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A PLEA FOR ALTERNATIVES IN ABORIGINAL EDUCATION *

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SYNOPSIS

This paper examines a proposal that there is a need for a reappraisal of community education as the term is understood and applied in schools on relatively remote, tribally oriented Aboriginal communities.

A fairly detailed examination is made of the current realities involved in teaching in such localities in order to develop an alternative approach to this concept. Implicit in this alternative is a rejection of the stratagem whereby an Aboriginal council or board acts as a rubber stamp in an a priori decision making process.¹ The principles involved in compensatory education are also rejected as being singularly inappropriate to the needs of Aboriginal communities.

A number of 'radical' overseas educationalists, whose comments and ideals seem appropriate to developing cross cultural perspectives, provide much of the material used in support of this plea for a new alternative in Aboriginal education.

INTRODUCTION

"If true commitment to the people, involving the transformation of the reality by which they are oppressed, requires a theory of transforming action, this theory cannot fail to assign to the people a fundamental role in the transformation process.'

Paulo Friere

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1. From my own experience it would seem that the majority of decisions made by such councils involves a knowledge of events that is gained quite independently of personal experience. Under such circumstances, where an advisor holds all the aces due to his previous knowledge *and experience*, the decision making process is little more than the ratification of an organizational fait accompli.

The aim of this paper is to present a personal and somewhat biased account in favour of developing a highly optimistic or utopian alternative in the education of Aboriginal Australians. It is an attempt to argue a case for radical alternatives as the only way out of the impasse we are presented with when we take a realistic look at the predominantly Aboriginal classroom.

A number of alternatives that are presently in vogue will also be discussed as being not only inappropriate to the needs of Aboriginal communities but as morally suspect as they are based on relatively subtle assimilationist and therefore racist premises. In particular, reference will be made to a number of current compensatory programs and project courses as belonging to this category.

It is further postulated that much of what has passed as education has been largely ineffective due to our complete misreading of what constitutes the present world view and future intentions of our captive clients. In developing this argument I have relied heavily on the reported experiences of such people as Sandra Stacey (1975), John von Sturmer (1973) and other experienced observers of the cross cultural scene. In addition to these observations, I have also used the experiences and self-doubts of various of my teaching colleagues as a sounding board for further developing my own ideas as to what constitutes worth-while teaching objectives and structures in Aboriginal communities.

Underpinning the implied, and in some instances, explicit attack on what constitutes presently accepted practice is the suggestion that the politically inspired concept of integration was little more than a subtle reintroduction of assimilation with all its monolithic overtones and destructive intent. It follows from this suggestion that the principle of self-determination needs to be better defined and understood in educational terms if we are to avoid repeating past mistakes.

Central to the alternatives proposed in the final section of this paper is a plea to educationalists to come to terms with the issues surrounding the concept of identity. The need to appreciate the ramifications of 'the looking glass self' is inextricably bound up with the development of a workable framework for genuine participation in community education. In a sense a Utopia is proposed, an overall pattern explored against the background of relatively small self-contained communities. By confining myself to this relatively minor scene, I avoid many of the wider issues contained in the education of ethnic minorities throughout the remainder of Australia, but at least it's an important starting point for I'm reminded of our moral obligations as teachers in such situations by Richard Neville :

"It's the good will of the prisoners that keeps the place alive", said the editor of Oz after leaving Wormwood Scrubs.

