

Developing the discourse of emancipation in Aboriginal education research: Establishing parameters for the Shoalhaven Aboriginal education research project

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ABSTRACT

In a recent paper on 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education in the Early Years' the Schools Council stated that research in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education "is not currently conducted at a level and frequency which is desirable" (1992: 9). Furthermore, the Schools Council is supportive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander demands for an end to inappropriate and offensive research methods that have largely been conducted *by* non-Aboriginal researchers *on* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their families and communities. Our paper describes how these issues and concerns are being addressed in a community-based and controlled Aboriginal education research project that is being conducted in the Shoalhaven area on the South Coast of New South Wales.

We have experienced the process of participatory research, using our Yolngu forms of interaction and learning and have subsequently applied our findings in our community, as part of our development of an appropriate Yolngu pedagogy and curriculum ... Working together and using our own approaches we see that we can work to develop ways to overcome the huge difficulties in front of us ... (We would) draw attention to the importance of unity, the strength that comes from unity and the valuable outcomes that come from adopting a collective, cooperative approach to our endeavours.

(Raymattja Marika, Dayngawa Ngurruwuthun & Leon White)

We must shift the role of critical intellectuals from being universalizing spokespersons to acting as cultural workers whose task is to take away the barriers that prevent people from speaking for themselves . . . all critical enquiry is fundamentally dialogic and involves a mutually educative experience. It must respond to the experiences, desires and needs of oppressed peoples by focusing on their understandings of their situations. Its ultimate goal is to stimulate 'a self-sustaining process of critical analysis and enlightened action' at the same time that it is not impositional.

(Michael Apple)

Introduction

In a recent paper on 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education in the Early Years' the Schools Council stated that research in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education "is not currently conducted at a level and frequency which is desirable" (1992: 9). Part of the reason advanced in the report relates to the difficulty researchers face in winning research funding in the extremely limited and competitive schemes that sponsor research, such as the Australian Research Council small and large grants. The other major contributing factor is related to the fact that "the area of research into Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders per se [sic] ... has become a highly charged political issue" (ibid: 9).

Referring to statements made by the National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC) in 1985 the paper emphasises that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have argued for some time that "Research in Aboriginal education is important. Emphasis should be placed on action oriented research and on research relevant to the needs of Aboriginal people as defined by Aboriginal people" (ibid: 9). In particular the NAEC argued that research should be conducted "substantially by and for Aboriginal people - not on them ... within culturally intelligible and acceptable frames of reference and should secure benefits for Aboriginal people" (ibid: 9).

This position is endorsed by the Schools Council who make the recommendation:

That the data collection process through the National Aboriginal Education Policy be accelerated and that provision be made in the policy to allocate some funds (sic) for appropriate research especially in the early education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. In both cases these people (sic) must be involved in the process of defining the data base, defining research areas and choosing appropriate researchers to undertake these tasks (ibid: 9).

Ignoring the many questions that this recommendation raises, the overall intention of the Schools Council is supportive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander demands for an end to inappropriate and offensive research methods that have largely been conducted *by* non-Aboriginal researchers *on* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their families and communities.

Our paper describes how these issues and concerns are being addressed in a community-based and controlled Aboriginal education research project that is being conducted in the Shoalhaven area on the South Coast of New South Wales.

Background to the project

In 1965, children from Wreck Bay, an Aboriginal community on the South Coast of New South Wales, were admitted for the first time to the primary school at Jarvis Bay. This move was the result of the application of an official policy of assimilation, which had been adopted in 1937 but which had been actively resisted for that area. Prior to this change, educational provisions at Wreck Bay were both ad hoc and mediocre, confirming the low expectations placed on, and the massive obstacles faced by, Aboriginal children generally in Australian society (see Kings & Stewart, 1992).

The move to Jarvis Bay Primary School was greeted by some parents enthusiastically, with the expectation that their children would be able to succeed given the right conditions and opportunities.

However, the school records demonstrate that despite this optimism very few Aboriginal children since that time have been able to break through the barriers to scholastic success. Between 1967 and 1982, 85% (96/112) were ranked in the bottom half of the Year Six Assessments for transition to the area high school in Nowra.

