



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 EDUCATION IN VICTORIA:
AN EVALUATION OF AN INNOVATORY EMPHASIS

C.J. Bourke,
Acting Supervisor of
Aboriginal Education,
Victoria.

BACKGROUND

The Victorian Education Department is philosophically opposed to the unnecessary segregation of children. Consequently, and with the approval of the Victorian Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs, the two special schools for Aboriginal children at Lake Tyers and Framlingham were closed some years ago.

During the existence of the Victorian Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs it had been traditional practice for that Ministry to undertake special projects, after consultation with the Education Department, to alleviate educational disadvantages of Aboriginal children. Generally this support took the form of funding specific school projects or school equipment. However, in relation to other states the Victorian funding for education was at a low level.

The transfer of responsibility for Aboriginal Affairs from the Victorian State Government to the Australian Government on 1st January, 1975, made it imperative for the Victorian Education Department to assume full responsibility for the administration of all funding pertaining to the education of Aboriginal children. This step was necessary because the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs does not seek to provide educational services for Aboriginal people. They believe that the provision of such services is the responsibility of existing State Government educational authorities. The Department of Aboriginal Affairs seeks to stimulate, co-ordinate and if necessary, support the extension, and where appropriate the accommodation of existing services to Aboriginals, and to ensure that special measures are taken to overcome any particular handicaps which Aboriginal people may suffer.

The Victorian Education Department decided that, as a matter of policy, the organization and administration of educational pro-

visions for Aboriginal children at pre-school, primary, secondary and technical levels would be the responsibility of the Director of Special Services, Mr. T.L.W. Emerson. It was further decided to establish a branch of Special Services Division which would be entirely devoted to Aboriginal education.

This decision was an innovative step aimed at improving, in the long run, the achievement of Aboriginal students. Underlying the decision was the belief that the formal education a person attains is one of the most important factors in determining his future, particularly if that person is a member of a depressed minority group in an industrialized society. Without literacy and some comprehension of the working of social institutions, people will have difficulty in coping with such fundamentals as jobs, home management, health management, child rearing and involvement in society's affairs. The findings of all studies on Aboriginal educational standards have shown that Aboriginal standards of academic achievement are far below those reached by the non-Aboriginal population.

The Aboriginal Consultative Group to the Schools Commission felt - "that the education provided for them (Aboriginals and Islanders) should allow for equality in educational pursuits especially in the acquisition of vocational skills which allow them to compete in the monetary economy of non-Aboriginal Australian society". (1)

It must be apparent that, for Aboriginal children, the educationists in this country need to evolve a system of education different from that being followed at present. Because, while the system may or may not be serving the general Australian community well, it is without doubt failing the Aboriginal people of Australia. The failure of the education system can be seen clearly in relation to the school participation rates for Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders taken from the 1971 census. The census showed at age 17 years only 7.38% of Aboriginals were still at school compared with 28.8% of non-Aboriginals; these figures are a devastating indictment of the present educational system. The figures could be even worse than they seem because Aboriginal students are often 12-24 months older than their non-Aboriginal classmates. So at 17 years, instead of being in forms 5 or 6, they may well be in Forms 3 or 4. If further proof is needed, one has only to observe the lack of formal academic or trade qualifications obtained by the Aboriginal people. The lack of viable, on-going and positive Aboriginal identity and the strong racial prejudice still being exhibited in the Australian community, are further proof, if it were needed, of this failure of our education system.

.....
(1) Report to the Australian Schools Commission - Aboriginal Consultative Group, July 1975.

Unfortunately, the beliefs and expectations of the mainly middle-class white teachers, school administrators, fellow students and other significant white Australians are, that Aboriginals are poor social outcasts, no matter how well the views are hidden nor how hard people try not to be chauvinistic. Consequently Aboriginal children have learned early in life that few whites really expect much from them. "This view is unfortunately reinforced by the Aboriginal adults who accept, however inadvertently, this negative evaluation of themselves. In an effort to protect their children from disappointment, parents ostracize or tease the children who do well at school because they fear the child's achievement may put him or her into situations where they can be pushed back by non-Aboriginals." (Smith H. and Biddle, E.H., 1974)

It is believed that a person's ability to function effectively and satisfyingly in our community is determined to a large extent by his self-respect, pride and confidence in himself. These in turn are affected by his experiences of success as well as his relationship to and understanding of his society and the opportunities it provides him. Unfortunately our education system has effectively reinforced the Aboriginals' negative self-concepts and has denuded them of self-respect and confidence.

