



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*.

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ABORIGINAL EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT*

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There must be significance in the fact that it has taken until 1976 for the first national conference of teachers of Aboriginal children to be organised, and that now it should be called by a teachers' organisation. Perhaps this may be taken to indicate that the problem is too difficult for governments.

The first need on an occasion like this is to realise that we cannot talk about schools and children and education in isolation. If the evidence from other countries is relevant at all, it demonstrates that educational problems cannot be solved through educational means alone. Education cannot be its own salvation because it depends for its success on its integration with other agents of social development. Secondly, it must be appreciated that the problems of Aboriginal education in Australia are not unique; they have similarities with problems in other countries, rich and poor. They are aggravated here because they are set in a rich, aware and free society. Nevertheless, it must reinforce awareness and engender a greater confidence in what can be done if we recognise that we have our colleagues elsewhere wrestling with very similar problems.

We tend in a rich society to have our attitudes distorted; we tend to overlook, for example, that in the world as a whole poverty is the norm, not the exception, and that even in a country like Britain one person in six lives below the poverty line. In one of the richest provinces of one of the richest countries in the world, Alberta in Canada, one person in five lives below the poverty line. In the world as a whole at the moment, to be poor, female, either physically or mentally handicapped and black puts you at the bottom of the heap.

Governmental concern about the problems of disadvantage and poverty derives perhaps both from humanitarian considerations and the recognition that this sort of distress is a prime cause of political instability. In the public at large, however, awareness is limited

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**Keynote address to the First National Conference of Teachers of Aboriginal Children, Adelaide, 25th August, 1976*

and apathy and complacency reign. The problems are increasing numerically throughout the world because success in death control has not yet been complemented by control of birth. The population of the world is likely to double between 1970 and the year 2000; in most developing countries the population is doubling every generation, and major cities, particularly in the developing countries, are increasing at anything up to 10 per cent a year. As a consequence, as Lester Pearson pointed out in the report *Partners in Development*, in 1969, the gulf between the rich and the poor is widening, not decreasing, and every year there are more poor, more dependent, more unemployed. India, for example, now has a million and a half graduates unemployed, including 60,000 engineers and 40,000 doctors. The less developed countries are trying very hard to improve their lot, but sometimes have the feeling that they are attempting to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps while somebody stands on their hands; the richer countries by their attitudes at G.A.T.T. meetings indicating their reluctance to release their control over the world's goods and the world's trade.

We must recognise, too, the inter-dependence of all people in society, between societies and between nations. Increasing urbanisation and industrialisation are made possible by larger populations but lead to greater specialization of roles and a dehumanising of society. They increase inter-dependence and accentuate dependence on external agencies and particularly on governments. It is not only the Aboriginal people in Australia who are being turned into economic and cultural dependents. Perhaps we should ask ourselves why Aboriginals should be assumed to be anxious to take on our guise. You will remember some years ago Mahatma Gandhi was asked what he thought of western civilisation. He pondered for a moment or two and then he said that all things considered he would be in favour of it. Of course, some of our materialism and some of our western technology does attract. The task is to allow those to become absorbed into a society without destroying the self-image and confidence of that society.

In this country, then, as in many others, are familiar problems of the juxtaposition of contrasting cultures at a time of change and uncertainty. It is not unique. In Mexico, shortly after the Conquest in the sixteenth century, it was recognised that there had been cultural shock, a collapse of Indian institutions and religion, the imposition of alien culture, resulting in disorder, demoralisation and rampant alcoholism. Last week in South Africa it was noted that in the riots in Soweto, beer-halls and bottle-shops were the immediate targets. Young Africans turned their anger on the bottle-stalls because they said liquor had demoralised their parents: "They gave you whisky instead of freedom". Arnold Toynbee, twenty-five years ago, said:

In a cultural encounter one thing inexorably goes leading on to another when once the smallest breach has been made in the assaulted society's defences.

Reaction is often of bewilderment and retreat.

The conflict of values becomes particularly apparent when different peoples are living alongside each other and in the Northern Territory perhaps even more than in the rest of Australia, we see these contrasting values very close to each other. We see the differing approaches towards concepts, towards the future, time, work and land. Consider the attraction of the Aboriginal to his land, and yet this was once a characteristic of western European attitudes.

