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What do we mean by an educational 'culture of survival'?

In 1987 Ralph Folds discussed what he proposed as widespread breakdown in the delivery of mainstream schooling in the Anangu lands of South Australia. In his discussion he outlined a picture of Anangu children's resistance to teachers' attempts to pursue mainstream educational goals in the day to day working of the classroom. This picture of communication breakdown along with the resultant consequences for classroom programming constitutes a pervasive theme that is dominant in the research on the education of Indigenous children in general and not merely with Anangu children (eg. Christie 1984, 1987; Harris 1980, 1985, 1990; Malcolm 1979, 1982, 1982a, 1987, 1991; Harkins 1994; Gray 1980, 1985, 1990, 1998).

One significant consequence of this continued breakdown of communication is a retreat by both teachers and children into the promotion and acceptance of low-level tasks that are commonly described by educators as 'busywork'. 'Busywork' activities keep children occupied but offer little real educational challenge and contribute little to academic development.

Folds refers to 'busywork' in the following terms:

"The most effective and pervasive teacher coping strategy is busywork based on

worksheet activities. Busywork activities in the settlement schools use copying, colouring and drawing which are capable of holding the attention of the Pitjantjatjara children, and this makes them highly attractive to teachers. Engaged in colouring or drawing on worksheets, the children often work away quite happily for half an hour or more at a time. (Folds 1987: 49)"

To the three activities listed by Folds (1987) can be added 'watching videos' which often occupies an inordinate amount of time as teachers attempt to settle children and reduce disruption. However, once the activity is introduced strong pressures continue to exist for 'watching videos' to become part of the regular classroom routine.

Busywork assumes a role in the classroom program primarily because the underlying presumptions and focus of classroom activity undergo a subtle and often unnoticed shift from the maintenance of an academic task focus towards one that has to do primarily with preventing breakdown and disruption at all costs. For both teachers and children the focus becomes one of 'survival' in what is perceived to be a chaotic environment. Folds (along with Christie 1984 and Gray 1998) proposes, that a typical response of embattled teachers in Indigenous classrooms is to minimalise or avoid altogether teacher student interaction to do with establishing meaningful control over academic learning. By avoiding the challenge required to engage Indigenous children in meaningful and productive academic learning, the teacher reduces the potential for disruption that typically follows any breakdown of communication.

Folds (1987) produces a representative transcript which illustrates clearly the pressures under which teachers find themselves as they attempt to negotiate curriculum tasks such as writing and which in turn lead to their reframing academic tasks as busywork. In the transcript below the teacher tries to elicit engagement with a writing task to do with a weekend football excursion. However, in the face of confusion and in fear of losing control, the task is reframed as "draw a football".

(The children are in a Pitjanjatjara language lesson being conducted by a white teacher. They are looking at some picture books.)

Teacher. Now. Who has finished the story we were working on last time?

(The children ignore the question and continue looking through the books)

Teacher. *(loudly)* **Who has finished the story?**

Students. Me, me.

Teacher. ***Nyinakati*** (sit down) **now**.

(At once the children start calling out 'me me me' and laughing)

Teacher. (pointing) **Yes you have finished Sandy and Phillip and Chris and Cathy. You stay here, the rest go over and finish the story called 'what you did on the weekend'**.

(Most children continue to read the books; others begin to wander around the classroom)

Teacher. *(to those who are to write their stories)*

What did you do on the weekend? *(No reply)*

Teacher. So no one seems to know - **I know some of you went** ***Fregon tanguru*** (from Fregon) **to watch football.** *(No response)*

Teacher. ***Kulilaya*** (listen everybody) **You went** *(pointing)* **and you, didn't you?**

Teacher. Those who went, draw a picture of the football, **football Nancy** *(pointing to paper)*.

(Text 1 - Folds 1987:48**)**

In the context of Indigenous education the use of the term 'busywork' which is employed commonly across mainstream schooling to refer to classroom activities requires further amplification because it provides an insufficient characterisation of the curriculum processes which result once a 'survival' perspective has taken hold in Indigenous classrooms.

'Busywork', as the term is commonly employed by teachers, refers usually to the kinds of trivial activities Folds (above) refers to as *"copying, colouring and drawing"*. Now while these kinds of activities are commonly encountered and are frequently used to 'pad out' attempts to engage the children with more readily recognised curriculum activities, they by no means exhaust the range of ritualised and unacceptably 'low challenge' pedagogic contexts prevalent in Indigenous classrooms. A major difficulty across the field of Indigenous education is that the same forces which operate to pressure teachers into 'busywork' activities also operate to distort the delivery of teaching across the curriculum in general. Of particular concern is the manner in which ostensibly academic tasks are subverted so that they too ultimately result in ritualised and unacceptably low challenge contexts. One example of an outcome of such subversion exists in the highly individualised reading programs that are commonly employed with Indigenous children.

