



Success- according to whom?

Perceptions of success differ according to cultural context. Sam Osborne and John Guenther provide insight into the role of language within success, self efficacy and education, stating “Language is the verbalisation of the most sensitive and deeply nuanced elements of a collective understanding of the world, providing a platform for shared meaning, making and expression of internalised values.”³² This conceptual thinking provides insight into the incompatible cultural values and the education system enforced by Western Society. In recent discussion with Anangu (Pitjantjatjara³³) educators, it was found that the Pitjantjatjara language does not have any words that resemble ‘aspiration’ or ‘success’, and more broadly offers no conceptual support to explain these complex concepts.³⁴ This collective non-engagement indicates that a conversation, rather than dictating should occur in regards to educational outcomes of Indigenous students, having a ripple effect on self efficacy beliefs. On the other hand, in discussion with Kevin “Gavi” Duncan success was a known term, yet when asking for his definition, focused on how the individuals see themselves; their self-concept. Interestingly Gavi stated, “Everyone loves to have success, but everyone should be real with how they achieve it and the outcome of that success”³⁵. In this he makes a clear distinction that success isn't the aim, or the outcome, rather the precursor to purpose, contrasting questionnaire respondents where, when defining success, ‘happiness’ as an outcome was the identifiable characteristic in the majority along with ‘achieving your goals’³⁶. When comparing these perceptions of success through language, it is evident inherent values to the cultures have a direct influence.

Due to these contrasting perceptions, attainment of success too contrasts with self-evident effects on the treatment of Aboriginals and is a problematic cause of issues regarding self-efficacy. 13 years of

³¹ Interview 2016 -Reid

³² Osborne, S & Guenther, J 2013, ‘Red Dirt Thinking on Aspiration and Success’, *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, vol. 42, no. 2, 17 October, pp. 88-99

³³ The Pitjantjatjara are located in the northwest of South Australia, extending across the border into the Northern Territory

³⁴ ibid

³⁵ Interview 2016- Gavi

³⁶ Questionnaire – Q3

schooling, compiled into three and a half weeks of exams to receive a scaled number needed for acceptance into university, confirms Western success to be measured by the ATAR rank, and as Interviewee Allan Reid specifically states, it is “how far up that rank you are”³⁷. This convention contrasted the interviewee’s micro experience in the indigenous community with “family trumping education; the importance of the family was placed above the importance of education”, as I too observed in Nganmarriyanga. This experience affirmed Gavi’s response, yet a growing understanding about the influence of imposed Western values in urban locations came to surface as he explains “well, actually in today’s society success is a priority for some Aboriginal people. They want to be proven that they can do it just as much as a Non-Indigenous person.”³⁸ This desire to achieve success by Western measures is Aboriginals asserting their self-efficacy, not necessarily for the purpose of being measured against Westerners in terms of cultural values, but rather for the purpose of human rights; to deter prevalent racism. Hanlen provides an example of how racism exists under the umbrella of miscommunication and misunderstanding. She explains how a group of Non-Indigenous student teachers, when looking at an Aboriginal form of cultural literacy (kangaroo sign) made a judgment saying ‘that is so primitive, they even have the tail going the wrong way’. Yet what they failed to recognise was it was a sign for the locals pointing down the hill to the waterhole, not as a piece of ‘art’.³⁹ There is a desire by Aboriginals for their culture to be recognised as a success in itself; to be viewed from the correct cultural lens.

As for the education...

Within Aboriginal communities, education primarily exists not to strengthen the individual, rather the community, which in turn, strengthens the individuals’ identity, as they feel a sense of belonging. While there exists numerous amounts of Indigenous Australian communities, each with their own culture, the process of education over the past 40,000 years has continued to exist in its original form, with change existing as a way of refinement rather than with the consideration or objective of growth,⁴⁰ reinforced as Gavi states “we couldn’t really advance because our law and kinship structure, which is our family system, stopped us from advancing as such.”⁴¹ Within Gavi’s language of ‘advance’ a Western opinion shaped by ethnocentric notions of progress and modernization can be understood, with change being viewed as linear and progressing towards modern, Western individualistic capitalism. The socialisation agent of education within Indigenous communities is all encompassing, acting as a single rite of passage determined *by* the group and *for* the group. It is made apparent education needs to focus around relationships, and strengthening

³⁷ Interview 2016- Reid

³⁸ Interview 2016 - Gavi

³⁹ Interview 2016- Hanlen

⁴⁰ ‘Ep. 3’ 2014, DVD, First Contact, SBS, 20 November.