There was a close relationship between the western European aristocracy and land; it was land that gave status; it was land that gave identity. Lord Leverhulme, fifty years ago, tried to improve the lot of the crofters in the outer Hebrides only to run into very severe problems because, as they said, they did not want prosperity, they wanted land. Again, the attitudes of Aboriginal people towards the concept of competition is contrary to western European ideas, but reflected very much in other countries, among the Canadian Indians, or Western Samoa, for example, where effort is communal and co-operative and not competitive. The relationship of Aboriginal people to their families, the concept of the extended family, again is something that the western Europeans have lost only recently, for names very often still reflect family association: Johnson, the O'Reillys, the McKenzies, the Papadopoulos, Fitzgibbon. When we review the difference between European and Aboriginal attitudes towards these concepts, the future, time, work, land, competition, family and social custom, it is obvious that the learning styles of Aboriginal children cannot be those of the European child. We cannot expect that against this completely different cultural heritage and sense of values standard approaches and western styles of learning will produce similar results to those that it does in European children. There is here a substantial conflict of reality which must be considered when planning education for Aboriginal children.

Because the juxtaposed cultures have not understood enough about each other, there has been confusion and a crisis of identity, a situation again not limited to Australia. A Trinidadian colleague once said to me, "We West-Indians are the greatest non-people in the world". Nor is identity related only to ethnicity. Adolescents are at a loss very often in our society. We have abandoned our rights of passage and our traditional educational development leaving our youngsters unsure of their status, rights and obligations.

At present, in Australia, the white western technological European society may be dominant but that society, too, has its insecurities and its fears. The arrogant certainty of the past has matured to a more realistic humility and an increasing recognition of the truth of John Hobson's comment of 1902:

We are incapable of implanting our civilisation (in India) by present methods of approach; we are only capable of superficially disturbing *their* civilisation.

The West is now confused by the need to cope with an accelerating rate of change consequent upon a shortening time between a discovery or invention being made and its application. The dominant society is unsure of its values, unsure even whether there are any permanent values or whether all landmarks are variable functions of space and time. There is far less confidence in the superiority of western culture. On the other hand, this insecurity leads to the identification of scape-goats and a bolstering of status by a denigration of the attributes of others. At the same time, the national social conscience urges the continuing attempt to pass on the apparent benefits of western society. The consequent timidity in the approach, exaggerated by political changes, has led to constant vacillations and discontinuities in policy. Endless research has been organised in an attempt to ensure the success of programs in advance, resulting only in a lack of action. At least one Canadian Indian group has suffered so many researchers that they now gather at the beginning of each summer to decide what they will tell the researchers that year.

These disadvantaged groups are essentially recipients, not participants, rather like the poor in the cities of Europe in the nineteenth century, at the mercy of public and private charity. There is, nevertheless, a real difficulty of effective consultation. Communities are increasingly mixed, and means have to be found to cater for them all, different people with different assumptions, living in different areas.

In the last generation there was an unbounded faith that social justice could be achieved through education, through the schools. Now perhaps there is less confidence. The question is now asked as to whether schooling infuses skills, competence and leadership into the community or merely creams away outstanding individuals, leaving the community leaderless. The reward for academic success is almost invariably a passport to somewhere else, outside the home community. Do schools, in fact, serve to polarise society? Do schools that serve neighbourhood catchment areas result in greater inequalities by reinforcing local advantage or disadvantage?

Schools have generally had a bad press while individual teachers are often remembered with affection. Is this adverse reaction to schools the result of their implying that they can do more than is possible? Are they seen by disadvantaged groups as a means for rapid social mobility, so raising expectations which they then cannot fulfil? Do they cause the rising threshold of competence? Can mass higher education ever pay off? The rising threshold of competence is an interesting phenomenon. Over the years the entry qualifications to many occupations have risen in academic terms, not because the demands of the job have changed but because it is easier to recruit from a smaller number of people; if therefore a lot of people are achieving leaving certificates, employers will demand matriculation; if a lot of people are getting matriculation, a first degree becomes the entry qualification. The donkey never catches up with the carrot.

