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CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC FACTORS AFFECTING THE EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS OF ABORIGINALS – AN ABORIGINAL PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

Much has been written on Aboriginal education both within Western Australia and Australia generally but, in terms of the delivery of education to Aboriginal students, it can be argued that there has been little change in the attitude of those in control.

In the climate where there is a general movement away from teacher education and an emphasis on tertiary institutions to develop in other areas, a danger exists that Aborigines will continue to have teachers with little or no knowledge of the historical, cultural and linguistic differences that impede the development and achievements of Aboriginal children in the classroom.

It is within this context that this paper, in looking at Aboriginal education, will examine some of the following points:

- (a) definitions of Aboriginality;
- (b) the nature of cultural differences;
- (c) the exclusion years in Western Australia;
- (d) Government policies;
- (e) language as a barrier; and
- (f) current achievements of Aboriginal students.

It is realised that even this approach is limited when one is attempting such a broad topic. Other areas that need to be mentioned include the debate on the educability of Aborigines; the standards of housing, health and employment; and racism and the degree of overall general acceptance by white Australians who have been socialised to reject Aboriginal people. The above-mentioned areas themselves need to be researched to gain an understanding of race relations in Australia and their bearing on education for the Aboriginal child at school. These issues are too broad for the purpose of this paper.

Attitudes of the average white Australian toward Aborigines have undergone a dramatic change in the last few decades. From a history ranging from complete genocide in Tasmania to the exploitation of cheap labour in the north, Australians in recent years have, for the first time,

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had to examine their guilt-ridden consciences and think about the original inhabitants. The process has been quite a painful one and will continue to be so until some solutions acceptable to all parties are found. It is in this framework that the paper takes direction. Not to lay blame at anyone's feet but to open dialogue in order that a meaningful discussion can be had.

Without education and the ability to read and write English is to deny access to resources within the community. If educators fail to provide Aborigines a reasonable grounding in literacy and numeracy then they are denying them their rights as citizens. Basically, this paper will examine some of these denials and will endeavour to see if they still exist within the educational system today. But, first, one needs to ask: Who is the Aboriginal?

The Aboriginal

Under this broad heading there is a lot of misunderstanding and confusion of the biological and the cultural. Aboriginal people and societies range from the traditional hunter and gatherer through to people, often the product of miscegenation, who live very assimilated lives within mainstream society in Australia. The diversity of social stratification and affiliations of tribal groups makes it hard to identify exactly who is an Aboriginal.

The 1905 Aborigines Act of Western Australia deemed that a person of one quarter blood to a full blood came under the definition of an Aboriginal. Hence the child of a half blood Aboriginal woman and a white man was described as a quarter blood (or caste as it was generally referred to). That child had automatic citizenship rights and didn't come under the Aborigines Act. Later, when that child reached adulthood, he or she was allowed all the privileges of white Australians.

This caused severe stress on the extended family, particularly when the child was alienated by European-Australian law. The present definition of Aboriginality used by the Federal Government is that:

Any person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island descent and who is accepted by the community as such, is deemed an Aboriginal.
(*Aboriginal Affairs Newsletter*, 1975, p. 61)

This definition may be fine but when the State Education Department of Western Australia is asked to bring into existence a bilingual education programme for Aborigines, the question arises as to where to begin and with what language, bearing in mind that there are over 50 Aboriginal languages in Western Australia.

Cultural Differences

As indicated above, Aborigines represent a whole spectrum of cultural differences and within the spectrum there are different needs at varying levels. With detribalised urban Aborigines, needs in education would be similar to white Australians but, rather than labour discussion on this group, this paper will concern itself with the more traditionally-oriented Aborigines.

From birth to pre-school, children from the latter group are oriented into different cultural norms and mores. In personal relationships, kinship ties are still of major importance and the child is enculturated with these. Most possessions are shared with the extended family, not the alienation of oneself into a nuclear family. Time does not have the same significance for Aborigines as it does for the middle class white Australian. The value of time as the regulator of every day activity is incomprehensible to Aborigines and thus a school day, with rigidly divided time segments, poses problems for Aboriginal students (Binnion, 1974).

One could continue listing differences in culture that affect the performance of Aboriginal students in these situations, but suffice to say that it presents serious problems when the child reaches school and is confronted with a completely new set of cultural values and expectations. Here again it would be important for a teacher to have some background knowledge of the exclusion years in Western Australia and the effect these had on the indigenous population. What were these exclusion years?

Exclusion Years

From the turn of the century through until 1946, the exclusion of Aborigines and part Aborigines from the State School system was a widespread practice in Western Australia. (For a broader discussion of exclusion, see Forrest, 1979.)

