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Perspectives on retention of Aboriginal students

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Abstract

Aboriginal students school experiences are the worst of any group in Australia. Many explanations have been put forward for this from a variety of perspectives, from deficit to critical. It is argued in this paper that a critical perspective is desirable to best explain failure, low retention rates, poor attendance and misbehaviour and at the same time enable strategies to overcome these problems. The positioning of Aboriginal students as oppressed, discriminated against and alienated in classrooms and schools, combined with a perception of them as active resisters of schooling is only one part of the story. In order to establish a context in which these negative expressions of power can be overcome for Aboriginal students, schools and teachers must acknowledge the cultural expectations, values and culturally constructed behaviours which define their identity. Until serious efforts are made to change the structures of schooling in line with Aboriginal students identity needs, resistance to perceived oppression will continue.

Introduction

Schools function in much the same way as they have done for well over 100 years. As Hargreaves (1994) has pointed out, schools are modern institutions in a postmodern era. The strategies employed in instruction, classroom management, and curriculum choice are no longer valid for today's world, yet they are perpetuated as entrenched features of a system long past its prime. Designed to transmit a finite and commonly accepted body of knowledge to students who were expected to be compliant and receptive, the school now is confronted with a great diversity of students who find difficulty accepting the culture, content and practices of the institution.

In their midst is a significant minority of Indigenous students who are among the lowest achievers academically in the country. Despite many reports and changes in programs (eg. Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, 1992; Department of Employment Education and Training,

1994; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1991) , Indigenous students continue to do poorly at school. Most recently, considerable effort has been made to bring their achievement in line with the level of success of the rest of society. Although such an outcome is essential from a social justice perspective and is consistent with the goals of Indigenous education (Department of Employment Education and Training, 1989) it will be achieved only if the structural components of schooling are changed to provide a more responsive environment for them.

The solution most often tried by schools is assimilation, and there is evidence that the most assimilated Indigenous students are the most successful at school. If we examine statistics of retention in Australian states, we will see that more Indigenous students in the ACT remain at school to the end of Year 12 than in any state or territory (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996) . These are likely to be the children of Indigenous civil servants who demonstrate successful assimilation to the culture of the dominant society at its most bureaucratic. It is unlikely, however, that such students, would be typical of the majority of Indigenous students across Australia. The practice of assimilation is no longer viable. Located in the functionalist perspective of schooling, it is still promoted in many schools as the solution to Indigenous student learning. However, it fails to acknowledge the contribution the students can make to the school through their own knowledge. Although they may become culturally assimilated, such students may still maintain an ideological stance as Indigenous Australians. This enables them to be successful in the mainstream institutions of society but at the same time they are able to identify as members of a modern Indigenous movement designed to foster the objectives of their people.

The diversity among Indigenous people means that there is no possibility of one outcome of the relation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous education. This diversity extends from traditionally oriented remote community people to urban Indigenous people who maintain symbolic links with traditional Indigenous culture but are more concerned with struggles for equality, social justice and personal and group advancement. The principal unifying element among these disparate people is the history of oppression they have experienced (National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, 1997) . Even here, however, some have closer links with this history than others. In remote areas the limited contact with non-Indigenous Australia has insulated them from the worst consequences of conquest. In contrast, Indigenous groups near the sites of first contact were ravaged by disease, murder and starvation, and in many cases, completely wiped out (Reynolds, 1981) .

To what extent has the educational experience of many Indigenous people become the grand narrative for Indigenous people? Harris (1980; 1990) , Malin (1990) , Christie (1985) and others have demonstrated the commonality of cultural attributes across Australia, and these influence Indigenous students' educational experiences. Teasdale identified three elements of culture relevant to knowledge, wisdom and learning. These are the content of knowledge which gives life and purpose to the group; the processes by which knowledge is analysed, stored and transmitted; and the settings in which these processes take place. Prior to European expansion, indigenous groups around the world maintained clearly defined and unique systems of knowledge, wisdom and learning but since colonisation much of this has been lost:

The arrival of the Europeans in most parts of the world É had far reaching consequences, for they brought with them their own languages, religious beliefs and political systems. They were certain of the superiority of their own knowledge and wisdom, and in most cases imposed it unquestioningly on those they conquered. Hence, they introduced systems of education that were based exclusively on their own processes of knowledge, analysis and transmission. Indigenous knowledge and learning were suppressed, often in quite deliberate and systematic ways. As a consequence, many indigenous groups were marginalised. (Teasdale, 1995 p. 588) .