Is schooling in Aboriginal terms essentially destructive when it does not emerge naturally from the society which is being exposed to it? George Lamming said of the town of San Cristobal in Barbados:

It's like how education wipe everythin' out, everythin' San Cristobal got except the ceremony and the bands. To the teacher and all who well-to-do it happen. Everythin' wipe out, leavin' only what they learn".

Is this inevitable when schooling becomes an artificial substitute for traditional rights of passage? Is this "education for subnormality", as has been said about the black population of South London?

There is, of course, a great deal of suspicion on the part of the people who are being brought into a western type of education. Oginga Odinga of Kenya said in *Not Yet Uhuru*:

The more alert objected to the way the schools taught this custom (yours) is bad and this (ours) is good, for they could see that the children at the schools would grow up to despise the old ways".

In order to overcome this suspicion, education has at least to pay off, and in Aboriginal society at the moment there are very, very few examples of education paying off. The understandable reactions to this in our area are low achievement, truancy, and the consequential lack of Aboriginal teachers. This is a vicious circle: because relatively few Aboriginal students achieve well at school there are few available to recruit as Aboriginal teachers; because there are few Aboriginal

teachers there are fewer Aboriginal children in school than there should be.

Schooling undertaken in isolation from social and economic changes, and ignoring the other influences to which children and parents are exposed, is doomed to failure from the very beginning. The "hidden curriculum" of western ways is not exclusive to the schools, it is also present in all the other influences to which Aboriginal people are subject. Yet it is impossible, even if it were desirable, for Aboriginal people to opt out. The modern world intrudes into even the most remote Aboriginal community. It intrudes in such ways as roads and transport, the use of money, the existence of a school. It intrudes in very direct political ways - the Land Rights Bill, the Councils and Associations Bill, in taxes and allowances, payments and subsidies, road safety rules, road traffic acts, the law.

The issues, then, are easily formulated. What forms of education will enable an ethnic minority to thrive and survive? What techniques and skills will help such a group to compromise and adapt without losing identity and self-respect? What sort of survival kit will serve?

If the conditions of some other ethnic minorities are reviewed, it appears that there are three main types: there are those who have retained their identity and reached some sort of accommodation with the dominant society; there are those who have retained their identity but have suffered for it; and there are those who have lost very largely their separate identity. Among those who have retained their identity and reached some sort of accommodation you could include people like the Welsh, Scots, Huguenots, Ukrainians and Armenians in Britain; the Chinese, Maltese, Italian and Greek communities in Australia; the Chinese Ukrainian and Amish in Canada. Wherever there is economic or geographical space to accept a separate people, wherever they do not appear to be a threat, they have been able to build satisfying lives. People who have retained their identity but have suffered, include Jews, the Ugandan Asians, the Ibos in Northern Nigeria and the Chinese in Malaysia. Wherever people have been privileged and apart and physically recognisable as being different, wherever they pose some sort of threat, they have suffered. The people who have lost their identity altogether include the Caribs, Aztecs and Incas. Until recently the North American Indian was declining in numbers. People who have been unable to compromise, people who have been too remote, too far apart from the dominant society have gone under. The key to survival has been the strength of society; ethnic minorities must have an intrinsic strength, a cohesion, a confidence, an ability to compromise by using the skills of the dominant society, and being

able to succeed on the dominant society's own terms, which ensure some acceptance. They have to play the majority at their own game - and win.

The environment, of course, is always changing, which means that compromises have to be effected by all people, majorities and minorities. Change, it might be said, has been the only constant feature. The Latin tag "Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis - times are changing and we have to change with them" - is at least two thousand years old. If people want the advantages of western technology, and most of them do, it must be recognised that this implies accepting basic changes in social structures and life styles and adjustments in values. In the case of Aboriginal people they have to start from Aboriginal reality and see how they can reconcile that with western realities, especially when living alongside majority groups in the urban areas. There is a further question which very few people ask: "How far do we have any control over change anyway?" How far can peaceful development be structured and how far does man have to accept "the inevitability of inadvertence", basic changes over which he has no control? If people are to compromise and seek a mutual understanding, it means that everyone has to be ready to accept some adaptation, some alteration, the non-Aboriginal people as well as the Aboriginal people. In this context, may be we have paid too little attention to looking at points of coincidence, identifying similarities between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people; perhaps too much attention has been devoted to singling out the differences. Perhaps if the problem were approached from the other end and common features found and built on, instead of looking at differences and trying to reconcile them, it might emerge that there are features in common, common ground, a basis from which to develop a cohesive program of mutual understanding.