The school and community made a deliberate effort to address these concerns and issues between 1982 and 1986. This involved a range of initiatives to provide support and encouragement to the children and their parents: establishment of an Aboriginal Education Committee, a Study and

Cultural Centre and an Adult Study Group; introduction of Aboriginal Studies for all classes; regular organised visits by prominent Aboriginal people; exchanges and excursions to engage with Aboriginal people and activities elsewhere; celebration of Aboriginal festivals and events; implementation of an anti-racist policy and practices; and the promotion of a positive ethos and development of an organic relationship between the school and community.

During this time Jervis Bay Primary School was regarded as a pioneering model in the development of Aboriginal Education. It received national attention for the work it was carrying out and many prominent people, including the Commonwealth Ministers for Education and Aboriginal Affairs, visited the school and community.

Nevertheless, despite the improvements that were made the results were not reflected in the Year Six Assessments. Between 1983 and 1986, 83% (24/29) of the Aboriginal children continued to be placed in the bottom half of the lists.

Since 1986 such assessments have not been required for transition to the area high school. Shoalhaven High School now determines its own criteria for streaming classes and provides targeted support to Aboriginal students.

In 1987, a group of eighteen Aboriginal students and the two Aboriginal Education Assistants at Shoalhaven High School were interviewed for their opinions on the issues they saw as important in schooling and education. Many pointed to continuing ethnocentric and racist attitudes and behaviours that they are subjected to daily. Perceptions about employment opportunities and the spectre of unemployment featured prominently in their responses: "How many Koories do you see workin' in the shops down town. Not very many, do you?! ... There's a lot of racism around here" (Stewart, 1987: 60). Most, however, were hopeful about gaining employment elsewhere in the metropolitan centres of Sydney and Canberra. Only one of the group was aiming for a professional career (lawyer or politician). Many had no firm goal in mind at all.

The research project outlined above, that was based on action research processes involving the school and community, raised concerns about the difficulties associated with improving the educational outcomes for Aboriginal students, even in situations where deliberate and concerted strategies were employed. It was argued that this is directly related to the structural and functional roles of the school in the production and reproduction of inequalities and the legitimisation of the social order. Specifically it was shown that the schooling process has supported the established patterns of social and cultural domination that have resulted in Aboriginal dispossession, underdevelopment and exploitation in Australian society. An historical account of these processes, based on class analysis and critical social theory, was used to demonstrate how and why Aboriginal students struggle with problems related to racism and poor educational outcomes from the school system.

Given the complex and problematic reasons for continuing difficulties faced by Aboriginal students in the Wreck Bay/Jervis Bay/Shoalhaven area, the research project raised the question of what additional measures might need to be implemented if the cycle of disadvantage is to be broken.

Revisiting the issues and establishing the parameters

At the beginning of 1992 we discussed the research project described above, and what had transpired since 1987, with the Aboriginal Education Assistants at Shoalhaven High and Jervis Bay Primary schools. These discussions resulted in the development of a draft proposal to revisit the issues and concerns and to establish what outcomes had resulted for students who had progressed through the two schools.

In framing the draft proposal for a follow-up research project it was understood that the process of consulting and negotiating with the range of stakeholders should reflect a code of ethics based

on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self determination. Such a code was being developed at that time within the Koori Centre at Sydney University and has since been formally endorsed and adopted by the Centre for all research conducted under its auspices.

As we saw it, as staff members of the Koori Centre, we were acting on behalf of the Centre in offering support in a research process that would be determined by Aboriginal decision-making processes. This included the possibility and option that the draft proposal might not be supported and endorsed by the Aboriginal communities and organisations in the Shoalhaven area. That was, and remains, their right and prerogative.

Discussions broadened within the two schools and initial agreements to proceed in developing the research proposal were given by their executives. At the same time the NSW and ACT Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (AECGs) were informed of the proposal and were asked to provide advice on how we might proceed.

In May, Shoalhaven High School held a staff development day to address Aboriginal education issues within the school. We were invited to participate in this professional development by informing the staff, community members, parents and other guests of the research proposal and sought their responses. Interest was expressed in the proposal by a wide range of people who stated that it was timely and necessary. However, it was also emphasised by the Principal of the school and Cluster Director for the area that approval by the school system would not be automatic and that we would have to submit applications to the New South Wales Department of School Education.

