

Woolaning: an Experiment in Indigenous Education.

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Abstract

This paper is based on recent ethnographic fieldwork at a remote regional boarding school for Aboriginal students of the Daly River region of the Northern Territory. This school shouldered the complex and seemingly contradictory identity of a community managed, independent Christian school, funded by the Federal government.

When it opened its doors in 2002, the College was considered to be the first of its kind, a strategic pilot project of an exciting new 'Total Development' strategy for Indigenous education in the Northern Territory.

This paper will briefly describe the history and philosophy of the College. It will outline some of the theoretical and practical thought behind this unique collaboration between an Aboriginal community, the Parent controlled Christian Schools Association, and the Federal Government.

Some the difficulties and challenges particular to this type of institution will be explored, as well as the more broad ramifications its development has had on Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory.

The paper will conclude with a reflection on the experience of long term ethnographic fieldwork, and consider the contribution that this kind of qualitative methodology can make to educational research, particularly research focussing on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

The study of education, in whatever form it takes fundamentally addresses key theoretical concerns of Anthropology. While definitions of culture abound, and tend to be far from authoritative, the understanding of culture as a learned process is considered a key feature uniting the plethora of culture definitions (Bailey 2002). Some of the most pervasive cultural learning is understood to take place as an individual grows up from childhood to adulthood within certain groups, in a process generally referred to as 'enculturation' or socialisation. As the study of education became cemented as a legitimate sub-genre of the discipline in the late 1960's Wolcott wrote,

"Enculturation perhaps ultimately is *the* dynamic aspect of culture, for it is in the process of incorporating new members into a group that shared and

patterned ways of behaving become distinguishable from idiosyncratic ones.”
(Wolcott 1971:114)

From this perspective, schools of any kind constitute valid and valuable sites of research for anthropologists interested in examining culture creation and transmission. In relation to the schooling of minorities, indigenous groups, or those more generally not necessarily orientated towards ‘dominant middle-class values’ (Wolcott 1971:113) educational institutions also provide a fertile ground for the study of relations of power, resistance and cultural conflict.

The research presented in this paper, is based on long-term (at least 12 months in situ) ethnographic fieldwork, using the traditional anthropological ‘participant observation’ methodology. I found that sharing in the experiences of students and staff on a daily basis was not only a privilege, but also provided an invaluable grounding for the relevance and accuracy of this research.

This paper will focus on just a few key points which distinguish the educational agenda at Woolanang, reflecting on what can be learned from this project. It will discuss the unique inspiration, collaboration, and possibilities that Woolanang Homeland Christian College can be considered to represent, and will conclude with a reflection on the relevance of the ethnographic approach for research in Indigenous education.

Background

The Daly River Region of the Northern Territory is roughly the size of Tasmania. Prior to the opening of Woolanang Homeland Christian College (WHCC) in 2002, there were no secondary schools in the entire area. While statistical data for the region is, due to the high mobility of residents, extremely difficult to obtain, the number of students eligible for secondary school in the Daly River region was estimated by those starting the College at about 500. Having said this, the 2001 Census statistics for the Daly River region show a total of 2884 Indigenous persons between the ages of 10 and 19 (ABS 2001).

Of this 2884 only 881 students in the region were currently enrolled in secondary schooling. This leaves about 70% of young people within the ages of 10-19 not attending secondary school. From the outset, the priority of the College was not to attract those students already attending schools in the cities, such as Kormilda and Yirrara, but rather the group of young people not participating in any kind of high school education.

The driving force behind the development of WHCC has been a small Aboriginal Community located on the western edge of the Litchfield National Park, at a place called ‘Woolanang’. ‘Woolanang’ is a Djerait word meaning ‘ringing’ or ‘singing rock’, which is a reference to the ceremonial importance of the area. The high ground of the tabletop range which runs through the Litchfield National Park, and more particularly the area at Woolanang, is remembered as a place where tribes from all around the region gathered during wet seasons to perform ceremony. The ‘singing’ rock refers to the sounds made by the clapping stones during ceremonial singing and dancing. The reverberation or ‘ringing’ of the ceremonial sounds made at Woolanang symbolise the importance of the events taking place there for the wider region. The plateau and range geographically rise from the landscape, and as the sounds echo across the flood plains of the Daly, so important events which take place at Woolanang are considered to ‘ring out’ as broadly significant for people throughout the region.

