

## EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT: THE FUTURE FOR ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

WITH RESPONSES FROM:

*Peta Goldberg, Roderic Lacey and Maurice Ryan*

The subject of employment and education in Aboriginal communities is one close to my heart. I am convinced that in any Aboriginal community, employment and education are at the heart of most of the problems. Solve these and you will have worked a minor miracle. I am just one of a long line of people who have considered these matters and I know that I am possibly no closer to any solution to the myriad of problems that abound in all small Aboriginal communities. Yet they are problems that I see daily. I liken these communities to a fast running train spearing downhill. The more difficulties that present in everyday life, the more Aboriginal people seek refuge in mind-numbing solutions such as grog, gunja or denial of personal aims and objectives. When the brakes are not applied, the faster the train goes. Inevitably the crash will come.

Employment and education are two of the most sought after objectives of governments ever eager to put band-aids on the Aboriginal problems. Yet in many cases I believe the simplest solution is often overlooked. Solutions are often based on Caucasian culture that can be extremely complex. To be successful any such solution is invariably seen as far reaching and all embracing. But often the self-doubts, caution and reserve of the country Aboriginal person are not considered.

It is often said that Aboriginal communities were provided for social reasons not economic. I believe community leaders are trying to make the best of their situations and with the help of governments, are introducing training and employment opportunities that were not available a generation ago. To the credit of communities and governments the level of opportunity has never been better. The availability of secondary education is available to all children regardless of family economics or background. Yet if this is so, why are many communities now slowly drowning in pools of despair, well-meant welfare systems and low personal self-regard? Why is the level of youth suicide apparently rising? The level of education appears to be dropping. Why?

The answers are complex and relate to lack of family support, student self-discipline, unsympathetic school systems, ready supply of alcohol and drugs, and increasing jealousy between

those who have and those who have not and the current welfare dependency. I believe authorities need to closely examine the application rate of those attending secondary institutions. In the first years after primary, the enrolment of young Aboriginal students from remote communities is high but there is a sharp drop off as they start to progress. There is often little family support, especially for those used to the closeness of the community. I believe school authorities do not understand the fears that abound in city institutions for the kid from the bush when, possibly for the first time, they have a need for the exercise of self-discipline.

The student dreams of home and the relatively little discipline of the community. As the homesickness and difficulties of attaining an education far from home increase, so does the attraction of that life back home. Do nothing but what the heart feels. To a young person who has often had very little family support or encouragement, there is simply nothing to challenge the immediate dream of a life of indolence back with the mates far from demanding teachers and schoolwork. There is nothing exciting or even logical about school life or studies or even life in the larger urban centres compared to fishing, hanging around with mates or the grown up world of grog and gunja. And they certainly know how to get back there! Soon the community hears the wail of the teachers or principal of the city secondary school announcing the expulsion for misbehaviour of the erstwhile student. The parent often has little choice. Back comes the former student to a future of what?

We all accept that education is the cornerstone of opportunity. Without it what do the young have? A world of CDEP (Community Development Employment Projects) or welfare that beckons with little hope. No wonder it's often all too hard. In an article printed in the February 2000 edition of *ATSIC News*, Bob Collins stated, "the dominant issue linked to poor and deteriorating educational outcomes is poor and deteriorating attendance at school. The pattern that has developed across the Territory is for sporadic attendance up to Year 7 at which point students drop out of the education system completely." As a community school principal and community leader, I could not agree more.

I believe the welfare systems of today, while well meaning in intent, are sowing the very roots of destruction of Aboriginal people. Welfare is not just about handing out money. Welfare is viewed by Aboriginal people as the total abrogation of personal responsibility for themselves and their children. Through welfare any vestige of culture is slowly being eroded. Welfare means someone else takes responsibility. The schools are responsible for education, not the parents. The community clinic is responsible for health matters, not the individual. The community store will ensure they do not starve and councils will ensure there is always housing. If a small child dies through poor diet, it is not the fault of the mother who largely fed her coke and ice cream, but the clinic.

While we may find these examples hard to accept, they are found throughout all communities, even those of a larger urban nature. Welfare takes away the responsibility from the people. Governments, community authorities and welfare organisations will always ensure food and shelter. There is no room for individual thought and often family values crumble. The family has lost its power and life plan.