This experience alerted us to the fact that despite our efforts to consult and negotiate widely and appropriately we were only at the beginning of a process that was becoming increasingly complex. Additional concerns were raised by the Principal of Jervis Bay Primary School, who was fearful that such a process might get out of hand and result in negative media attention. However, these concerns were allayed after discussion with her and the school's Advisory Principal.

A further invitation to participate in a staff development day at Nowra Technology High School led to the request by the Aboriginal Education Assistant that the proposal include that school in the research. After discussion with the school's executive the proposal was amended to include their participation.

We then received an invitation in June to attend a local AECG meeting to discuss the proposal with the view to it being considered for endorsement. Discussion of the proposal took all of the meeting time and raised important issues and concerns that we were asked to respond to. These included the requirement that the Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal Student Support and Parental Awareness (ASSPA) committees be given the formal opportunity to consider the proposal and a guarantee that the research would not be used for private purposes related to academic study and advancement.

These conditions we agreed to and we explained that it had not been our intention to proceed without consulting and negotiating appropriately with all communities, organisations, groups and individuals that were implicated in, or affected by, the proposal.

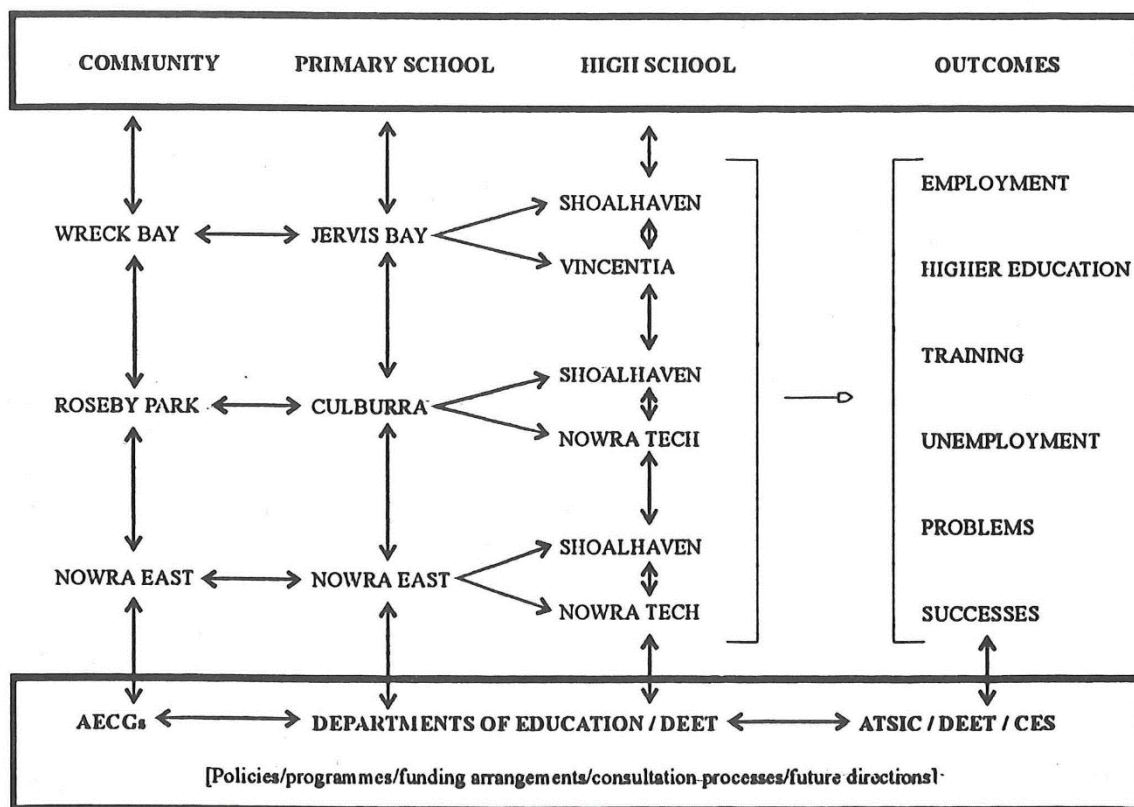
Further development of the project proposal has involved extensive consultation and negotiation with a wide range of Aboriginal people, their communities, schools and organisations. The overall process and dialogue extended throughout 1992 and will continue into 1993. Endorsement for the project was given by Wreck Bay, Roseby Park and Nowra East Aboriginal communities; Jervis Bay, Culburra and Nowra East primary schools and their ASSPA committees; Shoalhaven, Vincentia and Nowra Technology high schools and their ASSPA committees; and Shoalhaven AECG. The Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and NSW AECGs were also provided with information about the project. The NSW Department of School Education and ACT Department of Education formally agreed to the research proceeding. Support has also been provided by the Australian Research Council through the Small Grants Scheme. Efforts to attract funding from

