



Review: Noel Pearson's *Radical Hope*

Guy Rundle | Oct 23, 2009

In the days before email, every editor would regard the pile of mail submissions on the desk with a shudder — what fresh horrors awaited? After a few years, you could tell the maddies by sight. They preferred green ink, their submissions were an inch thick. Should you venture into them you would find that they all did the same thing in different ways. They attempted to explain current reality — everything from tariff protection to urban planning — in a theoretical extravaganza that began with either the Big Bang or a theory of neural operation, and proceeded from there.

Noel Pearson is no green ink maddie, but he comes pretty close to sounding like one in *Radical Hope*, an essay ostensibly on education, equality and race in Australia, but which manages to take in the question of whether quantum mechanics supersedes Engels dialectical materialist approach to dualism, how cognitive science has disproved Lockean rationalism, and how Western education would have been thoroughly transformed had the world listened to an obscure educationist named Engelmann.

There is everything in this — everything but an account of the failure of education in the far north that would give the reader sufficient evidence to judge the charges Pearson is making against it.

The essay begins with a compelling section reflecting on the an oft-hidden but essential component of any healthy society — what conditions are necessary for people in it to be serious, for their norms and values to have meaning? But the core of the work is an argument for a certain type of educational practice to be adopted in indigenous learning — a mode called “direct instruction” as pioneered by a US educationist named Siegfried Engelmann and some colleagues.

In the great split between analytic and synthetic approaches to learning, Engelmann comes firmly down on the analytic side. Everything should be broken down into bits, learning should be scripted so it is bad-teacher-proof, phonics is essential to reading instruction etc.

DI has made solid gains in areas where it can be applied — especially compared to overly synthetic approaches, which focus on creativity and jumping towards totalities — whole words, whole concepts. It has also generated a cult of proselytisers who ignore its shortcomings and limits.

Pearson has jumped into this cult boots and all, declaring Engelmann to be the “Darwin” of education, and adopting the myth of the zigheads, as Engelmann’s followers are sometimes known — that testing of DI was discontinued in the US out of political pressure and nefariousness.

Actually it was mostly budget cuts to everything. And DI's acolytes rarely mention its shortcomings, chief among them that it provides little basis for more synthetic thinking at higher levels. In a situation of educational collapse such as indigenous communities face, that may not be an uppermost concern, but the other thing is — absenteeism. DI is hard yards for kids coming from unstructured backgrounds, and in places where school attendance is not an internalised value they stop turning up.

It was because of these sort of problems that more “synthetic” educationists developed things like ‘culturally appropriate’ education which Pearson constructs as the great other, the monumental failure in indigenous education practice over past decades.

Maybe it is, but Pearson doesn't bother to show us how or why. In this hundred page essay devoted to addressing indigenous educational failure, there is no material or historical account of its development or practice, of what is being taught, of curriculum contents and approaches that Pearson finds so wanting.

Instead what we get is a mixture of amateur philosophising, often deeply embarrassing (Engels?! On dualism?!), and a naive and uncritical acceptance of the latest fashions in cognitive science. This is largely oriented around new theories which suggest that problem-solving capacities of infants and small children are far more hard-wired than previously suspected.

This is a highly technical debate for specialists, and the theories predispose no fixed educational theory, but Pearson is convinced — just as, using the “science” of eugenics a century earlier, people found it obvious that ‘racial hygiene’ policies should be applied to remnant populations. It is scientism pure and simple.

From there, having failed to argue his case, Pearson drifts into a free-form remix of his favourite excuse — it's all the fault of the progressive middle-class left. The policies they advocate remain undiscussed and uncriticised, but it's all their fault. Freire the educationist whom Pearson lines himself up against is dismissed with a confession of bafflement ‘I've read him three times and never understood what he's on about’.

Pearson could have given us a compelling argument for a new education approach. Instead he indulged himself in a new airing of old obsessions. The essay's release coincided with startling news that truancy was way down in Cape York schools, standards up etc etc. It took Chris Sarra, someone Pearson quotes approvingly, to point out that with the amounts of money being pumped into four small communities within cape York, they would bloody want to be.

Is Pearson creating an education revolution — or a series of Howard-era Potemkin villages, from which he issues his Enver Hoxha style manifestoes? It's about time he found the seriousness he seeks, in launching detailed and full critiques of the opponents he alleges have done so much damage.