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ACCESS TO EDUCATION
AN EVALUATION OF THE ABORIGINAL SECONDARY
GRANTS SCHEME **

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The following extracts[#] are taken from Professor Watts' evaluation of the Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme, which was tabled in Federal Parliament on 3rd June, 1976.

"Chapter 14..p.229

(b) Characteristics of Students, Parents and Schools

In Chapter I, I indicated that, in evaluating the Scheme, I would seek out some of the consequences of the institution and operation of the Grants Scheme and that I would look for the consequences not only for the students, but also for their parents, for teachers and schools and for younger siblings.(4) A great deal of information has been presented on the students' academic performance, their school attendance, their attitudes to education, their aspirations and expectations, their participation in extra-curricular activities, their friendship patterns and their self-concept.(5) While these student characteristics may have been influenced probably only to small and varying degrees by the Grants Scheme, they do give us a picture of the Grant holders.
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Available from the Australian Government Publishing Service.

See also major statement quoted in the Editorial, Vol.4 No.3, *The Aboriginal Child at School*.

4) During the collection of data, research teams interviewed the younger siblings of Grant holders who were in the final year of primary school. These data are not reported here; it was a relatively small sample and because of shyness and extreme youth it was often difficult to gain much understanding of the primary students' knowledge and aspirations

5) See Chapter 4

(i) *THE STUDENTS*

When presenting the data, I avoided the temptation of arriving at generalisations about the majority of students because I believe it is important for us constantly to remind ourselves of the heterogeneity within this group of students; their individuality is their key characteristic. However, it seems appropriate now to try to indicate some of the more frequently occurring patterns.

Academic performance: While some students achieve very well, as judged by evaluation within their schools, significantly large numbers are placed in adapted classes, or classes for the less academically oriented student.

School attendance: Almost a third of the students are very good attenders (attendance rate 95 per cent or more). One in eight attends less than 80 per cent of the time and the remainder have an attendance rate between 80 and 94 per cent.

Attitudes to education: The students display, on the whole, reasonably positive attitudes to school and to teachers; while few express negative attitudes, many seem fairly neutral and non-committal particularly about teachers.

Aspirations and expectations: Both aspirations and expectations are in general high and indeed, in view of their school performance, unrealistically high for many. About half the students have a reasonably clear view of the future, but others find it somewhat difficult to project a possible future.

Participation in extra-curricular activities: About one-fifth of the students do not join in the extra-curricular program of the school; of the remainder, most participate only in sport.

Friendship patterns: About one-third of the students name only other Aboriginals or Islanders as their best friends.

Judging by teacher report, the interaction between Aboriginal/Islanders and non-Aboriginals varies widely, and in schools where the ethnic group is a sizeable minority, interaction is frequently somewhat to greatly limited.

Self-concept: In general, the students display healthy self-concepts, and their self-judgments are not related to their academic performance.

(ii) *THE PARENTS*

The parents generally display a high valuing of education, as a general good. They have high aspirations for their children (as with the children some are unrealistically high in the light of the children's placement in adapted classes and their level of performance).

However, generalising, they have limited knowledge of their children's school activities or school progress, they interact very infrequently, if at all, with the school and teachers, and the educational climate of many homes does not provide strong support for the students.

They seem, from our data, not to be worried by the possibility of education widening the gap between their children and themselves; indeed they seem to welcome the fact that their children have better educational opportunities than they had.

(iii) *THE SCHOOLS*

In general, in our sample schools, the teachers report that relatively few changes have been effected to accommodate the increased numbers of Aboriginal and Islander students; a large number, however, see changes as necessary or desirable.

While some students, in the teachers' eyes, are less than satisfactory in achievement, attitudes, attendance and the completion of homework, significant numbers of teachers also report satisfaction with at least some of the students in these regards. ...

p.233 ...

(a) *THE AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY*

What happens within schools obviously is dependent to some important extent on what happens outside schools. Halsey(1) writes of policies which fail because they are based on an inadequate theory of learning :

'They fail to notice that the major determinants of educational attainment are not school masters, but social situations, not curriculum but motivation, not formal access to the school, but support in the family and community.'

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(1) Halsey, A. H., 1972: *Educational Priority Areas*. London, H.M.S.O.

There is a great deal of support from research all round the world for Halsey's emphasis on family and community.

