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ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER VIEWS

QUEENSLAND ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE : STUDIES ABOUT ABORIGINES

*In February 1980 the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Consultative Committee presented a report to the Director-General of Education entitled *Guidelines for Studies about Aborigines in Queensland Schools*. The report examines current approaches to teaching about Aborigines, presents guidelines for studies about Aborigines, offers an outline for the treatment of specific topics and provides information on resources and materials available. Finally, the report makes recommendations about the implementation of the guidelines. In the following pages we present extracts from the Report...Ed.*

3. PRESENT SITUATION

3.1 Viewpoint

In its first report, to the Director-General of Education, entitled *Education for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders*, the QATSICC stated that

It is important that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be encouraged to develop and retain a pride in their own cultural heritage. This could be achieved by reviewing teaching methods, text books and kits so that Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders can obtain a more positive attitude towards themselves and their own culture.

There is also a need for the wider Australian society to be encouraged to appreciate and become more aware of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage in this State.

The QATSICC believes that, perhaps, one method of ensuring that the whole of Australian society gains an understanding and appreciation of the complexity and richness of Aboriginal culture is through improving the teaching about Aborigines in schools. This would involve the introduction of *Studies about Aborigines* which is both interesting and has a greater degree of authenticity.

Through its investigations of available kits, textbooks, teaching materials and curricula the QATSICC has been able to identify certain issues which stand out. These issues include:

- i) *Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are not always given credit for the specific skills they possess.*

The Aborigine a century ago was an expert botanist, biologist, geologist, astronomer and certainly was able to survive in a very harsh and hostile environment. He needed to be familiar with his environment and to develop appropriate skills, to be able to survive.

Many of these skills have been handed down through the generations.

In discussing the feats of the explorers very little mention is made of the Aboriginal people who accompanied the explorers and who, because of their advanced skills and knowhow of the environment were largely responsible for the success of these expeditions.

- ii) *False assumptions are made.*

Many historians maintain that the Aborigines handed over their land without a fight. Certainly, there were very few recorded battles as are defined in military terms, but the Aboriginal resistance to the take-over of their land was in the form of guerilla and economic warfare. Because Aborigines lived in small tribal or clan groups, guerilla warfare was the most effective. The destruction of crops and livestock had such an impact on the settlers and farmers, that it rendered many of them penniless. Textbooks indicate that Aborigines were 'hostile savages'; but surely they were no match with their spears for the guns of the intruders. The Aborigines resisted to protect their own tribal land.

- iii) *Very little recognition of the positive aspects of Aboriginal life.*

The gap between Aborigines and Anglo-Euro-Australians has been widened by the ethnocentric attitudes adopted by the media, textbooks and literature. The media seems to be more interested in the negative actions of Aborigines rather than presenting a positive view, by reporting Aboriginal actions which can make Aborigines feel proud of their Aboriginality.

Textbooks have improved somewhat, few now accept 1770 as the start of Australian history. Aboriginal culture however is invariably poorly treated and is usually made to look quaint or bizarre.

Tasmanian Aborigines are still reported as being extinct. Stereotypes of Aborigines are also common. Perhaps the area that needs to be looked at closely is the history of Aboriginal contact in this country. Most history books or courses ignore Aborigines entirely or completely overlook the role that Aborigines have played in Australia since 1770.

- iv) *Very little mention of hostility and violence by the colonists - the Aborigines were the savages.*

The settlers had access to firearms while the Aborigines were limited to boomerangs, nulla-nulla and spears. The Aborigines were interested only in retaining that land that they depended upon for their livelihood. At some stages during Australian history Aborigines were hunted by the settlers as if they were animals.

- v) *Comments on appearance bad.*

Past and present literature describes the Aborigine using derogative terms. Emphasis is usually placed on the traditional people whose style of dress and lifestyle are different to that of people in the western world. Little mention is made of the fact that such clothes and lifestyle (nomadic) were the most suitable for survival in the environment that the Aborigines inhabited.