⁴¹ Interview 2016 - Gavi

these relationships for real progress to occur. This has been achieved amongst individual Aboriginal groups as Gavi explains, “Traditional practice is that elders are responsible for educating but I think everyone has a role... Everyone is a teacher. Everyone can teach your child about your history. Our culture is based on that communal way of teaching”⁴², however it is the next step of intercultural communication which needs to be achieved; facilitating growth of the educational scope learnt, for a sustainable cooperative society into the future. Resistance to teaching does exist, however society must seriously consider what drives this, as opposed to what they personally perceive the issue to be. Allan Reid speaks of how “Once you’ve got their trust you can start to work on teaching them, on educating them as well”, with his personal experience lending him to notice the difficulty of achieving this in low-socioeconomic communities⁴³. With vast distinctions in the values attached to the purpose of education across Aboriginal and Western society, as I myself experienced travelling to remote Nganmarriyanga, it is necessary to understand building trust as a precursor to teaching. However this can only occur when the hegemonic society view Aboriginal peoples through their own measures of success and praise them for their cultural identity.

This value contrasts to Western, urban ideologies of capitalism, in which the family has abdicated the responsibility of ‘educating’ to the government.⁴⁴ The social process of education for Western society is achieved through institutionalised structures, with the main form being school. Today, Western civilisation is teaching students about the power of the individual to ‘succeed’, with 72% of questionnaire respondents valuing personal success over the success of the community⁴⁵. The Western education system has been based on the commencement of the industrial era⁴⁶, in which the emergent generation is now being trained to be better than their predecessors. This introduces inherent hierarchies not prevalent in Aboriginal society as Gavi explains his knowledge of the interaction that occurred with Captain Arthur Phillip saying, “There is no hierarchy. We didn’t have this concept of a leader. There is no individual person as Phillip was. He was an individual who deemed himself a leader.”⁴⁷ The desire for continual enhancement of society has resulted in ever-changing, widespread values. This can be understood through Durkheim’s theory of the Division of labor.⁴⁸ As we become more progressive as a society, the ability to deviate becomes easier, resulting in specialisation within particular fields. The social process of education within the Indigenous

⁴² Interview 2016 - Gavi

⁴³ Interview 2016 - Reid

⁴⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012, Year Book Australia, cat. no. 1301.0, ABS, Canberra, accessed 28 November 2015

⁴⁵ Questionnaire- Q6

⁴⁶ We Are The People Movie 2009, Has education changed since the Industrial Revolution?, online video, 17 November, accessed 28 November 2015

⁴⁷ Interview 2016 - Gavi

⁴⁸ Hunt, M 2012, ‘Emile Durkheim’s Theories: Functionalism, Anomie and Division of Labor’, Study.Com, online video, accessed 28 November 2015

community has been based upon the obligation to sustain, and not necessarily modify the status quo. In traditional societies, such as remote Indigenous groups, there continues to be a common conscience of shared values and knowledge, acting as a direct contrast to individualistic Western beliefs. This has caused a tendency to discount Aboriginals perceptions of their ability to succeed.