This was the case with Indigenous Australians. The cultures of Indigenous people have not been totally lost, however. They persist more intact in some areas than others, particularly in remote regions of the country where European invasion was late and less overwhelming. Even in urban areas, however, it is apparent that Indigenous people possess knowledge and wisdom that is distinct from the dominant culture (Malin, 1989; Toussaint, 1987). The educational response to these differences determines whether a deficit, cultural difference or critical perspective is operating.

Indigenous people have not been passive recipients of domination, however. The perception that Aboriginal people are acted upon but do not act and so have no part in determining their destiny must be countered. Attwood (1989) presented an account of Indigenous people actively constructing their own reality through opposition to attempted domination by European missionaries. The processes in operation in schools parallel the situation identified by Attwood. It is possible that the identity being created will locate students in a position which is decidedly anti-school, so that their overt efforts contradict the efforts of the teachers. Christie (1981) explained the operation of this process in the primary school. Despite the efforts of the teacher, his or her goals are frustrated by the interpretation which the children place on the demands made.

The very need to construct an alternative identity within the dominant culture points to the drastic situation of Aboriginal people in Australia today. Their inability to participate equally and justly in society in ways which are satisfying and productive is a consequence of the extensive racism that exists and has existed since the arrival of the First Fleet. Morris (1988) elucidated the course by which the Dhan-gadi people re-established cultural distance between themselves and European society in Australia during the period of assimilation. Prior to this the existence of a strong original culture provided the basis for an appropriate cultural distance. The process of assimilation destroyed their culture and thus removed this barrier between the Dhan-gadi and the Europeans. Morris reports that the Dhan-gadi re-established the barrier through the establishment of a culture of resistance. An essential element of this resistance was the employment of collective activities (drinking and gambling) which operated in direct opposition to the individualistic pursuits demanded of them by the dominant society had assimilation been successful. The possibility emerges that resistance has become a part of Aboriginal response to the dominant society and, perhaps, is now a widespread part of the experience of schooling for Aboriginal students. Folds (1987) reported that resistance to schooling among Aboriginal people arose from conflict between school and community. This conflict was 'lived out in the contemporary classroom, school and community every day' (p.

20). Reporting on traditionally oriented schools in the

Pitjantjatjarra lands, Folds observed that the difference in the values of the community and the teachers was one source of conflict resulting in resistance, both for students and adults in the community. For example, Aboriginal Education Workers in the classroom worked to achieve social cohesion among the students, often in conflict with the teachers, who saw individual growth as the desirable goal. The response of Aboriginal Education Workers to the tension this created was to absent themselves from school, rather than to confront the situation. Many of those who continued to work in classrooms exhibited antagonism towards teachers, rarely used English except to communicate with the teacher and maintained community values and practices in preference to those of the teachers.

Folds (1987) reported that students in the schools he studied demonstrated resistance in a number of ways. Passive resistance (the 'wall of silence') consisted of refusing to communicate with the teacher, while more active forms consisted of ridicule by the students of the teacher and disruption of the activities of the classroom. In addition, absenteeism provided an avenue for many students to avoid the teacher altogether. Among the girls, resistance was expressed in choosing to focus on certain activities (such as showering and

shampooing) and ignoring the teachers' efforts to get them to focus on other activities. Shared work predominated over the teachers' demands for individual work while they rarely spoke English in class. Many of the students' behaviours exhibited resistance not only to the school but also, to a lesser extent, resistance to the expectations of the community. Folds concluded that the schools contributed much to the destruction of the culture of the communities in which they were situated, particularly as resistance resulted in failure to learn skills which would enable community members to overcome their dependent status. Malin's (1989) research points to the manner in which resistance develops, not necessarily through family/community socialisation, but through the adverse reception of the school to the child's responses in school.