Other problems pertain to race and culture. If a person tries hard to achieve any success and attains a measure of secure employment through education, begins to amass some items as are common in the mainstream population such as a car, boat and so forth, he or she will be ridiculed by their Aboriginal peers as a "white fella" until they accept that it is easier to "go with the flow". They will be reminded constantly they have lost their culture and reviled in the general community. The tall poppy syndrome is alive and well.

Yet communities today have opportunities unheard of when I was a young girl. Most can supply traineeships in all manner of courses. From driving heavy machinery or building maintenance to mechanics, from gaining skills in the commercial enterprises that many areas have, to learning in the Council office. The opportunities in any community far outweigh those a young person could possibly get in the larger urban centres where he or she would be competing with others on a greater scale.

Why don't more take up these offerings? Perhaps hopelessness sets in from a lack of schooling or the breakdown in family and community values. As a result school attendance can often be irregular. As a principal of a community school, one of the more difficult and frustrating responsibilities is to get children to even attend school regularly. Most parents understand but often simply do not seem to care or feel it is school responsibility. Often they may not even know where their children are. As I

said at the outset, solve the education problems and the rest should fall into place. To further quote Bob Collins, "what all this means at the end of the day is that poor literacy is the greatest single barrier to the employment of those Aboriginal people seeking employment."

Education is the cornerstone of the communities. Their very future depends on it. Resolve education and the remainder follow. Health and standard of living generally will improve. Let me quote you some examples. For many years at Nauiyu, our mechanic has been involved in training young people to become qualified mechanical tradesmen. He has had some limited success. However, any training he can offer is dependent on the standard of literacy his apprentice brings to the job. If he details the workings of a starter motor one afternoon, it may be a further twelve months before that apprentice has to again consider a similar job. If the tradesman is not readily available, will the apprentice consult a manual to recall how to break down and repair the item? Often his standard of literacy is such that it is a barrier to carrying out this simple task. No wonder much of what is learnt is learnt by rote.

Again, our housing manager has had Year Eleven students return to the community unable to decipher a building plan, read a measuring tape or count the number of louvres to be replaced in house number... Which one? Where is their future and that of their community without even a basic education? Education should also be concerned about communication and comprehension. The language of industry is English and it therefore must follow that all education must follow an English-based curriculum. While it is culturally acceptable to be able to converse in language and this surely should be encouraged, if a person is unable to converse and comprehend English then any future employment prospects for them will be negligible in today's society, especially outside the community.

Another area I have problems with is the apparent need for governments and visiting government advisers to always adopt the most complex resolution to problems. I believe we should not ignore the simplest and smallest steps towards any solution even though they may be the hardest to take. For example, some years ago the Nauiyu council was concerned at the increasing number of community residents who preferred to sit down on the dole rather than work on community CDEP. As a first step, council office staff were instructed not to help fill out any unemployment forms. The unemployment numbers dropped and the level of CDEP participants rose. If any one here has had to fill in any type of unemployment form, you can

readily appreciate the complexity of them.

Now that trend is reversing and there appears to be a growing number of people on the dole. I believe that ATSIC's policy that CDEP is a voluntary scheme and participants can exercise their right to accept unemployment benefits and sit in the sun while their neighbour works on the community grader is a further nail in the coffin.

Recently, a bricklaying team came to Nauiyu. Their laborer was asked if he wanted help to move some sand. He replied indignantly that was his job and it would only take ten minutes. Was it that he took pride in his job or was it that he knew that if he did not achieve these simple tasks he faced the sack? Consider this scenario in relation to CDEP participants. If the supervisor suggested that only one person would be needed to drive a truck or if he demanded an explanation why it took an hour to get a packet of nails from a nearby shed, it is likely the participant would simply shrug his shoulders and walk away. He may apply for a transfer to another CDEP program or he may simply go back on the dole. Either way he knows the welfare system will ensure he gets an income. Under CDEP no one can be sacked. And so life continues without anybody having to take any responsibility for it. I suggest that a mandatory CDEP (if positions were available) or a work for the dole system, while perhaps unpalatable to Canberra theorists, might be an ultimate saving grace for many communities. However this must be linked to education.

