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Section A: Schools

Voices Still to be Heard

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Introduction

Aboriginal self-determination

In a climate of self-determination it is essential to clarify what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people themselves feel about their cultural identity and future. These voices exist in a context of the great potential in Aboriginal culture and by contrast the severe problems which Aboriginal people face.

Lippman (1994) argues that, although there is some evidence of Aboriginal status becoming more equitable, education being one instance to avail self-determination, data continue to reveal that Aboriginal mortality and morbidity rates lie in stark contrast to those of the general population of Australia. The death rate for Aboriginal men and women of 35 to 44 years is eight times higher than for the average non-Aboriginal (Ferrari, 1997). Queensland Health (1996) recently reported that Cape York has yet to experience the mortality gains seen by Indigenous populations in New Zealand and North America.

Harris and Malin (1994) provide an insight into the perceptual constraints which inhibit change and act to entrench Indigenous people in a past

archaic and rigid world around the terms persistence and resistance. Persistence reinforces a view of Aboriginal peoples as primitive and incapable of coping with contemporary society. This is a static view of their culture which acts to imprison them. 'The labelling of a dynamic, interactive process as a singular and fixed body of commonly shared knowledge, attitudes, values and behaviours ...' (Harris and Malin, 1994: 100) can create a biological determinism which inhibits cultural change and development. In fact it is an inaccurate description as Yami Lester states, 'Hey, there are no blackfellas standing on one leg with spears, silhouetted against the sky' (cited in Forbes, 1996). By contrast, the resistance perspective acknowledges the frustrations and defiance which some Aboriginals articulate. Aboriginality can be seen to be both ambiguous and paradoxical, built around the uneasy combination of resistance and persistence.

Education

The history of education for Indigenous people within White Western educational establishments portrays a lack of integration and success. The National Review of Education for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in 1995 stated:

Participation in the present education system within this country is offering Aborigines an education which is limited. It is limited because it lacks cultural relevance and also because it could lead to the loss of Aboriginal cultural values. To be quite specific, continued participation in the present system assists Aboriginal people to

lose their languages, cultures and unique identity (DEET, 1995: 94).

In 1991, The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody commented that:

School-based education systems in Australia have historically been unwilling or unable to accommodate many of the values, attitudes, codes and institutions of Aboriginal society (Johnston, 1991: 336).

Though education may well have the potential to enhance self-esteem and status, it is important to register that it may also reinforce the values and norms of the dominant society and in so doing ostracise and undermine others. Data provide evidence of the lack of achievement in education for Aboriginals compared to other cultural groups (Johnston, 1991). These data on academic achievement are not encouraging, especially taking into consideration the understanding that qualifications are invariably a passport to better job prospects.

Aboriginal students' lack of attendance at school also gives rise to concern and indicates a lack of identity or connection with formal state schools. The Royal Commission into Deaths in Custody (Johnston, 1991) reported that in the last decade, attendance had improved but was still below the national average. In brief, the attendance of Aboriginal students declines to approximately one-third of the numbers of non-Aboriginals by Year 12 (National Review of Education of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, 1995). In 1992, the retention rate from Year 8 to Year 12 among Indigenous students dropped from 100 per cent to less than 30 per cent, and for non-Indigenous students it dropped to 75 per cent. Retention among Indigenous females in comparison with males was approximately 8 per cent higher.

There are a number of factors which influence lack of success in school, including poor relationships with teachers (Tesse and Polesel, 1996), parents' lack of experience with schooling (Johnston, 1991), poverty and economic disadvantage (Johnston, 1991), a lack of positive role models or understanding of Aboriginal culture in schools (Guider, 1991; Harris and Malin, 1994; Lee, 1993), and open prejudice and discrimination by both White peer groups and teachers (Sarra, 1997).

Racism and discrimination

These two factors are powerful deterrents for Aboriginal students' participation in school. Although those factors discussed previously may well inhibit confident interaction between students and teachers, it is vital to remember that a sense of inferiority and being ostracised is also an experience for Aboriginal students. These feelings may well ensue from underlying racism within White society's educational institutions. It is also important to recognise that for many Aboriginal children, school is the first concrete experience of White Western culture. For many Aboriginal young people, the school becomes the critical factor in their search for identity. If they feel accepted and affirmed in their schools, they will have a much stronger chance of developing a strong cultural identity. If the school is just another area of pressure and stress, it is often dismissed as irrelevant and not worth continuing with (Groome and Hamilton, 1995: 33).

