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# WHY INDIGENOUS ISSUES ARE AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT OF TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS

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The extensive failure of Indigenous students in school, particularly during adolescence, is a shameful characteristic of Australian education. Students who have most to gain from a successful school experience are the most likely to leave school with minimal skills and qualifications. The situation has shown little improvement over 30 years, as evidenced by the repetitious nature of articles in, for example, *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*. Government inquiries into Indigenous education, especially those addressing issues such as attendance (Bourke, Rigby & Burden, 2000), identity (Purdy, Tripcony, Boulton-Lewis,

Fanshawe & Gunstone, 2000) and achievement (Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2000a, 2000b; Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2000b) have resulted in little improvement. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1989) identified goals for Indigenous students but, despite considerable effort to achieve these goals, educational inequality for Indigenous students 'remains vast' (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2000b).

While a growing number of Indigenous students are successful at school, a significant proportion leave school before completing Year 10, and far fewer

complete Year 12 than is the case with non-Indigenous students (Department of Education Western Australia, 2002; Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 2000a). A cycle develops, by which the poor educational standards of Indigenous students exiting from school results in the inability to supply, from their ranks, the teachers and other professionals needed to provide culturally appropriate role models in the classroom.

As a consequence of the lack of Indigenous teachers, schools have to depend on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aides to provide Indigenous input. However, their role is subordinate to the classroom teacher and their presence confirms the status of Indigenous education in Australia. On the one hand, they provide a sociocultural connection for the students, but on the other they exemplify the widely held belief that "educational equality for Indigenous Australians is either not achievable, or if possible, only achievable over a long period of time" (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2000b, p. 10). Furthermore, through their interactions with non-Indigenous classroom teachers, the AIEOs are influenced by prevailing deficit explanations of the failure of Indigenous students at school and come to promote these explanations themselves. The result is a reduction in their effectiveness as advocates and models for Indigenous students (Partington, Godfrey, Harslett, Harrison & Richer, 1998)

In the 1980s, the federal government supported the ambitious goal of the National Aboriginal Education Committee to have a thousand Indigenous teachers in

schools by 1990 (National Aboriginal Council, n.d.). This goal was never achieved. Not only did insufficient numbers graduate but, among those who did, few stayed in the classroom for long, choosing instead more rewarding positions elsewhere. Most obtained jobs in educational administration or moved into other government departments very quickly so there are always relatively few Indigenous teachers in school. For example, in 2000, there were only 79 Indigenous classroom teachers in Western Australian schools (Department of Education, 2002).

As a result, most Indigenous students do not experience Indigenous teachers in their school careers, particularly when they get to secondary school, where the need is greatest. Mainstream classroom teachers are generally ill-equipped to teach Indigenous students in ways that promote success. Teachers reflect the dominant group in society and there is a “systematic lack of optimism and belief in educational success for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students” (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2000b, p.10).

In their efforts to achieve educational outcomes equivalent to those of non-Indigenous students, Indigenous students are confronted by many barriers that can be removed only with the support of non-Indigenous people. Power to effect change in education resides principally with the dominant Anglo-Australian majority. If it fails to acknowledge the difficulties experienced by Indigenous students, little will change. Unfortunately, many of the problems—and possibly the more significant ones—experienced by Indigenous students at school arise from the beliefs and practices of teachers rather than the attributes and behaviours of the students (Partington, 1997b). In relation to teacher education, Bourke, Dow, Lucas and Budby noted that:

One of the essential outcomes of core subjects focused on Aboriginal education should be a culturally sensitive and well informed teacher of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. An inclusive

approach should be promoted and racist attitudes challenged. Ignorance, mis-information and blatant racism should be dispelled. Such an idealized position is tempered by the knowledge that the racist attitudes of some teacher education students and teacher educators are so pervasive that they will be most difficult to alter. (Bourke, Dow, Lucas & Budby, 1993, p. 42)

