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PHYSICAL EDUCATION
WITH AN ABORIGINAL PERSPECTIVE

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Aboriginal children, like all others, have a love and enthusiasm for physical activity in the form of play, games and sport. For a variety of reasons, this enthusiasm does not always carry over into the other areas of the school program. Mitchell's (1973) comments are quite commonplace - and they apply not only in Aboriginal schools:

He was an alert lad with well above average intelligence, but apart from sport and a partiality for listening to good stories, he seemed disinterested in schooling.

Actually, it is not so surprising that Aboriginal people show an interest in physical activity as evidence suggests that recreational activities formed an integral part of the traditional way of life. The amount of time available for, and the extent and quality of the leisure pursuits, is suggested by Tonkinson (1974):

Contrary to earlier assertions about hunting and gathering peoples, we now know that the task of obtaining daily food rarely occupied more than a few hours of the Aborigines' time. In summer at least, the intense heat discouraged Aborigines from moving about during most of the day. Their leisure hours were many, whatever the season, and the opportunities to be sociable were endless. Horde members were constantly on the lookout for telltale smoke, which indicated the presence of other small groups. The resultant meeting generated excitement as people exchanged gossip, recounted their recent exploits, and perhaps held informal singing and dancing sessions. (p.18)

From a study of the writings of early explorers, missionaries and others, Salter (1967) was able to identify 93 distinct pastimes

and games. As a consequence of his literature search, he was able to develop a model to assist in the explanation of the role of these activities in the Aboriginal culture. The activities were described in terms of their predominant characteristics and how they related to the life style of the tribes. These characteristics were described by Salter as being chance, dexterity (physical skill), enigma, strategy, vertigo, imitation, exultation and pursuit. The activities were further classified as being of an individual or group nature and then as pastimes or games. Finally, the activities were related to six basic components of Aboriginal way of life - economic activities, political activities, domestic aspects, ceremonial rites, cultural identification and social integration.

Similarly, Moncrieff (1966) has also stressed the important role of play and games in the traditional way of life:

There is evidence that children's play was often directed towards the future skills required in adulthood. However, it also seemed that play was often for play's sake and evidence seemed to indicate much enjoyment from participation and little quarreling as a result of play activities. A wide range of games seemed to be evident in the culture and many have counterparts in the cultures of neighbouring races. Further investigation would be required into the part played by games in this culture, but from evidence gathered to date it seems that much time was devoted to recreation and to the training of children both in economic pursuits and ways of amusement. Games, along with music and dancing were interwoven strongly with the social and religious needs of the people. (p.10)

After reading such works, it would be an interesting speculation to suggest that perhaps the traditional Australian Aboriginal developed a higher standard of leisure than the one we know today. In the technological sense this may not necessarily be true, but if other criteria were selected the hypothesis may well be tenable. Consider for a moment some of the conclusions reached by Salter:

- 1) The games were played solely for their enjoyment, and victory and the awarding of trophies was of very minor importance.
- 2) Game rules were few, and many of the activities were of a group nature.

- 3) There appeared to be a maximum participation by all those who could do so.
- 4) Play activities were used to solidify internal relationships, and promote good will and social intercourse generally.

Although it would be difficult to ascertain if the above characteristics were always prevalent in traditional Aboriginal leisure, there is ample evidence of the problem areas that currently exist in contemporary Australian leisure patterns.

Perhaps rather than impose European styled Physical Education programs, it may be more valuable and enjoyable, for the children to have activities that at one time formed an integral part of their culture. To illustrate this concept, the game of 'spear the disc', an activity common to many preliterate cultures, was introduced into Physical Education lessons in schools in the Pitjantjatjara region of the far north of South Australia.

This particular game is vividly described by Mountford (1964):

When the meal was finished the children started to play. The boys began the spear and disc game. Already some of them had made a number of short spears from a tecoma vine which was growing on the rocky walls of the gorge, while others had cut a disc of thick green bark, about the size of a dinner plate, from a nearby gum tree. The players then formed themselves into two groups and took up positions about fifteen yards apart on the floor of the gorge. As the disc was rolled backward and forward between them, each group in turn tried to spear the target as it passed. There did not seem to be any spirit of competition, either between the boys themselves or the groups; their enjoyment was gained from the success in spearing the bark disc.

The game provided not only enjoyment, but training for the boys, for by it they acquired that quickness of eye and accuracy of aim that would be so essential to them in later life, when they, the boys of today, would be the hunters and food-gatherers of tomorrow, and the target not the rolling disc, but the quickly moving animals of the desert.