government departments, however, have been unsuccessful, despite the rhetoric of support for community based initiatives.

The figure on the following page shows the relationships between participating communities, schools and agencies and the associated outcomes of schooling being investigated. The research team that has been established through this process comprises the Aboriginal Education Assistants from the participating schools, a local Aboriginal community representative and ourselves representing the Koori Centre at Sydney University. - Our work is supported by a Reference Group of Elders who provide comment, advice and direction. The team has met regularly to discuss the project and plan for its implementation.

Research project parameters

The research project has been designed to address concerns and issues related to schooling and education for Aboriginal students in the Shoalhaven area of NSW who have traditionally been severely disadvantaged by the school system.



In particular the research project examines the relationships that exist between the Aboriginal communities, the students, their schools and the important outcomes related to employment, unemployment and further education and training. The social justice and equity goals of access, participation, retention and outcomes are being analysed to determine the extent to which schooling and education in the Shoalhaven area is meeting the needs and aspirations of Aboriginal students and their communities on the one hand and the local, state/territory and national strategic and operational goals on the other.

The research design and methodology seeks to identify factors that have a predictive value related to school improvement and effectiveness for Aboriginal students. This is being done by comparing situations and relationships between communities and schools over time with what is currently happening and what is proposed for the future. The project is also making use of

developments elsewhere to assess their applicability and appropriateness in the Shoalhaven context.

The need for empirical research of this kind is of critical importance if the concerns expressed in the recent report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody are to be adequately addressed and the processes and outcomes of schooling improved.

It is also worth noting that the first triennium for the National Aboriginal Education Policy is now completed and there has been no evaluation strategy developed to examine whether the policy and its associated strategic and operational plans have been successful. This research project represents such an evaluation in one area where there is a large Aboriginal population.

The research project is a significant attempt to examine the complex relationships between community concerns, wishes and aspirations relating to schooling and Aboriginal education, including access to and involvement in decision-making, and the institutional responses in terms of access, participation and outcomes that continue to be of serious concern to Aboriginal people. It follows up the research conducted in the 1980s and make links with contemporary issues and concerns raised by students, parents, community members, teachers, educational decision-makers and administrators and those involved at the state/territory and national levels in determining policy and funding initiatives.

The important research questions that have been raised by the project include: What specific programmes and targeted support measures have been implemented? What rationales have been developed to explain and justify such measures? To what extent have the schools developed strategies to encourage staff, students and community members to appreciate and value these developments? What evidence is there to demonstrate that outcomes are improving and what kinds of improvements are being sought by the different interest groups (do the goals of equity and social justice and the concerns related to Aboriginal identity, culturally appropriate curriculum and self determination contradict each other?) Has targeted support made any appreciable difference? What do the students and graduates regard as their most positive and negative experiences? What are the implications of such research findings for the on-going development of state/territory and national policies and programmes?, of school policies and practices?, and of the efforts and involvement of Aboriginal people, their communities and organisations?

Developing the discourse of emancipation

At the heart of this process is the concern that the project will challenge the relations of dominance that have so ensnared and disempowered Aboriginal people. The justification and rationale for doing this is provided by Aboriginal demands for self determination on the one hand and by oppositional theories and discourses on the other.

