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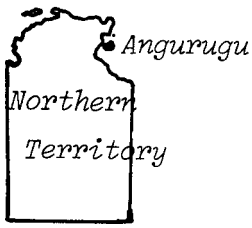
ACROSS AUSTRALIA....

FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER

THE EDUCATION OF ABORIGINAL CHILDREN IN NEW SOUTH WALES PUBLIC SCHOOLS SINCE 1788

Part 2*



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THE 1940's - THE BEGINNING OF THE END OF SEGREGATION

It is uncertain when the last exclusion of children from a public school, merely for having some Aboriginal ancestry, actually occurred. In 1937, the Commonwealth and States' conference on Aboriginal matters recommended assimilation as a general policy rather than protection, particularly with regard to the detribalized, part-caste Aboriginal people.[50] In 1938, the New South Wales Public Service Board in its report on the Aborigines Protection Board, recommended the policy of assimilation be implemented in schools. In 1940, the Aborigines Protection Act was amended. The Aborigines Protection Board was renamed the Aborigines Welfare Board and restructured to include Aboriginal members. [51] The complete responsibility for the education of all Aboriginal children was transferred to the New South Wales Department of Education. Almost overnight, the policy of segregation was changed to assimilation.

However, legislation is one thing, its implementation is another. The Department of Education was about to commence integrating Aboriginal children into normal public schools, but it was going to do so in towns where segregation had been practised for up to 60 years and where resistance by the white community would be very strong.

One of the Department's earliest actions was the assumption of complete responsibility for all Aboriginal school buildings from the Aboriginal Welfare Board. A program of replacing the untrained teachers with trained teachers was also begun. This was relatively

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simple, but the actual integration of Aboriginal children into ordinary schools was a far more complex matter. At least in retrospect, the Department appears to have adopted a "hasten slowly" approach. Perhaps more than any other schools, events at the Collarenebri and North Lismore schools illustrate the difficult road to desegregation. A rather detailed examination of these events is well worthwhile because it sheds light on what actually happened educationally, not to all, but to a majority of present day Aboriginal adults. It also gives interesting insights into the official and community attitudes prevailing at the time.

The first school chosen by the Department of Education in which to actively enforce a policy of assimilation was Collarenebri, no doubt because there was a significant number of Aboriginal children but no Aboriginal school for them to attend.[52] Aboriginal children had first been excluded from Collarenebri in 1900. Parents attempted, without success, to enrol their children there on several subsequent occasions (e.g. 1905, 1920). The wife of the local Presbyterian minister commenced some classes for Aboriginal children in the 1920's and there the matter rested until 1936, when poor health prevented her from continuing. In a rather militant fashion Aboriginal parents attempted to enrol their children at the school. They did not succeed, and for five years had no schooling. The Department, having assumed full responsibility for the education of Aboriginal children, saw the situation in Collarenebri as urgent. Under the new policy, no more segregated schools were to be established. When the local Inspector of Schools reported that the Aboriginal children were generally healthy, clean and well behaved, the Department's Chief Inspector, Mr B.C.Harkness, a supporter of mixed schools, instructed the headmaster to enrol Aboriginal children in 1941.[53] [54]

The Collarenebri Parents and Citizens Association reacted with a strongly worded protest and the local newspaper carried articles strongly critical of the Education Department's plans to enrol Aboriginal children.[55]

At the beginning of the 1941 school year, 14 Aboriginal children and 36 white children came to school and over 60 white children were kept at home. The headmaster was ordered to adhere to his instructions, but to enforce the existing regulations for exclusion of children on health and cleanliness grounds. Obviously aware of this loop-hole, the Aboriginal parents took particular care, and the headmaster reported that they were "scrupulously clean". The government medical officer was called in and he too gave a clean bill of health.[56]

During the first week of school, the headmaster tested each Aboriginal child and the effect of no schooling in the past five years was obvious. This was an educational problem. Ten and eleven year old children could hardly be placed in kindergarten. The headmaster, inspector and chief inspector all agreed that a special class was necessary. Depending on one's point of view, it could be regarded as either fortunate or unfortunate that accommodation at Collarenebri was overtaxed already. The headmaster suggested that using the School of Arts hall next door to the school might be a good compromise. The Department acted with remarkable rapidity. On Friday, 7th February 1941, the decision was made to establish the annex. By Monday, 10th February, the hall had been hired, a teacher appointed and lessons commenced (under one of the existing teachers until the new appointee arrived). The white children were sent back to school.[57]

