



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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COMMUNITY AND CURRICULUM:

Some general observations on the Strelley experience from a European¹ viewpoint

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Since its inception in 1976 the school at Strelley Station in the Port Hedland region of Western Australia's Pilbara has provided a model and inspiration for bilingual education and community involvement that has been followed by a number of the other station communities in the Pilbara and the Kimberley.

In order to comply with the legal requirements involved in establishing and attracting funds to an independent school, the Nomads group of Aborigines established the Nomads Charitable and Educational Foundation (N.C.E.F.) in the early 1970s. Registered under the W.A. Charities Act, the Foundation's constitution ensures that the ideals and interests of a traditionally-oriented Aboriginal community, determined to pursue a policy of self-determination and self-management, are fully supported. The Foundation also provides a facility for the recruiting of teachers and the drawing up of contracts designed to protect the interests of teachers and the community.

Schools supported by the N.C.E.F. are now located at Strelley, Camp Sixty-one (on the rabbit-proof fence approximately 50 miles N.E. Jigalong), Warralong and Kulkarraya Community School (Noonkanbah).

Authority over the daily running of the schools resides in school committees. These committees determine the division of adults and children into appropriate groupings, the positioning of all school activities, the selection of adults to work as teachers with white personnel and the approval or rejection of proposed teaching programs, curricula and teaching materials.

The communities have continually emphasized four areas they want the school to respect and support:

1. The social customs of the people.
2. The religion of the people (Aboriginal Law).
3. The major local languages.
4. The local economy.

¹ Throughout this article people of European descent are referred to as Europeans or whitefellas and people of Aboriginal descent and custom are often referred to as Marrngu.

Some years ago the teacher linguist at Yuendumu, a school in the Northern Territory, produced a simple but very telling parable which was subsequently published in a 1979 issue of *The Aboriginal Child at School*.

In this parable he recounted the confusing and contradictory experiences faced by a child during his first day at school. This not unfamiliar story was turned upside down by introducing a little European pre-schooler to his new Warlpiri teacher.

To introduce the theme of this article, Community and Curriculum, I can't do better than to recall the concluding portion of his parable which sums up the unfortunate situation the child was confronted with.

Some years ago, when the view was still widely accepted that Johnny, being English (European), belonged to a race of such low intelligence that he was impossible to educate, he would not have been here at all. After all, his language is the basis of a culture of materialism, chaos, self-destruction and greed. Later, however, it was recognized that Johnny did have an intellectual capacity to learn skills, and that if he is provided with a well-trained, patient, self-sacrificing teacher, he may be taught a better way of life. It is now hoped that, in this enlightened day and age, Johnny and his people recognize the privileged position in which they find themselves and take full advantage of the education that is offered them. Johnny will be taught in, and learn, the language of the superior culture, be thoroughly indoctrinated in a new religion, and taught acceptable ways of behaviour. Of course, this does not mean that Johnny has to completely give up all aspects of his previous life-style. Some of the products the Europeans make, the songs they sing, the paintings and sculptures they create, can come in very useful and are often very attractive. But the important factor remains, that Johnny's people were originally immigrants, and it is their moral duty to accept the culture of the true Australians.

(P.Buschenhofen, 1979)

To further emphasize the point contained in this parable I am reminded of an incident that occurred recently.

I was driving back from one of the camps on Strelley Station when I happened to turn on the car radio thinking it was time to catch the half past one news.

I was a bit late, however, and instead of the latest on the Razor Gang or a blow by blow on the Springbok tour I found myself listening to a Schools Music Broadcast. In beautifully modulated and carefully enunciated middle-standard English we were all stepping gently into a narrow gondola, grasping a heavy wooden oar in our hands and setting out to discover the delights of Venice.

Nicely produced, well presented and as culturally relevant to a child from a traditionally-oriented Aboriginal community as a refrigerator would be materially relevant to an Eskimo in mid-winter.

After switching off (the radio that is) I spent the remainder of the drive home thinking, yet again, about the old vexed question of what on earth are we teaching and why? Sure, for my own children there might be some relevance and insights to be gained from a knowledge and experience of the rich and complex heritage contained in renaissance Italy. I suppose it is even possible that modern Italian politics may contain valuable lessons for an Aboriginal community to learn but for a child growing up in a traditionally-oriented community songs about gondolas in sunny Italy say little and teach nothing about their present human condition and opportunities for the future.

