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Section D: Discussion Papers

Aboriginal Education and Culture: The Parting of the Waters?

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Abstract

This paper looks at the issue of culture and identity formation in the context of Aboriginal education. The paper provides a brief overview of traditional understandings of the word 'culture' before it examines current notions and the ways those understandings impact on the formation of identity. The paper concludes with a look at some of the implications of such understandings for the policy and practice of Aboriginal education.

> But everyone needs a home so at least you can have some place to leave which is where most folks will say you must be coming from (June Jordan, 1985 cited in Rutherford, 1990: 14).

Culture — An Overview

Theorising about, understanding, and trying to explain culture gets more slippery the more one tries to rationalise about it. Billington *et al.* (1991: 1) offer as starters two everyday, commonsense meanings of the word. 'The first is the "best" achievements and products in art, literature and music. The second is the artificial growth or development of microscopic organisms ... deriving from a much older usage of the verb "to cultivate" ...' Geertz (cited in Billington *et al.*, 1991: 37) sees culture as '... consisting of clusters of rule-governed forms of life, a multiplicity of cultural systems'. Austin Broos (cited in Groome, 1996: 1) defines culture as '... that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society'. In a working paper prepared for the Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS) in South Australia, Harkins *et al.* (1996) are content to accept the Macquarie Dictionary definition of culture as 'the sum of ways of living built up by a group of human beings, which is transmitted from one generation to another.' Taken as representative of a particular world view, these definitions neatly compartmentalise the concept of culture into a neat package that implies generally popular acceptance. It fosters the (perhaps insufficiently unverbalised) view of culture as anchored in the many interpretations of Marxist social, economic and political ideology. However, as Groome (1996: 1) correctly points out, 'it is ... an interpretation that holds significant limitations and difficulties'.

Not the least of these limitations is that culture in the sense(s) outlined above would appear to be an immutable body of specific societal practices that tries to make sense of chaos. But even more importantly it ignores completely the notion of culture as choice and culture as difference. It does not tease out sufficiently what it is exactly that culture is or how it is related to identity. And it ignores even more massively the possibility of cultural dissonance or incongruence and the resulting dislocation of identity and belonging that are an insufficiently examined part of living in culturally plural societies.

Culture, like language, is a semiotic system; it gives meaning, shared by a group of people, for signs, symbols, and objects that are arbitrary. In and of itself it has no meaning or value and it is perhaps this that Wolcott (1991: 265) intends when he writes 'no one has ever acquired culture and no one ever will'.

If culture is a meaning-making system of a multiplicity of ways of doing things, then it is reasonable to consider culture as changing and responding to new needs and identities. Multiple ways of doing things within a society then, break down man-made polities of dominance and subordination and render inconsequential the tension between what Rutherford (1990: 10) calls '... the encounter of the marginal with its centre'. On the other hand, such a cultural politics of difference would be able to recognise rather than subsume difference, to coalesce diversity rather than uproot certainty and to critique notions of cultural essentialism while recognising '... both the interdependent and relational nature of identities ... and their political right of autonomy' (Rutherford 1990: 10). A significant difficulty with the traditional definitions of culture outlined above is their tendency to nurture mono-culturalism as a way of thinking and to represent 'otherness' as alien and therefore as something to be feared and marginalised.

It is perhaps with this very much in mind that what Bhabha (in Rutherford, 1990: 209) has to say about cultural change and transformation is of particular relevance to the Australian context and the notion of Aboriginality. Australia's current image of itself is that of a successfully culturally diverse society. As Bhabha (in Rutherford, 1990: 209) so clearly points out, the problem of endorsing cultural diversity and the resultant multicultural education policies that arise out of it is that while diversity may indeed be celebrated, it is always accompanied by a corresponding containment of it. In other words, while '... these other cultures are fine, ... we must be able to locate them within our own grid' (Bhabha in Rutherford, 1990: 208). Such a framework inevitably fosters a 'them and us' attitude and locates difference as being marginal to the cultural hegemony.

