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## **Indigenous studies in all schools**

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Cherbourg State School is approximately 300 km northwest of Brisbane. It is situated in an Aboriginal community at Cherbourg with approximately 250 students. At the Cherbourg State School, the aim was to generate good academic outcomes for all students from kindergarten to Year 7 and to nurture a strong and positive sense of what it means to be Aboriginal in today's society. In this paper, I will discuss modernism and postmodernism in indigenous studies and how this has impacted on the design and development of the Indigenous Studies Programme at the Cherbourg State School. The programme was designed to provide students with the opportunity to learn about the history of Indigenous people from Indigenous voices and provide an understanding of the impact of invasion and the consequences on the lives of Indigenous people, in the past and present. The stories from the elders and members of their own community provided knowledge that allowed students to challenge Aboriginal identity by taking on existing perceptions so that they could be better processed and understood.

**Keywords:** Aboriginal; invasion; indigenous; political; assumptions; policies

Maintaining one's culture, values and traditions is beyond price. Human beings cannot live without that. We are glad to share our culture with Europeans and other migrants but we will never give them up. (Getano Lui, Jnr. 1994)

### **Prolegomenon**

The project described here centres on the setting up of an Indigenous Studies Programme within the Cherbourg State School. However, I would like at the outset to problematise not only the accompanying extracts of my dissertation but also the whole process of indigenous studies. We need, I believe, to consider what it is we are doing and what it is we are studying when we initiate an Indigenous Studies Programme. This, for me, means that what I need then is not to be simply reflexive, but rather to attempt what Roy Bhaskar (1993) has termed a moment of meta-reflexive self-totalisation. In other words, I wish to imbed the programme and the school within a much wider and indeed global context, and in doing so endeavour to take account of its relevant social, political and theoretical parameters. It is this task that I attempt in this prolegomenon.

That such a task is an urgent one can be seen from the decision of the Labor Government of Queensland to abolish the Department of Aboriginal Affairs without consultation with the Indigenous community. Throughout Australia, the last 10 years

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have seen the erosion of much of the left-liberal consensus that underpinned policy in the Indigenous area. Much of the goodwill that we, Indigenous Australians, once perhaps tended to take for granted has evaporated. As a consequence, we now need to be much more rigorous, reflective and careful in the programmes we put forward. That in itself is not necessarily a bad thing, for, as Nietzsche (1986, 281) has put it, 'What does not kill me makes me stronger'.

### Modernism and postmodernism and indigenous studies

The task of contextualising indigenous studies has been made a good deal easier by the publication in 2003 of a special issue of the journal *Social Alternatives* on Indigenous Education, edited by Jean Philips. It contained an important article by the leading Indigenous educator Victor Hart, who is manager of the Oodgeroo Unit at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), and it is the set of issues he has raised that I would like to take as my starting point. To begin with, I was deeply moved by his statement of the existential position of the black academic within the white academy and his expression of the feeling that there were better people in the black community to do the job, but that the university would not recognise them.

I was, however, somewhat bemused when Hart (2003) wrote of 'class theory' Marxism and democracy as 'valorised' within the academy. That, I am sure, would be news to most Marxists! The allegation of 'colour blindness' against the Marxist paradigm has more validity, but one has to acknowledge that attempts have been made to understand oppression beyond the class system.

More importantly, what Hart's (2003) contribution lacks is an understanding of the processes of modernism and postmodernism. Yet, these traditions of thought have produced the dominant intellectual movements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and it is vital that indigenous education be located both in relation to these movements and to their processes. To be fair, Hart is aware of the importance of modernism and postmodernism and continually refers to them throughout his article. He is understandably and rightly suspicious of these movements, but nowhere does he deliver a theoretically informed rejoinder. Worse, he is sometimes flawed when he refers to, 'postmodernist writers who desire a universality of all human conditions as explainable and rational' (Hart 2003, 8) and 'Aboriginal lecturers who cannot afford to indulge in a post-modern cynicism that resorts to scientific rationality to solve what are essentially issues of rights and racism' (Hart 2003, 11). These, as we shall see, would be much more accurate as characterisations of modernism.