The dispersion of tribes from the Litchfield area which occurred as colonial power spread through the Northern Territory is understood to have caused severe disruption to ceremonial routines, as

many people retreated south, with only a few maintaining active links in the area. As ceremonial activity is linked to the maintenance of health and vitality of both people and country, the dislocation from land caused by colonisation is considered to lie at the heart of the trouble and despair afflicting Aboriginal communities in the region (Growden 2005).

During the 1990's Joan Growden, the president of Woolaning Community Inc. became particularly concerned about the educational disadvantage of young people around Daly River out to Port Keats (Wadeye). Despite a population of 2000 people, Wadeye has not been provided with a secondary school, a fact that points clearly to the structural disadvantage facing Aboriginal communities in the region. In 1999, Joan Growden approached the Northern Territory Christian Schools Association (NTCSA) to work with her community as collaborators in a project to develop a regional secondary College.



(NTDE, 2005)

Together they completed a number of feasibility studies, travelling around various communities in region, and lobbying the Department of Education for funding for the project. The Woolaning Community offered the NTCSA a twenty year lease on thirty acres of their land, for a token price, and in February 2002 the Commonwealth Minister for Education, Brendan Nelson announced the government's intention to contribute 5.52 million dollars for the establishment of,

“...a new residential secondary school in a remote Indigenous community in the Northern Territory. The new school will be constructed at the Woolaning Community - 120km south of Darwin.”(Dept of Education 2003)

From this agreement, establishment of the College took place at a breakneck speed, taking its first enrollment of students in June, 2002. Arguably, the school opened long before it was ready, and students and staff were required to live and work in the midst of a construction site. Construction of the first stage of the College did not finish until June 2004; some two years after classes began. Students and staff speak of the early days of the College with a mixture of frustration and fondness; frustration for the potentially unnecessary difficulties it posed, but a fondness for the bond that living

through these conditions forged among members of the school community. One school house parent described her early impressions of life at the College this way,

“It was real, and it wasn’t very pleasant, and... plus the building side of it was going on, the lack of facilities, the expectations on the kids, the... racist comments they used to get, the ...lack of ...places for them to play...it was all...so - wrong, you know? It was all so upside down. But, now that I look back, it created a bonding with the girls that we had, that...will always be there ...tough times, give you that bonding... I think it created a bond. I’m not sure what happens, but it gives you this bonded-ness, but yeah, it was very, very difficult.”

A Unique Inspiration

The development of Woolaning Homeland Christian College (WHCC) has been a unique project at all stages, no more so perhaps than in its initial inspiration. Not the idea of a new government, or committee; rather the College was born of the spiritual vision of one Aboriginal Christian woman, Joan Growden.

This vision revealed to Joan significances of the place at Woolaning previously unknown, especially as it relates to the wider Daly River region and beyond. Part of this vision included a plan for a secondary boarding College for Aboriginal students of the Daly. In 2002, with the first enrolment of students, this part of the vision came to fruition at the Woolaning Homeland Christian College. While the focus of my research has been primarily on the life and culture of this school, it is vitally important to understand WHCC within its context as part of a much broader vision for Woolaning and the Daly River region.

The ‘Woolaning Community Kingdom Building Vision’ (Growden 2005) can be seen as the foundation upon which the College at Woolaning was developed, and continues to function. The mythology of the vision, and the visionary leader, continues to inspire the daily functioning of the College, and work as kind of touchstones to which the community turns when times are hard, or they feel they’ve lost their way. Mary Henry in her studies of school cultures has argued that stories, mythological, and philosophical foundations are of key relevance to understanding school cultures. It is through these stories that particular schools,

“...create and present a story about themselves to attract a clientele and carve out a niche for themselves within an ecology of schools” (Henry 1993:65)

These mythical foundations can be seen to drive a schools development, especially in the case of Woolaning, where at the heart of the mythological foundation lies a vision for the future. Often repeated extraordinary events of the past are key to directing and inspiring people towards an imagined equally potent future (Henry 1993).

Joan describes her experience in June 1999, as an ‘*open vision in the spirit*’ (i.e. not asleep) at Woolaning where she saw written scrolls flying towards her in the arms of cherubim over the ‘Woolaning Hill’, which lies behind the Woolaning Community. They flew over the mountain with God’s glory flowing behind down towards Joan’s home ordaining it as the ‘House of Prayer’ (Growden 2003). Later, this time in a dream, a second ‘similar’ vision came. This vision showed God’s Holy City descending out of heaven to Woolaning.