Both home and school may be undermined in their efforts by community factors. In the case of a minority group, the wider community of members and institutions of the majority culture may be not accepting, not valuing of the minority culture and its members. It may be reluctant to recognise the viability and worth of styles of life alternate to its own. If members of a minority group are surrounded by such an atmosphere then home and school find themselves frustrated in their efforts to provide a healthy environment for the developing individuals.

Where a society is composed of a majority group and one or more minority groups, the only healthy situation for the minority members is one where the society as a whole sees the value and accepts the worthwhileness of itself as a culturally pluralistic society. As Havighurst and Dreyer (1) see it, a successful cultural pluralism means :

- ' 1. Mutual appreciation and understanding of every sub-culture by the other ones.
2. Freedom for each sub-culture to practise its culture and socialise its children.
3. Sharing by each group in the economic and civic life of the society.'

Obviously Australia, particularly in some of its regions, falls far short of being a successful culturally pluralistic society; to the extent to which it does so fall short, so to that extent will Aboriginal and Islander youth be deprived of opportunities for healthy development, for maximum realisation of their potentials and for the contribution they can make to the welfare of their own groups and the society at large.

Community in a narrower sense can also limit the stimulus to growth that home and school might seek to provide. We saw in Chapter 2 the unsatisfactory position of many Aboriginal and Islander people in respect to employment, housing and health. Education cannot flourish under such circumstances. Efforts to improve access to secondary education, efforts to improve Aboriginal and Islander parents' participation in and support of the educational process and efforts by

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(1) Havighurst, R.J., & Dreyer, 1975: Cultural Pluralism and Youth. In R.J.Havighurst (Ed): *Youth*. 74th Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part I, University of Chicago Press.

schools to offer programs more effectively and more sensitively are likely to have limited success for students whose energies are sapped and whose creativity is stifled by unsatisfactory living conditions.

(b) *THE SECONDARY SCHOOLS*

But even within the most adverse community circumstances the schools can do much, certainly more than they have done and are doing.

On reading the research data presented in the preceding pages of this report, one must conclude that schools, both primary and secondary, are centrally implicated in the history of educational failure suffered by so many Aborigines and Islanders.

Six major areas disclosed by this research which require urgent attention within the school system are:

1. Staffing of schools: teacher attitudes and teacher expectations; specialist teachers; turnover of teachers.
2. Appointment of Aborigines and Islanders to school staffs.
3. Teacher education: pre-service and in-service.
4. Curriculum and teaching methods.
5. School organisation.
6. Home-school liaison.(2)

While action in these areas is primarily a matter for State education and independent school systems, it seems to me that the Australian Department of Education could assist the schools in their task in four ways.

- (i) The further provision of financial support, as through the States Grants Program.
- (ii) The appointment of Aboriginal Community Education Advisers who, as part of their function, would help bridge the existing gulf between home and school.*

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(2) Detailed discussion of these issues occurs in several chapters, especially 7, 8, 10, 11 and 12. Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6 and 9 include data highly relevant to the exploration of these issues.

* See next section for detailed discussion of this position.

- (iii) Provision of financial support, should the State Education Departments so desire it, for the establishment of special appointment by the schools system to schools with significant numbers of Aboriginal and Islander students.

We have, during the analysis of the research data, been reminded on numerous occasions of the special situation of Aboriginal and Islander students in schools where they form a significant proportion of the school population. We have noted, too, that it is teachers in these schools who most frequently see the need for changes in the schools to accommodate the needs of the students, and indeed that these teachers have already, to some degree, instituted changes.

With regard to the students themselves, we note that more teachers in these schools than in schools with only a few Aboriginal or Islander students refer to relatively poorer achievement, less positive attitudes to school, unsatisfactory completion of homework, more problems with attendance, and in some States minimum interaction between the two ethnic groups at school.

Our analyses of our own data show, in some States, a pattern of association between level of school achievement and ethnic composition of the school. But, in this rather sad picture, we do note (2) that students who attend schools where they comprise over 20 per cent of the school population have healthier self-concepts than other Aboriginal and Islander students. Again, on the negative side, we have reported that students with the least favourable attitudes to 'my home' are those in schools where the minority comprises 5 to 19 per cent of the school population.

There seems enough evidence to suggest, then, that these students need special help and that these schools need special help so that they can aid the students.

