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# Aboriginal Education in Urban Secondary Schools: Educating the Educators

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## Introduction

This paper discusses the importance of examining the behaviours of non-Aboriginal educators, rather than Aboriginal students, when attempting to evaluate the performance of Aboriginal students in urban secondary schools. It acknowledges that endemic problems exist and that the perceptions and actions of non-Aboriginal educators may be contributing factors. The paper considers some established discourse in this area and refers to two specific programs which commenced operation in a Darwin secondary school in 1994, and in which the author was directly involved.

Learning is a fundamental human need. Parents spend many watchful years protecting their young explorers from sources of danger, from fires and deep pools, as their search for knowledge leads them into new zones. It is a tragedy that this need to learn becomes entangled with resistance and conflict once institutionalised. Explanations of this phenomenon abound, particularly in the area of Aboriginal education. Low retention rates, high absenteeism, disproportionate numbers of suspensions and limited academic achievement scream that Aboriginal children are not experiencing the same levels of 'success' in schools

as non-Aboriginal students. To address the problems besetting Aboriginal education, it is essential to examine what is currently occurring and what needs to change. This is obvious — what is a little obscure is who needs to operate the microscope and who needs to be in the Petri dish!

A further question arises — Who needs to be educated if improvement is to occur? The answer is a simple 'Everyone!' Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, from politicians down to the humble student — everyone who is in the education process, plus everyone who contributes to the process through taxes and voting, needs to develop the understanding that to demand that all Aboriginal students fit into White, middle-class schooling is to deny them equality in egalitarian Australia. There must be provision of schools for Aboriginal students which are managed by Aboriginal people and other schools need to be equipped to provide acceptable programs and approaches for these students. This article is concerned with the latter type of schooling. It will attempt to examine Aboriginal education within the urban secondary school setting and to reflect on where and how changes need to be made.

There is no doubt that urban secondary schools are failing to provide Aboriginal students with successful secondary programs, as this group still experiences 'the lowest rates of high school graduation and university entrance of any group in Australia' (Malin, 1994: 29). It is difficult to explain this fact but, at the risk of over-simplifying the problem, it is possible to look at it from two perspectives — we can attempt to see what is happening inside classrooms, and what is being done outside them.

Teachers need to reflect constantly on classroom dynamics. It is clear that they need to be challenged to do this, by all participants at all levels of the education hierarchy, and that they need to be provided with the time and study opportunities to do so in a professional manner. However, regardless of what prompting and assistance they are given, the process must take place.

Teachers need to be exposed to theories such as those outlined by John D'Amato in his article, 'Resistance and compliance in minority classrooms' (1995: 245). This article examines resistance and compliance as basic components of classrooms, and notes that they are likely to be particularly prevalent in classrooms containing children from minority groups. It maintains that students behave in phases which can be divided into the 'honeymoon', the 'contentious' and the 'resolution' phases. The honeymoon phase is the watchful one, and it passes into the contentious phase where children will use 'acting' behaviour to test the teacher. This phase has three stages:

- playful, mischievous over-reactions to teacher instruction (e.g. shouting answers to questions)
- outrageous action (e.g. standing on tables)
- peer contention (deliberate teasing and disruption).

The third phase is the resolution phase where, depending on the teacher's reactions, students will continue to resist the teacher and the learning environment or they will comply with both. In the latter situation, some resistance will continue to exist but it is manageable and the class can function. If the former occurs, direct challenges will be mounted — between students, and between teachers and students. Outsiders (parents and staff members further up the discipline chain) will be involved, with teachers losing the willingness to resist unacceptable behaviour, and hostilities will continue. In such a scenario, students and teachers gain little from their daily interaction.

D'Amato refers to two theories to explain resistance — the cultural difference theory and the castelike minority theory. Cultural difference theorists maintain that students behave in schools in accordance with the sets of norms which operate within their homes. Where the set of norms the student has at home differs to that in operation in school, conflict is likely to occur. The teacher and

the student will react differently; confusion will arise and resistance will follow. Castelike minority theory relies on a sociostructural explanation. It argues that societies which contain racial divisions force the oppressed groups to become cynical, that they are aware that the social mobility which schools promise will be denied them, and that they develop a culture in opposition to the dominant one. They develop survival skills to help them cope with their limited opportunities, and they transfer this culture and these skills to their children. In simple terms, if the parents' experiences were negative and damaging, they will blame the schooling process and they will prepare their children for similar experiences.

