Essay:

When literacy can mean life

Author:

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"Let's play hangman," says my eleven year-old daughter, Claire. Heavy rain is falling and so we settle at the kitchen table and with pencil and paper play the word game that has been around longer than anyone can remember.

I look at this flaxen-haired child and her brother, Will, aged ten. Both are such avid readers that I have not the slightest doubt they will find all the answers they choose to seek. They have always loved books. On their birthdays I write stories for them in which they are the main characters, in charge of their destinies as they explore the Galapagos Islands, cross Antarctica or make their way up the Amazon. Before they could write they dictated their stories to their mother and me. We wrote them out and they drew the pictures. When we travel now they fill notebooks with accounts of the adventures we share and their discoveries.

As our game goes on, my thoughts drift to the Aboriginal kids who play a different version of hangman. Full of sad bravado, some kids in remote communities climb to the top of electricity poles to make a gruesome exit from life calculated to outdo their laughing mates, to scoff at death and perhaps at all of us for ignoring their sadness, anger and alienation.

Let me suggest that literacy can change the lives of these children; that literacy is life. But first we need to understand the link between literacy and health.

"The rights of our children can only be achieved in practice if they can sleep peacefully with a full stomach at night," said Cape York leader Noel Pearson, summing up the plight of indigenous children when he addressed Reconciliation Australia's National Reconciliation Planning Workshop in Canberra in May 2005.

What I see constantly in my work in remote Aboriginal communities is chronically malnourished children living under stresses that my own children would find unbearable. In a nation that exports food to the world we allow some of our children to go hungry. The truth is that the children of the first sunrise are usually thought of last.

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American scholar Paul E. Barton argues in his book, *Parsing the Achievement Gap: Baselines for Tracking Progress* (Educational Testing Service, 2003), that, of fourteen major factors contributing to a racial gap in learning in the United States, eight of them occur before children of disadvantaged minorities reach school. Many of these children are way behind even before they begin kindergarten. Of great importance is Barton's finding that hunger, poor nutrition and dangerously low birth weight are important contributors to what can be lifelong under-achievement.

Indigenous Australian children are born with dangerously low birth weights at two and a half times the rate of the rest of Australian children. This is one of the underlying reasons for their disastrous state of education, which is intrinsically connected to the health emergency in the heartland of Australia.

A plague of chronic illnesses known as "Syndrome X" is scything through a whole Aboriginal generation and lining up the next. Like a new Black Death, this cluster of so-called lifestyle illnesses, including diabetes, end-state renal disease, strokes, hypertension and heart disease, is growing at a rapid rate.

At 58, I am usually the oldest man in the street of the red-dirt communities in Arnhem Land. For indigenous men, the median age at death is just 56 and for women 60, about 20 years less than for other Australians. Across the Northern Territory and in many other isolated parts of the country, however, Aboriginal men are dying in their mid-forties. Families experience an almost constant sense of loss. The children endure an endless procession of funerals and grieving, adding more stress and depression to their already troubled lives.

For years some have explained Syndrome X as the consequence of a "weak gene". I heard this same racist excuse for inaction 30 years ago as I filmed for the ABC's *Four Corners* among Native Americans. But this myth has finally been shattered.

Monash University, the Menzies School of Health Research in the Northern Territory and the University of Mississippi examined autopsies of various racial groups and found a fascinating constant among those who had died of kidney disease. It was not a "weak gene". The common factor, Monash's Professor John Bertram told me, was being born a dangerously low-birth-weight baby with fewer nephrons in the kidneys, creating a high risk of chronic illness. These children, even in utero, are being programmed for early-onset illnesses because of their mothers' poor health, malnutrition and lack of education. Surely here is the key to the mystery of Syndrome X and a pointer as to how education can help ease this genuine health crisis in our heartland.

In their landmark study of indigenous health in Western Australia, former Australian of the Year Dr Fiona Stanley and Professor Ted Wilkes describe the disturbing pattern of

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hunger, poor nutrition, sexually transmitted diseases and the high incidence of smoking and alcohol abuse in young pregnant Aboriginal women. They estimate that 49 per cent of indigenous women smoke during pregnancy and 23 per cent continue to drink alcohol. These are two of the major causes of those dangerously low-birth-weight babies. But what distresses the researchers the most is that apparently the health education message has never reached these young Australians or has been ignored. We need to make a far more vigorous and creative educational effort, with messages shaped by indigenous people, to help young pregnant teenagers understand that it is not only their health that is threatened but their unborn children's health, intellect and ability to learn as well.