Exclusion resulted mainly from the pressures of the Parents and Citizens Associations and supported by the Education Department. Quite often the claim was that, because of the living conditions of the Aborigines, diseases were spread when their children attended schools. Using this excuse, the Education Department managed to exclude Aborigines from almost the entire school system in the south-west of the State. Further pressure from the Parents and Citizens Associations caused the Minister to allow any teacher in the Education Department to suspend Aboriginal pupils on their own initiative up to 1936 (Biskup, 1973, p. 191). Teachers suspended children who did not conform to the standards required of white pupils and, to quote:

Because of their home surroundings or low morals are not fit for association with white children.
(Native Affairs File 330/1936)

Aborigines were caught in a "catch twenty-two" situation. On the one hand, they could attend school if they were clean and tidy but, on the other hand, it was assumed that their low morals made them unfit to associate with white school children.

Living conditions for Aborigines were poor, to say the least, and often the reserve was situated more than three miles from the school. This ensured that Aboriginal children were kept out of schools because of the three mile limit (Forrest, 1979). Often the local shire would not connect scheme water to reserves because of the fear that taps would not be turned off and water would be wasted (Biskup, 1973, p. 150). This made it impossible for the people, living in sordid conditions, to keep clean. Added to the lack of water, shires often refused to remove rubbish from reserves which compounded the problem of unhygienic surroundings. In response to the exclusion, the Native Welfare Department opened up the Moore River Settlement and another one at Carrolup. Under the guardianship clause of the 1905 Aboriginal Act of Western Australia, the Chief Protector of Aborigines could remove children up to the age of 16 from their parents and place them as inmates into these institutions. The idea was that training would be given so that when the children left the settlement they could obtain employment. The settlements were seen in a different light by the white population and police began to shift Aborigines from towns and reserves and removed them to the settlements. In January 1915 the police shifted all Aborigines from Katanning to Carrolup (Biskup, 1973, pp. 153-4). The same practice occurred at Guildford in 1918, Northam in 1932, Moora in 1920, and Quairading in 1919.

By 1946, due to the World War and the demands by Aboriginal ex-servicemen, the Education Department resumed responsibility for educating Aborigines. Separate schools were set up and government teachers were employed on the various settlements. Church missions had to raise their standards of education and inspectors started to visit these schools.

Government Policies

Section 116 of the Australian Constitution stated, prior to its amendment in 1967, that "Aboriginal natives shall not be counted."

Early policies of the colonial and state governments were those of protection and segregation. These policies were doomed to failure because protection meant segregation and denial of access to education. The new concept of assimilation was introduced in 1939 as the Commonwealth Government's Aboriginal Policy. But very few Aborigines were allowed to assimilate. The aims of this policy were to increase education and training and:

The future assimilation of the native into the white race of Australia will present a decreasing problem.

(Annual Report of the Commissioner of Native Welfare, 1950)

The Commissioner went on to say that prejudice and segregation were widespread in the south of the State. Aborigines were forced to live in deplorable conditions on reserves. Local authorities generally were reluctant to permit reticulation of their scheme water to native reserves for fear of wastage. Further, it adds that it created an attitude of hostility toward whites by the Aborigines. This was born of disappointment and indignation and resulted in a shunning of social contact with whites. The victim was blamed for his social conditioning. It was seen as an inability on the part of Aborigines to assimilate but, during the period after the World War, Aborigines were still excluded from such things as football and cricket matches, horse races and trotting meetings, cinemas and hotels.

After the 1967 referendum Aborigines became Australian citizens, and reform, particularly in upgrading social benefits (that is, housing, health, access to the law and legal aid), and spending on education was part of the political platform. With all this money now available, research work on the status of Aboriginal education began in earnest.

People such as C. D. Rowley (1974), C. Tatz (1969), K. Punch and P. Tannock (1975) of the University of Western Australia, and many others, began to build up a profile of social and cultural differences that affect the Aboriginal child at school. Linguistic studies by people such as Kaldor and Malcolm (1980), Vaszolyi (1976), and Douglas (1976) have helped to produce a wider understanding of the reasons why Aboriginal children have learning problems. Language itself can alienate people and, in areas where the traditional language is spoken, one wonders how much learning occurs when the teacher speaks only English.

Language as a Barrier

This is probably the most difficult area to discuss, bearing in mind that the meaning of words differ if not sounded correctly. Vaszolyi (1976) points out that, because of different vowel systems, Aboriginal children may find difficulty in distinguishing the English vowels /EE/, /i/ and /e/. Take, for example, the Western Desert language, Pitjantjatjara, where such sounds as /P/ and /V/, /S/ and /Z/, and such patterns in English as the voiced/voiceless distinctions do not exist. When an "English only" speaking teacher presents new sounds to the Aboriginal child, the speech sounds of English do not correspond with the phonemes of his own language. The child mimics the sound, or to the nearest possible equivalent, in his own language. This shows up thus:

finger will sound like pinger (actually pingka)
fire will sound like byre (actually paya)
fish will sound like bitch (actually pitji)

and often a teacher may be tempted to think that remedial treatment is needed when he himself lacks a knowledge of language differences

Douglas (1976) suggests that quite often phonological levels are so closely tied up with physical ones that vernacular speaking children find it difficult to disentangle them. He gives an example from Ernabella Mission:

Sounds are so strange for them (Aborigines) that when I spell out PIT and ask what does that say, someone will answer 'bed'. I go over it again: Now listen PIT it says pit. Then I ask what a pit is? 'Yes, dat fer sleeping' says one of the boys. (Douglas, 1976, p. 67)

The problem of course ties in with cultural linguistic usage. The three vowel positions of /a/, /i/, /u/ and the lack of a voiced/voiceless distinction makes it difficult to hear sound differences. 'Pit' then becomes the equivalent of 'bed'. The difficulty of language is further borne out by Kaldor and Malcolm (1980) who show that often Aboriginal children just do not know what the teacher has said, because of differing sounds. The "English only" approach to educating Aboriginal children must be changed if justice is to be done. As A. P. Elkin (1964) stated:

The method of teaching English directly to non-English speakers without using the latter's language as a medium, has not proved as successful as was hoped. It is satisfactory for the first year or two with reference to concrete objects and situations. To go further, however, a bridge is needed between indigenous concepts and those the teacher seeks to introduce; and unless the local language is used as the main structure of that bridge, the child is apt to flounder and seem unable to go beyond rote achievement. (1964, pp. 149-150)

Current Achievement

The 150 years of contact with Europeans has produced in Western Australia twenty-five Aboriginal teachers, and seven graduates of the University of Western Australia, Murdoch University and the Western Australian Institute of Technology.

At present there are 10,000 Aboriginal students attending government schools in Western Australia. For the majority of these children, particularly those in high school, their school experience is one of failure.

According to the Commonwealth Department of Education, which administers the Aboriginal Secondary Grant Scheme, 75 per cent of Aboriginal high school students in Western Australia are achieving at a basic level in the Achievement Certificate Award. What does this mean and

can we continue to blame the victim for his poor results? Perhaps more relevant questions to ask may include some about the Achievement Certificate:

- (a) What cultural bias is there in the syllabus which alienates Aboriginal students?
- (b) How relevant is the curriculum in traditional Aboriginal communities?

This problem is compounded by the fact that very few of the practising teachers in this state have a working knowledge of Aboriginal culture. This aside, there is also the realization that parental support is lacking because of their own failure in the education system. Against this backdrop the picture is indeed gloomy.

Of one cohort of 3040 Aboriginal students who attended high school from 1973 to 1976 only 100 sat for the Western Australian Tertiary Admission Examination. These figures, prepared by the Commonwealth Education Department, indicate the great wastage of Aboriginal students and the urgent need for a review of the whole of the education system that is being delivered, as well as in the type of undergraduate training being offered to future teachers. There is a need for compulsory core units on Aboriginal culture in teacher education programmes so that some of the wastage of Aboriginal students can be curbed.

Summary

In summary, the writer has shown that cultural contact has had a drastic effect on Aboriginal society, particularly in the field of education. The exclusion years left their mark by creating a group of people who can only be described as culturally disadvantaged, that is, the traditional lifestyle was destroyed and the lack of education denied them a transition into the dominant culture.

Government policies were slow to respond and even today, with an "English only" approach to education for Aborigines, there is the creation of an atmosphere of alienation, particularly for traditionally orientated groups.

It is realised, however, that when it comes to identifying who is the Aboriginal there are problems. A blanket approach to Aboriginal education is not the answer for it must be recognized that there are different needs at different levels of integration.

In the area of language differences, educators must seriously look at and consider bilingual education. Student teachers should be made aware of Aboriginal cultures and cultural differences, particularly in the areas of language and language structures. The Australian ideal in education is equality. If we are to reach this goal, then we must recognize, accept and teach cultural diversification. The numbers of Aboriginal students

TABLE 1

Retention Figure of Aboriginal Students in Western Australian Secondary Schools

(Showing only students on Aboriginal Grants — applicable as at 30 June each Year)

Year	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980
8	704	795	703	818	763	834	1006	1062
9	554	615 (87.4%)	638 (80.3%)	611 (86.9%)	637 (77.9%)	686 (89.9%)	685 (82.1%)	783 (77.8%)
10	311	366	376 (52.1%)	448 (56.4%)	431 (61.3%)	486 (59.4%)	531 (69.6%)	548 (65.7%)
11	69	66	87	110 (15.6%)	139 (17.5%)	134 (19.1%)	140 (17.1%)	169 (22.1%)
12	11	23	13	29	35 (5.0%)	35 (4.4%)	34 (4.8%)	30 (3.7%)
Percentage of students proceeding from Yr 10 to Yr 11	—	21.2	23.8	29.3	31.0	31.1	28.8	31.8
Percentage of students proceeding from Yr 11 to Yr 12	—	33.3	19.7	33.3	31.8	25.1	25.4	21.4
Percentage of students in Yrs 11 and 12	4.9	4.8	5.5	6.9	8.7	7.8	7.3	7.6

who are achieving at basic levels in the Achievement Certificate can only be seen as an indictment against the present education system. (See Table 1.)

As stated at the beginning of this paper, one does not seek to blame people today for past failure but, more importantly, to open the way for meaningful discussion and dialogue between educators and Aboriginals over their educational needs.

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