The annex was a very important symbol, but it symbolised different things to different parties. To the Aboriginal people, it was progress - a step towards educational equality. To the white residents it symbolised their power to resist the Department's attempts at integration. To the Department of Education, it provided an unexpected solution to a difficult problem - a solution which might work elsewhere. At least the Aboriginal children were being taught, and in a public school. Did it symbolise to anyone the vulnerability of the Department to community pressure?

Before continuing this review of events at Collarenebri, it is necessary to consider events at North Lismore, which affected the whole state. The vulnerability of the Education Department to a pressure group operating through politicians was demonstrated at North Lismore Public School. The situation here differed from Collarenebri in that there was an Aboriginal school at Tuncester, some 8 km outside Lismore. Accepting the right of Aboriginal children to education, the Department was able to take a firm stance in places like Collarenebri, where there was no Aboriginal school. However, in towns where there was an Aboriginal school, the existence of this alternative provision weakened the Department's position.

In October 1942, the secretary of the North Lismore Parents and Citizens' Association wrote to Mr W. Frith, M.L.A., complaining about the attendance of Aboriginal children at North Lismore Public School, claiming among other things that they were a health threat and enclosing local newspaper cuttings making similar complaints. His letter indicated that white parents were considering withdrawing their children and enrolling them at East Lismore, even if they had

to move house. The pressure on the Department was now political. Mr Frith forwarded the letter to the Hon. Clive Evatt, Minister for Education, expressing concern at a "most serious and undesirable position". The Minister asked the Director-General to take action.[58]

Very lengthy correspondence ensued between the Director-General, the District Inspector, the Headmaster and various officials of the Education Department and other organisations. In 1943, the Department determined that the 22 children with some Aboriginal blood should be excluded from the North Lismore school and be transported daily to and from Tuncester by rail. The accommodation at Tuncester was improved by shifting a disused school building from Mororo. All this took until the end of 1943 to complete. The Minister was able to reply to Mr Frith early in 1944 -

> ...I now desire to advise you that approval has been given for the exclusion of children of Aboriginal blood from the North Lismore school...[59]

However, although he went on to say that "arrangements have been made for the attendance of these children at the Aborigines School, Tuncester", it is very clear that during the next few years most of these children received very little education. Not only were Aboriginal parents, who had not been consulted, now given the problem of getting young children on to an early morning train, but on at least two days each week, the train did not run due to wartime cutbacks.[60]

This was during World War II. The fact that some fathers and elder brothers of excluded Aboriginal children were fighting overseas in defence - as one clergyman put it - "of our liberties and privileges", did not go unnoticed by fair-minded members of the community. The Lismore Sub-Branch of the R.S.L., for example, wrote to the Minister for Education pleading "with feelings of sincere fraternity" the case for readmitting the child of a serviceman. Their request was turned down, but the cases of a number of children were individually raised with the Department by various groups, particularly the Aborigines Welfare Board. A way was found late in 1944 to admit some of them. In 1943, by an amendment of the Aborigines Protection Act, Aborigines who satisfied certain strict requirements could qualify for Exemption Certificates. These certificates entitled the holders to certain privileges not allowed to other Aborigines, such as entry to hotels. The certificates had to be carried by the holders, and were in force until 1963. Aborigines referred to them as "dog licenses". The Department saw this as a means of allowing certain Aboriginal children to be enrolled in ordinary schools.

A notice was placed in the "Education Gazette" which read in part:

> This Department has decided that children of any Aborigine securing such an Exemption Certificate are to be admitted to the ordinary public school.[62]

Some children were admitted under this regulation, but Exemption Certificates were not easy to obtain and a number of special cases were brought to the Department's attention (such as an adopted Aboriginal child whose adoptive parents could not gain an Exemption Certificate because they were white!). It was also becoming common knowledge that Aboriginal children were being freely admitted to ordinary schools *on production of a medical certificate.* A number of organisations objected to the discriminatory nature of this regulation, and it had been demonstrated elsewhere (e.g. Collarenebri) that strict enforcement of the normal health regulations was all that was necessary. The requirement of a medical certificate was withdrawn in the "Education Gazette" of 2nd February, 1948.

