



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

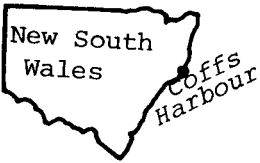
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HAWKS AND DOVES IN THE EDUCATION OF ABORIGINAL CHILDREN



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When I first moved to Coffs Harbour in 1972, I quickly became aware of the problems facing Aboriginal children in the school and community.¹ Now, ten years later, seems a good time to review the position.

Statistically there have been changes. The Aboriginal population in Coffs Harbour Shire is 1.6% of the total population, namely: males 200, females 194, total 394.²

The new Tyalla Primary which opened next to Orara High in 1978 has 29 Aboriginal pupils, while the Aboriginal population of Orara High itself has increased from 10 to 31 students (2 being in Year 11) in keeping with this school's growth from only Years 7 - 9 in 1973, to a full secondary school by 1976.

It appears that attitudes among teachers and white children have polarised. There are the 'hawks' and the 'doves'. When these terms were invented during the Eisenhower years in the U.S.A., it was easy to tell a 'hawk' from a 'dove'. The 'hawks' were those who favoured warlike measures and confrontation, while the 'doves' were those who wanted peace talks and mutual disarmament. These days it has become difficult to differentiate in the military aviary but in this educational issue there seems to be a marked line of division. On the one hand there are those who condemn as 'racist' any special programs of financial aid to assist Aboriginal children, 'the hawks', and on the other those who blame a white-dominated society for the problems Aboriginal children face, 'the doves'.

I read with interest the article by J.G. Coker, "Aboriginal Schooling", in which he states that it is counter-productive to make

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¹ Degens, P.: The education of Aboriginal children. *The Aboriginal Child at School*, Vol.1, No.2, August 1973.

² Health Commission Review Report of North Coast, 1980, Appendix 1, Part 8, p.48.

"sweeping condemnations...of all teachers, all schools, all the school systems across Australia", to lay the blame on white society, schools or community. The task is rather one of reconciliation and finding positive solutions.

In endeavouring to modify teachers' attitudes, raise self-esteem of Aboriginal children and awareness by teachers and white children of Aboriginal culture, I have been involved in a number of programs in some Coffs Harbour schools. In 1977, after lengthy planning, it was arranged for Kath Walker, Aboriginal poet, to visit some schools in Coffs Harbour. No money was forthcoming from the schools but I approached the President of CANDO (Community Aid and Development Organization), a voluntary co-ordinating body in Coffs Harbour of all welfare organizations. The president was the Baptist Church minister at the time and he obtained funding to hire the film, *Shadow Sister*, the film of Kath Walker's life, and cover her expenses for the visit. When, at Orara High School, I selected classes containing Aboriginal children to attend, I was accused of being 'racist', but I was able to fit into the gymnasium the senior English classes, which the English master wanted to attend.

The little Aboriginal girl from 70A class who presented Kath Walker with a posy was quite overcome and could hardly believe that the woman depicted in the film was really there in person, an Aboriginal who was 'someone'! Kath radiated warmth and charm in the discussion following, and particularly in reading some of her own poems, *Son of Mine*, *No More Boomerang*, and *Namatjira*. She was appalled at both Orara High and Coffs Harbour High Schools lacking any proper facilities for showing a film. At Coffs Harbour Primary school, the principal enthusiastically encouraged the students to become involved in the discussion and Kath delighted them with her recitations.

In 1978, Tyalla Public School was opened next to Orara High School and an Aboriginal aide was appointed to divide her time between the two schools. At Orara High School she became very involved with students, both Aboriginal and white, especially in helping with reading.