One way the Australian Department might aid such schools, to the benefit of the Secondary Grants students, is to help the State Education Departments to place a special staff member in each of these schools. Such a person would ideally be a trained and experienced teacher who received some additional training to fit him for his special role. He should, I believe, carry a small teaching load and, in addition he could fulfil many of the functions presently attempted by the education officers. In particular he could -

- (1) provide pastoral care for the Aboriginal and Islander students;
- (2) establish personal contact with parents and play a liaison role between home and school;
- (3) assist other teachers on the staff in their understanding of the students;
- (4) help identify students in need of special assistance.

His advantages over the education officers would be twofold. He would belong on the staff of the school; this would facilitate his role with staff. Secondly, in contrast to the education officer he would have much closer and continuing contact with the students and families, leading to a deeper understanding and knowledge, and he would be available immediately in times of special need.

Such a teacher could act, additionally, as the major liaison person for the Australian Department of Education in its administration of the Scheme.

- (iv) Organisation and support of a national workshop on the needs of Aboriginal/Islander students in secondary schools.

Many of the States are currently exploring special ways of meeting more effectively the needs of these students; some major projects include, for example, South Australia's Action Research Project for Secondary Education of Aboriginals, Western Australia's Project Classes, Queensland's expansion of the provision of an eighth year of schooling in some Aboriginal communities. In addition, individual schools are experimenting with innovations involving the development of new teaching strategies, and increased contact with parents, especially in reporting student progress.

These are but some of the innovations. (1)

It would seem an opportune time for the Australian Department of Education to take the initiative in mounting a week's workshop(2)
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- (1) Kauffman, P.: *Aboriginal Schooling in Australia*, April 1975, (available from Australian Schools Commission) provides a picture of some of the developments currently taking place.
- (2) Possible membership of such a workshop would include senior officers from Australian and State Departments of Education, the Aboriginal Consultative Group, Aboriginal parents, teachers, senior Aboriginal students, senior officers from other departments, and academics.

at which the States could talk together about their common challenges and the initiatives which each is taking. This interchange should be extremely profitable. In addition, now that the Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme is nearing the end of its sixth year of operation, senior people from the various State Departments and the State officers of the Australian Department could well discuss together its present achievements and possible future directions.

One particular item which might figure prominently on the agenda of such a workshop, since it is a major issue in Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory, is the situation of students in remote areas. Currently such students, under assistance from the Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme, attend boarding schools or hostels. The somewhat unsatisfactory results for many suggest that examination should be made of more effective ways of meeting their needs.

Such a workshop might well be a stimulus to further developments and would help authorities to clarify priorities in the area of secondary education for Aboriginal and Islander students.(3)

(c) Parents and homes

The importance of parents in determining the educational progress of their children has been a recurring emphasis throughout the early chapters of this report.

There is consistent testimony to the importance of the parents and simultaneously to the fairly widespread existence of a situation in which Aboriginal and Islander parents lack knowledge of many aspects of their children's lives as students, including the academic aspects, have no or little contact with the schools or teachers and do not provide support for their student sons and daughters in the shape of an informed and active interest.

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- (3) In 1971 a National Workshop on Aboriginal Education was convened at the initiative of and with the support of the Australian Office of Aboriginal Affairs and the Australian Department of Education and Science to consider priorities for action and research. Workshop members included senior representatives of State Education Departments. The Workshop concentrated largely on the pre-school and primary levels and it may reasonably be inferred that many of the developments in the primary field since 1971 owe something of their inspiration to that Workshop. See Watts, B.H.: *Report of the National Workshop on Aboriginal Education: Priorities for Action and Research*, Brisbane, May 1971.

As we saw in Chapter 5, there is a relationship between aspects of the home environment and student success at school.

Yet, at the same time, many of these parents would like to see their children do well and many would like to see their children secure 'good jobs', entry to which requires a certain level of academic success.

The challenge that faces educators is how to help parents create situations in the home that will be conducive to the realisation of their aspirations for their children and, indeed, to the realisation of the aspirations that many of the students themselves also hold.

An array of research results from within Australia and from overseas attests to the importance of home and family in determining the academic success of students.

