



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

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THE EDUCATION OF ABORIGINAL CHILDREN*



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I feel rather diffident in opening this topic as there are some of you who are far more experienced in this field than I am.

I think that, in talking about the Aboriginal people, some basic premises should be stated first. The Aboriginal people had a highly developed tribal system and a much higher ethical structure than the white man has. By contrast, an excellent study of Australian values is contained in a book by Ronald Conway, a Melbourne Psychologist, called *The Great Australian Stupor*. His equation of the Australian value system is as follows:

Material Wealth = Pleasure = Happiness = Reason for Living.

He writes -

Whereas the Aboriginal trod his enchanted earth for centuries on tip-toe, leaving the delicate balance of nature of a tired continent intact, the white settler preferred to greet the touchiness of Australian climate and soil with a murderous impatience.

When the white man came to this continent he took the best land for agricultural purposes. He broke up the tribal system so that the Aboriginal people were left leaderless and landless. Now we expect, in our schools and other aspects of our society, that the Aboriginal people will bridge the gap to a super-industrial civilization (with its questionable value system) in two or three generations.

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**This paper was presented at the North Coast Counsellors' Conference in Lismore, April, 1973. The views contained in it are the personal ones of the author and do not necessarily reflect the policy of the Department of Education in New South Wales.*

As I stated earlier, Aborigines have a different value system from white people; for example, they show a deep seated deference for old people. To Aborigines a young man or woman is one who is not a grand-parent and he pays great respect to his elders. The task of the young is to listen, use their eyes and to keep a silent tongue in the presence of elders or when required by them. Aboriginal parents tend to appear to be to us permissive, indulgent and even irresponsible; some Aboriginal parents regard white parents as having cheeky, rude children, as being unduly dominant, pushing and overbearing as parents. Aborigines are totally committed to their relatives who can come and stay for as long as they wish.

The tragedy of the majority of Aborigines today is that they are not the product of their own culture, but rather the by-product of their minority position as fringe people of a non-Aboriginal culture. This is certainly the case in Coffs Harbour.

The Aboriginal population is now increasing at a rapid rate; this means that more and more Aboriginal children will be enrolled in schools. The position can be compared with that of the Maoris in New Zealand. At the end of the last century, Maori culture had reached a stage of almost total demoralization and collapse and Maoris were regarded as a dying race, much as were our own Aborigines. However, there has been a general resurgence which accompanies the rebuilding and renewed flowering of a culture reborn, their own way of life; the Maori population is increasing.

There seem to be three types of education possible for Aboriginal children:

1. in special schools;
2. within a special class in the school;
3. within the ordinary classroom.

The policy of our State government is to integrate children of Aboriginal descent; as a result special schools are gradually being phased out. This procedure is not always successful. For example, at one centre some children who had done well in the Reserve School were transferred to the town High School and apparently did reasonably well. In 1968 there was a move to close the Reserve School and more children were transferred into town schools. The people of the Reserve thought that this would be a good thing. However, whereas the earlier movement to the

town school of one or two gifted children had been accomplished with ease, the transfer of larger numbers resulted in some strain.

It is known that the drop-out rate of children in secondary school is very high. If the Aboriginal population is assumed to have a normal spread of intelligence, as other races, level of intelligence is not being shown in success in school. The Aboriginal feels like an alien in our school system. By six years he is well aware that he is different from white children and has a different learning rate. He has a resistance to learning, evidenced by his relationship to his teacher and behaviour patterns with other children. In adolescence, the Aboriginal has a problem of identity; he is faced with the white community and its standards and his own community and its standards. There have been many drop-outs of gifted Aboriginal children in secondary school because of this conflict. They are rejected by their peers.

Coffs Harbour has Aboriginals who live on the fringe of the town. They may have a resistance to performing well in tests of ability but all are in the 80's or below. In Coffs Harbour Primary School there are fifty Aboriginal children out of a school population of 900 children. The Kindergarten Screening Test was administered this year but, in the opinion of the Infant Mistress, the Aboriginal children need some training before attempting it. They are shy and don't want to talk - they want to fade away into the background. Gross motor skills are well developed but fine motor skills need training. They simply lack experience and confidence.

The Aboriginal children, however, have many strengths. All the Aboriginal children enrolling at this school in 1973 were right handed, and only one out of ten had a tendency to mixed dominance. This is in contrast to the white children, many of whom had mixed or confused dominance. The Aboriginal children are much shrewder than white children and know how to survive. There is evidence of artistic ability, an appreciation of music and rhythm, and a keen sense of observation of the world around them. As the Infant Mistress at Dorrigo, who spent two years on Groote Eylandt, said, "The Aboriginal children have a different type of ability from white children and an ability to survive." Should we be trying to measure this in some way?

