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REVOLVE

ANTI-OPPRESSIVE WORK WITH INDIGENOUS YOUNG PEOPLE

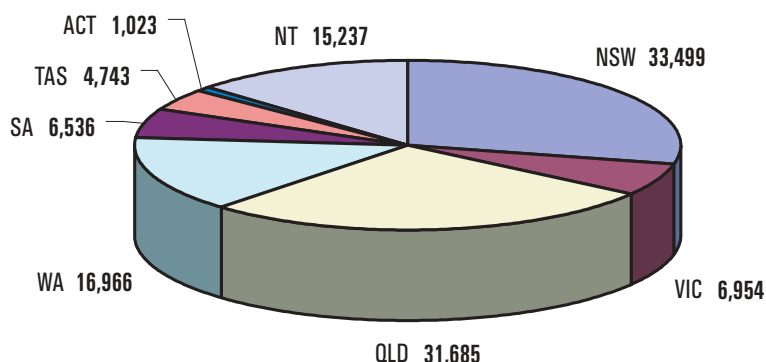
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This edition of Revolve aims to provide information about some of the issues of working with Indigenous (Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander) young people. It does not describe effective styles of direct-practice, but rather critical things to think about in our approach to working with Indigenous young people. There is often significant ambivalence about working with Indigenous young people, especially among non-Indigenous workers (Palmer, 2003, p.11). History, colonial and racist discourses, uncertainty about 'the other', and the difficulty in addressing the present disadvantage of Indigenous people contribute to this ambivalence. Dedicating an issue of Revolve to Indigenous young people is important, not because Indigenous young people are seen as an "issue" but because their experiences are very distinct and need to be better understood by YFC Australia and many Christian youth workers. Aboriginality or the category of Indigenous young people is not a "social, economic or personal problem facing young people" (Palmer, 2003, p.13). Indeed, Indigenous people are made in the image of God and their identity and culture should be celebrated and respected. It is also acknowledged that the writer is non-Indigenous and has limited knowledge and understanding of Indigenous culture. Furthermore, this issue of Revolve cannot detail a complete analysis of the issues facing Indigenous young people. The statistics presented about young Indigenous Australians does not intend to depict a negative stereotype of Indigenous young people; rather it seeks to highlight areas of major disadvantage and injustice experienced by Indigenous young people. This issue of Revolve will present an analysis of the context of Indigenous young people's lives, and how YFC Australia and Christian youth workers can respond, particularly through adjusting our way of thinking. It is hoped that this discussion will challenge some of our ambivalence about working with Indigenous young people.

THE FACTS

- There are approximately 116,698 Indigenous young people aged 12-24 years, representing 3% of the total Australian youth population (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2003, p.17).

Fig. 1 - Indigenous Youth Population by State and Territory



- 50% of the Indigenous population are aged below 20 years (AIHW, 2003, p.16).
- Indigenous young people are not one homogenous group. They have different backgrounds, cultures, languages and lifestyles. Before white settlement there were over 500 different clan groups with distinctive cultures and beliefs (Culture and Recreation Portal, 2004).