SOME COMMENTS ON THE PRESENT SITUATION

Commencing with an article published in August 1973, *The Aboriginal Child at School* has produced three articles of considerable importance in any consideration of what is happening in Aboriginal education. Between them the three writers (von Sturmer 1973, Stacey 1975, Harris 1975) in one way or another raise the spectre that should haunt all teachers of traditionally oriented Aboriginal children - '*Education for What?*'

Von Sturmer (1973) deals with the basic dissonance that exists between the *aims* of the mainstream culture and the *realities* of their reception by distinctive Aboriginal communities established in a Westernized setting. Much of what he says is summed up in the following conclusion:

'Communities were established with the aim - stated or unstated - that they were to be educational institutes for Westernizing traditional Aboriginal society. Their relative failure in this respect is paralleled closely with the failure of the educational system, properly speaking, in the settlements. It is tempting and almost certainly legitimate to state that the reasons for the one are at least partial reasons for the other. Certainly failure to Westernize has been interpreted as a failure to educate.' (von Sturmer 1973:15)

Sandra Stacey (1975) continues the theme of dissonance in her description of a failure to educate within the framework of Westernized expectations. In a sense her description of a fundamental confusion over means and ends in Aboriginal education is the most powerful indictment of our present policies and approach that I have come across.

Stephen Harris's article deals with the complexities involved in what is currently a much favoured and discussed innovation, bilingual bi-cultural education. However, his article does more than cover a number of the technical pedagogical issues involved, for it goes on to raise the twin issues of political ethics and long term cultural identity.

From my understanding of what these writers have to say, it would seem reasonable to claim that in the past, the major priority

in Aboriginal education has centered on the teaching of cognitive skills as the best means of providing Aboriginal people with an entree card for access into the mainstream culture. There appears to have been little or no importance attached to the concept of developing a support system, aimed at the maintenance of the affective domain within the framework of an existing culture, as a more effective means of establishing a springboard to future cognitive development and role identification. As an example of the emphasis placed on performance as opposed to competence, Harris (1975) instances the circular nature of the testing material used to reassure and justify the continuance of the Bereiter and Engleman inspired Distar program. This point adds weight to the criticism of current practices, which emphasise the drive towards the development of cognitive skills as ends in themselves.

While many teachers, particularly in transitional residential colleges, are well aware of this factor and are extremely concerned for the future psychological security of their sometimes unwilling clients, they nevertheless do not question the assumption that school as we know it is a necessary and ultimately good thing for Aboriginal children. While this insistence on *schooling* may or may not have its origins in a guilt reaction to the past, it remains to my mind a serious obstacle to the *education* of Aboriginal children.¹ A further explanation for this insistence on compulsory, institutionalized schooling might be found in the descriptions of Australian society as advanced by writers such as Horne and Conway.² Both they

1. Reference should be made to a series of letters that passed between Mr. J. Kickett, the Director of Education (W.A.), and various parliamentarians regarding the non-admission of his children to a Departmental school, 1915-1919.

B.T. Haynes et al., *W.A. Aborigines 1622-1972*, History Assoc. of W.A. 1973.

Peter Biskeep, *Not Slaves Not Citizens*, Queensland University Press 1973, deals in considerable detail with this and other instances whereby children of Aboriginal descent were denied access to normal Government schools.

2. Donald Horne, in *The Lucky Country*, Penguin Books, 1964, analyses Australian society in highly critical terms. His attack on its monolithic structure tends to rest on the assumption that Australians as a whole prefer to drag everyone down to the lowest common denominator. Written from what I would regard as an elitist point of view, he condemns Australian society for its lack of variety (i.e. its barrenness).

On the other hand Conway writes on the Australian character from the viewpoint of a clinical psychologist. His book, *The Great Australian Stupor*, Sun Books, 1971, urges Australians to examine their threatened heritage against a background of stupor induced by affluence, isolation and self-interest.

and other writers have extensively developed themes centred on the insistence of Australians in creating a society based on a beer, football, pie and sauce image. Unfortunately, for the tribally orientated Aboriginal, the acceptance of an alternative society based on a concept of cultural plurality seems remote.

While it is not necessary to go further into the reasons for the development and maintenance of the present system, a more detailed examination of the causes for its failure is probably necessary before pressing on to the principles involved in creating alternatives.