Fortunately, the philosopher Roy Bhaskar has provided us with a critique that I would argue should form the basis of our understanding of the relationship of indigenous education to the movements of modernism and postmodernism (Bhaskar 2002a). Bhaskar begins by giving three meanings for modernism: philosophical enlightenment and rationality; the High Modernism of the aesthetic avant-garde; and the process of technological modernisation. There are important differences between these three traditions, although they are often confused in common usage. In what follows, I will be paying particular attention to philosophical modernity and the process of modernisation.

Bhaskar (2002a, 26–33) outlines the following features of modernism:

- (1) egocentricity
- (2) false and abstract universality

- (3) incomplete totality
- (4) lack of reflexivity
- (5) judgementalism along with unilinearity
- (6) formalism
- (7) materialism

For Bhaskar, the *egocentricity* of modernism has to do with its self-contrasting with the non-modern. This contrasting is generally done in favour of the modern, with the non-modern being seen as inferior or primitive. This is not often stated so directly today, but in terms of indigenous education, many teachers still bring with them the notion that the problem with Indigenous students is that they come from cultures that are non-modern. Here, the ego of the modern teacher ensures the attitude that he is correct and that the student is deficient. Such attitudes surface repeatedly in Gary Johns (2006, 15) treatise, especially when he equates Pastor Paul Albrecht's account of cargo cult mentality with 'passive welfare'. Much closer to home, in a letter to the South Burnett Times, a teacher at the Murgon High School, Rosemary Pratt, recently wrote:

I don't know how sensitivity to the undoubtedly rich aboriginal experience of 40 millennia helps me engage indigenous students in learning for the modern world. (Pratt 2006)

By *false and abstract universality*, Bhaskar (2002a) means that modernism, which begins with the promise of liberty, equality and fraternity, fails to deliver on that promise. Instead, it posits the interest of a caste or a class of privileged people as the universal interest. In relation to Indigenous people, this abstract universality can be used to rebuff efforts to remedy the ravages performed on the Indigenous people of this land. Again, a classic instance is given by Johns (2006) when he argues against Noel Pearson's (2006) pleas that changes in welfare provision for Indigenous communities need to be made on an 'opt-in basis'. Johns will have none of that; he hoists the banner of universal equality and proclaims:

The philosophy of mutual obligation now underlies the welfare system. While the unemployed may have been uncomfortable with mutual obligations introduced in recent years, they were not given the option of keeping the money and not complying. Aboriginal citizens should not be treated differently. (Johns 2006, 25)

It should be noted here that Johns is much less willing to march under the banner of universal equality when it comes to matters such as the Stockman award of 1966. There equal treatment for Aborigines is seen as something of a mistake, severing (according to Johns) older Aborigines from 'the world of work' (Johns 2006, 15).

Linked to this abstract universality is Bhaskar's (2002a) third feature of modernism – *incomplete totality*. Within modernism, which has accompanied market capitalism, whole layers of society and, indeed, of feelings and thoughts are banished from consideration. Thus, the essentials of the relationship of white Australians with black Australians cannot be thought or spoken about aloud, though the statistics on school failure, unemployment, poverty, disease and infant mortality reveal their true nature.

The fourth feature of modernism, *lack of reflexivity*, follows from the previous two, as reflexivity involves the positioning of oneself within a totality, precisely what

modernism, with its desire to think of itself as both unique and inevitable, refuses to do.

In addition to this, the fifth feature of modernism is its *unilinearity* – the basic assumption that history must unfold in a certain way, specifically the way that has delivered capitalist modernity. Within the context of indigenous studies, this has resulted in an attitude towards Aborigines that positions them outside the historical process. A clear statement of this viewpoint is:

Australia is the present home and refuge of creatures, often crude and quaint, that elsewhere have passed away and given place to higher forms. This applies equally to the Aboriginal as to the platypus and the kangaroo. Just as the platypus, laying its eggs and feebly suckling its young, reveals a mammal in the making, so does the Aboriginal show us, as least in broad outline, what every man must have been like before he learned to read and write, domesticate animals, cultivate crops and use a metal tool. It has been possible to study in Australia human beings that remain on the cultural level of men of the Stone Age. (Walter Baldwin Spencer, Professor of Biology at Melbourne University, 1927, as cited in Beams 2004)

It is the unilinearity of modernism, regarding itself as the ‘end of history’, which produces the viewpoint that there is something wrong with you if you are not modern.

