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Towards a Composite Educational Research Methodology: Balancing the Authority Equation in Aboriginal Education

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Introduction

Education is not, on its own, a solution to inequitable power relationships (Bullivant, 1987: 45).

In northern Australia Aboriginal 'settlements' or communities are, in the main, the product of a variety of west-centric priorities, the needs, for example of missionaries to keep prospective converts conveniently at hand to maintain the pressure of the Christian conversion process or for government agencies to distribute welfare from single accessible locations. The establishment of fixed communities usually brought considerable advantage and power to those mainstream organisations which established them. However, along with some obvious physical benefits for the local people, such as improved access to some of the accruals of west-centric technology and welfare, came a variety of hazards and obstacles to the maintenance of a lifestyle with which local people felt secure and confident.

Perhaps one of the most significant impacts on Aboriginal lifestyle has been the advent of a generally mainstream-type education structure which, in its formalising and timetabling of educational processes, its preoccupation with literacy and largely mainstream concepts and skills, repudiates much of the current Aboriginal world view. But even more significant in its impact on community infrastructures must have been the

initial and continuing invasion of mainstream teaching staff which began with its arrival. For, in many communities, education remains the single largest employer of mainstream people.

Time impacts on mainstream ontology more than it seems to on the Aboriginal. It is only in recent years that a sensitive awareness of the dramatic consequences which ignoring Aboriginal perspectives has had on their way of life has begun to inform mainstream thinking. In most instances the changes are irrevocably in place; in many, languages have been lost or are being lost and with them, as the vehicles of local culture, many local traditions and beliefs. There may be no going back, and it may be equally difficult to control the forward momentum of time because, as Habermas (1963) attests, there is a certain futility in the notion of 'making' history in a conscious and rational way, and 'only by a higher stage of reflection, a consciousness of acting human beings moving forward in the direction of emancipation' can history be rationalised.

Coombs (1990) writes that the National Aboriginal Education Policy (NAEP) is 'assimilationist and will promote the destruction of Aboriginal culture and the society which embodies it' because it fails to recognise that significant numbers of Aboriginal people still prioritise the maintenance of their own culture over the acquisition of the skills and knowledge needed to operate in the mainstream. He urges greater consultation with parents, elders and other community members, and education modelled on the processes traditional to Aboriginal people.

This would be compatible with the early stages of acquiring literacy and numeracy in English. When they are secure in their Aboriginal identity it will be time for them to face the task of confronting ours (Coombs, 1990).

More recently, Coombs (1994: 187-188) expresses concern about a system that places the highest level of decisions on their behalfs in the hands of bureaucrats based in offices remote from communities. He identifies the home-grown initiatives which derive from the both-ways cultural competency of Aboriginal people as a vehicle for research and innovation influencing Aboriginal autonomy through, for example, educational 'theory and practice of pedagogy generally' (Coombs, 1994: 198).

The Significance of Discourse Theory to the Research

Foucault's (1972: cover notes) definition of discourse theory aims:

to reveal, in its specificity, the levels of 'things said': the condition of their emergence, the forms of their accumulation and connection, the rules of their transformation, the discontinuities that articulate them.

Many of the assumptions which accompany issues identified in this paper are informed by mainstream or 'dominant west-centric' discourses which Muecke (1981) identified as **anthropological, romantic and racist**, and by Aboriginal discourses, such as those Sheridan (1988: 76) proposes in response to Muecke's, as 'of a political identity as Aboriginal, a discourse of a political survival and independence'.

An evolving and popular discourse, of importance to educational debate, negates the idea of regarding Aboriginal culture as in decline and anticipating its imminent destruction and alienation in its traditional manifestations, instead attributing to it new meaning as essentially creative, 'producing new cultural forms and social mechanisms' (Jones, 1992: 63). The realities of time are critical to mainstream discourse of Aboriginality, relating as it proceeds, new notions or perceptions of the place of Aboriginal people in the current social scheme of things. What was acceptable yesterday may become inappropriate and *vice versa* (Lattas, 1992: 46).