In International Children's year, 1979, a sub-committee of the Coffs Harbour Teachers' Association (the same women who were on the Non-Sexist Education sub-committee) organized a seminar on Aboriginal Education at Tyalla Public School. It was very well attended and the Aboriginal people from Kempsey were most articulate in stating the problems that Aboriginal children face in society and in schools. Tyalla has one Aboriginal teacher and he showed the

depths of his feelings in one workshop when he stated that people have talked about doing something for years and years but "nothing has been done". He particularly saw the need for Aboriginal Studies in schools. Mrs Judith Ferguson, Aboriginal aide at Tyalla, presented a paper that she wrote for her A.T.A. Course in which she stated that she felt there is discrimination practised in schools. Her youngest son, Ben, had come home very upset after she had been appointed, as other children started to call him names. They had previously thought he was Indian, not Aboriginal. She also felt that at high school, as athletic training was held at lunch time, the Aboriginal children who went home for lunch were not given the chance to participate. Both statements resulted in some of the teachers involved being very angry and upset and denying them.

The N.S.W. Teachers' Federation took as its contribution to International Year of the Child the education of Aboriginal children. Its policy document was finally produced at the Federation's Annual Conference in 1980. Two of the delegates from Coffs Harbour were able to contribute to the final draft, my contribution being to emphasize that the Aboriginal people in each community must be consulted as to what they want.

Orara High School organized an excursion to Sydney for Aboriginal students of the two High Schools for Aborigines' Week in 1979. The Aboriginal aide was heavily involved but it never would have eventuated without the indefatigable efforts of the Aboriginal Secondary Grants Officer. The majority of the staff had expressed the opinion that 'they' should not be given money for extra privileges to go to Sydney. Some extra influence was brought to bear when an officer of the Schools' Commission visited Coffs Harbour to see the Innovative Grant, the Non-Sexist Resource Centre. When I explained the difficulties facing final approval of the excursion, he undertook to speak to the Regional Director, who approved it verbally. The Aboriginal Secondary Grants Officer himself advanced the money for the extras and was reimbursed, thus making the excursion a reality. Three women members of staff accompanied the group, which had a most marvellous experience visiting the Opera House, Australian Museum, Sydney Film Co-operative where they saw Essie Coffey's film, *My Survival as an Aboriginal*, the Zoo and the Rocks. The children's behaviour, participation and enjoyment were excellent. The only worry for the staff was when the coach looked as though it would become involved in an Aboriginal demonstration before the celebration in Town Hall Square. They were afraid of what the hierarchy might have said to see their students in a demonstration for Aboriginal rights, much to the amazement of Terry and the Aboriginal aide who always asked me simply, "But why, Mrs Degens?"

Unfortunately or not, one girl became a severe behaviour problem afterwards and the excursion was partly blamed. I noticed that one teacher was very loath to talk about the trip to members of staff, although she told me the children had behaved marvellously and she would be involved again. The aides thought that perhaps the most important parts of the excursion were the group interaction on the coach (the driver having three Aboriginal adopted children) and the experience of staying at a hotel. The children were really overawed at being waited on in the dining room and being able to ring each other up in their bedrooms!

In 1980 the Aboriginal aide invited Maureen Ewer, Storyteller, to visit Coffs Harbour and she asked for my assistance in gaining permission at each school. At the schools she visited, Maureen captured the interest and imagination of children from kindergarten to Year 12. She hopes to return one day to our town.

At the end of last year our aide had to resign for personal reasons. Her position was not filled until July this year. An Aboriginal Consultative Group has been formed to help parents liaise with the schools and the aide is actively involved in the formative stages of this group.

The new aide is being used to help children in mixed groups both at Tyalla Public School and Orara High School. She attended a Motivation Camp (for raising levels of aspiration in careers) at Valla Park for four days for Years 9 and 10 recently. Students were encouraged to consider staying on at school because of bleak employment prospects. She was interested that the children did not want 'black schools' but wanted to mix with white children as at present. They were not too enthusiastic about Aboriginal culture being part of the curriculum. It should not be made 'necessary' to study it.

This idea of all-Aboriginal schools was certainly strongly promoted by Kath Walker when my family visited her at Moongalba on Stradbroke Island last year. She maintains that Aboriginal children can only have their self-esteem and self-respect raised by being placed in separate schools with teachers who have non-racist attitudes. (D. Huggonson discussed this issue in his article "Black Schools: a Step Forward or Back").