Employment

The number of people in full-time employment is considerably lower for Indigenous people compared with the remainder of Australians. This has particular repercussions for young Aboriginals entering the labour market. Overall unemployment among Aborigines is four times the national average. Most who are employed are in temporary or low-skilled work, and less than 3 per cent are self-employed compared to 15 per cent of other Australians (Sarra, 1995). Only one-third of working age Aboriginals are in work compared to two-thirds of other Australians.

With particular focus on young people, data drawn from The National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders People (1995) reveal that in comparison with other Australians between the ages of 15 and 19 years, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are at least 15 per cent less likely to have employment and are 10 per cent more likely to be not in the labour force at all (that is not registered as unemployed either). These data become more divisive among 20 to 24 year-olds. Other Australians have a 65 per cent employment rate compared to a 45 per cent employment rate among Indigenous young people. In addition, 15 per cent of the 20 to 24 year-old non-

Indigenous people were not in the labour force, compared to 35 per cent of Indigenous people of this age range (National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, 1995).

There are complex reasons for the high rates of Aboriginal unemployment. First, Aboriginals often live outside labour market areas and their impoverished circumstances make transport into urban areas impossible. Second, their general lack of education and qualifications means that they can seldom compete in the labour market. These figures reveal the desperation of their circumstances and the perpetuation of a vicious circle. Lack of role models and experience within their communities, as well as reduced resources, makes breaking out this cycle an insurmountable barrier for many. Other relevant issues include racial prejudice in the labour market (Bamblett, 1993; Miller, 1985) and under-representation in the labour market.

Young Aboriginal women at school

In general there is a noticeable difference between Aboriginal male and female participation in schools. Between 1988 and 1992 there has been a rapid decline in participation of males in Years 8 and 9, with 15 per cent fewer males than females attending. However, in Years 10 and 11, females start to opt out. In Year 10 'other' Australian students have a participation rate of 98.8 per cent, while Aboriginal females have 78.1 per cent, and Aboriginal males 64.7 per cent. In Year 11 the statistics are as follows: other Australians, 85.8 per cent; Aboriginal females 46.2 per cent; and males 38.2 per cent. In Year 12 the numbers of Aboriginal students still reflect this gender difference and their participation is two thirds less compared to other Australians (National Review of Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, 1995: 69).

The present study

In focusing on young Aboriginal women's values and perceptions of the relevant influences on their educational and vocational future, the present study acknowledges the need to explore how the participants themselves view their options and

influences. It required a methodology which enabled them to feel free to speak, and it involved a process which emphasised sharing and equality. It was important to get to know community members, including the school groups, the Aboriginal School Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA) groups, and in particular the Elders, to gather their views and consent.

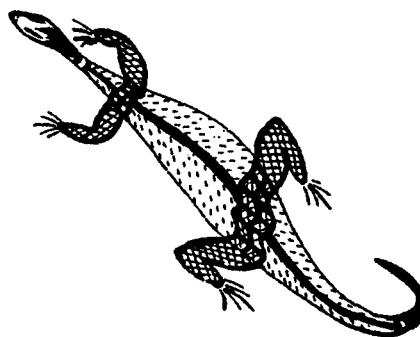
Method

The participants

The research study involved a small group of six Aboriginal females in two secondary schools in a large city in Queensland. The twelve students were all in Year 10 or Year 11, and were members of ASSPA at their school. In addition, two groups of Elders (six in total) who were involved in these schools agreed to be interviewed.

Selection of schools

The schools were selected because they were in areas which had a reasonably high Aboriginal and Islander population. Although one school has a relatively small Indigenous student population, this does not reflect the strong Aboriginal identity on an island in the area. This small number is due to the fact that few Aboriginal students continue to Year 11 and there is a school on the island which caters for students up to Year 10. The schools were also chosen because both localities have distinctive Aboriginal cultural bases.



Measure

A brief questionnaire contained demographic questions which asked about their school, year level, selected areas of study, possible career aspirations and parents' occupations. The broad interview guide explored the following areas:

- Aboriginality and cultural identity
- experience of racism
- views about schooling and teachers
- family influence.

Procedure

Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted with the young women. Each interview began with explanations and opportunities for questions. At the end of each interview, participants were assured of confidentiality and the opportunity to provide feedback on written summaries of the interviews. The interviews were carried out in rooms provided by the respective schools and were recorded. Approval was granted from each of the schools to conduct the interviews during school time. The participants were given information statements and consent forms. Confidentiality procedures were explained.

The Elders agreed to be interviewed in two small groups in their relevant community. A similar process was employed, although one of the interviews was not recorded at the Elders' request.

