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ABORIGINAL SCHOOLING

*J.G. Coker

It is disturbing that some commentators on Aboriginal education in Australia draw the superficial conclusion that, "the school system has failed Aboriginal children very badly".¹

There is abundant, undisputed evidence that Aborigines, as a group, consistently score much lower in English reading, writing and arithmetic tests than any other identifiable group in Australia.² They leave school at an earlier age and at a lower achievement level than the national average.

As an educator it is not something that I am proud of - and I should say that most other educators would feel much the same way. It is the task of all of us who are involved in the education of Aborigines to do all in our power to rectify the situation. But it is too glib, too shallow by far, to heap all the blame for Aborigines' low achievement on the schools, the school teacher or the school system.

Do those who make their sweeping condemnations suggest that all teachers, all schools, all the school systems across Australia - both government and non-government, have singly, and collectively failed the Aborigines? Is it claimed that in the 166 years since Governor Macquarie's first school for Aborigines, successive generations of teachers have failed to 'crack the code', so to speak?

If so, isn't this an incredible state of affairs? Can we really believe it to be true?

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¹ In 1976, the Senate Select Committee on Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders concluded that "...to date, the school system has failed Aborigines very badly by its inappropriateness and inadequacy." (Final Report p.139) (This comment was made by Lorna Lippmann in evidence to the Committee. Lippmann also said, (p.1832) "Schools are an institution of society and cannot be expected to perform miracles of egalitarianism of themselves.")

² Of course, a large number of Aboriginal children, particularly those in the Northern Territory, South Australia and Western Australia live in communities where English is not the normal language of communication.

Or is there something more to it? Are there other ingredients which have prevented Aborigines from achieving at levels which they - and we as educators, would desire?

It is possible, for instance, that the collision which occurred between the Aborigines and the European invaders had something to do with it? This collision, which made no impact at all on European society, completely devastated Aboriginal society. It dispossessed Aborigines of their land, it destroyed much of their culture, it poured on them an avalanche of technology which Europeans, through much greater contact with other civilization, had absorbed over the centuries, and it reduced them to refugee status in their own country.

The cultural gap that existed between the two societies two hundred years ago has not been bridged by our *society as a whole*.

Is it possible that the reasons for lack of educational success by many Aborigines lie in the continuing refugee status of much of Aboriginal society? What is the effect on schooling of poor housing, poverty, unemployment and poor health? And what of the other inevitable social miseries which follow? How does widespread alcoholism, a high incidence of one parent families and the large percentage of Aborigines held in custody, affect schooling?

Is this a chicken and the egg situation? Could better schooling have prevented all this - or does all this prevent better schooling?

Is it possible that ingrained racial and social prejudice has something to do with the lack of success which schools have with their Aboriginal clients? Is the deck stacked against them before they start? Do the Aboriginal youngsters suffer cruelties inflicted on them by the children of parents who have inherited the myths of racial superiority from generations before them?

Is it any wonder that Aboriginal children, the victims of this debilitating social morass, find difficulties at school - and the school finds difficulties with them?

Many of these socially bruised youngsters carry with them, and through no fault of their own, the ingredients of classroom conflict, of built up pressure which is likely to explode at any time. This tension, this fine line between all's well and all's hell in the classroom, is not conducive to good learning. Many teachers cannot easily cope with this kind of situation.

Of course all of this does not mean that schools can sit back and say that they can't do anything to improve the performance of Aboriginal students because societal pressures control the situation. Good schools do a lot to release the pressures - gently. They counsel, they sensitize their teachers, they inform, they develop trusted, respected relationships with the Aboriginal community, they demonstrate concern for, and value of things Aboriginal. They involve Aboriginal adults in the school. They modify curricula.

In short, they care : and they have staff (or develop them) with the skills to translate concern into meaningful action.

Not all schools are like this. Far from it. We have a long way to go before concerned educationists would be fully satisfied that the school system served all clients equally well. Sadly, we've got an imperfect system - and we take our customers from an imperfect world.

Schools can do a lot to help build a better Australian community. There are many that have done this for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children; and there are many more that are doing it today. But even the most concerned, well-staffed innovative schools (and tertiary institutions) which conduct courses for Aborigines, or who have numbers of Aboriginal students, have to live with their too-large share of disappointments. This is not necessarily because of their own inadequacies, nor because of the lack of ability of their Aboriginal clients, but because of two centuries of cumulative social miseries which are reflected in so many Aboriginal children.

To those who would rashly state "schools have failed the Aborigines", I would suggest that they should think again. Schools face a challenging task in providing a meaningful education for Aboriginal students, many of whom are products of 200 years of social misery.

Some schools are facing this challenge magnificently. Others are not. But all schools need encouragement if they are to provide the fertile environment required for Aboriginal education to flourish. This will not occur if critics lash out with scatter-shot statements which sting involved Aborigines, schools, teachers and administrators who have committed themselves to providing Aboriginal children with better life chances.

I make a special plea that all of us who are interested in Aboriginal education should respect the challenges and work together for the best interests of Aboriginal children.

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