This is, of course, an extreme example which will most likely be countered by a vague and generalized claim that I'm suggesting that Marrngu want nothing to do with Whitefella ways and that they do in fact want education for their children. That this claim contains an element of truth is not denied. What is denied, however, is the assumption by many people concerned with Aboriginal education who make such claims that they are in a position to go on and delineate in their own terms and, on the basis of their own values, determine the strategy for delivering this education.

In the old, simpler days, it was assumed that papa always knows best and the question of what constitutes a relevant education for Aboriginal people was rarely considered. In more recent and hopefully enlightened times the question of relevance has been theoretically brought to the forefront in considering strategies and materials to be used in Aboriginal education.

Unfortunately, however, the old basic assumptions still persist in a somewhat disguised form. That is, the position that Aboriginal communities require relevant education is accepted but consideration and determination of what is relevant still rests with initiators whose basic interests, life-style and viewpoint lie outside the experience and requirements of traditional groups. Claims that genuine consultation with Aboriginal communities takes place are, for

the most part, fairly hollow when viewed against a backdrop of a growing resentment towards white-dominated institutions whose basic failure is evidenced by less than satisfactory attendance figures, little real parental support and involvement in such institutions and the presence of large numbers of semi-educated Marrngu youth seeking employment with a meaningful lifestyle on the settlements and urban fringes of much of Northern Australia.

My view is that there has not been enough of the quiet, non-obtrusive long-term listening to Marrngu hopes and aspirations. The most effective consultation is often expressed in a language other than English where a literal translation may rob the original words of their inner meaning and true intent.

This type of listening which does, despite the odds against it, take place in a number of places throughout Australia seems to me to indicate that Marrngu, particularly traditionally-oriented communities, do, as suggested above, want education for themselves and their children. In many instances, however, their concept of education is something different from what has been called school in the past.

One thing that clearly emerges from such consultation is a growing awareness of the hidden curriculum contained in materials used in past and present schools. Another feature of past and current educational practice that is being increasingly rejected by communities is the system whereby the brightest and the best (and lately anyone who will go) are removed from their family and community to physically and culturally remote residential schools/colleges/technical centres.

Some communities are also actively rejecting the notion that it is they, the Marrngu, who have failed the school system and are actively questioning the institutions we call school with a view to shifting the blame back onto such institutions for failing to recognize and meet the particular educational needs of that community.

To balance this later viewpoint there have been, in recent years, a number of concessions made to such communities in the increasing employment of Aboriginal aides, training of Aboriginal teachers, the provision of sensitivity type courses for white teachers entering Aboriginal schools and research into and the development of appropriate teaching materials etc. Nevertheless, all these activities tend to beg the initial important question of what it is all for.

If we take the case of Aboriginal aides we find that a major justification for the employment of such people is to encourage self-esteem and to improve communication between white teachers and the students. We might find, however, that such a move is in fact counter productive, especially if it is the latter aim that takes precedence.

This is especially the case if, in a large traditionally-oriented community, a few aides are selected to support and bolster a structure for which the community feels, at best, an indifference and, at worst, an active hostility. There is created then even further painful discontinuities in the students and the community.

As this article has tended to present an increasingly pessimistic point of view it is perhaps appropriate to devote the second half to the viewpoint of a traditional community who have, over the previous six years, consistently worked at the questions and problems of what is involved in providing relevant education.

Central to this experience has been a growing concern and involvement in the development of the schools' curriculum as part of the communities' overall responsibility for the schools' operation (i.e. staffing, organization and administration).

For the Strelley and associated communities (including the many like-minded) school should be the following:

1. *In the first place a school should form an integral part of the community.* It should be contained within the community, supporting, meeting and reflecting the community's needs and aspirations and most importantly its perception of itself. This is, after all, what a school in a Western industrialized society should be, an instrument for cultural continuity and growth!

It is self evident, but still has to be stated, that a traditionally-oriented Aboriginal community is going to be different in many significant ways from that of a small rural town (the closest possible physical comparison that I can think of). From the obvious to the not so obvious. From the child's first language to the manner and style of his relationships with other people to the tangible and intangible values underlying his religious beliefs that tie him to his land and birthright. Education should be about the knowledge and affirmation of all these things.

2. *Secondly, a school should harmonize with its clients life-style and perception of self.* In the past, in most instances, school has represented a contradiction (dissonance) between itself and the

language and the values of the home. The language of the home should, at the very least, be the initial language of the school. To say otherwise is to deny a fundamental human right.