As previously suggested, there appears to be serious cross cultural confusion as to the means and ends of European initiated educational objectives. An examination of the health education program initiated by Sandra Stacey at the Institute for Aboriginal Development, Alice Springs, provides a clear illustration of this point. It is worth examining her experience in detail, for much of what she says literally pulls out the rug from under many of the concepts supporting a number of educational programs presently underway in similar communities throughout Australia.

'The method of education employed was to bring groups selected by communities who indicated they wished to participate in the program to Alice Springs for a 2-3 week residential course. The group participants and the Health Educator lived in a hexagonal building. Here, facilities and equipment similar to those available in the home/camp situation were used by the Aboriginals. There was a non-authoritarian approach by the Health Educator both during the 'formal' group discussions and the 'informal' continuing interaction with group participants. The vernacular was used as a medium of instruction. Residential courses were also conducted in the bush where the Health Educator resided with the Aboriginal people.' (Stacey 1975:3)

In most, if not all respects, an ideal situation and yet despite these advantages, Stacey goes on to describe its failure as an appropriate environment for learning. The lesson to be learned is discovered in the relatively simple explanation that the relationships developed between the teacher and the taught meant two entirely different things to two different sets of people. From the teacher's viewpoint the relationships established served as a means to an end, in this particular case certain established educational goals: for the student, the relationship was the goal, the educational objective a means to achieve this end.

The application of this principle is taken a step further by Stacey (1975:6) where, in a particular situation, she describes the importance of establishing relationships based on real rather than assumed needs :

'I have felt a difference in atmosphere when I am contributing to goals defined by Aborigines, that is, building a relationship or meeting an acute medical need, to when I am trying to achieve goals defined by me, that is, helping people to see a need to change their health practices... When I start to talk about teaching or my work, the atmosphere changes either to one of uneasy silence with withdrawal of eye contact, or to expected European behaviour, for example, politely co-operating in discussion around the topic I have introduced.'

A number of schemes involving community action are at present under way, where local involvement is cited as an ideal and acceptance and support is sought both prior to, and contemporary with the establishment of various educational programs. However, the basic weakness associated with many of these programs is clearly described by Stacey (1975:5) where she states:

'Unless the community defines the need, any attempt to conduct a program will be an imposition, and chances of persistent behaviour changes are minimal.'

This then is the basic dissonance that exists between school structures and Aboriginal communities. It is a failure to find a means whereby the community is able to express its needs and initiate action on their own terms. As von Sturmer (1973:15) points out:

'...It seems clear that a confusion must be removed: education for living in an Aboriginal community is not and should not be the same as for living in Western society.'

To complete these comments on the present state of education in predominantly Aboriginal schools, reference should be made to the growing awareness by policy makers of a genuine desire by a number of educators to provide the developing child with an ability to make a choice in terms of his future place in society (Dwyer: 1974). What I question in regard to many of these statements, is not so much the underlying assumption that people have a right to make this choice, but rather the means by which we go about providing

the rationale for making that choice. It is we, the mainstream culture, who are still determining the framework within which a choice will be made. It is still the European controlled school that sets the parameters for learning, and as such, conditions to a large extent future decision making. Genuine choice will only occur when the process is in the hands of the client. The logical step we should take is to recognize the existence of culturally different, and albeit, legitimate learning and decision making contexts. When we combine the observations of these three writers there emerges a solid argument supporting a consideration of radical alternatives in this particular area of Aboriginal education.

COMPENSATORY EDUCATION: A FALSE ALTERNATIVE

In a recently published book, *Education for Democracy*, Nicholas Tucker (1972:54) states:

'What is needed in deprived areas, is not more education but education of a different type altogether.'

It is on the basis of a key word contained in this statement that many of the alternatives proposed over the past decade may be divided into two distinct and separate categories. On the one hand there are the educationalists, administrators, planners and curriculum developers who act on the word *deprived* as the starting point for the development of a range of alternatives generally referred to as intervention and/or compensatory programs. On the other hand there is another group, social and political radicals, humanists for the most part, who deny the use of the word *deprived* as it is used in this particular context, but accept and promote the need for education of a *different type*.