Certainly, on the other side of the fence, the characterisation of Indigenous people as less than equivalent to non-Indigenous people has become an accepted fact among many citizens. Perceptions of laziness, incompetence, criminality, untrustworthiness and a general sense of unease appears to pervade the minds of many Australians in the dominant group when meeting Indigenous people. Such racist and unwarranted perceptions appear to be promoted by the media which highlights the activities of the minority of Indigenous people who are criminals and portrays them typical of indigenous people. A recent Sunday Times article, for example, headlined an article on juvenile offenders with the statement, 'Typical crim is black, 17, and a drug user'. (Fox, 1997). The content of the article indicated that the survey which resulted in these data was 'not up to scientific standard', and it referred to juvenile offenders with four or more detention sentences. It is common knowledge that Indigenous offenders are much more likely to be detained than non-Indigenous offenders for the same offence, and so the evidence is flawed and the article misleading. In the present economic and political climate the claim that people who are not successful in education or society are a burden on the producers of national wealth 'the owners and the workers' leads to the conclusion that they should be penalised for their parasitism. Failure, rather than being something to be overcome through allocation of additional social and economic resources, is an individual pathology to be exorcised through the application of stern regimes of work and testing. Schools, for example, are to be judged according to their ability to succeed in the three rs. Socially beneficial outcomes are assumed to follow. Such a perception is the privilege of the well-to-do and the secure. It re-establishes the authority of the knowledge of the ruling group in society. This knowledge relates to work, moral principles, curriculum and social interaction. Alternative knowledge is marginalised and devalued.

Even though there are grounds for disparaging this pressure for Indigenous students to adopt dominant societal standards of attainment, it is apparent that if they are to maintain control of their own affairs and avoid dependency on the state, success in the dominant system of education is a pathway to autonomy. At present, dependence on the state places Indigenous people in the position of clients of government departments such as state housing, social welfare and employment services. Success at school provides avenues to avoid client status. Strategies to bring about this success assumes considerable importance, which is reflected in the goals of Indigenous education in recent policy documents (Department of Employment Education and Training, 1989; Education Department of Western Australia, 1997). Even better, success at school with maintaining Indigenous cultural links is to be preferred.

The Research Project

It was in the light of these rising expectations for Indigenous student success in school that a collaborative research project was created. The project is a collaborative one between Edith Cowan University and the Aboriginal Education Branch of the Education Department of Western Australia. The purpose of the project is to identify quality schools for Indigenous students and promote practices which will bring about improved retention, attendance and

behaviour of Indigenous students, and the accompanying improved performance which is expected to flow from this.

It would be nice to claim that the theoretical underpinnings of the research are a pure instance of critical theory or symbolic interactionism or postmodern theory and so on. This isn't the case, and although there was a strong desire to commence this sentence with 'Unfortunately', we believe it is not necessary to be apologetic about the matter. This is because:

1. We intended to work with a range of schools to identify best practice. This needed to be done quickly and thoroughly, so that this phase of the research was completed by the end of this year. It was logical to choose a survey to do this. The purpose of the survey of Indigenous students in Years 6-10 was to get their attitudes towards their school and to determine whether they thought the school was potentially demonstrating best practice. Surveys, however, entail assumptions about the nature of both reality and knowledge, the permanence of attitudes, and the validity of test situations. Furthermore, they have the potential to be reductionist if it is assumed that we were searching for the essence of the good school.
2. There are several members in the research team who each have strong views on the nature of the research and, while these views do not limit the quality of the research, they do place conditions on the conceptual underpinnings. One team member has a strong interest in statistics and is keen to extend the 'lovely set of numbers' that emerged from the pilot study conducted in a high school and a primary school. Another is firmly committed to the value of research interviews and can be categorised as an interactionist. Two more have a leaning towards a critical/ postmodern perspective. While these may be mutually exclusive theoretically, it is common to put a foot in both camps, as evidenced by Giroux (1992) and others.
3. The task involved is not simple and there may be benefits in viewing the problem from a variety of theoretical perspectives because each has something to contribute to explaining Indigenous student's difficulties with school.

Already, there is support for findings which are consistent with an interactionist perspective. Ethically, we were constrained from focussing on poor quality teachers or identifying worst practice in schools (although these responses have emerged in informal discussions with students and teachers principally the latter). There are no such difficulties in identifying teachers who are doing a good job with Indigenous students. As a part of the survey, students are asked to nominate teachers who they think are best at teaching Indigenous students. We have commenced interviewing these teachers and the preliminary findings suggest that an interactionist perspective accounts adequately for the data. The literature on student expectations of good teachers is matched by the explanations of their performance with students given by teachers. The common message emerging from the interviews is one of respect for the students, advocacy for their situation in schools, fairness and teaching methods which emphasise reciprocity and high expectations. This establishes a commonality of belief a grand narrative of teaching practice with Indigenous students. It is consistent with the work of Harris and Malin and fits in well with symbolic interactionist theory.

