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ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER VIEWS

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN ABORIGINAL EDUCATION*

Gatjil Munyarryun,
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Community involvement is a process, not a program. In the past, Government policy in Aboriginal communities has meant that decisions are made by people outside of the community and then passed down to the community. There was no community involvement.

Now, however, community decision making is occurring at grass roots level and is a process which involves consultation and discussion. For example, decisions about the building of Yirrkala School were based on talks held between the Department of Education and the Yirrkala people who then made the final decision.

What is Aboriginal Education? Talk to an Aboriginal community and they will say that so far, education for them has meant '*balanda*' (European) education.

But every society has some sort of education which is part of the local community. Aboriginal Education is based on the four senses:

- a) Seeing (or imitation), such as when a boy sits watching his father make a spear and so learns to make the spear himself;
- b) Touching, to feel the differences;
- c) Smelling, it is possible to tell what is being cooked from some miles away by the smell;

and d) Taste.

We seem to neglect Aboriginal Education and expand Western Education, saying it is better. But what can education achieve if there is no community co-operation, no community involvement?

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*A paper delivered at the Principals' Conference held at Nhulunbuy, June 1-6, 1975. Reprinted with permission from *Developing Education*, Vol.3 No.1, June 1975, Darwin.

It is accepted that there is a need for education by Aboriginal communities, but we need a balance between 'balanda' and Aboriginal forms of education.

At Yirrkala now, there are sixteen Aboriginal Teaching Assistants training to go to the outstations where they will be responsible for the schools. Outstations are part of the de-centralisation policy and this we aim to fulfill in our community.

I won't go into the term 'self-determination' - it is political jargon and means nothing to me.

The object is shared responsibility for education. An example seen so clearly is the community's satisfaction with both the Yirrkala School and Dhupuma College. As well, there is great community effort.

I believe the community can achieve its ends through shared responsibility. I have a great feeling of responsibility for the development of the community and I believe everyone here at this conference has that responsibility too.

Education is the future for the Aboriginal community; it is the only way we will become a self-organised, self-sufficient community. And only with community enthusiasm can we do anything worthwhile.

Question: Could you expand on your statement about outstations?

Gatjil: At first I doubted they would last. I thought they might be a political movement to fulfill the needs of politicians. But since then, and since I have taken over my work, not as the 'big boss' but as the agent for the outstations, I have seen the Aboriginals at outstations doing things for themselves which at Yirrkala they would have been asked to do by the mission. It is an automatic response, illustrating their desire to do things by themselves. I am convinced outstations are permanent. A lot of development has occurred in these areas and this is the sign that they have the responsibility to say what happens.

Question: What sort of education do the Aboriginals want?

Gatjil: We need enough 'balanda' education to negotiate with the outside world. I don't think outstations will isolate us from the outside world. They are a chance to develop the way we want. There should be both 'balanda' and Aboriginal education so one does not feel

cut off from both worlds, but hold them in both hands. An education that will balance a community relating to its environment in local education.

Question: After the students finish at Dhupuma, what effort is made in the local community to see that they are employed and that they stay employed?

Gatjil: Firstly, it is a question of education for what? What will the end result be? The community at Yirrkala is keen to co-operate with Dhupuma and Yirrkala School in providing employment. Employment is always there, the problem is that we don't have enough people to work.

We are living in a competitive society, which is not to say that we want to compete with you or live like you, but we need skills. Otherwise we are looked down upon by the outside world; they say we have no qualifications so we are not the right people to do the job. We need tools, which are embodied in education, to help us do the work.

Question: Would the 'community feeling' you refer to at the outstations be possible in the existing community?

Gatjil: I believe nothing is impossible. It is just people that make it impossible.

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ABORIGINAL STUDIES COURSES -

A NEW ERA IN TERTIARY EDUCATION

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Aboriginal Studies at the Canberra College of Advanced Education has achieved a reputation as being one of the most favoured series of units available. Although it has immense popularity within Teacher Education, Aboriginal Studies also attracts a large number of students from other schools at the college. Its level of appeal is reflected in the content of the two units available. Unit 1 of the course aims at introducing students to a pre-contemporary understanding of the Aboriginal, his kinship, religion, habitat, livelihood, art, music and pre-history. Coincidentally, Unit 2 examines problems of Aboriginal-White contact in our society, its associated prejudices and cultural conflicts.