The first group, who are sometimes termed structuralists, have emerged as the most important single group in developing new educational programs for ethnic minorities in the U.S. These programs are basically designed to operate within a previously established structure, or, if a new structure is required, it is based on familiar patterns. To Australian teachers the best known of these programs is probably Head Start, as it is the basic model for intervention programs such as the Bourke experiment described by Nurcombe and Moffitt (Kearney et al., 1973: 125-146).

In this paper I wish to reject this type of program, or alternative approach to the education of Aboriginal children, as being inappropriate and, in fact, diametrically opposed to the philosophy and aims of the alternatives that I later describe.

Programs of the intervention type are based on the environmentalist argument that the child suffers from a deficit located in the black environment. Another type of program, often referred to as Project Education, is developed from a seemingly opposite assumption that there is a need to develop alternative abilities as a response to acknowledging a deficit located in different or inferior black genes. However, to counter these arguments there are a growing number of educationalists who consider both the hereditary and environmentalist positions inadequate as explanations of poor academic performance by ethnic minorities. This situation is forcefully stated by Gunnings (quoted by McConnochie 1973: 67) where he claims:

'Head Start, Follow Through and Upward Bound, while they are feeble attempts to provide better education for the poor, will always face problems because they are organized around the philosophy that there is something wrong with the child. This clinical approach is inappropriate because it does not treat the cause of the problem - the system.'

Thus an alternative explanation and one that fits in with the patterns of behaviour I have observed in my own classrooms, is based on an understanding of what the white school system has done to black self-concept. It would therefore seem appropriate to reject programs that have as their priority the development of cognitive skills at the expense of a well structured ego, which in turn implies the loss of a sense of personal identity. Harris (1975) in discussing the role of language in the development of identity, would seem to support this stance when he casts grave doubts on the approach taken by many schools in their introduction of English as a new and unfamiliar medium of instruction.

Unfortunately, our objectives in introducing compensatory and alternative abilities programs into Aboriginal schools have not as yet come under the searching criticism that has occurred in the U.S. Criticisms such as those made by Katz (1971: 356) should encourage us to reconsider many of our present practices.

'To talk of cultural deprivation is to patronize the poor: beyond this, people have a right to hold whatever beliefs and whatever attitudes they please;...It follows that the attempt in school to define one set of attitudes as superior to another, the attempt to teach patriotism, conventional morality, or even their opposite in a *compulsory* public institution represents a gross violation of civil rights.'

COMMUNITY EDUCATION : A GENUINE ALTERNATIVE

Having rejected the alternatives offered by the structuralists, I wish to examine in general terms, alternatives based on a development of the concept of community education.¹

In developing this theme, I have been influenced by two groups of writers, the progressive reformers and, to their left (and I am not certain that this is an altogether appropriate term) another group of radical writers of whom Illich is probably the best known. The major contribution of the first group is in the warmth and compassion of their writing which is very much concerned with the treatment received by the individual student at the hands of the system. Included in this group are such writers as Goodman (1973) Kohl (1975) and Dennison (1969). Much of the writing of this group is charged with a social realism that reflects their own experience in a variety of cross cultural settings.

The best introduction to the second group is probably contained in the following quotation:

'...the crisis in education begins outside the classroom, and a whole new approach to educational reform is required if education is to succeed.' (Shields 1973:20)

An Australian educationalist, D'Urso, takes up many of the themes developed by these writers and provides an added sense of urgency to a consideration of our own educational problems. In particular, he rejects the monopolization and distortion of educational values by institutionalized schooling. As such he supports the:

'disestablishment of schools and their substitution by inexpensive and informal learning networks organized through learning exchanges connecting anyone who wishes to learn something with someone qualified and willing to teach it.' (D'Urso 1974: 114).