As the angelic hosts had brought the message to Joan on scrolls, she was ‘directed by the Holy Spirit’ to write down what she had learned in the vision on large sheets of coloured cardboard resembling the visionary scrolls. With these physical scrolls Joan was now able to disseminate the Vision containing ‘the sovereign plan of God’ she was given, to a much wider audience. In her own description of the scrolls, Joan speaks of, *“the vision for the Aboriginal people of this Land....It’s the whole body joining together of divine order and structure of the whole house of God.”*(Growden 2003).



(Joan with scrolls at Woolanang Spring, 2005)

These scrolls are highly complex and fascinating documents for study, which I am just touching on briefly now to explain the unique beginnings of the school at Woolanang, and to emphasize the importance that mythological foundations play not just in the development of a school, but also for the strength of its sustainability. This can be regarded as particularly important in the context of indigenous education in Australia, whose history is littered with disappointment and abandoned ventures.

It has become clear through research at Woolanang, that the concept of a strong and correct foundation can be regarded as particularly important for some Aboriginal educational settings. Further, all schooling programs aimed at indigenous Australians carry the weight of, and are deeply embedded in both pre-colonial and colonial histories. Subsequently, indigenous education cannot be considered in isolation from broader social, political and indeed spiritual issues.

The Visionary experience that forms the foundation of the school’s philosophy makes it clear that ‘traditional’ pre-colonial forms of Aboriginal spirituality also underpin contemporary Aboriginal forms of Christianity. Understandings of the Dreaming, and its social implications are depicted as God ordained structures which have been severely dislocated by colonial processes. To a large degree the vision for the school itself is about restoring to the country the ‘correct’ people and governance systems as set out by Dreaming Law, and also the Christian God. Deviance from pre-colonial life-styles is considered by people at Woolanang to be at the heart of the difficulties that Indigenous Communities face today. Without the restoration of the correct people to the land and

recognition of true gatekeepers and authority figures for that country, any efforts towards improving the social conditions of these communities are considered by people at Woolaning to be doomed to failure. In this way, it is the knowledge that the correct foundations have been laid for the College that enables community members to have ‘faith’ in the school. This kind of faith is essential for ensuring ongoing community support and sustainability for a school.

Staff at Woolaning are constantly encouraged by the willingness of parents to be involved in all aspects of the school. Families of students take an active role in school development as members of the governing council, tutors, teachers and house parents. Parents are invited to stay at the school with their children when possible, and collaborate with staff in matters of discipline. This willingness to participate can be considered to be predicated on a more fundamental ‘faith’ in the project of the College, and a belief that this school offers something that just maybe can really make a difference for the future of their kids.

This point is not made to idealise work at WHCC, which can indeed be considered riddled with complexities and problems of its own. What needs to be highlighted however, is the importance of a foundation considered ‘correct’ and ‘true’ by the community which enables families and students to persevere *despite* the disappointments, challenges and obstacles which inevitably block the way.

In order to persevere and remain committed despite the daily challenges of life at the College, many staff draw strength from their knowledge of the Vision for Woolaning, and the privilege of being a part of the fulfilment of God’s plan in the region. Often when there is confusion, or staff are struggling in their commitment and ability to persevere they turn to Joan, to be reminded of the Vision; why they are at Woolaning and why it is important that they stay. The fact that applications for funding, visits to Canberra to negotiate with government officials, control of buildings and architecture, and requests for attendance and literacy data are all carried out by NTCSA management from their headquarters in Darwin, has meant that for WHCC staff, the NTCSA has become associated with all of the frustrating aspects of running the school. Joan in contrast has come to represent the spiritual heart of the College, with her uncompromising commitment to Aboriginal people of the region.

As a result, the Kingdom Building Vision tends to enjoy full endorsement from WHCC staff, who look to the Vision for evidence of the school’s ‘heroic past’, which also provides them with inspiration for its future. The very existence of the College is considered to be evidence of the Vision’s fulfilment, justifying in a concrete and tangible way their belief that God is with them and that he will finish what has been started at Woolaning. The constancy of the Vision and the role of Joan at WHCC, have come to represent also God’s steadfast commitment to the College despite what often appears to be the chaotic and fleeting nature of existence at Woolaning. One staff member spoke of the College in this way,

“[Woolaning’s] greatest asset was someone’s vision, and that vision’s been applied, and it’s grown. And the people who had the original vision are still involved with it.”

