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Pathways, Policy and Practice in Indigenous Education

Faith Irving, Monash University

Abstract

During the Whitlam Government years, Australia engaged with social issues related to Indigenous rights. The relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians underwent further scrutiny during the Commonwealth-mandated period of Aboriginal Reconciliation, 1994- 2000. Disturbing facts emerged concerning the relative degrees of disadvantage experienced by many Indigenous Australians compared to the non-Indigenous population, together with contributing social and historical sources grounded in the politics of governance and exclusion.

Key reports on the well-being of the Indigenous population point to the role of education in the formation of social identity. They highlight the need for non-Indigenous people to learn about the shared history, thus promoting an inclusive future that respects and values Indigenous culture and heritage. Education needs to reflect aspirations for Indigenous self-determination within the life of the nation.

Policy-making about Indigenous education is set within the current discourses of evolving national identity, citizenship and cultural pluralism, supported by anti-discrimination legislation and international conventions on human rights.

Yet some inherent challenges may be predicted in the implementation of Indigenous education policy, occurring at the personal, interpersonal and organisational levels. These challenges, together with some creative solutions, will be discussed.
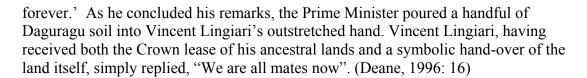
Signposts on the pathway

Sir William Deane (1996) observed, "The past is never fully gone, it is absorbed into the present and the future. It stays to shape what we are and what we do". Past interactions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are relevant to the work of present-day educators and systems and impact on society as a whole.

There is a photograph taken in 1975 of the then Prime Minister, Mr. Gough Whitlam, with Mr. Vincent Lingiari, Gurindji, which has arguably gained the status of an icon in the history of relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia, on the pathway towards Reconciliation and Indigenous self-determination.

Sir William Deane (1996) in the inaugural Vincent Lingiari Memorial Lecture, explained the context of the photograph. The Prime Minister had gone to Daguragu, a water-hole on Gurindji ancestral lands, to address the Gurindji people. The occasion marked the culmination of nine years of negotiation between Government, the Vestey Corporation and the Gurindji people, following the 1966 Wave Hill walk-off and strike by Aboriginal pastoral workers:

> "Announcing that he spoke on behalf of the Australian people, he (Mr. Whitlam) acknowledged that there was much to do to redress the injustice and oppression suffered by 'Black Australians'. He then ceremonially handed over deeds, 'as proof, in Australian law, that these lands belong to the Gurindji people and I put into your hands part of the earth itself as a sign that this land will be the possession of you and your children

forever.' As he concluded his remarks, the Prime Minister poured a handful of
Daguragu soil into Vincent Lingiari's outstretched hand. Vincent Lingiari, having
received both the Crown lease of his ancestral lands and a symbolic hand-over of the
land itself, simply replied, "We are all mates now". (Deane, 1996: 16)

Deane extrapolated from the symbolic events at Daguragu a number of "signposts" on the path
towards true national reconciliation. He observed that Mr Whitlam's speech and events around it
included an acknowledgement of the past "injustice and oppression" suffered by the Gurindji;
mutual recognition for some redress; the rejection of "any policy of complete assimilation and
integration" with the recognition that choice was needed, and that the role of government should
be to assist the Aboriginal peoples "to achieve their goals by their own efforts" (p18). He
observed that the formal ceremony of reconciliation expressed a consensus, reflected in Vincent
Lingiari's words, that both groups should "go forward…as friends and equals", with the
understanding that steps and policies would be taken in the future to redress past wrongs. The
signposts point to the principles of Reconciliation and self-determination.

Post-colonial theory points to relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people still
marked by the dynamics of power. In this context, the relationship between Indigenous and
non-Indigenous Australians has undergone scrutiny in recent years. Disturbing facts have
emerged into public awareness concerning the relative degrees of disadvantage experienced by
Indigenous Australians compared to the non-Indigenous population, based in the politics of
governance and exclusion.

Education can redress disadvantage
The importance of education in redressing the disadvantage experienced by many Indigenous
people was emphasized in key recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal
Deaths in Custody (Elliot, 1991) and its subsequent review, the report of the Council for
Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR, 1994) and the Bringing them Home Report on the Separation
of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (HREOC 1997). These
reports point to the urgent need for the wider community to get to know Indigenous Australians,
to learn about the shared history and to plan an inclusive future that respects and values
Indigenous culture and heritage. Teachers through their work are uniquely positioned to effect
positive social change, as there is recursive interplay between education and the social context
in which it occurs. Yet how do teachers take up this interventionist role?

