

# Aboriginal education. australia



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‘ In Australia only thirty seven percent of Indigenous students opposed to seventy four percent of non-Indigenous students complete year twelve’. (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). The above statistics imply that current Indigenous Education is affected detrimentally by western colonisation, inequitable government policies, and the variation of cultural beliefs. Aboriginal participation and education in Western schooling is far below the standard of academic achievement of non-indigenous Australians. This is resulting from a history of ill-treatment and dispossession of Indigenous peoples. Contemporary statistics prove the deprived health, sanitation, educational, employment and housing conditions of Aboriginal Australians, revealing their underprivileged position opposed to non-indigenous peoples. (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). Educators need to recognise Australian schooling is founded upon English ‘ scientific’ understanding and ‘ ways of knowing’ opposed to Aboriginals ‘ cultural and spiritual way of knowing’ and learning.

History has created, for many Indigenous Australians, a culture of learned helplessness and identity crisis which has left them unable to control their lives and their destinies. These social issues underpin the current disadvantaged education status of Indigenous Australians today. Indigenous Australians are Australia’s ‘ original people’; members and descendants of the many and diverse nations that comprised the Australian population of an estimated 750, 000, before colonization of Australia by white-skinned people started in 1788 C. E. (Smith, 2007; Trudgen, 2001).

The term encompasses mainland and Tasmanian dwellers as well as those from the Torres Strait Islands, north of the mainland. It is estimated the Indigenous population of Australia is currently around 500, 000, of Australia's population of 22 million people (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2008). The initial dynamics of contact between Anglo Saxon and Indigenous Australians outlines the juxtaposition of cultures and ways of knowing. An example of this can be shown from William Dampier's 1697 perception of the Indigenous Australians. The inhabitants of this country are the miserablest people in the world . . . (they) have no Houses and skin Garments, no Sheep, Poultry, and Fruits of the earth, Ostrich Eggs etc . . . and setting aside the Human Shape they differ but little from the Brutes . . . they have no Clothes . . . their only food is a kind of fish . . . I did not perceive that they worship anything. These sort of creatures have a sort of Weapon to protect their ware . . . Some of them had wooden Swords, others had a sort of lance.

The sword (as the ship was short of fresh water, Dampier attempted to get the Natives to carry some for him in return for some proffered clothing. ) But all the signs we could make were to no purpose, for they stood like Statues, with no motion but grinned like so many monkeys. Staring one upon the other, for these poor creatures were not accustomed to carry Burthens . . . so we were forced to carry our water ourselves and they very fairly put the Clothes off again as if clothes were only to work in. I did not perceive that they had any great liking to them at first, nor did they seem to admire anything that we had. (Stone, 1974p. 15) The above description demonstrates how Dampier's western culture is juxtaposed to the Aboriginals ways of knowing. Dampier referred to the Indigenous people as " creatures...

Brutes”. Through his ‘ way of knowing’ Damper deciphered that people with no buildings, clothing, and manmade things were deemed uncivilised. (Stone, 1974, p. 15). The Aboriginal people encompassed a sustained way of living in unison with the land. The lack of understanding between different ‘ races’ resulted in the utmost discrimination and death of traditional Aboriginal teachings.

Aboriginal culture recognises that the land and the dreaming are all interconnected through a spiritual sphere, land is not possessed by people rather people are possessed by the land. (Rose, 1996, p. 10) “ The Australian continent is criss-crossed with the tracks of the dreaming: Walking, slithering, crawling, flying, chasing, hunting, weeping, dying, [and] giving birth. Performing rituals, disturbing the planets, making the landforms and water, establishing things in their own places, making the relationships between one place and another” (Watson, 1996 p. 5) The dreaming is concurrent with life; it is a synonymous way of living. The early settlers had ideals of building a nation through agriculture, and urbanisation. The Aboriginal ontology is the dreaming; it is the Indigenous people’s way of being, and living from the land and its sacred sites. The dreaming provides the basis for Aboriginal existence, through this metaphysical way of knowing. Indigenous peoples were enriched by their culture. Knowledge was encompassed through the dreaming and stories told by the elders at specific sacred sites. Land is vested in each member of the language group as a sacred bequest from the Dreaming, and thereby provides the foundation for the group’s existence. Each group’s territory is physically, spiritually, economically and culturally essential for survival. Accordingly, connection