These are fine words, but what sort of practical strategies do these imply for the education of Aboriginal people in Australia today? If I may repeat my first statement, I believe that the first step is to recognise that education is one function of development. Approaches to Aboriginal education can best be considered in the light of the recent experiences of the developing countries where advance is planned on a broad front of social and economic development, with education as one important element alongside such others as health, communications, housing and employment generation. This approach would be relatively easy to adopt where the Aboriginal communities are separate and identifiable but it would also be possible in cities where the communities are more and more intertwined, because the core need is the social and economic development of disadvantaged groups, be they Aboriginal or other. The second step is for educators to assume

a mantle of humility and appraise what can be realistically expected of education. There are no nationally agreed aims and objectives for Aboriginal education, no development plans, no targets for the short, medium and the long term. Australia has never produced to my knowledge an overall development plan for Aboriginal people with an education development plan as an integral part of it, to give some sort of idea of where we are going in short and medium and long term and with provision for a rolling re-appraisal. Continuous re-appraisal is essential so that directions and targets can be adjusted in the light of achievement, so avoiding the sort of trouble that President Nkrumah encountered in Ghana; each year he assumed that he had reached the point that the plan said he should have done and embarked on the next stage, so moving farther and farther from reality until in the end the house of cards collapsed.

Can education perhaps help to channel the traditional co-operation and combined effort of Aboriginal communities into community development? Is inter-tribal co-operation possible or must there be increasing fragmentation such as that which bedevils so many countries of Africa and Asia? Can education produce leaders or inspirers - what in French Africa are called "animateurs" - village leaders with basic skills who can influence and support the traditional leaders and those with traditional status, and work largely through them in order to help the people to move in the direction that they would wish to go? Is it possible, is it desirable, for education to produce an elite? Alternatively, have administrators been approaching education from the wrong end? Should they be concentrating at this stage on adult education instead of the education of children among Aboriginal people? President Nyerere of Tanzania has said that he cannot afford to wait 20 years while the present generation of children comes through the schools and assumes positions of responsibility. He needs competent adults immediately, and so the drive is for adult education, reinforcing those who already have traditional status and enabling them to participate in the new development process. Such an approach also helps to narrow the division between the children at school and the older people who had no opportunity to go to school. How can education be linked with other aspects of development? Inter-Departmental Committees in their present form do not seem to provide the solution. Somehow a new form of joint planning and operation must be devised which does not expire strangled by red tape and bogged in bureaucracy.

Finally, there remains the most urgent problem for education, shared by virtually every country in the world at the moment, which is the linking of the output from schools to further opportunities of training and employment and the ensuring that those opportunities come into being. The creation of employment opportunities presents enormous

problems when populations are increasing and technology is reducing the need for labour. When, for example, Ghana can spend over \$20M on an aluminium smelter that employs fewer than 2,000 people, the unemployment problem is virtually untouched. What most people have to offer is labour and yet what is least in demand is labour. The extreme is to be found in India with its million and a half unemployed graduates, where there were 100,000 applications for 17 posts of Social Welfare Officer, and 50,000 applications for 30 posts of bank clerk. Now these are extreme examples - the numbers in Australia are not on that scale, but they illustrate the problems of employment opportunities for Aboriginal people, particularly at a time when there is rising unemployment among the more privileged. Unfortunately, the types of occupation that are open are decreasingly demanding of intelligence. As Polly Toynbee wrote in *A Working Life* : "There are still more jobs for stupid people than there could ever be stupid people to fill them". Here is the crux of the problem. What are we educating for?