Analysis

Data analysis involved examining, categorising, tabulating, or otherwise recombining the evidence to consider the original proposals of a study (Yin, 1984). In this study, the interviews were repeatedly listened to and partial transcriptions made. The issues raised were structured and to some degree categorised by the main themes which guided the interviews.



Findings and Discussion

This section summarises the responses of the young women participants and the Elders according to the key themes which guided the interviews. In addition, a section illustrating the convergence of their responses is included.

The importance of cultural identity

Identity and a sense of intuitive recognition was emphasised by all participants, with one participant commenting on the fact that the Elders always recognised her, despite her White complexion. Similarly, an Elder described how he came to know where his family came from through an Elder who recognised him, and emphasised how this recognition gave him such a powerful feeling of confidence and identity with which to cope with the problems in life 'That dignified me ... I used to go back deliberately to hear his words.'

During the interviews the participants expressed a unanimous desire to know more about their culture. In fact, originally one participant was reticent to engage in the study because she was unhappy that she had such a lack of knowledge of her culture.

The importance of Elders and the land

In general the participants voiced an enthusiasm and respect for Elders as well as the land. In the words of one participant, 'Aboriginal people respect the land, they believe you come from it ... everything they know about it gets passed on through generations'. This is linked with a great respect for Elders, 'because they can tell us what happened since the invasion. And because they tell us

about their own lives'. Another contributed, 'Wisdom, very powerful, some have a lot of experience'. By contrast one young woman who came from a more traditional and to some extent culturally protected locality expressed an awareness of the limiting expression of Aboriginal culture which could reinforce a view of its primitive nature.

Racism

One participant was clear about the racist views that some non-Aboriginal people hold, stating that 'Some Whites see us as human beings, some see us as animals full of violence, whingeing about land rights'. They described how prejudice was meted out by employers and members of the establishment. Another commented that 'It's taught me how to stand up for myself, and not to treat others bad, 'cause it will always come back to you. Sometimes though, you don't have to do anything and you still get into trouble.'

These students understood that Aborigines were labelled as poor, primitive and lazy: 'I got a job at [...] but then I was accused of stealing from the till and letting Aboriginal friends in, and then accused of just sitting on my butt and not doing work, and I didn't do anything, someone else was doing it and I got the blame.' They also provided an insight into negative stereotyping as well as an awareness of the way in which an Aboriginal face does not fit the right image for employers. Another participant mentioned that 'Who you are with ...' affects how you are treated and that out of Aboriginal areas there was a considerable and distressing difference. This particular student had heard racist remarks and opinions about Aboriginal people while she was in a lesson and this had seriously affected her sense of well-being at the school even though no one had directly voiced those views to her. Others expressed a wisdom and strength about how to survive racism 'You need a lot of confidence in yourself and to know who you are, you have to ignore people if they say you're stupid.'

What further complicates this picture of racism is the fact that some participants focused on the impact of 'colour' rather than Aboriginality as the catalyst to racial prejudice. In fact, participants felt that employers would assess a person in terms of the darkness of their skin. This left those with a White complexion the option to deny or avoid identifying themselves as Aboriginal if it was tactical to do so. It was in fact one participant who has a darker complexion who had had disturbing experiences of colour and culture prejudice.

Participants also expressed a concern about the lack of differentiation and knowledge that non-Indigenous people have about them. Several participants said that other non-Aborigines lumped

them together and did not recognise their individuality. The Elders also voiced the need to educate not only their own children but also those from White communities about Aboriginal culture. Many participants understood that ignorance and lack of interaction perpetuated racism.

The Elders

The Elders provided an important insight into their past, their present predicament and future hopes. They also expressed a great knowledge and pride in their beliefs and culture.

Though I grew up in a deeply genocidal culture it made me stronger, it made me stronger to be part of our forbears' culture. It was the negative stereotyping attitude that was the first thing that dawned on me as I was going to school ... Bush skills were put down. The fact is that to survive we had to hunt because of the ration system ... it wasn't easy, we had to ride horses for up to six hours to get to our destinations, to get to where we could get our traditional food. I experienced racism from my White teachers, they didn't want us to learn about our culture ... The whole thing that kept me strong was that it wasn't as they said it was ... the things I saw with the old people was a spiritual linkage, not only to people but to the land.

They also talked of their responsibility to their community and young people.

As an Elder I feel the need to talk to people to encourage them ... that they've got to learn. Some are getting a good education ... If this generation now don't have some people telling stories we'll lose so much, it's so important history isn't forgotten.

