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OBJECTIVES IN THE EDUCATION OF ABORIGINES :

SOME ABORIGINAL VIEWS

*B.H. Watts

A variety of statements made by Aboriginal people and groups about what they see as the aims of education is presented. There are diverse emphases but a common thread relates to the education of children in both cultures and a wish to see the children grow in competence in Western skills and knowledge but also retain their own culture and its associated knowledge, skills and values.

The following sets of statements, made by people¹ from various locations throughout Australia, exhibit concern for the achievement of the basic skills, for education that will permit job access (including emphasis by some on education to tertiary level), for the development of skills to live in the modern industrialized world and/or to contribute to their own communities, and concerns expressed by many that children learn about their own culture, some seeing this as part of the school program and others believing it should be taught by the Aboriginal people themselves.

Queensland Aboriginal participants in consultation with the Council for Aboriginal Affairs at Townsville (May, 1970) - Group reports:

This Conference demands the same facilities in education as are enjoyed by fellow Australians...

That Government implement a programme designed to foster the development of our history and culture...

(Brisbane group)

That...consideration be given to introducing where practicable, e.g. missions and reserves, the teaching of local languages.

(Large country towns group)

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This is a set of statements collected by Professor Watts from various sources.

¹ In a few cases, the reporter is non-Aboriginal.

...The children should be encouraged to learn skills, trades, become teachers, go on with tertiary education, be encouraged with scholarships and grants to enter universities. Provision should be made for adult education.

(Mission Group)

Kevin Gilbert:

They (Aborigines) have to be able to set up their own history so that they can positively assert Aboriginal identity for Aboriginal people. We must have folk schools for Aboriginal children...so that they can learn trades as well as their cultural traditions to properly obtain a knowledge of their own people, their own place in the scheme of things and only by this way with Aborigines directing these programs will education come.

(*Talking Point*, ABC, 10 August, 1975)

From Karalundi, near Meekathara, W.A.:

Our children are leaving school with few skills to meet the challenges of a modern industrialized society. Even for station work, people must now have mechanical and other skills if they are to take and keep worthwhile jobs.

(Letter to DAA, 1975)

The Mowanjum Community, Derby, W.A.:

The Mowanjum Community wish to put forward a comment to the body of people to whom Education is concerned within the field.

Here are some of the many problems which need to be looked into and dealt with in the near future.

For many years this has been going on because no longer do you find any kind of tribal education going on which in turn the young people have no way to relate to their own culture and therefore have a sense of hopelessness which causes them to feel they cannot cope with the 20th Century education they need.

Even when young people have the urge for further education they are not encouraged by school authorities

because these authorities do not think they can handle this education which in turn forces the young people to take lower education which does not enable them to get right jobs. Because of these reasons we have already stated...business people and professional people lose interest towards Aborigines. They find most doors for apprentice training are closed.

...We need our Aboriginal boys to learn as much as they can so when they are able to leave school these then could be future managers of our Panter Downs.

(3rd November, 1974)

From the Kimberleys, W.A.

1. Bardi people:

Our main concern is we want our children to receive the best possible education, to enable them to help the community by sharing their skills and knowledge and themselves, in that they would be able to live equally in whichever society they chose to live...Although the situation does not arise in our area, we would not be against our children attending schools with non-Aboriginal people (children). In fact, we are adamant that there be no segregation between the two.

We believe that Aboriginal children should be able to mix well with any people. This applies to older children (adolescents).

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We believe that the children should be educated in the Aboriginal culture by the tribal people. We would like to see more Adult Education opportunities for the people. Other methods could be used in furthering technical education.

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They believe that our own language should be learned and, if possible, the children should be able to read and write in their own language...The elders should go into the schools to teach children about Aborigines as Europeans do not know enough about Aborigines. It is important for all people, Aboriginal and others, to learn about each other. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people should be taught the same things. But we also should learn about hunting, cooking, Aboriginal law and language patterns, etc... (Aboriginal Consultative Group's Kimberley Investigation, 1975)

2. *Fitzroy Crossing people:*

The Kadjina community on the middle reserve at Fitzroy Crossing require that children learn to read and write in Walmadjarri. Time is to be set aside for children to be taught their Aboriginal lore.

Time is to be set aside for children to undertake bush activities...

The initiation time is to be created as part of the education system and children are to be released from school attendance...

The Christmas Creek people at the top reserve at Fitzroy Crossing want our children to learn well in schools... We want good people to go to Pundulmurra to have good training in different kinds of work - mechanics and building.

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Aboriginal people want schools to teach their children to read and write, to equip them and give them knowledge so that they can be the administrators of their own affairs...and equip them to communicate with white Australians. Schools should teach Aborigines reading and writing, and prepare them to keep books and accounts and count and brand cattle. Schools should allow Aborigines to learn their own lore.