- 10% of Indigenous young people are in a de facto relationship and 6% are married (AIHW, 2003, p.323).
- Education participation, educational attainment and mean literacy and numeracy scores are lower for Indigenous young people than other Australians (AIHW, 2003, p.324). For instance, in 2001, the proportion of Indigenous males who were still at school or who had completed Year 12 was 29%, compared to 68% of other Australian males, and for Indigenous females it was 38% compared to 78% for other Australian females (AIHW, 2003, p.325).
- Indigenous young people are more likely to be unemployed than other Australian young people. In 2001, the unemployment rate for 15-17 year olds was 31.8% for Indigenous young people and 16.3% for non-Indigenous young people, for 18-24 year olds these figures were 27.3% and 12.8% respectively (ABS, 2001, cited in Jonas, 2003, p.11).
- The estimated life expectancy for Indigenous males is 56.3 years, compared to 77 years for other Australian males. For Indigenous females the estimated life expectancy is 62.8 compared to 82.4 for other Australian females (ABS, 2001, cited in Jonas, 2003, p.4).
- A greater proportion of Indigenous young people rate their health status as 'fair' or 'poor' than other Australians, and this is more marked among females than males (AIHW, 2003, p.329).
- Only 64% of Indigenous young people report that they are 'delighted, pleased or mostly satisfied' with their lives, compared to 80% of other Australians. 28% of Indigenous young people report that they feel 'mixed' about their lives (AIHW, 2003, p.330).
- Death rates of Indigenous young people between 1999-01 were almost three times those for other Australians (144 per 100,000 compared to 52 per 100,000); and 70% of deaths among Indigenous young people were of males (AIHW, 2003, p.331). External causes of injury were responsible for 70% of deaths (AIHW, 2003, p.333).
- Indigenous young people are almost 6 times more likely than other Australian young people to die from intentional self-harm (suicide) by hanging, strangulation and suffocation. The suicide rate among young Indigenous males is 4 times higher than for young Indigenous females (AIHW, 2003, p.334).
- In 2000-01 Indigenous young women were hospitalised for pregnancy and related conditions at a rate 2.8 times that of other Australian young women (7,880 per 100,000 compared to 2,772 per 100,000). Pregnancy with an abortive outcome accounted for 12% of pregnancy related hospitalisations of Indigenous young women (AIHW, 2003, pp.339-340).
- In 2001, 25% of Indigenous young people drank at levels considered to be at high risk over the long term, compared to 14% of other Australian young people (AIHW, 2003, p.344).
- 38.4% of Indigenous young people recently used an illicit drug (AIHW, 2003, p.345). Among Indigenous females, the main drugs of concern were heroin, alcohol, cannabis and amphetamines, whereas for Indigenous males alcohol, cannabis and heroin are the main drugs of concern. Inhalant or volatile substance abuse is also a significant drug issue amongst Indigenous young people.
- The rate of Indigenous young people aged 12-16 years who were the subject of child protection substantiation was 12.5 per 1,000 compared to 4.4 for other Australians (AIHW, 2003, p.351).
- Young Indigenous people are over represented in the juvenile justice system. For instance young Indigenous males are 20 times more likely to be in juvenile detention than other young Australian males. In 2002, Indigenous young people aged 25 years or less represented 25% of the total prison population for that age group, though they represent 3% of the Australian youth population (AIHW, 2003, p.353).
- In 2001-02, there were 5,200 Indigenous young people who were clients of the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP), representing 16% of all young people who were SAAP clients (AIHW, 2003, p.354).
- Indigenous people are 4.6 times more likely to be the victims of violent crime than non-Indigenous Australians and Indigenous women are 12 times more likely to be the victims of assault than non-Indigenous women (Blagg, 2000, cited in Keel, 2004, p.5).
- The main concerns for Indigenous young people to Kids Help Line are (in order) family relationships, child abuse, leaving home and homelessness, peer relationships, intimate relationships, violence, bullying, pregnancy, loneliness, legal issues and employment and financial issues (Kids Help Line, undated, p.5).

OUR COMMITMENT

These statistics are alarming to say the least. Whether we work with Indigenous young people on a daily basis or whether we encounter Indigenous young people through our generalist work, we cannot ignore that they are valued members of the Australian youth community. As Christian youth workers, **we are committed to reaching every young person, which of course must include Indigenous young people.** This therefore means that **we are committed to loving them and to giving them the opportunity to reach their full potential physically, relationally, emotionally and spiritually.** Acknowledging this commitment means we can take steps towards effective ministry.

