

Indigenous Education and Social Policy Development in NSW

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An Inclusive Society? Practicalities and Possibilities

Indigenous Education and Social Policy Development in NSW

Abstract: This paper discusses the historical context of the NSW AECG and the NSW Aboriginal Education Policy, and emphasises the need for culturally inclusive policies and effective implementation strategies. It also highlights the relationship between Indigenous educational disadvantage and colonisation, demonstrating the need for dominant educational frameworks to be inclusive of Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing.

Indigenous Education and Social Policy Development in NSW

Indigenous educational disadvantages are inextricably linked to colonisation and its continued manifestation within the school curriculum and education system. Over the past few decades, the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (NSW AECG) has played a crucial role in addressing Indigenous educational disadvantage and in placing Indigenous education on the social policy agenda. This paper will discuss the historical context of the NSW AECG and the NSW Aboriginal Education Policy (NSW AEP), emphasising the need for culturally inclusive policies and effective implementation strategies.

The 1996 NSW AEP was developed in collaboration with the NSW Department of Education and the NSW AECG to address the disadvantages faced by Indigenous students in schools and to educate *all* students about Aboriginal Australia. In 2008 the policy was revised in accordance with Recommendation 6 of the Aboriginal Education Review and the Aboriginal Education and Training Policy was released. Before discussing these policies in any depth, it is important to provide a sociocultural and historical context of Indigenous education in NSW in order to understand the need for culturally appropriate directions in Indigenous education and social policy development.

Fundamental Frameworks: recognising diversity in educational paradigms

'All educators need to recognise the Eurocentric ideologies that have shaped educational curricula and therefore their students, and recognise very different and legitimate ways of knowing and doing that are not now a typical part of the educational process' (Battiste et.al. 2005, p.13).

Education provides a critical framework through which cultures thrive and societies function. The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights states that 'Everyone has the right to education' (Article 26.1) and that 'Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children' (Article 26.3). Access to education is critical in determining positive socio-cultural outcomes of peoples within all societies. Cross culturally, there is much diversity and variation in relation to the way in which educational frameworks exist. It is critical that all cultural models of education are respected, not simply 'tolerated' in order for different frameworks to exist concurrently and for all students to have equal access to education within culturally diverse societies.

Educational frameworks in Indigenous communities are fundamentally based upon the transgenerational transmission of culture and knowledge (Horstman 2001). Knowledge is carefully regulated by elders within communities and transmitted through a variety of forms of communication. The European invasion of Indigenous nations disrupted the socio-cultural frameworks of Indigenous societies, and in particular dislocated Indigenous models of education, hindering the traditional pedagogies of learning. The cultural paradigms through which Indigenous knowledges are transmitted differ significantly to western cultural models of education and ways of knowing, being and doing. Disregarding the importance of difference, policies of protection and assimilation imposed western cultural models upon Indigenous peoples, with the intention to sever and subvert Indigenous socio-cultural frameworks (Fletcher, 1989).

Western educational institutions were established to 'christianise' and 'civilise' Indigenous children with the aim of subverting Indigenous culture. This was attempted through the further disruption of the transgenerational transmission of culture and knowledge, when children were forcibly removed from the 'cultural influence' of their families:

'Our chief hope now is decidedly in the children; and the complete success as far as regards their education and civilisation would be before us if it were possible to remove them from the influence of their parents'

- Protector of Aborigines, Adelaide 1840 (cited in Parbury, 1999)

Producing Policy: Indigenous disadvantage and social policy development in NSW

Culturally inclusive social policy in the area of Indigenous education is fundamental to achieving social justice. In educational frameworks where Western paradigms continue to exclude Indigenous ways of knowing, Indigenous students will continue to experience educational disadvantage. Inquiries and reports such as the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (1991) and the *Bringing Them Home Report* (1997) highlighted the impact of past policies on poor educational outcomes for Indigenous Australians. The findings and recommendations of these reports emphasised the need for new, culturally inclusive policies to be developed in terms of Indigenous education, and the establishment of Indigenous consultative bodies to be involved in this process.

Consultation and negotiation are fundamental to the development of any social policy that involves Indigenous peoples (Smith 1999). The NSW AECG is a key consultative body, and has effectively informed the NSW Department of Education's policy development, providing not only a point of contact with the community, but in offering critical information as to how policies should be constructed. The partnership between the Department of Education and Training (DET) and the NSW AECG was formalised in 1999 through the signed agreement *Securing a collaborative partnership into the future: Consolidating a 21-year working relationship* (NSW DET 2004). The NSW AECG has a strategic governance body that consists of local and regional groups, recognising the diversity of Indigenous communities throughout NSW. The main focus of the NSW AECG is supporting the empowerment of local Indigenous communities and encouraging active community input into Aboriginal education at the local level (*NSW AECG Inc.* 2009). Current president of the NSW AECG Cindy Berwick argues that 'this will empower our people and contribute to improving outcomes in Aboriginal education and training' (Berwick cited in *NSW AECG Inc.* 2009).

