



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

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*HARDSHIP'S ROAD IN A WHITE WORLD

Di Coutts

National Aborigines Week begins on July 5, and with it, a major campaign to force politicians and Australian educators to reverse the disturbing pattern of failure at all levels of Aboriginal education.

In recent weeks, a Federal Parliamentary enquiry into Aboriginal education has received submissions from Aboriginal groups advising state and federal governments. Their recommendations included:

- A national Aboriginal Education Commission be formed to administer all money earmarked for Aboriginal education.
- Permanent support-teams of trained Aboriginal counsellors, and academics at a cost of \$65,000 at four tertiary institutions.
- Clarification of state and federal responsibilities towards Aborigines.
- The establishment of several independent Aboriginal schools.
- Immediate recruitment and training of more Aboriginal teachers and teacher assistants.

But some Aborigines are managing to survive in the education system. Here are the case histories on two of them:

* Seventeen-year-old Lee Madden is one of only 89 Aborigines in New South Wales who will complete year 12 at school this year. That's better than last year's alarming total of only 65. But it still represents less than .9 per cent of the state's 11,000 school-aged Aborigines.

Even worse are the national figures for 1981. Less than 400 students - or only .8 per cent of Australia's total Aboriginal school-aged population of 49,000 - can hope to finish high school this year.

On latest statistics, Lee will be lucky to pass. If he does and decides to go to university, he will be only the 35th Aboriginal to enroll since last year.

* Reproduced, with permission, from *The Australian*. (Higher Education - Ed. John Bremer), Wednesday June 24th, 1981.

So far Lee Madden has been lucky. His family of six supported him, first at Alexandria Primary in Sydney, and later at Cleveland Street Boys High in Surry Hills. His Aboriginal school-mates weren't as fortunate. Many of them lost their confidence and any interest in study with the death or desertion of one or both parents or through frustration at being caught up in a system they couldn't relate to.

"Most of them had grants and plenty of good ideas but, when the time came, the parents weren't there to help," Lee said. Both of Lee's parents worked while he was at school. In addition to his job with the Eastern suburbs railway, Lee's father directed the Aboriginal Medical Service, where Lee's mother worked with Aboriginals as a nutritionist.

Early this year, Lee became the first Aboriginal voted school captain at Cleveland Street Boys High - an inner-city school of 600 boys from predominantly migrant families. At present he is considering several offers of tertiary study next year. The first is an economics and management course at the Australian National University. Lee is eligible for an Aboriginal study grant of \$2703, which increases slightly when he turns 18.

He had hoped to use his first grade tennis experience to manage a tennis complex, but is also considering other offers from the Commonwealth Department of Sport and Recreation.

So far, Lee's done well. Unfortunately, figures which show only 881 Aboriginals currently enrolled in Australian tertiary institutions, and a disappointing 483 Aboriginal graduates must cause him some concern.

* Last week, Chris Kirkbright became the third Aboriginal to complete a degree in Law at the University of NSW. It took him seven years to complete, mainly because he lacked basic skills in exam techniques, understanding libraries, organising study and coping with an alien environment.

Born at Werris Creek, in 1953, Chris and his Aboriginal mother were always on the move. "Reports of us stealing, fighting at school and having nits nearly had us in Welfare homes several times, but we used to jump on a freight train and skip town," he recalled.

His English father was an alcoholic and left the family in 1956, when Chris was three. For the next 12 years the family lived everywhere from river banks and rubbish tips to tents at Gunnedah; wherever his mother, Ethel, could get jobs as a domestic or a barmaid. He eventually settled in Currabubulla, 20 miles from Tamworth. His mother

was employed as a gatekeeper on the railway and Chris used to catch the train an hour a day each way from Tamworth.

"I decided to be a lawyer in 5th Form. Maybe because I'd had so many run-ins with the law!" he said. Isolated from his country town and other Aborigines, Chris found it hard competing.

"Generally, Aborigines have a different motivation. We tend to be more concerned about our people than our individual achievements. We urgently need professionally skilled Aborigines to advise governments state and federal in policy areas."

At present, for example, the Australian Law Reform Commission has a reference on Aboriginal Customary Law. The Federal Government asked them to look at the criminal justice system and how it can recognise laws which govern Aboriginal culture.

Australian law doesn't recognise as a defence, to either assault or murder, an Aboriginal's belief that what he did complied with Aboriginal law. Chris said that, under Aboriginal law, should that man fail to comply he can receive the same punishment he was to have administered. State court reports are full of examples of this conflict of culture.

For the first time last August, the NSW Government asked Aborigines to compile a report on land rights. It was headed by Australia's first Aboriginal lawyer, Miss Pat O'Shea. "It was a good example of our case for using Aboriginal lawyers to help formulate policies affecting Aborigines," Chris said. Neville Wran later committed the NSW Government to the granting of land rights to Aborigines in NSW.

"Having a European qualification means I can understand both sides," Chris said. He said his chances of helping black clients in a white legal system are better than most. A white person will never truly understand social forces that operate on Aborigines.

"The Aboriginal community has got experience, it has graduates, and it's determined to decide its own future," Chris said.

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