Abstract

This paper examines how the identity formation of a student from a socially disadvantaged minority group can be influenced by the school system at high school level, and outlines how the school organization, curriculum design, and teacher practice can effectively contribute to helping to construct a positive identity within the system.

Key words: Aborigine, Minority, Education System, Educational Culture, Institutional System

Introduction

While the purpose of this paper is to examine how the identity construction of a minority group member may be influenced by the school environment, this research in no way reflects the individual circumstances of all Aboriginal women in Australia, some of whom have achieved high profile leadership positions in Australian society. An Aboriginal female student has been chosen as a case study for this research, as according to the data available, she represents a minority group which currently stands to be the most disadvantaged by the system. Aborigines, in comparison with other minority groups and the mainstream Australian population, continue to have poor tertiary education attendance, health problems, high suicide rates, high unemployment levels, and high crime rates (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1996, 1998, 2000, 2003, Brown 2001). While there are many social factors that influence these areas, a positive identity formation can, at the very least, reduce the incidences of suicide, attempted suicide, teenage pregnancies, and eating disorders (Emler 2001). In 1991, the Royal Commission into Black Deaths in Custody found that formal schooling was undermining the self-esteem of Aboriginal students (NBEET 1992). This paper will therefore look at what can be done to redress this situation.

To put the role of schools in 'identity construction' in perspective we need to consider that the school works within much broader social processes. Contributing factors include the predispositions of the student (natural talents and abilities), the wider world, the family, the community, school and peers (Spencer and Markstrom-Adams 1990). Identity construction is a symbiotic process combining these different social influences on the individual student. It is just as important to contextualise the aforementioned contributing factors to reflect the process of identity formation, which may be considered as an amalgamation of 'past experiences and present hopes' as well as one's present 'talents, limitations and characteristics' (Heuven 1994).

The consequences for an identity that is blocked in its positive formation are best conveyed by Pinar (1993):

If what we know about ourselves, our history, our culture, our identity is deformed by absences, denials and incompleteness, then our identity is fragmented. This fragmented self is a repressed self. Such a self lacks access both to itself and the world. Repressed, the self's capacity for intelligence, for informed action, even for simple functional competence is impaired. Its sense of history, gender and politics is incomplete and distorted.

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As teachers and administrators contributing to the construction process of identity we must consider the outcomes we aim to achieve through the social experience of education. According to Chikering and Reisser (1993), a positively formed identity can be assessed over eight main areas, including:

1. A sense of personal belonging to a cultural and social group
2. Comfort with gender and sexual orientation
3. Comfort with body and appearance
4. A strong self-concept involving fulfilling roles and lifestyles
5. A knowledge of acceptance by valued others
6. A sense of competence and control over one's life
7. Belief that one can improve one's life
8. A coordinated and harmonious personality

While it is highly unlikely that any one individual will achieve success and or satisfaction in all these areas, and acknowledging that identity formation is continually in process, 'good schooling' (Hall 1990), will nevertheless aim to support achievable outcomes for these goals. The areas where action most needs to be taken have been divided into three areas of School Organisation, Curriculum, and Teacher Practice, however this is not to give the impression that each area should be acted upon independently from the others. Indeed without progress being made in all three areas simultaneously, in a collective strategy, the potential for success can be significantly decreased. The influence of the organisation of schools upon identity can be compared to the stock upon which the sauce is based, and the ingredients are the variables of both individuality and other external social influences. It not only contributes significantly to approaches to teaching, it also informs the curriculum to a large degree in terms of subject weighting, classroom interaction, student subject options, and so on. The teachers and students coming into a new school are required to effectively conform to the values, policies and rules as part of the cooperative learning environment. It is from here that many of the problems of negative identity formation can be located, as cooperation and conformity are often translated as uniformity with the emphasis on equality; An approach which we know contributes to a hegemonic system and disadvantages those students without the cultural makeup and social understandings of the dominant culture. Let us consider the systemic influences that perpetuate this situation?

