

## **'CULTURAL' TENSIONS**

Here I will draw down the 'cultural' tensions in policy to bring forward the dilemma this produces at the level of practice.

However powerful the rhetoric of policy, however coherent the arguments, the dual goals of policy — cultural maintenance and equal outcomes — have produced an enormous headache when it comes to implementing programs to achieve these goals.

The reason for our headache is the continuing dilemma: that in pursuing the dual goals of policy, we take up, in a singular framework, what are essentially oppositional positions. Neither the cultural agenda nor the pursuit of equal outcomes can be properly targeted without the undermining of the other. This is precisely a dilemma to us because we have been positioned from the outset to view our educational situation as it is constituted, in and through our 'difference'. That is, we have in our heads an organisational schema that is based on our 'difference', that theoretically we are trying to resolve these differences at the same time as we are trying to maintain them.

This has led to a research agenda that has worked from the same premise. If there is this difference, then let's map it all so that we understand it all; let's develop programs that accommodate it, that don't undermine it; let's teach to it, etc. But what has this agenda achieved in classrooms?

Policy and reform under the cultural agenda have brought many changes into schools: new schools in communities, better access, better programs, professional development, cultural awareness, more local input, improved outcomes. But, despite this, the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous students continues, the students who do get into the workplace

and tertiary institutions still struggle with English, and teachers still struggle to teach it effectively, despite effort and commitment.

The positive results of this agenda, in terms of curriculum and pedagogical issues, have been the acceptance of cultural sensitivity as an issue in classrooms, and the importance of cultural relevance and local contexts in the development of alternate curriculum and pedagogical practices. In more remote areas, this has resulted in the recognition and inclusion of the indigenous context in indigenous classrooms. In schools where indigenous students are a smaller proportion of the student population, policies of inclusion and support are evident. These achievements are quite considerable and should not be devalued.

But there have been negatives in this agenda. To me, the most damaging has been the infiltration of anthropological schemas into indigenous educational policies and practices. More than anything I think that this has framed the issues in counterproductive ways, and the Torres Strait context is an excellent example of this, no doubt mirrored in many Aboriginal contexts. There has been such an overwhelming consensus about the suitability of the 'difference' model for our educational context, that it has entered popular understanding in a way that blinds us to its weaknesses and its contradictions. This transference of anthropological understanding into popular understanding has given the anthropological discourse primacy over the educational context. They have come to be viewed as one and the same.

The point I wish to make is that the anthropological model that has conceptualised our learning difficulties as the product of 'cultural difference' schemas, or the mismatch between two different sets of values, has over-emphasised the role of these differences in the learning process.

I do not have any problem with the learning-styles work of people like Harris (1990). He worked from and for a particular context, with a particular goal in mind, and his explanations and the models and strategies that emerged from those may well be appropriate to that context, and suitable for the goals that were being pursued. But it is the transference of those ideas into other contexts, or even just into popular understanding, that leads to ambiguity and confusion.

Broad understandings of differences are useful, in that, they call into question some of the assumptions that teachers may have about the students

they teach. All the cultural (and linguistic) differences that have been brought to light through research are useful knowledge for teachers to have — precisely because they make teachers more sensitive to their students, and because they reveal the complexity of the factors with which they are dealing. At the same time, they invite more responsive measures to help students move into another context. However, there are a number of dangers associated with substituting one set of assumptions with another.

Firstly, the cultural difference schema also stands to provide a convenient explanation of student failure that exonerates teacher practice. For instance, it is commonly heard in educational circles today that ‘indigenous children do not have certain mathematical concepts’. I have heard it said also that Torres Strait children cannot learn the concepts of measurement because they do not exist in their own language and culture: ‘teaching big and small is easy, but the refinements of that such as tall/short; thick/thin; wide/narrow; near/far and the comparatives big/bigger/biggest etc. are difficult and they just do not seem to get it’.