It is doubtful if (a) improving access to education and providing support through a scheme such as the Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme and (b) improving the schools attended by these students will have major outcomes for large numbers of students if, at the same time, their parents continue to be excluded, and to exclude themselves, from the educational process. Havighurst (1) has written of an implicit contract between home and school :

'The parents contract to prepare their child for school entrance, both cognitively and affectively. They further contract to keep him in school and to make home conditions appropriate for his success in school. The school contracts to receive the child, teach him as well as it can, taking account of his strengths and weaknesses and the ways in which he can learn most effectively.

Very little of this contract is put into legal codes, but the education of the child is successful only when both parties carry out their obligations fully. Sometimes one or both parties fail to understand the nature of these obligations.'
(Havighurst, 1970: 314).

If one believes in Havighurst's view of the conditions for successful education, and in this view he is supported, as I have said, with a great deal of research evidence gathered in diverse places on diverse groups, the challenge becomes one of finding ways effectively to help parents 'keep their side of the contract'.

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(1) Havighurst, R.J.: 1970 Minority sub-cultures and the law of effect.
American Psychologist, 25,4,313-322.

Many schools are currently trying to establish better contact with parents and, as we shall see in the next section, the Australian Department of Education is seeking to have established a position of Aboriginal Student Officer (2); there will be a limited number of such positions and the officers will communicate and liaise with parents (among others) on matters associated with Aboriginal Study Grants Schemes..

All of these developments are highly desirable and should assist in helping Aboriginal parents to extend their understanding of educational programs.

But none of these ventures would be likely, I think, to achieve the goals of helping parents -

- (1) to understand ways in which they can help their children, even though they themselves may have had limited formal education;
- (2) to understand the ways in which teachers teach and students learn and thus the true significance of regular attendance, of satisfactory conditions for the completion of homework, of the student's possession of requisite materials and books, of the student's need for access to resource materials, of the student's need to be able to discuss school issues with respected adults outside the school;
- (3) to understand the evaluation system adopted by the school and hence to have a realistic knowledge of their children's progress;
- (4) to understand the relationship between school achievement and vocational opportunities;
- (5) to understand the education structure and to know the various routes that are open to their children and what might lie at the ends of those several routes;
- (6) to know about a wide diversity of occupations that are open to youth and to understand something of the various job satisfactions involved so that they may stimulate their children's interests and help them to aspire towards jobs which would make the most of their talents.

The list of understandings could be extended almost indefinitely.

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(2) See details in Section 3.

The fruit of these understandings, if they are achieved, would be greater support of the student (probably one of the most significant determinants of his progress and aspirations), and for the parents, greater enjoyment of and satisfaction from a new aspect of the parenting role, a greater sense of competence and confidence and a feeling that they can influence events, for their children at least.

Such understandings, too, are a prerequisite to the next step, which I see as a critical step: *the step when parents know the educational system well enough to be able to interact with it in such a way as to ensure that it is responsive to them and their children in ways that they desire.* At present, in general, Aboriginal and Islander parents accept the education that is offered and the manner of its offering, not because they are content but rather because they are not in a position to see alternatives. With greater knowledge and understanding, they would be in a better position to shape education to their ends, to have an influence in bringing about the changes they desire.

Until progress is made towards these goals, I believe many Aboriginal and Islander youth will continue to find it difficult to meet the demands of the school (which will continue to be unresponsive to their needs, partly because their needs are not articulated). School, since it is not an issue of explicit importance in the home, (where the people of real significance to the youth live) will continue to be of little personal relevance to the youth, and he will drop out in the face of discouragement or alienation or pressure from a peer group or the attractiveness of life outside the school, much more readily than he would be likely to do if he were backed by informed parental support. He will continue to be dependent on others for periodic stimulation of his aspirations and periodic information on possible futures rather than receiving continuing and informed and on-going stimulation within the home.

I think the achievement of these goals with parents can be helped only to a certain degree by schools and by visiting education officers and visiting Aboriginal student officers. What is required is a person resident on the local scene, a person who is accepted and respected, a person who is available to help parents gradually and meaningfully to extend their understandings and to extend their parenting role.

I believe the person must be a person of the group - an Aboriginal or an Islander. It is high time we stopped putting Aboriginal and Islander people in the position always of looking to white people as the sole sources of advice and expertise. Perhaps there could be no greater stimulation to Aboriginal youth in their school endeavours

than a strong pride in their own people as the source of advice and expertise about school matters. Additionally, the Aboriginal or Islander knows intuitively (1) the ways of thinking of his own people; he knows their frames of reference and thus he can communicate effectively, and can help people to fit new information meaningfully into their existing knowledge and ideas and thus gradually expand their understandings.

