

Education, Employment, and Everything The triple layers of a woman's life

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The Equity and Empowerment of Australian Indigenous Women Through Success In Education: Australia's Own Daughters Of The Dreaming

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Abstract

This paper discusses the importance of education in the lives of Indigenous Australian women. Empowerment, whether it be personal, social or professional, can be sought through the attainment of education. As the traditional “gatherers” of food for survival, many Indigenous women now need to focus their energies upon the gathering of knowledge; indeed, this knowledge is as intrinsic to their survival as food once was. Knowledge carries the currency necessary to compete within the professional world as opposed to surviving on the fringes as was the case for 200 years after the arrival of Europeans. While the opportunity to be heard certainly needs to be in their own voice, it is equally imperative that the articulation of that voice be understood by their predominantly non-Indigenous audience. Indigenous women were relegated to both sexual and domestic enslavement, stolen from their families and silenced through the banishment of their native tongue. Whether known as the traditional gatherers, “Women of the Centre”, “Women of the Sun”, or “Daughters of the Dreaming”, these women have proved pivotal in the survival of their people. This paper will discuss how their continued impact can be assured through the empowerment that education can bring to them.

Introduction

As a non-Indigenous woman growing up in Queensland Australia in the 1960s I felt very cognisant of my 'lesser' status as a female. As a young girl with 3 brothers and an all round sports loving, beer toting Aussie bloke for a dad, it did not take too long before I realised that when my father wanted a drink at the pub with the boys after playing cricket all day, the fact that his wife and children were relegated to the car at the front of the pub until he was ready to grab his 'tallies' of beer and come home, was totally normal practice. This was necessary because of course women were not allowed inside of a hotel during this time. Now this is merely a small example of sexism in the memories of a then young white female, I can only but begin to wonder at the layers of oppression suffered by those who were not only 'inflicted' with the curse of femaleness but also had to suffer the indignity of black skin as well. For many Indigenous women, the entering of a hotel even in this new millennium, can be either forbidden or at the very least stigmatised.

It didn't take me too many years to understand that if I was to compete in this male dominated patriarchal society that I would have to fight for it as it was never going to be given lightly or handed over to me as an inherent human right. It was at this time I began to understand the empowerment that was incumbent with education. The awareness of my social oppression as a female sparked within me a genuine passion for social justice and further understanding of the added layers of oppression suffered by my Indigenous sisters. It is this passion that ultimately drove me toward Indigenous education and social access. Exclusion appeared to be the common denominator of oppression and therefore finding a means of culturally appropriate access that did not set Indigenous people up to fail became a driving passion. This opportunity for empowerment presented itself through the program I currently coordinate, namely Remote Area Teaching Education Program (RATEP).

The Indigenous cycle of oppression has been perpetuated throughout the generations of young Indigenous people by excluding their reality from the day to day realities of the school classroom.

Inequity and marginalisation are just two of the problems traditionally faced by Indigenous students and are at the core of poor Indigenous education outcomes. For this reason, inclusivity and the application of critical theory and critical pedagogy are highlighted as a means of redressing a history of exclusion and mistrust in the relationship between minority learners in Australia and formal education. Critical theory has an explicit interest in the abolition of social injustice (Bronner, 1993, p.2). Further, as Abby Wolk (2000) stated:

...critical pedagogy challenges the notion that the world is what it is and can't be any different. It enables learners to reflect on their own experience historically, giving their immediate reality a beginning, a present, and most importantly, a future. (p.1)

The discussion draws upon a framework from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (2004) concept paper, *A Challenge and a Vision: Marginalisation a Threat to Society*, to examine RATEP as a professional education context to promote inclusion. In order to give you a context it is important to firstly give you a brief overview of the RATEP program. RATEP addresses the issue of role models

and acknowledges the vital role they play in the lives of young school children. Traditionally Indigenous children received the majority of their learning from the women who defined their existence - women such as their mother, sisters, grandmother and aunts. These women were the keepers of the much needed knowledge surrounding their culture, survival and kinship patterns etc, in other words those pieces of knowledge fundamental to survival and happiness. The decimation of traditional education through the imposed teachings of the Europeans signalled the coinciding decimation of the understood and desired learning process. It is now traditionally, classroom teachers who are seen as authority figures who are looked to for advice, guidance and learning by students who view them as what Vygotsky would refer to as 'significant others' - those upon whom young children depend for knowledge and growth (McInerney & McInerney, 2002).

