

Reform and Resistance in Aboriginal Education: The Australian Experience

Quentin Beresford and Gary Partington, eds., University of Western Australia Press, Crawley, Western Australia, 2003, vii + 312 pages, ISBN 1 920 69403 X (pb)

Despite years of policy directives, research projects and curriculum initiatives, Aboriginal students remain the most disadvantaged group in terms of education. Their early exiting from schooling, lack of close connections to mainstream educational settings, disproportional representation in 'disciplinary techniques' within schools, and their over-representation in the criminal justice system, all clearly indicate that Aboriginal youth have been given short shift within mainstream education – and see little of value in it in terms of their current and future lives. Evidence that something is seriously wrong has been available for a long time; what to do about it remains the unanswered question. The authors of *Reform and Resistance in Aboriginal Education* present a number of different answers, seeking a more holistic and constructive way forward.

One of the strengths of this book is the diverse expertise that the authors bring to examining the historical and cultural effects of 'whitefella' health, legal and education systems on Aboriginal communities. The chapters include a succinct historical outline of Aboriginal experiences of education in the twentieth century, a summary of current health issues of Aboriginal children, a practical examination of Aboriginal English and the ways that it might be used to address questions of literacy, and an overview of Aboriginal youth and the law. Each of the ten chapters, written or co-written by twelve different authors, covers a separate field of Aboriginal experiences in relation to education. Each chapter draws on recent research, key reports and policy documents to describe the current state of play and, more importantly, why this might be so.

In many ways, the reasons offered here for the failure of mainstream education to engage with the lives of Aboriginal youth are hardly surprising: curricula that too often fails to make meaningful links with Aboriginal culture; the lack of positive relationships between Aboriginal parents and educational authorities – due in part to the intergenerational effects of the stolen generation; the extreme poverty that many Aboriginal communities continue to face; the 'third world' state of health, inseparable from poverty; the lack of ongoing, post-school training opportunities and work within communities; the continuing and devastating experiences of racism; and the lack of mainstream commitment to coherent and consistent policies and programs to address these issues.

Backed up by a wealth of statistics, the book presents an easily accessible and concise overview of issues faced by many Aboriginal communities in the twenty-first century. However, I suggest that this book works best as a 'dipping in' text. Read from cover to cover, the overall effect is to produce a thoroughly daunting picture of the state of Aboriginal education, Aboriginal health and encounters with the legal system. This is not to deny or wish away the accuracy of the many useful statistics that are included in this book as means of tracking the problems. But the cumulative effect when read from start to finish is to cast the 'story' of what it means to be an Aboriginal young person living in twenty-first century Australia as one of almost insurmountable difficulties. The authors continually reiterate – with some practical suggestions – that education/teachers have an important role to play in addressing these issues. Yet, as a teacher-educator, I wonder whether the impact of this overwhelmingly negative picture might be to instil a sense of the futility and hopelessness of the task rather than critical engagement with the issues.

Along with teachers in training, two other groups form the intended audience for this text: teachers working in schools with Aboriginal students and those 'agencies and professionals involved at some level in serving Aboriginal youth' (p. 8). I would suggest that health and legal professionals would also find much of value here.

However, given the stated aim of providing 'critical research perspectives' (p. 7), a more explicitly theorised approach to the various chapters might have added depth to this collection. The editors note that

to avoid repetitious reference to these underlying structural issues, a decision was taken to create a theoretical chapter ... The chapter provides an extended discussion of the key theories widely used to explain educational failure among Indigenous/minority youth ... and applies them to the Australian context. (p. 5)

This sole chapter does offer summaries of various theories. Yet, how these very different frameworks might be used to make sense of key issues presented in the separate chapters is not immediately apparent. More explicit analyses of the data from a number of theoretical perspectives would be useful to enable readers to think more critically and delve more deeply into the issues. Additionally, more explicit examples of 'resistance' and 'reform' on the part of Aboriginal communities (as suggested in the title) would be useful.

Nevertheless, the book presents valuable ways to examine how Aboriginal lives are (re)presented, via official statistics and reports. The various chapters provide starting points at least for critical analysis, ways that might move teacher education students

to a more thoughtful approach to understanding how education might intersect with and help to address issues of alienation, poverty, despair, violence and dependency.

As a teacher-educator, I found the last two chapters of most interest. Each of these took a somewhat different stance from preceding sections. Each either directly or indirectly highlighted how non-Indigenous teachers might need to rethink their own beliefs and values, and re-examine their own critical frameworks in order to understand Aboriginal communities more fully. Jim Heslop's chapter on 'Living and teaching in Aboriginal communities' firstly points out that those who teach in rural and remote areas are mainly young, unmarried, non-Aboriginal, often in their first teaching appointments. The chapter provides a useful summary for novice teachers of some key issues in living cross-culturally and practical advice in developing respectful relationships with those whose community they join as outsiders. Recognising the right of the community to set an educational agenda for their children and the need to listen actively to the key stakeholders are two areas that are emphasised. The focus here seems to shift from a spotlight on the problems of Aboriginal education to recognising and respecting Aboriginal parents' concerns and commitment as starting points for change.

The final chapter, 'Directions and best practice' by Quentin Beresford, points to specific examples of how Aboriginal communities, working in partnerships with health, education and business professionals, have reformed schooling so as to improve children's experiences, engagement and outcomes. Such specific examples of Aboriginal community involvement in their children's education demonstrate hope in the face of despair and illustrate what can be done by communities, despite years of indifference and lack of commitment on the part of education authorities.

The book has much to offer as a useful overview of key issues and a starting point to explore more holistic and constructive ways of thinking about cross-cultural teaching. Implicit throughout are the contributions that education still might make to the lives of Aboriginal children when teachers learn to work productively with Aboriginal parents and communities.

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