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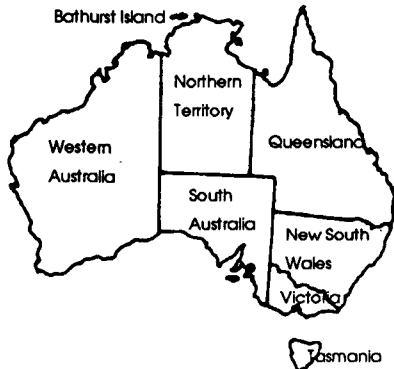


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Aboriginal Education — A Reality in the 1990s¹

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My topic today is Aboriginal education — a reality in the 1990s. To be more specific, I should say Tiwi education is a reality in the 1990s. For it is in the Tiwi context that education has taken a giant step forward. This is because firstly we are working together to Aboriginalise the school — or rather to localise the school. Secondly, I have been challenged to 'let go', to move away from the dominant role as Principal (i.e. non-Aboriginal, non-Tiwi Principal). This challenge came as late as May 31 1995 from our present Assistant Director of Catholic Education.

I feel that to be true to my topic I need first of all to refer to three educationalists and their philosophies that over the years have been a spring-board and stamping ground for me. I refer to Paulo Freire, Martin Buber and Professor Hedley Beare.

In his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire speaks of education as 'an act of depositing in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor'. This, he states, is 'the banking concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing and storing the deposits'. In this concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing.

Against this banking concept of education, Freire pleads to educators to abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with problem-posing/problem-solving by people in their relationship with the world. He calls such education 'problem-posing' education. He sees education as the practice of freedom — as opposed to education as the practice of domination. Freire helped the oppressed to see the world not as a static reality but as a **reality in process**, in transformation.

I will refer later to this point of reality.

Freire's three philosophical assumptions upon which his approach to education are founded are:

- humanisation is the basic calling
- people are capable of changing their world
- education, as an act of knowing, is never neutral — it always has a political consequence.

I will dwell now on Freire's second assumption, that people are capable of changing their world and we are capable of coming to a critical consciousness of our reality to the point where we can act to change it. This is the reality of Aboriginal education in the 1990s.

Martin Buber lived from 1878 to 1965. He was a Jewish writer and philosopher. In his book, *Education Between Man and Man*, the point that struck me was when he stated that across the whole extent of the planet new human beings are born who are characterised already and yet have still to be characterised — this is a myriad of realities, but also one reality. The child, not just the individual child, individual children, but the **child** is certainly a reality. Therefore, as the child is a reality, then education must become a reality.

¹ This paper, and the following one by Teresita Puruntayameri, were presented at the Research Council of Education in the Northern Territory in August, 1995.

Aboriginal education must also become a reality.

Buber's thinking on education is profoundly beautiful and deeply human, and his understanding that 'education is ultimately shaped out of inclusiveness, reverence, grace of being, friendship and humility' is one, I believe, to be treasured, to be inspired by and to return to over and over. I can say this because I see the same inclusiveness, reverence, grace of being and humility evident in the Tiwi people as a whole, and this stands out in stark contrast to the competitiveness of the Western world.

In his paper, Professor Hedley Beare, our First Secretary of the Northern Territory Education Department and now Professor of Education at the University of Melbourne, has something similar to say. In his paper, 'The curriculum for the 1990s — a new package or a new spirit', Beare states that:

I have tried to suggest that perhaps there is too much curricular 'theology' around at the moment. We are too rationalistic, too earnest in our planning, too mechanistic, too deadly serious. We would enable our younger generation and ensure their future more adequately, I think, if we reinstated compassion, responsibility, and respect for the incredible oneness of the cosmos, if we valued gaiety, playfulness and an organic connectedness in our education.