with land is an integral part of the psyche of every person within the language group” (Fryer-Smith, S. (2008), p. 139) The Aboriginals way of knowing was vested in the ancestral beings connected to the land and rituals, this ‘ way of knowing’ was more than education. It was a way of living, learning, and co- existing in the Aboriginal community.

Non-indigenous people and policies have created today’s circumstances. The Western concept of property and ownership negatively impacted on the dreaming and significant sacred sites were inaccessible due to western colonisation and settlement. A conflict of interests and ways of living resulted in upheavals and discrimination of the Aboriginal people. ‘ Not only did white man deprive the Aborigine of his hunting grounds and food supplies, but he also drove him into the land of hostile tribes where he could not hope to exist for long’ (Woolmington, 1973, p. 62).

Contemporary Indigenous students are still suffering unequal rights through the current education system. There needs to be smoother transitions from home to school, bridging the gap, and enabling effective teaching and learning to take place for Aboriginal students. (Harrison, 2009). Over time, Indigenous ill-health has been used by white culture to rationalise racial segregation, exploitation of Indigenous Australians in the workforce, and to support the notion that Indigenous Australians should be ‘ protected from themselves’, which was behind many policies that turned

Indigenous life into a police state and created a culture of poverty (Mitchell, 2007). It is now acknowledged that past government legislation and practices enforced on Indigenous Australians- from the time of colonisation,

through the protection era of the late 1900's and the assimilation policies of the early 20th century which resulted in the discriminatory "White Australia" and "Stolen Generation" policies- have contributed to Indigenous Australians being one of the most socio-economically disadvantaged groups in Australia (Thomson, Hardy, Krom, & Stumpers. 2007). The social determinants of education of Indigenous Australians have been entrenched in the inequalities created and supported by racial and social discrimination (Larson, Gillies, Howard, & Coffin, 2007). The effects of these inequalities over generations, and the collective cultural grief caused by this disempowerment that is part of Indigenous culture today (DOCS, 2009), have further disempowered Indigenous Australians from the ability to self-improve their social determinants of education.

Aboriginal people are living in a culture of learned helplessness where they are constantly questioning their identity and trying to find their place in modern society. Aboriginal people have suffered loss of culture, land, and spirituality, since 1788. Western colonisation and Australia's '1901 Federation' detrimentally affected the physical, mental and psychological civilization of Indigenous Australians. The Angelo Saxon deemed Australia as a free country claiming 'terra nullius' stating the land belonged to nobody.

Non-indigenous people forced assimilation on the 'blacks' Indigenous peoples were deprived of their land and spirituality; forced into white society. Aboriginal children were forcibly removed and placed in Christian Missionaries, the children were unable to speak their traditional languages or practice Aboriginal culture or beliefs (Thomson et al). Aboriginal education was passed down for hundreds of generations through the elders. The

learning of Aboriginal peoples was not a 'scientific' or academic way of life. It was a peaceful life, lived in ties with the land and kinship.

The indigenous peoples have been subjected to Western substances and diseases since colonisation, affecting their health patterns and resulting in large numbers of early deaths, far below non-indigenous statistics. A contemporary health issue that is problematic for aboriginal students learning is 'Otitis media,' it is common amongst Aboriginal children, and impacts on the student's ability to learn and communicate in the classroom (Harrison, 2009, p. 46). Teachers need to recognise the context and health problems of the individual students in the classroom, to close the gap between indigenous children and their peers.