In these lessons children work supposedly at 'their own level' on their own book selected from a box of graded texts available in the classroom. The teacher role is relegated to helping individual children by hearing them read to her. This approach is usually justified by appeal to the need to match each child's reading task to her/his individual ability level.

Whole ranges of forces conspire to disrupt and make such reading support ineffective. Not the least of these being the fact that Indigenous children working on basic sentence level readers typically develop non-productive strategies that tend to ritualise the reading process (eg, memorising, looking at pictures and reducing decoding to initial letter identification only). Once children are caught up in these ritualising strategies, it becomes impossible for them to make effective reading progress.

An added difficulty is that it is not possible in most instances for teachers to provide effective assistance to Indigenous children as they struggle with their reading books in individualised reading activities. Their inability to assist effectively has to do with the fact that it is only possible to help constructively during a reading attempt if the reader already knows a substantial percentage of the text. The necessary level of reader performance before effective prompting during reading is possible has been commonly acknowledged to be about 90% accuracy (e.g. Betts, 1957; Holdaway, 1979; Guppy and Hughes, 1999). This requisite 90% level of accuracy is commonly referred to as the child's 'instructional level' and while some variability in instructional level is possible, the failure of prompting below instructional level reading is readily demonstrable.

If one attempts to support a reader who is not already achieving at an instructional level, then the outcome is usually to cement the child's tendencies to become overly dependent on adult assistance with no advance in the child's reading competence. In fact, continued work at inappropriate levels of reading accuracy involves extreme stress for both teacher and child and invariably damages the child's confidence and ability to act constructively in meeting the reading challenge.

In individualised reading programs with Indigenous children where they are expected to progress largely on their own initiative and at their own pace, literacy development becomes a drawn out and tedious affair. Progress, if it is achieved

at all, is slow and laboured such that the vast majority of children are still struggling with initial level elementary texts at the end of their primary schooling.

In observing the reading progress of Indigenous children, particularly those in remote area schools in the Anangu Lands and fringe and transient Alice Springs children at Yipirinya, one could easily conclude, as one teacher insightfully pointed out, that the first one or two elementary grades had been spread out across the whole of the primary school and into secondary.

This situation is underlined in the first report of this project (Gray, Rose, Cowey 1998) which looks at the situation across the Anangu lands in South Australia. However, it is proposed that similar circumstances exist in a significant majority of schools for Indigenous children and that even in schools where outcomes are somewhat higher, similar issues are relevant.

The problem with the type of lesson activities encountered in a 'survival' culture is that they are essentially dysfunctional in the sense that they are incapable of leading to any worthwhile educational gains no matter how diligently and repeatedly they are employed in classrooms. This is because achieving a meaningful academic focus means completely restructuring the programming principles which underpin the lessons in the first instance. The difficulty is that the key element in any restructuring is that the activities must engage the children in a meaningful academic focus yet this is precisely what the 'survival' culture has evolved to avoid.

The common factor across Indigenous schools is the fact that the children are in most instances working in highly ritualised and non productive ways on unacceptably low level materials. Consequently, the related issues of communication breakdown, busywork, and minimalisation of focused and challenging interaction around learning tasks constitute PRIMARY OBSTACLES to be overcome before it will ever become possible to achieve meaningful education outcomes in mainstream terms for Indigenous children.

The Scaffolding Literacy teaching model provides a framework

within which the necessary understandings to do with how to engage productively with academically oriented literacy tasks can be progressively taught to the children. However, while the model itself is clear, its sustained implementation in the 'real world' of Indigenous education in Australia requires a radical reorientation towards an explicit and age appropriate pedagogy when such perspectives are essentially non existent. Moreover, this reorientation must be effected in the midst of a pervasive culture of survival pedagogy.

Although the tenor of some research writing which points to the 'survival focus' of Indigenous classrooms is at times somewhat critical of teachers who are presumed to allow this process to occur (eg. Folds 1987, Christie 1984) the problem will not be overcome by simply shifting blame to teachers and expecting them to change. One clear understanding arising from this project is that it is far easier to observe and critique individual instances of teaching than to navigate the construction of an effective academic focus on a day to day basis in the classroom with Indigenous children.

In particular there are two main factors which make change difficult to achieve and sustain for individual teachers working without support. The first has to do with the distance between the children's actual performance level and the expected grade level performance that the teacher would normally expect the children to achieve.