> In future a medical certificate will not be required for the enrolment of Aboriginal children....[63]

The regulation went on to say, however, that if there was substantial opposition in the community, the enrolment should be deferred and the advice of the Department sought.

Understanding these developments, the events in Collarenebri can be taken up again. Few problems occurred in Collarenebri until late in 1946, when the teacher of the annex resigned and was not immediately replaced. This rather unrelated event had a significant effect on the integration of Aboriginal children there. All the Aboriginal parents petitioned the Department to allow their children to attend the main building. What was more important at the time was that several Aboriginal families sought permission to enrol their children under the new regulations requiring only a medical certificate.

When the first family was admitted to the main building in 1947, there was an immediate public protest. However, it was obvious even to the Aboriginal people that the children admitted to the main building came from those families who were able to accept and demonstrate white society's values of health, cleanliness and living conditions and by 1947, opposition to them was much less. The protestors carried a motion condemning the Department's action, but they represented a minority of the town's residents. A counter-petition from local clergy and other residents was forwarded. The

inspector met with those who objected to the enrolment of these children. The headmaster had very carefully enforced the Department's health regulations, and the protestors finally could put forward no other argument than that the children had some "Aboriginal blood".[64]

Although another teacher was appointed to the annex, the next few years saw the gradual transfer of children to classes in the main building. Late in 1949 "The Daily Telegraph" claimed that white residents of Collarenebri were again planning to boycott the school if the Department closed the annex.[65] The inspector met with the Parents and Citizens' Association and explained the policy of gradual integration. There was an isolated letter of protest to which the Department replied coolly,citing La Perouse as a school where integration was being achieved.

There was, however, the educational welfare of the Aboriginal children to be considered. By 1949, under a trained Departmental teacher, the 15 children in the annex were receiving the individual attention their educational disadvantage required, and it seemed to the Department that to force the pace of integration at the expense of individual care was not justified. Although this may have been a rationalisation to delay the problem of full integration, it was soon forced by other considerations. By 1951 there were only a few pupils remaining in the annex and there was an acute teacher shortage due to the post-war baby boom. The annex was closed and by July 1951, all Aboriginal children were enrolled in normal classes in the main building.[66]

In 10 years, Collarenebri had gone from active resistance to quiet acceptance of mixed schooling. This process was typical of the Department's attempts, first to enrol unschooled Aboriginal children in normal schools, and later to merge Aboriginal and normal schools. At Lismore, Kempsey, Gulargambone, Condobolin and dozens of other places, the policy of assimilation became a hasten slowly approach, and mixed schooling was to a great degree achieved fortuitously in much the same way as the annex at Collarenebri collapsed. Of course, a few schools remain with a totally Aboriginal enrolment. They are properly staffed public schools and exist either for geographical reasons or because the Aboriginal community prefers that the school remains.

THE PRESENT ERA - EQUALITY OF ACCESS

Where does the present begin? For very good reasons, I have considered the past in some detail, but now that we are to

consider the present, to ask where it begins is more than simply posing an academic question. To say that, technically, it begins right now, is avoiding the issue because this moment marks no particular milestone in Aboriginal matters. Perhaps the referendum of 1967 marked something. (It is even regarded in some legal circles as conferring Australian citizenship on Aboriginal people for the first time). On the other hand, there are those - not without justification - who claim that we will only emerge from the past when discrimination, racial prejudice and injustice cease in the community.

In the field of Aboriginal education, which is of course, the subject of this article, a case could be built for the 1950's which, in a general kind of way, saw the Aboriginal child's right of access to schooling acknowledged and defended. However, I have chosen a more precise date - the 23rd August, 1972.