The fact is, Torres Strait children do have those concepts, but they express them quite differently. When a five year old puffs up his shoulders and says, ‘he’s big this kind way’, he means tall. When a child says ‘I go...I go, go...I go, go, go’. He means, ‘I went a very long way’. The difficulty lies not in the concept, but the language that expresses it. This is the difficulty of teaching mathematics to any child. The issue is how to teach them a standardised language through which to express certain relations that are evident in their world and the world beyond them. The problem in teaching these concepts is more a literacy issue, and yet we hear these generalisations expressed more often as essential cultural differences. So knowing these things about Torres Strait children is not merely understanding some essential cultural difference, but it is about having quite a specialised understanding of how children give expression to the world that they see themselves in. Awareness of these things has implications generally for the teaching process. For one, sorting concrete objects won’t solve the problem — it is verbalisation that is key. Yet many teachers are content to teach such concepts concretely, and test them that way because they have a preconceived notion that that is how these children learn. The student moves on and fails problem solving at a higher level because he cannot untangle the mathematical language of the

problem. And we all sit around thinking they fail because of a mismatch between two sets of cultural understandings and values — that no amount of teaching and effort seems to overcome.

There are countless examples like this where attributing particular difficulties to problems of cultural difference inhibits the response of teachers to the effects of these differences in classrooms. Let me provide you with a few more examples.

- (a) It is one thing to say that the lowering of eyes and not making eye contact is a cultural behaviour and should be accepted in classrooms. Any sensitive teacher would not admonish a child for such a thing, if they understand it as a cultural behaviour. So awareness of difference is helpful, perhaps essential. But it is another matter to neglect to teach that child that in other contexts it is important and appropriate that they do make eye contact. The task then, for the teacher, is to provide the conditions for children to learn appropriate behaviours for different contexts. If we do not, we will diminish the child's chances for success and opportunities in the modern world.
- (b) It is one thing to accept that children are different from others and prefer to learn collaboratively in groups, or not be spotlighted. But it is another matter to neglect to build the skills and confidence needed to stand in the spotlight and to work independently, when we know very well that children need to develop all these skills to be successful later on.
- (c) And so with language. It is one thing to say children prefer visual and aural modes of learning, but it is another matter to use this as a rationale for neglecting the written word when we know this is exactly what they need.

The description of cultural differences is useful and knowledge of them increases teacher sensitivity and understanding of students. But we *fail* our students if we do not ensure that they develop the necessary skills for success in non-indigenous contexts. And we *insult* the intelligence of our children if we think that they cannot learn to distinguish what behaviours are appropriate to what contexts, and cannot learn to switch between them. This does not equate to permission to berate and diminish children who behave inappropriately in the classroom and learning context. It is to argue the opposite — that classroom and learning

environments need to provide the conditions in which students can learn the skills that are necessary to operate in different contexts.

Nowhere has the anthropological model been more damaging than in the language issue. In the Islander context, I think it has been quite damaging. That the anxiety we have about losing traditional languages can be used to undermine the need to equip our children and our workers with English is a great pity. These are issues that have to be addressed, but the promotion of one language against attaining expertise in another is simply to misunderstand the context of the debate. I think it very important for Islanders to keep their eye on the main game when it comes to educating our children, and I know that all around the country and across very diverse Aboriginal contexts, many Aboriginal people feel the same way. Our communities are literally 'a drop in the ocean'. We do not have many avenues for leverage with governments. English literacy and understanding the world beyond our communities, beyond our local and cultural context, is as critically important for our future survival as understanding our traditional pathways. Anything that diverts us from the urgency of achieving educational success for future generations should be avoided.

These are illustrations of the tensions that are produced by the double binds in the current policy position, and that have been translated into a popular understanding that constrains educational responses in achieving policy goals. Teachers grapple with these tensions on a daily basis. On the one hand, they are aware that the effects of cultural differences do produce real difficulties for their indigenous students. As well, they know that many of the strategies that work for other children do not work successfully for their indigenous students or at best extend the timeframe that it takes to learn necessary skills. On the other hand, many teachers are extremely practical and know the urgency and necessity for their indigenous students to do and perform in their classrooms exactly what other students do, if they are ever to master literacy practices. Many feel constrained and guilty if they focus on English literacies and neglect cultural factors. Many worry about their role in taking children further away from their cultural context. Not surprisingly, many effective literacy teachers begin to lose confidence in relation to their understanding of the situation. They lose themselves in the confusing array of advice, suggestions, their desire to do the right thing, an inability to please

everyone, conflicting perspectives, particular individual situations where their efforts are not well received or are not given support. In essence, they lose themselves to the uncertainty, the constant changes, and the knowledge that their indigenous students are the losers. Their problems with indigenous students are in addition to all their other problems in the classroom.