The sixth feature of modernism is its *formalism*, in which ‘formal, analytical, abstract, quantitative modes of reasoning and modes of being’ are glorified. Other ways of being, such as the indigenous one, are quite simply scorned or scoffed at. Thus, for Indigenous Australians to talk of ‘sacred sites’ was, and is, to invite derision from modernists.

The final feature of modernism that Bhaskar (2002a) delineates is *materialism*. This refers to the instrumentalist manipulation not only of the nature but also of the people. For the modernist, everything is a means to an end and nothing has an intrinsic value. I cannot think of anything more antipathetic to the indigenous world view.

Bhaskar (2002a) outlines the following features of postmodernism that he sees primarily as a reaction against modernism:

- (1) epistemic relativity
- (2) linguisticism
- (3) ontological irrealism
- (4) judgemental irrationalism
- (5) lack of totality
- (6) lack of universality
- (7) lack of a concept of emancipation
- (8) a heightened (unsustainable) sense of reflexivity
- (9) proximity to the politics of identity and difference
- (10) traces of suppressed discourses

The first feature of Bhaskar’s (2002a) framework for postmodernism is *epistemic relativity*; I would venture to suggest that scepticism would be a better way to phrase this. Critical realism accepts epistemic relativity and sees it entailed by ontological depth. If we think of the search for truth in terms of the metaphor of digging deeper, then at any point in the process of digging, it is always possible for someone to dig deeper and uncover another layer of the truth (Collier 1994, 49); thus, epistemic relativity depends on recognition of the profound nature of reality. However, within

postmodernism, scepticism is grounded in the persuasion that reality either does not exist at all or is in such a constant state of becoming that scientific explanation is impossible.

The second feature of postmodernism is its *linguisticism*. This reflects the growing importance of language in the twentieth-century thought. In some varieties of linguisticism, language is regarded not as a means of communication but as the ‘house of being’, the means by which reality is called into existence. It is of course always important to pay attention to language, but reality cannot be reduced solely to the linguistic (Bhaskar 2002a).

Closely allied to linguisticism is Bhaskar’s (2002a) next feature, *ontological irrealism*, which would have it that it is impossible to say anything about the true nature of reality. The forerunner of this viewpoint is surely Nietzsche’s (1986, 63) assertion that science does not explain but merely ‘interprets and arranges the world’.

The fourth feature of postmodernism is that its scepticism stretches as far as to deny the possibility of judgemental rationalism, instead actively embracing *judgemental irrationalism*. How, though, can there be emancipation when it is not possible to say that account X is inferior, less accurate and so on, to account Y?

In the fifth and sixth features, postmodernists view life as a pastiche and *not as a totality*, along with refusing to *universalise*. This, of course, is a reaction to the abstract universalism of modernism. But the failure to articulate universality, or to see life as a totality, means that, as a postmodernist, one is not able to give an explanation of universal phenomena, such as capitalist globalisation or cultural convergence, while at the same time, these processes are directly affecting Australian Aborigines.

The seventh feature of postmodernism is its *incapacity to sustain a concept of human emancipation*. This is extremely serious in its relation to indigenous studies. What is at work here is postmodernism’s relativity; having abolished the notion of the truth and embraced judgemental irrationality, postmodernism cannot, for instance, provide us with good reasons for rejecting the mainstream white account of colonialism in favour of an Indigenous perspective on this process.

Bhaskar’s (2002a) eighth feature of postmodernism is a *heightened sense of reflexivity*. However, this is reflexivity cut free from its context and is consequently unsustainable.

The ninth feature of postmodernism deals with the emergence of the politics of *identity and difference*, which is based primarily on opposition to modernity’s abstract universalism. A classic instance here is Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s rejection of white feminism’s claim to speak on behalf of indigenous women (Moreton-Robinson 2000). Speaking of the pair of identity and difference, Bhaskar argues:

non-identity always presupposes some prior or encompassing identity or identification, otherwise there would be no grounds for declaring the non-identical elements distinct. Thus concepts of identity, unity, etc. are ontologically, epistemologically and logically prior to concepts of non-identity etc. (Bhaskar 2002b, xiv)

In relation to identity and difference, Bhaskar (2002b, xiv) argues that there is a tendency for difference to consume identity, as is evident in Elizabeth Ellsworth’s (1989) and Cathryn McConaghy’s (2000) works. This is because without a notion of ontological depth, the emphasis on the Many (difference) inevitably casts doubts on the possibility of the One (identity). It is only critical realism, with its stress on ontological depth, which can sustain the notion that one can be both an individual and a member of a collective.