Thinking in terms of cultural **difference** on the other hand takes as givens, '...the difference between cultural practices, the difference in the construction of cultures within different groups ... [and leads inexorably to a realisation and acceptance of] incommensurability' (Rutherford, 1990: 209). For Bhabha (in Rutherford, 1990: 209), incommensurability is about dropping the facade of trying to '... fit together different forms of culture and to pretend that they can easily co-exist'. Instead, acknowledgement of incommensurability leads to a focus on the nexus between different practices (the development of the 'third space') to see where and how the new practice (read identity, culture) will fit. The application of Bhabha's thinking to the Australian context in general and to Aboriginal issues in particular is of great relevance, centred as it is around the fundamental concept of the politics of negotiation.

Contemporary theorising about culture then, moves away from the notion of culture as fixed and immutable and something that is acquired only by those 'in the know' to something that is '... constituted out of different elements of experience and subjective position ... [to] become something more than just the sum of their original elements' (Rutherford, 1990: 19). This is an important change of approach and emphasis as it focuses the epicentre of demonstrable cultural competence at the level of individual choice and experiences. It is what Goodenough (1963) called 'private culture' and what he changed to **propriospect** in 1971 (Wolcott, 1991: 260). For Goodenough, and, indeed, for Wolcott who developed this idea further, propriospect was '... the totality of the private, subjective view of the world and its contents that each human develops out of personal experience' (Wolcott, 1991: 258). Gramsci (cited in Rutherford, 1990: 19) puts it like this, 'Each individual is the synthesis not only of existing relations but of the history of these relations. He is a precis of the past'.

If the thinking of Rutherford, Wolcott and Gramsci indicate the application of the personal to the societal in the formation of a cultural identity, this is not to view people as **creators** of their culture in the sense that G. and L. Spindler (1991: 277) use it. Neither is it to view them simply as bearers but rather as agents of '... personal **adaptation** in the acquisition of cultural competencies' (Spindler, 1991: 227) (emphasis added). It is as Rutherford (1990: 20) puts it '... people make history, but not in conditions of [their] own choosing.'

Such an understanding of culture does not need to claim any universal truths, does not '... depend on a guarantee of meaning ... [and thereby reveals] the power structures that preserve the hierarchical relations of difference' (Rutherford, 1990: 20).

In the context of Aboriginal Australia it means that Aboriginality can now be thought of not so much in terms of difference within the 'grid' of the cultural hegemony, but more within the framework of creation of that 'third space' that Bhabha wrote about. Articulation of identity is now able to be formed not by seeking to express identity within the framework of the dominant hegemony, but as a differential collective expression of competency models that build on personal subjectivities.

Stuart Hall, who is a leading contributor to the (Birmingham) Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), expresses this much more eloquently when he differentiates between the views of cultural identity as a reflection of common historical experiences and shared cultural codes and cultural identity as an expression of difference. 'Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past ... [and it] undergo[es] constant transformation' (Hall in Rutherford, 1990: 225). But most importantly, Hall (1990: 233) theorises identity not as reaction by 'Other' to colonising '... exclusion, imposition and expropriation', but rather as continuing action by a people to '... justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence' (Hall in Rutherford, 1990: 237).

In his own way, Hollinsworth (1992: 141) offers a model for the creation of the 'third space'. In examining Aboriginality as descent, as cultural continuity and as resistance he seeks to inform the search for Aboriginal identity by suggesting his preference for Aboriginality as resistance. I think that what Hollinsworth offers is a genuine attempt to make a difference for a silenced minority; his article deals with the small everyday component parts of the much bigger picture that theorists like Bhabha, Rutherford and Hall have painted.

Arising out of such understandings, culture may be seen to be learned ways of actuating social behaviour which are specific to a particular group of people. Culture is always socially accepted contextualised ways of responding to the past as well as adapting the way things are done to the present; it is not static. Cultures differ one from the other, and may be viewed not in the context of difference as inferiority so much as difference as identity. Located within such constructs, Aboriginality can quite legitimately be based on the past (include essentialism but not determinism) as well as respond to the present (Aboriginality as resistance to subordination) while laying the emotional and social groundwork of coming to terms and celebrating Aboriginality as difference for the future.