As the first quote at the beginning of this paper asserts and confirms "working together and using our own approaches we see that we can work to develop ways to overcome the huge difficulties in front of us" (Marika, Ngurruwuthun & White, 1989). The model provided by the Yirrkala Community School and the Homeland Centres in North East Arnhemland is very compelling: "In a yolngu school, where do we start? Do we start from the curriculum documents which are sent to us from outside the community? Or do we negotiate together a starting point and direction on the basis of where we are, who we are, who is with us, where we are to go, who can help us, and how we can use the laws and traditions of our ancestral leaders and our community elders? This is what the Galtha rom shows us. That in a yolngu school, there is a proper yolngu way to negotiate a plan of action, which takes all the important factors into account" (ibid).

In the broader context, Errol West has been a passionate advocate for genuine self determination in Aboriginal education and research. At the first National Aboriginal Higher Education Conference held in 1991 he made this point:

The battle for power is about not just our right to say what should happen, for that has been delivered to us through the funding programs horticulturalist goals. It is over *possession of our intellectual property, contemporary and historical*. It is about prising open the fists of white academics who for years have been universally recognised as the experts on everything from cultural to causes. It is about us saying No!! (West, 1991).

The NAEC, of which Errol was Chair for some time, articulated this view in the policy terms referred to in our introduction: "research relevant to the needs of Aboriginal people *as defined by Aboriginal people*" (Schools Council, 1992: 9, our emphasis). As we also pointed out in our introduction this has been endorsed most recently by the Schools Council: "these people (sic) must be involved in the process of defining the data base, defining research areas and choosing appropriate researchers to undertake these tasks" (ibid: 10).

These examples demonstrate the direction that is being taken by communities, leaders and advisory bodies to government in pursuit of the elusive goal of Aboriginal self determination within the Australian nation state.

Oppositional theories and discourses provide an important additional supportive framework for critical practices and discourses that are concerned with challenging the legitimacy of the dominant order and breaking its hold over social and political arrangements. The research project is located within this paradigm. Indeed it would be impossible not to be located in this paradigm as a logical consequence of supporting and valuing the central principal of Aboriginal self determination, which is a fundamentally oppositional position.

The endeavour of oppositional theories and discourses is to transform critical thought into emancipatory action. The concern is with those processes and ways of relating to each other as human beings that promote enlightenment, empowerment and political action in order to challenge the multiple oppressions that surround us and impact on us.

The challenge for us as critical intellectuals and cultural workers is to find ways of applying these theories and discourses without creating further impositions, as Michael Apple emphasises. This requires processes that are supportive, facilitatory and collaborative, and that allow people to speak and act for themselves in a "self-sustaining process of critical analysis and enlightened action" (Apple, 1991).

In developing the research project we have worked and acted in ways that are consistent with these central principles. Members of the research team have respected each others' right to speak and act on their own behalf within a collaborative framework. Assumptions are not made, in someone's absence, about whether or not they would support a position or decision. This is also the case in our relationships with others in the communities and schools. In discussing the project with elders, community members, representatives and organisations, school staff members and administrators, we have been responsive to the issues, concerns, requirements and demands that they have raised. We have sought to convey the message that we are engaged in a dialogue based on a concern and regard for mutual respect and consideration.

A special place in this process is held by elders, who by virtue of their wisdom, knowledge and status provide important guidance and direction. As David Suzuki has emphasised:

We need a radically different way of relating ourselves to the support systems of the planet. My experiences with aboriginal peoples have convinced me, both as a scientist and as an environmentalist, of the power and relevance of their knowledge and worldview in a time of imminent global catastrophe (Knutson & Suzuki, 1992).

We share this view. As Bill Neidjie has expressed it: "White-European got to be listen this culture and this story because important one this" (Neidjie, 1989: 171).

Conclusion

Our effort during 1992, as we have worked with a wide range of people to develop the Shoalhaven Aboriginal Education Research Project, was a journey of discovery. As we progressed through this process, opportunities unfolded, support was provided and the project was strongly endorsed and given shape and substance.

This exploration and dialogue has revealed exciting possibilities for transformative action. Self determination through the activation of community decision-making processes is turning the often quoted rhetoric of governments and bureaucracies into reality. The energy dynamic that has been unleashed is creating a radically different way of conceptualising about and implementing educational reform.

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