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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

language to the mother language or to one of the official languages of the country.

Appropriate measures shall, as far as possible, be taken to preserve the mother tongue or the vernacular language.

In December, 1972, the Prime Minister, Mr Whitlam, said the Australian Government would *"launch a campaign to have Aboriginal children living in distinctive Aboriginal communities given their primary education in Aboriginal languages"*.

South Australia was already pursuing this policy prior to the Prime Minister's announcement. (It is emphasised that reference is being made to Aborigines living a traditional life style in remote areas of the State.)

TRIBAL ABORIGINAL SCHOOLS IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

There are five South Australian schools which serve distinctive tribal Aboriginal communities. These schools are at Indulkana, Ernabella, Fregon and Amata in the far north-west, and at Yalata in the far west. Pitjantjatjara is the everyday language of communication.

In its traditional form, Pitjantjatjara was a preliterate language and it is only in the past few decades that linguists have established it in a written form. Some Aboriginal adults are literate: very few adults have a firm grasp of spoken English and practically none can write it.

BILINGUAL AND BICULTURAL EDUCATION

The term "bilingual education" as used in South Australia means children learn in both Pitjantjatjara and English. "Bilingual education" is an inseparable ingredient of "bicultural education".

A deliberate attempt is made in each of the five tribal schools to develop aspects of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures far beyond the language component.

At Yalata, there has been some resistance to the introduction of Pitjantjatjara literacy because historically the early mission schooling was conducted in English. On the other hand, teaching in the vernacular had been strongly established at Ernabella long before the South Australian Education Department assumed responsibility for the school.

In the north-western schools, the general pattern is for initial literacy to be established in Pitjantjatjara. After the child has firmly grasped the skills of reading and writing in Pitjantjatjara, these skills are then directed to developing English literacy. This usually can commence after two years of primary education. It follows a build-up of oral English which commences in varying degrees at preschool level. Each of the five tribal communities has a preschool. The Ernabella preschool is conducted for the community by an Aboriginal teacher.

IMPLEMENTING BILINGUAL EDUCATION

Bilingual education is introduced by using teaching teams of Aboriginal teachers, teacher-aides and non-Aboriginal teachers. At present, no professionally trained tribal Aboriginal teachers are available in South Australia, so the learning programmes are usually planned by trained non-Aboriginal teachers in consultation with the Aboriginal members of the team. As the Aboriginal teachers and teacher-aides gain experience, they are asked to undertake more responsibility for the planning and implementation of the programme.

In the early years at school, most of the instruction to children must be given through Aboriginal teachers or teacher-aides. The amount of assistance which they seek, and are given, varies with the team. In some cases the Aboriginal members are confident, able teachers, and have good rapport with the non-Aboriginal teacher. In other cases, there may be a language barrier, or general lack of confidence, which makes it difficult for the trained teacher to hand over to the Aboriginal team member as much responsibility as is desired. As the children's understanding of English increases, the non-Aboriginal teachers take a more direct part in the teaching process.

Bilingual (and bicultural) learning continues through the school with a strengthening of the English facets as the children progress. However, components of Aboriginal culture, such as

traditional crafts, dances, stories and songs (all taught by Aboriginal staff) remain an essential ingredient of the curriculum throughout the children's schooling.

PITJANTJATJARA LITERATURE

Teachers have developed Pitjantjatjara reading and phonics texts and these are constantly being revised and expanded. In addition, some small story books have been prepared by Aboriginal authors using both traditional and contemporary themes. This programme is being accelerated by encouraging literate Aboriginal teachers and teacher-aides to write, and by printing stories written by older children.

The South Australian bilingual programme is not expected to result in a large array of material printed in Pitjantjatjara at this time. There is a place for some English material to be translated into Pitjantjatjara but English will remain the major printed medium available to the Pitjantjatjara people in the foreseeable future.

TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

Proficiency in the use of English is an important ingredient at this time in the life of the Pitjantjatjara people: development of this skill is stated by the people to be very high in their list of educational priorities. Currently, it is the weakest aspect of the bilingual programme, but plans are in hand to overcome this. The Australian Government has been asked, by the Minister of Education in South Australia, to produce material specifically for teaching English as a second language to tribal Aboriginal people.

South Australia has pioneered bilingual education in this country in an endeavour to lower some of the barriers confronting Aboriginal people who speak their own language, and who are living in their own distinctive communities. The programme has attracted attention from educationists around the world. More importantly, it is expected to catch the imagination of the people to whom it is directed, by providing them with cultural tools in their own language and in English.