At the same time, it is clear that the students are not a unitary group, that the development of a uniquely Indigenous teaching practice for all Indigenous students may be misleading as the practices emphasised could also be appropriate for non-Indigenous students. Power relations also intrude upon the teaching-learning context and create different experiences within the dominant pedagogy for Indigenous students. For these reason, both a critical or a postmodern perspective may be more appropriate.

Although it is likely that a diversity of realities exist and that no one model of instruction is likely to succeed with all students, the present dominance of the system encourages us to acknowledge the existence of certain desirable outcomes in society. This directs us to adopt conventional solutions to the issues that confront us. We are tempted away from the radical

explanations and practices because they lack the institutional imprimatur that gives comfort to the researcher and continued support from the system. (Erickson (1996) noted this in his keynote address to the 1996 AARE conference). What we are doing is investigating what works with Indigenous students, and assumptions underlie this goal. As non-Indigenous researchers, there is the possibility that we will not perceive important elements of the condition when it comes up. Bounded by our own cultural perspectives, we may fail to acknowledge the alternative realities that may emerge. Do we function like Malinowski (Erickson, 1996) and study individuals as 'subjects' whose characteristics we are seeking to categorise and explain from our perspective? Certainly, the introductory survey could lend strength to such a conclusion. Furthermore, Burbules's (1997) argument is quite relevant here: that categorising differences 'can obscure at least as many issues as it reveals' (p. 101). Investigations of Indigenous education usually are reductionist because they categorise students: Indigenous/ non-Indigenous; rural- urban; male - female; English as a first language - Indigenous first language; and so on. It is clear that these categories are not as clear cut as at first appears. Even the first and fundamental categorical difference Ñ Indigenous - Non-Indigenous Ñ involves subjective identificational issues that are not easily distinguished. The extent to which an individual student is indigenous is more than skin colour or heritage: the sense of belonging to the group is a central defining characteristic of Aboriginality and dichotomies may be of little value if this sense is important in school participation and success.

This failure of dichotomous categories is cautionary for us because the introductory survey embodies some elements of such categorisations: gender, school attendance, liking for school, and so on. We are positioning the students according to a range of categories which may or may not be relevant to their schooling and which may be only markers of a very complex array of fluid positions within the category. In defence of this approach, we are using it as a preliminary instrument to identify 'interesting' individuals for further dialogue. Obviously, the statistician in our team will study the data to draw conclusions of a positivistic nature. Other members of the team will identify individuals whose responses suggest their views may be worth obtaining, and rather than functioning in a reductionist approach, we will seek to describe the richness of the diversity that exists among the students, their families, the school and the teachers.

A Critical Perspective

From a critical perspective, research cannot be conducted as if the students, teachers and parents are viewed as subject in the process. In 1982, Giddens defined the aim of critical theory to be 'the liberation of human beings from their domination by forces constraining their rational autonomy of action' (Giddens, 1982, p. 87) . Critical theory has been the foundation for much research into the oppositional nature of schooling over the past twenty years (Eg. Folds, 1987; Walker, 1988;

Willis, 1977) . More recently, its theoretical limitations have been exposed as a consequence of the rise of postmodern perspectives on society.

The limitations in critical theory as developed by Habermas centre around the notion of what Habermas refers to as the 'ideal speech situation', which : involves not only the rational attainment of consensus but also complete mutual understanding by participants and recognition of the authentic right of each to participate in the dialogue as an autonomous and equal partner (Giddens, 1982, p.86)

There is now be some debate as to whether this autonomy of action is attainable, or can be judged to have been attained, in real life (Lakomski, 1997) . Whether an equal power distribution exists is impossible to determine, possibly except in hindsight, which is an inadequate condition for continuing such a dialogue. In the literature, the critical approach has left behind notions of equality of power and rationality of argument. The influence of

Lyotard, Foucault and others have redirected sociological thought more towards the impermanence of the world and the influence of power relations in the construction of knowledge. The existence of one reality is replaced by multiple realities; grand narratives are rejected as expressions of the totalising power of certain hegemonies; and discourse becomes the expression of power and knowledge. Postmodernism suggests that what has been presented in our socio-political and our intellectual traditions as knowledge, truth, objectivity, and reason are actually merely the effects of a particular form of social power, the victory of a particular way of representing the world that then presents itself as beyond mere interpretation, the truth itself. (Garry Peller in Giroux, 1992, p. 53) .