Hollinsworth (1992: 149) critiques the essentialism I have mentioned above not because a culture may not contain some degree of essentialist characteristics, but because such reductionism may be used negatively against the very people it purports to identify. Dodson (1994) in essence agrees with Hollinsworth. Like Hollinsworth he believes that there is a need to '... resist ... an essentialism which confines us to fixed, unchangeable ... characteristics, and refuses to allow for transformation or variation' (Dodson, 1994: 10). Hollinsworth (1992: 149) refers to it as '... the stereotypic template [of] ... cultural or physical ways'. Both would support Hall's sentiments of cultural identity as constant transformation. But Dodson (1994) agrees further with Hollinsworth's preference for Aboriginality as resistance. Thus, he says that Aboriginal identity needs to resist categories imposed by dominant hegemonic understandings (the 'essentialist templates' of the hegemony) to speak back and retain control. Such resistance is '... assertion[s] of our right to be different and to practise our difference. [It refuses] the reduction of Aboriginality to an object [and resists] translation into the languages and categories of the dominant culture' (Dodson, 1994: 10). And to make it quite clear what he means, Dodson says that Indigenous peoples '... must continuously subvert the hegemony over our own representations ... [in order to] create the world of meaning in which we relate to ourselves ...' (Dodson, 1994: 6). This is as close to Aboriginality as resistance *à la* Hollinsworth as one can get.

If culture then is something dynamic and more than simply the sum of past history; if it is about a multiplicity of ways of doing things; if it is about accepting difference; then identity, with which it is closely allied, will reflect similar experiences and subjectivities as Indigenous minorities strive to stake out their presence in the 'third space'.

Aboriginal Education, Culture and Identity

In the context of culture and identity, socialisation and education, '... children who live in two cultures, one of which is stigmatised as inferior by dominant groups, have great difficulty in resolving the conflict of loyalties which ensues ...' (Smolicz, cited in Groome, 1995: 37).

That this is a central issue in the whole debate about issues in Aboriginal education cannot be denied, particularly in the wake of the legacy of a fragmented cultural identity; 'young Aborigines who lacked a strong family resource for identity formation were frequently looking to their schools to provide it' (Groome, 1995: 36). Schools and educators, it is reasonable to say, are the new 'battlegrounds' where the ideological wars must be waged. This is particularly so in the light of some of the findings of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (cited in Groome, 1995: v). '... Aboriginal youth ... remain poorly serviced by the various education systems in Australia. Low self-esteem, diminished educational opportunities, and a consequential lack of employment prospects ...' were also cited as outcomes of a marginalisation of cultural difference where 'other' was synonymous with 'alien'.

In the arena of issues in Aboriginal education, affective factors such a positive identity are important predictors of educational success. Hall (cited in Groome, 1995: 3) views it as '... always being formed, a "production" which is never complete, always in process'. And, as Groome (1995: 4) points out, 'because identity formation depends heavily on perceptions of messages received from others ... the potential is always there for an erosion of identity in the face of rejection or harassment by others'.

It is perhaps what Fullan (1991) meant when he distinguished between first and second order changes. The 1988 Hughes Report notwithstanding, the 1995 Ministerial Council for Education, Employment and Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) report on *A National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People 1996-2000* tries to go some way to remedying what Fullan (1993: 4) refers to as '... education [as] ... moral purpose ... which is to make a difference in the lives of students regardless of background, and to help produce citizens who can live and work productively in increasingly dynamically complex societies'. While there is not much new in this kind of thinking, it does, however, develop further the possibilities of change and negotiation in Aboriginal education as culture and identity within '... the larger social agenda of creating learning societies' (Fullan, 1993: 6).

The unthinking person's perception of Aboriginal culture as marginal and something to be endured within the dominant 'grid' does not make for a positive self-image. Identity development 'is particularly complicated for children and adolescents belonging to ethnic and minority groups' (Spencer and Markstrom-Adams cited in Groome, 1995: 3). Prolonged exposure to widely held negative messages about oneself, one's family, social group and, indeed, culture make it very difficult not to develop a negative identity. Add to this the fact that 'identity formation is made more complex ... [by] the other players in the game, [and] parents, peers, and teachers frequently have their own, often competing, images of identity that they want to impose' (Groome, 1995: 5).