## **RE-FRAMING HOW WE VIEW LITERACY**

I want to come back now to the theoretical level to discuss how shifts at the level of theory might re-frame how we view the literacy issues.

Both policy, and as a consequence, practice and research, have been theoretically framed in a rather simplistic way. Our position, our problems, and the way they are discussed keep being brought back to simple dualities: traditional versus mainstream; traditional language versus English language, etc. Whilst there is nothing problematic about pursuing the dual goals of cultural maintenance and equal outcomes, we do need to find a more effective theoretical framework within which primacy can be afforded to indigenous standpoints.

The reality is that the indigenous context in relation to the mainstream is very complex. The two domains are not entirely separate and the boundaries are not well defined. Today, indigenous people operate at the interface of two different cultures that have different histories and different world-views. Neither traditional cultures nor the 'mainstream' are static entities and, theoretically speaking, we do not operate entirely in one or the other at any given time. We are constantly engaging with changing ideas and knowledges from outside our communities, as we shape and reshape our worlds. Any theoretical framework that is deployed to assist us in understanding and improving our position has to address the reality of this complex interaction. To consider the literacy situation of, for example, Islander children, as a simple movement between traditional and English language, and to consider those languages as simply encapsulating two opposing cultures, is to ignore the dynamics of reality. It is also to ignore the reality of what people do as they go about their lives. The complexities of teaching literacies are evident

in classrooms everywhere, and the particularities of diverse indigenous contexts inject additional complexities into the task of teaching. Teachers in the system, and indigenous people outside of it, have to learn the language of such complexities.

What is central to many indigenous lives is our relation to the 'mainstream'. It impacts on us daily in many ways. It is that relation we have to understand. It is that relation we have to change if we are to improve our position. That relation shapes our position at the interface. The education that we provide for our students must attend to these complexities if students are ever going to understand what factors produce their position.

This is why research at the theoretical and knowledge level is important. The work I am currently doing is an attempt to establish an indigenous standpoint (Nakata 1998b). This means, as simply as I can put it, that we — as indigenous peoples — need a particular reading position from which to assess knowledges that inform how our position is understood, and how our relation with the outside world is engendered. My immediate goal as a Research Fellow is to use this standpoint to build better courses in indigenous studies, but it will have further implications, especially with the literacy issues.

The reason it is necessary to develop such a standpoint is because we need an alternative to the anthropological standpoint on 'difference'. I have criticised this standpoint because, to a large extent, the discourse of difference is just an updated version of the discourse of inferiority, and it perpetuates our marginalisation. But I have criticised it as well because it does not adequately represent how we have experienced our position at the interface of converging historical trajectories. Yet we cannot submerge the anthropological standpoint of difference without providing a standpoint that will uphold us as a group with a unique and distinct culture, with our own history, our own traditional knowledges, our own identity. I argue that in establishing an indigenous standpoint, we uphold, indeed strengthen identity, through understanding our position in relation to the outside world. We gain and retain a sense of ourselves through understanding our traditional relationships and our own history, as well as through understanding our relationship with the outside world.

Instead of being preoccupied with our 'differences', we can shift to understanding how the knowledges of the outside world work to position us

in particular ways, and in a particular relation (Nakata 1997c). In our recent history, this has been an extremely demeaning relationship and we have already achieved much to re-establish a more equal relation with non-indigenous peoples. And if we understand these things, then all our actions and interactions at the interface of two different cultural sets of understandings — which is where we operate on a daily basis — can work to assert our position, to assert our independence from others, to identify ourselves in relation to others. In this way, we become more powerful players in shaping and influencing knowledges that seek to position us, and to explain to others what we are, and where we need to be going.

If we do not develop our own theoretical standpoint we will always be in the position of relying on others to assess what is best for us, instead of doing it for ourselves. Without our own standpoint, those of us who do master English literacies will continue to unwittingly undermine our position by viewing our difficulties from a perspective that is not our own. Simply retaining cultural knowledge as an adjunct to learning English literacies will not overcome this. This is why the type of research that I do, which seems so far removed from classroom practice, is important to the ongoing process of understanding what we have to do to improve our position, and why the dialogue has to keep going in a constructive way. Someone with a different perspective has to step back and keep looking back in, if a clearer picture is to emerge.