- vi) *Very little mention of the destruction of Aboriginal Society through contact with non-Aborigines and through dispossession of their land and culture.*

Aborigines depended on the land for their livelihood. When they were dispossessed of their land, part of their way of life was destroyed. Contact with the intruding settlers saw the destruction of Aborigines through the introduction of foreign diseases and illnesses.

- vii) *Little evidence of success models.*

Textbooks and literature do not provide Aboriginal models with which the Aboriginal can identify. The American Indians have heroes in such people as Chief Sitting Bull, the Aborigines have very few personalities or groups identified in a positive manner. The QATSICC believe that within Aboriginal history and present day situation there are many individuals and Aboriginal groups who could provide evidence of success, either through western values or Aboriginal values or both, but who are not identified.

viii) *Lack of geographical placement.*

So often stereo-typing regarding Aboriginal way of life occurs because groups described and stories told are not placed in their geographical context. Certain stories from particular regions have relevance only in the area that they are collected. Recognition of the geographical placement of the story teller is essential to ensure that an accurate and meaningful account of stories is presented.

ix) *Absence of the study about contemporary life of Aborigines.*

Most literature in schools tends to concentrate on the emotional aspects of traditional Aboriginal life-style without much emphasis on contemporary life-style. All cultures change depending upon the intrinsic and extrinsic forces that act upon a society. (The introduction of an education and technology to Aboriginal society has meant that changes to that society have occurred). There is now in Australia a traditional contemporary society, one which uses westernised skills for its own benefit while still keeping some affiliation with traditional Aboriginal life. Aboriginal people in the urban areas still have a strong kinship with each other, a part of traditional society which has been retained. A study about Aborigines should highlight these factors.

x) *History of Australia has been recorded through the eyes of Europeans.*

Most textbooks and kits describe Australian history through the eyes of the settlers and colonists. Very little emphasis is placed on an Aboriginal viewpoint. It has only been in recent years that attempts have been made to have Aborigines record aspects of Australian history. If more Aboriginal persons were employed to collect aspects of Australian history and culture as told by Aborigines then a more accurate and less biased study of Australian history and culture could be developed.

Aboriginal society ranges from the traditionally-oriented people to those assimilated into the wider Australian society. As a result of this factor, the degree of studies about Aborigines would depend on the clientele being served. For example people in a traditionally-orientated community would not need an extensive treatment of traditional culture as this should be done by the elders in their particular community. For traditionally orientated students, emphasis should be placed on urban Aboriginal culture and lifestyle.

The QATSICC believes that one method of overcoming the dilemma of teaching traditional and non-traditional culture in varying degrees would be the establishment of camp sites. These camp sites would need to be of two types, one in the country where the emphasis would be on the teaching of survival skills in the city. Such camp sites could be administered and run by Aborigines under the direction of the QATSICC and the Education Department. More than one such camp site would need to be built to cater for the demand. Teachers would need to accompany their students at such centres. (See Appendix 1)

The QATSICC consider that the study of contemporary Aboriginal way of life should be given comparable emphasis to that of the more emotive traditional Aboriginal life style.

Studies about Aborigines should be taught wherever possible by Aborigines. Materials and kits used in schools should have the prior approval of Aboriginal people. It is essential that Aborigines are involved in all aspects of studies about Aborigines..

In Aboriginal Communities attempts should be made to develop local studies kits. This could be a feature of the school's *Studies about Aborigines* program. Kits developed at a local level could be used by schools in other regions provided prior approval of the researched group is given.

Aborigines should be involved in any on-going evaluation of programs on *Studies about Aborigines*.

AIMS:

The QATSICC considers the purpose of introducing a more formalised *Studies about Aborigines* as being twofold:

- a) *To revive/teach Aboriginal culture to Aborigines*
- b) *To sensitise non-Aborigines*

3.4 QATSICC Comment on the Present Situation

From investigating the present situation on *Studies about Aborigines* it becomes apparent that the major focus of this topic is in the primary school.

