

Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs) and the role of 'values education' in remote Indigenous communities in South Australia

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The following article addresses 'values education' and how values such as: peace, human rights, democracy and sustainable development are used by Aboriginal Education Workers (AEWs) in remote Indigenous communities in South Australia. The UNESCO-APNIEVE source book, Learning to Live Together in Peace and Harmony (1998) demonstrates how values are used to develop greater understanding between cultures and how these values can be applied in cross-cultural educational settings.

The structure of this paper will be divided into two halves: the first half discusses contextual information regarding AEWs in remote Indigenous schools in South Australia, as well as the historical and social concept of values. The second half of the paper discusses how 'values education' can enhance the relationships between non-Indigenous staff and AEWs. Finally, this paper supports non-Indigenous staff who work in remote communities developing a deeper understanding of Indigenous perspectives on the values of peace, human rights, democracy and sustainable development. Through understanding values in a cross-cultural educational setting comes the opportunity to gain greater equality for Indigenous representatives in the school such as AEWs.

It must be stressed that references to cross-cultural issues in relation to AEWs embody McConaghy's (2000) ideas with respect to the dismantling of culturalism. Specifically, this paper does not misconstrue Indigenous people as being defined by culture alone; rather it recognises the full potential of AEWs in relation to their work role, in contrast to limitations imposed by cultural perceptions of AEWs. This article highlights the unique cross-cultural position of AEWs in remote Aboriginal communities in South Australia. This article also attempts to address the assumptions that continually prohibit equality of recognition for AEWs, particularly in relation to western value systems.

Contextual Background of AEWs in South Australia.

By 1975 Aboriginal Education Workers, (also known as Aboriginal Teacher Aides and Aboriginal-Torres Strait Islander Education Workers) were hired to assist non-Indigenous teachers throughout Australia (Buckskin, Hignett, 1994). The role of AEWs vary according to the needs of the students and the school in which they work. This article will focus on the remote Anangu schools that are located approximately 1000-1500 kilometres north west of Adelaide, South Australia.

There are eight Anangu schools within the area commonly identified as the Lands. The Lands is the Pitjantjatjara/Yunkunytjatjara Lands of north-western South Australia owned by the Anangu people. The names of the Anangu schools are: Pipalyatjara, Murputja, Amata, Ernabella,

Kenmore Park, Fregon, Mimili and Indulkana. There is one more Anangu school in the south west of South Australia called Yalata. These schools, as well as the Adelaide based Wiltja program at Woodville High School, operate under the umbrella of Anangu Education Services, Department of Education, Training and Employment and the Pitjantjatjara and Yunkunytjatjara Education Council. English is often the third language for students on the Lands as Pitjantjatjara or Yunkunytjatjara is most often their first or second language.

Anangu values

There are strong Anangu value systems maintained in the communities on the Lands. I worked as a team-teacher in 1997 at Amata. My main role was to work along side AEWs and the person with whom I worked the longest was called Anne Jack (who was an AEW in 1997 and has since become an Anangu teacher). She taught me a range of cultural, educational and personal values that were enlightening on many levels. The following are reflections of Anangu values based on my perceptions of community life and my experiences working and living at Amata. This is a non-Indigenous perspective but I was fortunate to have positive working and social relationships with members of the community that assisted in my understanding of some Anangu values.

Cultural issues such as adhering to kinship principles, that is, whom people can speak to and in what fashion are very important. Respect and discipline were two such values that manifested from this particular practice. When students in a class did not get along as a result of clan differences, Anne Jack placed these students apart in the class room. The implications of such issues could only be resolved through this spatial knowledge and are generally not available to non-Indigenous staff. Thus AEWs are invaluable as they are aware of personal and social issues about students that can affect the dynamics of a class room. Furthermore, the value of honour is maintained by AEWs as they are aware of such cultural issues. Other values that were important to acknowledge were community protocol, particularly in relation to egalitarian decision making processes. Whilst this was not practiced by all members of the community, those that did took a long time to make a decision about community issues as everyone was involved in the process. When parents entered the Child Parent Centre which Anne and I jointly ran, I once questioned why a particular Aunt was in the room who had no children of her own in the room. Anne looked at me and then at the sky which was a powerful cue to realise the importance of family. The value of family and belonging are very important values.

Ceremonial practices, particularly funeral practices meant that students were absent for up to two weeks. This can be considered as truancy by non-Indigenous staff but it is considered an extremely important value as it is through the ritual of such a grieving process that Anangu people can begin to let go of their deceased. These values have been maintained despite the influence and domination of western values that operate within these community schools. The role of the AEW within these schools is crucial because he or she acts as the translator or buffer of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous values systems. Recently many AEWs have become Anangu teachers through the AnTep program (Anangu Teacher Education Program, University of South Australia) and they also continue to play an important role as values translators.