The NSW AECG was established in 1976 to provide advice to educators on behalf of Aboriginal communities (Masella 2006). It was established by the Indigenous community in a climate where Indigenous peoples had limited access to education, and retention rates were very low with few Aboriginal students completing school beyond the middle years (Masella 2006 p.32). In 1970, only three Aboriginal students completed the HSC in NSW (Lester in Masella 2006, p.32) and until 1972 the policy of 'Exclusion on Demand' allowed Aboriginal children in NSW to be expelled by 'the will of the people with the Minister's sanction' (Minister John Perry [1899-1904] cited in Parbury 1999).

A decade later (in 1982), the NSW AECG placed Indigenous education on the social policy agenda, which led to the development of the first NSW *Aboriginal Education Policy* of the (then) New South Wales Department of Education's Aboriginal Education Unit (DET 2004). The policy was aimed at 'educating Aboriginal students, involving communities and promoting culturally appropriate teaching' (DET 2004, p.35). However, when it was made mandatory in 1987 many schools complained that the policy was not relevant to them as they had only few, if any Aboriginal students at their school (DET 2004).

In 1996 the policy was reviewed and rewritten by the NSW Department of Education and the NSW AECG with a strong focus on educating all students about Aboriginal Australia, whilst still focusing on the outcomes of Indigenous students (DET 2004). The NSW AECG argued that this was important because:

'Aboriginal education is not only the appropriate education of Aboriginal students but also must involve the education of all students about Indigenous Australia. Participation and outcomes of Aboriginal students will improve when Indigenous culture, history and contemporary issues are integral to the curriculum for all students' (NSW AECG Inc. 1995 cited in NSW DSE 1996).

It was based on this premise that the 1996 NSW AEP was developed for 'all students, all staff and all schools' with the goal of promoting 'the educational achievements of Aboriginal students, to educate all students about Aboriginal Australia' (NSW DSE 1996).

Assessing the Outcomes: the implementation of the NSW AEP

The framework of the 1996 NSW AEP provided a space where dialogue between schools and Indigenous communities could potentially develop, and collaborative relationships could be formed. However, implementation strategies were poor and the policy was insufficiently put into practice. Many teachers within schools were ill equipped to meet the proposed goals of the policy, and lacked training to ensure the implementation of new and critical aspects of learning and teaching (pers comm. Berwick 2008a). Although the NSW AEP was supported by development and training modules, there was a significant lack of resources to implement the policy which effectively prevented the aims of the policy being achieved. Berwick was an Aboriginal consultant for the 1996 NSW AEP and was partly responsible for the implementation of the policy in 300 schools throughout 5 districts in only a matter of months. Comprehensive training for teachers would have been impossible to carry out in the short time period.

Another significant issue was that most university students training to work as teachers had not been exposed to Indigenous cultures, educational methodologies or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education studies prior to entering the school system as teachers. Not only can this result in culturally unsafe learning environment for Indigenous students, but sufficient implementation of Aboriginal education policies would be unlikely as local communities may be

disinclined to be involved with schools. Linda Burney, former president of the NSW AECG argues :

'Because so many teachers know so little about Aboriginal culture and about Aboriginal Education history, there is very little understanding of the reasons why Aboriginal people might be reluctant to have much to do with schools, and often even less understanding of what might be the appropriate ways to invite Aboriginal community involvement (Burney 1991 in Smith 1999, p.183).

Teachers who enter the school system that have limited knowledge or exposure to Indigenous cultures, educational methodologies and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education studies can perpetuate prejudice and discrimination toward Indigenous peoples and contribute to the cycle of institutional racism that continues to exist within educational institutions. As part of the *Teaching the Teachers: Indigenous Studies Project of National Significance*, an on going project initiated by the late Oodgeroo Noonucal, a study undertaken by Mooney, Halse and Craven et al (2005) looked at the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education studies for pre-service teachers. The study found that 'many students entered undergraduate degrees with covert but deeply entrenched prejudices against Aboriginal culture and people' (Mooney et. al. 2003. p.7) and 'that preservice Aboriginal Studies subjects do make a positive difference for teachers' (Mooney et.al. 2005, p.7).

