of the schools and communities served by Batchelor College, we could develop a way to indicate appropriate questions that could be used to interrogate these 'teachers' as a collective.

Possible themes that arise from the reports of interviews provided by Buckley	Direct quotes from 'teachers'	Some pertinent questions that could have been asked
Professional development needs	The staff of the College have an unwillingness to separate the professional from the personal person.	How were you introduced to Batchelor College's involvement in your workplace? Was it at a regional level or at the local level? What messages have you got related to Batchelor College courses from Regional Office staff? Principals? Teachers?
Ownership and control of education programs	... no liaison with the schools or the communities actually takes place	Who introduced you to your role in your current workplace? What mention was made of involvement with Batchelor College? What have you done to alert Batchelor College about this difficulty? What happened?
Communication of aspirations	... the aspirations of the graduates do not fit with the aspirations the community has for the school	What have you done about this? What happened? How did you feed this issue back to Batchelor College, to the graduates and to the community? What suggestions do you have for breaking down the likelihood of these divergent expectations and aspirations?

Possible themes that arise from the reports of interviews provided by Buckley	Direct quotes from 'teachers'	Some pertinent questions that could have been asked
Reciprocity between participants and participating institutions	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	<p>What have you done about this?</p> <p>How can Batchelor College staff be given insights into the realities you face in your workplace?</p> <p>What are some of the difficulties that you imagine that Batchelor College staff must face because they don't have these experiences?</p>
Professional ethics issues and grievance procedures	<p>... graduates are still expected to pass probation ... punctuality, assuming a reasonable workload and absences</p> <p>In many cases students did not complete or attend practicums but were passed by the College.</p> <p>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.</p>	<p>Who is responsible for making decisions about probation after appointment?</p> <p>How many graduates have you worked with for whom this has been a particular issue?</p> <p>How do you deal with this situation as a co-member of the team?</p> <p>What are some of the issues that have arisen from your interaction with graduates related to this?</p> <p>With regard to these non-performers, were they part-time students at Batchelor or full-time students?</p> <p>How were these graduates recruited, inducted to the school, appraised and counselled at the School level?</p>
High attrition rate of Indigenous educators	The high attrition rate of graduates is a real concern. ... most graduates seem to have little sustainable skill due to scant attention to core curriculum	<p>How many graduates have you worked with?</p> <p>What sorts of skills do these graduates have? (strengths)</p> <p>Are there any ways that you have found you can assist graduates in this situation?</p>
Personnel selection and procedures	Tutors often do the work for the students and lecturers do not have recent primary school experience.	<p>What could be done by Batchelor College to avoid this situation?</p> <p>When you say 'often' could you explain what you mean?</p> <p>Why do you think that recent primary school experience is necessary?</p> <p>Have you taken this issue up with Batchelor College?</p> <p>What happened?</p>

From discussions such as these much more detail would have emerged that would have provided suggestions for further action. There is subsequently a spin-off of an approach like this, that Buckley has ignored — the chance that there may be a receptive audience amongst both Batchelor College staff and students to this sort of information as a possibility to move forward constructively. However, the likelihood at the moment is that they will read his research in an international journal and rightfully feel wronged in being judged with scant evidence in this public forum by an unknown jury.

In his conclusion, Buckley draws our attention to 'the principles of professional development outlined by Raeburn [sic] *et al.* (1993)'. It is unfortunate that Buckley did not research the origins of the principles listed by Raeburn. It will probably surprise him that these principles in fact derive from the work of a large number of educators who have worked either as Batchelor College lecturers, tutors, students or consultants to the Batchelor College teacher education program. The eclectic origins of these principles are a demonstration of the successful outcomes that can emerge from a commitment to working constructively on controversial and difficult issues. Buckley fails to convince that he has the perception to see that the gaps between our hopes and what happens are the

stuff of life. Dealing with these gaps requires a level of sophistication and sensitivity that is lacking from this portrayal of the view of the 'teachers'. It is hoped that readers will not fail to appreciate that Batchelor College's contribution over the last two decades deserves a more rigorous and fair assessment than Buckley provides. For those readers who missed the March/April issue, don't bother!!

References

- Carr, W. and Kemmis, S. (1986) *Becoming Critical: Education, Knowledge and Action Research*, rev. edn. Brighton, Sussex: Falmer Press.
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Call for Submissions

The Editors of *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* welcome submissions such as:

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- ◆ book reviews
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- ◆ reports on relevant conferences
- ◆ information about resource centres and how to access them
- ◆ resources and materials for teachers and students.

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All material should be sent to:

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