Wallace (1990: 162) too reminds us of dangerous assumptions which attempt to legitimise the dualism between discourse and the world:

the discussion of liberation, or empowerment, when directly opposed to the condition of

powerlessness or enslavement as though the two were mutually exclusive, seems to demand simple arguments that ultimately neutralise the ability to describe or ameliorate the problem the argument was initially designed to address.

The Research Issues Identified

Institutional racism is covert and relatively subtle; it originates in the operation of essential and respected forces in the society and is consequently accepted. It manifests itself in the laws, norms and regulations which maintain dominance of one group over another. Because it originates out of society's legal, political and economic system, it is sanctioned by the power group in that society and at least tacitly accepted by the powerless, it receives very little public condemnation (adapted from Carmichael and Hamilton, 1967).

Contrary arguments also need to be considered, accepted or disregarded, in a discussion such as this. Maori writer Alan Duff, whose controversial novel subsequently became the equally controversial movie, *Once Were Warriors*, provides an interesting alternative insight into the plight of the Maori in Aotearoa-New Zealand, that an assumption has been for many years that the 'rot [which] set in from the outside' was of the mainstream's making. He contends that the real problem for Maori people is that they are by tradition and culture not a self-questioning people, but that their way has been to value, respect and unquestioningly accept the opinions of their elders. He sees a real danger of Maori culture becoming lost in this authority of retrospective thinking in an era of dramatic mainstream-influenced change (Duff, 1993). The Aboriginal world view also gives a high regard to the experience and knowledge of age and views questions in a less inquisitorial manner than the mainstream. However, whether this is a superior or inferior characteristic is purely a value judgement.

In fact, Eckermann (1994: 2-3) says '... no culture can be measured or evaluated against another'. Christie identifies strengths for both world views, that the mainstream enables us to make life more comfortable but this, in consequence, affords us more power than we can sensibly manage, while the Aboriginal world view coherently merges people with each other, their land, and the 'dreaming', which may adversely affect their coping with the mainstream (Christie, 1985: 13). While research tends to distance itself from the influence of value

judgements, educators are forced, by the imposition of the mainstream's educational culture, with its accompanying west-centric curriculum, methodologies and administrative procedures, on Aboriginal students to participate in what is essentially an outcome which supports the notion of the 'superiority' of mainstream education.

When Aboriginal teachers express their concerns regarding schooling they frequently berate the imposition of mainstream education and its pedagogy, curriculum or bureaucracy on their cultural learning environment. Nirrpuranydji (1991) describes local concerns about the school at Gapuwiyak, of how the balanda (mainstream Australian) teachers brought their own curriculum, 'a Balanda curriculum, and imposed it on the community's children with little consultation' (Nirrpuranydji, 1991: 85). In the same text Bindarriyl *et al.* (1991) describe how, in one Aboriginal school, the predominantly mainstream staff, perceived by the minority local teaching staff as the 'power brokers', preached 'Aboriginalisation' but did not appear to want to part with or share their authority. To address this, the local Aboriginal teaching staff arranged to meet without the mainstream staff, to take charge of Aboriginal and mainstream teaching in the school because they saw that both affected their destinies. At the same time they urged mainstream staff to go into the community and learn about local Aboriginal culture, contending that it was reasonable to expect such learning to be both ways. The mainstream response ostensibly was to meet the demands of the local staff but to resist, whenever the opportunity arose, by tactics such as applying inappropriate mainstream pedagogies to Aboriginal cultural education activities. Kwabena Nketia (1988: 104) observes that whether the tone of any such response is grudging or enthusiastic is important because this affects its effectiveness. One Aboriginal clerical worker stopped working at an Aboriginal school because 'every day when I went to work the [main-stream] principal was always sitting at my table doing all my work' (Bindarriyl *et al.*, 1991: 170).