I do not know when the last Aboriginal child was excluded from a school merely for having Aboriginal ancestry. Very few, if any, such exclusions have occurred in the last 20 years, although the rigidity with which temporary exclusion on health grounds has been enforced, has varied from school to school. The *possibility* of exclusion on racial reasons theoretically existed until about six years ago, as the regulations requiring principals to defer or refuse enrolment of Aboriginal children on the grounds of "home conditions" or "substantial (community) opposition" were still in the Teachers' Handbook.[67]

On the 11th August, 1972, a letter from David K. Baird of Queanbeyan, New South Wales, was published in "The Australian". I wonder if Mr Baird (who is quite unknown to me) knows how immediate was the result of his letter. He quoted the relevant section of the Teachers' Handbook, claiming that it was a "disgusting example of how little is being done towards progress in this area".[68] The letter was cut out, put on a file and sent for comment to Mr G. Falkenmire (Staff Inspector). Mr Falkenmire recognised that the section was "offensive in import and did not faithfully reflect the policy of this Department", and recommended that the whole section be withdrawn. The Director-General of Education approved the withdrawal on 23rd August 1972.[69]

By this time, the Commonwealth Government was developing a system of Aboriginal Secondary Grants, applied first to secondary pupils beyond school leaving age (1970)and later to all Aboriginal Secondary pupils (1973). About 4,000 Aboriginal secondary school

children in New South Wales receive assistance under the grant. The Commonwealth Government commissioned an independent evaluation of the grant by Professor B.H. Watts, of the University of Queensland. This report shows the significant effect of the scheme and strongly urges its retention.[70]

Also during this time grants of money were made available to the State Education Departments by the Commonwealth to assist the education of Aboriginal children. In 1975, a formal agreement between New South Wales and the Commonwealth, gave full responsibility for funding to the Commonwealth. Recognizing the high degree of educational disadvantage of Aboriginal children, the Education Department now develops programs to upgrade the educational underachievement of Aboriginal children and annually seeks financial support for these programs from the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs.

As a result of these funding arrangements, advisory services are being developed for schools with high Aboriginal enrolments, in-service courses and conferences are provided for teachers of Aboriginal children and additional resources are available to schools. Most important of all, an Aboriginal Teacher Aide Scheme is placing large numbers of trained Aboriginal people as teachers' aides in schools of high Aboriginal enrolment.

The present policy of the Department of Education towards the education of Aboriginal children is that they have equal access to all of the educational services of the Department. Furthermore, where special needs are evident, Commonwealth funds are sought and applied in various positive ways.

LOOKING AHEAD

We can talk with some authority about the past. We can be knowledgeable about the present. About the future we can only speculate.

If the present has been shaped by the past, then the past and the present are already shaping the future. In the past, Aboriginal people in New South Wales suffered, among many other deprivations, severe educational injustice. The legacy of this educational deprivation is still a major factor in the underachievement of Aboriginal children. It is visible in the Aboriginal infant-school child struggling to cope with skills and materials patently unrelated to his home environment and early childhood experience. It is visible in the primary-school child, low in self-concept,

more often than not grouped, because of failure to acquire the basic skills, with the mentally retarded. It is visible in the secondary-school child, with little motivation to achieve at school, convinced of its irrelevance to the future,and labelled after years of failure, as a slow-learner. It is visible in the Aboriginal adults with extremely high rates of unemployment, unable to provide adequate adult models for their children and unable to provide for them the home conditions and supportive environment conducive to success at school. It would be naive to imagine that the legacy of the past will not be a major factor in at least the foreseeable future.

The bulk of this article has been concerned with *access to education*. Relatively little has been said about *quality*. Access to education is not enough. Equality of opportunity can be a severe handicap if it precludes programs which take into account the individual needs of children. Aboriginal children have special needs which require considerable depth of understanding and considerable professional skill on the part of the teacher. The initiatives at State level such as the Aboriginal Teacher Aide Scheme, conferences and support of individual school programs are, of course, all to do with quality of education and the recognition of special needs. However, as teachers we are all too painfully aware of how much the quality of education depends upon the quality of the teacher.