Figure 1 which was introduced at the start of this part of the report illustrates only too well the kind of situation that commonly faces teachers working in Indigenous classrooms. It is worthwhile revisiting it briefly again.

Figure 1. Distribution of reading ability in a Year 6/7 class prior to intervention

(graph here)

Briefly none of the 28 children in this class could engage with books at better than Year 1 level. In fact, a significant proportion of the children were unable to read beyond Kindergarten level (89%)

The day to day issues facing a Year 6/7 teacher with such a class are frightening. Children such as those represented in Figure 1 are an immense distance behind the level of literate functioning that would be expected of children in their final years of primary schooling.

How does a teacher engage children with such low literacy in reflective literate tasks that would be appropriate to mainstream curriculum expectations for Year 6/7 students? They can read with comprehension nothing even approaching their appropriate level. Even when the teacher sets out to teach reading directly she is confronted by a sizeable cohort of absolute non readers.

In addition, children at this year level are adolescents and not kindergarten children who can be satisfied with simple childish or trite content in their reading matter. They have the interests of adolescents and are soon frustrated with the childish and limited level of reading interaction that is available to them.

Furthermore, because the children have not learned to read or otherwise experience successful school participation they have not learned to function effectively within the predominantly literate discourse that pervades schooling. The term discourse is used in the broad sense employed by Gee (1990) here and includes those behaviours (eg. listening skills, behavioural orientations, reflection on tasks etc) that are part and parcel of becoming a successful learner in mainstream schooling.

In such circumstances survival goals such as the organisation of children's behaviour and the reduction of disturbances is highly likely to become a primary driving force in the shaping of the classroom curriculum.

Quite apart from the large gap that typically exists between actual and expected performance, there is another issue to do with the amount of suitable support for teachers that is available in the literature on Indigenous education. If the teacher turns to current 'best practice' in an attempt to lift these children to mainstream levels of performance she will find that in most instances these either offer little real support in reaching academic goals or actually reinforce the drive towards reframing educational goals as 'low level'. For example, conventional practice in reading teaching if a child cannot read a particular book is to place the child at an even easier text. Moving children in years 6/7 backwards and

forwards over a range of simple readers will do nothing to develop them to the kinds of level they need to achieve. This has been illustrated repeatedly on this project (see Gray, Rose, Cowey, 1998 and videos – Book Orientation: the Potential and Scaffolding Literacy: Outcomes, Yipirinya Years 6/7 1999). Furthermore, the practice of learning to read by reading large numbers of extremely simple texts is given added legitimacy in current times by a mistaken overgeneralisation of a highly focused early literacy remediation practice derived from Reading Recovery (Marie Clay, 1993) to general classroom practice across the whole of the primary and even secondary grades in mainstream schooling.

Even in broader aspects of teaching where for example the teacher is concerned to engage the children in academic discussion around a topic, current child centred interaction practices for classroom talk are of little help. Malcolm (1979, 1982, 1982a, 1987, 1991) reacting against miscommunication he has studied where teachers sought to direct students into predetermined notions of educational discourse proposes that teachers allow children to lead the discussion. However, when this option is pursued teachers invariably find that the outcome is certainly talk but it is talk that is rarely focused to any legitimate academic end (eg. Gray 1998, Harkins 1994) and therefore it is of limited use to teachers concerned to develop outcomes to do with mainstream academic performance.

Issues to do with difficulties teachers face in simply harnessing current mainstream ‘best practice’ to achieve effective educational outcomes with Indigenous children in circumstances such as those faced by the teacher of the 6/7 class outlined earlier could be developed much further here (eg. issues to do with practices such as small group co-operative learning, oral language development etc). However, the point of the discussion has not been so much to elaborate these as to illustrate the magnitude of the difficulties confronting teachers of Indigenous children in an effort to explain why it is that teachers whose performance would normally pass without concern in other more favourable teaching contexts should appear so inept when confronted with Indigenous children and the need to achieve effective academic goals.

Thus, for the teacher of a class such as the year 6/7 class discussed from Yipirinya the task of working constructively towards the achievement of substantial mainstream academic goals is a daunting one. Mainstream practice

as it is commonly interpreted in schools rarely translates directly and the teacher must possess a strong understanding of how teaching practice can be analysed and reconstructed in the face of the responses of the children. Teachers must possess an exceptionally clear understanding of their teaching/learning goals and must have a strong confidence in their ability to achieve them in the face of learning breakdown and periodic confusion.

The maintenance of a strong academic focus in the education of Indigenous children is therefore a potentially frustrating and even traumatising experience for individual teachers and for education systems generally.

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