If pre-service teachers were to undertake compulsory Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education studies, the implementation of the NSW AEP would be more successful as 'Aboriginal studies [has] the potential to produce high quality teachers, [and] contribute to the broader national agenda of fostering reconciliation and social justice in schools and the wider community' (Mooney et. al. 2003, p.7). In 1992, when the *Teaching the Teachers Project* was in its early stages, only one university in Australia offered a core Aboriginal Studies subject as part of the pre-service teacher education program (Mooney et. al. 2005). As a direct result of the *Teaching the Teachers Project*, 'a significant number of universities have introduced core studies since the release of the project in 1996' (Mooney et.al. 2005, p.16). This was described as 'an historic achievement in Australia teacher education, which potentially represents an ongoing contribution to the reconciliation process in Australian society' (Mooney et.al. 2005, p.16).

Despite these positive achievements, less than 50% of Australian universities offer mandatory Aboriginal Studies in pre-service education programs, and teacher education institutions continue to be encouraged to introduce mandatory Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies into the curriculum (Mooney et. al. 2003, p.1; Mooney et. al. 2005b). Until this occurs, Indigenous students will continue to be exposed to learning environments that are culturally unsafe, hampering their ability to achieve positive educational outcomes.

Developing Social Policy: the review of Aboriginal education

Although the 1996 NSW AEP positively addressed the issues surrounding the poor educational outcomes of Indigenous students, the goals of the policy were not necessarily being met. In October 2003, a major review of Aboriginal education and training in NSW examined the success and failures of policies surrounding Indigenous education in NSW. The main concern was in regards to the implementation of the NSW AEP and it was recommended that the policy be updated with the NSW AECG:

'Numerous community visits, field trips and submissions strongly highlighted the need for the Department to be accountable for the full implementation of the Aboriginal Education Policy (AEP) across all New South Wales Government schools and that the current unacceptable achievement levels for Aboriginal students could be directly related to the AEP not being implemented in schools in a holistic or significant way' (NSW DET 2004).

As a result the NSW AEP was updated into the Aboriginal Education and Training policy which does not only apply to schools, but also includes all areas of public education covered by the DET including TAFE NSW, designated preschools, community education and corporate sectors (NSW DET 2008a). The new policy is based on much the same principles as the previous policy, with the goal that 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students will match or better the outcomes of the broader student population' (NSW DET 2008b).

The main criticism of the new policy is that it continues to lack effective implementation strategies in which the policy can achieve its outcomes. Berwick argues that there needs to be community ownership and 'consistency of delivery and employment' in relation to policy implementation, 'otherwise this will only widen the gap [in education]' (pers comm. Berwick 2008). Adequate policy support and a 'suite of strategies' is needed to ensure effective

implementation of the policy (pers comm. Berwick 2008a). It has been suggested by the DET that teachers will undertake a mandatory (possibly online) three hour cultural education program as part of the implementation strategy (pers comm.. Berwick 2008a). This is highly problematic as 'making it mandatory may work against it being a positive experience for some staff' (NSW DET 2008a).

Community Consultation: creating critical connections

The NSW AECG continues to play a critical role in developing meaningful relationships between schools and Indigenous communities. The structure of the NSW AECG is based on community groups that provide a solid communication and consultation networks for educational institutions in NSW. Berwick argues that community involvement is fundamental in creating sustainable learning environments for all students - "*Teachers come and go, students come and go, but the community stays there*" (pers comm. Berwick 2008a).

The Aboriginal Education and Training policy maintains a framework where schools can utilise and adapt the policy according to the needs of the school and the community, recognising the diversity of all students and communities throughout NSW. This deters from one of the most common problematic aspects in Indigenous social policy development – that one size does not fit all (Lucashenko 1996).

Conclusion: decolonising educational institutions

'...education is one of the critical sites for decolonising work, particularly because the modern structures of the economic and education systems have been so often crafted out of the colonial borrowings of European systems' (Battiste et. al. 2005, p.13).

Indigenous peoples throughout the world are leading the movement of decolonisation, particularly in the area of education. Potlo'tek First Nations academic Dr. Marie Battiste argues that a postcolonial framework 'is not about rejecting all theory or research of Western knowledge. It is about creating a new space where Indigenous peoples' knowledge, identity, and future is calculated into the global and contemporary equation' (Battiste 2005, p.225). The new Aboriginal Education and Training Policy could play a significant role in tracing a path for the decolonisation of educational institutions in Australia.

The success of the Aboriginal Education and Training Policy depends on its implementation. The new policy has a strong framework which can potentially lead to the development and cultivation of meaningful relationships between schools and Indigenous communities. Furthermore, the policy would be better implemented if pre-service teachers were exposed to Indigenous education methodologies and ways of knowing, prior to entering the school system. In the keynote address at the launch of the Aboriginal Education and Training Policy, Berwick stressed the importance of policy implementation to the future of Indigenous education:

'A policy is just words on paper. It is how these words are translated into action and practices that make the difference...lets work together to effectively implement this policy...so that education continues to not just be a dream to Aboriginal people but a reality' (Berwick 2008b, p.3).

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