THE INNOVATIVE PROGRAM

The Special Services Division of the Education Department made a start on a special program, to provide additional supportive services to schools with Aboriginal pupils.

The Director of Special Services promised his direct support and interest in Aboriginal education, and his strong support, especially in the early stages, enabled the program that has developed to get off the ground.

Statistics which are available show that the Aboriginal Education Section was responsible for providing supportive services for 1407 Primary and 822 Secondary pupils. These pupils were to be found in all parts of the state and some 491 schools were involved in their education.

There have been *three* main areas of innovative activity in Aboriginal education this year. Field based staff in the form of Resource Teachers have been appointed. The employment of Aboriginal

people in schools has been promoted through Special Work Projects Grants. Funds have been made available to assist handicapped children and also to assist schools with substantial Aboriginal populations to develop programs to meet specific needs.

RESOURCE TEACHERS: ABORIGINAL EDUCATION

After consultation with the Director of Special Services it was decided that the first step should be to obtain Resource Teachers. It was intended that these Resource Teachers should - (i) assist classroom teachers in developing an appropriate curriculum and skills for children with extra needs, especially Aboriginal children; (ii) promote home-school awareness of mutual problems in the education of disadvantaged children. Teachers with the desired qualifications were not available. Contact was made with Teachers Branch, Special Education Branch and various state colleges. From these efforts six people were found who indicated their willingness to act as the first Resource Teachers: Aboriginal Education. Four of the teachers were in their first year in the field but had undertaken a course in Aboriginal studies during their teacher training. These people also had experience either in teaching or living with Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory or South Australia. The other two teachers were quite experienced; one had a Trained Special Teacher's Certificate, but neither had been involved in Aboriginal Affairs in the past.

These six teachers arrived in Melbourne on 24th February to undertake a two week in-service training program. This orientation program was devised by the Acting Supervisor. The training aimed to give the Resource Teachers a basic understanding of the reading process as well as experience of language development programs. These two areas, it was felt, were the most important areas of academic need facing the Aboriginal pupils. During the two weeks the teachers were also exposed to some discussions on Aboriginal education and the problems they would face in their new roles. The Resource Teachers were also introduced to many of the people working in Aboriginal Affairs, for example, Department of Aboriginal Affairs officers, Commonwealth Department of Education, Special Health Services etc. These contacts broadened the teachers' outlooks and gave them more understanding of the situation facing the Aboriginal people of Victoria.

The teachers took up duty at Cann River, Orbost North, Nowa Nowa, Preston North East, Robinvale and Shepparton. Their anticipated roles and duties were widened and interim guidelines were

developed to specify their roles in Aboriginal education.

The Resource Teachers have endeavoured to provide the supportive services, as suggested in the guidelines, to the schools they serve. The roles of these teachers depend to some extent on their location and the demographic concentration and/or dispersion of the Aboriginal pupils in their district. Some of the teachers are more or less permanently based at one school, because of the large numbers of Aboriginal pupils at these schools. The other teachers are much more mobile and they have a definite commitment to several schools in their area.

As an innovation, the Resource Teachers have acted as change agents. They have assisted classroom teachers in the selection and development of programs related to the children's needs, with attempts to emphasize development as well as remediation. This part of the program needs further development. Many of the Resource Teachers, due in part to their own inexperience, have felt unwelcome in some of the classrooms, and this has hindered them in developing their roles as consultants. There have, unfortunately, been some derogatory remarks by classroom teachers about the whole concept of specialist assistance for Aborigines. "Something should be done to help the poor whites - the Aborigines get everything and just waste the lot", was an often heard comment. While one school principal commented, "I hate blacks!" Such comments have left Resource Teachers confused and feeling somewhat helpless at the task in hand.

