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*ABORIGINAL EDUCATION IN VICTORIA:

NEW DIRECTIONS - 1975 -?

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THE PROBLEM OF THE PAST

In the past our school system failed to attend to the educational, social, and emotional needs of Aborigines. By accepting the simplistic and convenient notion that a more advanced technology reflected a superior social, spiritual, cultural, and educational development we were able to justify the denial and denigration of the Aboriginal character, culture, and history in the very schools we compelled Aborigines to attend.

There is little in the present Victorian situation to suggest that Aborigines now find any greater relevance or understanding of their needs within our school system. Aboriginal enrolment at pre-schools is negligible; attendance at primary school is generally irregular; the "drop-out" rate at secondary level (Years 8-9) is about six times the rate for non-Aborigines.

After one hundred years and more of our school system where are the Aboriginal doctors, teachers, pilots, lawyers, businessmen, and politicians?

How many of the few who have persisted to attain tertiary levels have done so at a cost of having to deny their Aboriginal heritage?

Why do Aborigines reject our school system?

What do we do to make our schools more acceptable to Aboriginal students?

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Should we seek alternative solutions outside our school system?

These are some of the questions to which we must attend if we are to provide learning experiences that are relevant to, consistent with, and designed to enhance the neurological, physiological, psychological, emotional, cultural, and skills development of Aborigines who are required to be, or wish to be educated to function effectively in our multicultural society - irrespective of the cultural orientation they *choose* to maintain.

SEEKING SOLUTIONS

Caveat emptor (let the buyer beware) has long been a tenet of our commercial existence. If the buyer is wary of our product and will not buy we must examine the product for faults or shortcomings and review our pricing structure. More importantly, however, we must ascertain the client's reasons for rejecting our product.

A clear client statement of desired policies and practices in Aboriginal education exists at the national level in the *Report to the Schools Commission, 1975*, by the Aboriginal Consultative Group to the Schools Commission.

When the Aboriginal Education Branch was established in 1975, with the handing over to the Victorian Education Department of the responsibility for the administration of the Commonwealth States Grants Program for the education of Aborigines in Victoria, the Acting Supervisor (an Aborigine) initiated a series of innovative programs that reflected the policies and recommendations contained in the Report to the Schools Commission (1975).

As a first step resource teachers were appointed to schools with high Aboriginal enrolment to provide liaison, consultant, teaching, advisory, and teacher-education services to the base school, to other schools in the area, and to Aboriginal parents and community groups. This move to take the school into the Aboriginal community was complemented by a second program designed to bring the Aboriginal community into the school, through the development of the Special Work Project Scheme under which schools were funded to provide employment and training for Aborigines as teacher aides, clerical assistants, library assistants, groundsman, and so on. Where the Aboriginal employee was able to develop close contact with the Aboriginal students within the school environment some fairly consistent changes were observed in the students' attitudes towards school and learning.

This very positive influence of some untrained Aborigines on school staffs has interesting implications for the future emphases in Aboriginal education. This is particularly so, when we consider that the presence of Aborigines on school staffs tends to bring about changes in attitudes of those staffs towards Aborigines; greater understanding of schools and teachers among Aboriginal parents; and a quickening of interest in schools among local Aboriginal community groups and organisations.

A third program involved the funding of a range of school-initiated projects designed specifically to meet the needs of Aboriginal pupils. Funds were provided for cultural, enrichment, remedial, developmental, socialisation, and recreational programs in individual schools located in all parts of the State.

The fourth early thrust was to obtain the introduction of a scheme whereby mature-age Aborigines could be enrolled in diploma of primary teaching courses within the State College of Victoria, under subsidised, special entry conditions. Two colleges enrolled fifteen Aborigines under this program early in 1976, and a lesser number in February 1977. It is hoped that, after completing this course, and with several years of teaching experience, these Aboriginal teachers will take up resource teacher positions in the more critical areas of the State. This would be close to the end refinement of the resource teacher concept in Aboriginal education.

The advent of a non-Aboriginal Acting Supervisor in 1976 necessitated the formalisation of consultation between the Department and the Aboriginal community. This involved the setting-up of an Interim Steering Group to set guidelines for the formation of a widely representative Victorian Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (V.A.E.C.G.), which would assist in the planning, implementation, and administration of programs in Aboriginal education. The Interim Steering Group met in mid-1976 to prepare proposals for submission to the Schools Commission for funding.

Apart from proposals relating to the formation of the V.A.E.C.G., a major proposal was for a series of Aboriginal parent seminars in country areas in order to provide the local Aboriginal community with information concerning the types of options or alternatives possible in the education of their children. In addition it was hoped that these seminars would provide clear, first-hand expressions of Aborigines' expectations, aspirations, and felt needs in their children's education. Three of these weekend seminars were held late in 1976, at Shepparton, Robinvale, and Koroit.

Although this was only the beginning of the consultative program, some interesting facts emerged. It seems that many Aborigines would welcome the introduction of programs in Aboriginal culture and history and, at secondary level, an Aboriginal language. There are also some indications that an Aboriginal secondary school would provide a more relevant learning environment for those young adolescents who are rejecting our schools. No strong move towards a separate education system is evident at the local level.

PRESENT PROGRAMS

Although funding has been available from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs for the establishment of a central office staff of twelve to support a current field staff of sixty, institutional difficulties have prevented the filling of all twelve positions. Current establishment comprises an acting supervisor, an administration teacher (primary), a research assistant, two Aboriginal liaison officers, a clerical assistant, and a typist. These service some eleven resource teachers, forty-nine Aborigines employed in schools, and a student population estimated to be in excess of 2600, in some 488 schools throughout the State.