It is described here that one can both understand and accommodate Moreton-Robinson's (2000) suspicion that the de-essentialising of race is 'most often aimed at Aborigines and not at the whites who write about them and that, when it comes to whiteness, conventional ways of deploying race have not been radically destabilised' (Probyn 2005). What Moreton-Robinson (2000) is expressing is a frustration brought into play by postmodernism's emphasis on difference, which, I repeat, inevitably leads to the destruction of the concept of identity.

The tenth and final feature of postmodernism that Bhaskar considers is the *eruption of a discourse on the emotions*. Thus, we have the growth of phenomena such as the spread of first-person narratives on whiteness (Brewster 2005). This aspect of postmodernism is, in my opinion, to be wholeheartedly welcomed. It both permits and justifies personal accounts by Indigenous Australians of their lived experiences. However, I would argue that this new freedom should be extended to matters of spirituality. Currently, the academy is within the grip of secular chauvinism, and those who talk of spiritual matters are at best tolerated and patronised. Typical, here is the experience of the philosopher John Caputo who tells us:

I have many friends who love to talk about exposing philosophy to the 'other', still better to the 'unconditionally' or 'wholly' other, but when I mention religion, they turn pale. It turns out that by 'other' they mean literature. So their unconditional, wholly other is constrained by several conditions, and religion is just too, too other for them, too 'tout autre', if I may say so (Caputo, as cited in Wyschogrod and Caputo 1998).

For all that, it is impossible to discuss indigenous matters without raising the point that for Indigenous Australians, the sacred and the spiritual is all around them. Here, it is worth pointing out that Bhaskar's (2002a, 2002b) philosophy of meta-reality, with its emphasis on spirituality, re-enchantment and the oneness of all creation, is capable of accommodating the indigenous experience.

### **Rationale for the programme**

The history of the Aborigines, the first Australians, has formerly been presented from a non-Indigenous perspective. Indeed, it would be perhaps more accurate to say that the first Australians were regarded as having no history at all. How else can one explain the doctrine of *Terra Nullius* – the legal fiction that Australia was uninhabited when the First Fleet arrived here in 1788? It is worth recalling Hegel's (Hegel, as cited in Wyschogrod 1998, 119) views in this context on the relationship of history with sub-Saharan Africa. He characterised its 'people as savage, lawless, and barbaric; accepting of slavery, and tribal warfare; fetishistic; and fanatical' and went on to summarise his diatribe as:

At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. (Hegel 1991, 99)

It is, therefore, extremely important that as educators we ensure that the *true* history of Australia is presented. My use of the term 'true' here is deliberate and not at all naïve. I am aware of the neo-Nietzschean tradition and its position that there is no such thing as the truth but that we must forget that (Bhaskar 1993, 136). The assertion that there is no such thing as the truth is of course self-contradictory, and it is a scandal that this view gained so much purchase within the academy in the 1980s.

Indeed, although one still hears academics repeat the self-cancelling banality, ‘There is no such thing as the truth’, one has only to ask the speaker ‘Is that true?’ to expose the limitations of such naive scepticism.

In contrast to the followers of Nietzsche (1986), it is worth considering the position on history taken by Kant (as cited in Westphal 2004), for whom history could be reflected upon as progress, decline or chaos (Kellner 1992, 256).

Arguably, the dominant Anglo cultural group within Australia seeks to tell the story of Australia as one of ‘progress’, wherein we all, in joyful strains, proclaim that ‘Australia fair’ is forever advancing (McCormick 2001). It is hard, however, from an Indigenous perspective not to view the same history as one of decline, tarnished by a genocidal onslaught on one of the oldest cultures on this planet.

Kant (as cited in Westphal 2004) objected to the view of history simply as ‘chaos’ on moral grounds (Kellner 1992, 256). However, there are grounds other than moral for resisting the post-structuralist position that depicts history as simply a rhetorical overlay on the flux of being. It is of great importance that we hold on to the notion of historical truth and accuracy. To the Jewish people, the denial of the Shoah is rightly seen as no small matter; to Indigenous Australians, the truth of the massacres that their people have endured is likewise not a matter to be set aside.