To overcome "white backlash" the Resource Teachers have also assisted white children by involving them in their programs and withdrawal groups. Unfortunately these white children are not so much disadvantaged as educationally retarded. The attempts to avoid the "backlash" have placed the Resource Teachers in a situation where they are trading off assistance to Aboriginal children against the fear, real or imagined, of this white backlash.

The Resource Teachers are generally isolated and remote from one another. Their letters to the Supervisor often mention the loneliness of their job. Unfortunately, they have received insufficient supportive visits from the Supervisor, due mainly to the impossibility of the task given to him. However, each Resource Teacher has received a supportive visit at least once each term. It has been found that the second and subsequent visits by the Supervisor have been more effective in overcoming many of the problems which beset the Resource Teacher.

The long delayed arrival of the printed guidelines for the Resource Teachers and a similar delay in their receiving a grant to purchase materials and aids, embarrassed them considerably. These delays were caused by faults in the administrative system and were both unnecessary and frustrating. One of the worst aspects of the delay was the undermining of the Supervisor's credibility.

The major impact of the Resource Teachers has probably been among the Aboriginal community itself. Although each teacher has developed the home/school liaison differently, this is the first time in most of the areas, that Aboriginal parents have actually had contact with a teacher. This fact is very apparent in discussions between the Supervisor and parents, where they speak so approvingly of the work of their Resource Teacher.

The school Principals of the home-base schools have noted that there is a great improvement in home/school relations and many children's attendance at school has improved. This improvement, according to the principals, has been due to the efforts of the Resource Teachers in meeting and improving relations with parents.

The long term aim of the Resource Teachers is, of course, to improve the academic performance of their Aboriginal charges. All principals have reported improved academic achievement, but, in only two terms, measurable improvement was hardly expected. However, the case of the Aboriginal boy at Reservoir East Primary School is worthy of mention. He was, according to his class teacher, a virtual non-reader before the arrival of the Resource Teacher in March. When the Supervisor called in August, he had "taken off" and read fourteen books, and was close to being an independent reader. Of course, it is not certain that the Resource Teacher was the necessary catalyst for this previously troublesome boy, but this case is well worth recording.

The following comments from school principals, indicate their judgements on the effectiveness of Resource Teachers as an innovatory step in Aboriginal education:

- . a program designed to build up the children's self-respect and appreciation of their culture has been built up.
- . has cultivated a rapport with the Aboriginal children concerned.
- . children look forward to her visits.
- . I have noticed some improvement in the attitudes of the Aboriginal children in both academic and social fields.

- . she has become a really effective force in the area.
- . the special display over two weeks, in the group schools, of Aboriginal artifacts, etc., was a resounding success.
- . I have been here for several years and I think I am a very good teacher who has done a lot for the kids, yet this Resource Teacher has, in a few months, accomplished more than I have even hoped I have.
- . she assists Aboriginal children in remedial work and cultural pride and development.

The Resource Teachers have developed their roles variously, and the following excerpts from their reports show the extent of the roles they are developing as change agents in the Victorian educational scene:

- . the children do seem to enjoy these activities and frequently pop in for a chat, at recess, lunch-time and before and after school.
- . parents appreciate how important their encouragement is to their children's attitudes and achievements.
- . we take a group of girls to a club each Thursday evening.
- . we had a lovely party of cocoa, biscuits and hundreds and thousands on bread and butter.
- . you must obtain the respect and confidence of the children.
- . the girls were very conscious of their duties as hostesses.
- . I have tried to concentrate on experience-type projects.
- . all parents are interested and genuinely concerned about their children and their education.
- . recently a young married woman came to ask if I would help her to learn to read so that she could get her driver's licence. She had come on her husband's suggestion. She came every day from 4-5 o'clock for a fortnight, weekends included, and then successfully passed her test. We were both thrilled.
- . we had two education meetings which were fairly well attended.
- . I would hope to have regular afternoon teas.
- . a study group was held on Mondays and Wednesdays from 4-5.
- . I was asked to testify in court on the boy's behalf.
- . I have invited the group to tea at my place.
- . I enjoyed the camp; it was both challenging and tiring.
- . in fact, I'm on speaking terms with two Preps who don't speak to their teachers.