More Indigenous teachers in the classrooms ensures a presence of Indigenous 'significant others' to help instil cultural diversity and inclusivity in the classroom culture. Inclusivity offers solutions to a myriad of poor education outcomes and RATEP helps address the issue by providing Indigenous teachers who have been empowered through exposure to philosophies such as critical theory and critical pedagogy as a means to affect inclusion in the classroom. At last a more consistent and recognized connectedness to their real world can be present for Indigenous students as opposed to the complete domination of a Caucasian worldview.

One of the key deterrents for Indigenous women training to become teachers in the past has been the need to move away from their community and kinship system and learn to thrive in an alienating and unsupportive environment. This deterrent has therefore culminated in a shameful lack of Indigenous role models in our classrooms - role models who prove to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students alike that the central position of power to teach and support belongs just as naturally to our Indigenous Australians as it does to our non-Indigenous.

This environment of inclusion begins with the RATEP site and then naturally flows on into the classroom of these RATEP teacher graduates. This dramatic change in the approach to, and the acceptance of, education is in part due to the implementation of critical theory.

Critical Theory

Critical theory is a philosophy that emphasises the importance of questioning and challenging "the seeming obviousness, naturalness, immediacy, and simplicity of the world around us, and in particular, of what we are able to perceive through our senses and

understand through the application of our powers of reason" (Nowlan, 2001, p.2). Critical theory helps challenge the *status quo* of poor Indigenous educational outcomes and thereby provides a venue for alternative thinking and outcomes. It encourages the student to question and challenge the social, racial and sexual oppression embedded in the education system and the very fibre of culture itself. As stated by Giroux: "The primary characteristic of this school of thought is that social theory, whether reflected to educational research, art, philosophy, literature, or business, should play a significant role in changing the world, not just recording information" (1999, p.1).

The opportunity for Indigenous teachers to challenge the *status quo* and to promote social change in the classroom, for example, may be an overt multicultural approach to the classroom environment and their approaches to the curriculum. Indigenous teachers can prepare alternative units of work that include Indigenous perspectives of history as a means of addressing ignorance and racism and of providing multiple perspectives. These Indigenous perspectives can help encourage the changing of students' viewpoints and combat the passivity commensurate with the acceptance of social norms. Encouraging students to be independently critical and to challenge these social norms is an imperative of critical theory. This approach also helps instil pride in black Australian history and, at the same time, helps make the curriculum relevant to Indigenous students.

Education that provides multiple perspectives also provides multiple choices for individuals in terms of their developing belief systems and this is arguably as pertinent to majorities as it is to minorities. For example, this would provide an invaluable opportunity for students to undertake a unit of work that examined the traditional roles of Indigenous women prior to European invasion. This is an area of knowledge that has the potential to evoke Indigenous pride and non-Indigenous awareness. As further stated by Kellner:

A teacher's inclusion of multicultural pedagogy and an active engagement with diverse ethnic, racial, and national issues is critical to...social well-being.... Teachers must acknowledge uniqueness and difference as they also applaud similarity, for the strength of small communities and also society at large derives from celebrating our diversity. (p.1)

Critical Pedagogy flows naturally from the precepts of critical theory and therefore needs to be acknowledged. The adoption of critical pedagogy as an approach to educators' professional practice is a logical progression as it shares the same philosophical roots as critical theory.

RATEP provides an opportunity for its graduates to focus directly on its principles from a grass roots level in their pedagogical approach. For example, RATEP

participants are in a position to exercise critical perspectives which are signalled by Giroux as vital:

...raise questions about the relationships between the margins and centers of power in schools and are concerned about how to provide a way of reading history as part of a larger project of reclaiming power and identity, particularly as these are shaped around the categories of race, gender, class, and ethnicity. (1999, p.1)

The presence of Indigenous women in the classroom helps to not only challenge the *status quo* but consequently displaces it with the new knowledge that must evolve from their sheer presence in this political moment of the classroom. These women are being seen in a centralised position of power as opposed to a marginalised position of silence and invisibility - a presence commonly only seen through the inappropriate and deceptive manipulation of the media's stereotyping.

The Relevance of Inclusivity There are positive implications when applying critical theory to the issue of inclusivity as a means of challenging the barriers to inclusive education, as its underpinning philosophy is intolerant of the principles that impede equity and access. Marginalisation is a very real problem in contemporary societies: As highlighted in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation:

One of the greatest problems facing the world today is the growing number of persons who are excluded from meaningful participation in the economic, social, political and cultural life of their communities. Such a society is neither efficient nor safe (2004, p.3).