Indigenous education in Victoria is set within the current discourses of pluralism and Aboriginal
Reconciliation. Indigenous Studies is a relative newcomer to the Australian curriculum agenda.
Currently, teachers in Victorian schools are mandated to teach Indigenous Studies to all
students. However, turning policy into classroom practice can be problematic for non-
Indigenous teachers. The onus is on them to interpret 'sound professional practice' in teaching
for and about Indigenous people The particular degree of challenge that individual teachers
encounter also lies in the wider debate, underpinned by social, cultural and historical factors.
Also, most Victorian teachers currently in the workforce have not undertaken Indigenous
Studies as a core part of their pre-service training.

The historical and social background to the complex relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia has only recently come to light. Yet it has a relevance that extends to the work of present-day educators and systems and impacts on society as a whole.

Since colonial times, teachers have been charged with implementing some of the many policies that have governed the lives of Indigenous people. Education policies focused by turns on assimilation, segregation and integration and past educational opportunities for Indigenous students have been limited to the type to fit them for domestic or pastoral work (see Fletcher, 1989). Throughout it all, Indigenous people maintained their struggle for self-determination, recognition and 'voice' (Broome, 2001).

Racism and prejudice

Discourses of power were overt in the assimilation policies and the so-called 'White Australia' policies, based on a concept of privilege and a notion of citizenship where light skin-tone was the key with which to access benefits more easily than others might. On the basis of skin-tone, decisions were made whether children were to be removed from, or to remain with their families and resources were granted or denied. However, the definition of 'white' could vary in terms of its implications for degree of membership of the dominant group. Indigenous-descent children who were classified as 'white' and who grew up in non-Indigenous families were not guaranteed to be racially acceptable to the wider 'white' community and to have the privilege of 'white' access to resources (McKay 1999). This is reminiscent of the 'commodity myth' posited by Gee (1996: 123), in which beliefs about the distribution of social goods often advantage some groups against others.

Governance and identity

The work of Michel Foucault indicates that words can serve to define groups within society, resulting in a process of objectifying people as the "other". The categorisation of others makes it easier to generalise, depersonalise and dehumanise, which in turn can be a basis of racism and prejudice (see Grassby, 1984; McConnochie, 1973; Markus, 1994; De Castell, Bryson, 1997). However, where the power differential is extreme, as is the case between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, the implications for quality of life and well-being are dire. They represent a pervasive threat to future success in life for the children currently in classrooms. Racism and prejudice of non-Indigenous towards Indigenous communities has a far-reaching impact on the potential for young people to achieve their best, and to lead happy, balanced and fulfilling lives.

Policy

In Victoria, the State government acknowledged the relationship between past child welfare policies and contemporary Indigenous disadvantage through its publication, *Response to the Bringing them Home Report 2002* (State of Victoria). The document outlined a holistic, inter-departmental strategic approach to the multi-faceted recommendations of the report. The goals for education were drawn from *Yalca: A Partnership for the New Millenium, Koorie Education Policy* (VAEAI / DE&T 2000), a policy statement on Indigenous education. *Yalca* is significant in that it was developed collaboratively between the Department of Education and Training and the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI), the representative body of the Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups in Victoria. As such, the goals of *Yalca* reflect Indigenous voice and inform the Indigenous component of the mandated State Curriculum Standards Framework (Irving 2003).

Self-determination

Self-determination is a key aspiration for contemporary Indigenous communities. Jonas (2000: 19) quotes the view of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination on the issue of self-determination within the life of the nation:

> The right of self-determination of peoples has an internal aspect, that is to say, the rights of all peoples to pursue freely their economic, social and cultural development without outside interference.

Components of self-determination expressed in *Wurreker (the message-carriers) The Koorie community and TAFE in equal partnership* (VAEAI/DEET, 2000: 22) include the right to take responsibility for determining the personal and communal directions of the individual and the community at all levels of policy development and implementation, with:

- Development of the community
- Maintenance of Koorie identity and culture
- Individual development through education and employment pathways

Self-determination, identity and the role of education

Achievement of the aims of self-determination depends on the ability of the wider community to understand that, as with everyone, the identities of Indigenous people are not only shaped by their cultural heritage, but by their widely varying individual experiences, lifestyles and circumstances (see Jonas: 2000).