Again some years ago, many communities encouraged their people to become teachers. Not by setting off to study to be a teacher but by offering the intermediate step of learning to become an assistant teacher. Each class had its teacher assisted by an Aboriginal assistant teacher. However, the policy of Territory education has changed. In a mood for aboriginalisation, our educational administrators have decreed where there is an Aboriginal teacher, there is no need for assistants. A white teacher can have an Aboriginal assistant but it is considered an Aboriginal teacher does not need one. However this policy does not take language into consideration. In communities where there is only one language, this policy might be acceptable.

At Nauiyu where there are at least ten different dialects, the situation can be quite intolerable. Teaching positions are dependent on student attendances. If students do not attend regularly for any reason, finance for education is cut and so the circle continues.

A further result of the reduction in assistant

teachers is there are fewer Aboriginal people now trying to become educated as teachers. Why cannot more funds be offered to communities to encourage education and a return to reality? Few young persons without encouragement in education at an early age can accept positions such as the community Building Manager or the Town Clerk that is often the European ideals. Yet such positions of responsibility are achievable if they have a reasonable and realistic level of education. Reintroduce some intermediate positions in areas such as schools; add a dash of local encouragement and return a measure of responsibility to families for their own destiny and the present trend of dependency on others may be reversed.

In our community there are many examples of personal achievement: mechanical apprenticeships completed albeit in seven years instead of four; teachers graduating who were once assistants. But these are largely of a past generation. There are very few of the young ones today accepting the offerings that are dangled before them. Why? Because the steps are too big. Achieving a qualification as a tradesman carpenter is often unthinkable or unattainable without basic education based on a realistic curriculum. The communities are currently on a road to nowhere. Aboriginal education needs to be thoroughly reexamined. Without a realistic degree of literacy, any opportunity is really just window dressing to any possible aspirant. Education is the key to the future.

For how long are we going to pay lip service to this ideal?

#### A RELIGIOUS EDUCATOR RESPONDS TO MIRIAM-ROSE UNGUNMERR-BAUMANN

*Peta Goldberg*

Pope John Paul II, in November 2001, issued a formal apology for what he called "shameful injustice" done to indigenous peoples in Australia, New Zealand and the islands of the South Pacific. Throughout the document, *Ecclesia in Oceania*, the Pope apologises for imposing a particular vision of Christ onto Aborigines and asks forgiveness of Aboriginal people. He particularly mentions the stolen generation and laments the role some people within the church played in injustices of the past. For many Aboriginal people the apology marked a new beginning for relations between indigenous people and the church. The apology had been a long time in coming and represents a change in thinking from the early days of white Australian settlement when many believed that Aboriginal people needed to be purified or cleansed of their Aboriginality. *Ecclesia in Oceania* not only offers a formal apology but also challenges all of us to work actively for reconciliation and justice. It is in this

context that I respond to Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann's paper.

I can, as someone who has spent a short period of time living in a central Queensland Aboriginal Community, share a little of Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann's disenchantment with current forms of education and employment for Aboriginal people in remote communities. The band-aid solution of the welfare system does appear in Ungunmerr-Baumann's words "to be destroying Aboriginal people". Ungunmerr-Baumann says that the welfare system is slowly eroding culture and it will not be until families are empowered to reclaim what is their rightful responsibility that change will take place. The picture that Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann paints is not the usual one presented in a religious education unit on Aboriginal spirituality and yet if true reconciliation is to take place these and other issues must be addressed.

We need to examine closely the ways in which we present Aboriginal people, their culture and their spiritualities. As a religious educator, I am conscious of the difficulties teachers can face in preparing units of work on "Aboriginal Spirituality". At the outset we need to acknowledge that we stand outside Aboriginal culture even though we also know that in some strange, paradoxical way Aboriginal spirituality is part of our landscape too. We should not forget that Aboriginal spiritualities were evolving in 1788 and continued to develop so we must not equate Aboriginal spiritualities today with some reconstruction of spirituality available two hundred years ago. It is very difficult to teach about Aboriginal spirituality without considering Aboriginal history and particularly Aboriginal people's relationship to the land. Those of us who belong to the Christian church might need to uncover something of the history of early Christian missionary interaction with Aboriginal people and even be prepared to accept some responsibility for what were unfortunate interactions with limited understanding on their part.

#### Some Suggestions for Teaching

One of the initial difficulties in presenting such a unit is the limited access we might have to a wide range of resources that accurately portray the immense diversity within and among Aboriginal peoples, culture and spiritualities.