This was most certainly once the case for all Indigenous Australians who were placed on missions and imprisoned; they were punished for communicating in their own language and the decimation of their languages spelt the concurrent decimation of their lifestyles and cultures (Indigenous Law Resources: Reconciliation and Social Justice Library, 1992). Whilst Indigenous exclusion was once confined to the perimeters of Australia and was seen strictly as a domestic problem, we are now members of a global society that requires certain abilities and knowledge to be able to participate both personally and professionally - a continued marginalisation and oppression of a whole people ensures that participation cannot take place and therefore continued imprisonment and dependency are guaranteed - the prison walls of the mission may not be physically visible but are soundly in place just the same.

As stated in UNESCO's concept paper, "Regular schools with inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discrimination, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all" (2004, p.5). RATEP

epitomises this commitment to inclusive orientation through its unique approach to inclusivity by placing highly trained Indigenous teachers in schools to affect inclusivity from within the education system. Education also provides the key for social access and engagement. It fulfils UNESCO's definition of an effective educational policy, it states, "Any educational policy must be able to meet the challenges of pluralism and enable everyone to find their place in the community to which they primarily belong and at the same time be given the means to open up to other communities" (2004, p.5).

Whilst RATEP focuses on educating adults, it equips those adults to go into the education system and have invaluable impact upon Indigenous and non-Indigenous children, with the hope that it will go full circle and break the cyclical pattern of poor Indigenous education outcomes.

The essential area of role modelling is addressed as Indigenous teachers are placed in the classrooms of young children. Positions of authority are indeed available to Indigenous peoples the missing ingredient has been primarily the belief that they exist. Self-belief and confidence are intrinsic contributing factors of success. Indigenous education has traditionally been a problem of seemingly insolvable complexity within Australian schools, much of which stems from a lack of student attendance (Bourke, Rigby, & Burden, 2000). Many 'responses' have been put in place over the years as a means of addressing the problem but to date have enjoyed very little success. RATEP, on the other hand, has seen positive innovations with the provision of role models for young Indigenous students and has transformed the approach to inclusivity within the schools that have RATEP teachers. It is intended that graduates of the program will bring with them to the schools an in-depth knowledge of the cultural, linguistic and family backgrounds of the children they and their colleagues will be teaching. Suddenly school need not be this alienating and irrelevant place that other generations were forced to attend and endure. The social currency provided by schools can now also provide authentic social currency for Indigenous learners.

Addressing the issue of inclusivity from within the education system itself is a transformational approach. Inclusive teaching practices recognise the relevance and importance of the individual student within the classroom, the uniqueness of their position and the impact of their culture. As stated by Wolk, "when we deny the central place of students actual life experiences, we miss the opportunity for an authentic context for learning, and set ourselves up for a lot of resistance" (2000, p.1). The recognition of difference and the ability to embrace the rich diversity that can grow from its acknowledgement can likewise add a rich

diversity to the classroom that benefits all those who are fortunate enough to share their experiences and ideally form a sense of group identity in the process.

Awareness of Access The barriers that have traditionally been formed by issues such as difference of gender, culture and race form only part of the complex dilemma that stands in the way of access and equity. In analysing the barriers to learning, UNESCO's paper distinguishes "learners who have historically faced barriers to learning have had few opportunities for further education at the tertiary level" (2004, p.10). This separates RATEP from other Indigenous programs as it functions from within a mainstream university. Lack of tertiary access has indeed contributed significantly to poor Indigenous education outcomes and places further emphasis on the value of RATEP. The ultimate indicator of RATEP's success, however, will rest with its existence no longer being necessary. This will be apparent once there are enough Indigenous teachers within Australian schools to implement inclusivity and impact upon the ambitions and self esteem of Indigenous students. These students will see first hand and therefore believe implicitly that positions of authority are available to them making segregated programs that endeavour to instil those very beliefs redundant).

Another barrier is that of attitudes. Negative attitudes are identified as a further barrier to learning. They have contributed to the continuation of negativity that surrounds the perceptions of education held by many Indigenous peoples. There are many Indigenous parents who, in some instances, have such appalling memories of school and the discrimination overtly displayed towards them, that they don't enforce the school attendance of their own children. This cycle of negativity from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples has to be broken and by making school a more positive experience through inclusive practices such as role modelling with Indigenous teachers, the cycle can indeed be broken. UNESCO points out the inadequate and fragmented human resource development that contributes to marginalisation and of course this is perpetuated through the lack of cross-cultural communication and awareness training offered in our schools.