The answer to me seems to lie in a combined effort of education at school and education in the home. At my secondary school this year we have a staff member who spent the last three

years employed by the Adult Education Department of Sydney University trying to educate mothers about diet and hygiene in the home. He says they must learn to solve their own problems and his place has now been taken by an Aboriginal. Malnutrition, of course, both ante-natal and post-natal, can result in mental retardation. Meals-on-Wheels visits some of the Aboriginal Families in Coffs Harbour, but I consider that if we continue to give handouts like this we may be doing more harm than good, as the people are not being helped to be self-reliant. Pre-school education is of great importance, to develop verbal skills and language generally. There are some Aboriginal women who could well run these pre-schools (as they did in Taree) and they should be given every encouragement to do so. Any group which has been discriminated against must raise itself up. Unfortunately, this is not always encouraged. At one specific Save the Children Pre-School, there was an Aboriginal girl who was capable of taking over, but, as she was not given any encouragement, she left. Now she is receiving from social services only \$1 per week less than when she was working. This is scandalous.

What happens in Coffs Harbour Infants Department is that the Aboriginal children soon fall back in the academic subjects and are well aware of this. Part of the cause is their poor attendance and changing of schools, again the result of their home background. The parents allow them to stay at home if they want to. The behaviour which results is timidity in the classroom and aggressiveness in the playground, sometimes from the one person. All classes in the kindergarten are 35-38 pupils, so that it is almost impossible to give the individuals the help and encouragement that they need. The Department helps handicapped children by placing them in small classes for special education, yet the Aboriginals who need special help do not receive this aid.

The only special placement that is available is an OA class. This year in OA Junior we have ten Aboriginal children out of a total of eighteen. I must emphasize that there have been marked improvements this year in the OAJ Aboriginal children in attitudes, self-confidence and social adjustment, and some definite improvement in mathematics and reading. We have an aide for the OA and OD classes and she is treating the sores of the Aboriginals and trying to train them to look after themselves. The P.&C. applied for the P.&C. grant* and some

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**P.&C. Subsidy for Aboriginal children, \$10 per year, to be used for text books, excursions or other approved ways. Apply to: Aboriginal Directorate, P.O. Box K718, Haymarket, N.S.W. 2000*

money is used for the medical equipment necessary, particularly bandaids. Some of it has been used for books and some for excursions. All the Aboriginal children last year went to Dorriggo's National Park, to the "Magic Puddin'" and to Kumbaingerie, the flora and fauna reserve (some Aboriginal parents even insisted on paying for their children to go there). They will all go on similar excursions this year. I would like to see an Aboriginal person as an aide in the Infants Department. She would be able to help the Aboriginal children in many ways, such as helping them to order a nutritious lunch. The Aboriginal children have plenty of money, but order pies and sweets.

I feel that some attempt to overcome these problems must be made at the Infants and Primary levels. There appears to be a lot of evidence that the cumulative deficit phenomenon is operating in our schools. The result of this is that the longer children of low socio-economic status attend school, the worse is their educational position relative to their higher socio-economic peers. This was found in a study of Greek and migrant children in Melbourne*. Other findings are equally applicable to Aboriginal children.

At Orara High School we have ten Aboriginal children out of a total enrolment of six hundred and four. They range from two full-blood in appearance to white, with two having red hair. I have begun some group therapy with them and some very interesting attitudes have been revealed. The boy with a real chip on his shoulder realized straight away the reason for the group being chosen and told me that two more should have been there. These two were absent from school. In the second session I broached the subject of how they felt about their Aboriginal background and one white girl indignantly said that she had no *black blood only red*. One girl became very hostile about this, saying that everyone has red blood. This same girl is very conscious of her colour and finds it hard to mix at school. She said that white men accost her and her coloured friends when they are coming home from the pictures, and say things to them which they would not say to white girls. All children were hesitant at first about talking about Aboriginal problems but as their confidence increased they became quite articulate. Four of them, only thirteen years old, drink

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**An examination of the Psycholinguistic Abilities and Disabilities of Grade II Children of Different Socio-Economic Status and Ethnic Background - Greek and Australian. by Des Pickering, 1971.*

and smoke. The others said this was terrible. They blamed the white man for bringing liquor into this country. All children are in the D-G classes. In my opinion, all are underachieving academically. All thought that the Aboriginal grant for students of fourteen and over is a very good thing. They spend theirs on clothes or save it for Christmas presents.

SOME SUGGESTIONS TO HELP ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

1. Have Aboriginal Advisers in Teachers' Colleges and visiting schools, advising about the teaching of Aboriginal culture to all children.
2. Teach Australian history honestly. New Zealand history, as taught in schools, begins with the arrival of the Maoris, Australia's with the voyage of Captain Cook. Aboriginal children must wonder why their ancestors don't rate a mention. Professor MacIntosh believes that there is evidence that the Aboriginals made the first sea migration in history. A lot has been written about the Polynesian sea voyages of only 1,500 years ago, yet little about the amazing feat of the Aboriginals, 30,000 years ago in what one must assume to have been the most primitive and elementary of water craft.
3. Special education for Aboriginal children within the present school system, with a deeper study of their own culture, giving them a pride in their own race and teaching their own languages where applicable. Kindergarten children should be taught in their vernacular when they do not speak English.
4. Prevention of learning difficulties in the Infants' Department by providing small classes in Kindergarten and 1st. Class (10-20 children).
5. Improvement of pre-school education, with Aboriginal teachers where available.
6. Aboriginal aides and teachers in our schools.
7. Teachers must be careful not to pre-judge Aboriginal children and expect failure. This attitude in teachers has been found to lead to failure.