

Increasing Inclusion in Educational Research

A continuing debate: Valuing the 'Cosmoscape'?

'So these children learnt that in starry quietness they could be still, know things and keep their identity, because the totemic world is cosmic through and through' (*Dark Sparklers*, 2003, p.41).



By Ken Masters

I HAVE READ WITH GREAT INTEREST

the open debate conducted in *RI* around increasing the inclusion of Indigenous people as educational researchers. I introduce a major 'Sage on the stage', Bill Yidumduma Harney, Senior Lawman Elder, of the Wardaman people of Northern Territory, Australia, and his book, written with Hugh C. Cairns in 2003 and revised in 2004: *Dark Sparklers*. I suggest that he and his people could well be 'included' as educational researchers in terms of this debate. To help him in his theorising and practice, this Elder coined his concept of the 'cosmoscape'. (*Dark Sparklers*, 2003, p. xvii). This is described but not defined in Cairns's Glossary as 'visible, observed, concrete landscape and night sky perceived as a whole and seen and reflected on all together' (*Dark Sparklers*, 2003). This is virtually interchangeable with Alan Rayner's notion of 'NaturesScope'; the expression of a 'natural inclusional understanding' (Rayner, 2012). I claim that, as with much else in this extraordinary book,

the quotations above provide evidence within living standards of judgement of effective, life-enhancing energy/values/learning within his Aboriginal community; his work with his Tribe and Hugh Cairns can surely be taken seriously as educational research within Jack Whitehead's understanding of the 'educational'.

Dark Sparklers tells us about the re-introduction of authentic Cosmic-Totemic traditional culture, including Aboriginal Astronomical knowledge, at remote Menngen in Northern Territory, Australia, following recovery of some Wardaman Lands under the Land Acts. This enables returning alienated Aboriginal youth, via authentic initiation over years, to recover identity in such a way as to live viably, with abundance, in at least some of the 'realities' which they may be called upon more or less to inhabit. In doing this I suggest that these 'returners' thereby co-creatively 're-moralise', and 're-value', following their prior alienated experience of acculturated poverty within consumer capitalism, neo-Darwinist education into competitive individualism, neo-colonialism. (McTaggart, 1992, pp. 47-61, quoting Broudy, 1982).

Pip Bruce Ferguson and

Moira Laidlaw initiated the debate in *RI* 102 and 104 by proposing, in New Zealand and Chinese contexts respectively, that Indigenous Elders with serious educational roles should be recognised as educational researchers in the Academy. I respond to some of their points, and to those of Je Kan Adler in *RI* 104, via focussing on, and comparing, Whitehead's and Rayner's contributions.

In *RI* 103, Whitehead argued for an 'epistemological transformation in what counts as Educational Research'. It should include knowledge 'not easily encapsulated within written text ... and therefore inappropriately excluded' (Whitehead, 2008, pp.16-17). The Elder's writing in *Dark Sparklers* is from oral transcription, metaphoric, allusive. He called for 'new standards of judgement in what counts as educational research in Journals of Educational Research'. Later, he extends his argument to express the importance of visual data which 'emphasises the importance of flows of life-affirming energy with values in creating a safe 'space' for relating, enquiring, learning and researching in educational relationships'. There is plenty of striking visual data in *Dark Sparklers* evidencing life-affirming energy. Whitehead

distinguishes 'educational' from 'education': it's not about policy or discipline-based theorising but an alternative epistemology which explains the 'educational influences of individuals in their own learning, in the learning of others and in the learning of social formations'. The experience of Initiates in *Dark Sparklers* (p. xx) is based around discovering an 'alternative' perception of the 'Really-real' in the 'cosmoscape'. Reducing 'educational research to policy or practice' may discount 'the importance of educational researchers as 'knowledge creators.' By coining and sharing the 'cosmoscape' etc., Bill Yidumduma Harney creates and enables the embodied assimilation of knowledge. In *RI* 110, Whitehead suggests that 'explanatory principles include the energy-flowing values that individuals use to give meaning and purpose to their lives' (Whitehead, 2010, pp 25-26). This is at the heart of the Elder's approach. He suggests 'an organic view of educational theory which is living in the public conversation of those constituting professional practice'. The Ceremonies, in their transformational effectiveness, are private, with alternative epistemology and ontology evidenced in the book. He has now brought 'the Stories' within 'public conversation'. The 'Living Standards of Judgement' are presently accountable within the Tribe, and via the Wardaman Corporation to the Australian State. Values are Inclusional, in that they do not come from 'abstract rationality'; rather from dynamic interfaces' of the cosmoscape and its related,

embodied 'guidelines' of Totem and Tabu, based on the 'thrival of the fitting' (Rayner, 2002). I suggest that the 'cosmoscape' and adjacent metaphors are 'explanatory principles' bringing meaning and purpose around a sense of intangible presence within the inclusion of space in Rayner's sense.

Rayner contributes to the debate in *RI* 109. He argues that we can move away from research based on 'rationalistic generalisation', fixed-frame analysis, the exclusion of the observer, the separation of Teacher from Student (and treating students like 'competitive survival machines'), towards his interpretation of the educational. This, critically, involves the 'co-creative fluid dynamic transformation of all through all in receptive spatial context', 'a natural philosophy of kindness', 'space as non-resistive presence', 'natural flow-form' with fluidity, openness, circulation, improvisation, and inextricability (Rayner, 2010, pp. 26-27). *Dark Sparklers* exhibits all this. 'Transformation' expresses its heart. Space is not conceived as 'empty', or as 'connecting the separate/djscrete'. The 'cosmoscape' emphasises the connectivity of earth/cosmos. The mystery of 'Source' is maintained. There is no reduction of the Presences in the Stories/Night Sky to a single, Christian one; to 'God' as a Singularity, or a spurious homogeneous Unity or Whole. The Stories are un-reified metaphor, not economically packaged, reductive, intellectual abstraction. This is a striking and moving account of 'natural inclusion' which can inspire. Their observer, Cairns, is 'included'; there is

no 'spurious objectification'.

You are reading this because Bill Yidumduma Harney and other Elders have assented. He may himself, now or later, indicate how/if he wishes to relate to being taken seriously as a knowledge creator, an educational researcher in a context where the epistemological is political. It may well not be appropriate for him to 'engage'. But just what might 'inclusion'/ recognition mean in practical terms? This Elder has co-authored three books with one more to come. His Stories are being archived by an American university. He has been an Artist in Residence within the Law Faculty of Bond University (his paintings hang in the Australian Federal Parliament). He teaches the cosmoscape, with Abor, to visitors at extraordinary Rock Art sites via Dreamtime Stories, and also in colleges in Australia and the USA. He and his people collaborate with local universities in environmental projects. How might respect and appreciation be offered to him for his significant educational research contribution to his People's learning, and to encouraging us all to 'find our cosmoscapes', demonstrating the viability of the authentic via his educational conversation; and to Indigenous people who have evidenced substantial educational research in their own terms, but are not educated into the literacy and abstract rationality of the (neo-colonial?) university, and for whom an academic career as such is not the point? Perhaps appreciation can lead to dissemination. ●

References

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