1. Streaming

The practice of testing and streaming clearly places a label on the students, (Connell et al 1982), and for the poorly performing student this is difficult for them to remove, often leading to their giving up on studies and other behavioural problems associated with a damaged or low self-esteem. Streaming was formally abolished in Australian curriculums in the 1970's due to its 'inequitable and suspect outcomes for students' (Zevenbergen 2002), however it is still widely practiced outside the curriculum. Streaming usually involves placing students into a 'suitable' class level by emphasising abilities in traditional subjects, such as Maths, English and Science, over other abilities, thereby devaluing other skills that the student may possess, which in turn affects their sense of competence, and self-concept. The structure of learning itself in streaming...
based schools is organised around individual competition which on a broader scale promotes one class or social group over another. With the majority of Aboriginals being at the lower ends of the socio-economic and academic achievement scales, this practice has grave implications, as statistically an Aboriginal will be in a lower stream (ATSIC 2000), probably coming to the secondary level already stigmatised by a primary school experience that required her or him to acquire a new system of learning and associated behaviours according to an Anglo-saxon middle-class model.

2. School Culture: Policies and Codes ¹

In the area of school policies and codes, Connell et al., (1982), point out that the Australian education system has a history of a reformist approach that is still evident today. Reform has meant, in effect, changing or constructing identity and culture to suit the dominant system. In the majority of Australian schools the anglo-conformist, middle class culture, dominated by male gender ideologies, still informs the expectations of appropriate behaviour and conceptions of achievement. For example, as a female student there is a greater emphasis within the school structure on passivity and sociability than on achievement and competition. Boys are actively encouraged to participate in sports such as rugby whereas girls either perform supporting roles or roles which emphasise socialisation (Connell 1982). Such expectations have the effect of facilitating a gender based hierarchy where the male takes a dominant role and the woman a subservient one in society. There is an emphasis on lessening the capacity for the female to take assertive control over her life, a devaluing of her identity as a woman, (as her achievements are not as widely lauded as the achievements of her male counterpart in socially high profile fields of endeavour such as on the sports field for example), and a reinforcement of gender orientation. While the parading of sports heroes before the school can clearly be of benefit to the Aboriginal male, who statistically have high achievement rates in areas of physical competition, it is of little benefit to Aboriginal women. And while many white women will have the benefit of being able to achieve some kudos through academic achievement this is not the case for Aboriginal girls. One approach to this problem is to establish an equal weighting on the contribution to the school in subject areas and activities undertaken by women as well as devaluing the emphasis on the kind of aggressive competitive atmosphere that encourages the domination of one gender over another.

From the Aboriginal perspective it is important for the school to understand and value the expectations of their culture, but more importantly to incorporate some Aboriginal ideas and norms within the school organization, such as using their skills, crafts, and other culturally relevant activities. Aboriginals must be allowed to achieve, and by incorporating such activities this provides the opportunities to do so (NBEET 1992). Moreover, this acknowledges the culture as 'living' and interactive, thereby conveying a real message of acceptance to Aboriginal identity and not one of just tolerance (Rizvi 1992).

Gender dressing to appropriate standards in many schools reinforces the gender expectation, as a certain code of behaviour goes with wearing dresses. Girls that do fight the system by not wearing a uniform or wearing it improperly have their sexual morals called into question and can be labelled with such terms as 'promiscuous' (Gilbert and Taylor 1991). This questioning of morality can be doubly damning for an Aboriginal girl as she must deal with common stereotypical images of black promiscuity (Groome 1995). Also, the concepts behind wearing a uniform can be confusing for them as this kind of uniformity of dress can be quite foreign to them, as well as the idea that the uniform is something that must be taken pride in and respected. Such concepts of materialism and symbolism in western clothing are hard to understand for many Aboriginals, and especially for the vast majority of Aboriginals who live outside the urban centres. The punishment that results from the lack of respect or conformity to such aspects of the school system may lead to confusion in terms of their sense of belonging and personal appearance.

Schools must respect and value difference. By insisting on a code of dress, it may put financial pressure on poorer families and therefore create more stress at home. It also sends out a clear message that uniformity is an integral part of the education process, which is clearly at odds with 'inclusive' government education

¹ 'Culture' in this instance refers to a shared system of values, understanding, and ethos.
policies that were established to celebrate difference. It also draws excessive attention to physical appearance, and difference thereof, thus causing the Aboriginal student to have a heightened awareness of non-uniformity based on different skin pigmentation (Rizvi 1993).