To argue that a study is critical is to locate oneself in a certain sociological perspective that, initially, appears to have been surpassed by alternative theories. However, the term 'critical' has been appropriated by postmodernist sociologists to refer to the process of inquiry, rather than to locate the writer within the Habermasian tradition. For example, Erickson (1996), noted that the critical perspective brings political interest to the surface:

The researcher is using analytic terms and perspectives that are loaded with social interests and has to subject these to critical scrutiny, in order to deconstruct the assumptions and concepts by which the research is done. Thus, the critical researcher in education inquires, 'Whose interests are being served?' And 'Whose perspectives are being silenced?' when intelligence, or readiness for school, or effectiveness is conceived of and operationalized this way rather than that. (Erickson, 1996, p. 9)

Kincheloe and McLaren (1994) adopt a slight change of terminology to denote the move from critical theory as such to a more inclusive perspective: they define a 'criticalist' as a researcher É who attempts to use her or his work as a form of social or cultural criticism and who accepts certain basic assumptions:

- ¥ that all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are socially and historically constituted;
- ¥ that facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from some form of ideological inscription;
- ¥ that the relationship between concept and object and between signifier and signified is never stable or fixed and is often mediated by the social relations of capitalist production and consumption;
- ¥ that language is central to the formation of subjectivity (conscious and unconscious awareness);
- ¥ that certain groups in any society are privileged over others and, although the reasons for this privileging may vary widely, the oppression that characterizes contemporary societies is most forcefully reproduced when subordinates accept their social status as natural, necessary, or inevitable;
- ¥ that oppression has many faces and focussing on only one at the expense of others (e.g., class oppression versus racism) often elides the interconnections among them; and finally,
- ¥ that mainstream research practices are generally, although most often unwittingly, implicated in the reproduction of systems of class, race, and gender oppression. (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994, p.139)

In what might be referred to as a benign categorisation, Kincheloe and McLaren identify several critical traditions, from the neo-Marxist work of Horkheimer, Marcuse and Adorno through the genealogical work of Foucault and the deconstruction of Derrida to an eclectic meld of the work of Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard and others. The last grouping is most reassuring because the many strands of postmodern thought make it difficult to locate oneself with a particular strand when much of what educational researchers do cuts across

not only boundaries within postmodern thought but also across those between postmodernism and other perspectives.

The postmodern perspective explains many of the inconsistencies of former social theories. As Giroux (1992) stated, 'by acknowledging questions of power and value in the construction of knowledge and subjectivities, postmodernism helps to make visible important ideological and structural forces, such as race, gender and class'. The approach provides a way of thinking and writing about issues that previously were taken for granted hegemonies. Culture, for example, can be seen both as a subjectifying hegemony which brings about consensus and subordination, but also as an avenue to liberation from these states.

A critical approach to our research, then, adopts the third of Kincheloe and McLaren's (1994) categorisations: a meld of postmodern theorists to enable the development of alternative ways of thinking about Indigenous education.

Implementing a Critical Perspective in our Research There are certain consequences of the adoption of a critical perspective to the research endeavour. Because we are engaged in bringing about change as a result of our initial work, however, we also need to address schools' participation in the change process in ways that are consistent with the perspective. In order to implement a critical perspective in our research, the following issues are pertinent:

1. We have to give voice to the participants. To do this it is necessary to develop a rapport with them, explain the research project clearly and conduct discussions Ñ rather than interviews Ñ as equal participants in the project. Connell, Ashenden, Kessler and Dowsett (1982, p. 214) described this approach as follows:

Because we had to explain ourselves and get other people's agreement at each major step, we were under pressure to be sensitive to their interests and concerns. It also meant that they became fairly familiar with us and the project. By the time we taped an interview with a parent, he or she would normally have seen two or three of our pieces of paper, and we would have visited the house two or three times. We showed ourselves willing to put time and effort into understanding their kids; and we think that is a major reason for the very good rapport with the parents that most of the interviews show. In this approach there is an acknowledgment of the equality of the participants and their right to interrogate the foundations of the research. This is consistent with a Habermasian perspective on the research process. It does not go far enough, however, because the participants are not fully engaged in the process. They can interrogate the process, but they have no control over its direction or intent. Even in a Habermasian context, one of the tenets of critical research is that participants must function as autonomous and equal partners (Giddens, 1982, p. 88) . In the approach adopted by Connell, et al, the dominant power still rests with the researchers who ultimately pull the strings. A better way to go is to coopt participants into the project as equal partners. The research then becomes their research as much as our research. This is the foundation of action research, a procedure by which the participants explore the dimensions of the problem being investigated at the same time as acquiring practical educational product from the research.