The commodification of education in Western societies now acts as a mechanism for social stratification based on wealth. The education system in Australia is a socialising process. The student enrolls to be socialised to the standards as predetermined by an authorised body to meet certain intellectual standards, into the dominant norms of the master society. If the individual does not learn how to play the system, or refuse to participate then it is too bad. Past inequity of human rights, failing to recognise Aboriginals as human beings with dignity, thought to be a ‘dying race’⁴⁹ has left a gap, almost too large to fill as Aboriginals attempt to undergo cultural adaptation to Western education to be ‘successful’. Reid explains this continuity over time, stating ‘still in our town there are trust issues in the institution of schooling. There are still a lot of people alive who were taken from those same buildings to never see their families again, so the importance of real history in Aboriginal culture has propelled these sort of memories.’⁵⁰ Racism and poverty cut down Indigenous Australians life chances, life choice and the quality of their lives. Western education at a macro level is dictating what is perceived as important. This mass scale consumption of regimented Western education to bring social order is perceived as a sterile contrast to the agency of education in Aboriginal communities. This includes the importance of Indigenous Australians as a race. Thus, while Aboriginals have a sense of self and ‘success’ within their own cultural traditions, this unconscious racism may be resulting in ‘failure’ of a people group. This conceptual thinking is shown in this account from the Stolen Generations. “Even though I had a good education with (adoptive family) and I went to college, there was just this feeling that I did not belong there. The best day of my life was when I met my brothers because I felt like I belonged and I finally had family” (Confidential Evidence number 384⁵¹).

Western education as a system allows for selectivity of what is learnt. A variety is presented before the student, and then the student is permitted to make a choice, discarding the unused choices on offer. Regarding curriculum on Indigenous Australians, questionnaire respondents made aware the lack of knowledge learnt through their schooling⁵², which raises ethical concerns as to whether society is taking responsibility for the rights of people. So deep is the deficit applied, that education

⁴⁹ Racism No Way n.d., Understanding racism, NSW Government, Department of Education, accessed 28 November 2015

⁵⁰ Interview 2016 - Reid

⁵¹ Bird, op. cit

⁵² Questionnaire - Q11

policies direct education ‘away’ or ‘out’ of the Indigenous subject, disabling key components of cultural production⁵³. Participants of the focus groups noted this tokenistic treatment of the indigenous community as people and as a subject within school.⁵⁴ Western society is entrenched in ethnocentric attitudes, with schooling institutions lacking provision of empowerment of Indigenous Australians.

Western institutions are educating Aboriginals in remote locations yet limited content is actually being learnt. Before introducing Western education into remote cultural groups, we must understand their perspective and Aboriginal cultural integrity. Current societies have “unconsciously absorbed racial assumptions and attitudes about Aboriginal people” in which we need to counterattack ‘students’ (thinking) in ethnocentric ways”.⁵⁵ Society needs to realise, as Hanlen states, that “teachers act as the instrument of the law” and this lack of trust from the authoritative source is creating struggle. The Board Of Studies NSW states “there needs to be a participation of Aboriginal parents and community members...regarding education services for their children”, not only to “achieve equity but also achieve a strengthening of Aboriginal identity”.⁵⁶ This exemplifies the need for effective intercultural communication in relation to education, for the sustainability of Aboriginal identity, thus self efficacy beliefs, thus success. Reid offers insight on the positive outcomes as after establishing a trusting relationship one child commented “He’s not black. Not one bit. But you can trust him.”⁵⁷ This child also, for the first time in his life, accepted his punishment (for misbehaving in school) and believed he did something wrong. This self responsibility only resulted after the trust was established; once his identity was valued. This parallels when an Indigenous Australian heard “Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal students sing(ing) songs in assembly in Bundjalung⁵⁸”, they “felt proud” that their “language and culture had finally been accepted into the school community”.⁵⁹ Thus future strategies of enhancing self-efficacy require a focus on adopting a view of cultural relativism.



⁵³ Fogarty, W 2015, ‘A view beyond review: challenging assumptions in indigenous education development’, UNESCO Observatory Multi-Disciplinary Journal in the Arts, vol. 4, no. 2

⁵⁴ Focus Group

⁵⁵ Elvin, R (Ed.) 1997, *Making A Difference: a guide to the Education-related Recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody*, Board Of Studies NSW, Sydney NSW.

⁵⁶ ibid

⁵⁷ Interview 2016 - Reid

⁵⁸ The Bundjalung language was spoken in the north-east corner of New South Wales and the south-eastern corner in Queensland

⁵⁹ Elvin, R (Ed.) 1997, *Making A Difference: a guide to the Education-related Recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody*, Board Of Studies NSW, Sydney NSW , pp 29