



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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SCHOOLS COMMISSION REPORT FOR THE TRIENNium 1976 - 1978

CHAPTER 9

EDUCATION FOR ABORIGINES

9.1. Over the last two years Australians have become more aware through the bitter comments of Aborigines in the media that a new government cannot overnight solve problems which have been festering for more than a century. It is still possible for the National Population Inquiry Report to note in 1975 that 'in every conceivable comparison, the Aborigines and Islanders ... stand in stark contrast to the general Australian society, and also to other "ethnic" groups, whether defined on the basis of race, nationality, birthplace, language or religion. They probably have the highest growth rate, the highest death rate, the worst health and housing, and legal status of any identifiable section of the Australian population'. They also have the least schooling.

9.2. Noting that a range of educational initiatives had been taken at both State and Australian Government levels, the Commission initially felt that it was possible that action needed was already in progress, particularly as other agencies had been working with the complexities of the situation for much longer than the Commission had been in existence. As it studied the situation however, the Commission came to the conclusion that one element, the voice of Aborigines themselves, was still muffled. To assist it in its consideration of the problems the Commission formed an Aboriginal Consultative Group chosen by Aborigines from all parts of Australia.

The Commission is pleased to acknowledge the assistance it received from the Group. The Commission unequivocally supports their belief that the great need is for Aborigines to take more responsibility for their own advancement. The proposals of this chapter therefore are intended to support that type of action.

POPULATION, HEALTH AND POVERTY

9.3 The number of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in 1971 was estimated to be between 116,000 and 150,000, about one per cent of the Australian population. Those identifying as Aborigines were distributed in all States, with 32,000 in Queensland and more than 22,000 in each of Western Australia, Northern Territory and New South Wales. Less than 10,000 lived in each of South Australia and Victoria and less than 2,000 in Tasmania. Many who identify as Aborigines in southern States are of mixed ancestry.

9.4. Two population features are of educational interest. The birth rate is estimated to be double that of the general population, so that at present rates of increase the total Aboriginal population will reach a quarter of a million by the turn of the century. As a consequence of the birth rate there is an unusually high proportion of children under 18 years of age. The other feature is the location of over 85 per cent of Aborigines in country areas (compared with 35 per cent of other Australians). Many educational problems thus relate to provision of adequate services in rural areas. Even among Aboriginal city dwellers responding to the Brisbane Poverty Commission enquiries, less than 18 per cent said they had actually spent their childhood in the city. The general problems affecting country children discussed in Chapter 6 are thus also important factors in the education of Aborigines.

9.5 It is not possible to understand educational problems without reference to the health situation of Aborigines, which in a country with such immense health care resources remains a national scandal. Health statistics in the Northern Territory in 1973 showed an infant death rate of 80 per thousand in Aboriginal children, compared with fourteen for the remainder of the population. Studies in the Kimberleys and at Yirrkala in Arnhem Land (1) have highlighted major nutritional and disease problems. Many Aboriginal children still suffer

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1. Australia. Parliament. House of Representatives. Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs. *Present conditions of Yirrkala People; First Report* ... (Canberra, AGPS, 1974).

from malnutrition, respiratory infection and diarrhoea. The Yirrkala study revealed a chronic ear infection rate of 25 per cent, and that 11 per cent of children were suffering from anaemia. The obvious deafness of those who have untreated middle ear infection and the nasal mucous on the faces of many children are the visible signs of serious health problems which create 'the 80 per cent child' handicapped by nutrition and health throughout his school career.

9.6 The 1971 Census data revealed that very few Aborigines were employed at the clerical, administrative, professional or technical levels. The frequency rates for these positions for the Australian population as a whole were almost twelve times greater than for Aborigines. Thus the number of potential Aboriginal leaders with the skills and employment experience to fit them to be competent spokesmen for their people is relatively small. Moreover, a far higher percentage of unemployment exists within Aboriginal communities than is general in Australia, with significant repercussions on health, living standards and educational attainment. The Aboriginal population is seriously deficient in housing and amenities considered as basic for other Australian families. A high proportion of their dwellings were classified 'temporary shelters' or 'camps', and one quarter of homes consisted of one room without bathroom, kitchen facilities or electricity. Such inadequate living standards in so many homes makes success in home studies an impossibility for many secondary students.