In addition to the school-based programs funded by the branch, current programs include:

1. An Aboriginal study centre set-up in an Aboriginal community centre in Collingwood. This provides a range of classes and study sessions for Aboriginal students at secondary and tertiary levels, and will house a resource library. This centre is administered by a committee of management of nine Aborigines.
2. In-service education sessions for resource teachers, Aboriginal teacher aides, and teachers involved in the education of Aborigines.
3. Review and evaluation of films, video programs, and resource kits relating to Aboriginal education.
4. Continuation of the subsidised teacher-training program in three colleges within the State College of Victoria.
5. Continuation of the consultative program seminars in country and urban areas.

6. Involvement in funding and organisation of school camps for Aboriginal students.
7. Funding and organisation of a variety of excursions for students and teacher aides.
8. Visits to schools by Aboriginal speakers, performers, and interstate student groups.
9. Publications and audio-visual productions in conjunction with other branches of the Victorian Education Department, and other organisations.
10. A State-wide survey of Aboriginal enrolment in all types of schools.
11. Maintaining close liaison with other departments and organisations involved in Aboriginal affairs and participation with them in interdepartmental planning and action committees.
12. Continuation of the development of curricular materials for Aboriginal education.
13. Provision of supportive contact and information services to schools and Aboriginal students, where required.

Some of these programs are as yet in the early developmental stages - largely because of the heavy load on the incomplete central administrative staff establishment.

PROPOSED PROJECTS

1. Consolidation and extension of current programs.
2. Establishment of Aboriginal learning centres in areas such as Robinvale, Swan Hill, Shepparton, Bairnsdale, Echuca (where requested or approved by the local Aboriginal community).
3. A feasibility study will be undertaken by a linguist to determine where, when, and how an Aboriginal language could be introduced into schools.

4. A tertiary bridging course for prospective tertiary students for 1978, held in January 1978 to prepare them for entry into the State College of Victoria or other tertiary institutions.
5. Training of resource teachers and some classroom teachers in the use of the *People of the Western Desert* teaching unit, which is based on the MACOS scheme.
6. Presentation to the Teachers Tribunal of a prepared submission detailing a permanent career structure for Aboriginal teacher aides.
7. The establishment of a State-wide network of Aboriginal liaison officers to provide regular support and assistance to schools, pupils, parents, and communities.
8. A trial scheme to provide financial assistance at primary school level that is similar to that provided through the Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme currently administered by the Commonwealth Department of Education with emphasis on the children entering the transition phase between primary and secondary education.
9. Training of selected members of the Aboriginal community in the presentation of programs on Aboriginal culture.
10. The establishment of a secondary "school" or learning centre as an optional alternative that will provide, in a distinctively Aboriginal environment and in addition to the basic skills required for functioning in the Australian society, a curriculum heavily emphasising the rich heritage of the Aborigines.
11. A series of parent-teacher seminars - as an extension of the consultative and community involvement programs.
12. Assistance in the development of an Aboriginal cultural exposition that will comprise two components - a major, static exposition at a centre to which school groups could be brought; a smaller, mobile unit that can be taken to schools or community centres on request - in conjunction with the Aboriginal speakers and performers program.

13. Other projects as may be recommended through the consultative program at local, regional, State, and national levels.

The projected programs will, hopefully, be initiated some time within the triennium 1977-78 to 1979-80. Development will, of course, depend largely on the availability of funds from the Commonwealth and, to a lesser extent, on the acceptance of an increasing long-term financial commitment by our own Education Department.

DEVELOPMENTAL DIFFICULTIES.

The major difficulty in developing a comprehensive range of special programs in Aboriginal education has been the lack of administrative staff to provide effective support to the resource teachers, teacher aides, schools, and students. Perhaps the greatest gap has been in our inability to build up the full Curriculum Development Unit of curriculum officer and two research assistants. As a consequence we have been unable to undertake the development of suitable materials and kits to meet the very apparent needs of teachers who are interested in implementing courses in Aboriginal studies. The development of a resource and information service has suffered also.

Part of the staffing problem is associated with the funding policies of the Commonwealth. Funding is on an annual basis, from 1 July to 30 June, with no guarantees given of the continuation of funding for specific items from one year to the next. This, of course, inhibits forward planning and creates some reluctance within our Department to appoint staff.

A second difficulty in Aboriginal education is in the fragmentation of the responsibility for educational programs for Aborigines in the State. State Ministries of Health, Education, and Social Welfare are involved, as are the Commonwealth Departments of Education, Aboriginal Affairs, and Employment and Industrial Relations. The Council of Adult Education, TAFE/Access, and some tertiary institutions are also involved.

A move towards the solution of this problem has been made in the recent setting-up by the Commonwealth Department of Education of an Inter-departmental Co-ordinating Committee on Aboriginal Education.

A further important developmental problem is related to the need for greater involvement of Aborigines in the management of their affairs. The problem is in the lack of suitable training programs for Aborigines as they move into administration, liaison, advisory, and consultative positions. The Community Organisation Course at Swinburne College of Technology is developing into a source of competent, articulate, and confident Aborigines capable of filling such positions, but a range of more specific training courses is urgently required.

Finally, the problem of poor communication of information concerning the activities and services of the Aboriginal Education Branch of the Victorian Education Department will gradually be overcome as more administrative staff are appointed.

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THE ABORIGINAL CHILD AT SCHOOL

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