CHALLENGING NEGATIVE DISCOURSES

Discourses are the ways we talk about particular things based on our attitudes, opinions and thoughts. They therefore effect how we relate, behave and work with young people. Discourses occur across interpersonal, practice, organisational and policy levels (Wong, 2004, p.13). We need to analyse our discourses because they highlight how we think about Indigenous young people and therefore how we work with them. More so, discourses reflect how we exercise power in our relations with Indigenous young people. **Our discourses about working with Indigenous young people will determine whether or not we disempower Indigenous young people and reinforce oppressive power relations.** If we are exercising power in a way that is disempowering for Indigenous young people, then we need to critically reflect on this and move towards a more empowering discourse.

Unfortunately dominant discourses of youth work with Indigenous young people include colonialist discourses, assimilationist discourses, moral underclass discourse (MUD), and ethnocentric or racist discourses.

Colonialist discourses involve ideas of conquering and taking over or dominating another people's land, resources, wealth, culture and identity. Overtones of colonialist discourses can appear in youth work that involves distancing Indigenous young people at one moment, and then "featuring them as subjects to be concerned about" in the next, and where there are tensions between "the will to assimilation and control and the desire to care, protect and educate for 'their own good'" (Palmer, 2003, pp.11-12).

Assimilationist discourses involve ideas of 'making them like us'-'to think white, act white and be white" (Edwards and Read, 1992, cited in Briskman, 2003, p.96). These discourses would play out in approaches that discourage Indigenous young people from understanding and living out their Indigenous identity, culture, language and spirituality, and in practices that encourage skills to fit into 'the Australian way of life'.

Moral Underclass Discourse is often applied to young people generally, and holds that "moral and behavioural deficiency is identified at the cause of social exclusion" and disadvantage (Wong, 2004, p.12).

Ethnocentric and Racist Discourses involve prejudicial attitudes in which the customs, beliefs and cultural practices of white Australians are uncritically held as superior to the social arrangements of Indigenous Australians, and are accompanied by discriminatory behaviour. Racist discourses assume inferiority of Indigenous Australians on perceived biological differences (Hollinsworth, 1998, pp.50-51) and take many forms.

What does this mean for YFC and Christian Youth Workers?

As Christians committed to sharing the love of Jesus with every young person, we cannot perpetuate racist and oppressive power relations that are fed by discourses such as the ones described above. Doing so is simply a contradiction of the person, character and works of Jesus Christ. For us, this means firstly examining our own values, opinions, beliefs and ideas about Indigenous Australians. The following questions might help us to do this:

- In our thinking and practice, are we trying to control or assimilate Indigenous young people to fit with 'our way of life'?
- Do we think of our work with Indigenous young people as 'for their own good'?
- Do we think that Indigenous young people should not understand and embrace their Indigenous culture?
- Do we think that the problems Indigenous young people may experience are because of their own moral and behavioural deficiency?

If we have answered 'yes' to any of the above questions, or if we have never even thought of these issues before, then we need to seriously think about the effect this is having not only on the Indigenous people and communities we are working with, but also how this is feeding into the wider oppressive structures of our society. We should bring these attitudes before God. Once we have examined ourselves, we need to begin to challenge these negative discourses and ways of seeing Indigenous people in ways that don't replicate these discourses.

It is also important to recognise the role of the church in many of the unjust policies and practices in relation to Indigenous Australians, including the forcible removal of Indigenous children to encourage assimilation. This reminds us about the danger of such discourses and the need to critically challenge these within the wider church body. As representatives of Jesus bringing His love to Indigenous young people, we cannot afford to perpetuate these racist discourses.

A STRUCTURAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF INDIGENOUS YOUNG PEOPLE

The statistics mentioned above highlight many alarming concerns about the wellbeing of Indigenous young people, but more so, the system that is creating such injustice. The AIHW recognise that "loss of control and feelings of hopelessness and the marginalisation and exclusion of Indigenous Australians from wider society" significantly explain much of this disadvantage (2003, p.321). This disadvantage stems from a "history of dispossession and racism", beginning with the colonisation of this country, and subsequent genocide of Indigenous peoples, through to assimilation policies and practices and the denial of the need to formally apologise for the oppressive practices white people have inflicted upon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples over white Australian history (Gloz, 2002, p.2). Thus the culmination of racism, the history of dispossession, the denial of Indigenous Australian's human rights and the many oppressive policies and practices frame the context of understanding the experiences of Indigenous young people.

Rather than seeing the problems experienced by Indigenous young people as fundamentally rooted within Indigenous young people themselves or related to their family and peer context, "and a result of their...maladjustment to the social norms", this framework allows us to see these problems as a "manifestation of the structural problems of [Australian] society" (Wong, 2004, p.10). This is not to say that Indigenous young people are "powerless victims of circumstances" (Averis, 2003, p.26). Without such recognition, we are simply reinforcing the oppression of Indigenous young people. Therefore, an essential aspect in youth work with Indigenous young people is that, if we are committed to loving them and giving them the opportunity to reach their full potential, we must also be committed to challenging the injustice they experience. In other words, holistic work with Indigenous young people must include a structural analysis and be committed to changing the context within which the above-mentioned problems arise and which determines the level of opportunities they have. Effective youth work with Indigenous young people cannot overlook this commitment.

What does this mean for YFC and Christian Youth Workers?

Prov 29:7 says, "The righteous care about justice..." Isaiah 1:17 says, "...seek justice, encourage the oppressed..." As Christians working with Indigenous young people it is not an optional extra to seek justice with them, it is a must. This can take many forms, and may include:

- Understanding - avoiding an 'expert' attitude by continually learning about the history, culture, spirituality and relations within Indigenous Australia.
- Relationships - actively seeking to build respectful and meaningful relationships with Indigenous young people and their communities, working with them in challenging injustice and encouraging them to maintain hope. We should make efforts to know the particular Indigenous young people we are working with-their background, hopes and aspirations. This means getting in with their community. They want to get to know and trust us too, and this takes time and personalisation (Morris, 2004).
- Partnerships - forming partnerships with organisations and communities already engaged in advocating for the rights of Indigenous young people and mobilizing collective activity towards change.
- Empowerment - giving Indigenous young people we work with control over all aspects of their lives, which means giving them opportunities to make decisions that affect their life choices and well being. Although many Indigenous young people would have an understanding of the political causes of their disadvantage and oppression, empowerment also means helping Indigenous young people to better understand this connection and taking steps with them to overcome their oppression (Mullaly, 1997, pp.167-168).
- Advocacy (both case and cause advocacy) - advocating for reconciliation and changes to social and economic policies (such as curfews targeting Indigenous young people and juvenile justice policies leading to the over-representation of Indigenous young people in the justice system). Being prepared to engage in social action and raising awareness of the issues amongst colleagues, peers and the general community is also significant in advocacy work.

CONCLUSION

Like all youth work, relationship is central. We can't have meaningful and empowering relationships with Indigenous young people, and share Jesus' love through these relationships, if we don't understand their culture and the context of their lives. Furthermore, we cannot respectfully share the love of Jesus with them if we are ignorant of how our own attitudes and perceptions contribute to the oppression of Indigenous people. St. Francis Assisi exhorted us to "preach the gospel at all times and when necessary use words". By confronting our own racism, negative attitudes and stereotypes towards Indigenous young people we can begin to 'be' people who live out God's love for Indigenous young people. It's only by doing this that we can be in a position to engage in meaningful and effective ministry with Indigenous young people and their communities.

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Revolve is a quarterly document that provides updates on the current trends and issues pertinent to young people in Australia. Revolve provides an interpretation as to what the research means for YFC and Christian youth workers, which incorporates recommendations about how we can do our ministry and mission better. Revolve is a means by which we can be attuned to the issues and needs of Australia's young people so as to better meet and respond to them.

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