Teacher education programs in universities devote most of their attention to preparing teachers to teach children who are members of dominant Anglo-Australian society. If teachers know nothing more about Indigenous people than what they see on TV or read in newspapers, the potential for mis-education is dramatically increased. Indigenous students often are very different from students from Anglo-Australian backgrounds and so teachers are ill-prepared to teach them. Because their training typically focuses on preparation to teach students who fit within a certain range of backgrounds, language, beliefs and attitudes, teachers are likely to lack the competencies or understandings required to teach students outside this range. In particular, the beliefs they possess about those students may contribute to their failure. Ignorance of Indigenous history, oppression, culture and expectations is likely to lead teachers to adopt strategies that compound the disadvantages Indigenous students experience and accelerate their departure from school.

### **Problems with school**

In a study of factors influencing attendance of Indigenous students at school, Bourke, Rigby and Burden stated,

There is a growing body of opinion represented in the literature that school-based factors are of primary importance in relation to non-attendance of Indigenous students (Bourke, Rigby and Burden, 2000, p. 3).

Many Indigenous students do not like their teachers. Godfrey et al. (2001) found that 42 per cent expressed this view and a similar proportion (39%) considered that their teachers didn't care about them. Drawn almost exclusively from the

dominant Anglo-Australian community, teachers bring the attitudes and beliefs of the dominant community into the classroom. With a limited knowledge of Indigenous people or Indigenous cultures, both student teachers and regular teachers rely on stereotypes and misconceptions. Their negative perceptions of students are reciprocated and this has consequences for the students' achievement, behaviour and retention at school.

The difficulties created for Indigenous students by schools are related largely to issues of dominance and subordination. From an early age, Indigenous students demonstrate culturally different behaviours that lead mainstream teachers to impose more controlling behaviours on them than on non-Indigenous students. Harris (1980) and Malin (1990) have described in detail the social and cultural characteristics of Indigenous children in remote and urban locations. These characteristics are quite different from those of typical Anglo-Australian children but in themselves they are no hindrance to a quality education. Malin examined the treatment of Indigenous children compared with non-Indigenous children and has found that behaviours that are perceived negatively by teachers are given much greater weight in the case of the Indigenous children. Often these behaviours, such as helping, demonstrate social maturity on the part of the child but they are not expected in the classroom and so the teacher regards them as undesirable (Malin, 1990).

Another cultural characteristic that leads Indigenous students into trouble at school is their tendency to treat adults as equals, and this extends to teachers. The subtle markers of deference and conformity to the teacher, well known to non-Indigenous students, are often absent in the responses of Indigenous students, and this may cause teachers to become oppressive in their behaviour management. Non-conforming students, who are liable to cause discipline problems, are seen as threats by teachers, for whom discipline is a major factor in their self-perceptions of competence (Partington, Waugh & Forrest, 2001). Add

to this the widespread perception among teachers of Indigenous students as behaviour problems, and it is likely that they will have little chance of avoiding conflict with teachers.

From the teacher's point of view, there may be considerable difficulty in identifying the factors that contribute to good behaviour, effective participation and success on the part of many Indigenous students: obviously, if they could learn English effectively, much of the difficulty in instruction would disappear. But gaining competence in English is related to many other factors, and when all of these — first language, culture, health, attendance, racism, other priorities, and family and peer relationships — are taken into account, the likelihood of success for Indigenous students is much more problematic than for other students.

Although much of the literature claims to find no racism in schools, from the perspective of Indigenous students and their parents racism is a reality (Groome, 1995). Research indicates that many teachers are racist (Brennan, 1998; Gool & Patton, 1998; Partington, Godfrey, & Richer, 2001). There are numerous grounds for Indigenous students to claim racism against them at school. For example, teachers may withdraw Indigenous students from classroom participation on the basis of their cultural identity or they may fail to listen to the explanations provided by such students when they are in trouble (Godfrey, Partington, Harslett & Richer, 2001). Differential treatment is common and is complained about by Indigenous students. As reported by Partington, Waugh and Forrest (2001), one Indigenous education aide observed that many Indigenous students in his school felt they were picked on:

I think what it is they're not really listening to what the kid has got to say. Like I said before, most of them feel they're getting picked on. Other ones are doing things, like starting it off or doing it and the other ones, the ones who are getting caught are the ones who are sort of answering and when they get caught by the teacher [she]

sends them out and [is] not giving them a chance to explain themselves that another party were involved and if the other party was sent out too, they'll feel a lot better. They believe in fairness. (Partington, Waugh and Forrest, 2001, p. 61)

Students are well aware of the extent of fairness among teachers. All students make judgments constantly about their teachers and their interactions with them. Although a teacher who discriminates against Indigenous students receives little respect, they are in a relatively powerless position to do anything about it. Often, school and education system authorities fail to listen to the complaints of Indigenous parents, workers or students (Groome, 1995; Godfrey, Partington, Harslett, & Richer, 2001; Partington, Godfrey & Richer, 2001). The causes of this lack of recognition of the validity of their complaints may be diverse but it is likely that the negative perceptions held of Indigenous people by some teachers and authorities play a major role. The relative powerlessness of the students and their parents gives teachers the opportunity for oppression without fear of retaliation.

In relation to health, for example, far more young Indigenous students suffer from otitis media (and its consequence, conductive hearing loss) than do non-Indigenous students (McPherson, 1992; Morris, 1998; Watson & Clapin, 1992). The consequences for learning are considerable, with up to half of Indigenous student in any class suffering from conductive hearing loss at the one time (Howard, 1991). These consequences, which are most severe in the early years of schooling, include inattention, behaviour difficulties, poor attendance, low achievement and, in particular, problems in learning to read and write. For Indigenous students who come to school with a language other than English, communication difficulties are exacerbated. Teachers need to be aware of the widespread occurrence of conductive hearing loss and use strategies that assist students to overcome the learning difficulties that can occur as a result.

Even without the complication of hearing loss, Indigenous students who enter school with a language other than standard Australian English may have difficulty. Those who use other dialects of English, such as Aboriginal English, can be at a disadvantage because many teachers are unaware that the students' language is different and assume the students simply speak poor English. This can have a negative effect on students' school learning (Malcolm, 1998).

In addition to the above, students' motivation may be reduced as a result of environmental factors outside the school. Indigenous students may have home lives that are quite different from what teachers expect: large, multi-family groups may live in the one house, limiting opportunities for study; alcoholism, a serious problem in many Indigenous homes, can cause difficulties for study, and poverty is much more common among Indigenous than non-Indigenous families. Indigenous students are likely to have fewer resources for learning and their opportunities for success are influenced more by the resources allocated by the school.

Difficult lives out of school and a continuing frustration at their inability to receive fair treatment, are major reasons for Indigenous students leaving school. School should be a sanctuary from difficulties experienced outside the school and it should be a place where they can be encouraged to succeed and take advantage of opportunities for education and training. For this to happen, however, schools need to change. This change can only occur through more effective education of teachers.

### **Changing the Perspective of the Teachers**

There are serious difficulties in enunciating the principles that should provide the framework for a program to educate teachers about teaching Indigenous students. There are competing paradigms,

each of which implies a course of action that may be at odds with other courses. Those who believe that attention to cultural differences is the solution to effective teaching of Indigenous students (For example, Christie, 1985; Harris, 1987) would adopt a course of action that differs from those who believe that oppression and alienation are the root causes of Indigenous students' difficulties (See Munns, 1998). A combination of these alternative approaches is most likely to result in a framework for the successful education of Indigenous students (Partington, 1997a)

The choices available to teachers in the instruction of students are complex and interrelated. They have control over a matrix of variables that influence the task of teaching. Decisions regarding curriculum content, behaviour management, relationships with students, language and methods of instruction, administrative procedures and school rules have to be made in the light of many other variables. Influencing all of these variables, however, is the way in which teachers use power in the classroom. By examining the power relations that exist, the teacher is more able to explain the success of relationships in the classroom. It is possible that a fear of loss of control (Partington, Waugh & Forrest, 2001) leads teachers to:

spend large amounts of effort seeking to control and limit student actions in the belief that they should be the holders of power in the classrooms, and that student contributions to power relations are a form of insurrection against the legitimate government of the classroom (Manke, 1997, p. 124).