With the thoughts of these three educationalists I venture to look at Aboriginal Tiwi education in the 1990s as a reality. That is to say, I feel it has come of age and there is no turning back. We have offered many 'new' packages, as Beare rightly stated. Some were good, others mean nothing to the children we strove to educate, because we imposed rather than questioned and listened. I agree that what we need in Aboriginal education is a new spirit. Yet if we are the educators we claim to be, we only have to look at what is uppermost in the lives of Aboriginal people, *viz* the spirit. In Tiwi way, the 'spirit' or Yaminga as the Tiwi call it, means life, spirit, breath, pulse. In other words, it is the line of life. Perhaps we have bypassed the very core of all Aboriginal education, *viz* the right to be the people God created them to be. We have had our Freires and Bubers in the Northern Territory. We have had people of that educational calibre, such as Beth Graham, Sr Teresa Ward, Fran Murray, Stephen Harris, all pleading with us to allow education to be owned by Aboriginal people.

It is only now that this reality has begun to take its rightful place in our educational world.

And what does it mean? It means that we move from a telling to a listening phase, but not only listening, but hearing and heeding. In an effort to see therefore, what this listening might be calling us to in the Aboriginal context, we must proceed with caution, conscious of the wide group of people we would need to lead, the way we would need to follow. We would need to recognise the reality that Aboriginal people never act as 'leader' in the mainstream way of being leader. Leadership, from a Tiwi perspective, is group leadership. We need to give time for Aboriginal people to develop their style of leadership which will hopefully not be a copy of our culture's climbing the professional ladder. Family education meets families where they are in their spirit, not where we educational leaders wish they were. Each family system (skin group/spirit) has a way of organising and integrating these ideas and only the person and the system can tell where they are and what they need. This means for us in the 1990s that we have to look at learning and therefore at education for learning in a different way from in the past. Here in the spirit is the reality.

I mentioned the phrase 'family education', for until we can get the parents and extended family to own education, I feel that education 'for what' will never come to fruition amongst Aboriginal people. Education will remain a 'school-based' task rather than a family task. For the very seed of learning is implanted deeply in Aboriginal people, for as I see it the most powerful learning influence in the early life of the child is the relationship he or she has with those around him/her.

Furthermore, if these questions are to be answered there has to be dialogue. As Freire suggests, everyone has different perspectives based on their own experiences. In order to solve problems, people need to engage in a dialogue to acknowledge the other person's perspective and find some common ground. Dialogue, rather than argument, accepts the validity of another point of view.

It is this validity of another point of view that urged me to write about Aboriginal education in the 90s. We all realise that education should have, as one of its main tasks, the ability to invite people to believe in themselves.

I am speaking of my own involvement in Aboriginal education. For many years I worked for and believed in the banking concept of education. I failed many times to invite people to believe in themselves. And it is here that, with Freire and Buber, I have come to believe in the philosophy of Hedley Beare. He writes:

There was once an American sociologist who told a Shinto priest that he could not understand Eastern theology. The Shinto priest replied, 'We do not have a theology. We dance.'

And Hedley Beare takes this up by saying:

What our students need in the 1990s then, and I am in deadly earnest, is the message of the heart, the awareness that the universe is a harmonious dance and that usually our best response is to let our spirit dance with it. For the 1990s we need educators, parents, schools and a society who can help children to identify with the **being-ness** and **becoming-ness**, that dance, in balanced harmony, at the expansive heart of the universe.

Who can best give this to our Aboriginal children in the nasty here and now? We see the harmony, the balance of our Aboriginal students disintegrating because of the problem of drug addiction and the power of the socialisation process. It doesn't matter how many new packages we put in our schools if we fail to 'invite' people to believe in themselves. And where to begin? With our Aboriginal teachers. And it is at this point that I now invite you to travel with me into the 'Milimika' ground — the ground prepared for a Tiwi ceremony — for it is here that I am learning to be part of the group, rather than a leader. The Northern Territory Education Policy, as we all know, has for quite a few years set up strategies to train Aboriginal people to become teachers, literacy workers, principals. We began this early in the 1970s. In fact, on the death of Anastasia Kelantamama, our first Batchelor-trained teacher, the then school board members approached me to rename the school 'Murrupurtiyanuwu' in memory of her. What was this saying? Perhaps it was pointing out that a new spirit was needed. This was in 1990.

