

Equity in education: a main goal in schools



Equity in education should be one of the main goals that all schools should be aiming to achieve. It should not be accepted that students from various backgrounds and social groups achieve different outcomes (Ryan, 2000). All children regardless of their background have a variety of skills and talents and it is the role of the school and its' teachers to encourage students to develop these by providing them with a range of opportunities and learning experiences. Not all children will achieve the same outcomes, but there should not be a huge gap between the outcomes that one social group achieves compared to another (Cobbold, 2002). Through discussions with Indigenous Australians about their educational experiences, it is possible to understand the issues that arise when teachers do not have an understanding of Aboriginal culture or when Aboriginal children are expected to fit in with western culture.

On Monday the 26th of April, an interview took place with Maureen, an Indigenous Australian currently living in Geraldton, Western Australia. Maureen was born in Geraldton in 1964, the first child to a Mullewa born man named Roy and Olive who was born out in the bush just north of Mullewa. Soon after her birth, Maureen's family moved from Geraldton to Mullewa where she spent the majority of her childhood years growing up as a tom boy, spending her time camping, motorbike riding, shooting and other similar activities. At five years old, Maureen's mother gave birth to her younger brother and later gave birth to two more girls. Maureen's brother currently lives in Perth, one sister is in Townsville and the other is living in Geraldton. As Maureen's family is from the Geraldton/Mullewa region, they

are part of the Yamaji community and speak Wajarri, one of the Kartu languages of the South-West area of Australia (Douglas, 1996).

Many Aboriginal people view their culture according to the area they come from (Harrison, 2008). This is especially true for Indigenous Australians living in the regional, northern parts of Australia, however, being located in the town of Geraldton Maureen feels as tho she is not identified by where she comes from as much as Aboriginal people living in remote areas are. Being a Yamaji Aboriginal person, Maureen's skin colour is quite fair and she finds that Indigenous Australians living in northern areas of Australia see her as a white person whereas white Australians see her as an Aboriginal. Although she fully acknowledges her Indigenous background, Maureen feels that she belongs somewhere in between white Australians and Indigenous Australians and is able to fit easily into both worlds. Maureen is also a Christian and therefore highly respects but does not fully encompass all of the beliefs and customs of her Aboriginal, Yamaji culture. She believes that the Christian God is her culture first and that her Aboriginal culture is second. She also stated that when going into other communities she is mindful that many Indigenous Australians take their culture very seriously and that it is important that, when entering another community, one must be extremely sensitive and respectful and " not bang straight in there being disrespectful".

As Maureen grew up, she attended the Mullewa Primary School which she particularly enjoyed and did very well at. The majority of students at the school were of an Indigenous background while all of the teachers were non-Indigenous. Maureen especially liked her year one teacher who was always caring and provided her students with a supportive and memorable

classroom environment regardless of the race or social class of her students. According to Batten, Frigo, Hughes & McNamara (1998), Indigenous Australian children are primarily taught by non-Indigenous teachers who have not been successfully trained to cater for their learning requirements and in an environment that is culturally inappropriate. Although the year one teacher at Mullewa Primary School was not indigenous, she had received adequate training, advice and experience with Indigenous children and was therefore able to cater for their needs and provide them with a suitable, culturally sensitive, learning environment.

Once Maureen completed her primary education, she went on to continue her high school education at the local Mullewa High School which she did not enjoy much at all compared to her primary education. Maureen described how she got to high school and “ started being stupid and scatter brain, mucking around with your mates”. Although Maureen did not enjoy high school as much as primary school, she still loved attending as she was able to see her friends and have fun with them. Her favourite subject was English as she had an effective teacher and achieved good grades. Her most disliked subject was Mathematics as she did not enjoy working with numbers and detested the teacher. An effective teacher incorporates pedagogical practices that are suitable for all students and not just some at the expense of others (Turner, 2006). Maureen’s mathematics teacher used the ‘ chalk and talk’ teaching strategy which, according to Thompson (2009), does not promote enthusiasm or require students to utilize analytical thinking skills. It is important that educators find a way to minimise educational inequality of educational outcomes between Indigenous and non-indigenous children

(Craven, 1999). If the high school mathematics teacher was more willing to get to know and understand his Indigenous student's needs instead of being ignorant to cultural differences, then he may have been able to employ more effective pedagogical practices.

According to Harrison (2008), it is important that teachers make an effort to get to know their Indigenous students and their students' families both in and out of school. This can be achieved by encouraging parents to come along to class to help out for an hour or so, or by going to local community events (Harrison, 2008). Maureen found that she had a good relationship with a number of her teachers, the majority of which were from her primary school rather than her high school. She notes how even though her teachers are quite aged today, whenever they bump into each other they still say hello and catch up on recent events. Many of Maureen's high school teachers however, did not make as much attempt to get to know the students' families, one factor possibly adding to Maureen's dislike of high school and its teachers.

As none of the teachers at Mullewa Primary School or High School had an Indigenous Australian background, Maureen suggested that she thought the teachers did not really understand Aboriginal culture but as the majority of students were Indigenous Australians, they were able to see how the kids talked, lived and acted. Indigenous Australian culture was reflected in both of the Mullewa schools in this way as the teachers often went along with Indigenous cultural events as a result of the high Indigenous student population. Another positive factor of attending a school with a high Indigenous population was that Maureen never experienced racism or

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bullying from others. During the interview Maureen stated that she was fully aware that racism was out there but had never personally been attacked. Many of Maureen's friends were white Australian children and many of them were also Aboriginal children. They all associated together and saw each other as children and not as a colour, race or social class. Maureen stated that even today, when she looks at another person, they are just another human no matter what the colour of their skin is or where they come from.