The Elders recommended that their young people should have the opportunity to go out into the bush and learn survival tactics because this would give them a sense of self-confidence.

I feel that with the affinity that Aboriginal people have to the land, it's a good starting point for them to go out there, not as a career but I think they'll get a greater sense of appreciation once they've had that experience ... Walking in the bush is extremely important.

The Elders contributed their own understanding of the effects of racism in schools and how damaging it could be for Aboriginal students.

I think to get the best out, the best ability out of our kids [segregated schooling] wouldn't be a bad idea, to have separate colleges and their own role models. I feel that some of our kids can't handle mainstream society and pressure and that a special school would help. If kids are willing to read they'd be better off, they'd have a better future ... My kids, they've gone through the mixed system and they've had a great deal of success ... What is more pronounced today instead of that cycle of integration, and because of deep-seated racism, is that a lot of families won't send their kids to school.

The Elders believed that their young people would affiliate with a (physical) area but also expressed a sense of identity which transcended place and found itself in a sense of 'knowing'. 'Here in [...] I see kids grow up from little to teenagers to older people and get a feeling of belonging to this area ... to identify with the area.' One female Elder said that she felt that 'I can go anywhere, wherever I feel, because my spirit's free.' They took a very philosophical approach to the meaning of life and expressed more of a transcendental view of a sense of belonging among their people. Their focus was less on place and more on an inner belief. In terms of existential meaning one Elder commented, 'You are first a human being and then whatever you want to be.' Concerning their young people, one Elder commented, 'I think they can go on to better things and still come back ... I guess that's who they are, they might get married, they might travel far away but they'll still be the same.'

All the Elders also mentioned the need for their young people to have a strong positive sense of identity as well as a:

... respect, and discipline for that respect ... They have to learn the great asset to listen; if we didn't utilise the great value in listening, I don't think we'd be here today ... Children have to have a respect for who they are, that they're as good as anybody else. Our culture is second to none, it's been proven — 40,000 years of survival — it's mind boggling stuff for these kids to believe, to me it portrays a very intelligent people with great wisdom.

Correspondence between the Elders' views and those of the young women

The Elders elaborated on much of their cultural identity, and expressed a great knowledge of their past. Both they and their young people took a very

proactive stance towards integration and self-determination and a great pride in their cultural heritage. Like their young people, the Elders believed the way forward was to mix with different cultural groups and to listen to others. They expressed the need to keep educating their own children and other cultures about Aboriginality, to circulate in schools and to discuss matters with the Principals and teachers. In Queensland, an initiative has been launched within the Education Department whereby Elders and others in the community are called on to assist in school behaviour management issues. A draft proposal, *Community Approaches to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Student Behaviour Management: Reflecting the perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders* (Queensland Department of Education, 1997) has been circulated.

However, both young people and the Elders understand that the negative effects of racism which exists in many institutions means that some students may be better off in segregated schools, where they could develop more of a sense of security, cultural identity and belonging.

It is also essential to note that both the Elders and young people voiced a very contemporary knowledge and awareness of the problems they face and how to survive. They recognised the importance of their cultural heritage but also the need to keep learning, achieve academically and vocationally, as well as the need to survive despite the constraints of racism and materialism. They expressed concern about alcoholism, unemployment and drug abuse and how it affected their young people as well as quite possibly these young people's respect for their Elders. They recommended the need to keep talking to keep the culture alive. They also emphasised the importance of a sense of sharing and being 'part of', rather than 'apart from', the community. As their young people had anticipated, they voiced an openness toward their children's future aspirations and understood the necessity for some to leave their local area to succeed educationally and vocationally. Therefore those who wish to advocate on behalf of Indigenous students would benefit from actively enlisting Elders and community members into educational establishments.

Summary

Many participants expressed a capacity to deal with two contrasting and conflicting cultural identities. However, the circumstances and experiences of different communities are enormously varied, and this study has only documented the experiences of a small number from a limited area. As outsiders, what came was notable was our own perceptual limitations and the wealth of Aboriginal culture which could provide greater insight into the meaning of life and could enrich any society.

Finally, in honour of the contributions that the participants themselves made, we finish with their voices which reflect the hope and wisdom that these people still have.

'Everyone reckons that [...] has very bad people, but if they came here and talked to people they would think differently.'

'I reckon other nationalities should know about each other. That's the good thing about this school.'

'It is good to have the country open to everyone.'

'I just like the way they all get together as a bunch and do their own singing and dancing and everyone is really close to each other whether they are related to you or not.'

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