EDUCATIONAL TRENDS

9.7 Schools do not hold Aboriginal students to the same extent as other Australians. Table 9.1 provides comparative details which show the situation in 1971.

TABLE 9.1

SCHOOL PARTICIPATION RATES FOR ABORIGINES AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDERS AND TOTAL POPULATION, AUSTRALIA 1971

Age	Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders	All Australians
	per cent	per cent
years		
15	59.64	81.5
16	28.16	53.7
17	7.96	28.8
18	2.51	7.6
19	0.61	1.3

Source: *Australian Department of Education.*

Although these figures are an improvement over those recorded for earlier years, only slightly more than one per cent of Aboriginal adults have completed secondary education.

9.8 Three Aboriginal scholarship schemes are administered by the Australian Department of Education. The Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme, first established for a limited range of children in 1970 and subsequently extended to all Aboriginal students at secondary school, now benefits eleven thousand students. Over one thousand Aborigines benefitted from the Aboriginal Study Grants Scheme in the first half of 1974, for opportunities ranging from commercial shorthand to university courses. The first successful applicants for Overseas Study Grants for Aborigines, which allow up to ten Aboriginal students to study overseas each year, have recently (May 1975) been announced.

9.9. In 1974 fifty-six of the recipients of Study Grants were at universities and seventy-two at other tertiary institutions. These figures are more than double those of 1971. The increased number is partly a reflection of the greater willingness of tertiary institutions to admit Aborigines without conventional matriculation, eleven being so admitted in 1974. The Commission commends these developments, and notes the encouraging success rate among all these students. Similar opportunities for further education, for those who have not completed secondary schooling, may be equally effective.

9.10 There have been a number of other developments of note: State Education Departments have appointed full-time officers, one of them Aboriginal, who are responsible for the co-ordination of education for Aborigines in each Department; at least two schools have been established on the initiative of Aboriginal groups, and authorities have provided some mobile out-station schools to cater for Aborigines leaving larger settlements in favour of their former home areas. There has been considerable expansion of pre-school provisions. All mainland Education Departments now recognise the importance of employing Aboriginal staff; over two hundred are employed in Northern Territory schools; South Australia employs over seventy aides, Queensland fifty, Western Australia twenty and New South Wales forty. The Northern Territory has a progressive scheme which enables teacher aides to become qualified teachers after five years of study and classroom teaching experience and which has provided nineteen provisionally qualified Aboriginal teachers so far. Bilingual programs are now common in Aboriginal schools in the Northern Territory. Similar programs and special attention to language teaching are being developed

in several states. The Queensland Van Leer Project, for example, has adapted the methods and material used in the teaching of English to migrant children in Aboriginal learning. Finally, a number of post-secondary courses designed specifically to meet the needs of Aborigines has been introduced at several tertiary institutions throughout Australia.

9.11 Since the 1967 Referendum transferred special responsibility for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people to the Australian Government there have been large increases in Australian Government expenditure on the education of Aborigines. The pattern for the past four years is shown in Table 9.2.

TABLE 9.2
DIRECT AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT EXPENDITURE ON
ABORIGINAL EDUCATION

	1971/72	1972/73	1973/74	1974/75
	\$'000	\$'000	\$'000	\$'000
Grants to the States	1,214	2,887	4,392	4,592
Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme	2,536	4,267	6,093	7,716
Aboriginal Study Grants Scheme	474	631	905	1,345
Overseas Study Grants for Aborigines				53
Grants to voluntary organisations	241	100	429	1,100
Direct expenditure in the Northern Territory				
. Salaries and admin- istrative expenses	2,030	3,552	4,958	8,812
. Other	1,566	2,880	4,023	8,996
	8,061	14,318	20,800	32,614

(a) Estimated

Source: Senate, Debates. No.15. 16 Oct. 1974, p.1744.