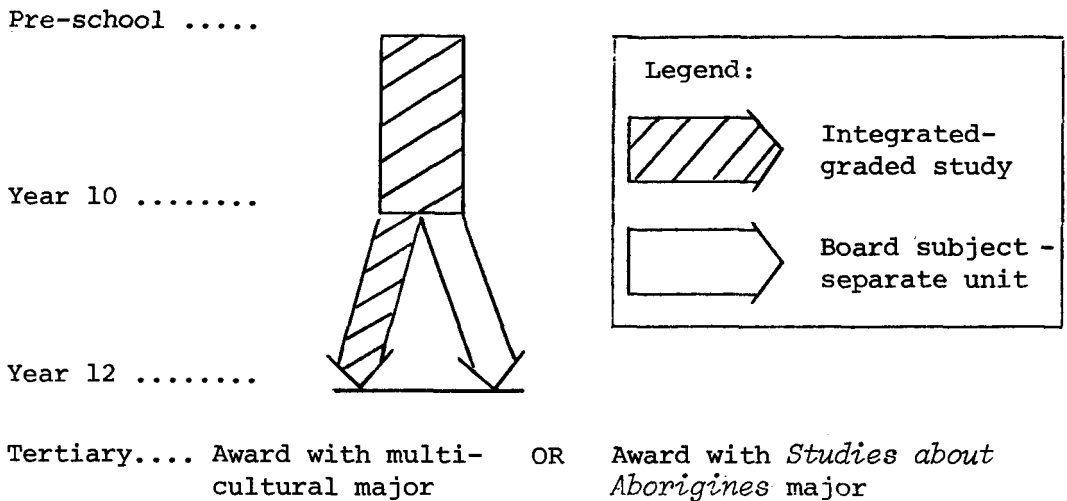
The QATSICC is concerned that this is the case. It considers that changes need to be made so that *Studies about Aborigines* should be an integrated graded study from pre-school to tertiary education. The QATSICC considers this essential if the wider Australian society is to gain a greater appreciation and understanding of Aboriginal culture.

4. GUIDELINES FOR *STUDIES ABOUT ABORIGINES*

4.1 Basic Model

The QATSICC sees *Studies about Aborigines* as an integral part of every Australian child's education. So important is the need for all Australian children to acquire an understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal way of life, both traditional and contemporary, as well as urban and tribal, that the QATSICC considers that *Studies about Aborigines* should be an integrated-graded subject from Years 1-10, with an option in Years 11-12 for students either to do *Studies about Aborigines* as a recognised board subject or continue to do this topic as an integrated-graded topic. (See Fig.1)

Figure 1
Basic Model of *Studies about Aborigines*



4.2 Explanation of Basic Model

As illustrated in Fig.1, the QATSICC considers that there should be two (2) strands of *Studies about Aborigines*. Briefly these are

- as an integrated-graded study from pre-school to tertiary education; this integrated study to be an integral part of education for a multi-cultural society
- as a separate board subject in Years 11-12, and for those who wish to pursue the subject further as a tertiary subject.

The QATSICC provides the following reasons for its decisions on the particular model that it has chosen.

4.2.1 *An integrated study*

Although the QATSICC sees the need for making studies about Aborigines a separate unit in studies for all students throughout pre-school to tertiary it considers that it would be most practical to have the study as an integrated part of other subject areas. The QATSICC would see though, that wherever study of Aborigines is mentioned in the curriculum, then it becomes compulsory for teachers to deal with the topic.

The degree of compulsion will depend to a large extent on the resource material available as well as the teacher confidence and ability to handle the situation. It would be necessary for some materials to be developed.

4.2.2 *Part of education for a multi-cultural society*

Because of the complex multi-cultural nature of Australian society, the QATSICC sees *Studies about Aborigines* as being part of education for that society, i.e. children learn about Aborigines as well as other groups in Australia, e.g. Torres Strait Islanders, Greeks, Euro-Australians and Anglo-Australians.