This point is not a trivial one for groups struggling for emancipation. Telling the truth of what has happened to us is an important stage towards getting the powerful in Australia not only to acknowledge the past but also to actively seek a way forward, through which we can all work together to produce a better world.

This can be achieved; the voices of Australian Indigenous peoples must be heard in order to correct the imbalances and inaccuracies that have influenced the attitudes of society, in the past and in the present. It is these same imbalances and inaccuracies that are poisoning the body politic and preventing this nation from achieving greatness. If the mainstream society has to develop an understanding and respect for Indigenous people and culture, then implementation of an Indigenous Studies Programme is needed to provide a balanced, accurate and honest account of issues relating to history, governmental policies and legislation, racism and discrimination, identity and the arts, as well as any other specific or local issues that may be raised within the school. In facilitating change, there needs to be a shift in the mindsets and beliefs of adults and students, many of whom seem to be acquiescing to the negative stereotypes of what it means to be Aboriginal or what it means to be a Torres Strait Islander.

The point I am making here is of course an ethical one. Although the Indigenous Studies Programme described here does not draw directly upon his work, my thinking has been influenced by the Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas. For Levinas, ethics is the primary philosophy, preceding any branch of metaphysics; what comes first is our duty to the other. Levinas states:

The Other’s hunger – be it of the flesh, or of bread – is sacred; only the hunger of the third party limits its rights. (Levinas, as cited in Putnam 2002, 33)

We are thus responsible for the ‘Other’ in Levinasian ethics. Moreover, this responsibility is asymmetrical; it is not a case of an I-thou relationship based on mutual reciprocity, as in the work of Martin Buber (as cited in Putnam 2002, 39). Indeed, Levinas (as cited in Putman 2002) has laid repeated stress on the ‘asymmetry’ of the ethical relationship with the ‘Other’ – I am responsible for her and she is not obliged to return that responsibility.

Moreover, for Levinas (as cited in Davies 2002), there is no timeline for that responsibility. This contrasts sharply with a subject who defines herself by her own time and, as a consequence, refuses to take responsibility for the past. Paul Davies (2002, 173) summarises how this viewpoint operates as follows:

The subject who would define itself solely by its own time and by the origin that ensures that time is the subject's own will always detect in a certain lateness, a legitimate, logical and moral defence (I wasn't here then: that was before my time: I can only be held to account for what is of my time).

It is this position that was advanced by the former Prime Minister, John Howard, when he refused to offer an apology to the Aboriginal people (BBC 1999). Levinas (as cited in Davies 2002), however, rejects as insignificant the 'lateness' on which the approach of Howard and others depends. He argues instead that, 'the subject is answerable for all it did not know and did not do, even where there was nothing it could know and nothing it could do' (Davies 2002, 173).

Levinas (as cited in Davies 2002) was of course, as Putnam (2002, 36–37) points out, a moral perfectionist. However, his views are certainly worth considering, even if only as a challenge to the moral glibness of the subject who takes refuge in 'I wasn't there' while enjoying the fruits of expropriating Indigenous Australians.

Consequently, this project outlines the importance and need to provide an Indigenous Studies Programme in all schools for all children. It is crucial to stress here that this requires not an optional 'boutique' course that will provide nothing more than a romantic and palatable tour through the land of the exotic 'Other', rather, what is required is nothing less than the teaching of indigenous studies to *all* students in *all* schools because all Australian students need to learn the truth about Australia's past so that, in turn, they can develop a foundation for a better understanding of the present situation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – in the hope of making a better future for all of us.

### **Indigenous studies: what attitude and what approach?**

It is also vital to note in this context that the development and delivery of Indigenous Studies Programmes in schools is not primarily an attempt to lay blame for past atrocities; at the same time, we should not seek to avoid the actuality of such events. Nor is an Indigenous Studies Programme an attempt to promote any particular political stance; it is rather, in its essence, a purposeful and instructive structure, with the goal, at its core, of promoting social justice through education.