EDUCATION AND ABORIGINALITY

9.12 Reference to expenditure of money is not a particularly helpful way of understanding Aboriginal education, unless the list reveals that the diversity of the Aboriginal population necessitates a diversity of responses. Within the Aboriginal population itself there are major cultural differences. At one extreme there are the tribally oriented societies living according to traditional patterns and at the other extreme individuals who have adopted an urban life style not easily distinguished from that of white Australians. It is meaningless to talk about Aboriginal education as an entity; even the feeling of 'Aboriginality' which separates those who identify as Aborigines from white Australians has many manifestations.

9.13 Among Aborigines there is a strong feeling of alienation from the mainstream of Australian society, even after participation in the educational system. They feel their problems are not those of the ethnic minorities: rather they relate to being both the original inhabitants and black. Those Aborigines who succeed in adapting to the majority culture find it difficult to do so without denying their cultural heritage. The Commission's Aboriginal Consultative Group argued that the Aborigine is not culturally deprived, merely 'culturally different'; but that the tension between the Aboriginal community, with its values of kinship, sharing, mutual interdependence and emphasis on non-verbal communication, and the white, middle-class school with its emphasis on verbal skills, competition and individual success, is one contributing factor which leads to an erosion of self-respect and increasing frustration amongst many young Aborigines.

9.14 Prejudice and discrimination arise in schools from the tension between two differing value systems as well as from the more obvious differences in skin colour. It is important to appreciate the contribution made by poverty and poor living conditions to this outcome. It is easier for many teachers to feel affection for and to want to associate with a clean and well nourished child, whether that child is white or black. The conditions in which so many Aboriginal families live, and the low and intermittent nature of the incomes of many, combine to produce a situation in which many Aboriginal children are poorly cared for physically. These material factors, combined with cultural clash and the attitudes of others towards them, make educational success extremely difficult for many Aboriginal children. It is

still extremely rare for teachers to understand, much less turn to educational advantage, the Aboriginal cultural heritage and traditional ways of viewing the world. Nor do many understand that Aboriginal culture has much to contribute to Australian life. There will need to be many changes in teaching and in school materials before Aboriginal students have that self-esteem which comes from knowing that others respect the things of value to them.

9.15 It is equally important that a community wider than the particular schools in which Aborigines are enrolled should also understand the relevance and value of Aboriginal culture. The traditional image of the savage who has skilfully adapted to a hostile environment is certainly no longer an appropriate image of the circumstances of most Aborigines – emphasis on the exotic distracts attention from the human values which made life, survival and richness of Aboriginal culture possible. Efforts to ensure that the general community appreciated these facts more deeply would do much to ensure that as Aborigines live and work among white Australians, as they must in the modern world, they are accorded the human dignity that is their due. The values of mutual responsibility, so strong in Aboriginal culture, might even modify the individualistic and materialistic emphases of mainstream Australian society in humanly valuable ways if they were more widely appreciated. Cultural modification should not be seen as a one-way street.

Language

9.16 Language is another aspect of Aboriginality which is of major educational significance. Few Aborigines can, today, live in Australia without competence in English. English competence will, in time, become essential for even tribal Aborigines in the same way that it is already essential for rural 'fringe dwellers', and those who live in towns. Although language competence is as critical to access to opportunities and to control over circumstances for Aborigines as for other Australians, Aborigines frequently start with greater problems. Where a vernacular language is customarily spoken the bilingual approaches now being developed can both preserve and develop the vernacular, while assisting in acquisition of the language of commerce and further education. But a large proportion of Aboriginal children come from homes where 'restricted' English – restricted in the forms of language which express generalised concepts and complex relationships – is the main language. For these children intensive oral language development must precede or at least accompany

any attempts to establish literacy. Pre-school experience is therefore important, particularly if the teachers have special language development skills. In addition, throughout schooling the crucial relationship between language competence and intellectual development will often require that special assistance be available if language problems are not to compound other difficulties.

PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

9.17 The most important priority is clearly for integrated action by federal and State authorities on a combined basis to improve health and welfare. No child can be expected to do well educationally while nutrition and health deficiencies intensify the basic disadvantage of poverty; the handicaps are too great. Action in this sphere, while outside the strict terms of reference of the Commission, continues to be of urgent priority.