Even so, in the current project, it is still our decision to coopt the participants, and if we choose to operate in other ways and go in alternative directions, our choices dominate. So the notion of equality is more appearance than reality. We construct research situations in which participants appear to be equal partners but this is an illusion. But we do not have absolute control: we are very much subject to the school's decisions whether to participate, to pull out, to restrict the extent of their participation, and so on. So the research situation, rather than being a site of domination or equality, is a site of contestation and compromise.

2. We need to declare our interest. In the process of negotiating the participation of teachers, students and parents in the project, we need to state what our intentions are in the research. In part, this is stated in the permission form which each participant

completes, but also in the preliminary discussions with participants we state our views on the processes in Indigenous education which are inhibiting success, continuity and participation. Generally, these views find acceptance among the participants whose support indicates that, although there is a measure of self-interest, the desired goals of the project are worthwhile for the community.

3. As a part of the research we will examine relations of power in the school. The key questions revolve around notions of agency and structure. It is likely that teachers will ground their arguments in the rationality of the students behaviour, so that it is within their power to succeed or fail at school. Behaviour is seen as purposive and goal oriented. From this position, the students are regarded as possessing the power to influence their own lives (and the lives of others). Such an approach is frequently found at the micro level when teachers claim that students deliberately disrupt classes, walk out of the room, and know what they are doing when they do these things. However, these same teachers are also likely to argue that disruptive students lack appropriate upbringing by their parents, are unable to control themselves and demonstrate a marked lack of social responsibility. They have a notion of what it is to be normal, and students who function outside the limits established by the teachers are regarded in some way as deviant. This is a convenient label for Indigenous students, given the stereotypes that exist about their values and behaviours. The often markedly different lifestyles of Indigenous people leave them open to accusations of deficiency and lack of order in their lives by those who lack a breadth of understanding of the reciprocal nature of oppression and the cultural differences that exist. This says as much about those who would marginalise and oppress Indigenous people because of their alleged differences as it does about the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (See Giroux, 1993) . Both of these views fail to take account of the complexities of the social situation. Both make assumptions about the locus of power: in the first it is believed to lie with the individual; in the latter with the social system. But both oversimplify the social situation. Power indeed is lodged with individuals, but not always and often in a shared manner. There is power within the system but it is not permanently lodged there simply by virtue of the existence of the institution. Rather, the dynamics of relations among those within institutions bring about the existence of power through their joint endeavours and that power comes to reside in the institutions, not permanently, but in a way that gives the institution a long term influence. The agents in the institution rely for their individual power on a shared acceptance of the rules by which the power is reified.

In our reesearch, we must engage the participants in dialogue regarding the forces of domination and emancipation. Although we don't approach them with this jargon, the issues discussed are replete with evidence of a concern with power and liberation. So far, only parents, Aboriginal and Islander Education Workers, teachers and principals have been interviewed in schools which have nominated themselves as demonstrating good practice. Even in these schools, there is ample concern among all groups Ñ and especially among parents, AIEWs, and teachers Ñ for the ways in which Indigenous students have more limited options than other students. The expression of concern regarding racism and structural oppression are evident. One Aboriginal Education Officer made the following observation about the uses of power in the school:

Michael: That's why I reckon that teachers in the main, given that they don't really know what you're going to get, they're very difficult to change, its much easier to mould the kid to suit the wide variance among teachers that he or she is likely to meet and to give the kid some power to be able to deal with that, so rather than sort of constantly work on the teachers to say, you've got to recognise all of these things, maybe we should be spending more time working on the kids, because the kid knows best where he comes from to say, here look, you're going to meet a lot of silly white buggers over the next 15 years, you've got to be very tolerant, you've got to be very understanding, there are times when you're going to get angry, here's the way to get through that anger bit, to come back to the teacher and say, I was angry yesterday, I still believe that I'm right but I'm

prepared to sort of come back in here and start again, I think we're better off doing it that way, and that's what a system like ours is in essence.

Here there is an acknowledgment of the power that the system has over the students. It is an admission that the system can't be beaten: the students have to change if they want to succeed. At the same time, there is clearly an awareness of the power in the system. Here we see, however, that hegemony does not exist: Instead, this teacher suggests that students become critically literate in the way the system operates so that they avoid becoming victims of its power.

The admission that the system might be too powerful is challenging for us, however, because our research is posited on the possibility of systemic change to improve the quality of schooling for Indigenous students.