Also at this time a Tiwi concept emerged of naming the stage where their children were. Instead of classifying classes in the Western way, we moved into Tiwi classification. By this I mean instead of 'Pre-School', 'Early Childhood', 'Primary' and 'Secondary', the Tiwi name these stages based on

physical growth rather than on academic progress. Thus we have: 'Pwakayini' (Pre-School), 'Jirnani' (Early Childhood), 'Jipakiyayi' (Primary) and 'Yangali' (Secondary).

In 1992 we, on our own initiative, set up a training program for a Tiwi Deputy Principal as no government funding was available. Yet something was missing, and we never moved from the Western mode of authority structures. I can see now that I, as Principal, had not understood Freire's point that everyone has different perspectives based on their own experiences. We non-Aboriginal people were raised with the values of our parents and the teaching experiences of our grandfathers and forebearers who provided the currents in which we assimilate and accommodate new experiences. Our Aboriginal people were born amid other currents and have other collective memories and aggregate experiences in an entirely different swim. I see now it was my insecurity to allow others to dialogue.

This year, Murrupurtiyanuwu is grateful to Bill Griffiths, our Director of Catholic Education, and to Sister Trudy Keur, the Assistant Director, for the interest and support given to us in this, our first year of having a Principal-in-Training. Every three weeks, Sister Trudy visits us and mentors us along the way. Both Bill and Trudy set up meetings with the Tiwi Land Council, Local Council, Women's Group, school staff and local teachers before the program was launched. I was given freedom to set out with Zita, the Principal-in-Training as I thought best. Term One was almost a disaster. I couldn't let go; we had no infrastructure and very little dialogue. I was Principal and had very little time to train a Tiwi Principal.

Let me now return to the Milimika circle mentioned earlier. The term 'Milimika' refers to a cleared ground that has been prepared for ceremony. It is sometimes difficult to find who is really leader; yet the ceremony goes on because of the knowledge of the culture and what is demanded by the group. Now, how does this 'circle' fit in with the processing of learning — the school? The answer is, in this 'Milimika' circle you have the infrastructure to hold a ceremony. I have found, by listening at last to the Tiwi, that they look at education and the organisation of the school as a 'Milimika' ground.

The school is a place of ceremony, because things happen at school. Different people are leaders at

different times. This gives the infrastructure needed to be at times a leader and at times a follower.

At this point I would like to share how this tremendous insight shook the solid foundation of my Western style of leadership.

On one visit of our Assistant Director for Catholic Education, we were asked to draw up an 'infrastructure' suggesting who we thought could support Zita, our Principal-in-Training. This was the authentic 'Tiwi way' of group leadership. Gently, the proposal was indicated. Yet in my insecurity I held on to the running of the school in the only way I knew. Zita went ahead. She chose four local teachers, one from each skin group, to support her. Here was the infrastructure, the Milimika circle. She also chose four elders, one from each of the skin groups. This was in place, yet I was not coping.

Term Two 1995 commenced very shakily. There were quite a few problems and upsets. Then on May 31, at one of Trudy's visits to Zita and myself, I was challenged to look at the infrastructure Zita had set up and to use it. Like St Paul, I was thrown from my secure saddle and the moment of truth was before me. Physically I left the room, in complete pain because of my inability to 'let go'. Yet here was the gauntlet of challenge to really become a group member of the Milimika circle. The ceremony had begun.

We held meeting after meeting, following the pattern of the Milimika circle. Sometimes we were leaders, sometimes we were followers. We began to realise that Hedley Beare's philosophy could be ours. We began to dance, i.e. to dialogue in a balanced harmony. The validity of another point of view became a reality.

This is why I say that in Tiwi education there is no turning back. At Murrupurtiyanuwu now there is no Assistant Principal, but rather in our ceremony ring there are five people. These five are Tiwi dialoguing together, at times with the whole staff.

At present, the Milimika group is working through the Assistant Principal's duty statement and re-writing it to meet the needs of the school in the here and now.