However, until recently, Indigenous achievements, culture and diversity were largely hidden and rarely acknowledged by the Australian media or through education systems (see Russell, 2002; Langton, 1996). Singh and Henry (1998) observe that the relative availability of information sources may influence perceptions in favour the dominant discourse. The dearth of information about the Indigenous peoples of Victoria may therefore lead to the formation of inaccuracies and unhelpful stereotypes. In consequence, many people, including teachers, may fail to see the reality of Indigenous culture as a living, vibrant and evolving force and Indigenous people as individuals. This situation impacts on the educational outcomes and employment aspirations of Indigenous people. Although numerous employment initiatives emphasise the value of a multicultural workforce which includes Indigenous people (HREOC: 1992; HREOC: 1993; Shaw: 1995; Rayner, 1999), there are very high levels of unemployment, with flow-on effects to other aspects of life and well-being. In addition, an inability to perceive Indigenous cultural and individual diversity on the part of potential employers results in the wastage of talents and resources otherwise available to the Australian economic community (see HREOC 1993; Shaw 1995).

Brady (1996) relates the projection of colonial mores and values on to the alien landscape to the development of the Australian national identity. These perspectives have been the basis for policy and practice in dealings with Indigenous Australians, persisting to mask the realities. As a first principle, the process of reconciliation into a cohesive community will therefore need to involve the renegotiation of shared understandings and an acceptance of other world views. Non-Indigenous educators are the products of their own cultures and experiences and may have had limited opportunities to find out about Indigenous culture. In Victoria, few non-Indigenous teachers report that they have knowingly had the chance to listen to Indigenous perspectives and perspective or 'voice'. Indeed, as many as 80% of the state's teachers report that they have

never met an Indigenous person. This is significant in the light of the fact that 50% of the Indigenous population of Victoria is under 18 years and of school age. Yet cultural awareness training, which forms part of many training programs in industry (VCM, 2000), is not a core requirement for pre-service training in Victoria, in spite of its recognised importance in teacher education. (Craven,1996).

In her book*, Lady of the Lake*, Gunditjmara elder and historian, 'Aunty' Iris Lovett-Gardiner M.A. (1997), stressed the importance of educating children about shared history, building mutual understanding and respect:

> I don't think anything will change unless people get a proper aspect on who Aboriginal people are…To live in two worlds, side by side, you need to eliminate discrimination. And education has got to go into schools about Aboriginal people, that there are people here who have a proud heritage.

Citizenship and education

Self-determination is closely allied to citizenship rights, in the sense that individuals and communities are empowered to participate according to their capacity and to assume the rights and responsibilities inherent in membership of the group. In discussing notions of citizenship, Yeatman (1998: 139) reflects that relationships of unequal power and capacity can be negotiated in ways to enable the actors to be "reciprocally and dialogically accountable to each other"; assistance may be given in ways that respect or deny the citizenship of the less powerful group, that is, the exchange can either contribute to or detract from empowerment. Similarly, necessary support may be provided to Indigenous communities in ways that augment or diminish the potential for independent action. The freedom to assume meaningful responsibility will be a vital component of any policy or program where self-determination is truly the aim.

Teachers through their work are well placed to help communities to build their capacity and also to develop partnerships that enable the parties to contribute according to their abilities and inclination. Also, citizenship in this case may entail being represented in the school curriculum, through the overt valuing of Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy. Therefore, skills in developing relationships based on respect and trust, good communication, and an appreciation of the holistic, interconnected nature of communities would be an important aim for schools and for individual teachers who wish to further the Reconciliation process and promote self-determination (Rose: 1999). For most teachers, this might well require personal attributes of patience, resilience, persistence and flexibility and the ability to identify meaningful areas where Indigenous perspectives might be introduced. Such teachers would act as a bridge from one culture to another: Willing to negotiate with community and colleagues, they create opportunities to put Indigenous Studies on forefront of the school agenda. Comfortable with both discourses, they would continually reframe their experiences in the light of reflection and take positive steps to go forward in this professionally challenging area.

Professional Development: The Koorie Education Awareness Project

What kind of professional development is required that can empower teachers to meet such challenging demands? This research question gave rise to the following one-year study to ascertain an effective format for staff development, to build teachers' confidence and competence in introducing Indigenous perspectives in their workplaces. Equally important,

there was an intention that the professional development format would be congruent with the precepts of Indigenous self-determination. Designed as an action research activity, the concept was developed collaboratively with Indigenous educators and community representatives through the Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups. A budget to allow two days of teacher release time for each participant and basic administrative costs was granted through the Teacher Release to Industry Program administered by the Department of Education and Training and the Victorian Employers Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VECCI).

