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EDUCATION FOR ABORIGINES

REPORT TO THE SCHOOLS COMMISSION BY THE ABORIGINAL CONSULTATIVE GROUP- JUNE 1975

In June 1975, the Aboriginal Consultative Group presented a report to the Schools Commission on *Education for Aborigines*. The members of the Aboriginal Consultative Group who presented the report were :

David Anderson, NAC, Vic.; Jill Churnside, Pre-School teacher, W.A.; Roslyn Ella, Teacher, N.S.W.; Walter Fejo, NAC, N.T.; Rex Granites, Teaching Assistant, N.T.; Eric Hayward, Community Worker, W.A.; Nita Koolamatrie, Teacher, S.A.; Verna Langdon, Community Worker, Tas; Ted Loban, NAC, Torres Strait Islands; Bruce McGuinness, NAC, Vic; Natasha McNamara, Lecturer, S.A.; Michael Miller, Teacher, Qld; George Mye, NAC, Torres Strait Islands; Wiyendji Nunggula, House-father, N.T.; May O'Brien, Teacher, W.A.; James Stewart, Teacher, S.A.; Margaret Valadian, Social Worker, N.S.W.

Special Advisers: John Moriarty, Department of Aboriginal Affairs;
Eric Wilmott, Department of Education

Convenor: Alan Randell; Executive Officer: Paul Kauffman

In prefacing their report to Dr.K.McKinnon, Chairman of the Schools Commission, the Aboriginal Consultative Group stated :

"... We recognize the existence of an Aboriginal people consisting of many diverse communities and individuals, and that specific educational needs are different amongst different Aboriginal groups. But we see a common cohesion of cultural values and aspirations that identify us as a distinct people, with aspirations often quite different to that of the non-Aboriginal community.

The two most important conclusions reached during our deliberations were :

1. Aboriginal people should be involved in their own education at all levels, and that they should be responsible for and have some realistic control of this process.

2. We do not wish to see the responsibility for the education of Aboriginal children removed from the Government education systems operated by the various States and Territories.

We realize that at present there is a shortage of appropriately skilled Aborigines in high level administration and we sought various strategies to overcome this.

We are most concerned at the dimension and magnitude of problems faced by Aboriginal children in Australian schools. At this stage we feel that we have been able to examine only the surface of these problems, but we have made recommendations that would allow much more adequate studies of various areas. Some areas are the responsibility of other Government departments. Other areas we propose to study in detail ourselves in the near future..."

In this issue we present the terms of reference of the report, the Aboriginal Consultative Group's vision of education, and the basic assumptions upon which the Consultative Group operated. In the next issue we will present the recommendations and thinking of the Consultative Group with respect to the four areas of need in the education of Aboriginal people as recognized by the Consultative Group.

1.1 TERMS OF REFERENCE

"Schools in Australia" made reference to the educational disadvantages faced by Aboriginal children. The Interim Committee for the Schools Commission, however, was not able to mount a special enquiry into the educational needs of Aboriginal children in the short time between December 1972, when the Interim Committee was appointed, and May 1973 when it presented its report. In order to obtain an Aboriginal opinion on this area, the Commission formed an Aboriginal Consultative Group to advise on the present needs and future provisions for the education of Aboriginal people in Australia.

After discussions with other Government departments the Schools Commission approached the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee and asked them to provide nominations. The Group was appointed and first met on 16 December 1974.

The terms of reference were that the Group would present a viewpoint to the Commission on :

- present policies and educational provision in respect to Aborigines;
- present patterns of administering funds for the education of Aborigines;
- specific matters the Group feel are of importance in respect to the education of Aborigines.

1.2 OUR VISION

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 anglicised Aborigine but rather as an instrument for creating an informed community with intellectual and technological skills, in harmony with our own cultural values and identity. We wish to be 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 the current education system with its over emphasis on manpower orientated goals that most Australian people know.

We see the need for a change in education for both the Aboriginal and non Aboriginal people, 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.

2. BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

2.1 The Aboriginal population

We see this country's population as being composed of two distinct groups of people.

- a. The Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders and their descendants, who are the indigenous people of this land.
- b. People of a number of other races, predominately European, who have chosen to make this country their home.

2.1.1 Identity

The identity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people is primarily a question of descent and should be established on the basis of family lines. We realize that for some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people, documentation of descent will be difficult and some appropriate method of determining lineage may have to be devised.

2.1.2 Nature of population

In 1971 we numbered somewhere between 106,000 and 150,000 people. Compared to the total Australian population we were young, rural dwelling and rapidly growing. More were employed in "agriculture" (5,000) and "community services" (6,000) than in any other category. About 2,500 of us were unemployed. The number of registered unemployed has risen steadily to over 4,000 in 1974. In the same year at least 55 Aborigines were attending universities, but the largest occupational group (of almost 40,000) were those enrolled in schools.

2.2 Values and objectives

The following statements are far from complete in terms of presenting a total educational philosophy. But they do offer insights into the areas which have most concerned the Consultative Group and we believe they are also a true reflection of the hopes and aspirations of most Aboriginal people.

We believe that every child has a right to be brought up as a member of his own culture. This does not mean that he must be prevented from learning about (and learning from) other cultures, but simply for survival the individual must be firmly rooted in his past, and his past (perhaps more than his present) is his culture.

The child should nevertheless be educated in such a way that he is able to function successfully in both his own culture and the wider Australian society if he so desires.

Furthermore, we believe that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island culture should be retained and that Aboriginal identity

should be actively developed through education. It is accepted that some parts of Aboriginal culture and folklore associated with survival in pre-European times should now be replaced with those skills which will allow the Aboriginal people to participate equally in the trade and professional areas of the Australian economy.

We are not prepared, however, to sacrifice social values such as responsibility for the well being of others, sharing and non-destructive competition. These are a fundamental part of our identity. Such values should in no way exclude Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island people from acquisition of vocational and professional skills which allow them the same level of achievement in the monetary economy of the non-Aboriginal Australian society.

We seek the highest quality of education available. We wish to have the same range of choice as any other Australians when deciding our future.

Notwithstanding our desire to promote Aboriginal cultural values within Australian educational institutions, we would not wish to have those cultural elements of a religious nature, such as sacred ceremonies and rites taught in schools, as these are the responsibility of the various communities.

2.3 Four areas of need

The Consultative Group recognised four areas of need with respect to the education of Aboriginal people.

- A. Administrators and decision makers
Involvement, appointment and training of Aborigines to high level administrative and decision-making positions which affect the education of Aboriginal people.
- B. Professionals
Strategies to meet some of the needs at the professional and trade levels.
- C. Children
Children who are of pre-school or school age.
- D. The excluded
People who do not have the opportunity to take advantage of education, or who have withdrawn because of the deficiencies in some education systems.