



# The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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## Reviews

world is condemned for the propagation of 'falsehoods'. There is little acknowledgement of the work of Reynolds and Rowley, even though both are used to support Pattel-Gray's demonstrations of racism throughout the book, and even in this section on education. Such broad condemnations, also applied to politics, the media, and the churches, apart from their inaccuracy, generate a perception of racism as an all-pervasive monolithic entity. This 1994 analysis leaves little rhetorical space to describe the deterioration in race relations that has occurred in the past few years. For example, while the impact of the 1967 referendum is open to question, especially in the light of the current Federal government's attempt to legitimise 'negative discrimination', it is difficult to justify Pattel-Gray's characterisation of the vote — 'a more racist and dehumanizing action is difficult to imagine' (43).

The central thesis of the book, the attack on the Australian church, also suffers from a lack of careful analysis. While it is true that the Australian church 'was tangled up in its own cultural imperialism and racism' (122), there is no acknowledgement that for much of its early years, the Australian church was an application of a European religion by Europeans. While there is extensive quotation of World Council of Churches studies such as the 1971 report which used genocide to describe white Australian practices, the fact that elements of the Australian churches have recently been outspoken in their opposition to racism is neglected. This distinction appears to be drawn in support of Pattel-Gray's belief in the redemptive capacity of a Christianity which is located outside of Australia — the 'international Christian community' (238). The Australian church's inability to acknowledge its 'Original Sin' is said to disqualify its current 'insincere' support for reconciliation.

Pattel-Gray does provide ample evidence that concepts such as economic development and Christianity have almost always existed only for White society, and spends some time on the churches' role in laying the 'groundwork for government oppression' (147). Pattel-Gray's pessimism seems justified, also in the light of

current events, when she identifies the apathy and lack of profound change that, after initial public outcry, have been the dominant response to events such as the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. However, there is generally insufficient careful analysis in this book to offer such insights.

### ***Excerpt from 'Oppressed but Liberated'***

**from *Sister Girl* to be published in 1998  
by University of Queensland Press**

*Jackie Huggins*

The Diploma of Aboriginal Education instilled in me a positive and enthusiastic attitude to teaching. Prior to seven week teaching prac in the Northern Territory, I was looking forward to the challenge of teaching in (what I was led to believe was) an Aboriginal school. I felt strongly motivated to get started.

After many hours of travelling to the bush, this motivation turned to despair on my first meeting with some members of the school staff who had arrived at the motel to pick up our excess luggage. As the door opened, to their amazement there I stood. I had seen that look so many times before, the look that attempts to belittle one's confidence, that asks 'Hey, what gives you the right to be here?' or says 'So you're the student teacher and — you're black!' Only Aboriginal people know what it feels like to be degraded in this way, to feel the taunt of racist jibes.

As I boldly stared back, one woman, as if to cover up a guilty party's embarrassment, kindly informed me that 'the children will be glad to see you — no offence of course love — but someone of the same colour — you know what I mean.' I replied that I was indeed looking forward to acting as a role model for these children. Intuitively I predicted that this would set the scene for the next seven weeks. However, nothing could have prepared me for what lay in store.



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There were two camps in the small non-Aboriginal community: the racist and the non-racist elements. Surprisingly, the people who I thought would be overtly racist and whom Aboriginal people most feel defensive about — the police and their families — ironically became strong allies in the end. I suspect having had the opportunity to teach the senior policeman's two daughters for almost half my teaching prac contributed to the goodwill felt between us.

Ablaze in green and gold bicentennial colours, the school was ethnocentrically Anglo in its administration and operation. Responsibility for formal education rested with teachers who were not accountable as employees to the Aboriginal community. I was initially allocated to a married, conservative, middle-class supervising teacher who told me that she was there to make her 'gold mine' and then leave. Her lack of interest in Aboriginal education was quite evident, claiming that after six years at the school she could not speak one word of the local Aboriginal language.

The startling realisation that I was teaching at a school which was blissfully ignorant of the cultural difference between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals and which had chosen to 'safely' teaching the children using assimilationist methods soon became apparent. This grated on my deeply-held beliefs of sensitively integrating Aboriginal education within the white system.

I was forewarned that the style of the school was unlike ordinary 'bush' schools. Being the largest building around for miles its squeaky clean image belied its oppressive teaching of Aboriginal children. Everything I hated about the Anglo treatment of Aboriginal values and lifestyles as unimportant was to be found here. In the Australian education system Aboriginal children learning at school are taught an entirely different set of values from the ones which they may learn in their Aboriginal home. For example, to tell another child the answer to a question is 'sharing' that information, while it is perceived as 'cheating' by Anglos. The Aboriginal children therefore can become cultural misfits who can neither effectively relate to Aboriginal society nor to white society.