Objectives

9.18 In relation to issues of direct educational relevance, the Commission believes a key priority is to be clear about the purposes of Aboriginal education. The Commission accepts the view of the Group as being particularly relevant:

We see education as the most important strategy for achieving realistic self-determination for the Aboriginal people of Australia. We do not see education as a method of producing an anglicized Aborigine but rather as an instrument for creating informed human beings with intellectual and technological skills, in harmony with our own cultural values and identity. We wish to be the Aboriginal citizens in a changing Australia.

Education should be a constructive process, building on what a child is, and developing his or her natural potential, not destroying and denying his birthright.

It would be a tragedy to destroy one of the last remaining people who do not worship material values. Our vision of education is not compatible with over-emphasis placed on manpower orientated goals that most Australian people know.

We see the need for a change in education for both the Aborigine and non- Aborigines, their teachers and their children: to create an Australia where the values and cultures of both people thrive.

The process of achieving this will require many major changes in direction for your education. It is also ours, but does not serve us as well as it does you; nor do we completely understand it, but at least we are aware of where it most fails us.

9.19 There may be a degree of incompatibility between the values of Aboriginal culture and the achievement of full participation in industrial society on terms which give equal access to its benefits. This is especially so as individually owned property is a basic feature of the Australian version of industrialisation, and a range of values, incentives and social arrangements flow from this fact. There are certainly tensions between the two cultures, but Aboriginal people should be allowed to work through to their own resolution of those tensions.

National Involvement and Responsibility

9.20 The Commission commends the combined efforts of State and Australian Government departments, which have already resulted in a range of educational initiatives. Many of the initiatives begun in the last few years will take time to show results and it is not yet appropriate to attempt even a preliminary evaluation of them. The Commission had no information which suggested a need for it to recommend major additional funds for basic financing of schools. The Commission believes, however, that a most important priority and the most useful direct contribution it can make in the short term is to support moves which progressively place more responsibility in the hands of Aboriginal people themselves. The forms of doing this are complex, because Aboriginal education is not an entity in itself, except perhaps in exclusively Aboriginal schools; the majority of Aboriginal children are in ordinary schools.

9.21 At the national level Aboriginal involvement is crucial to effective development of policy. Several alternative ways of achieving greater involvement were considered but as operational responsibility for Aboriginal education effectively lies in the hands of the States, with whom the Commission itself is in constant

interaction, the best solution appeared to be the establishment of a Standing Committee of the Commission. The Commission will therefore establish a Standing Committee on Aboriginal Education, with Aboriginal membership, and will delegate to it substantial responsibility for policy advice, liaison and research.

9.22 The Commission will also encourage related agencies to turn to the Standing Committee as a means of involving Aborigines in policy making and advice. The Committee could become a useful source of advice to the Children's Commission on the placement and management of pre-school, day care and after school facilities as they affect Aboriginal people, and in arrangements for their management. It could collaborate with the Technical and Further Education Commission on second chance and further education for older students, be a means of disseminating information about successful experimentation at all levels of education, and a channel through which Aboriginal people could obtain information about the opportunities open to them. It could also advise the Curriculum Development Centre and other curriculum bodies on the development of materials about Aboriginal history and culture for use in schools.

9.23 National funding for Aboriginal education, additional to that spent by States, has been planned and administered by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. While this has been very effective in building up the flow of resources, the educational aspects of projects could be more strongly stressed, and Aboriginal people more involved in their planning and development. It would be advantageous for changes to be made to enable project funding to be channelled through the Australian Department of Education. But for the change to be most fruitful it is essential that Aborigines be involved in the development of policies and in advising on implementation.

9.24 Although the Australian Government undertakes financial responsibility for schools which have a predominantly Aboriginal enrolment in the Northern Territory it does not take the same responsibility in the States. There is no obvious reason why the Australian Government should not undertake the same responsibilities in the States if this is desired by the States or the authority operating a school: it was given appropriate powers in the Referendum of 1967. The number of students involved is small but the resource needs of the schools concerned are high, especially in the far north of Western Australia and Queensland. These schools will find it difficult to

operate effectively without adequate resources. The Commission is recommending accordingly.