The incorporation of an Indigenous Studies Programme into the syllabus recognises how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their cultures influence contemporary Australian society. An Indigenous Studies Programme has a scope to identify and acknowledge aspects of the cultures of Indigenous Australians and to provide views and space for debate around current Indigenous issues in Australia. It will enable students to learn about the ways of life of Indigenous people in Australia's past and present, and how these have changed over time, their contribution to Australia today and their potential contribution in the future.

Of course, it would be naive not to recognise the political context in which indigenous studies are now located. Clark (2004) has rightly reminded us of just how much the teaching of history is a contested area. For instance, I have used the

term ‘invasion’, and I am aware that it is controversial. Clark (2004, 15) informs us that:

In 2000 the Brisbane *Courier Mail* (a Murdoch broadsheet) exposed Queensland’s new SOSE syllabus for apparent political bias and educational inadequacy. ‘Captain Cook and [former Prime Minister] Sir Robert Menzies do not feature in a new Queensland schools syllabus booklet’, wrote Martin Thomas (2000), ‘but Eddie Mabo and Ho Chi Minh do’. Claims of political one-sidedness prompted the newspaper’s campaign. Opposition to the new syllabus, continued Thomas, objected to the way it advocated ‘environmental zealotry and communist heroes while dismissing white settlement as an invasion’.

Nevertheless, despite the controversy, I have chosen to employ the word ‘invasion’, not because it is loaded emotionally but because of its *explanatory* capacity. No other word, certainly not ‘discovery’, conveys the nature of a venture that was, of course, deeply imperialistic.

I would like to explicitly acknowledge in this context that I am influenced by Roy Bhaskar’s (1994) use of the Isaiah Berlin examples of descriptions of Nazi rule in Germany. Berlin offered the following statements:

- (1) The country was depopulated.
- (2) Millions of people died.
- (3) Millions of people were killed.
- (4) Millions of people were murdered.

Bhaskar (1994, 110) states that:

All four statements are true but (4) is not only the most evaluative, it is also the best (i.e. the most precise and accurate description of what actually happened). And in virtue of this, all but (4) convey the wrong perlocutionary force, for to say of someone that they died normally carries the presumption that they were not killed by human agency. And to say that millions were killed does not imply that their deaths were part of a single organized campaign of brutal killing

Analogously, my argument here is that ‘invasion’, despite its evaluative nature, is to be preferred to ‘discovery’ because it contains more explanatory power. ‘Discover’ might be usefully understood in terms of Pratt’s (1992) concept of ‘anti-conquest’ in which the colonial power denies having conquered a territory but rather claims to have simply happened upon or discovered it. Here, one has only to think of the now discredited doctrine of *terra nullius* to show how mainstream interpretations of Australia’s past have been formulated within the discourse of ‘anti-conquest’.

To those who maintain that ‘invasion’ is insufficiently objective, I would again turn to Bhaskar (1993) to point out that the term ‘objectivity’ itself is highly ambiguous in the Kantian and associated traditions. Within Kantianism (as cited in Bhaskar 1993), ‘objectivity’ can be located in the nominal region where it tends to mean ‘(a) existentially independent of human beings (i.e. an object) or (b) the intentional object of our sensory awareness’. Alternatively, it can be located in the phenomenal region where it tends to mean (c) inter-subjectively constituted (i.e. a reproduct/transform such as a fact), (d) quasi-phenomenally constituted, (e) impersonal, or (f) just the opposite of any sense of ‘subjective’ (Bhaskar 1993, 325). In my usage, ‘objectivity’ is defined in critical realist terms, in which the intention is to achieve explanatory power with regard to descriptions of reality.

### **Misconceptions, attitudes and stereotypes: the need for education to change**

Generally, there is a misconception within the mainstream society that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are given special treatment in comparison with the non-Indigenous people. On the contrary, public benefits are at the same level for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia. However, because Indigenous Australians have been identified as the most economically and socially disadvantaged group in Australia, special government programmes have been established, designed to meet the specific needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Similar services are also available for low-income and migrant communities in Australia.