This person might most appropriately be called a *community education adviser*. He would be employed by the Australian Department of Education (2) as an officer concerned with encouraging and facilitating the school progress of Aboriginal or Islander Secondary Grant students through working primarily with the parents. His tasks would be essentially to act as adviser to parents and to help them to create a positive educational tradition for their growing children.

He would work not only with parents but also with students, being available for advice and support. He would work with the school, transmitting positive feedback from school to home and home to school. He would be the community contact, at least the initial contact, for the education officer and for the vocational officer and he would develop support programs as follow-up activities to their visits. He would be a source of information on matters of educational and vocational concern. (3) He would convey to relevant departments the desires of the people in regard to programs when they felt the need for such mediation. Essentially, he would be in some respects enacting the role of a community developer, but his focus would be education.

All these are positive roles. The community education adviser is not a truant officer, not an enforcer of rules and regulations. He is partly, but not entirely, a liaison person. He is an adviser to the Aboriginal and Islander people of the community on education.

This is a complex set of roles. To be effective in his task the community education adviser would need acceptance by and support from the local school which would need to understand the nature of his role.

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- (1) As indicated later, certain personal qualifications and training are envisaged in addition to his membership of the group.
- (2) The classification and salary scale of the position would need to be determined by the Australian Department of Education and the Public Service Board.
- (3) This of course will require that he have ready access to outside sources of information when necessary.

Persons to fill such positions would need to be carefully selected and well-trained. My experience in working with Aboriginal adults as parent educators and as research assistants makes me confident that suitable people would be readily located and be attracted to such a task.

I would envisage an initial training period of six weeks. I would recommend for consideration a program with components such as -

- ..an initial training period in Central Office in Canberra, probably for one week, where the advisers would learn about the Scheme, its aims and objectives, its rationale and its achievements. This week together would also help them to develop a feeling of being one of a group of people about to create new opportunities for their people. During this week also they would have the opportunity to establish initial contact with the Aboriginal Education section of the Australian Department of Education and with the secretariat of the Aboriginal Consultative Group to the Schools Commission.

- ..a period of five weeks in the State or regional office of the Australian Department of Education, becoming acquainted with the personnel administering the Scheme and local policies and practices. They would also have the opportunity of working with the senior officers in the state education departments with special responsibilities for Aboriginal education. They should also meet with the vocational officers working in the area of Aboriginal employment. At the end of the training period they should be introduced to the secondary schools attended by the Aboriginal Secondary Grants students from their communities or areas.

After the initial period of training and their return to their own communities, it would be essential for the advisers to remain in close touch with the Secondary Grants section so that they could continue to become more knowledgeable and competent and be assured of a line of support. They should be visited by an education officer once a month for the first few months. Weekly bulletins from the Australian Department of Education and the Australian Department of Labour and Immigration could serve two purposes - such bulletins could help the adviser himself to maintain his contact with the departments and could serve also as a source of stimulus and information to the people.

After a period of six months, it would be advantageous for all advisers to come together for a week to exchange experiences and problems and to undergo a period of in-service training.

The establishment of these positions could do much, I believe, to transform the present educational scene for Aboriginal and Islander people. If the scheme succeeded in achieving the major goals, the objectives of the Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme would be greatly facilitated. An additional benefit would arise from the fact that the community education adviser would inevitably have an effect on the parents of younger students as well, and thus extend the numbers of Aboriginal and Islander parents able to contribute to the educational success of their children.

These are possible achievements. Since this would be an entirely new approach on the Australian scene, I would recommend that it be tried on a pilot basis and carefully evaluated at the end of 12 months.

I would recommend that, in the first instance, 14 such advisers be selected and trained, two from each of the States and two from the Northern Territory. Ideally, one would be from an Aboriginal or Islander community and one from a town or city with a significant Aboriginal or Islander population.(1) It would be critical to the success of the undertaking that the principals of the secondary schools attended by the students should fully support the advisers and welcome them in the schools."

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(1) This would allow an evaluation of the effectiveness of such advisers in different settings.