9.25 The Commission also believes the schools at Townsville and at Oombulgarri in Western Australia, which have been initiated and run by Aborigines with support from the Commission, are important expressions of the strong desire of some Aborigines to become involved in and responsible for their own advancement. In the immediate future any dangers of these initiatives are more than outweighed by the experience of successful acceptance of responsibility for adults and the models of enterprise and confidence they represent for students. Continued necessity for such schools in the longer run will depend on the extent to which existing government and non-government schools can adjust to the needs of Aborigines. The Commission proposes for this triennium to continue to extend to Aborigines the opportunity to experiment with the forms of schooling which best meet their needs.

State and Local Involvement

9.26 When the Consultative Group and members of the Commission met with State Superintendents of Aboriginal Education, the Superintendents expressed interest in consultative processes at State level similar to those the Commission was using. They supported many of the practical suggestions made by the Group, including workshops, meetings, and conferences with local Aborigines and assistance to Aboriginal committees in the development of self-help processes and other initiatives. This type of involvement, at present not well developed, could with profit be built up to a much higher level.

9.27 Parental and community participation in the education of Aboriginal children is another important possibility. Although the majority of parents do have educational aspirations for their children these are rarely successfully communicated. Parents have little understanding of the process of schooling, nor are they knowledgeable about avenues through which they may make their desires known. They are dubious, and with good reason, about how seriously their views, if expressed, will be responded to. The Commission considers that many possible advances in Aboriginal education will not be possible while schools systems continue to work with children alone. The people who can work more effectively with parents are members of the Aboriginal community itself; and such people need to be present on school staffs. The efforts already being made in the direction of positive discrimination in favour of Aboriginal students could be further

expanded. Home liaison workers, counsellors and Aboriginal teacher aides could assist parents, counsel students, establish homework learning centres and find other ways of overcoming the difficulties of students and the hiatus between school and home. Because of the small pool of qualified Aborigines, appointments would need to be drawn from unqualified and inexperienced adults who might need assistance and training to become effective. The Commission believes the advantages of such closer involvement to be more important than the problems of engaging people without traditional qualifications.

Leadership and Training

9.28 There can only be an effective Aboriginal voice and involvement if Aborigines are able to aspire to leadership positions. There is a need, for example, to train understudies to superintendents of Aboriginal education where the people holding such positions are not already members of the Aboriginal community. More Aboriginal teachers, social workers, liaison officers and so on are required for both government and non-government schools. In addition to present schemes to assist students, there is a need to extend opportunities at secondary level for mature-age Aborigines to re-enter the educational process. If the Aboriginal Study Grants Scheme were modified to cater for this group, and if the Technical and Further Education Commission were to arrange suitable study opportunities, significant advances would be possible.

COMMISSION ACTION

9.29 The Commission can facilitate most of the action proposed within its recommended program structures. It will :

- a. establish a Standing Committee on Aboriginal Education to take on in a more permanent way the work of the present Consultative Group, and to advise it on policies in Aboriginal education and means of implementing them, and to be available to other educational agencies seeking similar advice;
- b. provide funding through its Services and Development Program for the training of Aboriginal social workers to liaise between school and home, and for Aborigines to

understudy officers in the Aboriginal Section of State Education Departments in those States in which departments of education support such developments;

- c. provide through the Special Projects Program funds to enable the operation of consultative groups in States, the staffing of some independent Aboriginal schools, secondary level re-entry opportunities, and innovative projects associated with Aboriginal education;
- d. encourage the Curriculum Development Centre to include improved Aboriginal curriculum materials high on its list of priority projects;
- e. regularly review the adequacy of all arrangements for Aboriginal education, and as necessary make specific recommendations on funding needs other than those included in this program.

9.30 It is also *recommended* that:

a) the Australian Government set up and implement an urgent national review of action in fields of health, nutrition and welfare, necessary to ensure that Aboriginal children can benefit to the full extent from educational programs;

b) the Australian Government undertake in principle fully to finance schools with predominantly Aboriginal enrolments in the States, if asked to do so by appropriate school authorities;

c) administration of grants for Aboriginal education to schools and systems by the Australian Government become a responsibility of the Australian Department of Education.

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