Western value systems

The following section focuses on the meaning of values within a western framework as this highlights the enormity of what AEWs have to address when working in a western school system. It also demonstrates the difficulty of incorporating Indigenous values within a western value system such as those promoted within schools, namely individualism, merit and success.

Values

In the 1960s western societies underwent a social and political revolution. Inherent within this socio-political upheaval was an enormous values shift. This triggered social questions regarding the role and meaning of values. Western philosophical analysis regarding the nature of values became primarily concerned with the individual. In simplistic terms value philosophers in the 1950s such as Baylis (1958) marked the end of objective methods of analysis as major philosophical criteria that held sway since Aristotle. The value system in western culture shifted from the assumption that values were objective criteria by which one should unquestioningly live, to more subjective constructions that were shaped by society.

The 1960s shift in consciousness was a transition in the belief that values were no longer objective but, instead, were intertwined with the immediate subjective and social environment that formed complex value systems via cognitive and emotional processes. Theorists such as Maslow (1959, 1968, 1970) and Rokeach (1973) identified the hierarchical nature of values, and how shared values could potentially be used to bring about greater understanding between people of differing gender, class and race. Furthermore, it was the value of individualism so highly placed within western value systems that shadowed a collective value that supported greater equality.

Ubuntu (human dignity) in South Africa, Kirra and Kurdungurlu (public accountability and governance) in Walpiri, Central Australian Desert, (Biddle, 1996) Li in Confucianism (Kwong-Loi-Shun, 1995) and Gitti in Japanese (Honderich, 1995) represent some of the highly placed collective approaches to values. In many cases non-western value systems are concerned with the effects of social action upon the community rather than the individual. This point does not attempt to homogenise non-western cultures, instead, it illuminates a difference between the way in which values are placed within a system depending upon one's cultural background.

In western culture the law, Christianity and values are closely intertwined. Liberalism, the dominant legal and political philosophy of the West, emphasises the right of the individual and thus the value of individualism is often placed at the top of the hierarchy of values in western culture. Since Corpus Juris Civilis, (a legal text organised by the Emperor Justinian's minister Tribonianus in 529-534 AD and later adapted by 11th century monks to design the legal text upon which western law was founded), Christianity and values have been intertwined. The legal and social framework of western cultures have focussed on individualism and not the collective since at least the eleventh century AD. (Parkinson, 2001). However, the earlier mentioned theorists of the 1960s identified the need to shift the hierarchy of values, that is, to emphasise collective values that have positive community outcomes, instead of focusing upon the individual. Unfortunately, due to the nature of capitalism and the power of individualism, the majority of western society continues to maintain individualism at the expense of collective outcomes.

Values Education

Fortunately 'values education' embodies values that are primarily concerned with collective outcomes. It is understood that values such as peace, human rights, democracy and sustainable development cannot exist in isolation and in order for humanity to improve, emphasis needs to be placed on collective values as well as individual values. The 'values education' source book *Learning to Live Together in Peace and Harmony* (1998) addresses education within the Asia-Pacific region and the focus is on developing 'mutual respect' and helping each other on a collective level. It is a 'holistic' approach to learning to live together in peace and harmony through sharing and learning about values in cross-cultural situations. All of the values promoted in the source book are interrelated.

All values related to peace are linked to those of human rights, democracy and sustainable development. Sustainable development, which covers all aspects of human life, cannot be accomplished without peace. Peace cannot be achieved without democracy. It would be difficult to attain democracy where violations of human rights exist. (1998: 20)

It is therefore important to focus on those values that transform inequality where it still exists within western education. After all, 'wherever there is exploitation there can be no human values...' (Cairns, 2001:132). Some AEWs on the Lands have been working in the school for twenty years yet their experience may not be recognised by non-Indigenous staff, particularly team-teachers with whom they work daily. The aim of 'values education' is to promote greater equality for groups such as AEWs who remain subject to hierarchies of domination that are perpetuated via western bureaucratic systems, and the ideology of individualism.

It is important for AEWs to have equality of recognition for their roles within schools. In order to achieve such recognition it is important that Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff, students and members of the community recognise the important position of AEWs within a school. The goals of democracy stated in the *Learning to Live Together in Peace and Harmony* source book demonstrates this point in the following:

The goal of education for democracy is essentially to enhance human existence by imbuing it with a sense of dignity and equality, mutual trust, tolerance, an appreciation of others' beliefs and culture, a respect for individuality, the promotion of active participation in all aspects of social life, and freedom of expression, belief and worship. When these things are present it is possible to develop effective, democratic decision-making at all levels, which will lead to equity, justice and peace. (1998, 60)

In order to have a productive and positive school in remote Indigenous communities it is essential that the values of democracy are implemented on all levels of the education process, including the emotional level. Emotional engagement between AEWs and other staff members is important because it is the place where one *feels* valued. As stated by an AEW who was interviewed for the *ARA KUWARITJAKUTU PROJECT*: 'When the new teacher came to our community I sat at the back of the class for the first six weeks.' (Buckskin, Hignett, 1994: 79) One of the most common problems AEWs face when a team-teacher arrives to work with him or her is lack of recognition. The roles of AEWs are not clearly defined as they are subject to the principals of the school. The roles of AEWs in schools are not learnt at teacher training courses and thus there is a general lack of education regarding the importance of AEWs in schools, particularly in remote Anangu schools.