A Unique Collaboration

The concept of WHCC is not easy to describe in a nutshell, and when attempted, the ‘nutshell’ appears somewhat contradictory and incongruous. Despite this, the descriptor that the college carries is that of a ***‘remote, regional, residential boarding school for secondary students in the Daly River region’***. It is a Parent Controlled Christian School falling under the auspices of the Northern

Territory Christian Schools Association (NTCSA), and has been fully funded not privately, or by the Territory government, but rather, by the Commonwealth government.

The description of the Christian inspiration of the College, goes some way towards explaining the collaboration with the NTCSA, a Christian schools association with a philosophical commitment to making Christian education a viable option for all Australian families. The Woolaning Community were attracted to working with the NTCSA for a number of reasons. To begin with, the NTCSA had already established an Indigenous Learning Centre at their Marrara school in Darwin, along with a 'family group homes' strategy for students, cementing Indigenous Education as a priority of the association. In contrast to the dormitory style accommodation of other schools in Darwin, the NTCSA had set up family group homes, each catering for up to twelve students living together with a set of houseparents in various suburbs around Darwin. Marrara's Indigenous Program's Manager expressed it this way,

"The parents from the remote communities were then asking Marrara if they could come up with a better accommodation solution. They wanted a normal house in the suburbs with a mum and dad. And so in 2000 we set up our first family group home for 14 students. That then very quickly caught on, and we ended up with six houses and about 65 students just 12 months later." (ABC 2003)

Members of the Woolaning Community were also aware of the NTCSA's commitment to community management strategies, not just as a projected goal, but as the entire basis of their Parent Controlled Christian schools model. Community management of education is certainly not a new strategy for the NTCSA, but rather has always underpinned their existence. Indeed, as Andrew White then the NTCSA's Indigenous Programs Manager pointed out, *'these are the only kinds of schools we know how to set up'*. One of the key elements of the vision Joan had received for the development of WHCC had been that the College would be run by the community, with a governing board of relevant tribal elders from all over the region.

The Woolaning Community cite the dispersion of tribes from the Woolaning area which occurred during the early colonial era, and subsequent confusion this has created in terms of local authority structures as lying at the heart of difficulties faced by communities in the region today. For them, the restoration of peoples to their traditional homelands and the reinstating of correct tribal leadership is key to turning around the fortunes of their communities. It is also considered to be crucial to the success of the Woolaning Homeland Christian College.

Thus the experience with, and commitment to community management exhibited by the NTCSA showed an affinity to the governance particulars outlined in the Vision received for the school at Woolaning.

It is also important to note that the development of Woolaning Homeland Christian College, was just one element of the much broader agenda of the Vision for Woolaning which Joan received. In its entirety, the Vision also encompasses a wide range of social priorities including health, tourism, business development, church development, the establishment of a bible College, a cattle station, and the bottling of local spring water for sale, just to name a few. Education can be regarded as simply one element, albeit foundational, of an all-encompassing development agenda for the region.

The broad focus of the Woolaning Community, and their Vision for the region also corresponded with the approach of the NTCSA. The NTCSA is committed to what it describes a 'Total Development' approach to education within which the teaching of literacy and numeracy is considered only one part of a 'broad front' of development initiatives.

According to White, a total development approach to education involves the adoption of an holistic strategy taking into account the many challenges faced by indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. In such an approach, secondary education programs must be complimented by efforts in health, early childhood, family and student support, regional development and career planning. The far reaching nature of this approach to education means that the secondary school program itself, is considered only one part of a much wider strategy encompassing several other, and equally critical initiatives.

“Education should be designed within an overall community development framework which includes family support, capacity building, adult training, employment creation and self-management.” (White 2003)

The community development approach to education aims to set students up to be successful in their secondary schooling through early intervention programs before they ever arrive at high school. This is achieved through early childhood education, efforts towards increasing primary school attendance, and health initiatives. The approach also looks beyond school graduation in terms of career planning and the creation of employment opportunities in home communities for the skills students have gained. Thus it becomes evident that the project of reform assumed by the NTCSA, while immediately focussed on the students at the Woolaning site, more broadly takes on nothing less than a transformation the world beyond. The ‘Total Development’ approach coincides with the broad-based agenda set out by the Woolaning Vision, where the education of students at WHCC is seen as part of a larger project for the greater reform and revival of Aboriginal Communities in the Daly River Region.