While D'Urso (1974) balks at the complete dismantling of the present system, he sees a good case for converting schools into autonomous community learning centres open to people of all age groups and offering the widest possible range of opportunities for developing

1. I pursued the mechanics involved in the setting up of a community education scheme based on the principles outlined in this paper, in "Strelley: an alternative in Aboriginal education". *The Aboriginal Child at School*. Vol.4 No.2.

self-potential.

However, the case for deschooling does not rest on the shortcomings and the failings of the school system itself, but goes further, to state that schools must be denied so that man may continue the process of his education. This is to argue that, as a compulsory client, the student has no alternative to the 'hidden curriculum' that is contained in all institutionalized school settings. (D'Urso 1974). In fairly simple terms the community needs to be freed from the school in order to develop its potential as its own educator, and I see alternatives of this magnitude as the logical extension to the argument that the Westernized school has basically failed to achieve its aims in Aboriginal communities. This in turn leads me to reject the assumption of educationalists such as Rubinstein and Coleman (1972:29) that education should be compulsory and that there are certain subjects which are self-evidently 'good' for people to learn. However, before rushing ahead and developing an argument in support of Illich's concept of learning webs as a viable alternative to the institution called school, it would be wise to note the advice offered by Reimer (1974:89) to the would be innovator:

'The school system must not be replaced by another dominant system: alternatives must be plural... One student should not learn at the expense of another, nor should success for one student imply failure for another. Alternatives to schools should not manipulate individuals but, on the contrary, should prepare individuals to direct and recreate institutions, including their governments. Education should not be separated from work and the rest of life, but integrated with them... Alternatives to school must, above all, allow everyone the opportunity to learn what he needs to know in order to act intelligently in his own interests.'

The implications for the Aboriginal community are obvious. The starting point for community education must be a genuine desire by the school to relinquish control to the community. Teachers, as special people with particular skills in organizing particular types of resources, should be prepared to assume an entirely different role. This point is strongly reinforced by Harris (1975: 24) where, in referring to the success or otherwise of bilingual programs, he stresses the importance of local control over such basic decisions as what language is to be used and who does the teaching. Harris then goes on to conclude that if local control remains in the hands of the representatives of the dominant monocultural society, the use of the vernacular in primary education will never amount to more than a powerful veneer.

An important value principle contained in Illich's argument for deschooling centres on the right we have as teachers to tell others what they must learn, even if it's for their own good. Illich goes on to suggest that the burden of proof in this regard is usually misplaced. In the majority of learning situations the burden of proof is placed on the student if he wishes to deviate from the framework imposed by the teacher and the school. Illich is suggesting that the burden of proof lies with the teacher and the institution to justify the nature of their institutionalized framework and what it does for the child. If we accept this premise then many of the claims made by schools established to educate the Aboriginal may sound somewhat hollow. In particular, Illich attacks the trend towards teaching techniques and materials which have as their aim the production of specific behavioural changes. As suggested by Petrie (1972: 474):

'... the technique violates the ethical principle that we must prove our right to interfere in the learning of another. The institution is a manipulative one.'

As previously suggested, much of what Illich proposes centers on the establishment of networks, and it is on the basis of the principles supporting these networks that I see the development of genuine educational alternatives for traditionally oriented communities.

Without going into details, which in a sense is to do an injustice to the breadth of Illich's ideas, the networks aim at providing access to learning situations on terms that are dictated by the members of the community. At one level, access should be provided to educational objects on the basis of a Friere type dialogue.¹ At another level access should be provided to what Illich terms a skill exchange. Students who wished to master a skill could contact a model

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1. 'The Friere method consists in discovering, through research, the basic vocabulary and living conditions of the group to be taught. Then, through group dialogue, the fundamental interests of the students are uncovered. This is no superficial technique, but a deep search in which a teacher well prepared for the task engages jointly with a student group to define the essence of what Friere calls their "reality". The process cannot be designated in a single English word, but a rough translation of "conscientiazacao" would be "creating consciousness". What is meant is consciousness of deep reality, a reality of which the student is not fully aware, probably because it was repressed to avoid the pain of cognitive dissonance.'