D'Amato's article is not necessarily the definitive answer to the problems faced by teachers and students in the education of minority groups, nor are the two theories he outlines. However, unless teachers are challenged to reflect on their classrooms at this theoretical level, they will continue to blame either their students or themselves when learning does not occur. Instead, they need to be equipped with the skills to analyse the dynamics of classrooms and to modify their behaviour to suit the needs of their clientele.

A further area for reflection, for classroom practitioners and educational planners, is the differing concepts of education and learning. Whether one is a Marxist and supports the social conflict theory of education, or perhaps argues that the structural functionalists were closer to the mark, Western educational theory sees schools as central to learning and as institutions with the express purpose of socialising the young. This assumes that there is a previously established, commonly held set of norms that schools operate by and perpetuate. It also assumes that, springing from that set of norms, is an overt and a covert curriculum to enable this process to occur.

Even a superficial examination of Aboriginal approaches to learning indicates that the centrality of schools in the learning structure and a non-negotiable curriculum may be inappropriate. Marika-Mununggiritj and Christie (1995), amongst others, outline the concept of 'galtha'. Essentially, galtha is a connecting spot, a place (either physical or intellectual) where people join to negotiate, create, develop and perform important functions.

'Galtha is everywhere, wherever Yolngu (and Balanda) people are acting properly, there is a possibility of galtha' (Marika-Mununggiritj and Christie, 1995: 30). Included in the concept of galtha is the idea that 'we must negotiate an agreement about our perspectives if we are to produce significant knowledge' (Marika-Mununggiritj and Christie, 1995: 30).

If galtha is a fundamental concept of Aboriginal learning, and if non-Aboriginal teachers continue to dictate the content and structure of classrooms, it is understandable that Aboriginal students and parents will regard

teachers as behaving improperly and the knowledge they are imparting as insignificant. This is only one of the many ways in which Aboriginal and Western concepts of education differ. It is essential that everyone in the

education process is given the opportunity to understand these differences and to work together to reconcile them. Those at the 'chalk face', the classroom teacher and the student, know that problems abound but they are almost powerless to address them unless a system wide approach is adopted. Individual teachers are not at liberty to abandon the curriculum, nor can they remove the institution of schools from learning. They can, however, if enabled to develop a sensitivity to these fundamental differences, incorporate such techniques as negotiating some aspects of the curriculum and inviting community members to take part in the education process. The simple process of meeting with Aboriginal parents and discussing what they want for their children would show some respect for the concept of galtha.

For significant change to occur, whole faculties within schools need to be educated about their approach to Aboriginal students in their care. A program designed to do this is outlined in an article by Knight *et al.* (1995). This program was developed and implemented in an urban high school as a response to the non-participation rates of the school's Aboriginal student population within the

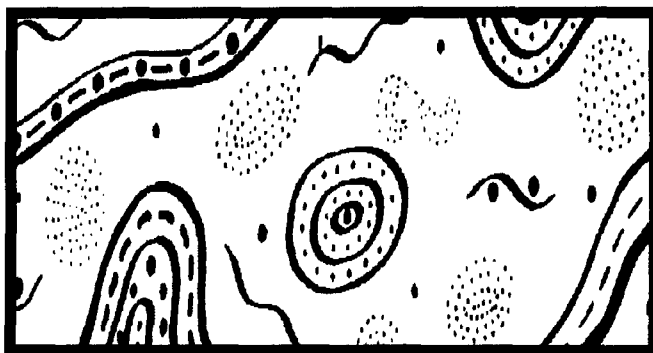
area of mathematics. Basically, the school brought its Aboriginal students at a particular level together, in relatively small class, provided them with the support of an ESL teacher who had extensive experience and interaction with Aboriginal students and parents and a classroom teacher who was committed to adopting appropriate classroom methodology. This methodology centred around four basic concepts: appropriate teaching/learning strategies, classroom management techniques, community cultural values and resources, in terms of people, materials and the environment. To ensure that all mathematics

teachers in the school developed the understanding required, the whole faculty was involved in developing the course and, although the ESL teacher remained constant to the program, the classroom teachers were rotated. The article does not state it but there were

only four mathematics teachers at the school at the time. Also unstated is the fact that a similar program was operating in the school's English faculty with a further four teachers. Both programs experienced remarkable success whilst operating but they both saw the ongoing benefit to students dwindle where ongoing support could not be maintained.

It is interesting to note that of the ten teachers involved (eight classroom teachers and two ESL teachers) five are still operating within the Northern Territory's education system and they are all in positions where they can actively implement the knowledge they gained from these programs. To varying degrees, they are working to extend their own understandings and to raise the consciousness of teachers around them. Four of the five have areas of responsibility which directly impact on significant numbers of teachers.