4. It is necessary for us to attempt to establish equality between the researcher and the researched. Obviously there are class, gender and race differences between the researchers and the participants, and the establishment of such equality is unattainable in its complete form. Our approach is to partition the research so that, as one of the researchers put it so succinctly, 'It's horses for courses'. One member of the research team is Aboriginal and is able to work ore effectively to establish equality with parents. Although equality with students is more problematic, given the obvious age and status differences, rapport is apparent in the relations established by this researcher with students. Another member of the team has close links with principals in schools and is well placed to conduct interviews with them that are marked by mutual understanding and respect. Two other members work with teachers and are able to bring about the same kind of relationship in their interviews.

Later in the research, when changes are being proposed, implemented and evaluated, it will be important to ensure the continuation of a sense of equality. This, possibly, is the hardest element of the research to achieve because of its multi-level nature. Rather than researching just teachers or just parents, the inclusion of people from a range of statuses makes the attainment of an egalitarian approach unlikely, given the resources at our disposal.

5. We will encourage collaboration in change arising from the research.
It is intended that an action research approach will provide the foundation for the changes that are intended. A small group of schools will be involved in a process which empowers the teachers to make, and judge, the quality of the changes being made. We regard it as central to the success of the change process that we also involve parents and students in the collaboration.
6. Other processes the researchers must engage in include the analysis of motives for the conduct of the research and the involvement of participants in decision making. This is accomplished through the incorporation of a reference group into the structure of control of the research project. Comprised of key players in Indigenous education and the education system, this reference group 'keeps us honest' and ensures that the motives for the research continue to be liberating and critical rather than self-serving and hegemonic.

The Research Process

The process by which the school responds to the needs of students can be examined using a variety of techniques. Statistical analysis can demonstrate trends and relationships; ethnographic analysis can show the influence of individual action and its apparent cause in people's motivations and relationships; interviewing can discover people's attitudes and actions. To investigate the complex relationships among agency and structure, however, requires a more analytic tool, and this is supplied by discourse analysis. This reveals the underlying assumptions and relationships among the various attitudes, perceptions, hierarchies and sources of power in the processes at work. Even data gathered by other

forms of research, such as interviews, ethnographies and observations, can reveal these relationships through discourse analysis. Thus it should be possible to employ a variety of data gathering approaches such as observation and interviews as well as recording of discourse in relation to these processes in order to contextualise the research and investigate the research process itself. The outcomes of such an analysis will reveal the complex web of power relations, interactions, attitudes and assumptions at the level of agency, integration and system. The ways in which discourse analysis is useful in addressing the construction of power and identity and the allocation of material and symbolic resources were elaborated by Luke (1995). He noted that Learning to engage with texts and discourses, then, entails far more than language development or skill acquisition per se. It involves the development and articulation of common sense, of hegemonic 'truths' about social life, political values, and cultural practices. Luke argued that different children confront different discourses in the classroom, based upon the teacher's development of what Foucault refers to as a 'grid of specification' (Luke, 1995) for the child, depending upon whether he or she is male, female, culturally dominant or different, cognitively competent or challenged.

From this it should be possible to inform teachers and students of these relations and demonstrate how the forms of domination and resistance operate to inhibit educational success for Indigenous students. Also, the different discourses that function in different social contexts should reveal that students are not constructed monolithically in the diverse settings they inhabit. Family discourses will differ from school discourses, especially for minority students. A comparison of discourses can indicate how children are differently constructed in these different settings and possibly explain why many students do not like school.

If schools represent only the dominant culture, members of minority groups will be alienated. As Giroux (1993) pointed out, The content of the curriculum needs to affirm and critically enrich the meaning, language, and knowledge that different students actually use to negotiate and inform their lives. While there is no simple route to incorporating the student experience or popular culture into the curriculum, especially in light of the real fear by students of having these spheres colonised by the schools, it is imperative that these issues be addressed in ways that are as self-critical of the school as they are supportive and critical of the voices and histories that students bring with them to the school. (p. 26).

Without a careful examination of the institutional processes at work, schools will continue to limit the opportunities of Aboriginal students and exclude them from full participation in the benefits of formal education. A socially responsive institution is the minimum requirement for effective schooling for minorities.

Problems

There are problems with discourse analysis, however, that can be addressed by incorporating credibility checks on the assumptions and conclusions drawn from the evidence. An examination of discourse that indicates power relations, subject positioning and normalising narratives needs to be supported by evidence that these processes are indeed at work. Also, discourse analysis relies on the production of naive discourse. If participants in the social situation are aware of the processes of subjectification and normalisation that are signified by discourse, they may seek to avoid using such discourse in favour of politically correct language, in which case the researcher would need to investigate much more subtle markers of discrimination and power relations.