It is very necessary then to address the range of misconceptions that clearly exist when it comes to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

### **Cherbourg State School's Indigenous Studies Programme: an overview**

The development of a whole-school Aboriginal Studies Programme as a part of the curriculum was recognised as a key strategy for improving positive Indigenous student outcomes at Cherbourg State School. Chris Sarra, the principal of Cherbourg State School from 1998 to 2005 and the school's first ever Aboriginal principal, states:

Any school that is serious about delivering an Aboriginal studies program must present it in a credible format and not just as an add-on activity, or something to do during NAIDOC (National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Day of Commemoration) week. It is fair to say that life at Cherbourg presents many tough challenges for our children. Like many Aboriginal communities, issues such as employment, alcoholism, domestic violence and child abuse challenge the community. The Aboriginal Studies program is designed to take an honest look at these issues, and to generate an understanding within our children that these issues are often the legacy of historical and sociological processes and not the legacy of being Aboriginal. As our children come to grips with this level of understanding, it is expected that they will be empowered enough to make personal choices about the extent to which the systems in which they are located can impact positively or negatively upon them. The implication for the whole community then, is that they can move more positively into the future and hopefully leave behind the negative disruptions of the past. (Sarra 2003, 10–11)

The Aboriginal Studies Programme at Cherbourg State School provides an understanding of the impact and consequences of European invasion on the lives of Indigenous people, in the past and present, with an emphasis on Aboriginal people's experience and interpretation of Australia's history.

The studies unit has been developed in consultation with elders and members of the community of Cherbourg. The unit values local Indigenous people by providing an opportunity for members of the community to heighten the awareness of Aboriginal history and culture, particularly in relation to their community.

The nature of a curriculum document of this type is to create a living and dynamic resource to be used throughout the school. Accordingly, it has always been envisaged that it will be added to and extended as issues evolve, as teaching personnel, experience and knowledge change, and as student cohorts move throughout the Queensland Education system. Knowledge base and experience will have a logical and real effect on how the teaching of the issues is undertaken. Teaching staff will need to adopt a sense of ownership of the document, thereby feeling comfortable in suggesting modifications, additions and expansions through their own experiences in the classroom.

The underlying assumption here is that we are dealing with processes rather than with constants. To think of Indigenous culture and perspectives as nouns rather than as verbs lends too much credibility to the approach that seeks to construct Indigenous people as museum pieces who can speak only of the past and have nothing to give the present or the future. The bones of our ancestors, which have provided exhibits for the museums of the world, speak to Indigenous Australians of the full logic of that approach, if only they spoke as clearly to White Australians.

Our method is radically different in that we recognise Indigenous Australians as people with emergent properties and thus capable of change and of absencing the difficulties that they undoubtedly face today. The category of emergence is drawn from Bhaskar's (1993, 49) critical realism:

in emergence generally, new beings (entities, structures, totalities, concepts) are generated out of pre-existing material from which they could have been neither induced nor deduced. There is a quantum leap ... This is matter as creative, as autopoietic ...

It is because we recognise that Indigenous Australians have emergent properties that we are not surprised that even in the most difficult and adverse circumstances, they have and can achieve so much.

Issues chosen reflect those faced by Indigenous Australians on a daily basis. Sensitivity on the part of teaching personnel needs to be exercised in an environment in which Indigenous children are the majority and in which issues may take on a rather personal nature.

Learning is seen as a two-way process, and so, the teaching staff also becomes learners with a new generation of Indigenous Australians as their partners. The Indigenous community, at large, sees the issues related to our history as a vital learning area for our children. It is then necessary for the teaching staff to recognise the history of Australia as inclusive of Indigenous Australian experiences. There is a need to recognise within ourselves as teachers bias or emotional reactions to issues that are dealt with as part of an indigenous school's curriculum. Where personal accounts of Indigenous history are used to substantiate statements, discretion and respect for the Indigenous experience must be exercised. Non-Indigenous teaching staff may have to deal with their own experiences and identity as an Australian in order to teach parts of an indigenous curriculum.

The Cherbourg community views the teaching of indigenous studies as an important and necessary method of keeping Indigenous culture strong in an ever-changing world. Given the history of Cherbourg State School, it should be acknowledged that to do otherwise would amount to an attempt to ignore Indigenous culture, or even to insult and strive to eradicate it, and would be a fundamental departure from the past efforts of the school (Blake 2001; Sarra 2005). The story of the Cherbourg community, particularly its historical context, is covered so that students can gain access to their past and teaching staff can gain a better understanding of the situations in society from which their students come. If this document can help to build a bridge of understanding, then students, teachers and the wider community will be able to move forward to a brighter future.

