

A Serious Dialogue with Noel Pearson's *Radical Hope: Education and Equality in Australia*

BARRY OSBORNE WITH ELIZABETH OSBORNE

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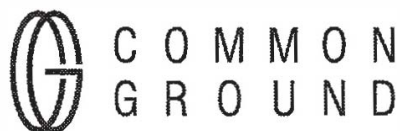
Interdisciplinary Social Sciences

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First published in 2013 in Champaign, Illinois, USA
by Common Ground Publishing LLC
as part of the Interdisciplinary Social Sciences Book Series

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Osborne, Barry, 1942-

A serious dialogue with Noel Pearson's Radical hope: education and equality in Australia / Barry Osborne.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-61229-188-8 (pbk : alk. paper) -- ISBN 978-1-61229-189-5 (pdf)

1. Aboriginal Australians--Education. 2. Educational equalization--Australia. 3. Pearson, Noel, 1965- Radical hope. I. Title.

LC3501.A3O83 2013
370.994--dc23

2013007029

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Preface

This book had very humble beginnings. When I picked up Noel Pearson's article, I was impressed by its breadth and scope. At the same time I had some niggling doubts about parts of what he wrote.

I jotted down some of the parts that concerned me as someone who has worked in various areas of Torres Strait Islander education for many years. My intent was to write a journal article to raise my concerns. I am retired and there is no academic press for me to publish. I did not want to defend what I had previously done as a teacher, researcher, consultant or university lecturer. Rather I wanted to raise issues that seemed important around some of what Noel proposed. The humble journal article grew like Topsy until it reached its current incarnation.

Some of that growth occurred serendipitously. I stumbled upon two of the key articles that contextualise the Pearson agenda more widely – Tingle's (2012a) and Stiglitz's (2010). The fields in which these two authors write are outside any expertise I have been educated in or indeed which I have read deeply at all. Nevertheless, if what they wrote in these two articles stands up to rigorous critique by others more skilled in the areas than me, then what they have to say has important ramifications not only for Indigenous education but for education across Australia.

Readers may be puzzled by the authorship of this book. It is written from my personal perspective as an educator, but my wife Elizabeth has been an integral part of my work and this book. Her area of expertise is as an oral historian of Torres Strait. She also researched and wrote key elements of the history of Torres Strait up to 2009 for inclusion in a subject I taught at James Cook University until the end of 2011. As well, she has seven years' experience as a volunteer literacy teacher in a school for Indigenous students. Accordingly she is well aware of the challenges in the field. So she has been an excellent sounding board as a well-informed outsider to the field. What is more, as a foster mother to several Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal children, she knows experientially many of the

issues and heartache associated with educating them and standing against the racism they confronted.

My wife has been acutely aware of education issues throughout my career as a teacher, researcher and lecturer. And in the process of bringing this book through gestation to birth, she has been incredibly important – challenging me to explain what did not make sense to her, tightening my argument, probing me for evidence of what I had thought was self-evident or widely known. Then she proofread, prodded and encouraged. It seems to me that her contribution was crucial enough to find acknowledgement on the front page, rather than in a brief acknowledgement elsewhere. Her contribution has been crucial and deeply appreciated. Fortunately Common Ground accepted my reasoning.

Chapter 1: Introduction

There is considerable tension in Australian public life as I write. In a context of a major economic downturn around the world, there is a minority federal government, a public angry with politicians (Tingle 2012a), a report recommending major reform of funding for schooling (Gonski 2012), various calls for reconciliation between white and Indigenous Australians via constitutional reform (for example, Langton in Robinson 2012), and calls for an end to passive welfare (Pearson 2009a). The press has been replete with opinions about Pearson and his plans for Cape York Aboriginal communities and the education of their children. This book has as its central focus Pearson's 2009a paper on *Radical Hope: Education and equality in Australia*, which was published in *Quarterly Essay* (35). The subsequent issue of *Quarterly Essay* (36) contained responses from eight noted Australians and further comments on their responses by Pearson, which I will also incorporate.