Aboriginal peoples have been positioned throughout history as inferior to western society. This can clearly be recognised through government policies which directly segregated 'white and black' society and created a culture of learned helplessness and identity crisis for the Aboriginal peoples. "Social Darwinism provided an essential justification for the systematic mistreatment of Indigenous peoples. It gave scientific endorsement to the politically dominant ideas of nineteenth century economic liberalism". (Hollinsworth, 2006, p. 81).

Generations of Indigenous Australians were separated against their will from the land to which they were spiritually and emotionally bound, and in which they carried out all the occupations that gave meaning to their lives. This has resulted over time in a culture of learned helplessness, where Indigenous Australians have felt disempowered to control their lives and destinies

(Zeldenryk & Yalmambirra, 2006). Schooling can be a struggle for Aboriginal people, it has only been part of their history and culture since western colonisation, forcing them to adapt to the western models of living and learning.

Culture plays a major role in the way individual students learn. Educators need to value that the classroom is filled with students from different cultures; belief systems, socio-economic backgrounds and religions.

Australian classrooms are enriched with multiculturalism, and fortunately the twenty first century is technologically developed, enabling educators to have access to numerous resources and broaden the ways in which information is communicated to students.

Teachers need to utilise these resources in an effective way to improve student learning, and most importantly enrich Indigenous students' education. Children begin to learn from birth, using their five senses to decode and encode the world and environment around them. Indigenous and non indigenous children come from different environments and contexts, practicing different discourses and exposed to different views on what is socially acceptable (Pahl & Rowsell, 2005, p. 98). This means that students have different expectations from educators.

Statistics prove that from an early primary school Aboriginal students are below academic average of non indigenous students. ' Sixty percent of Aboriginal children are significantly behind non-Aboriginal children by the time they start Year One' (" Aboriginal Education," n. d. , para. 1). Educators need to reflect on why this is, and make changes in the ways information is



presented to individuals. One example is through literature. Texts need to relate to children's lives so that they are able to make meaning of the text, as well as be able to read it.

Teachers should assign texts that will make sense to the student. Choose texts and materials which indigenous students can relate to and understand, if we only read books and watch films with non indigenous peoples Aboriginal students will fail to see the significance in their learning. A text which is not relevant to students' lives will not be comprehended and little to no learning will occur. (Harrison, 2009). Australian educators need to understand the Aboriginal culture and the unequal power relationships throughout government policies and history.

Aboriginal resistance to assimilation 1950- 1967, 'white' society were often positioned at the top of the hierarchy, 'black' society were always fighting for their rights, culture and survival (Hollinsworth, 2006, p. 121). It is vital for Indigenous students to have a smooth transition from home to school; educators should encourage parent participation in schools and be approachable. Speak to the parents of the Aboriginal students and ask them to assist you in ways to make learning comfortable and easy for their child, let them know that their child's well being and education matters to you.

Encourage the bilingual classroom students to speak both Aboriginal English and School English. The students need to feel comfortable so that learning can take place (Harrison, 2009). Be approachable and active in the wider community so that parents feel comfortable to communicate with you about their child. Smooth transitions from home to school can help indigenous

students feel comfortable in the classroom and not alone or segregated from the others in the classroom. Historically, Indigenous Australian culture has been subverted and undermined by racial discrimination and vilification, and forcefully overlaid by white culture's dominating 'rules and regulations' resulting in a culture of mistrust of white society and governance which is still prevalent today. There is still widespread prejudice from white culture about a perceived inadequacy of Indigenous people to self manage and improve their education status. Contemporary educators need to use resources effectively, and create a safe learning space for indigenous students so that they do not feel there is an imbalanced power relationship. Indigenous 'ways of knowing' are exposed through their histories and culture, these 'ways of knowing' are different from 'Western' ideals.

Students' culture should be celebrated and embraced into the classroom so that Aboriginal students can build a stronger sense of identity as an Aboriginal Australian in the twenty first century. References Aboriginal education. (n. d). Retrieved from <http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/education/>

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