## **Conclusion**

The Indigenous Studies Programme at the Cherbourg State School is designed to challenge Aboriginal identity by taking on existing perceptions so that these can be better

processed and understood. Against the background of these understandings, the programme is designed to develop and embrace a newer, more positive, Aboriginal identity. In overall terms, the programme challenges the way by which children see themselves and their community. Another approach that can change the way by which Indigenous children see their own community is by promoting greater opportunities for positive community involvement in schools (Sarra 2005).

Indigenous studies is a whole-school programme that has been implemented from kindergarten to Year 7. The programme was written in collaboration between the staff and the Indigenous community from Cherbourg.

I have argued throughout this article that the incorporation of Indigenous studies must involve educating *all* students, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia. Indeed, implementing an inclusive curriculum is a key strategy in achieving the participation and outcome goals of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education policy, through its final goals as listed below:

- 20 – Enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at all levels of education to have an appreciation of their history, culture and identity.
- 21 – To provide all Australian students with an understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditional and contemporary cultures (MCEETYA 2000, 81).

An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Programme will provide children with an appreciation that will lead them to reinterpret history, rectify ignorance, enhance cultural respect, overcome racism and promote social justice in the Australian society. It is hoped that the incorporation of such a programme will empower students to shape a more socially just Australian society today and in the future (Department of Education and Training 1996).

It is important that teachers presenting an Indigenous Studies Programme are equipped to convey an accurate history of Australia, with an informed understanding of Indigenous Australian issues, to *all* students, or to facilitate the learning processes of indigenous studies using human resources who have the knowledge and skills to provide accurate and informed accounts of particular issues.

Rhonda Craven (1999) states:

Culturally appropriate education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is not a privilege but a fundamental right. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education must involve the education of ALL students about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education means telling the truth about Australia, and all Australian children have the right to learn the truth about their country.

The inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge, history and viewpoints will enable *all* students to appreciate and understand their rich and diverse heritage, to expand their views on Australian history from an Indigenous perspective and will provide an opportunity for non-Indigenous students to appreciate viewpoints that may be different from their own.

Within the Indigenous Studies Programme, we need to examine issues ranging from historical accounts of government policies and practices, racism and discrimination to cultural respect and tolerance. This would serve to raise the awareness of students and help them to examine and investigate a range of social justice issues. The

Indigenous Studies Programme can be used as a vehicle to challenge, rather than accept, social injustices that are a daily occurrence for Indigenous people and to provide learners with skills and knowledge that will assist them to participate as equals within a multicultural society.

An Indigenous Studies Programme, acknowledged within the school's curriculum framework to be an inclusive practice and not an added-on subject, recognises the fundamental importance of Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander cultures within the mainstream society.

The knowledge shared in an Indigenous Studies Programme builds on the existing knowledge of individuals, allowing them to retain the mindset they already have or giving them the opportunity, where appropriate or necessary, to be open-minded and see Indigenous issues from a different perspective. An evolving shift in attitudes and perceptions within the Australian community could develop strong and effective partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Incorporating an Indigenous Studies Programme in schools could assist in developing a positive and productive partnership between the school and the Indigenous community.

An effective tool in the operation of a successful Indigenous Studies Programme is the use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, from the local or the broader community, who have knowledge and skills on particular issues and can share them, giving an Indigenous perspective in an Indigenous voice. On the other hand, the removal of community participation or an Indigenous voice from an Indigenous Studies Programme will guarantee a limited experience of Indigenous issues from Indigenous perspectives and may help perpetuate the inaccuracies within Australia's official narrative. Rather than this, what is needed is that students be exposed to Australia's untold history.

Teaching indigenous studies within the school curriculum will allow all students to become aware of the injustices that have occurred for Indigenous people and help them to understand how these injustices are being maintained and how they can be challenged. Indigenous and non-Indigenous students can identify and suggest solutions that could improve the negative perceptions perceived by mainstream Australia. Providing all students with Indigenous experiences and knowledge that have influenced Indigenous people will increase an awareness and appreciation for Indigenous people and their culture.

### Notes on contributor

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She has been teaching in schools from the early years through to secondary levels and in tertiary institutions for over 18 years. Her interests are in the area of indigenous education, with a particular focus on social justice, inclusive education and human values.

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