Doctors have told me that every extra year of education for a young woman may add up to four years to the life expectancy of her child. It's a different take on literacy, isn't it?

Ken Wyatt, Director Aboriginal Health, NSW Department of Health, has said that educating a young woman for an extra year can also reduce the danger of infant mortality when she gives birth by between 7 and 10 per cent. What a staggering thought. Isn't this the most powerful invitation to concentrate on early, life-empowering education for indigenous children? This is what I think of when I say "literacy can mean life."

In the Northern Territory, some Aboriginal communities have illiteracy rates as high as 93 per cent. But this is not a problem only in remote communities. About 70 per cent of Australia's 460,000 indigenous people live in urban areas where most remain severely disadvantaged.

Many of the 30,000 Aboriginal students in NSW schools are at least eighteen months behind in reading and writing by Grade 3. By Grade 7, on average, they are five years behind. The strugglers will drop out of school and try to make their way through life with the literacy level of six year-olds. From Cape York to the Kimberley, in Central Australia and western NSW, this lack of education among indigenous children stands in marked contrast to the high literacy and long life expectancy of other Australian children.

Imagine your own chances. If you can't read you won't understand the label on a bottle of medicine, even if you need that medicine to live. You will be lucky to get a driver's licence. It is likely you will be trapped in a maze of poverty resulting from having only low-paying work or being unemployed and dependent on welfare, feeling life-threatening powerlessness and having wretched health. You are also more likely to have children who will inherit these disadvantages unless, through literacy and opportunity, they can step through the right door to a brighter future.

When the former US Surgeon General, David Satcher, visited Australia a few years ago he was pressed for a solution to the health crisis cutting short Aboriginal lives. His

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answer? Education. Life-skills education creates the necessary motivation and knowledge for individuals to seek to gain control of their lives, an essential first step to better long-term health.

While Native Americans still lag far behind white Americans in education – only 58 per cent complete high school compared with 91 per cent of white Americans – Satcher believes that education has been an essential factor in empowering communities to regain some control over their destinies, including the bringing about of improvements in health.

Filming in the Native American lands back in the early 1970s, I learned that the life expectancy of Native Americans then lagged twelve to sixteen years behind white Americans. Today the gap is three to five years.

This should give Australians hope that education can help close these critical gaps for indigenous children. But first we must educate ourselves to understand the issues.

My daughter, Claire, called me to her room one night, asked me to sit down and then began to read the lines that had captivated her in Anita Heiss's book, *Who am I? The Diary of Mary Talence, Sydney, 1937* (Scholastic Australia, 2001). Mary, an Aboriginal child, had asked her teacher how Captain Cook could "discover Australia" when her people were already here.

Claire and I shared a conversation about how school becomes an alien place when stories make no sense to a student, when the history taught has a time line that the child knows is a lie, when the books ignore colour, context, culture and even sense of place as Aboriginal people know it.

For many indigenous children in cities, rural areas and remote communities, their view of the school has not changed a great deal since the era of The Stolen Generation in which the fictional Mary lives. School to some is still a *gubba* (white man) place, created by those white ghosts who floated into their lives more than two centuries ago. It's the institution from which their grandparents were taken away as children. Many schools might as well be behind high barbed-wire fences because they are not viewed as part of these indigenous communities.

This is not always the fault of overworked principals and teachers. This space between us, this silent apartheid, has long been part of Australian society. It reinforces a widespread Aboriginal view that education is "a white thing".

The belief that school learning is not really for black people is found among other disadvantaged racial minorities. The Institute for Research on Learning in Palo Alto, California, proposes that a school is only a powerful learning environment for children whose values, beliefs and languages coincide with that of the school. In Australia, many

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Aboriginal children do not feel part of the school community and know they are viewed by many teachers as unlikely achievers.

This cultural view of education is one of the essential factors in the economic dominance of one race over another. I think this is Noel Pearson's message in insisting that education ultimately is about "supply and demand".

In their book, *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning* (Simon & Schuster, 2003), Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom examine why some (but not all) minorities see education as the preserve of the dominant social group and also how school systems often reinforce this "culture of failure". The Thernstroms argue that reform is needed on both fronts because a lack of quality education is creating a widening gap in opportunity. Within a few decades, almost 80 per cent of America's well-paid jobs will require tertiary education. Although 87 per cent of Afro-Americans are graduating from high school, they finish Grade 12 reading and writing at a Grade 8 level. This almost guarantees under-achievement, restricts their standard of living and has a marked impact on their health. It is why the Thernstroms conclude that the racial gap in learning is the central civil-rights issue for Americans today.