(Aboriginal Consultative Group's
Kimberley Investigation, 1975)

3. *Looma and Go Go people:*

We want our children to go to Government schools, attended by non-Aborigines if possible. Cultural and traditional ways should be taught to Aborigines in their camps and reserves...Aborigines could also be taught to be electricians and nurses, teachers, mechanics and carpenters.

(Aboriginal Consultative Group's
Kimberley Investigation, 1975)

4. *Payulu (Go Go) people:*

We like our children to learn more high school and to learn both ways, including the tribal law. We want our school in our place. (Aboriginal Consultative Group's
Kimberley Investigation, 1975)

An older Centralian Aboriginal man:

We want our children to be taught the white man's language so that they can understand things - we ourselves will teach them all about our tribal myths.

(as reported by Harney, 1969)

Of people at Warugurna Community, Giles, W.A.:

The Warugurna Community has requested the Education Department to become involved in providing a suitable learning programme for their children at Giles. Their perception of the school is one that provides a blend of traditional, Aboriginal education with the development of basic communication, literacy and numeracy skills as required in a Western society. The Warugurna people see the European teacher as one who will help in structuring, initiating and supervising programmes to develop communication skills in English, basic English literacy and possible assistance with vernacular literacy programme, basic numeracy, and programmes aimed at establishing desirable levels of health and hygiene. Their [the community's] role is seen in perpetuating their own culture, ritual of song, dance, drama, expressive art, weapon making, hunting, identification with their own land, communication of traditional information, these aspects of real life-style education not being for display, but for physical, social and emotional survival. The parent body offered full support to a system which would provide this service to them.

(Reported by C.Mounsey, 18th September, 1975)

Of people in a diversity of communities¹:

...most Aboriginal people I spoke with stated quite clearly:

We want the 3 R's because that's what will get us and our children good jobs (or better jobs as the case may be).

¹ Discussions held during visits associated with Aboriginal Consultative Group to the Schools Commission report on TAFE access (1976). Personal communication.

Schooling is quite simply vocationally orientated. (This is also my experience in my own community). 'Aboriginal education or studies', as opposed to formal schooling, was seen as a community responsibility, for the most part, *not* the school's. For some urban communities, this is not the case: they want Aboriginal studies (culture courses etc.) as part of their curriculum; they want independent Black schools, with all Black staff.

Again, the majority of the people I spoke with weren't really keen on the idea of Black schools for Black students because:

We have to live and work with
White people.

Or from a parental point of view:

We had enough of those special Black
schools on the Mission and they were
only second-class ones ...

This second point of view was somewhat different for tribal people but essentially they weren't opposed to the idea of mixed schools.

(Chris King, 1976)

*Of parents of Aboriginal secondary school students
throughout Australia (746 mothers and 336 fathers)*

In general the parents believe the students are learning something useful at school...they frequently make reference to the value of education itself (as a generalized good) or the value of specific skills such as literacy, manual arts, domestic science...more than 30 per cent of the parents, however, could not suggest any specifically useful outcomes of education.

...for more than half (60 per cent) of the mothers and 40 per cent of the fathers) school progress is seen to be more important because of its relation to job opportunity or, more generally, 'getting somewhere'. The outcomes of education are stressed least frequently by mothers from Aboriginal communities (47 per cent) and most frequently by mothers from town reserves (72 per cent).

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Most parents do not see school achievement as the only important area in the lives of their children; almost one-third stressed the need also for morality and good character.

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...by and large the parents have high aspirations for their children...mothers in isolated areas and towns have somewhat lower aspirations.

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In discussion with the parents an attempt was made to find out their attitudes to the teaching of Aboriginal/Islander languages and culture within the high school program. In general, there was marked enthusiasm for this proposal...The parents are even more favourably inclined towards the proposition that schools might teach about Aboriginal/Islander cultures than they are to the teaching of languages in school.

(Watts, 1976:34-49)

Of 916 Aboriginal secondary students throughout Australia:

Interest in schooling because of perceived job opportunity is marked...66 per cent of the students give as their major reason for wanting to stay on at school their desire to gain an educational qualification that will enable them to get the job they want.

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61 per cent of the students were favourably inclined to the teaching of Aboriginal/Islander languages within the high school program and 77 per cent to the teaching of Aboriginal/Islander culture.

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Students reveal very high aspirations...only 39 per cent do not want to continue their education beyond the junior stage.

(Watts, 1976:54-67)

The following sets of statements express particular concern that schooling should enable the Aboriginal people to control their own affairs:

The Pitjantjatjara people in South Australia

The tribal elders want the younger people to learn new skills which will enable them to manage their own community township with minimal outside help.

(Reported by J. Coker, 1975)

I want school for children. Too many white fellers come little bit, don't stay. Too many white fellers here. When our children learn more, white people go.

[What do you want for the children?] English. We want our children to learn so that we can run our own affairs.