In June, the Resource Teachers spent another week on an in-service training program designed to give them audio-visual skills, understanding of speech defects and some sensitization to the needs and feelings of Aboriginal people. This program was reasonably successful, but the Resource Teachers still need more contact with the spokesmen of the Aboriginal people.

Part of the role of a Resource Teacher is to endeavour to change the attitudes of teachers and other whites who hold prejudiced views of Aboriginal people. To change attitudes is part, if not all, of the educational process, but it is one fraught with the danger of strengthening the very attitude one is trying to change. Consequently the Resource Teachers need some understanding of social psychology and, in particular, changing attitudes. Further in-service training in this area must prove to be beneficial.

There are among teachers and the general community commonly held misconceptions about Aboriginals, such as, for example, "They get their homes given to them." Resource Teachers need to know the facts on such matters so they can produce evidence which may help to correct the misapprehensions under which so many of their colleagues labour. The next in-service training session should be aimed at both these points.

In summary, the Resource Teachers, it would appear, have been a welcome innovation in the field of Aboriginal education. As change agents they have endeavoured to stimulate discussion and change the attitudes and actions of parents, teachers and pupils. They have endeavoured to be a bridge between the school and the home. It is too early at this stage to make a serious evaluation of their overall effectiveness, especially in the long term goal of improving the academic achievement of Aboriginal students. However, the signs are encouraging. Parental interest appears to be more alive, some classroom teachers are endeavouring to try new programs for their Aboriginal students, and for the first time, in many cases, the Aboriginal students have a teacher who they know is on their side. As well, the students are more relaxed and confident when with the Resource Teacher and this confidence appears, in some cases, to be carrying over into other situations.

One problem which has still to be resolved is the previously discussed question of "white backlash". As noted earlier, it is felt that to concentrate solely on Aboriginal students could create resentment and ill-will among teachers and the general community. But

to avoid this means that much of the Resource Teachers' scarce time is devoted to non-Aboriginal students and this must lessen their effectiveness in working with the Aboriginal students. No definite policy decision has been made on this issue to date, but the comment of an Aboriginal parent at Echuca should be borne in mind, "Thank God, they've done away with the special grades at Echuca. When we were kids we went into the Special class and stayed there for the whole time we were at school. The special class was for dumb whites and Aboriginals. We didn't learn much there".

The present Resource Teacher innovation is vastly different from the old special classes mentioned above. There is a different emphasis, and hopefully the result will be different. But the implication made is still valid. As to whether the Aboriginal children should be grouped with white children with quite severe learning disabilities must soon be decided. There are services available to children with learning difficulties and these should be used by the school. However, the unfortunate reality is that, in many cases, because of remoteness, the Resource Teacher is the only specialist assistance available. Over the past few months the policy has been to try and match the Aboriginal pupils receiving attention with white children of similar ability, whenever withdrawal groups are taken. This should at least mean that Aboriginal pupils will not be retarded further by white children with greater educational handicaps.

Part of the Resource Teacher's duties will be to develop programs in traditional Aboriginal culture for inclusion in the school curriculum. There have been attempts on the part of the Resource Teachers to develop this innovatory program. But the major thrust in this area will be made after a Curriculum and Research team is set up to provide supportive services and materials to the Resource Teachers. This aspect of the program will develop after more consultation with the Aboriginal community. During the recent National Aborigines Week, one Resource Teacher did arrange an exciting display of artifacts and other aspects of local Aboriginal culture. The display aroused a great deal of interest locally and was transferred from school to school.

SPECIAL WORK PROJECTS SCHEME, 1975

In April, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs gave Special Services Division the responsibility for administering the Special Work Projects Scheme in Victorian schools. The Special Work Projects is an attempt by the Australian Government to give employment opportunities to unemployed or underemployed Aboriginals. According to

the Department of Aboriginal Affairs opportunities for on-the-job training were also to be encouraged. At the time of the change-over some twenty-one people were employed in Technical schools in a variety of occupations such as clerical assistants, library assistants, groundsmen, cleaners etc.