In the remote communities I work closely with, east of Katherine in the Northern Territory, illiteracy is now threatening the continuity of an ancient culture among the Jawoyn people who are scattered in small settlements of 300 to 400. With great sadness, an elder noted that most of his countrymen and women have to find others to help them write letters as they desperately seek help to save their children from the same fate. "Building the skills of reading and writing is the key to our survival as a people," the Jawoyn elder said.

In the Northern Territory, just 60 Aboriginal students in government schools completed the School Certificate in 2004. The Northern Territory Minister for Education, Syd Stirling, points out that the success of 60 Aboriginal students against all of the odds is in fact a 240 per cent increase since 2001. School attendance and retention have also been creeping up as more than ten thousand Aboriginal students in Northern Territory government schools are introduced to a new program, Accelerated Literacy. The architects of this program, Brian Gray and Wendy Cowey of Charles Darwin University, are convinced it will demystify school for Aboriginal children and improve understanding in the classroom of how learning is a two-way pact. Teachers must be convinced these children can become literate and the children must also believe they have the ability to learn.

As always, educators around the country are divided. Discuss indigenous education and they will explain constructivism, conditioning, behaviorism and Piaget's model of

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child development and learning. You hear Paulo Freire's theories about engaging students with critical questions about where they fit into the world. Some academics still argue fiercely for bilingual education while others say it is a wretched failure when English is the language of the wider society. There are passionate advocates of phonics, whole language and accelerated literacy approaches to the teaching of reading and writing.

Perhaps we waste a great deal of time arguing about the best methods for teaching indigenous children to read and write. The truth is that every human brain is different. The success of most education theories is usually determined in practice by how well they are understood by teacher and student. Adequate training of teachers and equitable funding of schools are every bit as important as the teaching theories. On that there is agreement but the fact remains that, the further you get from our cities, the more educationally disadvantaged are schools and Aboriginal students.

It is all the more impressive to see wonderful teachers such as Mike Puccetti, the principal of Wugularr School in Jawoyn country, achieve truly life-empowering feats with Aboriginal children. A boy who once could barely express himself in any language walked up to me out of the darkness and opened a conversation that I will never forget. He told me how he and his friends had painted some bright pictures because they wanted to help the effort to raise money for books and other tools to build a stronger community.

Noel Pearson's rallying cry to indigenous parents, urging them to demand better education for their children, recognises how decades of disadvantage and despair have created this education malaise. If parents don't encourage their children to learn then it is easy for some teachers to conclude that failure is inevitable.

Educating everyone to the possibilities also means shaping a teaching force capable of meeting the challenges on the front line of this crisis. In the Northern Territory, the Education Department struggles to recruit adequately trained teachers, and many are exhausted and leave within a year of being send to remote communities. We need our most experienced teachers to be willing to work with and learn from children who are often multilingual, living in great social stress and, for the complex reasons I have sketched, likely to be greatly disadvantaged before they even begin school.

Up to 80 per cent of the Jawoyn children have chronic hearing loss caused by persistent, untreated middle-ear infections. Anaemia and other poverty-related conditions weaken concentration and the ability to learn. An increasing number of very young Aboriginal children are diagnosed with depression which, according to a study by the Mater Hospital in Brisbane and the University of Queensland, is linked to their dangerously low birth weights and exposure in utero to the effects of alcohol and tobacco. Some Aboriginal children are still bussed long distances to school and often endure bullying and racism.

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At Tully in North Queensland, where the old walking paths through the rainforest are now dissected by train lines and high-tech farm machinery rumbling across vast acreages of cane fields, I have been working with Aboriginal elder and educator, Ernie Grant, author of the teaching framework, *My Land; My Tracks* (Innisfail District Education Centre, 1998).

Looking into a video camera and measuring his words carefully, Grant explains how education can close the gap between black and white children. "All of the current problems in black and white relations," Grant says, "can be traced back to the notion that 'it didn't happen'."

This brilliant, multi-talented man is 70 years old. He has been a pilot, served in the Australian Army, worked in Papua New Guinea, studied history and anthropology, and now has produced a DVD of *My Land; My Tracks* as a teaching aid for Queensland schools.