This complex picture of cultural dislocation and identity bifurcation may partly explain why the attempt at relocating Aboriginal learners through education has not succeeded as well as it might. Refusal to acknowledge the notion of the incommensurability of two cultures and the failure to make available a subsequent 'third space' may have contributed. Insufficiently wide acceptance of current models of culture as choice within changing realities may also have contributed. But most importantly, to my thinking, Aboriginal children, culture/identity, and education have as yet been unable to reap the benefits of a much wider acceptance of the progressive mind-set that sees culture as difference and values '... the interdependent and relational nature of identities ...' (Rutherford, 1990: 10).

It is interesting to note that in the Foreword to the National Board of Employment, Education and

Training (NBEET) Report No. 35 (Groome and Hamilton, 1995: iii), Hughes says that '... an extraordinary number of reviews and reports produced in the area of Aboriginal ... Education ... have been broad based and essentially concerned with policy and politics ... [and that what] Aboriginal Education now needs [is] publications that are particularly strategic ...' That is to say, the implication is that what is needed is more micro than macro.

This is interesting in the light of the Summary and Conclusions of Carter and Goodwin's (1994: 308) paper, which make a strong case for the inclusion of racial identity theory for both students and teachers alike. This is broad-brush policy which, if implemented sequentially and methodically at the level of teacher education centres and schools will change significantly the way multiculturalism is 'done' in Australia. It would shift multicultural education '... from **knowledge *of*** others to a more inclusive process that enhances racial identity development on the part of **all** students' (Carter and Goodwin, 1994: 325; emphasis added). It would not only encourage teachers to have some (theoretical) background in dealing with diversity but also locate cultural pluralism as it is practised in Australia as an asset and not as a deficit to be overcome (multiculturalism and difference is no longer difference that is something to be worked within the 'grid' of the hegemony). Finally, such a broad-brush approach to schooling (and its attendant teacher education) at the level of what Hughes calls 'broad based ... policy and politics' would shift current expressions of the racially based social scientific paradigm in Australian multiculturalism education from '... cultural difference to racial inclusion ... [so that] the dual goals of inclusion and equity in education can be achieved' (Carter and Goodwin, 1994: 326-327). It is only then that ways of enhancing such policy at the school level could begin to look at the 'particularly strategic'.

In his monograph on the conflict of cultures in Aboriginal education, Thomas (1991) would appear to subscribe to just the sort of stereotyping notion that racial identity theorists like Carter and Goodwin would have us move away from. Thomas positions the reader in the very first sentence of the foreword to the monograph with his statement '... I am of Aboriginal descent'. For me, knowledge of this fact does not confer a greater or lesser degree of respectability on the message. But Thomas (1991: 10) goes on to state that there is '... a conflict of learning styles; a cognitive conflict' that accounts for 'the poor showing in outcomes of Aboriginal students ...' Such a statement reduces the whole debate to a set of essentialised generalities that fly in the face of documented research by people like Huber and Pewewardy (1990) and Ladson-Billings (1992) (cited in Carter and Goodwin, 1994: 320), because research suggests that cognitive learning styles are not consistent enough to codify such an essentialisation and '... can implicitly contribute to labels that further stereotype visible racial/ethnic group members' (Carter and Goodwin, 1994: 320).

The issue of culture and identity within the framework of Aboriginal education is not quite so simply that 'the future of Aboriginal education lies in bi-culturalism' (Thomas, 1991: 22). Rather, it is more a matter of coming to terms with one's culture as a developing synthesis of the past in the service of the present together with a much greater awareness of the politics and power of identity.

Who you are and where you come from may quite easily be viewed within the constructs of racial identity theory for all citizens. Such thinking makes a non-issue of difference as other and alien and is more truly inclusive of a diverse school population.

Such thinking too, and all it encompasses, is more truly equitable for all learners but especially for Aboriginal learners so that, to return to my opening quote and to paraphrase Jordan (cited in Rutherford, 1990), most folks will indeed know where you are coming from.

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