This logically leads to the next point of cultural awareness. Some teachers may be culturally unaware and ill equipped to work in multicultural teaching contexts. Critical pedagogy can impact greatly upon the liabilities of a cultural morass, as highlighted further by Darder, 'a critical pedagogy must seriously address the concept of cultural politics by both legitimising and challenging cultural experiences that comprise the histories and social realities that in turn comprise the forms and boundaries that give meaning to student lives

(1991, p.77). More Indigenous teachers having a presence in our schools provide a means of addressing the lack of awareness of Indigenous culture. As highlighted in the UNESCO paper, the curriculum itself might also be degrading (2004). This of course has been one of the major issues for Indigenous students who have been educated with the negative and degrading representations of early Aborigines in particular. The image of the Aborigine standing on one foot holding his spear and wearing a lap lap is one of the most prominent representations in earlier Australian history books. This depiction is very degrading and promotes the Aborigine as a nomad – a person who 'roams aimlessly' – this could not be further from the true essence of Indigenous seasonal travel patterns. These are just some of the issues that can be addressed to overturn the historically degrading representations. Kellner discusses the need for making "teachers and students sensitive to the politics of representation, to how media audiences' images of race, gender, sexuality, and cultural differences are in part generated by cultural representations, how negative stereotyping presents harmful cultural images and the need for a diversity of representations..." (1997, p. 2).

Barriers of Language The issue of language in education is a very real problem for many Indigenous Australians. As the UNESCO paper states, "In many countries the language of instruction is different than the language the students talk at home and use in their community thus creating difficulties in understanding for many students" (2004, p.18). RATEP graduates have provided a solution to this problem in the communities where they are now teaching. Indigenous people had their language stolen from them as the most expedient and dramatic means of both silencing and controlling them. Women of various cultures throughout history have been commonly silenced and oppressed through a lack of social and educational access, but surely the most profound form of oppression is the silence that emanates through the lack of an actual language. Now these women as teachers and centralised figures of authority, have found their voice through the medium of education and are now able to share that voice as a means of having their presence both felt and heard - a truly life changing achievement that can have an infinite and perpetual impact.

Training of Personnel The same UNESCO paper (2001) highlights the importance of training education personnel and equipping them with the skills for working in inclusive settings. RATEP addresses this issue directly by virtue of its clientele who are all Indigenous. These pre-service teachers also provide a valuable source of cultural inclusion and awareness when completing their practicums with non-Indigenous teachers – it becomes a mutual learning experience. As the numbers of Indigenous teachers increase,

ultimately, so might the impact on the views and attitudes of teachers who have not had the opportunity to be exposed to Indigenous culture. This may in turn give insights and further understanding of some of the problems experienced with Indigenous students. Any exposure to cultural difference must surely be an asset and a starting place for overcoming racial and cultural ignorance.

Conclusion

One of the most significant aspects of RATEP is its long-term approach to poor Indigenous education outcomes. The RATEP model is not simply another 'bandaid' used to cover the infestations that culminate from Indigenous neglect but is an authentic remedy that attacks the core of the problem – it helps dislodge the roots of ignorance and pave the way for inclusivity with educated, knowledgeable and proud black role models; Indigenous teachers for now and the future. Education is at the grass roots of escaping oppression and marginalisation as it empowers the individual with the knowledge to function from within mainstream society and not 'dwell on the fringes' as mere spectators. Knowledge is indeed power and the knowledge gained by these Indigenous women in their challenge of the status quo empowers them to impact change on the belief systems of the students they will teach in future years. As poignantly stated by Nowlan (2001, p.2):

"...education in critical theory enables the development and refinement of our ability to engage as *critical citizens*, that is as empowered agents able effectively to question, challenge, and contribute toward the progressive transformation of the prevailing status quo within the communities, societies, and cultures that we work to help maintain and reproduce every day, and in relation to which we are, as such always not only inescapably interested – but also vitally important – participants".

Once Indigenous peoples are participants of society they are no longer marginalised but function instead as mainstream members of a community. These people were once silenced through the stealth of their language - this lack of language spelt the lack of social access to survive as part of the mainstream social hub - this left nowhere to dwell but on the fringes, never really being able to physically access the prosperity that sat so tantalisingly in clear view of those forced to survive on the periphery of genuine access. This exclusion acts as a daily reminder of what is available to the 'Other' - the 'Other' being anyone other than those forced to survive and dwell on the fringe of society. It is through the reclaiming of their voice via education that social access can no longer be denied - education becomes the key necessary for opening their doors of desire and hope. Here's hoping that with enough determination and

the empowerment that is afforded by education, that the Indigenous women of our country - 'our daughters of the dreaming', will never be oppressed through silence again.

I would just like to finish with the poignantly profound and beautiful words of Swami Sivananda who said: The best thing to give

Your enemy is forgiveness;
To an opponent, tolerance;
To a friend, your heart;
To your child, a good example;
To your father, deference;
To your mother, conduct that will make her proud of you;
To yourself, respect;
To all peoples, kindness
(Dyer, 2004, p.123)

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