Maureen finished year ten at Mullewa High School and applied for her first job as an Aboriginal Education Worker at the same school. She was successful in getting the job and worked there for six years and thoroughly enjoyed it until the last year when she decided that it was time to move on and try something else. After working at the school Maureen moved to Sydney at the age of twenty-one where she tried her hand at nursing for six months but found it difficult as it was the first time that she had lived away from her parents and so decided to travel. Maureen worked and travelled her way all around Australia until she made it back to Kalgoorlie in Western Australia, got married and had her first child. The family then moved to Carnarvon for a small stint before returning to Maureen's birth town, Geraldton, where her second child was born. Maureen, her husband and two children then travelled and worked their way up to Melbourne where they decided to reside for a short time before returning back to Geraldton where Maureen continues to live.

Although Maureen only completed up to year ten at Mullewa High School, she returned to her studies and completed year eleven at Perth Modern and Geraldton Senior High School. She then went on to complete a Youth Social

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Workers course and a three year Diploma in Theology course. Maureen now works as a community legal educator where she does liaison work in local Geraldton schools, teaching students about the different types of abusive, how to recognise it, and how to stop it. Throughout her vast experiences, Maureen has seen many Indigenous Australians suffering from abuse and enjoys her current job as she is able to teach children how to safely remove themselves from harmful situations. Maureen's skills, qualifications and experiences are quite impressive and according to Harrison (2008), a good education opens pathways to employment opportunities. This is obvious in Maureen's circumstances in that she has been able to successfully gain a number of high quality job positions as a result of her educational skills and experiences.

According to Harrison (2008), many Indigenous parents do not support schools or encourage their children to receive an education. This is often a result of the negative schooling experiences they had when they were a child (Craven, 1999). Maureen believes that education is very important, especially for kids in today's society and wants her own children to receive the best education possible. As she works in the school environment, Maureen sees many Indigenous children that are not encouraged to be at school by their parents and who are not pushed to achieve excellence by their teachers. This is a very common scenario according to Adams (1998) as a teacher with low expectations for their Indigenous students is one of the main contributors of poor educational outcomes. Having a good education is one of the fundamental factors associated with having a good job later in life. There is also evidence that a high quality education may reduce the

likelihood that Indigenous youth will be involved in incidents that result in police arrest (Hunter, 1997). In addition to this, the level that Indigenous students are socially accepted and supported by their peers and teachers directly impacts the level of poverty and consequent mindset often resulting in better health and longer life expectancy (Malin, 2002).

As previously mentioned, Maureen has a very positive outlook on education and views it as power, “ but power in a good way”. This attitude towards education and schooling are predominantly the result of parents who also share this same positive outlook. As a child, Maureen was encouraged to try hard at school and was not allowed to miss out on a day of school unless it was for an acceptable reason such as being sick. By not allowing Maureen to wag, and by constantly discussing school and education in a positive manner, Maureen’s parents instilled a sense of importance about education in her. Having her own children now, Maureen has ensured that this same attitude towards the necessity and importance of trying hard and receiving a good quality education has been passed down to them.

Whilst working up north in a town called Karalundi, Maureen worked with children at a boarding school, many of which had unfortunate backgrounds and parents that were not there to encourage an education. Wanting the best for these children, Maureen continually informed them of the importance of a good education in order to get somewhere in life, to support themselves and a family later on, and in order to buy things they might like such as a car. As these children had not been taught to value schooling and had experienced teachers that constantly did not provide for their learning needs, Maureen’s advice was unfortunately not accepted. Munns and <https://assignbuster.com/equity-in-education-a-main-goal-in-schools/>

Connelly (1996) support this scenario and suggest that Indigenous children often receive poor outcomes when the culture and beliefs at home clash with the school culture. Culturally inappropriate teaching methods, testing practices, content relevance, teacher skills and expectations, relationships, language barriers, funding and attendance are further factors that contribute to the negative attitude towards schooling and education that many Indigenous children have adopted (National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia, 1996). 2, 113 words.

EXTRAS:

Yamaji and language is wajarri. Starting to teach it in a couple of schools now. I think its good ay cos we live in Australia so why should we teach them French or Japanese or whateva. Teach them all wajarri so we all understand the language cos its been lost now. Be good to bring it all back up again.

As an upcoming teacher, what advice would you give me to best teach your children?

Well I've always said that when people go and do their training to be a teacher they should learn culture, aboriginal culture cos just thinking back in the past ya get a lot of people that come straight outa uni and stuff that don't understand aboriginal children yeh and they, cosy a need to, they think they just you know, " dumb little black kids, chuck em in the back, they don't know nothing, they play up because they're naughty kids" i think its a good idea to find the underlying issues and understand aboriginal kids and where they come from, what they have to put up with and the whatsa name of the family, all the problems, you know cos mum and dad might be drinking and smoking and something? And got no job and all those issues, it sorta effects

the child as well throughout their life. And to understand the underlying issues yeh. I think its good to get to know the families as well, cos with aboriginals ya know the first time ya see someone ya ask about the family and that sorta opens the doors to talk and u also show the parents that ya care about them, ya care about their child and ya want the best for them. I'm glad u asked me that question.