(Reported by Penny, 1975:16:17)

From the Northern Territory:

Aborigines who have had schooling at least to secondary level in 'ordinary' schools see schooling as the means to political, social and economic equality. The expectations of most Settlement Aborigines are more limited: it is that their children will be able, through schooling in the 3 R's in English, to replace the balanda who are at present essential to the management of non-traditional activities.

(Penny, 1980:8)

Gatjil Munyarryun, Yirrkala, N.T.:

It is accepted that there is a need for education by Aboriginal communities, but we need a balance between balanda and Aboriginal forms of education... We need enough balanda education to negotiate with the outside world... There should be both balanda and Aboriginal education so one does not feel cut off from both worlds, but hold them in both hands.

(1976)

May O'Brien, W.A.:

Aboriginal adults today, in most cases, see education as the key to providing the leaders they want, as well as providing technical experts in their communities, and so on.

(O'Brien, 1979:441)

Finally, the two national statements by Aboriginal committees are presented.

*The Aboriginal Consultative Group to the
Schools Commission, 1975 Report:*

Values and objectives

The following statements are far from complete in terms of presenting a total education philosophy. But they do offer insights into the areas which have most concerned the Consultative Group and we believe they are also a true reflection of the hopes and aspirations of most Aboriginal people.

We believe that every child has a right to be brought up as a member of his own culture. This does not mean that he must be prevented from learning about (and learning from) other cultures, but simply for survival the individual must be firmly rooted in his past, and his past (perhaps more than his present) is his culture.

The child should nevertheless be educated in such a way that he is able to function successfully in both his own culture and the wider Australian society if he so desires.

Furthermore, we believe that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island culture should be retained and that Aboriginal identity should be actively developed through education. It is accepted that some parts of Aboriginal culture and folklore associated with survival in pre-European times should now be replaced with those skills which will allow the Aboriginal people to participate equally in the trade and professional areas of the Australian economy.

We are not prepared, however, to sacrifice social values such as responsibility for the well being of others, sharing and non-destructive competition. These are a fundamental part of our identity. Such values should in no way exclude Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island people from acquisition of vocational and professional skills which allow them the same level of achievement in the monetary economy of the non-Aboriginal Australian society.

We seek the highest quality of education available. We wish to have the same range of choice as any other Australians when deciding our future.

Notwithstanding our desire to promote Aboriginal cultural values within Australian educational institutions, we would not wish to have those cultural elements of a religious nature, such as sacred ceremonies and rites taught in schools, as these are the responsibility of the various communities.

*The National Aboriginal Education Committee, 1980,
Statement on Rationale, Aims and Objectives in
Aboriginal Education*

Aboriginal parents have expressed the desire for their children to be able to function successfully in both their own culture and the wider Australian community.

Aboriginal people are equally entitled to the highest quality of education available...

The NAEC believes that policies on education for Aborigines should be developed within the guidelines of the following aims:

1. To reinforce and recognise that there exists a common feeling of Aboriginality among all the descendants of the indigenous people of Australia which includes the traditional and non-traditional people of the mainland, the Torres Strait Islands and Tasmania.
2. Education for Aboriginal people must be a process which builds on what Aboriginal people are by recognising and developing their natural potential and not by destroying their cultural heritage. The National Committee believes that some changes to the school system would enable a strong Aboriginal identity to be a positive education factor.
3. Aboriginal studies must become an integral part of the education of every Australian. It must be taught with a high degree of respect and understanding to develop an accurate knowledge of Australian history, Aboriginal cultures, and lifestyles.
4. Education for all Australians must be a means of promoting cross-cultural understanding through an intensive community education program. It should aim to develop understanding, tolerance and respect for the differing cultural viewpoints held by the peoples of Australia. In doing so the uniqueness of the indigenous people must not become a lost entity within a multi-cultural Australia.

5. The educational services offered to both traditional and non-traditional people must aim for and be capable of developing and strengthening the Aborigines' knowledge of, and pride in their cultural heritage as well as obtaining the academic and technological skills required of Aboriginal Australians today. To ensure effective learning the latter must be acquired in harmony with the Aborigines own cultural values, identity and choice of lifestyle, whether residing in an urban, rural, traditional community or homeland centre.

6. Aboriginal people must be given responsibility for the implementation of policies, funding and the administration of programs in Aboriginal education.

7. In order to ensure the effectiveness of education services for Aboriginal people, Aborigines should play the major part in the delivery of those services. This requires an immediate and substantial change in policy and the implementation of new programs, to train and employ Aborigines in the various fields of education.

8. Aboriginal education research must be of direct benefit to Aborigines.

The preceding statements convey a picture of what Aboriginal people want in the education of their children. Different groups stress different goals and present differing emphases. The life circumstances of various groups of Aborigines help to explain particular aspirations. As in any society, it is difficult to ascertain what individual parents want and in Aboriginal as in other societies, we can only be guided by those views articulated by individuals and by groups.

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