- When teaching about the Dreaming, for example, it would be important to use a variety of stories which reflect the experiences of Aboriginal people and the land to which they belong. Try to find stories of the local area as well as the well-known and popular stories of Aboriginal people from other parts of Australia.

- Students often respond well to situations that they perceive as "real life". Invite a guest speaker belonging to the local Aboriginal community to speak to your class about their life and what it means to them to be an Indigenous Australian.
- Aboriginal art styles vary. Try to display a diversity of images from all parts of Australia, from coastal communities to the central desert as well as examples from your local Aboriginal community.
- Rather than relying solely on text-based materials about Aboriginal people, invite a dance group to perform for your class and have them explain the story told in the dance. (Such performances would usually attract a fee).
- Be aware of cultural lore and laws – for example, many groups do not allow females to play a didgeridoo.
- Remember that Aboriginal people are the "primary" source of information and that textbooks, while important, are secondary sources.
- When speaking to Aboriginal people be aware of varying cultural customs. For example, for some people direct eye contact can appear confrontational; for others, silence is a sign of respect and does not indicate lack of interest or knowledge.

Many of us we are only just beginning to learn about Aboriginal spiritualities. To create units of work to use with students is a challenging but very worthwhile task. My hope is that we continue to develop and expand the teaching of these units so that a better and broader understanding of Aboriginal spiritualities can be developed.

#### Conclusion

In 1974, Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann painted the Stations of the Cross in the renovated church at Daly River Mission, Northern Territory and challenged us to view the passion of Jesus through indigenous eyes. Today, she challenges us via an impassioned plea to work for change in Aboriginal education. If as religious educators we can provide the students in our classes with an appreciation of Aboriginal spiritualities we would be beginning the journey to reconciliation and justice.

#### MIRIAM-ROSE UNGUNMERR-BAUMANN: A RESPONSE

Roderic Lacey

We live in challenging times. On 26 May 2002, we celebrated Sorry Day, four years after *The Bringing Them Home Inquiry* into the Stolen Generations was tabled in the Federal Parliament. We marked, on 3 June, the tenth anniversary of the epic High Court Mabo decision, which challenged the validity of the foundation doctrine of *terra nullius*.

At this time of commemoration, all Australians need to ask themselves: What has changed for Indigenous Australians in regard to Reconciliation and Native Title? Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, in her statement on meanings of and consequences for education and employment for Aboriginal people, speaks from the inside. Her voice from inside her own experience and her life among the Nauiyu community, is full of deep sorrow and promise.

For her, the only practical way forward for Aboriginal people is for viable policies and strategies that allow and support real and basic opportunities for both education and employment. Her vision, in the face of demeaning and disempowering welfare payments, is destruction of her people:

I believe the welfare systems of today, while well meaning in intent, are sowing the very roots of destruction of Aboriginal people. Welfare is viewed by Aboriginal people as the total abrogation of personal responsibility for themselves and their children. Through welfare any vestige of culture is slowly being eroded.

Strong words from a strong woman leader! She confirms Bob Collins' words;

What all this means at the end of the day is that poor literacy is the greatest single barrier to the employment of those Aboriginal people seeking employment.

In other words, these two realities are inexorably bound together. Her voice again:

Education is the cornerstone of the communities. Their very future depends on it.

Since 1788, with the coming of colonisation and settlement into ancestral lands, indigenous Australians have become entrapped in that process of dispossession and settlement. We need to hear and read the cry by a person of insight and compassion, spoken from "the other side of the frontier". Despite Henry Reynolds' writings from that other side, and his plea "Why Weren't We Told?", there is another perspective. As Sally Morgan teaches in her Foreword to *The Lost Children*, edited by Coral Edwards and Peter Read (1989):

And it is important for you, the listener, because, like it or not, we are part of you. We have to find a way of living together in this country, and that will only come when our hearts, minds and wills are set towards reconciliation.

In one sense, Aboriginal voices, like those of Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann and Sally Morgan, are opening up disturbing and important ways of being Australian. While non-indigenous Australians, as the inheritors of the benefits of dispossession, alienation and oppression, can try to face and acknowledge our "black" history (which brings us shame), these women are giving us other perspectives on that history.