The study, known as the Koorie Education Awareness Project (KEAP), incorporated a number of elements designed to facilitate a two-way dialogue between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants: Forums were held with Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators in partnership. Other important components involved opportunities for mentoring by Indigenous educators, collegial networking among participants, cultural awareness training "on Country", and the development of locally-based education projects in the participants' workplace. There was a stated need for a framework that would provide overall direction, while allowing 'unscripted space' to accommodate the wide diversity of situations and participants and meet local needs,

In the course of planning the education forum about 'good practice' in Indigenous education, a number of non-Indigenous teacher participants were personally recommended by members of the Indigenous community for their positive attitude and demonstrated commitment to quality Indigenous Studies in their schools: "He/She is doing a good job and trying hard at the school. The heart's in the right place" was a typical comment.

These teachers were surprised and highly gratified to know that they had been nominated in this way, not feeling that they had done anything out of the ordinary. Notably, while the teachers were conscious of the professional mandate for them to introduce Indigenous Studies in school at the state and system level, their commitment came from a personal conviction it was timely for 'space' to be created to facilitate the involvement of Indigenous people in the development and delivery of education programs. They expressed a keen aware of their personal limitations in terms of knowledge about Aboriginal culture and had a strong desire to find out more. This conviction led them to establish on-going relationships with appropriate Indigenous contacts, over extended periods.   The *Koorie Education Awareness Network* evolved, as a collegial network of non-Indigenous and Indigenous Victorian educators.

Each local network creates a space for cross-cultural dialogue and reflection, in which opportunities for forming mentoring relationships may arise. It also supports teachers to establish educational links with their local Indigenous community in order to develop locally-appropriate Indigenous Studies programs. It provides a sounding-board for ideas, links people with similar professional interests and helps to chart successes as a resource-base and inspiration to others to 'have a go'.

Many Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in education are sharing insights and forming mentoring relationships in this way, seeking to develop their cross-cultural understanding in collaboration with Indigenous community representatives. (Irving, 2002)

Motivational factors

Teachers discussed how they got started in the area of introducing Indigenous perspectives in their teaching. They were able to identify motivational factors that encompassed a professional responsibility, the recognition of education as being important for the social justice issues. Organisational blockers included the lack of time permitted to give to this area, to establishing and maintaining the relationships.

Grant Sarra, a NSW school principal who is widely recognised for his exemplary professional practice and the outstanding educational achievements of his Indigenous students, describes anecdotally the process of building of relationships between school and home that altered attitudes and therefore the learning outcomes for the students – often entailing informal meetings in the supermarket, at the sport field. This is not an easy area to negotiate. At the personal level, it may entail psychological and social pitfalls and requires humility and self-reflection, even an interrogation of motives, on an on-going basis. Criticism at the professional and personal level can be a searing experience. To the question, "What do you do when it gets hard?" some teachers reply, "It's my job". They have a lively commitment to their role as a change-agent which supports them through challenges and enables them to persist.

Organisational change
Personal attributes and affective factors lead to motivation at the individual level. However, the motivation experienced by an individual may lead to changes of his or her behaviour, but it is not enough to enable change to occur at the organisational level. Resources are needed to enable this to take place. So, even though a teacher may have the personal commitment, goodwill and dedication to initiate a program within a school or company in regard to its dealings with the Indigenous community, unless the program has the support of the wider organisation, its impact will necessarily be limited. However, the motivation of an individual who also has access to the necessary resources or can recruit wide support may well lead to significant change.

Going beyond the individual
An individual can do much to raise awareness, and in so doing, may bring the organisation to the point that it sees that there is a need which should be responded to and acted upon. Even government staff cultural training programs may take years in development before being implemented, later to become entrenched as part of organisational practice, as in the case of Environment Australia which now provides staff with a comprehensive cultural awareness program.

Once there is an expectation within the organisation, then the mandate is established, making it easier for people who wish to do so to continue with the development of relationships in the necessary way. Conversely, an apparent mandate can exist, with little action ensuing. As McConaghy (2000) has observed, just because something is enshrined in policy, does not necessarily mean that it is implemented or acted upon. There may be a shadow between the rhetoric and the reality of the situation.

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