I would not have even attempted to plan a geography lesson with the students as, like the Bob Hawke treaty, it would introduce 'pie in the sky' for the victims, who had not had sufficient cross-cultural and educational sensitivity thrust upon them to enable them to cope with such airy-fairy concepts. Besides, what could a mere urban mortal like me teach these children about the land? Aboriginal cultural knowledge about and expertise in climate, relief, soil, and vegetation was far superior to European knowledge. Aboriginals knew all the available edible plants, animals and insects. In the northeast, some 240 species of edible plants were known and a further 90 species of molluscs were common knowledge. In north central Australia from five to nine different climatic seasons were recognised, along with times when supplies of game and plant food varied, and when certain parts of tribal areas were more attractive for occupation than others. They were the true experts and it was presumptuous of me to assume otherwise. The white education system has much to learn from Aboriginal people; indeed, white Australia should be looking to Aboriginal expertise in describing the nature of geography.

In fact, nothing much had changed since I went to school some sixteen years ago. As one perceptive young teacher pointed out, 'You might as well be teaching in suburban Sydney as out here if this is how Aboriginal education is being taught today.' Constantly I felt myself identifying so well with these students, drifting back to my primary school days when I was one of about three Aboriginal children in a class dominated by white children. However, even though the white children at the school were in the minority (95 per cent Aboriginal, 5 per cent white) I couldn't help feeling that the whole system and style of teaching was geared directly to the white children rather than to the Aboriginal majority. If the reverse situation to mine and that of many Aboriginal children in other country and urban schools had occurred, what a difference it would make, for now we would be witnessing a ninety per cent success rate in Aboriginal education.

When a system works only for a few and not for the majority, it is the system that is at fault, not the

people for whom it is offered. From an Aboriginal point of view, the system had failed and had a lot to answer for in the teaching of Aboriginal students. The system as it was operating at the school created the alienation of Black children from the culture of their parents, and it assumed that European culture was superior to Aboriginal culture, and hence avoided relating to the latter. The children and their parents were never consulted about what and how they would like to be taught, therefore making the process entirely white ethnocentrically determined.

Children are conditioned into accepting the 'culture' of the powerful and dominant white society and that the white way of understanding and doing things is the 'right' way. The European approach to education is based on competitiveness by way of achievement, topping the class and striving for academic excellence.

In terms of achievement and competitiveness Europeans have a totally different concept to Aboriginals of what these words mean. Individual achievement, while important to Europeans, is a cultural barrier to Aboriginal people, as kinship and social networks dictate an Aboriginal person's life and make it impossible for an Aboriginal to excel unless she or he assures their community that she or he is doing it for them and not for her or himself. Similarly no one has convinced me that competitiveness is inherent in Aboriginal culture, as traditional Aboriginal society was egalitarian. This extends into the contemporary scene where Aboriginal 'leaders' and achievers are constantly pulled down by their community for their seeming competitiveness and standing 'beyond' the group.

I can draw parallel between my twelve years in the public service and what life is like as a teacher in a school of this type. A small cog in a huge machine. People are always insisting that you can change the system from within, but from my personal experience this is not the reality. Sure one may gain a few wins here and there but nothing which radically alters the institution's philosophies or policies. You are always working within an oppressive framework. No, I could not endure several more years of that, as one can actually become deluded that you can 'change the system'.

The whole teacher training experience set me back 200 years. Just when an Aboriginal person feels that wonderful and positive things are happening for her or his race and that finally Australian society is coming together to accept Aboriginals, a glaring example of archaic and colonial attitudes stands entrenched and affects the very psyches of the users and facilitators of the country's educational institutions.

Aboriginal people believe that the challenge in education today is to prepare their children to be able to maintain their own cultural identity as well as functioning in the wider Australian community to their own and to their people's advantage. Therefore co-existence without inhibiting identity is the right Aboriginal people seek.

For this reason I now believe my skills would be better spent on concentrating on 'white Australia as a whole' rather than on isolated Aboriginal children who would never stand a chance in mainstream society. My conviction is even deeper that Anglo adults need educating about Aboriginals far more than Aboriginal children need to receive whitefellas' education in this country.

My disappointment with my teaching experience directed my further studies into another area which before had held little relevance — Women's Studies. History has always been my field of study, so it was interesting to combine the two subject areas for postgraduate purposes. It also allowed relief from the stagnation of a disastrous year.