However, the mainstream might argue with equal validity that even in schools where Aboriginal teaching methodologies have been liberally employed — in some instances for at least the past

decade — schools seem no more effective and attendance, always an issue and an indicator, has not improved. But mainstream assumptions that their way is 'best' and that the process of assimilation should continue to its end are being contested. In many communities a struggle has begun to return the authority of knowledge and power which Aboriginal people believe was wrested from them, sometimes overtly, sometimes insidiously, by mainstream people who may or may not have had a genuine concern for the best interests of Aboriginal people. Consequently the assimilation of the Aboriginal person and culture into the mainstream is being challenged and the most visible challenges are taking place in schools and community education centres.



Of course one of the obvious difficulties in this contestation of ownership is in the variability of each community's situation. No two are alike and there is a real range of degrees by which each is influenced, either by their Aboriginal world views or the encroachment of mainstream world views. A measure of both may be in the evidence of their 'cultural baggage', for example how much traditional ceremony is maintained, or what dependency there is on the provision of mainstream processed foods, as two extremes. Some communities, as groups of Aboriginal people, have found the exercise of maintaining their cultural activities and perspectives easy, while others struggle to retain even a semblance of pre-contact lifestyle.

Then there are, among the artificialities of these settled camps, situations where more than one language group 'keeps house'. In some instances a number of different, even unrelated groups may share a site where the land, in fact, belongs only to a single group, the traditional landowners. In these settings not only is there a relationship to cultivate and maintain with the representatives of the mainstream but also with the 'immigrants' from other neighbouring countries.

The Problem

The resolution of any kind of power shift or balance is not assisted by the many complex issues which the arrival of the mainstream and the subsequent establishing of communities have brought.

However, in this writer's opinion, it is probably only in the acceptance of a mutually negotiated power equation that a satisfactory resolution to any struggle in the domain of education can be resolved by all of the parties implicated.

The system is unlikely, for example, to accept any changes in administration, methodology or curriculum delivery which excessively complicate procedures already in place or bring about a perceived decline in the quality of the education process, mainstream or otherwise. Aboriginal parties to any dispute are equally unlikely to accept any compromise which devalues or does not prioritise their needs and desires, particularly in support of the maintenance and evolution of their own cultural aspirations.

Also within both of these larger groups there will be sub-groups vying, often with estimable and persuasive reasoning, for support of their own interests which may, in turn, clash with those of their peers. An example may help to demonstrate this.

In one community there were concerns about afternoon attendance resulting from the negative impact of a long school day, which included an extended hour-long lunch, a requirement of the local community. Indigenous staff met with mainstream staff and agreed to run the school for the same number of hours but to start much earlier, to extend recess and to remove the lunch-hour entirely so that the school finished soon after the old lunch hour would have begun. An unexpected hesitation occurred when members of the mainstream in the community demanded that a return be made to the earlier timetable so that the school could maintain what they perceived as its 'duty of care' to their children while they, the parents, worked. They asserted that this had always been an unwritten but nevertheless understood condition of their employment in the community.

In fact a resolution was reached through agreement that the lunch hour would continue to run after school and, through a half-hour supervised session, bring the conclusion of school for their children back to the original time. In this way it seemed that the best interests of the local children and of the others were thus embraced. Nevertheless, it remains to be asked whether this change

constituted '... not a response of the community to the new circumstances confronting it but a change enforced by the wider society interfering in its internal practices' (Kukathas, 1992: 244).

So, whatever results, all internal and external influences must enter the final equation for, as T.S. Eliot suggests, it is illusory that cultural communities might be insulated from wider society; the illusion can only be sustained

by a careful fostering of local 'culture', culture in the reduced sense of the word, as everything picturesque, harmless and inseparable from politics, such as language and literature, local arts and customs (Eliot, 1962: 93).

Lijphart (1995: 283-286) promotes the idea of autonomy rather than sovereignty to allow groups to manifest themselves within larger society rather than be identified by the majority.

The minority person who adheres to a minority culture is likely to be looked upon as second class and second rate, his culture is disparaged as unworthy (Van Dyke, 1995: 50).