In conclusion, let me raise my sights a little further than the immediate future. Aboriginal people have begun to feel a pride in who they are, and are beginning to gain the emotional strength necessary for them to strive for the life style they believe they want.[71] [72] I am enough of an idealist to believe in the possibility of a plural society - an Australian society in which groups with different attitudes and values can retain their individuality and yet interact with respect and dignity with other groups. Changes must most certainly come. Some Aboriginal people believe they can only achieve their destiny step by step, aggressively and antagonistically forcing it from the white community. It is my hope that progress will come increasingly as a result of their own leadership and involvement in decision making prompted through the goodwill of the community and positive and constructive assistance readily provided by Commonwealth and State Governments.[73] The corner-stone of such progress is education - the sort of education which allows Aboriginal children to pass through our schools with dignity and which gives Aboriginal school leavers *real* choices in life.

Our schools should give no less than this.

50. Commonwealth of Australia: *Aboriginal Welfare - Initial Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities*, Canberra, 21-23 April, 1937. Govt Printer, 1937.

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52. Fletcher, J.J.: Collarenebri - an attempt to integrate Aboriginal children. *The Leader*, Vol.6 No.1, N.S.W. Dept. of Education, 1975, pp. 30-36.

53. Chief Inspector B.C. Harkness to Inspector J.H. Cartwright, 12/10/1940. N.S.W. Dept. of Ed. File 46/59/8443.

54. J.H. Cartwright to B.C.Harkness, 19/11/1940. N.S.W. Dept. of Ed.File 46/59/8443.

55. Collarenebri *Gazette*, 22/1/1941.

56. Fletcher, J.J., 1975, op. cit. p.32

57. Fletcher, J.J., 1975, ibid.

58. Letter from W. Frith to C. Evatt, Minister for Education, enclosing letter from C. Riley, President North Lismore P. and C. and newspaper cuttings, forwarded by Evatt to Education Dept.for response, 28 Oct. 1942. N.S.W. Dept. of Ed. File 42/150/25115.

59. Evatt to Frith, 1 Feb.1944. N.S.W. Ed.Dept. File P67/00385.

60. Inspector O.R. Jones to Superintendent of Primary Education, 15 Oct. 1945. N.S.W. Dept. of Ed. File 45/150/25031.

61. W. Lang, Assistant Secretary, Lismore RSL Sub-Branch, to the Minister for Education, 21 March 1944. N.S.W. Ed. Dept. File 44/249/31032.

62. N.S.W. Dept. of Education. *The Education Gazette*, 2 October, 1944. p.278.

63. N.S.W. Dept. of Education *The Education Gazette*, 2 February, 1948, p.43.

64. Fletcher, J.J., 1975, op.cit. pp.35-36.

65. *The Daily Telegraph*, Sydney, 6 November, 1949.

66. Fletcher, J.J., 1975, op.cit. p. 36.

67. N.S.W. Education Dept. *Handbook, Instruction and Information for the Guidance of Teachers.* Second Ed. para.5.1.3.4.

68. *The Australian.* 11 August 1972.

69. Director General to Staff Inspector Falkenmire, 23 August 1972, N.S.W. Ed. Dept. file P67/00385.

70. Watts, B.H.: *Access to Education - an Evaluation of the Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme.* A.G.P.S. Canberra, 1976.

71. Biernoff, D.: The Dreamtime no more. *Current Affairs Bulletin* Vol. 51, No. 9, Feb. 1975.

72. Harris, J.W., The Aboriginal identity. In *The Teaching of Aboriginal Children - Papers from the Dubbo Conference.* N.S.W. Ed. Dept. 1975, pp. 8-13.

73. Rose, W.D., The education of Aboriginal children - for what purpose? In *The Teaching of Aboriginal Children - Papers from the Dubbo Conference.* Ibid. pp. 1-7.

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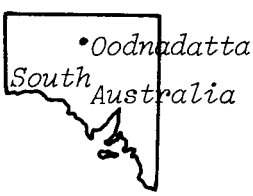
SELECTING BOOKS FOR ABORIGINAL CHILDREN



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This article stems from several requests by teachers and librarians, following our April article (Vol. 6 No. 2) for information about books that are popular with Aboriginal children who use the facilities of the Oodnadatta School library.

In our two and a half years of operating this library, we have gained a reasonably clear insight into the likes and dislikes of our readers. While the supply of lists is useful because, obviously, books successful in one libarary are usually popular in another library, the librarian must take into account the local factors which will probably influence the type of book the borrower will favour. While I don't wish to labour this point for the readers who may be well aware of these factors, there are several people