The result, according to Manke, is increased resistance on the part of students. Rather than attempting to oppress students, teachers might be more successful in their interactions with students if they sought to establish good relationships.

The formation of good relationships between teachers and students is important for Indigenous success at school (Harslett, 1999). Many teachers neglect to establish

such relationships, often to the detriment of their own well-being and the students' achievement. In an unpublished paper reporting research into school discipline procedures, Partington (1998) identified the classroom characteristics of Indigenous secondary students:

- ∞ They view things from their own perspective. They don't see the broader picture and might not consider the effect of their actions on the rest of the class.
- ∞ They are affected by events inside and outside the school and may come to class in a bad mood as a consequence of something that happened at home or in the playground.
- ∞ They like to be treated decently and will respond better to teachers who are considerate.
- ∞ They are continually making judgments about the teacher on matters such as interest, likeability, fairness and knowledge.
- ∞ They respect teachers who are fair.
- ∞ They don't like teachers who shout, are sarcastic or who are unfair. They will either respond in kind or they will take offence at these behaviours.
- ∞ They like to be helped when they can't do the work.
- ∞ They respond better to behaviour management if they are warned before action is taken against them for misbehaviour.
- ∞ They often utilise physical acts rather than oral communication to express themselves. There may be a lot of bravado in students' responses.

Most of these characteristics apply also to non-Indigenous students. However, there are subtle differences that lead teachers to impose more severe demands on Indigenous students. According to Partington (1998), teachers tended to show less flexibility in their interactions with

these students and they resorted to confrontational behaviour. He reported that some teachers exhibited a range of behaviours that exacerbated behaviour problems and resulted in more severe outcomes than were warranted initially. These teachers:

- ∞ didn't listen to the students;
- ∞ believed misbehaving students were deviant;
- ∞ demanded compliance to their authority in the classroom and failed to use a consensual style of management;
- ∞ had superior command of language but failed to exercise it in negotiation with the students; and
- ∞ worried that escalation of incidents would occur and extend to other students.

Sarcasm, scapegoating, differential treatment and an unwillingness to create a classroom environment that was inviting were characteristics of these teachers. Their uncompromising behaviour was typical of the teachers with discipline problems in their classrooms.

### **What should be taught to student teachers?**

A number of things contribute to more effective learning by Aboriginal students, and these should be a part of the stock of attitudes, knowledge and skills of student teachers by the time they graduate:

- Awareness of the existence of racism. Often, teachers fail to comprehend the racist nature of their words and actions and this can result in the alienation of Indigenous students. Racism needs to be defined from the perspective of Indigenous people and the social processes that result in Indigenous perceptions of racism should be made clear to teachers.

- The establishment of good relations is a prerequisite to effective interaction, and this makes it imperative for teachers to work to become accepted if the students

are going to come to school, attend to the teacher and strive to learn.

Acceptance of the child's prior learning is essential for continuity of learning. If teachers do not take into account what the child has learned in the family, the essential criterion for effective learning — building on prior knowledge — is negated. While Indigenous students share many characteristics with non-Indigenous students (Groome, 1995), their heritage ensures that there are also differences. If teachers assume there are no differences, this can lead to lack of interest and possible failure on the part of the Aboriginal child.

Teachers must be able to construct the classroom as a welcoming place for Indigenous students. Aboriginal life and culture should be represented in the classroom and school (Groome, 1995). This doesn't mean bark paintings and boomerangs. The presence of Aboriginal people, Aboriginal English, pictures of Aboriginal people, curriculum content with which they can identify and Aboriginal role models are all features of the situation that can be changed to encourage the greater participation of Aboriginal children in schooling.