A Brief Survey of the Research Issues

Examination of a number of issues and the validity of their accompanying **assumptions**, through the employment of a variety of methodological instruments, is critical to the main thrust of the proposed research program.

These issues include that of **policy and administrative control**. Aboriginal teachers argue that they need to control the policy and administration of their schools. The mainstream resists this in a number of ways, including applying the argument that in many instances this is already the case or that their Aboriginal colleagues are not yet qualified to take on the associated tasks.

A variety of issues also need to be resolved within the main issues of **curriculum and assessment**. Among these are whose curriculum should be implemented and when, and what assessment criteria validate mainstream teaching and learning, and are Aboriginal expectations of outcomes necessarily the same? Investigation of the appropriateness of curriculum and assessment strategies and the agendas of power within them may deserve a separate research program.

On the issue of **pedagogy**, examples of subject-directed research worthy of note are offered in a collection of writings entitled *Aboriginal Pedagogy: Aboriginal Teachers Speak Out* (Bindarriyi, Yangarriny, Mingalpa, Warlkunji, 1991). Here Aboriginal teachers share research in areas such as pedagogy. The idea that pedagogical study should be constrained to classroom teaching practices tends to be rejected by Aboriginal teachers, but using learning environments other than the classroom is not well supported, at least in mainstream institutional practice, so its investigation as an Aboriginal concept is certainly appropriate to Aboriginal educational research (Henry and McTaggart, 1991: 40).

Both-ways education, another important issue, should mean access to and the equitable exchange and valuing of contributions of all members of a community (Elliott, 1989: 14). Many local teachers contend that the learning is all one-way for mainstream teachers and want the 'both-ways' process to apply to all. A concern of local teachers in Aboriginal schools is in the preservation and regular use of local languages in support and maintenance of local culture. As Torres (1988) says of her children's writings, teachers wish they could present a stand-alone oral culture, but are compelled to encourage written language by the contemporary context of learning.

I try to look at it in a realistic sense as much as possible. I would prefer to use the oral tradition but the society we live in today is largely not an Aboriginal system and it's very hard to maintain the traditional ways of handing down the cultural and historical information and expect our children to learn the stories off by heart ... If the old people are gone, your stories are gone too ... (Torres, 1988: 193).

Timetables impact seriously on two apparently incompatible world views of time — the linear mainstream and cyclical Aboriginal perspectives. Time has real implications for implementing timetables and, as has already been illustrated elsewhere in this paper, the timing of the school day. Some might even argue that school happens with too great a regularity and consistency for a culture which sees events as deciding timelines, rather than the reverse.

Regarding the issue of **staffing**, the ratio of local to mainstream staff is often one of the most visible manifestations of the balance of power in a

community school. What may be less visible is who actually holds the power. This should be a critical issue in the proposed research. Arguably the greatest ongoing expenditure in Aboriginal schools is in the maintenance of those structures which allow mainstream staff to continue to enjoy a quality of life matching expectations of mainstream living. Local staff might equally contend that this is an inequitable expense.

Where mainstream staff control maintenance of the physical resources of a school they apply mainstream expectations of 'reasonable wear and tear' to these. They may also argue that this is not a priority with their Aboriginal colleagues.

Mainstream staff sometimes argue that their Aboriginal colleagues seem apathetic about the very educational issues Aboriginal teachers have identified. Aboriginal teachers may counter this by identifying apathy as a sense, to them, of powerlessness. Because this is significantly distorted by the assumptions that accompany the perceptions of both groups, it needs investigation to establish the validity of claims. Kalantsis and Cope (1988: 56) speak too of the disillusionment suffered by minority group parents in general as the anticipated gains mainstream education promises to provide do not come their way and the importance of addressing this through research, with implementation of programs resulting from the findings of the research. Repeated over the years, the powerlessness of Aboriginal parents to change the pattern finally leads many to 'give it away'.