In this way, the decision by Joan to invite the NTCSA to collaborate with the Woolaning Community for the development of the Woolaning Homeland Christian College can be seen to be based on both spiritual and practical affinities encompassing faith, community management, and community development approaches.

Unique Possibilities

The keenness of the Woolaning Community to collaborate with a Christian Schools association, and the subsequent interest which has been expressed by a number of other Indigenous communities to establish their own schools following the same model, raises interesting questions not just about practical or strategic affinities, but also about the nature of Aboriginal forms of Christianity and contemporary understandings of Aboriginal ‘tradition’.

While an attempt to make clear the boundaries between the separation of church, or religion and state can be regarded as fundamental to the historical development of western democratic models of education, more recently the idea that the spiritual and the secular can be so clearly distinguished has been called into question (see Judge 2002). For Parent Controlled Christian Schools the concept that all education is founded on religious beliefs has always been maintained as a core belief. Richard Edlin, the current Executive Officer (Teacher Education) for Christian Parent Controlled Schools Ltd. regards it as kind of a mission to ‘debunk the myth of religious neutrality in education’ writing,

“Values are always religiously based, even when their advocates refuse to admit to a religious perspective” (Edlin 1999)

Similarly a writer for the Christian Educators Journal (April 1971) writes,

“Human life in it’s entirety is religion; it is service of God or of an idol. Education therefore is never neutral but unfolds in obedience or disobedience to the Lord.”
(Olthius and Zylstra 1971)

Moreover debates about spiritual beliefs, the place they should have in the classroom and secular education has, and continues to form fertile ground for debate and disagreement. What has been interesting in research with Aboriginal families from the Daly region sending their children to school, such concerns about the influence of Christian beliefs in the classroom have not been raised. This, despite the history of missionary schools which includes for many, painful memories of young children sent away to Christian or Catholic boarding school institutions, common for many indigenous families of the ‘Stolen Generation’ era. The question of why families of students at Woolanang are willing to allow their children to attend Christian boarding schools, which even the NTCSA admit bear disturbing parallels to indigenous education policies of the past, is no small conundrum.

Scholars of Aboriginal religious forms in Australia often emphasise the all-encompassing nature of the spiritual.

“[T]here is a close relationship between the religious life and the rest of social life in general.” (Berndt 1999:230)

"We Australian Aborigines make no distinction between the religious and the secular, between the natural and the super-natural. Our religion can be seen as a particular view of the universe and sets of relationships with it; relationships which include people, gods, Spirit, magical power, totems, the land, features of the landscape, living creatures, trees, plants and all physical objects. All of these are, in some sense, potential sources of power.” (Gondarra 1996:43)

Western dichotomies of sacred and profane as clearly distinguishable entities do not generally correlate with ways in which Aboriginal people of the Daly Region reckon experience. Certainly the intermingling of biblical, spiritual, and practical language and priorities in the Woolanang Community Kingdom Building Vision can be seen to exemplify the indistinction between religious and secular interests which has been identified from Stanner onwards as a key characteristic of Aboriginal religions (Keen 2005:76). For those planning the school at Woolanang, learning to read and write in English and future career opportunities, cannot be considered separately from spiritual well-being. This understanding of health impacts on all aspects of life at WHCC.

When things go wrong, students are undisciplined, or other obstacles arise people at Woolanang are inclined to look for the spiritual root of the issue. In practice, this means that prayer vigils, demon possession and witchcraft are common elements of experience at Woolanang taken very seriously by students, parents and staff alike. For families of students at Woolanang, a school which takes into consideration the spiritual realm of all situations constitutes a very different experience of education, but one that is completely rational, indeed helpful.

The fact that the philosophy of the staff at Woolanang is unashamedly ‘Christian’ is for many parents not considered problematic, but rather in its own way, a kind of return to tradition. The Daly River region has a history with the Catholic Church which dates back a number of generations to the nineteenth century. Such an understanding of ‘traditional affiliation’ however has become

problematic for people of the region under Land Rights legislation which requires that people justify themselves as ‘authentic traditional owners’ in order to be awarded land rights.