There are general problems with a critical approach to research. There is the need to get results from the study quickly and with a minimum of resources. Any product of the research project is potentially open to the criticism that it is promoting grand narratives. From the point of view of the partner in the project, answers are demanded and they are urgently needed, in the light of the new Commonwealth-State agreement on Indigenous education (Education

Department of Western Australia, 1997) . A critical perspective, however, leads to the conclusion (if we can use the term) that there are no clear answers, only partial solutions that are relevant at this moment in time and in certain contexts.

As Erickson pointed out, self-critical work is being denigrated and silenced by contractors and 'hard science' supporters (Erickson, 1996, p. 12) . The desire for definite answers and immediate solutions gives an advantage to positivistic approaches to research. However, the change process requires more than this: failure to acknowledge the diversity of meanings and the hidden nature of much of the power underlying institutional practices results in the inability of research which focusses on the superficial realities to bring about effective change.

Results

We have all encountered the bandwagons of education the past generation: open education, multicultural education, self-esteem enhancement, phonics, new maths, and so on: each new development has had its easy solutions and quick fixes. The influence of the promoters of these solutions is not directly a result of their marketing skills, however: such solutions to the problems associated with schooling are sought by teachers who have little time for complex and long term solutions. The promise of immediate resolution of learning problems, misbehaviour, negative attitudes and non-attendance persuades teachers to adopt simplistic solutions that focus on short term behaviour change without addressing the structural and contextual issues that underlie the problems.

Part of this is a consequence of their backgrounds: schooled in either functionalist or interactionist sociology, many who work with Indigenous students regard their performance, behaviour and attitudes to be either deviant or a consequence of self-esteem problems. Remediation is still practiced in response to the former approach but in the latter, changes to the knowledge base underlying the interactions is seen as a solution. So, for example, teachers experiencing behaviour problems can resolve these by becoming aware of cultural differences among the students; encouraging greater achievement is a consequence of finding out about culturally specific learning styles, while support from parents will come with more equal interactions with teachers. In many cases, these things do make a difference: teachers who adopt the strategies find that students perform better, behave in class and their parents develop a commitment to the teachers who follow these patterns.

Some years ago, on The Coming Out Show on ABC Radio, a former prisoner explained how she was empowered as a result of education she gained in prison. Paraphrased loosely, she stated, 'I didn't realise how oppressed I was until I did that course. It gave me the vocabulary to describe my condition, and I was able to see my life from another perspective. Then I knew I was oppressed, and I have been able to do something about it'.

In our research the information we obtain is based on the teachers' world view: If they see the world from an interactionist perspective, they will describe the school context from such a perspective. They will be bounded by a vocabulary of interactionism (although our research already is discovering elements of functionalism, especially among those schools which argue that there is no difference between the Indigenous students and the other students). Except for a few, they have yet to develop a perspective of conflict or oppression, let alone a critical perspective. So culture is seen as more important than racism, or deficiencies in students are seen as the cause the problems that exist in schools.

Conclusion

From the perspective which guides our research, we are searching for solutions in which the practices employed in the classroom can be modified to accommodate Indigenous students without marginalising or oppressing them. We assume a degree of consistency among these

students so that what works for one student is, hopefully, likely to work for another. The problem is, there are many variables, and what is relevant to one student is not necessarily relevant to another, nor to the same student in a different context. So, for example, a student may resist a teacher of social studies, but be a model student in art. In the event of constructing a range of processes that are common across a range of students, it is possible that we neglect major influences for other students whose needs are not met by these processes. Consequently, while the use of general explanations is a convenient solution to the problem of dissemination of results, it is unlikely to be as effective as participant involvement in restructuring school processes. An action research approach is both theoretically more consistent and practically more beneficial to changing educational practices for Indigenous students.

Through the use of an action research approach in the second stage of the research we hope to change these perspectives in order to engage teachers in an examination of the uses of power in the school and classroom, and the ways in which student participation, behaviour and learning are influenced by the relations of power in the school. By introducing teachers to the meanings embedded in the discourse which they employ in teaching students, as well as informing them of the alternative perspectives on the processes of schooling held by Indigenous students and parents, it is anticipated that renewal of education for Indigenous students will be possible.

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