Addressing the Research Issues and Research Problem through a Composite Educational Research Methodology

The problem then lies in seeking research instruments capable of measuring, in a variety of ways, the strengths and weaknesses of the influence of each vested interest group in the equation of educational authority in an Aboriginal community school or education centre. Because any outcomes and consequent strategies or recommendations must be acceptable to all participant groups, the research methodologies employed should involve the subjects as participants, scrupulously address

equity and access, be ethical in process and outcome, and have the capacity to identify, measure and evaluate the impact of tensions in authority and the ways these manifest themselves.

The issues seem immediately to suggest the use of ethnography as a research tool. However, the weakness of ethnography is in its presentation of the objects of research 'as at once exotic and familiar' (Frow, 1995: 161) which appears to be no more than a reflection of west-centric romanticism, authenticating Said's Orientalist view of other cultures (Said, 1978). Ethnography, if employed, must incorporate King's (1990) notion of 'genuine partnership' with 'understanding based on mutuality', by involving the participants as the subjects, rather than objects, as far as is realistically possible, in the process and product of the research program.

Welch (1992: 57-78) advocates Comparative Educational Research, which stresses culture and cultural relations in diverse cultural groupings and settings as a means of comparing and contrasting educational settings. Usually, but not exclusively, these investigations are applied on a grand scale to State education systems as the subjects of comparison. However, this does not negate application to such a relatively small-scale setting. The problem exposed here presents a situation where tensions fostered by perceptions of education and cultural inequity and lack of access existing between cultural groups are manifested in an educational setting promoting what Williams (1977) describes as 'selective cultural tradition'.

There are several issues which might benefit from this form of research, including **both-ways learning, language maintenance and pedagogy**. As a methodology for research, Comparative Educational Research methodologies are valuable if they are employed in giving meaning to the ways in which 'power as domination [that deforms praxis]' operates within these subject groups (Bernstein, 1983: 156-158). What in fact exists seems to match Dewey and Kandels' (1954: 33) equation of a State's worth as being 'intimately related to the growth encouraged in the individual and the authority gained by consensus and tensions between order, as represented by community, and individuality'.

This project suggests a mix of comparative education methodology and intercultural relations with an emphasis on understanding rather than knowing. This might be achieved through four stages, firstly by objectivising the other culture, then methodically removing mutuality by retaining control, but acknowledging the subjects as entities, and finally returning to mutual dialogue but with neutral control. Concern for a human and liberating interest completes an hermeneutic emphasis on communication and understanding. What is critical to the overall credibility of the research, however, is the necessity for the subjects also to be the objective participants in the research process.

Moos (cited in Fisher, 1992: 221-246) proposes a research methodology which investigates and measures the interactions of personal relationships, personal growth and self-enhancement together with system maintenance and change dimensions, such as responsiveness to change. There is potential for its application in this setting in the seeking of teacher and student perceptions of the equation of the tensions alluded to above, perhaps through an evaluation of perceptions of interest and disinterest, such as by tracking behavioural patterns and changes. There is room for its application in examining pedagogy as it is perceived by both students and staff, local and mainstream. Any one of several developed instruments for measuring psychosocial environments could be applied to the setting and the outcomes collated and applied, with others, to a resolution of the overall research problem.

Bannister (1992) offers another research methodology in Program Analysis, which is particularly appropriate in dealing with a potentially small population base. Perhaps more than some other instruments it has real potential for interventionist outcomes written into its process, as it investigates the cause-effect chain of program operations and suggests, from assessment and evaluation of these, strategies for change in general and their improvement in particular.

It could well be applied to programs at the administrative operational level of a community education centre, such as in evaluating the efficiency, appropriateness and social justice of School Actions Plans and generally of school policy and administrative control. It might also be applied

to the implementation of State curriculum through the school's subject and classroom programming and assessment processes to ensure that it is genuinely inclusive of all clients within the school environment, throughout all stages of its 'outcomes hierarchy' to final achievement of the anticipated end-product, at the top. It might also be employed to examine aspects of the bilingual program, language and cultural maintenance and both-ways learning. Perhaps it might also be applied to an analysis of time use and of timetables as program resources.