The Special Services Division felt that as schools were educational institutions, who were receiving a 100% subsidy of wage and costs for these employees, the educational and training aspects of the scheme should be stressed. In general the Acting Supervisor found that schools were unaware of, or were not really stressing the educational and training aspects of the scheme. Consequently, all the participating principals had to be visited and informed of the terms and conditions of the grants. The major condition emphasized was that the funds were available for twelve months only, and if an approved course of training was being undertaken, funding could be extended for a further period.

These visits appear to have brought about a change in emphasis in the schools. Principals are now keen to have their employees gain some academic or training qualification - Aboriginal people are now undertaking Leaving and H.S.C. Subjects as well as typing and business studies, library technician courses, horticultural studies etc. The actual training or educational course depends entirely on what is available in the area and what the employee desires to do. The only provision is that the training should benefit the employee in that it will improve his/her future employment opportunities. All the above conditions will be waived if the school undertakes to provide permanent employment at the end of the project.

Initially, in the early days of the scheme, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs approved applications to employ five or six people at a school. In general, these have not proved to be satisfactory and it is now the policy of Special Services Division to have no more than two Aboriginal employees per school.

This scheme, it is believed, will provide Aboriginal people with an opportunity to gain skills which they can later use to obtain employment. It is of the utmost importance that the opportunities so provided are not wasted. It is apparent that, in some cases, the employees need bridging assistance before they can undertake a more formal academic or training course. This will be discussed with schools during third term. The necessity of offering tutorial assistance to these Aboriginal people should also be part of the schools'

responsibilities and will be discussed during visits by the Supervisor in third term.

There has been a tremendous upsurge of interest in this scheme since High School and Primary School Councils have had the authority to employ ancillary staff as teacher aides. At this time some fifty Aboriginal people are employed in schools in all parts of the state. Maintaining contact and developing a working liaison with the schools and the Aboriginals employed is now just too much for the Supervisor.

In an endeavour to provide close liaison it was proposed that an Aboriginal person should be employed to supervise this scheme. The initial step was taken in May, various papers have been written on the matter, and approaches have been made to the Public Service Board. The reasons why the person supervising the scheme should be of Aboriginal descent, were clearly spelt out to the Board. At this stage a final reply has not been received from the Board, but it is confidently expected to be in the affirmative.

Despite the lack of supervision and liaison, the Special Work Projects are generally felt to be successful. Most of the people employed have proved to be very satisfactory. A few of the younger employees have left the schools. The reasons for their leaving have not been investigated, but such an investigation could strengthen the scheme. The employees in their late 20's have, in general, been more settled in themselves, and their training and employment have been satisfactory.

At the end of each quarter, the school principals are requested to forward a report on this innovation to Special Services Division, and to date all reports have expressed the principal's satisfaction with the scheme.

It is hoped that the Special Work Projects Scheme should, if correctly handled, enable up to 50 Aboriginal people to gain some academic or training qualifications each year. As such, it is a wonderful opportunity for Aboriginal people who have not been able to gain satisfactory educational qualifications or training at their first experience in schools, to have another opportunity while being gainfully employed. With increased liaison it is hoped that a greater emphasis will be placed on the educational and training aspects of the scheme.

As indicated earlier, the Special Services Division wishes to employ an Aboriginal person as a liaison officer to supervise the Special Work Projects Scheme. It is also hoped to employ Aboriginal people as Typists, clerks etc. Additional liaison officers are also required for the Aboriginal Education Section of Special Services Division.

After two centuries of generally ignoring the thoughts and wishes of the Aborigines, there has been a complete turn about by white educationalists and others. It is now "essential" to confer with Aborigines before publishing educational kits, materials, etc. This trend has been described by one Aboriginal leader as another white "rip off" from the blacks. His feelings are that once again the white race is exploiting the Aborigines. This "picking of our brains" is beginning to create some resentment because the white person is being employed in areas where some Aborigines could also be employed. In many instances the Aborigines are not even receiving payment for their services. Even when payment is made the amount is set by the white person. This means he judges the value of the Aborigines' contributions.