A lack of clear school policies and codes also has a damning effect. By not having easily accessible and well publicised rules against racist, sexist and prejudicial behaviour, students are unsure about what is appropriate behaviour and may feel justified in asserting racist attitudes that they hear outside the school or at home. This can be a double-edged sword and has been shown to lead to witch-hunt types of situations in which teachers can be the victims. However considering that there is a tendency at schools to ignore a more public approach to these issues (Kalantzis 1985), positive policies can only benefit and empower Aboriginals when handled in a sensitive manner. For example, schools may have policies about harassment, but nothing that specifically targets racist, sexist and prejudiced behaviours, and attitudes towards fellow students that may be unacceptable. Nor do they outline what constitutes such behaviours. What this lack of firm policy does is create an environment of insecurity for the victims, and potential victims, and with feelings of insecurity emerge attendance and learning problems (NBEET 1992).

What can also contribute to a secure schooling environment for Aboriginals is a policy of consultation and cooperation between the school and the local Aboriginal community. This connection both values the outside milieu of the individual student and supports a sense of belonging in the cultural transition between community and school (Ladson-Billings 1992).

There are various programs, policies and strategies that schools can introduce at an organisational level that would assist in the support of students from different minority group. These ideally need to tailored to suit the needs of the students and the local community. In the case of a female Aboriginal student these would include:

1. Establish a comprehensive non-streaming policy.
2. A clearly articulated anti-discrimination code.
3. A clearly articulated philosophy of education goals with statements on Aborigines and women.
4. Incorporation of the Aboriginal community resources.
5. Inclusive decision making - including Aboriginal students, parents, community leaders and appropriate gender based research based on the decision involved.
6. Improvement of the school's physical environment, to imbue students with a sense of pride and personal belonging.
7. A policy of counselling and avoidance of punitive measures.
8. An equal weighting of subjects and skills.
9. Ensure Aboriginal culture is visible in the school.
10. Establish special programs to assist in entry into the school, with academic and social support.
11. Develop behaviour management programs that are congruent with Aboriginal values.

**Curriculum**

The school curriculum in Australia has historically served to subordinate women to men and support differentiation in employment opportunities and social relations. The curriculum at many schools is still fundamentally hegemonic in that it places a hierarchy upon learning by valuing some academic knowledge above others in individual competition (Angus 1986). While there are many subject choices available to students in the modern era, many of these choices are only available in the urban areas (the vast majority of Aborigines live in country regions) and subject assessment weighting still heavily favours the more traditional 'academic' subjects. Not only does this marginalise other learning areas, including music, kinaesthetic, spatial, linguistic, inter and intrapersonal skills (Armstrong 1994), it also forces the more traditional choices upon women and minority group members, whose skills have traditionally been in these areas.

The curriculum also can help to perpetuate a fail-cycle if it does not design assessment that takes into
consideration the language and cultural difficulties faced by Aboriginal students in using English, and does not assess such things as the multi-lingual skills they already possess. Curriculums for the benefit of the majority ignore the fact that many Aborigines are in fact learning a new language and a new culture as well as an academically focused learning program largely foreign to them.

Therefore a curriculum that promotes equality and opportunity needs to be refocused and redesigned in content and selectivity as follows:

1. Revalue the way the curriculum is weighted so as to acknowledge a variety of skills and strengths that people from a variety of backgrounds may benefit from.
2. Reflect the achievements of women and Aboriginal students in society, thus validating their existence and promoting a sense of self-worth.
3. Provide study in subject areas relevant to Aboriginals, thereby valuing knowledge of the Aboriginal experience - past and present.
4. Provide a flexible timetable in a way that does not restrict choice and opportunity in subject selection.
5. Provide a broader selection of subject choice for country areas.
6. Incorporate Aboriginal language and Aboriginal English.

Teaching Practice

From the previous sections we can see how the school organization and the curriculum inhibit learning achievement and participation, and prescribe the activities and issues for the classroom. We now move onto classroom practice, that is, how the teacher may incorporate the strategies and suggestions above into the daily classroom environment.