Whole faculty approaches like these are essential to the process of educating the educators. Not only do they begin with the confronting statistical data in relation to non-achievement of students, they demonstrate how, through school level intervention,



this can be reversed. They remove the feeling that the problem is too big and that individual teachers and schools are powerless to effect change. The tragedy for individual students who revert to failing grades once the support is withdrawn serves to highlight the success of such level demanded of the teachers, they cannot maintain the level of commitment demanded if they teach 100 students (across four classes) and if they must meet all the other demands secondary schools place on staff.

This leads to the question of system-wide decision making and policy change. Michael J. Christie (1994: 168) charges that white educators 'continue to organise education in such a way that Aboriginal educators can really only participate on white terms'. He states that dominant attitudes insist that Aborigines rather than non-Aboriginal educators and structures need to change and that this is regarded with 'bitter irony' (Christie, 1994: 169) by Aboriginal people. It is evident that this problem needs to be addressed. In schools situated in communities and managed by Aboriginal people, we should see steady progress towards self-determination and autonomy and thus, a complete reversal of this situation. In urban schools where Aboriginal students are in the minority, the situation is more complex. Aboriginal educators in such settings are still too few in number to effect major attitudinal change. They are still battling with the perception that their training and experience is inferior to their non-Aboriginal counterparts and they are faced with problems of such overwhelming magnitude that their unrealistic workloads often render them ineffective. Given these factors, Christie's comments are valid. Aboriginal educators need the time and resources to join with their non-Aboriginal colleagues and to contribute as equals in the planning, design and delivery of education programs.

It is important to change the national view on Aboriginal education. Unfortunately, the 'issue of equity is still not understood by many Australians and consequently affects the ability of the Aboriginal population, overall, to achieve equitable educational outcomes' (Malin, 1994: 27). Many Australians, including teachers, believe that equality means treating everyone in the same way, regardless of individual strengths and deficits, and they have no commitment to the affirmative action policies which have already been introduced

to benefit Aboriginal students. Even more damaging are the attitudes which question the justice of such policies and which encourage teachers to be complacent about the inequities they perpetuate in their own classrooms. Although not openly hostile, these views certainly have their roots in ignorance and racial insensitivity and they can develop into overt racism.

One notable attempt to address this problem is outlined in Malin's (1994) article, 'An anti-racist teacher education program'. This article is refreshing in that it breaks a taboo which encircles discussion about teachers and teacher education. It brings out into the open that teachers, like any group in society, need to be challenged about their attitudes and that they harbour just as many racist attitudes as other people. It confronts the reader with the disturbing realisation that 'It seems that racism is natural, that it exists in all societies, and that most of us think racist things or act in ways that have racist outcomes whether we intend this or not' (Malin, 1994: 101).

The article proceeds to outline an anti-racist program which has been incorporated into two compulsory, undergraduate units in the Faculty of Education at the Northern Territory University. The program was sensitive to the possibility 'that anti-racist programs can create more prejudice than they eliminate' (Malin, 1994: 102). It seems that students are resistant to anti-racist programs and that great care must be taken when deeply seated attitudes are to be challenged. There is some debate about whether racism is best challenged intellectually or emotionally and the NTU program attempted to attack the problem on both fronts.

The findings which can be gleaned from reading the journal extracts published in this article are most disturbing. This relatively well educated group of young people who were training to be educators 'tended to shun theory, finding it intimidating and irrelevant' (Malin, 1994: 106) and reacted with anger to information about affirmative action programs. Further reading of the article leads to speculation about the success and failure of such courses but it also confirms the need for them.

There is also the need to challenge these attitudes and many others in classrooms and in every aspect of Australian society. If we are to achieve equity for Aboriginal students in schools, we have to change our way of thinking. We have to abandon colonial attitudes and eradicate racial ones. The responsibility to bring about these changes lies with every Australian.

Those people in positions where they can influence others need to accept that they must do so and they need to adjust their programs and general behaviour to actively institute change. Many Aboriginal students accept, as personal failure, their inability to achieve in urban schools and to access the benefits education leads to. Others are angry and disrupt the system that actively works to exclude them. We need to legitimise that anger and that of their parents, and to somehow use it to generate change. We need to recognise, as a society, that social justice has been denied to this group of people over a 200 year period and we need to join with them in their efforts at reconciliation. It is time for non-Aboriginal Australians to accept that Aboriginal Australians have been asking, for some time and with a great deal of restraint, what Australia claims to offer all its citizens: a fair go!

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