The Special Services Division will also need to consult with the Aboriginal people when developing the program for Aboriginal education. But it would be preferable that Aborigines be employed as research assistants etc. on a permanent basis. This should avoid the situation where the only people being gainfully employed from the money which is being provided for Aboriginal advancement are non-Aborigines. Unfortunately, this appears to be happening in other states and other Government Departments, where employment opportunities for Aborigines are severely limited.

The Aboriginal Education Section of Special Services Division has a policy of giving preference to Aborigines when employment is available. This policy has caused and will continue to cause problems with the employing authorities. For Special Services Division to employ people, they must either be teachers or public servants. Both categories have regulatory bodies which stipulate precise educational and/or training requirements for the various positions and these generally preclude Aborigines from employment. However, efforts are being made by the Director of Special Services to make the employment of Aborigines as public servants a much less harrowing procedure.

This must be a short term measure, for it is imperative that Aborigines be given on-the-job educational and training opportunities that will give them an equality with the non-Aboriginal members of the

community. Education is seen "as the most important strategy for achieving realistic self-determination for the Aboriginal people of Australia"(1) The employment conditions need to be more flexible so that Aboriginals can participate in developing this new thrust to improve the efforts being made in Aboriginal education. The Aboriginal Consultative Group to the Schools Commission concluded, "Aboriginal people should be involved in their own education at all levels and they should be responsible for and have some realistic control of this process". (2)

FUNDS FOR SPECIAL NEEDS

The third main area of innovation has been to enable schools with substantial Aboriginal enrolments, or handicapped Aboriginal pupils, to have access to funding which will assist in meeting specific needs. Schools have been invited to make submissions for funding to enable them to undertake programs which are aimed at overcoming disadvantage or developing Aboriginality.

Schools have been funded to purchase reading materials and to develop language programs for their Aboriginal pupils. As well, funds have been made available to purchase sporting materials, and to send Aboriginal children to camps and excursions.

Emphasis is now being laid upon the development of programs which aim to increase understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal culture. There is a renewed interest in traditional Aboriginal culture among Aboriginal people, and properly handled programs should arouse an interest in, and an understanding of traditional Aboriginal culture among Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals. This should enable the Aboriginal child to develop pride in being Aboriginal, and the non-Aboriginal child to develop tolerance and understanding. The Aboriginal Consultative Group to the Schools Commission said, "Furthermore we believe that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island culture should be retained and that Aboriginal identity should be actively developed through education". This view was supported by the results of a survey among Victorian Aboriginal parents by the Acting Supervisor of Aboriginal Education. Eighty seven per cent of the parents surveyed were in favour of children learning about traditional Aboriginal culture at school. A question still to be resolved is who should teach it, Aboriginal or White? Many Aboriginals firmly believe it should be an Aboriginal teaching about Aboriginal culture and if this is possible it would be favoured by the Supervisor.

.....
(1) Aboriginal Consultative Group Report to the Schools Commission, July, 1975.

(2) Ibid

Most of the programs funded are still in the embryo stage and no real evaluation can be expected until late in 1975. However, even at this stage the interest and enthusiasm this innovation has generated is quite apparent. It only remains for this interest to be consolidated into achievement.

Funding has also been made available to assist handicapped Aboriginal children. Schools have purchased special hearing aids, wheel chairs, electric typewriters etc. to assist their pupils in overcoming their disabilities. The added stature given to these pupils by the purchase of these specialist items of equipment will be watched with interest. The schools will be reporting on the value of this equipment to the children toward the end of 1975.

The Department of Aboriginal Affairs has granted funds to the Special Services Division which will enable most of the program to be implemented. If the program is successful, our education system should produce enlightened Aboriginal people with intellectual and physical skills developed to their natural potential but in harmony with Aboriginal values and identity. Policy guidelines in respect to the education of Aboriginals stress that such education should reflect the distinctiveness of the Aboriginal people, their social forms and culture, and accept that, as a principle, Aboriginals should be entitled to retain, develop or adapt this distinctiveness.

.....

Reference

Smith H. and Biddle, E.H.: *Look Forward Not Back*. A.N.U. Press, Canberra, 1974.

.....