However, since Aborigines constitute the indigenous people of this country they should be recognised in their own right and not be seen as an immigrant/ethnic group. As much emphasis should be placed on the teaching of *Studies about Aborigines* as is placed on the study of immigrant/ethnic groups. Years 11 and 12 *Studies about Aborigines* should be a separate unit of study and also part of other subjects within multi-cultural education. When discussion about Aborigines occurs, a comparison should be made where possible with migrant/ethnic groups.

We see this as a possibility if the specific topic areas on *Studies about Aborigines* are compulsory. It has been noticeable that if studies about Aborigines have to compete with studies of immigrant/ethnic groups then teachers tend to opt for the more attractive latter study. The fact that more resource material is available in the study of immigrant/ethnic groups makes teaching this topic more appealing for teachers. It is imperative then that studies about ethnic/immigrant groups are not done at the expense of studies about Aborigines.

4.2.3. *A graded study per topic area*

As children progress through school they should learn more about Aborigines. Topics taught in pre-school should not necessarily be treated in later primary or secondary unless done so in greater depth. Topics of a sensitive and controversial nature should be taught in Years 11 and 12 e.g. Land Rights. In grading topics curriculum developers should consider the reasoning abilities of the children.

4.2.4. *Graded within topic areas*

Information within a particular area needs also to be graded. For example: In Music

Music for Pleasure (pre-school)...

- children exposed to Aboriginal music without formal lesson

Music for dance (primary)...

- children learn to dance or to mime music

Music for appreciation and understanding of value (secondary)...

- children actually study Aboriginal music

The QATSICC has attempted to develop examples of how each topic area can be graded. (See Specific Programs). Curriculum developers however should have the expertise to further develop these guidelines so that what is being aimed at is achieved. If *Studies about Aborigines* is to maintain student interest from pre-school to tertiary education it needs to be graded.

4.2.5. *From pre-school to tertiary education*

The QATSICC considers it essential that the whole of Australian society should have an understanding and appreciation of the complexity of Aboriginal culture and diversity of Aboriginal society. If this can be achieved perhaps the injustices experienced by Aborigines could be overcome. The QATSICC considers that for people to gain a full education about Aborigines then they need to study about them from pre-school to tertiary. The greater the exposure the greater the likelihood of the wider Australian society accepting Aborigines in their own right.

All teachers, in particular, need to undergo some training so that their knowledge of and attitude towards Aborigines can be improved positively. Unless teachers are aware of the factors

affecting the educational performance of our people then their effectiveness as educators/practitioners must be questioned. The Committee believes that if educators have an understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal way of life then they would be more aptly equipped to cater for the social issues that may arise in the classroom.

4.2.6. *Studies about Aborigines a board subject*

The QATSICC considers that any students wishing to do further studies about Aborigines should be given the option to do so. We consider that if at the end of Year 10 *Studies about Aborigines* was to be regarded as a board subject then students would be able to continue their study in this subject area. Students doing this subject as a board subject would be able to do further research into the area in which they are most interested. Maybe at this stage, students could actually learn the structure of an Aboriginal language.

4.2.7 *At tertiary education level*

The QATSICC considers that, particularly in the field of teacher education, provision should be made for teachers undergoing study to have exposure to *Studies about Aborigines*. The QATSICC believes that this would enable teachers during pre-service training to obtain some awareness of the issues associated with being an Aborigine in the wider Australian society.

The QATSICC considers that tertiary students could be exposed to the *Studies about Aborigines*, either as an integrated study within education for a multi-cultural society or as a separate unit as education for Aborigines. The QATSICC sees it as compulsory for teacher trainees to undergo at least *one* of the above two subjects.

4.3 Some Points to be Considered when Teaching *Studies about Aborigines*

4.3.1 *Aboriginal involvement*

It is essential that Aborigines be involved in the planning, teaching and evaluation of *Studies about Aborigines* wherever possible (see statement of Aboriginal involvement 4.4).