Britta Duelke’s research in the area around Daly River discusses the complexity of the ways in which land affiliation is understood (see Duelke 2005). The development of the outstation movement in the 1970’s, where some of the groups which had been required to live together at the Daly River Mission moved back to their traditional homelands, saw a revival of pre-colonial forms of religion and governance. While all acknowledged the importance of these homeland areas, not everyone wanted to live there however, choosing instead to stay at the Mission, citing spiritual affiliation to the country there and claiming sites of sacred significance. For the Aboriginal people whose families built the mission at Daly River, the site is understood as a place of historical and contemporary significance. Duelke suggests that this, coupled with intact kinship systems and active adherence to these familial structures continues to provide a sense of continuity and ‘traditional orientation’ for people at Daly River (Duelke 2005:281). While Duelke’s concern is with connections to place, it appears from research at Woolanang that this affiliation with the mission site also constitutes a degree of spiritual affinity with the Christian faith. On one occasion I asked the father of some students at Woolanang, if sending his children to a Christian School caused him any concern. He replied,

“No. My mother, my family were all Christian. As I got older, I sort of went away from that – it’s not a strange thing to me – I know all that. It’s good for my kids to learn that.”

This statement which speaks of a generational affiliation or connection to Christianity of some ‘temporal depth’ raises questions about how Aboriginal ‘tradition’ is understood. While the ramifications of this re-evaluation for Land Rights claims are evident, it also raises questions for educators, and goes some way towards understanding what can at times be perceived as an unlikely alliance between Aboriginal communities and Christian education. For many Aboriginal people Christianity is a familiar part of family life and history. Further, pre-colonial spiritual beliefs incline towards ways of being where the spiritual is not excluded from everyday activity, a stance that sits well with Calvinistic Christian school’s philosophy. For Aboriginal people at Woolanang spiritual beliefs need not necessarily be omitted from school education any more than they would be from ceremonial activity, or political initiatives. The philosophical stance of the Northern Territory Christian School’s Association which insists on the religious nature of ‘everything’ including education finds no objection from Aboriginal people at Woolanang, and can be seen as another element of the dynamic which has enabled these two groups to work together on the Woolanang Homeland Christian College project. Christianity at Woolanang can be considered uniquely particular, used to both revive and reinforce pre-colonial Dreaming Law. The development of the College itself can be viewed as a concrete example of the inextricability of sacred and profane in Aboriginal religions.

Ethnography and Indigenous Education

“Ethnography can shed new light on old problems and ask new questions that will make some of the old problems obsolete. Ethnography cannot do this, however, if it is prematurely killed by the hostility inevitably directed at such more qualitative and more descriptive research methods – methods most professional educators and social scientists have been taught to believe are not acceptable.”(Spindler 1982:4)

The anthropology of education seemed to cement its position as a subfield of the discipline in the 1960's with the 1968 founding of the Council on Anthropology and Education, as a branch of the American Anthropological Association (AAS). Prior to this the anthropology of education had maintained a relatively low profile, carried out by a small number of practitioners such as Spindler and Brameld (see Shimahara 1988).

Following the establishment of the Anthropology of education as a legitimate subfield of the discipline, and the value of ethnographic approaches towards educational research, the so called 'crisis' of Anthropology as a discipline, and more specifically Ethnography as its method, which took place in the 1980's, the popularity of this approach for educational research saw a decline. The ethics of subjecting the 'other' to an academic gaze through ethnographic writing, and an increased awareness of the power relations dynamic in such depictions, affected researcher's enthusiasm for the ethnographic approach within educational research no less than it did in other spheres of the discipline (Skeggs 1999).