It was while photographing from a jutting rock, some thirty feet above the players, that I noticed the picturesqueness of the scene below. The boys had chosen a level pavement on the floor of the gorge as their pitch. A shaft of light from the later afternoon sun, coming through a gap in the hills, illuminated that pavement with all the brilliance of a powerful spotlight, leaving everything else in deep shadow. In the middle of the scene, like actors on a stage, were twenty or more naked brown-skinned children, their bodies almost luminous in that brilliant light; some poised like bronze statues as they waited, tense and eager to spear the oncoming disc; others running, jumping and laughing from sheer joy and the excitement of the game. (p.34)

In an attempt to make the game suitable for a Physical Education lesson, it was somewhat modified by using balls in place of the spears and a circular piece of five-ply for the disc. The children found the game exhilarating, particularly when the disc wobbled off course and careered amongst them. The loss of balls was a distinctive feature of the game as many rolled away into the surrounding bush. Actually bean bags would have served the purpose much better, while car tyres or car rims would have also made fine targets. Certainly such an activity could more than adequately replace an anomalous event like the triple jump which, on sports days, normally culminates in the winners mounting a dais to physically discriminate between first, second and third placegetters.

Games like 'spear the disc' would be more appropriate, firstly because of their Aboriginality and secondly because they contain the characteristic values of games played in the traditional culture. One important outcome of such games is that while one child or more could 'win' by hitting the target, no individual becomes a visible failure. In fact, losing need not be an important outcome of Physical Education at all. The well known Olympic cliché, "It is not whether you win or lose that counts, it is how you play the game", was beautifully illustrated to me when I heard a boy asked how his team fared after a game of football. Proudly he replied, "We came second".

Another very significant feature of the above associated with such innovations was the enjoyment of the Aboriginal teachers in teaching the games. In fact, Aboriginal teachers could play a very important role in the recall, modification (if necessary) and presentation of traditional games in Physical Education lessons. One qualification that Aboriginal teachers possess would be their empathy

for the learning strategies of the children in attempting to acquire the physical skills of the games. While the following description by Hart (1974) relates to wood-work, it has important implications for the teaching of Physical Education activities:

Most skills were learned by careful observation and imitation. The art of chipping flakes off a piece of quartz to make a stone knife or spear head was watched by the boys who would then try out the process for themselves. If they were not successful the boys would observe even more carefully next time just how the skilled craftsman made the stone knives and then attempt to chip the quartz more effectively.

An Aboriginal wood carver was invited to teach how to carve animals out of mulga to the boys at a special Aboriginal school. He demonstrated how he cut the wood, rough shaped it first and then, using the natural shape and texture of the wood, went on to shape the very lively figure of a kangaroo. The white teacher later explained to me how he had wanted to interrupt and give the boys a chance. The Aboriginal, he had thought, was wasting time doing everything himself and should have arranged for all the class to try out their skill.

The Aboriginal craftsman knew that the boys were observing carefully and after seeing the whole demonstration would be able to try out their skill. His method was to train their powers of observation, stimulate an interest by producing an artistic creation and then give an opportunity for imitation and practice. There is no doubt that the white teacher would have produced more class activity at first, but it is doubtful whether they would have learned very much about the skills involved. The activity of the class, without first observing the craftsman's techniques and imitating them, might have been purposeless and even harmful to their interest in this work. (p.17)

Above I have presented only one specific example of a traditional activity being modified. Others were attempted by a colleague, Bob Crouch, and myself, when we made short visits to Aboriginal schools in the far north of South Australia in 1974 and 1975. At Ernabella, young girls were introduced to soccer with two basic rules: "This mob goes that way and this mob goes this way", and "You can't use your hands". The game was an instant success. Again it was not necessarily a new game to the area, as Dawson, (1881:85) described

such an activity being played in the Northern Territory around 1880. Similarly, women were successfully introduced to hockey at each of the four schools in the Musgrave Ranges. This game, too, has been reported in the literature by Haddon (1917), Hassel (1936) and Roth (1902). Other games and pastimes reported in the literature, particularly Salter's thesis, that could be used, include tracking, wrestling, firemaking contests, memory training, skipping and various types of football. Finally, not only do past leisure activities have a potential for inclusion, but also activities that were a part of day to day living. I once observed an interesting event at Amata, when four women appeared on the oval, each with an empty bucket on her head, and then attempted to race over a distance of approximately eighty metres. Unfortunately, but to the amusement of all, two lost control of their buckets while gathering speed! Again, I make the point of the appropriateness of this activity for inclusion into a Physical Education program. Not only does this technique symbolise a traditional means of carrying heavy loads, but it is also very economical in bio-mechanical terms. (Astrand 1970:273)

Unfortunately, it was not until 1974 that the first serious concern for Aboriginal people was expressed in the Physical Education literature. At that time Willee (1974) wrote an editorial:

Recreation is, of course, an essential part of preventive medicine and has important contributions to make to healthy living. The urgency of most of the problems of Aborigines is undisputed. The relationship of these problems to recreation and recreation itself to Aborigines have been neither explored nor discussed at top level. (p.4)

To realize Willee's call for discussion, the author would be pleased to receive comments concerning the appropriateness of the concepts outlined in this paper..

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