3. *Thirdly, a school should provide the community with an opportunity to grow from within.* Just as education has always had as its prime function the effective passing on of past knowledge and experience, it also has allowed (in a formalized sense) for growth and new directions.

While the first two points I have made fit closely into the observed pattern of both traditional and contemporary Marrngu life-style and beliefs, this later point introduces issues of complexity, particularly where it concerns curriculum development.

It is fashionable and no doubt anthropologically correct to refer to Marrngu communities as "closed societies" and this concept is often conveniently used to explain the failure of the Marrngu to adapt to and adopt white institutions. This concept does not, however, fit neatly with the actions of the particular group that is the source of information of this article. Following the disorientation brought about by the pastoral invasion of the Pilbara (and I use the term invasion deliberately with plenty of hard evidence to back me up) and the regrouping of a community around an initial central issue, the 1946 strike, the community has never allowed anyone the comfort of generalization and stereotype.

On numerous occasions the community has adapted outside forms to suit ancient practices and in some instances created new social and economic systems to maintain their Aboriginality. The setting up and subsequent development of an independent school is a good example of such an initiative. Implicit in this move was a perception by the community that there was a need to maintain authority and control over this key element affecting their future lives.

The community as a whole clearly understood the close relationship between what is taught, how it is taught and who teaches it and the current cohesion and future direction of the community.

For this reason the schools were established on the understanding that they would teach initial literacy, both for adults and school-age children, in the languages of the constituent members of that community.

It was also clearly understood that such a program would depend heavily on a growing involvement by Aboriginal people in the formal

teaching process and that the development of teaching materials would rely heavily on local input. In particular it was realized that the development of curriculum materials must support Aboriginal values and the social fabric (classificatory kinship system) of the community.

The obvious question that now arises is to what extent have the expectations of the community been met by the structures they created.

Clearly initial literacy in the mother tongue has had a beneficial psychological effect. Six years experience in the program clearly demonstrates the reinforcement of identity and feelings of self-esteem.

Also, from a subjective point of view, the increasing involvement of Aboriginal people at all generation levels in the grass roots planning and design of curriculum materials has had a far-reaching effect on the group's perception of itself.

Involvement of this magnitude has taken a number of different forms. With the teaching of initial literacy in Nyangumarta and Manjiljarra the teaching materials contain local experience as expressed by members of the two language groups. From simple pre-reading activities through to initial readers the materials present Aboriginal people and situations. With increasing sophistication in the vernacular literacy program there has developed an increasing need for diversity and volume in reading materials. This is being met by the printing of personal past histories, past events involving the group, current events and viewpoints etc. Health manuals including the use of traditional medicines, explanations of voting procedures and explanations of current events such as the census are examples of this type of material.

Initially much of this material was transcribed from tapes, prepared for printing and printed by Whitefellas employed by the community. There has, however, been a marked and fairly dramatic shift over the last two years away from Whitefella expertise and involvement in this area as various training schemes have come to fruition. With increasing confidence and expertise much of the material is now being directly collected, recorded and printed by the Marrngu. The stage has now been reached where Marrngu literacy workers are preparing reports, recording their own and other people's points of view, reminiscences, etc., in the two languages currently in use. Increasingly older people are involved in expressing ideas and opinions as to the format and context of materials used in the school.

The community newsletter, *Mikurrunya*, is a good example of involvement of the community in developing expertise and control over new forms of media.

The employment of Aboriginal teachers and the development of a locally-based onsite Teacher Education program as an essential component in the delivery of a community monitored curriculum have also had a highly desirable impact on the community. Marrngu are seen as essential to the process, while involvement in literature production, etc., has deepened the community's appreciation and awareness of themselves as worthwhile people.

From an educational base such as the one being created at Strelley and associated schools planning for an Aboriginal future takes on a new dimension and sense of purpose.

Reference

Buschenhofen, P., Trendy experimentation or cultural enrichment.
The Aboriginal Child at School, 7:5, 1979

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GUEST EDITOR - APRIL/MAY ISSUE

Mrs Dawn Muir has agreed to be guest editor for the next issue, that is, Vol.10 No.2.

Mrs Muir is Lecturer in Education at the University of Queensland. Some of her major educational interests include the following:

Teacher education (pre-service and in-service), motivation, remedial teaching, language, and reading.

Mrs Muir made a considerable contribution to the editor's early research work into aspects of Aboriginal education and, through assisting at the National Workshop on Aboriginal Education which was conducted in 1971, met many of the people currently involved as administrators in the education of Aborigines.

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