In discussing and taking on new responsibility I see, as Beare states, that we are creating a new

spirit here at Murrupurtiyanuwu — 'we need in short a new spirit to infuse education, not simply a new package of programs'.

Taking on responsibility for our Tiwi women is difficult. They are 'group' people and find it daunting to confront. Thus in the Milimika circle the group does not confront the individual. When plans go wrong, as they surely will in all walks of life, the question we ask now is, 'what then?' This is proving life-giving. For when we meet 'what then' we are learning to be responsible for our plans and in many cases learning a lesson that discussion together is the only solution to find the 'what then' answer in our journey through localisation.

This group meets one afternoon a week with Zita and myself to dialogue. As Freire stated, people need to dialogue, to acknowledge the other person's perspective and to find some common ground. We do this on ceremony ground.

What about the curriculum matters that need to be addressed? Without an Assistant Principal, the group invited non-Tiwi teachers to take on more responsibility for the English Language area. The Co-ordinators (Primary and Secondary) have responded to the invitation and have taken full responsibility for all matters relating to the Western mode of education. We feel good about the changes, and we have commenced to 'dance' in our circle. We feel the infrastructure is in place and its main task is to invite and re-invite people to believe in themselves.

I would like to stress again Beare's philosophy that what is needed in the 1990s is 'the message of the heart'. I feel that our local Tiwi teachers can do this because they know where the children are coming from, what they appreciate, how they feel, what they find difficult and what they find easy, what motivates them, how to get them interested and how to make education meaningful for them.

Barry Dwyer, who is Area Administrator in the Catholic Education office in Parramatta, New South Wales and is a much sought-after speaker at education conferences, refers to this message of heart in his recent paper 'Time for a primary manifesto'. He writes:

You just don't hear a lot of talk (officially, anyway) these days about 'growing', 'playing', 'discovering',

'creating', 'experimenting', 'exploring', 'learning' and 'celebrating'. I suppose it's all too soft and mushy — too 'primary' — in the hard-headed world of 'competencies' and 'excellence'.

Let us remember that for the Tiwi teacher (and I would stress here that this is true of all Aboriginal groups) it is the **who** they relate to that is important. Each group has an insider's knowledge of their group — sometimes not easy to articulate.

We need to take note of the hidden meaning of ways of being and doing, and who better than the people from the inside. The 'spirit' is what gives life, so for the Tiwi it makes immense sense to have a leadership which children sense can give life — hence the representation from each of their 'spirit'-yiminga' groups gives life to Tiwi education.

In conclusion, having invited you to 'dance' with us as we move into the reality of education at Murrupurtiyanuwu, you will, I hope, have seen that this reality for the Tiwi is becoming firmly rooted not only in the content of the curriculum but in the very warp and woof of their world view. Having placed their own infrastructure via the Milimika ring, I believe that they have taken on what Hedley Beare urges all educators to do, 'to value gaiety, playfulness and an organic connectedness in our education'.

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Group Leadership Towards Aboriginalisation or Localisation at Murrupurtiyanuwu

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Milimika commenced at Murrupurtiyanuwu when we realised that for a Tiwi person it is too difficult to stand alone in leadership. Thus as Principal-in-Training I came up with the idea of a Milimika group.

The word 'Milimika' has two meanings in Tiwi:

- a cleared ground made by families to eat, sleep and talk when they are out bush
- a cleared ground made for ceremonies, 'pukamani' where Tiwi people 'yoyi' dance inside the ring, remembering the deceased person.

Also in the 'kurlama' ring, only men perform singing as they walk around inside the circle.

The meaning that I took from 'Milimika' is that school is like the ceremonial ring. Sometimes as a leader I dance, sometimes as group leaders we dance.

Our philosophy of the leadership role in the Milimika circle is that people work together as a group:

- group discussion
- listen to one another
- each has their own say
- group decision-making on educational issues, e.g. bilingual education and interviewing new staff. If it's a Tiwi person we ask the spouse to be present.