- Involving parents in the education of their child has benefits in all cultures, but for Aboriginal students it has particular value. Firstly, it establishes a link between the home and the school, and the teacher can enlist the support of the parents in the formal education of the child. This is important because of the lack of cultural continuity between home and school. To many Aboriginal people, particularly those in traditionally oriented communities (but also in urban locations) a gulf exists and the school is seen as an alien institution that has little relevance to the immediate lives of the people. Secondly, the parents can get to know the teacher and so establish a relationship, a factor that is very important in coming to work together. If the parents (and the child) regard the teacher favourably, they are more likely to acknowledge his or her expertise and accept the instruction offered.

- An understanding of the potentially different values of Indigenous

students can contribute to teachers' interactions with them. Values brought by students from home must be evident in the school. These can be subtly different from Anglo-Australian values, but can have a significant impact on the way students are perceived by teachers and influence the way they perceive the teachers. For example, Aboriginal students have a much more equal status with adults than do Anglo-Australian students. This leads them to speak more as equals than to use terms and tones of deference (Harris, 1980). Some teachers may take exception to this, which leads to rejection of the child and reciprocal rejection of the teacher by the child. It is easy to see how the situation can degenerate to a downward spiral in the quality of relationships between teachers and students.

- Teachers must be aware of what constitutes threats to their classroom management and how Indigenous students respond to threats against them. Perceptions held by students can contribute to their willingness to engage in what the school regards as socially undesirable behaviour. If they believe that teachers are unlikely to support them when they claim they have been unjustly treated, they are more likely to take matters into their own hands. Coupled with this, Indigenous students' greater reliance on physical solutions to social conflicts is likely to lead quickly to sanctions by teachers (Malin, 1989). This gives the individuals concerned a negative reputation (Partington, Waugh et al., 2001), and lead to non-acceptance at school. Teachers should endeavour to ensure they identify the correct aggressor when working with Indigenous students in conflict situations. Racist actions and remarks by non-Indigenous students can often lead to bitter responses by Indigenous students.

- Teachers need to be aware of and able to accept Aboriginal English or other Aboriginal languages in the classroom (Malcolm, 1998). This is an important factor in the social adjustment of Indigenous students at school. What is often regarded as poor English is in fact a valid language in its own right, with the

variety and richness that enables it to be used as the daily language of interaction for a large number of people. It is unfortunate that many of the grammatical forms of Aboriginal English are considered ungrammatical in Standard Australian English. Forms such as *We was looking*, *I only been here for two years* and *I treaded on a nail* are typical of such errors, while dropped hs, unusual plural forms and alternative consonants can lead to perceptions of incompetence in English. What is usually occurring, however, is the employment of Aboriginal English terms in a standard English context.

- Because of the diverse environmental influences on Indigenous students, teachers should acquire an understanding of these influences and the strategies that may be useful in overcoming their negative aspects. For example, children in poverty may miss out on meals and it may be desirable for the school to provide meals to improve their receptivity to learning. While this may be considered paternalistic, it is a path chosen by many Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness committees in schools.

## Conclusion

Of course, it is not only teachers who have to change: if they are to succeed at school, the children must bridge the gap between Indigenous lifestyles and the lifestyle that is necessary for school success. In order to do this, however, there must be some benefit for them. In particular, Indigenous students must feel comfortable at school and in control of their lives. Rather than being a mirror of society, the school needs to become an advocate for students so that it redresses the inequalities and injustices that exist elsewhere in society.

If teachers use the above strategies, they will demonstrate that they are not seeking to oppress the students but accept them as they are. The alternative realities of Indigenous students are acknowledged in the use of such strategies and this promotes changes that enable them to succeed at school despite the external barriers that



exist. The problem, however, is that the implementation of such strategies is often unacceptable to school authorities and teachers, who are largely members of the dominant social group and, as such, are unable to see the justice of approaches that challenge their own values and programs.

An understanding of the reality of classroom life for Indigenous students should be a requirement of all graduating student teachers. Without this knowledge, they will continue the misrepresentation of Indigenous people and contribute to the disadvantages suffered by Indigenous students in school. The efforts of governments and their agencies to bring about change in education will not succeed by focusing on the students. It is essential that teachers change first.

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