Focus and Approach

Within a specific time and space, this book examines key parts of what Pearson has written – predominantly the educational component. My detailed academic analysis places this work in a wider context. I do this for a diverse audience as a would-be “serious” person, a term appropriated from Pearson's call for Cape York Aborigines to be “serious people” to imagine a new future and work to “maintain the hard places [they] call home ... [and their] languages, traditions and knowledge” (Pearson 2009a, 11). As much as I would like to see this Radical Hope of cultural renewal blossom, I am not Aboriginal and so I see no place for me in his call for this important work. Nonetheless it is my intent to dialogue about Indigenous education in a reflexive sense (Bourdieu 1992; Sarup 1988) by interrogating my role/biases/subjectivities in the process of selecting for and writing this book. After more than four decades in Indigenous education I might

have some worthwhile inputs into what Pearson has written about education to further the dialogue he calls for.

I intend to weave together three strands into my argument. The first strand incorporates my personal journey, much as Pearson includes his in *Radical Hope*, initially as classroom teacher in Torres Strait then as an academic and consultant within Torres Strait. Although Cape York Aboriginal communities are different from each other and Torres Strait Islander communities are diverse as well as being different from Aborigines, all these groups share some common histories and challenges.

The second strand is academic. It comprises elements of Pearson's arguments and in some cases contrary evidence. My sources for this academic strand include evidence-based research as well as newspaper articles that are rarely referenced so that details can be cross-examined. Since Pearson is a prolific newspaper columnist I needed to delve into such material to follow through on his ideas, to trace their development and consistencies over time.

The third strand deals with the context of schooling in time and place. In particular, it sketches some of the current debates about schooling; higher education; the power or diminishing power of politicians; the global financial crisis; globalisation and other issues in the here and now. They all provide a challenging environment to work towards *Radical Hope* in both community renewal and in education in the particular place of Cape York. Ignoring such a complex context at this time probably condemns initiatives to improve matters for Indigenous Australians to ongoing failure.

Noel Pearson is a formidable force in Australian Indigenous affairs, including in education. He has worked and agonised over Indigenous issues in lucid, far-reaching ways to tackle the many challenges facing Aboriginal Australians particularly in Cape York communities. What is more, he has challenged and continues to challenge basic assumptions about the parlous state of Indigenous affairs and what might be done about it. Not only that, he has led and continues to lead a variety of coalface reforms based on his persuasive analysis of the origins of the current situation and why things fail to improve for remote Indigenous communities. He is an outspoken, hands-on theoretician – a public intellectual (Apple 1993). That is why his *Radical Hope* essay (Pearson 2009a) is so important.

Pearson is also controversial. There have been a series of opinion pieces in major newspapers: some are critical of his person and his ways of dealing with people (Koch 2012; Cadzow 2012). Others are supportive of elements of what he proposes (Gilbert 2012; Langton 2012). I am avoiding this *ad hominem* debate in order to examine the issues that Pearson has raised, his analysis of them and in some way to seek progress in the various reforms/strategies he recommends and is implementing in the area of education for Aboriginal students in remote Cape York Peninsula. He writes well beyond the canvas of education. However, I restrict myself to it because the education of Indigenous students has been my field since 1968.

Some of Pearson's Background

Before I examine Pearson's analysis and several of his claims, let us consider some of his background as evidenced in his own writings because as expansive as *Radical Hope* is it does not, indeed cannot, explain all that Pearson has sought to do, nor does it elaborate on much of who he is. In order to incorporate more of him and the history of his projects I read much of his work published prior to *Radical Hope*. I conclude that he came to his educational understandings first as an Indigenous person, as a school student, as a member of an Indigenous community and as a lawyer/historian/anthropologist. He sees the values and relationships associated with Aboriginal law have been lost (Pearson 2009a, 23). From a land rights campaigner he broadened his gaze to the outrageous social problems (pp. 23-25) to condemn issues like "passive welfare and grog and drugs [that] are finally tearing our society apart" (Pearson 2000, v), that have corrupted values, relationships and responsibilities (p. 19). In the same monograph he notes the close link between the "economic and social" (p. 31) and "the inability of government to tackle issues in a holistic way" (pp. 40-41). He identifies four types of leadership (pp. 49-51); namely "white dictator"; "black dictator"; "white saviour/servant" and "black saviour/servant"; and proposes "new models of leadership sharing power" (p. 57). Such leadership would pervade "all levels of society, and all citizens in an active democracy [would] take responsibility for the state of their society and its direction" (p. 52).

