

Education and literacy for governance: A community view

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In Australia today, the language of power is English and herein lies the key to Aboriginal people successfully being able to present their issues and concerns to the wider Australian forum. At this time there are too few speaking for too many. The representation of Aboriginal issues rarely if ever encompasses the viewpoints of Aboriginal people in remote areas. If this is to change and Aboriginal people are to become recognised in Australian society and truly represented in decision making organisations, the first essential tool the people must be equipped with is competency and confidence in written and spoken English.

Government policy ensures that English is taught in all community schools but the withdrawal of funding for bi-lingual programs exposes one of the major barriers to Aboriginal people becoming literate in English. Like so many elements of Western Culture, English was imposed on schools with little recognition and value placed on traditional language, literacy and education. If educators expect Aboriginal people to value a Western education and the benefits it can bring such as entry and acceptance into the country's power structures, then a reciprocal value must be placed on the values, traditions and languages of Aboriginal people. It is only when Aboriginal people can see these benefits that they will encourage and support the English literacy of tomorrow's decision makers. Until this barrier can be overcome, true progress cannot be made.

Note that I distinguish English literacy because what needs to be clearly understood is that Aboriginal people are perfectly literate and numerate in their own ways. Likewise they are capable and confident in their self governance. We are talking about a culture that has clear roles and responsibilities in governance for thousands of years. The difference now is that in order to be full participants in the dominant society we acknowledge the need to develop a new literacy. However, this must be a genuine two-way street. It must be realised that Aboriginal culture and values has much to offer and rather than throwing out the old to bring in the new, a combination that builds on the values and skills that Aboriginal people possess will be much more effective. Western values beliefs and knowledge have been enshrined in the school curricula and practices since the introduction of a Western education system and the challenge facing schools is provide an inclusive education that adapts these elements whilst still recognising and valuing Aboriginal cultural knowledge. This will lead to a long needed conceptual renewal of the school system that will be more effective in addressing the goals of Aboriginal people, including self governance and improved educational outcomes.

Therefore the importance of improving literacy and numeracy in English is to allow Aboriginal people to speak for themselves rather than through others and to gain the confidence to present their own concerns.

The imposition of a Western education and the lack of mutual value placed on both Western and Aboriginal education has resulted in a rift between many schools and the community they serve. The school is often seen as quite separate and community members feel no sense of ownership over the education their children are receiving. This results in poor community and parental support of education in general and a lack of encouragement for the children. This barrier must be broken down. The distance between community and school must be narrowed to encourage the growth of a genuine educational partnership. I believe as a senior community member as well as the school principal I am able to foster a collaborative coexistence between the school and its community so that the school is seen as an extension of the community. Support from parents and community members will help improve retention rates and subsequent outcome improvements in all areas.

One of the guiding questions I was given asked if community leaders have the educational levels necessary for adequate government. The answer is an unequivocal yes. Our culture has as I said before governed itself for millennia. However what is really being asked is if Western educational levels are sufficient to allow effective management in a Western model of governance. Certainly amongst the adults there is a wide variety of English literacy levels but I think there are even bigger issues that need to be dealt with and many of these are cultural. Aboriginal meetings are well organised with everyone knowing their place in proceedings and having the confidence to place their opinions in a traditionally appropriate manner. What has happened in communities and is still happening is the imposition of a government system that is foreign to most Aboriginal people. The structure of formal meetings, the administrative requirements and the formal decision making process makes many people feel uncomfortable; it saps their confidence often leaving them dissatisfied with the outcomes. It also challenges traditional values and relationship hierarchies by forcing new roles on some people. Change is not always a bad thing but it needs to be realised that it must be a gradual process that is well supported. I believe Aboriginal people embrace the concept of self governance even if they are puzzled by aspects of the model that they are bound to operate within. What is needed is not just improved educational levels but an improved type of education, one that provides scaffolds between the old knowledge and the new, one that does not foster inequality and one that doesn't just pay lip service to the concept of an educational partnership but makes it a reality.

It is essential that community schools adopt workable and inclusive programs that will enable students and the community to maintain the intricate balance between school and community, and culture and knowledge. A truly collaborative approach to these issues will allow a traditionally proud people to maintain their pride as their voices are heard.

The issues facing indigenous education are complex with many dependant variables. The issue is far from the simplistic view of improved literacy and numeracy outcomes. Nor can the issues be dealt with one at a time. Because of the close interrelationships, a cohesive approach must be taken that acknowledges how each element will impact on the others. This is a challenge

that must be faced head on because I firmly believe that education has an essential role to play I the desperately needed improvements to life and governance in Aboriginal communities.