Here is one of the new message sticks of our digital age, a DVD that discusses a longer time line of Australian history and the Aboriginal relationship to land, language, culture and community. There is a special emphasis on relationships, spiritual values, animals and bush foods because they all contribute to a different view of the world around us. Grant explains eloquently the Aboriginal sense of place. He is not romanticising the past but believes that it is necessary to acknowledge the strength and resilience of the world's oldest continuous culture before we can comprehend the scale of the threat it is facing today.

The *My Land; My Tracks* project is built on the conviction of black and white educators at the Cairns-based Indigenous Education Training Alliance that we will all benefit by educating our children, and indeed ourselves, to a better understanding of indigenous culture. This can only deepen our appreciation of what it means to live in this land.

Ernie Grant is inspiring and others are following in his tracks. Chris and Grace Sarra, Aboriginal educators from Cherbourg, Queensland, are also championing the idea that indigenous studies are vitally important for all Australians. As part of the Dare to Lead program, they are committed to measurable improvements by indigenous children each year and a teaching force better equipped for what is surely our nation's greatest immediate challenge, as Chris explains elsewhere in this issue.

When my American-born wife, Kim Hoggard, travelled through the heartland of Australia, she too found it hard to believe that we expect Aboriginal children to somehow learn and thrive living in Third World conditions. My children, Claire and Will were astonished to discover that most remote communities had no doctors, pharmacies

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or even decent, affordable food. A shack with a broken stove and fridge, plumbing blocked and in disrepair, a shower in a lean-to at the rear and sometimes fifteen to twenty people sleeping on mattresses inside, is not a place most of us would like to call home.

For children who have always had books and library cards, it was unsettling for Claire and Will to discover homes without books and no public libraries in many Aboriginal communities. Without any prompting from Kim and me, they went looking for suitable books for the youngest children. They painted boxes and wrote letters to the kids and sent them off to an Aboriginal teacher, Lorraine Bennet, who used an old tin shed to start the first preschool in Wugularr. Soon after, the children followed up with more books, early-learning toys and sporting goods sent to Mavis Jumbiri and Yve Weinberg, teachers staffing a new school at Manyallaluk, further east on the dirt track.

Publishers and booksellers began to join this effort. In 2004, Suzy Wilson from Riverbend Books in Brisbane heard of the children's actions and approached me with the idea of establishing a Reader's Challenge to try to build a bridge between children in remote communities and other young Australians. The Readers Challenge was started with the support of the Fred Hollows Foundation to help get books into remote communities, at the same time as encouraging children to read. This extends nationwide in 2006, when the Australian Readers' Challenge is launched in March (www.readerschallenge.com). What the schools in remote areas still desperately need is more helping hands and, in particular, more tutors to give Aboriginal students the time needed to catch up on so much learning. We could do with a whole peace corps if only suitably qualified people could be trained and then display the commitment to pitch camp to help Australia's forgotten children discover the power of literacy.

After the Sydney Olympics, Ian Thorpe established a foundation to support research and treatment to alleviate childhood illness. It soon became clear to him that for indigenous children the key to good health was education. Providing appropriate resources for early learning and for young mothers in remote communities has become a focus of Ian's Fountain for Youth trust. With over half a million dollars raised from the public, another one million has been committed to this education work by the federal government. A new project is Literacy Backpacks for the Jawoyn communities. The backpacks are filled with good reading for all members of the family and include newspapers, magazines and audio books (www.ianthorpesfountainforyouth.com.au).

There is a challenge here, of course, that goes well beyond the first steps of providing the tools to increase literacy. First you have to dismantle the system of silent apartheid that keeps remote communities separated, isolated and impoverished. While the incoming federal president of the ALP, Warren Mundine, argues for a move to far greater private land ownership, Mick Dodson counters that communal land ownership is a

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central tenet of Aboriginality. Each man commands respect in what is developing as another crucial debate over how to change the structures of disadvantage.

But consider this. Both men have the power to articulate these choices in the future course of indigenous life because each has had a first-rate education. The unfinished business of treaties, land ownership and rights to resources no doubt will be passed to a new generation of indigenous men and women. While governments of the day and society itself may swing between the usual inflexible policy choices of assimilation or separation, only indigenous leaders of great power of mind and the very best education have any chance of successful negotiation. With this in mind, we must not delay in taking action to improve the education of indigenous children, because literacy will mean life. ■

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