



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*.

In 2022 *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* transitioned to fully Open Access and this article is available for use under the license conditions below.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

ABORIGINAL VIEWS

WHAT EDUCATION MEANS TO ME
AN ABORIGINAL'S PERSPECTIVE

Terry Widders,
Secretary,
Commission of Aboriginal
Development,
Australian Council of Churches,
Sydney, N.S.W.

Mr. Widders was born and raised in a total Aboriginal family-society. Leaving Armidale High School at 15, he spent several years in various jobs before becoming a student at Armidale Teachers College. This paper was presented to the Fourteenth Annual Conference of The Australian College of Education, at the University of Sydney in May, 1973 and is reproduced here with kind permission of the author and The Australian College of Education.

In order to arrive at an understanding of what education means to me, I have had to review and analyse two major past experiences.

They were:

being raised in an Aboriginal extended family system; and
being "educated" - in secondary school - in the lifestyle of the white majority.

Far from being continuing experiences they produced a paradox, the understanding of which I did not come to until quite recently.

However, to clarify this, I will describe generally the life I experienced as an Aboriginal child, and later, briefly that of education in a middle-class setting.

One consideration I ask you to keep in mind, however, is the importance of a principle called continuum of awareness, and when this is disrupted an individual, or group, must build a new

awareness or remain disoriented.

So, from a specific review of my childhood, I would say I developed a strong sense of being a whole person, and this as a result of high nurturance (that is, consistently strong attention given to my evolving *person*), great autonomy in decision making and, subsequently, a growing sense of responsibility towards other people generally.

The overall effect of this on me was to nurture a growing interest in, and intellectual appreciation of the world around me.

As regards education in school, then, the net effect was I mastered the work set me, mainly because I was interested and curious and, generally, teachers didn't disagree with my personal conduct.

And a fundamental reason for my outlook was the absence of any group pressure on me in any way (even that of giving me the "message" through their treatment of me) towards the idea that I must "succeed" at school.

The reality I perceived then was generally stable, interesting and with very few frustrating personal or social barriers to prevent my coming to grips with it.

Please understand, however, that my personal situation was directly attributable to the strong and fair authority of the head of our group, my grandfather.

In effect, it was due to his sense of justice about personal and social relationships - their responsibilities and reciprocal obligations - that my early life pattern took its shape.

(Incidentally, not once did he relate to me, or anyone else of our group, any history or values regarding his past experiences, as an initiated member, of the traditional, or changing traditional lifestyle of Aborigines.)

Summing up then, my perceptual stocktaking of the here and now - the reality - was rich, relatively unimpeded and subsequently led to strong conceptual development.

On reflection, I see that this could not have taken place without the guidance of three important factors. They were:

- (i) Stable, warm personal relationships within my immediate group.
- (ii) Absence of constraining - others - personal and social ambitions exercised over me (that is, no syndrome of goals to be attained).
- (iii) A relatively straightforward introduction to the here and now: the life we led and that of others around me.

Education as I viewed it at that time was but one in a series of related tasks - neither under nor overemphasized - that required doing.

However, this pattern of growth, this atmosphere, was greatly disturbed on the death of my grandfather.

And what occurred in my education after this, in terms of school results, interest in and understanding of the reality of the world around me, became subject to a high anxiety that permeated our group; firstly those around me, and then me.

In effect, while the group was not effectively dealing with our unsettled anxiety problem, I was unable to constructively deal with either school or anxiety in myself; that is, my personal relations.

By chance, it was at this stage that I started boarding in an all-male hostel, and attended secondary school from there.

I had become a de facto member of white, middle-class society.

And, at first, my energies were more concerned with coming to grips with the new environment, this phase being mainly experimental.

Within a short time, however, I was being urged by various members of my family to "better myself through education".

And simultaneously I came against the unwritten law of schools: "Pass the exams - finish school - increase your opportunities".

Neither of these pressures could I understand at the time, which in turn led to being anxious about the future, and despondent about the present.

And, in time, the paradox clarified itself: my whole-person growth/general education as formerly offered by the group was no longer available, while opportunities for future "development", offered by school, included whole development in the now, and this within the context of my group.

As a result, the impasse I experienced hastened my decision to leave school and, intermittently, home.

Now, while neither of these educational phases could be called "true education" (but what is I'm not going to be definitive about), they certainly were educational experiences.

And they were significant experiences since they posed a crucial question: "Why was this so?" "Why do these experiences stand in contradiction?"

Several years passed, years taken up with experiencing a wide spectrum of Australian society, and years spent in trying to resolve a basic contradiction in my experience.

And, in time, I came to understand a very significant principle, which was that people's attitudes - that is, the true complex of motives that shaped their feelings and ideas - largely determined their whole lives, whether they were conscious of it or not.

From this view I came to see that attitudes shaped attitudes. Or, that people, in the course of being themselves, greatly influenced those standing in close relation to them.

Now I make this point, for apart from class position, it explained to me - theoretically at least - why some sections of this society "succeeded" at school and others didn't.

It followed, then, that with a majority collection of attitudes in school aimed at economic and social security - the goals as manifested in the life-style of Australian society - that schooling must serve as the process of continuing and ramifying such attitudes.

Was this education, or was it not?

One thing was certain, however, it was, and is, the reality; a reality that emphasized goals and not growth of the individual.

That education functions this way was understandable, I found, if viewed from the popular standpoint of it being the lead-up to entering the relative context of Australian society, for here we have capitalism dominating the economics of our livelihood; sectarianism serves as religion; political parties represent democracy; and wealth/status substitutes for human and social rights.

All this means, I found, is that education/success/growth - in our non-cultural context - is determined differently according to goals that different groups aspire to: goals are equated with growth.

Up to this point, then, I have been concerned with summing up my diagnosis of education in Australia, and tried, or rather implied, the factors that helped determine this view.

Now I wish to give my vale judgement ot today's education, and additionally, why I see it as necessary to begin transforming the rationale dominating current thinking on and practice of it.

Firstly, the sum effect of education is that it legitimates the parochial attitudes of most students, and this because education serves the hedonism of Australian society.

That is to say, students are subtly coerced to become parochial to attain the hedonistic goals that is the ultimate offering of our society, and schools are the deified institutions through which one must pass to attain the goals.

And this, in turn, must be at the expense of one's relations, within and outside the family; understanding of, and

hence the feeling of being able to act potently on, one's situation; and, most importantly, the desire to want to understand and act.

Ultimately, such a process destroys the emotional and intellectual flexibility necessary to set in action a process of reflection on the now reality, act effectively to recreate the existing social order, and thus build a new unity of practice and theory.

Therefore, to reach a stage where education is no longer dominated by a goal/success system, but rather is concerned with a growth/awareness *process*, a change must occur within the social structure.

And this change need not specifically be economic, social, political or cultural, but rather a combination of all that leads to a flexibility of attitudes within a person, within his social and personal relationships and his awareness of social phenomena.

Therefore, at base, I see this change needing to begin at the level of people's interpersonal experiences.

That is, through the sharing of such experiences must come a deeper understanding of the whole self and acceptance of this state can only lead to development of flexible attitudes and greater awareness of other people.

Most importantly, this sharing of experiences must lead to a broadening and continuing of awareness of social phenomena.

By this I mean an awareness of the forces that create or influence social change; the effect of social change on the structure and people, their attitudes, emotional state, and ability to relate to the changes that occur in themselves, and the changes that occur in others.

.....