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THE SUCCESS OF CHERBOURG STATE SCHOOL'S PROGRAM FOR ABORIGINAL STUDENTS

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Teachers often become very despondent about their job. One reason for this is because all too often they are made aware of their failures rather than their successes. In this article I am very pleased to be able to report on the success of Cherbourg State School. Although Queensland reserves are not noticeable for creating hope, one of the bright lights at Cherbourg is education.

Over the summer of 1972-73, I spent eight weeks at Cherbourg interviewing residents about their attitudes to migration, as reported earlier in this journal.* One hundred and six people in an age-stratified sample were asked to rate Education amongst fourteen attributes of Cherbourg and five other types of location. The results presented in this report are based on statistical analysis of the formal interview data, and on considerable information gained during unstructured interviews and from observation.

RESULTS

In responses to the six locations, Education ranked as follows out of the fourteen attributes: Cherbourg, 2nd; Cities, 8th; Large Towns, 7th; Other Reserves, 5th; Small Country Towns, 9th; and Stations, 10th equal. In the most desired alternative to Cherbourg, Education ranked only 9th. These results were based on medians of ratings for the three age strata combined. Strength of feeling about an attribute was gauged by the rank of an attribute. High or low ranking attributes (such as Education at Cherbourg) were considered as important in promoting or inhibiting migration. Middle ranking attributes (Education at all other locations) were regarded as being relatively unimportant to respondents.

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*Aboriginal Migration: a survey amongst Cherbourg residents,
The Aboriginal Child at School, 3:4, 1975, 49.

When the distribution of responses on the individual attributes was compared with the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test to the distribution of all responses together, Education at Cherbourg was rated significantly better by the 20-29 year age group, by people over 30, and by the three strata combined. Only the youngest stratum (10-19 years) was not very enthusiastic, but significant responses occurred in only one out of twenty tests applied to Education at the other five rated locations.

Amongst the younger probable movers, Education was not an attribute likely to affect migration one way or another, but amongst parents the quality of the schooling currently given at Cherbourg was a strong factor keeping them at the settlement. Very aware of their lack of formal education, parents generally believed that their children would find life easier if they gained a good education. It was very apparent from interviews that the strength of the Cherbourg results was due to favourable reaction to the primary school rather than to the neighbouring town's secondary school.

EDUCATIONAL CHANGES

There were four main reasons why the primary school was being successful. These were the dissociation of the school from the Department of Aboriginal and Island Affairs, the experimental reading program developed by the Van Leer Foundation, the employment of Aboriginal teaching aides in the school, and the school's attempts to liaise with the community.

In 1962 the Queensland Sub-Department of Native Affairs was transferred from the Department of Health and Home Affairs to the Department of Education, and control of reserve education was passed to professional educators. When a separate Department of Aboriginal and Island Affairs was created in 1965, education remained behind. This transfer saw a marked improvement in educational standards at Cherbourg. Prior to 1962 few pupils advanced beyond primary school. In 1963 only seven settlement children were at secondary school in Murgon, but three years later there were 83. By 1973 there were 119 children from Cherbourg attending secondary schools, 248 enrolled at the primary school, and 44 at the settlement pre-school.* Most secondary students attended the integrated Murgon High School, and primary school children attended the Cherbourg State School.

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* Figures from *Annual Reports* of the Department of Aboriginal and Island Affairs.

There can be little doubt that the increase in enrolments and achievement was due to the Department of Education. For sixty years prior to the transfer of schools, Queensland Aboriginal policy had been to provide primary education only. Out of 38 respondents aged over thirty, 35 had received only primary education, and there is little evidence to suggest that this schooling was satisfactory. Even if the Department of Aboriginal and Island Affairs had maintained control of the school, and even if the Department had been innovative, the attitude of Cherbourg residents to the Department was such that passive non-cooperation (sometimes called apathy) would probably have subverted any positive efforts.