However, those principals who support the role of the AEW enhance opportunities for achieving the values inherent within the above mentioned quote on democracy. David Huppertz who was a principal in two Indigenous schools in South Australia during the late 1980s and early 1990s revealed the importance of AEWs. He stated in a phone interview (22.9.03) that AEWs are the link to community and they act as interpreters between the school and the community. He refers to the way in which AEWs reveal invaluable information regarding cultural issues. For example, what is acceptable to one group may not be for another group. AEWs are:

...vital in being able to link the Aboriginal values with those held by the white teachers...You might all have a feeling and understanding of peace but how that is valued or how that is seen from a cultural basis may be different...one of the places where this really comes in is with family...there are things that happen within an Aboriginal family that I didn't understand but AEWs did in particular with regard to relationships. If you look at sustainable development you can't understand relationships with the land without AEWs.

Huppertz's experience as a principal who worked with AEWs reveals just how important AEWs are to a school community. Furthermore, through the process of understanding values within a cross-cultural situation AEWs provide the link and understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous values systems. This is the point where greater equality can be attained for not only AEWs but for Indigenous students as where there is understanding there is greater opportunity for acceptance of cross-cultural values.

The concept of sustainable development raised by Huppertz is important as it is the students who will be the future carers of the environment. AEWs provide a particular link to understanding the environment, particularly in remote Indigenous communities. This connection to the land is most regularly represented through the areal dot paintings that depict the topography of central Australia. These images were often painted in the class room by AEWs and parents in art class. Imagery that depicts particular Anangu symbology was also represented and integrated within the students' learning. It was an integrated practice rather than a formulaic session based on instruction. It is this understanding of the land that many AEWs have that creates a deeper insight and appreciation by students about the land.

It was also this understanding of living in a remote community and being connected to the land that provided a space for peace. This is a generalisation as there is also dysfunction on the Lands like any other community life. However, I was astounded at the level of peace of many people who lived in the community despite the difficulties of isolation. This was often represented in the class room when Anne Jack and other AEWs with whom I worked could control a class with non-verbal cues that would direct a seemingly chaotic class into one of quiet attentiveness. This ability was created through peace as opposed to the need to control through shouting or ordering. Some teachers have this skill and this is not dependent upon one's cultural background, however, many teachers who feel they are unable to control certain Indigenous students would rely on the AEW to help them. This is revealed in the following:

Central Office mob says be pro-active, get the parents involved, take initiatives. So I do. I set up a parent's area and start inviting them in. What happens- some kid plays up a bit in another class and the teacher yells for me to come and get him. They come

rushing over to my parent's meeting and insist that I get him and just leave the parents sitting there. (Buckskin, Hignett, 1994: 76)

Due to the lack of clarity regarding the roles of AEWs and the different demands placed on AEWs it is difficult to maintain a sense of peace. However, the concept of peace as stated in the *Learning to Live Together in Peace and Harmony* source book provides an opportunity for everyone to begin to practice peace:

A culture of peace is necessary for a meaningful life together. In a world where there is great diversity in personal, social and cultural ways of being and living, possession of significant human values can overcome these differences and ensure peace and solidarity. The process of peace building starts from within the heart of each individual, when this is shared with other groups and cultures, it can lead to peace. (1998: 24)

Peace can be attained both on an individual and collective level. When we achieve an understanding of different ways of attaining the same value in cross-cultural situations, such as peace, then we are able to demonstrate something powerful and useful for children. It is important that the adults embody and practice the values of peace, human rights, democracy and sustainable development as they are all interconnected values and through demonstration children learn. Through the process of accepting diverse ways of practicing shared values then we are closer to bringing about greater awareness and fulfilment.

Conclusion

The examples mentioned in relation to understanding the importance of AEWs through the value of democracy, the roles they play in schools and the values many AEWs uphold on the Lands are a small sample of some very deep and broad issues. Yet, my experience revealed to me a long term lack of recognition that AEWs experience. It is through the avenue of understanding and practicing values within cross-cultural education settings that there is the possibility of intersecting such inequality.

The values in the *Learning to Live Together in Peace and Harmony* source book namely, peace, human rights, democracy and sustainable development provide an entrance into understanding these values from an Indigenous perspective within schools on the Lands. When educators learn to work in cross cultural situations and take the time to learn, in this case, Anangu values, then there is understanding and communication. It is at this point that non-Indigenous staff can assist in the process of developing a greater appreciation of the value of AEWs. Values education provides an opportunity to discover new and creative ways to develop Indigenous education where those who are most at stake are the children and members of the communities that AEWs represent within a western education system.

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