While research models, such as Blake and Mouton's Square (cited in Cleary, 1992) may pose some ethical and implementation problems, because of the sensitivity of the issues under investigation, with carefully planned procedures and attention to the structure of the eliciting devices, such models should provide insightful perspectives of the views of different vested interests in the area of equitable delivery of education. The strength of these instruments lies in the immediacy of the visual representation of the perspectives. Research Models lend themselves to ease of interpretation as graphic representations.

A modification of the Blake and Mouton Square might offer a model with 'issues of equity', from 'no equity and access' at 0, to 'total equity and access' at 9, on the vertical axis, contrasted with educational and cultural outcomes (0, 'no attention to educational or cultural outcomes', to 9, 'all attention to both') on the horizontal axis. Cells representing different permutations and combination of the dichotomous responses would offer immediate informative data on perspectives under investigation. Matched with other research instruments, questioning similar aspects, such as an investigation of school and classroom environment and its relation to behaviour, it would provide powerful support for conclusions which are an outcome.

Historical Research (Rodwell, 1992) advances methodologies which are very appropriate to researching many of the issues and assumptions which inform this research problem. Historical Research prescribes an initially almost autobiographical documentary approach, chronicling self-analysis, socio-cultural roots, political biases, then a need for clarity and objectivity where the research problem is concerned,

and finally a review of all related literature and resources. The first of these makes sound sense, given the rhetoric the topic usually inspires; the second allows for opportunities to re-negotiate research pathways, ideal for research in a community where the only constant is change; and the third demands rigour and discipline in accurate recording, collection, interpretation and evaluation of evidence and data. Three categories of historical data are described as preliminary, through reference works and biographies, primary sources of documents, professional journals, relics (school photos, uniforms, commemorative journals) and oral testimony, and finally of secondary sources, such as an event described through a 'third' person.

Thus Historical Research could be employed in assessing equity issues to gauge the extent of past influences on issues such as the setting, buildings, plants and resources, curriculum, language and cultural maintenance, staffing and maintenance of infrastructures which currently support mainstream staff in communities. From the outcomes of such research, predictions might be posited on the strength of previous experience and understandings.

Ethical Considerations

In a setting such as that described, a survey of potential research instruments and methodologies should not conclude without reference to issues of ethics of research which demand that critical reflection on the body of theories, presuppositions and speculations informing the inquirer's observations be seen as being as important as scrupulous observation and data collection (Degenhardt, 1992: 13). Among the earliest needs of such a project would be resolving whether one or several communities might be invited to be involved. In fact it is usual for communities themselves to identify a research problem of this nature. This counters the frequently uninvited presence of the researcher whose only interest is invested in the qualification or kudos which follows a 'successful' research outcome. Other early preparations would involve formulating and implementing the ethics requirements and processes essential to negotiation of access to the problem site, documenting the settings, collecting and analysing data, keeping records and presenting the findings.

Summary and Conclusions

This paper has attempted to identify the balance of the equation of authority as it embraces knowledge and power, as an issue critical to the successful resolution of the tensions the writer contends affect the delivery of accessible, equitable and effective education to Aboriginal children. Briefly, through a survey of the literature, the paper examined issues related to this educational authority in Aboriginal education.

A brief survey was outlined of a possible complex of research methodologies drawing on key elements of a variety of educational research forms appropriate to researching the problem, to identify and evaluate the components and variables which inform the balance of the authority equation in Aboriginal education. Through these methodologies, data could be elicited and histories of the causes of the tensions perceived could be chronicled through all the participating groups and a variety of sources called on to internally and externally validate data. If it was then decided, on the evidence of the outcomes, that interventionist policy might assist in making equitable and accessible appropriate areas of education and cultural understanding, where these might relieve perceived tensions, then strategies might be recommended and applied.

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