In the late 1960's state primary schools at Cherbourg and Palm Island became experimental schools using language programs developed by the Bernard Van Leer Foundation Project (Grey et al, 1969). The Project had found an overall retardation of sixteen months in Standard English amongst an unspecified sample of children with an average chronological age of five years seven months (Bernard Van Leer Foundation No3, 1969, 1-2). Partly this was due to environmental conditions at Cherbourg creating undersized, malnourished pupils who especially suffered from hearing problems (Bernard Van Leer Foundation No.2, 1969; Jose et al, 1969, Stuart et al, 1972). The education program developed took this as given and concentrated especially on classroom problems and relationship of school and community. Dwyer (1974) discusses in some detail the type of classroom program developed to cope with the educational aspects of the situation. Much information was gained and many lessons were learned: the structure of Aboriginal English, the importance of a supportive classroom atmosphere in helping children develop proficiency in Standard English, as well, the importance of teachers' attitudes and expectations. Some of this was a relearning of old lessons in a new context, but certainly teachers were finding pupils taught under the new system were further advanced than those taught previously.

A third aspect of the school's success was the employment of Cherbourg residents as teacher assistants in the school, again with the aid of the Van Leer Foundation. Dyer (1973,26) saw the role of these assistants as being essentially to mediate between the school and the community, increasing the involvement of each with the other. Six aides, with the assistance of an advisor in the school, received pre-service and in-service training. Eric Law (1974), one of the assistants, wrote that he saw his duties as assisting the teacher, assisting the students, and communicating between the teacher and the home. Assistants were developing specialist roles within this framework according to their interests and abilities.

These were new and relatively well paid jobs which offered assistants constructive employment on behalf of their people. Involvement in education by assistants was high and was having a multiplier effect. While Dyer (1974) reported that there were plenty of difficulties, particularly in the way in which classroom teachers made use of the assistants, the assistants' contribution to the school's success was a critical one.

My own observation certainly accorded with Dyer's (1973, 29-31) comments on encouraging feedback from parents to the school, and with Law's (1974, 39) comment that parents were becoming proud of their school. They were readily able to compare their children's progress and enthusiasm with their own when they had been at school or with secondary school pupils. Some were rather bemused that children could get up early in the morning and want to get to school early. Children's work was displayed on community noticeboards, in parents' houses and to neighbours and visitors. Not all parents were as enthusiastic, of course, and many were unhappy about the secondary school. This was unpopular because of the relative lack of progress of blacks compared to whites, and because of racial problems at school. Parents were prone to suspect white teachers of siding with white children - whether or not this actually happened. Lack of effective liaison between the school and the Cherbourg community did little to dispel this suspicion, while the major duty of one of this school's two Aboriginal assistants was a negative one of controlling and disciplining Aboriginal pupils. Despite this, the survey results showed that education rated second only to the ties of kinship and friendship as the most desirable aspect of Cherbourg.

CONCLUSION

The data clearly illustrated two sides of one controversy over Aboriginal education. Generally education was an unimportant factor in the assessment by respondents of various locations, but they did respond very enthusiastically to a program catering to their educational needs and to effective liaison between school and community. The success of the pilot survey employing Aboriginal teaching assistants was remarkable. From both structured and unstructured data it was quite apparent that the scheme was creating greater awareness of the need for and the needs of education.

The information also highlighted the dilemma of separate schooling versus integrated schooling. The benefits of separate

schooling would seem to me to have justified the system in this instance. A rapid increase in educational standards appeared to be occurring, enthusiasm for education was certainly increasing, and increase of Aboriginal self-esteem should have followed. The next real test will occur as new program pupils progress from the primary school to the secondary school with its greater difficulties and less easy liaison.

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BILINGUAL EDUCATION

IN SOUTH AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL SCHOOLS

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AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT AND SOUTH AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION DEPARTMENT POLICY

Australia is a member nation of the International Labour Organisation. Article 23 of the I.L.O. Convention concerning the Protection Integration of Indigenous and Other Tribal and Semi-Tribal Populations in Independent Countries reads:

Children belonging to populations concerned shall be taught to read and write in their mother tongue, or, where this is not practicable, in the language most commonly used by the group to which they belong.

Provision shall be made for a progressive transition from the mother tongue or the vernacular