1. The selection of resources is vital and a teacher needs to be particularly discerning in this area. In the case of Aboriginal students the material can - and this varies according to the subject - ignore their contribution to society or ignore vital historical perspectives, demonstrate a lack of heroes or significant positive figures, and reinforce negative stereotypes and attitudes. Less obviously, material which focuses on a seemingly positive topic area may contain embedded prejudices in the way it is presented. Teachers also need to be particularly aware, that materials which do not utilise the aboriginal community in a significant way, devalue the existence of the Aboriginal student. An example of this utilizing may be in inviting a local tribal elder to explain some aspect of the local Aboriginal culture or social structure. If this is not done the Aboriginal student soon recognises the divide between the classroom culture and their culture. These aspects contribute to form a negative or deficient self-concept, which may manifest itself for example in a reluctance to participate in group work.

2. In the approach to lesson content, as with the curriculum, the teacher needs to be inclusive so that the material considers all students’ background, abilities and gender, and values culture and historical perspectives. The teacher must also ensure that their culture and customs actually contribute to the learning, and they can take pride in who they are as well as reinforcing connections with the school and community. For example, if the class is covering a unit on Mythology, then the teacher would have the opportunity to cover Aboriginal mythology along with Greek and Nordic etc.

3. In the case of classroom interaction, when boys dominate this it has the effect of a drop in the girls’ confidence to participate and makes the learning process less interactive and therefore less stimulating (Teese 1995). The dominant form of interaction need not be in the form of question-answer-discussion as the demands of male behaviour management in this forum can serve to marginalise the girls. Also, discriminatory language and derogatory remarks can further damage self-esteem, and the teacher not picking up on these things is guilty of tacit consent. Females and Aboriginals need to feel confident in expressing themselves in the classroom via encouragement.
from the teacher both tacitly and otherwise.

4. An Aboriginal female must be considered from the perspective of a student in the transition between cultures, as in many cases they are actually learning a new culture and language. If forced into the culture, this can seriously damage positive identity formation, in that their own communication styles are ignored and devalued. The teacher needs to be appreciative and inclusive of Aboriginal styles of communication. Some strategies may be to include a more group orientated interaction with peers and less teacher direction - small groups being particularly appropriate for girls and Aboriginal students (Gilbert 1994). Also, Aboriginal English needs to be incorporated into discussions as a valid and skilled form of communication (Buttjes and Byram 1991), and customs - such as lack of eye-contact, use of humour - need to be respected in teacher-student interaction (Groome 1995).

If the teacher's values and attitude, reflected by classroom practice, do not establish an environment that appreciates individual and gender difference, supports interculturality (Ramsey et al. 1984), understands and appreciates student learning idiosyncracies, believes in all the students’ ability to achieve, and treats students fairly, then the minority student may begin to question self worth, reject the learning environment and develop behavioural problems as is the case in many traditional style schools today. Furthermore, it has been shown that when problems become apparent it is the tendency of the teacher to blame the student and categorise him/her as a non-achiever (Ramsey ibid), rather than indulge in any self-refective analysis of teacher practice.

Conclusion

Many Aboriginals must deal with the fact that while they are gaining more respect and authority in their own communities, the negative schooling experience robs them of this and can result in feelings of inferiority, failure, truancy and poor performance. The current high school system (both its culture and infrastructure) is creating conflict and confusion in the identity formation of Aboriginal students which contributes directly to these factors. While positive role models such as Cathy Freeman are emerging for Aboriginal women, these are mostly sports related heroes and they are few and far between, and this makes the task doubly difficult in the short term. To improve the possibility of positive identity construction in schooling for female Aboriginal students, while recognising this is also conditioned within a network of constantly evolving social relations, teachers and administrators need to focus on incorporating and valuing the students and their communities, whilst catering for individual and cultural differences. There also needs to be a restructuring of dominating/subjugating practices and policies within school organisation, and we need a curriculum which seeks to include, empower and enable and not one which sustains a hegemonic system and excludes on the basis of gender and ethnicity. However it would be far too simplistic to advocate change and correct procedure solely within the school environment. Realistically we need to examine more closely the influences and relationships, direct and indirect, between the school and other social, political and economic structures to obtain a more composite picture that would enable the government and NGOs to develop more comprehensive strategies to work towards improving the situation for Aboriginals and women. Unfortunately, some of the suggestions and initiatives outlined above would cost the tax-payer money, such as increasing options for course selection, and the political voice of those who seek to withdraw or restrict government funding for Aboriginals is gaining more credence from mainstream Australians.

While this paper deals with the education system and educational culture in Australia, there are clear implications for Japanese society in regards to similar problems faced by the Korean, Ainu and Burakumin minority groups.

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