He sees this kind of leadership as needing to "establish a partnership interface between outside government and the Aboriginal people of Cape York Peninsula" (Pearson 2000, 70) and establishing "economic development" (p. 83) via "engaging in the real market economy" (pp. 89-91) – rather than "the 'gammon' passive economy that exists" (pp. 27-28). There is not a lot here that deals directly with education except identifying it as one of the many problems needing to be confronted namely that "our children do not participate in the education system anywhere near as successfully as other Australian children" (p. 15) and identifying the need for "a vision for children" to involve an ambition for education (p. 61). "Clearly we need to develop and maintain a vision for the future of our children in Cape York Peninsula. This is our most important planning task as leaders of our region" (p. 61).

Most of the above is explicit or implicit in the *Radical Hope* (Pearson 2009a) essay with education as one central concern, but I have sketched it in for three reasons. The first is that it provides some of the history and compelling breadth of Pearson's concerns/analyses. The second is that he sees these issues incisively as holistically interrelated and requiring attention on multiple fronts, rather than as individual hurdles to jump. The third is to stress that because he had yet to deal with the specifics of schooling in 2000, it indicates that he has come from a broad social analysis to embrace primary schooling specifically within that holistic context whilst continuing to work on other components of the big picture, like welfare reform and economic development to tackle poverty and home ownership in lieu of dependency on welfare housing.

There is nothing wrong with this trajectory of trialing strategies as he goes, indeed it creates a person developing and refining fundamental understandings of the big picture that is experientially informed, clearly stated and compelling. In

the process, he provides an holistic scope of the field with which few can compare.

Some of My Background

My trajectory is entirely the opposite. Having grown up in Adelaide I had no contact with any Indigenous people until my late teens – until I was 21, I had met only Pastor Doug Nicholls, had heard Harold Blair sing and saw two Aboriginal footballers playing in the South Australian Football League. Only once during my pre-service teacher training from 1960-1963, were Aborigines mentioned but there was no mention of Torres Strait or its people. After three years' teaching in regional South Australia followed by five years on Thursday Island, I knew I could not teach Torres Strait Islanders despite my best efforts and theirs. I ultimately did post graduate study to learn better ways to teach these students. Then in a new role as a lecturer I sought to help pre-service teachers avoid some of the pitfalls I fell into teaching across cultures if they were appointed to a Torres Strait school. I also assisted Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal pre-service teacher education students to improve their learning outcomes and obtain full qualifications while sustaining their natal cultures. Along the way I came to understand the bigger picture of how societal forces and schooling marginalised and continue to marginalise the two original peoples of our country.

Thus Pearson went from the big picture, grounded in specific communities, which he is reframing to include a focus on schools and quality teaching while continuing to reform various elements of the big picture (dealing with welfare dependency and community dysfunction – as he used to call it). I went from classroom teaching, focusing on best practice. From being a narrowly focused teacher (seeing the poverty, overcrowding and poor nutrition outside Thursday Island State High School but about which we were powerless to do anything) I became a lecturer/researcher who ultimately developed a much wider understanding of the big picture, having started off from a narrow technicist research base. Schooling's role in continuing marginalisation of Indigenous Australians is now called euphemistically the "gap" which is discursively apolitical. Besides I am well aware of other issues than narrowing the gap, always now officially quantified in terms of numeracy, literacy narrowly defined, attendance, retention to and success in year twelve, and school to work transitions.