Vocational education alone does not create jobs, it creates unemployed technicians. This has been recognised for at least forty years but too often we appear content as educationists to see our responsibility terminating when school days end. The implication is that the output from the schools has to cater for itself. What the schools are doing now does not appear in many ways to be wildly successful yet there are many reasons for not doing otherwise. The Minister of Education in Fiji said a year or two ago:

I'd be prepared to change, to innovate, to produce a new, liberal, farsighted system of education, but how do I sell it to my electorate? They say to me, 'You have done all right from the present system, you have climbed up, you're the Minister, why kick the ladder away for our children? We recognise the odds against are very high, but nevertheless we know the way you did it - why change?'"

In the Northern Territory this is a very real dilemma because it is impossible in any case to change quickly, having regard to the very great investment in capital, staff and equipment and in the light of the need for our output to be recognised and accepted elsewhere. We cannot work in isolation, we have to swing together if we are going to move at all in a different direction. How can Aboriginal needs be reconciled with those of the wider community? Ought we to declare the limitations of our schools, at least until we have a greater proportion of Aboriginal teachers? Ought we to devise a basic core of necessary learning? Ought we to eschew the implication that schools in their present form are Aboriginal and portray them rather as an alien institution offering a certain service which is available on

demand? Do we merely cheapen Aboriginal ritual and ceremony if we ask for them to be incorporated into the activities of the schools? Are we in danger of cheapening it to the extent of Indonesia and South Africa, where real culture and tradition have, in many cases, lost their meaning and become merely tourist attractions? Should the initial concentration be on the children or should education in the first place be directed towards the adult population? What practical alternatives, what supplements to present activities are possible? Is advance possible in aspects of self-help, self-development, community service through curricular activities, learning on the job, the division of the school curriculum into short units, so that children and young people can move in and out of the education system, picking up each time where they left off?

The key lies with the teachers. At the moment the teachers are mostly white - and perhaps more Aboriginal opinion should be sought about suitable training for teachers. Perhaps certain subjects should be prescriptive for teachers during preservice training. I see considerable advantage in the approach adopted in some of the Canadian Provinces, whereby teachers can acquire cumulative credits leading to a further qualification, by attending vacation courses and inservice training. There is an urgent need for more Aboriginal teachers, and these will not appear in anything like the necessary numbers if arbitrary but irrelevant qualifications and pre-conditions are maintained. There seems to be merit in the Penny report suggestion that the type, style and levels of training should be reassessed, in order to increase rapidly the number of Aboriginal teachers in our schools. Very many worthy people may be excluded from the profession at present by unrealistic and unnecessary pre-conditions.

There is a major role here for the teachers' organisations. The teachers organisations have taken the present initiative in calling this conference. Having recognised the need, perhaps they might now devise the means, taking the lead for governments to follow. Co-operation amongst teachers organisations might be easier, more flexible, more responsive than co-operation amongst state governments. Teachers' organisations certainly have the opportunity to provide professional support in terms of inservice training, information and teacher centres. Teachers' organisations have the opportunity to encourage the sorts of experiment that might be viewed with suspicion were it decreed by an authority. Perhaps more Aboriginal people might be invited into the teachers' organisations. Teachers' organisations must explore further the non-educational factors that affect education and the need for informing the public at large about the current aims and methods of education.

Governments have always said the right things about education: perhaps it is up to the teachers' organisations to do them. Enlightened statements have never been lacking:

Education should be adapted to the mentality, aptitudes, occupations and traditions of the various people, conserving as far as possible all sound and healthy elements in the fabric of their social life. Adapting them where necessary to changed circumstances and progressive ideas as an agent of natural growth and evolution. Its aim should be to render the individual more efficient in his or her condition of life whatever it may be and to promote the advancement of the community as a whole through the improvement of agriculture, the development of native industries, the improvement of health, the training of the people in the management of their own affairs and the inculcation of true ideals of citizenship and service. It must include the raising up of capable, trustworthy, public-spirited leaders of the people belonging to their own race.

