WHY INDIGENOUS EDUCATION PROGRAMS

cannot succeed without a critically reflective teaching practice

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NOT FOR THE first time, Indigenous education returned to the headlines last year. It is hard not to think that the sporadic but intense debate and the renewed and revised government initiatives again generated heat but not much light. The time has come to ask: is Australia's education system even asking the right questions?

Successive federal governments have introduced a number of strategies to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student outcomes in literacy, numeracy and school retention.

Some gains have been made; however, a large discrepancy remains between the educational outcomes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in Australia. The Department of Education, Science and Training's *Accelerating Indigenous Education Outcomes* report (October 2004) states:

> *On many measures, recent results for Indigenous students (have) improved since national testing began in 1999. Still, Indigenous students have lower literacy and numeracy skills than other students—67 per cent of Indigenous students achieved the Year 5 reading benchmark in 2001 in the national assessment compared with 90 per cent of other students.*

The question needs to be asked then, given the numerous government educational initiatives, why haven't Indigenous student outcomes improved more rapidly and more dramatically in the past two decades? Is it that the types of programs which have been implemented are flawed, or is there a more deeply rooted systemic issue impacting

on student outcomes? How can socially just educational experiences and outcomes be generated?

The current approach is clearly not working, and examples of "better practice" reveal more about the school culture itself than about how to achieve improvements in Indigenous student literacy, numeracy and retention rates. For example, the DEST-funded *What Works* website provides exemplars for improving Indigenous student attendance and retention rates, but the case study provided by a Northern Territory school is paternalistic and unreflective. In one section the school principal describes the role of Aboriginal education workers as follows:

> *They are a very important source of information, sensitivity and above all can be seen as successful role models. In addition they can be the integral link between the school and the home. In relation to Indigenous staff, in many cases, they can give an insight, based on sensitivity, respect and cultural awareness, into the complexity of relationships between school and family.*

On the surface this reads as a positive statement. Aboriginal education workers play an important—in fact, a crucial—part in Indigenous education. But a critical appraisal is required of what is actually being said. The Aboriginal education worker is not presented as an equal member of the professional staff but rather as a tool that non-Indigenous staff can use better to understand the "complexity" of the social milieu Indigenous students come from. While non-Indigenous teachers must learn to engage with Indigenous students and their communities, they should also question how they normalise white middle-class nuclear family models and view Indigenous extended family models as different or deviant from the norm.

The statement also idealises the Aboriginal education worker as a role model for the Indigenous students within the school, without questioning whether the role model being presented is also one which obviously occupies a differential power status within the school hierarchical system. Despite their importance, Aboriginal education workers do not occupy the same status, or enjoy the same pay and benefits, or the same security of tenure as do most qualified teachers. The unspoken message presented by the school principal is one which acknowledges hard work and commitment, but refuses to acknowledge the lack of status and inferior benefits afforded to Aboriginal education workers.

This is not an inconsequential point. As Welch (1988:206) succinctly puts it: "Education often serves as an instrument of internal colonialism by socialising the colonised into an acceptance of inferior status, power and wealth." This *What Works* exemplar does not identify whether there are Aboriginal teachers employed at the school, only the role of the Aboriginal education workers and the crucial role they play in mediating the black–white divide. The onus is not placed on the white teachers within the school system to recognise and negotiate different cultural ways of behaving; rather it is the duty of the Aboriginal education workers to mediate between the two.

The main difficulty with many of the exemplars offered on the DEST *What Works* website is that most convey a paternalistic and patronising attitude, and none attempts to challenge the underlying issue of pervading social structures and how these impact on the educational outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

As Tracey Bunda and Alia Imtoual (2006:29) point out, the literature in the field of education and whiteness has not developed substantially in this nation to impact on the teaching of race and social justice. They argue that in a climate where politics seeks to influence educational content and pedagogy, educators and education policy makers must become engaged with issues surrounding difference and begin to engage with the hierarchies of knowledge. They must seek ways of empowering communities to build supportive and substantive relationships between themselves, educators and researchers.

Importantly, they call for a teaching ethos which is reflexive and which critically engages with difference.

It is crucial that cultural differences are acknowledged and inform teaching practice. Social justice cannot be realised by preaching the need to treat all students the same. Students are not all the same, and culture and race directly impact on their educational experiences in a myriad ways. The students' Aboriginality should be recognised and acknowledged. Social justice cannot be realised by claiming that colour is irrelevant and all students should be treated the same. Colour is relevant, as is culture. To not acknowledge colour or one's culture, to assume a colour-blind/culture-blind stance in the attempt to be equitable to all students in the classroom is as dangerous as pejoratively stereotyping students solely on the basis of their colour. Applebaum (2005:283) explains the inherent dangers of colour-blindness as follows:

> *Firstly, colour-blindness obscures the positive and cultural contributions of race to individual identity … Secondly, colour-blindness not only ignores the positive contributions of racialised groups, but also ignores or denies the systemic harms that people of colour experience. In a world where race still matters, refusing to take race into consideration results in the dismissal of systemic oppression.*

The fact that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have endured "systemic oppression" across every educational sector has resulted in the mediocre educational outcomes that governments now decry. Rather than retaining a gaze on these lower than mainstream (read: white) educational outcomes, it is timely for educators and policy makers to examine the very institutions that perpetuate these outcomes, and the role dominant social institutions play in continuing to propagate subordinate educational attainment. Governments do not speak in terms of colour or culture, but by avoiding any discussion of these issues, or refusing to acknowledge the lived reality of being non-white in a white Australia, they will continue to fail to address the causes of educational inequality.

For Applebaum, "the colour-blind approach ignores the contemporary social reality of racism and obscures not only the race of the victims of racism but also dispenses with the need to interrogate whiteness as the invisible norm by which others are marginalised" (Applebaum 2005:284). Furthermore, the colour-blind/culture-blind mentality can be used to explain inequality by blaming either the individual or his/her subordinate group and its cultural characteristics (Applebaum 2005:285). The latest government Indigenous educational initiative betrays such a colour-blind mentality.

The newly introduced "mutual-obligations contracts" between students, their families and schools will place the onus for improving the educational outcomes of Indigenous students on the children themselves, their families and their communities. There is an underlying assumption that since children will be obliged to attend school, their very attendance will result in better educational outcomes. That carries a hidden implication that if they do not succeed it is due to a deficiency within the individual student rather than any systemic problem within the education system itself, and the social, political and economic institutions it serves. The reality is that until systemic problems are addressed, and until educators acknowledge how their whiteness is complicit in the marginalisation of Indigenous students within the education system, this latest initiative will also fail. Keeping students in class five hours per day, five days per week, for some 30-odd weeks per year, will not raise the educational profile of Indigenous students, because systemic problems will continue to remain.

As long ago as 1999 the Coolangatta Statement claimed that education, and the measurement of educational outcomes, do not reflect "Indigenous standards, values and philosophies. Ultimately the purpose of this education has been to assimilate Indigenous peoples into non-Indigenous cultures and societies." The statement continued: "...The so-called 'drop out rates and failures' of Indigenous peoples within non-Indigenous education systems must be viewed for what they really are—rejection rates." Indigenous students will continue to reject the education system and its values until the system itself reflects on its white western knowledge base and acknowledges other ways of knowing.

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