More recently however, as the qualitative underpinnings of all knowledge, including that produced by the more traditional 'quantitative' forms of enquiry has been identified, (Giarelli 1988, Walford 2001:1-2) it has been argued that the reflexivity, and accountability necessarily required by the ethnographic approach is precisely that which makes the method an invaluable tool for educational researchers. Skeggs writes that,

"It is the impossibility of not being able to avoid the accusations of exploitation, colonial reproduction and the quagmire of representation and ethics that makes for a reflexive and vigilant researcher." (Skeggs 1999:33)

Despite this, it would appear that in Australia particularly, long-term ethnographic studies of schooling experiences remain few and far between. In the early 1970's Sommerlad completed an ethnographic study of the early stages of the Kormilda school project in Darwin (see Sommerlad 1976). This school which opened in 1967 is described by Sommerlad as **'a concerted stab at assimilation'** (Sommerlad 1976:1) and was intended to provide academic and social 'post-primary' education for promising indigenous students who had successfully completed primary school. During the eleven months in 1970 that Sommerlad lived and conducted research at Kormilda, the College enrolled students from 38 different communities and suburbs, with a total of 170 students.

The main focus of Sommerlad's study are the 'discontinuities' between life in student's home communities and life at Kormilda, and the subsequent 'identity crisis', resulting in students becoming marginal members of both communities. She found that the structures for living at Kormilda, including curriculum content, leisure activities or value hierarchy, were based on a deficit model of Aboriginal culture, which communicated a negative attitude towards life in home communities (Sommerlad 1976:130).

"The failure of the College to provide any reinforcement for Aboriginal identity was perhaps the most disturbing element to me... It is against this background that Kormilda College seemed particularly dysfunctional since it appeared to be devaluing the worth of this identity and seeking to replace it..." (Sommerlad 1976:17)

It was the marginalization of students within both western society as well within their home communities that Sommerlad saw as the key problem with Kormilda's approach. She quotes Lewin, who argues that it is not the belonging to many groups that causes identity problems, but rather the

‘uncertainty of belonging’. She argued for fundamental changes in the ways in which governments conceptualised indigenous education stating that,

“Until some form of secondary education is available in the Aboriginal townships and resource centres, Aboriginal choice has little meaning. We therefore recommend, as a matter of urgency, a study of the feasibility of developing local secondary – type education (as distinct from post-primary) at least for the larger concentrations of Aboriginal population throughout the Territory...Until such a feasibility study has been completed, and at least one pilot study has taken place, no further residential colleges of the Kormilda type should be contemplated.” (Duke and Sommerlad 1976:56)

The obvious relevance of Sommerlad’s some 35 year old observations to the contemporary context of indigenous education in Northern Territory is somewhat disturbing in itself. What is relevant to this paper however is that since Sommerlad’s 1970 study, decades have passed without any further long term ethnographic study of schools in Australia. This reality has been influenced by a wide range of factors including a governmental emphasis on measurement and the statistical analysis of learning ‘outcomes’, as opposed to investigations of the constitutive experience of education. Logistical considerations of the length of time and subsequently money required by long-term ethnographic studies, has also resulted in the perception of ethnography as a prohibitively impractical methodological approach.

While certainly not an exhaustive or infallible methodology, it would appear that the ethnographic approach has much to offer the field of educational research. I would argue that ethnographic accounts of day to day life at schools such as Woolaning provide an important counterbalance to the statistical data that dominates educational research. Particularly in the case of indigenous education, where cross-cultural understanding and the negotiation of alterity are considered key to learning outcomes (see Harris and Malin 1997), a contextual analysis to illuminate the sometimes depressing statistics of indigenous educational achievement appears particularly pertinent. Contextualisation of indigenous learning outcomes not only ensures a more richly informed and possibly more accurate basis for interpreting statistical data, ethnographic research also ‘humanises’ data in a way that can enable readers to see beyond tables and figures to the everyday struggles and complexities of life in a given context. The long term relationships and tacit understandings of community life that long term research engenders can be seen to reduce the distance between researcher and the lived experience of those being researched, resulting in potentially less alienating and more accessible research findings (see Goodson and Walker 1988).

Nicholls’, Crowley and Watt’s critique of the contemporary relevance of the ‘Aboriginal Learning Styles’ theory revealed the potential for this approach to lead to the reinforcement of ideas regarding an unchanging, monolithic ‘Aboriginal culture’, clearly bounded and oppositional to mainstream non-Aboriginal Australian society (Nicholls, Crowley, and Watt 1996). They argue that this approach also fails to account for the historical and contemporary social context of racism, dispossession and disadvantage that no level of English literacy can overcome on its own.