Miriam-Rose teaches us that in 2002, there are many indigenous Australians in the north, as well as in the cities of the south, who are living broken lives, whose hope and responsibility for their futures are not really available to them. These citizens are both dispossessed of country, life and dignity, and are entrapped in a situation, where those, who are the majority, have a stranglehold on power, wealth and opportunity.

Hers is a voice, not so much "from the other side", but for inside, inside the trap of power and possibility. And Sally Morgan: like it or not *we are part of you*. We are the one people, the one country, so we all have the power to go and enter into partnerships with those dispossessed, and to create together spaces and opportunities for those others to take hold of their own responsibility for change, on their terms. It is not "them and us".

Miriam-Rose's final question:

For how long are we going to pay lip service to this ideal?

The future and hope for our response to her question lie in our hands, all our hands.

#### **WELFARE AND EDUCATION: A RESPONSE TO MIRIAM-ROSE UNGUNMERR-BAUMANN**

*Maurice Ryan*

Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann's discussion raises issues of responsibility, compassion, guilt, dignity, work and community engagement – the kind of issues in which religious educators take a firm interest. I think she has much to teach religious educators about the way to respond to the complex concerns she identifies. Ungunmerr-Baumann says that the kinds of welfare systems put in place to assist people living in indigenous communities are mostly well meaning but ultimately destructive. When others have taken up this issue of welfare dependency, their response has too often been posed in terms of a simple either/or choice: social responsibility for individual lives has not worked; individual responsibility must be the answer – each individual must assume responsibility for their own welfare. This kind of dualistic thinking seems to be well represented among contemporary Western governments,

especially in Australia. You can pick up a newspaper most days to find such logic being expressed. Ungunmerr-Baumann's article suggests an alternative to this simplistic notion.

The reasons why well-intentioned welfare schemes have not been successful in indigenous communities are the same reasons they would not work in any community. The ready provision of "sit-down" money cannot be a remedy for people who are marginalised or disconnected from their communities and from Australian life. Whether the proponent of the system of welfare was the church, the state or some other corporation, a fundamental misunderstanding of the human person seems to have been perpetuated in the way that indigenous communities have been approached by the dominant culture. In order to overcome this misunderstanding, an appropriate balance must be found between the exercise of social responsibility for the welfare of others and the necessity for individual persons to exercise their own freedom and choose their own path in life.

Implementing such balanced policies requires different skills from those practised by benevolent bureaucrats, as Ungunmerr-Baumann implies. Finding appropriate balance between corporate responsibility and individual needs requires the exercise of reasonable authority. It demands assistance from those who possess greater power and resources in the community. Ungunmerr-Baumann's suggestions for employment and education are not a continuation of the stifling benevolence of present policies; they are recognition of the complexities of power and responsibility.

New models of assistance to those marginalised from majority culture are coming forward. As one instance, consider the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh which pioneered a form of micro-credit that extends small loans – sometimes as little as a few dollars – to people who invest in enterprises such as purchasing a cow and selling the milk or setting up a market stall that returns a profit to the stallholder. Interestingly, the large majority of the Grameen Bank's customers are women who tend to

spend their profits on their children's health and education. Such schemes attempt to foster a spirit of shared responsibility for welfare. They seek to find a balance between the handout mentality and the abandonment of those in need.

Where such a balancing line between welfare and self-responsibility ought to be drawn will require further consideration and discussion. What Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann teaches us is that the issue of welfare reform is not a simple either/or choice; her reforms imply the need for many gradations or stages along a spectrum of responsibility. Particular circumstances of power and potential will need to be taken into account in order to determine the point of engagement along this spectrum. Nor should it be forgotten that all of us are only ever one slip away from total dependence on the care of others.

Religious educators can explore with their students the issues raised by her case study: the meaning of human dignity, the value of work, the limits of the responsibility we hold for one another, and the way we share the abundant resources of money, power and knowledge possessed by the Australian community.

*\*Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann is a tribal elder, an artist and Principal of St Francis Xavier School, Nauiyu, Daly River, Northern Territory. Miriam-Rose received an AM for her service to the community of Nauiyu Nambiyu (Daly River) through the promotion of Aboriginal education and Aboriginal art. She was awarded an honorary doctorate by NTU "...in recognition of her outstanding service and contribution to the Northern Territory..."*

**The respondents:**

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