(Reimer 1974: 82).

who would demonstrate it for the learner. This approach is designated by Petrie as follows (1972: 475):

'The skill-demonstrators would not be teachers; they would limit themselves solely to demonstrations. That this is at all feasible follows from Illich's belief that good teachers do not really teach anyway. Rather they motivate and remove institutional bars to learning. In a skill exchange the student would already be motivated, so a demonstration and perhaps drill instruction would likely be enough.' ¹

For all the criticism heaped on the mechanics underlying Illich's proposals for ensuring the autonomy and dignity of man, the basic message is difficult to refute. This is particularly the case in a situation where few educators have made a genuine attempt to allow the client to define what he wants and what is good for himself.

In a sense, the process is similar to the use we make of a pocket calculator and reminds me of a personal experience which may throw some light on what I presume to lie at the heart of Illich's proposals. Recently I took a number of these miniature computers with me to a school located in a traditional community. I introduced their use to a composite grade five and six, speakers of English as a second language and well below the maths achievement level of their European counterparts. The response was quite dramatic in that an immediate and accurate accessibility to the computational aspect of the four processes was achieved. The key to the concept appears to centre on *accessibility* to the skill the client wants on his or her own terms. It's the business of the teacher or demonstrator under these circumstances to stay right out of the task of defining the community's interests.

Having stressed this argument ad infinitum throughout this paper, I will conclude by referring to an important issue that is in a very real sense related to the application of Illich's principles to education in Aboriginal communities. As mentioned previously, Harris and

1. I share Hugh Petrie's (1972: 469) pleasure in Illich's wit and ability to develop an argument with an unexpected turn of phrase such as: 'As Max Weber traced the social effects of the belief that salvation belonged to those who accumulated wealth, we can now observe that grace is reserved for those who accumulate years in school'.

Stacey refer to a number of areas where considerable differences exist in both the motivation and the learning modes of the two cultures. Possibly the most vital area referred to by Harris concerns the *environmental or special arrangement of the learning content*. He sums up this possibility as follows:

'What kinds of buildings are most suitable for Aboriginal schooling, or must it all be inside buildings? One of the most important environmental features that could affect an Aboriginal person's preparedness for learning might be the composition and positioning of the group of Aboriginals with whom he is at the time.' (Harris 1975: 14).

Once again the implications for the sort of alternatives that I am proposing should be fairly evident. Learning occurs everywhere and for the Aboriginal traditionally in an extended family setting. There seems to be little that would prevent the extension of learning networks into this basic situation as a realistic alternative to its destruction by the formal school system. If importance is to be attached to the growth of self-respect, then value should be accorded to the basic institutions and values of the client community.

SUMMING UP

The main purpose of this paper has been to present a plea for alternatives, and this, despite a long history of Utopias forgotten, dismissed and institutionalized. For, as Reimer (1974: 137) categorically 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.'

If cultural plurality and self-determination are to mean what the words and the politics imply, we ignore this statement with the knowledge that future generations may judge us as wanting in foresight and courage. It therefore seems appropriate for Sandra Stacey (1975: 9) to have the final word:

'The aim of any educational program is not to solve problems. Problems are never solved: an intolerable set of problems is replaced by a tolerable set. An educator should, by working through the expressed needs of a community, bring people to a capacity where they can determine their own problems and create their own methods to alleviate them.'

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CHILDREN'S RESOURCE MAGAZINE

The Aboriginal Curriculum Service Unit, a co-operative undertaking involving the Education Department of Western Australia, the Catholic Education Commission, and Mount Lawley C.A.E., has commenced the publication of a *Children's Resource Magazine*. This magazine is directed at Aboriginal children with about 4th Grade reading ability. It will include material of a multi-ethnic nature of high interest, and is designed to stimulate reading and broaden the children's experiences.

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