What could be more enlightening? It is taken from the White Paper on Educational Policy in British Tropical Africa, published in 1925. The point about this is that it was prepared by *us* for *them*. The consequent failure came about because it was prescriptive and not consultative and because the educational side of the program was implemented without the complementing developmental activities. Here again teachers' organisations can turn their unique status to good use by encouraging the formation of aims and objectives for Aboriginal schools together with Aboriginal people and then determining the means together with the Aboriginal people. Lord Kimberley in 1880, in Malta, said :

Improving people against their will seldom succeeds in anything but exciting ill-will and obstruction to reform".

The teachers' organisations can help to avoid this counterproductive paternalism.

Finally, we have to recognise that, like the golfer, we have to play the ball from where it is. We have to develop from where we are now; we cannot assume other base lines, we cannot wish things other than they are.

You may appreciate some thoughts on possible outcomes from this

meeting. First of all, it seems to me that credibility depends on there being some positive results from this meeting, some practical outcome. We have to be realistic and yet visionary. There is no advantage to be gained from designing a better dinosaur when time has passed it by. We ought not to be looking exclusively at how to do better the things that we are already doing, but rather at what other things we ought to be doing instead or as well. Perhaps you would wish to think in terms of some resolutions addressed to governments. This is always good for governments. As Gully Jimpson said in *The Horse's Mouth*, "The only good government is a bad government in a hell of a fright", and it is up to meetings of this sort to provide a little healthy fright, reminding governments that education is essentially a political matter and a function of government, needing co-ordination, requiring aims, objectives and a plan. Perhaps you might think in terms of some prescription for the combined effort by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people at all levels and of both sexes, to push forward community development and the development of "animateurs", people who can inspire communities without necessarily being seen themselves as the community leaders.

Teachers organisations have a number of possible functions. Some I have outlined; to these I would add the need to encourage and promote among white people an awareness and concern for their Aboriginal compatriots, and the need to encourage the training of more Aboriginal people as teachers. Also the more appropriate training of non-Aboriginal people who will work among Aboriginals and to provide professional support and development for white and black.

There is, too, a new role for teachers' organisations in seeking co-operation with other professional organisations, unions and associations, those concerned with health, transport, architecture, law and engineering, both nationally and internationally. There is a lot to be learned from what is going on elsewhere, through the World Confederation of Organisations of the Teaching Profession, the International Council for Adult Education, the International Bureau for Education and others.

Then, harking back to my earlier remarks about so very few examples of success which can challenge Aboriginal people here, perhaps it is up to teachers' organisations and voluntary organisations to make those examples apparent. For example, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of the South Pacific is a Trinidadian; he is only three hours away by air from Australia, and to bring him here and let him comment and encourage seems to me to be a highly desirable undertaking. In Australia, at this moment, is the Jamaican National Dance Troupe. The leading dancer and choreographer of that company is Rex Nettleford, who is not only a dancer and choreographer but also the Director of the

Department of Extra-Mural Studies at the University of the West Indies, and a lecturer in political science. How much benefit could be obtained were he, and others like him, to talk to groups who would appreciate some of the potential opportunities, some targets to which to aspire?

In conclusion, you must consider seriously how to maintain the initiative that is now being taken. Is there to be a standing conference? If so, how will it relate to the National Committee on Aboriginal Education that the Commonwealth Government is now setting up? How are Aboriginal people to be involved with the continuing initiatives? How can a continuing flow of information be made available to those who are interested? How is information to be collected, co-ordinated, edited and disseminated? How are new areas of thought to be opened up? Is there merit in regular workshops, short meetings of small numbers of people representing various interests in order to concentrate on very narrow issues, produce recommendations and contribute material to a resource centre? Let us at least ensure that there are positive outcomes from this gathering designed to reinforce Aboriginal identity and encourage the education and the broadening of the horizons of all Aboriginal people as an integral part of the Australian nation, as has been possible for a number of other ethnic minorities.

Could I conclude with a brief exhortation in the words of the Life President of Malawi, Ngwazi Dr H. Kamuzu Banda, when he opened an education conference at Soche Hill college a year or two ago. He said,

This conference must be practical, after it ends I want action. After you've finished here don't think you've finished, because you haven't. This is not a UNESCO conference at all. No it's not. This is a conference convened for practical reasons, to solve practical problems, not an academic conference, not a conference where this one want to show off what he knows by presenting a windy paper. Not that kind of thing.

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