4.3.2 *Teaching areas of culture*

Aboriginal society ranges from traditional to urban. It is not possible to generalise distinct groups as there is a lot of

overlapping with the differing social groups. However, because of the intrinsic and extrinsic forces acting upon Aboriginal society, changes in the way of life (culture) have occurred.

Some teachers believe incorrectly that the only development for Aborigines is to become westernised. However, the QATSICC believes Aboriginal development to be the ability to function within the greater Australian society without greatly losing one's own cultural heritage and identity.

When teaching *Studies about Aborigines*, teachers must ensure that they concentrate not only on traditional way of life but also on contemporary urban lifestyle of the Aborigine. It is important also that teachers do not reinforce the false assumption that Aboriginal development is moving towards being westernised i.e. from ganyah to westernised house.

4.3.3 *Sacred ceremonies*

Although teachers should refer to the fact that there are important sacred ceremonies, they must not teach about such ceremonies. Informing children of sacred rites is the responsibility of the Aboriginal people.

4.3.4 *Use of kits*

In recent years, many kits and resource materials have been developed. However, many of these could, if used incorrectly by teachers, give a negative perspective and emphasise negative stereotypes of Aboriginal way of life. To avoid such occurrences, teachers need to check that material being used in their school has the approval of this Committee (QATSICC) or the approval of the Aboriginal people in their community.

Most *Studies about Aborigines* kits have been developed as whole units. Teachers must use the whole unit rather than sections within the whole. For example, if a kit has filmstrips, slides or films attached, it is imperative that some teaching about the topic to be shown is done before and after the showing. If one does this one avoids repetition of negative stereo-types.

4.3.5 *Approaching Studies about Aborigines positively*

Teachers need to be aware that many textbooks and reference books contain incorrect and out-of-date information. When referring students to research data, teachers need to be aware of this factor. A quick perusal of the textbooks/reference books would avoid incorrect information from being recorded.

Many negative stereo-types have been developed over the decades regarding Aborigines. Teachers teaching *Studies about Aborigines* should as much as possible, provide positive information about Aborigines.

4.3.6 *Attacking controversial issues*

If teachers are not completely familiar with controversial issues that may be raised in the classroom, then depending on the age group of the children, directing children to a research project would enable children to obtain a wider viewpoint of the issues as raised. Involving Aborigines is another method of approach.

4.3.7 *Development of Local Studies Kits*

An approach where people from the local community develop their own history should be used in classroom. This could be done by students taping and recording stories of elders from the school community. The Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Acton House, Acton, ACT would be used in gathering resource books and information about any particular Aboriginal group in Australia.

Developed kits of other Aboriginal communities such as "People of East Arnhem Land", could be used as guides for the community to produce its own resource kit.

4.4 Aboriginal Involvement and Consultation

- . Before the introduction of *Studies about Aborigines* into Queensland schools consultation, particularly with the Aboriginal members of the local school community is important.
- . Aborigines should be involved in helping to develop, implement and evaluate *Studies about Aborigines* in schools.
- . On-going consultation should occur not only with State Aboriginal organisations but also at a National level.
- . In traditional communities, if kits-resource materials about Aborigines are to be introduced, prior approval of the local community of the content of the kits is important.
- . In the urban communities, whenever *Studies about Aborigines* is to be implemented either as an integrated unit in education for a multi-cultural society or as a separate whole unit, then members of this Committee (QATSICC) should

be involved in the planning, implementation and evaluation of such studies.

- . This Committee (QATSICC) will attempt, through its members, to compile a directory of Aboriginal resource persons, who could be co-opted to be involved in the teaching of *Studies about Aborigines* in each district/region throughout Queensland. This list once compiled will be held by members of this Committee and names of contact persons will be made available to any school on request.
- . Members of the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Consultative Committee (QATSICC) to the Director General of Education should be informed by schools who wish to introduce *Studies about Aborigines* into their school curriculum. Involvement of members of QATSICC in any program on *Studies about Aborigines* as speakers, educators or merely as resource persons would be useful to any school.

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