And Now *Radical Hope* – An Overview

Noel Pearson's (2009a) article *Radical Hope: Education and Equality in Australia* in Quarterly Essay (35) is wide-ranging, insightful, and an important call for "serious people" (p. 11) to rebuild Indigenous cultures/communities in his remote part of Australia, and identifies many shortcomings of schooling provision in such communities. Before continuing, I am compelled to point out that he knows well the challenges and progress in the four Cape York communities he is intimately connected with, but the title of *Radical Hope* implies/suggests a much broader agenda. The first section – Prologue – covers eleven pages and the article concludes with a three page Epilogue: Stanner Redux. The remaining 91 pages are my main focus because the prologue and the epilogue focus on ways forward

for serious Aboriginal people rather than on a place where I have insider knowledge at several levels – education.

Pearson makes it very clear in *Radical Hope* that education is critical for his people, but he does not stick exclusively to that topic even though the forthright and wide meanderings repeatedly return to matters of education. These include a section on the unpublished research work of the late Aboriginal academic Maria Lane, who builds a case against welfare dependency and decries culturally appropriate schooling (pp. 31-34). He also describes elements of his own schooling (pp. 35-38).

As examples of his meanderings beyond schooling, Pearson spends many pages on Barack Obama, and his vision of No Excuses (indeed Pearson had trialed an aspect of No Excuses in the Cape York schools) and the lack of An Even Keel in education interspersed with aspects of his ongoing search for solutions to educating the Indigenous children and adolescents of Cape York. Then comes a section called Ground Hog Day in which he criticises the state government for poor policy and re-cycling that poor policy in new guises. He also has a Returning to the Cape York section where he cites his commitment to the notion that “If the student has not learned, the teacher has not taught” (p. 35). This leads into his discussion of Siegfried ‘Ziggy’ Engelmann and the case for Direct Instruction to provide quality instruction in order partly to overcome the difficulty of attracting and keeping quality teachers in remote Cape York. Engelmann’s Direct Instruction provides scripted lessons that new teachers can readily adopt with the Direct Instruction support mechanisms even if a staff member leaves after a brief stint. Quality instruction is hence not teacher dependent. His next section is “The Cultural Hearth“ which deals with mother tongue and cultural maintenance in a context of participation in the real market economy. Discussion continues under a heading of “The Dialectics of Education Policy Debates” that has a section on schools as class sorting machines. Prior to the Epilogue he concludes with a Section called “No Excuses on an Uneven Keel”. Hence, the article is broad and insightful even surgically analytical.

Moreover, Pearson offers a potential set of solutions at the policy (political) level. There is much to recommend his article, including his take on remote Indigenous community renewal, “no excuses” for school failure and his description of the difficulty of attracting and sustaining skilled and committed teachers to provide quality education in remote places like Cape York. However, I investigate more closely four of his key claims: 1) the Left-liberal’s creation of passive welfare and its fostering the dumbing down of what teachers offer Indigenous students; 2) the role of culture, biculturalism, mother tongue and culturally appropriate curriculum in education; 3) failing to close the educational gap because of rapid changes to Education Queensland policies on Indigenous education associated with a lack of its bureaucratic memory; and 4) difficulties of providing quality instruction in remote Indigenous communities. Before I deal with each of these issues in separate chapters (three to six), in chapter two I provide a context; a personal background; as well as a brief history of schooling in Torres Strait with which I have been intimately associated; options that had been available to me over time as a teacher, a teacher educator and as a school volunteer; and knowledge-constitutive interests to encourage the serious reader to interrogate what I write.

Initially my musings on *Radical Hope* as outlined in Chapter 2 emanated from my experiences of teaching Torres Strait Islander high school students, subsequent research into their education, and helping to prepare pre-service teachers to teach Indigenous Australian students via what I and other researchers call culturally relevant pedagogy. Then I discovered the subsequent reactions to Pearson's paper in *Quarterly Essay* (36) by eight people from various backgrounds, including political, academic, anthropological, educational, bureaucratic, and political journalism. Where what they write relates directly to my initial musings, I incorporate their ideas and analyse them in Chapter 7 – before drawing some of the issues together in Chapter 8, which also deals with the implications and possible ways forward. Finally Chapter 9 places all of the previous discussion in time and space as we seek ways forward.