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STRELLEY:

AN ALTERNATIVE IN ABORIGINAL EDUCATION

J.R. Bucknall,
Strelley Community School,
Port Hedland, W.A.

Towards the end of last year I wrote a somewhat optimistic article for the West Australian Newsletter of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, under the heading, 'A Plea for Alternatives in Aboriginal Education'.

In this particular article, I proposed a need for a complete re-appraisal of community education, as the term is used and abused, in schools located in relatively remote, tribally oriented Aboriginal communities. Included in the proposal was an examination of the current realities involved in such situations based, for the most part, on the observations of Von Sturmer (1973), Stacey (1975) and Harris (1975). On the basis of their findings and my own observations, I then went on to reject the basic principles involved in compensatory education as being singularly inappropriate to the needs of many Aboriginal communities. The article then concluded with an attempt to place the writings of a number of 'radical' overseas educationalists into an Australian culture-clash context, with the aim of producing a worthwhile theoretical basis for future developments in Aboriginal education.

This article, based on an earlier paper delivered to students at Mt. Lawley College of Advanced Education, where I lectured in Aboriginal Education, was written within the relative security of academia without the pressing need to put up or shut up, which faces the majority of would-be innovators. In this brief article I hope to remedy this shortcoming, that is, describe an attempt a community is making to translate principles and ideals into reality.

The Nomads Group, possibly better known to many people as McLeod's mob, is a group of Aboriginals living on Strelley and Coongan Stations in Western Australia. They are a group who have maintained an independent existence based principally on mining, since their inception in 1942. One of the important outcomes arising out of this independent stance, has been the group's insistence that

they should maintain control over the forms of schooling that best meet their needs. Education for the nomads represents a concern by the total community for the maintenance and further growth of a life style and economic system which will provide further depth and meaning to their cultural heritage. For a number of years therefore, the leaders of the group have been determined that education as a lifelong process should be retained within the framework of the value systems and social organization of their own society. They have consistently rejected the divisive influence of an educational system which separates child from parent and behavioural norms from community values.

On the basis of this determination, an alternative was proposed by the community which involved a request for 'no strings attached' funding from the Australian Government. And so it was with an initial establishment grant of \$50,000 from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, and the hope of additional funds to come from the Schools Commission once the program is declared 'efficient' (in accordance with the appropriate act) the Strelley Community School was established in February 1976.

Commencing with the principle that education should take place everywhere, and for the Nomads traditionally within the extended family system, a group of four European teachers have been employed as resource personnel. As the community is fairly scattered in terms of its physical locale, a number of shelters have been constructed by the members of the various camps with the intention that they will provide a focus for a variety of activities. At this stage in the program, they are largely utilized by the mothers and younger children who have commenced a pre-school program based on inter and intra-family interaction.

The shelters are also used for a number of basic literacy programs which at this stage centre on developing communication skills in the English language. Extensive background research and preparation for a literacy program based on Njangumarta is under way, but it will be 1977 before this aspect of the program is fully operational. The shelters are open to and utilized by the whole community who are well aware of everything that is going on.

A central location incorporating the station workshop and a variety of other facilities is being developed for a wide range of alternative activities covering all age groups. A scheme incorporating short term courses (2-6 weeks) utilizing visiting specialists has been requested, with a particular emphasis on providing specific

skills related to station management. The first of these, a shearing school for ten men, commences soon.

To the outside visitor it would appear that the school *maya* (shed) is the place where the action should take place, but in this they are mistaken. It is in the camps, in small groups incorporating all age groups, that the real action is taking place as the people of Strelley determine for themselves what it is they want from their school.

Strelley Community School represents a unique opportunity for the community to express its needs and initiate action on its own terms. Reimer (1974:137) offers a fitting conclusion where he states:

"Something more than schooling is obviously in question here; indeed, almost the opposite of schooling is meant. People are schooled to accept a society. They are educated to create or re-create one".

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