While we were at Moongalba, a group of children from Murren Bridge arrived on an excursion and it was fascinating to see how their wild behaviour disappeared under Kath's skilful program of raising their self-awareness of their own culture in such a beautiful place. It is hoped to organise a group of Aboriginal primary children from Tyalla to go on a camping trip to Moongalba next year.

The Commission for Justice and Peace of the Catholic Church. Race Relations of the Quakers, Board of Social Responsibility of my own church, the Uniting Church (and others) are all taking positive and sometimes costly steps to bridging the gap between white and Aboriginal culture in our society. The Uniting Church "has donated the 'Black Church' in Redfern to the Aboriginal community, and in Alice Springs it has committed land it owns in the central business district to a commercial development which incorporates 'the needs of Aboriginal people'." ¹ It therefore saddened me when the mid-North Coast Presbytery of the Uniting Church decided that land rights for Aboriginal people did not concern them and the Coffs Harbour Parish Council agreed! This, in a town where the old tribal leader, "Granny" Ferguson, died only two years ago. She had told me in great detail about how the blacks used to go into the surf at Coffs Harbour and catch the mackerel by hand when they were 'on' long before the white man came.

There seem to be feelings of guilt on one side and need for revenge on the other. Unless these feelings are faced openly and resolved we may see further polarisation amongst our two main races. The 'hawks' and 'doves' must resolve their attitudes or we may see a repetition here of the Brixton riots in the United Kingdom.

A statement on behalf of the Brixton Council of Churches by Tony Lucas² maintained that

the riot in Brixton was, before all else, an outburst of anger directed at the police. It has been increasingly apparent for some time that there has been a serious breakdown of trust and understanding between the police and the black community...Repeated use of unreasonable force and demeaning treatment against individuals, with the accompanying stresses of fear and shame brought to their families, has done a great deal to bring our present community to flash point...We want to see a policing that the community can truly support and actively contribute to...a new forum is needed in which police and community members can really listen to each other.

The Wongala Housing Co-operative in Coffs Harbour has successfully rehoused many families from the dilapidated old homes on the Reserve into new brick homes built there. Many Aboriginal families

¹ *Forward*, newspaper of the Uniting Church, Nov.11, 1981, supplement p.1.

² *Christian Action Journal*, September 1981, p.8.

are living in Housing Commission districts so, actually, this gives them a choice of integration or segregation. The World Council of Churches Report has as one of its major recommendations that "State and Federal Governments expand Aboriginal housing programmes as a matter of urgency."¹ Yet some 'hawks', after the opening, expressed the opinion that brick houses were too costly to build for Aboriginal people!

May I recommend a novel recently published by Grace Bartram, of Coffs Harbour, called *Darker Grows the Valley?* The story tells of the first white settlement in the Bellinger Valley and the effect on the Aboriginal tribes who were driven to the cliffs near Dorrigo and forced to jump over to their death. Both sides of the situation are described with great sensitivity, the white settlers endeavouring to clear and cultivate the valley and the Aboriginals striving to retain their hunting grounds and adapt to the 'invaders'.

The Bundjalung language of the North Coast has been documented² and used for teaching purposes in Victoria. Some Aboriginal parents have expressed their opposition to its being used in Coffs Harbour schools. However, communication is not a secret surely? and the implementation of an Aboriginal Studies course, particularly concerning pre-history, seems to me essential in raising awareness of the Aboriginal traditions. I am relieved to see that since my original article the WISC-R test of individual ability has changed the acceptable answer to the question, "Who discovered Australia", from "Captain Cook" to include a number of other navigators plus "Aborigines". Such small steps forward can lead the 'doves' to hope for future changes in attitudes and relationships.

Reference

Huggonson, D.: Black schools: a step forward or back. *The Aboriginal Child at School*, Vol.9, No.4, August/Sept. 1981, p.11.

¹ *Justice for Aboriginal Australians*. Report of the World Council of Churches' team visit to the Aborigines, June 15-July 3, 1981. Australian Council of Churches, p.62.

² *Bundajalung Picture Book*. Compiled by Margaret Sharpe. Northern Rivers College of Advanced Education, 1977.