The fetishization of education as the cure-all for social disadvantage is a common pitfall, particularly among those educational practitioners and others who also must live and work within the structural constraints which have created contexts of disadvantage. Partington (1996) discusses the unhelpful dichotomy which results from an exclusive focus either on ‘learning styles’ or ‘social oppression’ in educational research and argues for a flexible approach which takes into account differences among and within Aboriginal communities. The ethnographic focus on the local and particular can be seen

to correspond to these kinds of requirements. At the same, the social structures which may inhibit educational achievement are also impossible to avoid.

As an ethnographer at a 'remote' regional boarding school, I was struck by its fundamentally contingent and tenuous nature. The College's very existence was dependent upon the sometimes conflicting agendas of state and federal governments, Daly River regional communities, the Christian Schools Association, various family groups, not to mention the students themselves! The ethnographic approach provides a helpful means of focussing on the local and particular, while at the same time taking into account broader social issues which impact on daily life in a given context.

While the benefits and shortfalls of the ethnographic approach can and have been argued in detail, from questions of validity to the politics of representation (Walford 2002), it can be argued that the approach does indeed offer a unique perspective which can be regarded as particularly useful for indigenous educational research. The in depth, located nature of ethnographic research provides a kind of illumination for the statistical outcomes which often bewilder policy makers, and others further removed from the actual context. Considering what is regarded as the 'unsatisfactory' state of indigenous education across Australia, ethnographic research can be considered a helpful tool to augment other kinds of research providing a clearer, more comprehensible picture of the complexities and challenges which those involved in indigenous education at all levels face.

Beyond this, the relatively long-term nature of ethnographic research can be seen as particularly useful in research which concerns Aboriginal communities. Before embarking on fieldwork, my supervisor often reminded me, *'Remember, you won't even be a person for six months!'* Indeed, it was certainly several months of living at Woolaning before I began to make connections and be understood as a 'real person' by community members. This phenomenon can be linked to traditional Aboriginal understandings of relationships, which require some kind of familial connection before one can relate adequately. However, this is further compounded by a history of researchers, 'whitefellas', and government officials who are seen to breeze in and out of Aboriginal communities. So familiar are staff at Woolaning with newcomers who speak of their passionate commitment to indigenous education, only to leave a short time later, that they speak of not bothering to 'get to know' new people at Woolaning until at least six months have passed. This is not so much a stance of arrogance, but more a measure taken in a context of multiple pressures and demands to guard against disappointment and wasted time. This context of understandable wariness and cynicism regarding the intentions of outsiders creates a wall between a researcher and school environment which can only be removed over a period of time. As ethnographic fieldwork continues a researcher is able to reach a depth of familiarity which gives community members confidence that they will be able to understand their struggles and experience with some degree of meaning. It is in this context of mutual trust and respect, built over a period of time, that researcher and school communities can collaborate in significant research.

While certainly not heralding some kind of saviour for research into indigenous education, I hope that these reflections on ethnographic fieldwork go some way towards revealing a few of the ways in which this approach remains relevant to the discipline, and can be considered particularly helpful in certain indigenous educational contexts.

Conclusion

To conclude, Woolaning Homeland Christian College is yet to secure funding to complete the final stages of their school, which would enable enrolments to increase from 50 to 80 students. Even at full strength the College can only hope to deliver high school education for a proportion of students

in the Daly River region. There are elements of the way in which the College functions that can be considered inefficient, contradictory, and even unsustainable. What has become clear through research at Woolaning however is the strength that an educational facility can attain when it is based on a spiritually firm foundation; a foundation that families, communities, and staff have 'faith' in. The College at Woolaning has been an indigenous initiative from its inception, providing a vision for the future of Aboriginal students in the Daly River region that communities as well as a range of independent bodies recognised as a genuine prospect, and were subsequently willing to support.

A particular challenge for Woolaning in the future will be the struggle to remain true to the initial vision of a regional, culturally relevant school, governed by a council of appropriate 'gatekeepers' or custodians for the country at Woolaning.

Requests from other communities in the Northern Territory to develop their own Colleges along similar lines however, suggests that the word of what is taking place at Woolaning, is indeed 'ringing out', as the name suggests. The significance of place in the context of indigenous education should not be underestimated. At Woolaning, the re-gathering of young and old people at this site of traditional meeting and learning is considered to be crucial to the restoration of the health and well-being of both people and country in the Daly River region. Students at Woolaning are not simply learning to read and write in English, but are also re-learning a sense of belonging to the area, drawing strength from this reconnection to a vital homeland.

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