



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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Teachers should be very wary of any reference book which will entrench the lies of the past, and all Australians should be dismayed that Time Life Books are presenting such a biased view of their country to readers throughout the world.

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The Early Childhood Education of Aboriginal Australians.
Teasdale, G.R. and Whitelaw, A.J., 1981. A.C.E.R., Hawthorn,
Victoria. (176 pages).

*L.J. Dwyer

This book describes and analyses six innovative programs of early childhood education for Aboriginal Australian children.

'Placed together' the authors claim, 'it is clear that they have played a very dominant role in shaping the direction of early childhood education provision for Aboriginal Australians since 1967' (p.19)

According to the authors, the year 1967 was a watershed in the education of Aborigines. During the subsequent decade more change took place in basic philosophies, approaches, and provisions than had occurred throughout all the previous years of European settlement. Several factors were involved - the 1967 referendum which, by the greatest majority ever recorded, removed two major discriminatory clauses from the Australian Constitution; changing community attitudes - a realization that Aborigines had not been given a fair go; a growing awareness of the extent to which the education system had failed the Aboriginal people; the influence of the North American compensatory education movement; a series of national seminars; and so on.

For the benefit of non-Australian readers, who cannot be assumed to have any prior knowledge of the origins, history, culture, and present day life-style of Aborigines, the authors provide two introductory chapters in which they consider some of these factors - 'Aboriginal Australians: a Historical Perspective', and 'Educational Provisions for Aboriginal Australians'. Although these chapters are aimed at non-Australian readers, most Australians would do well to read them closely.

* Mr John Dwyer, Deputy Director, Division of Primary Education,
Department of Education, Brisbane.

In particular, many Australian readers will be surprised at the paucity of educational provisions for Aborigines prior to 1967. By 1967 the field of Aboriginal education was still an educational backwater. There was little status for classroom teachers, and no career opportunities, in being appointed to an Aboriginal school. Schooling was strongly centralized and had been devised to meet the needs of the majority culture. Very little attention was given to pre-schooling for Aboriginal children and when it did exist it generally reflected white, middle-class values and approaches, and its aims generally dovetailed with the broader social welfare objectives of most missions - to bring the Aborigines "up" to white standards of living and thus expedite their eventual assimilation. In the words of the noted Aboriginal poet, Kath Walker -

The policy of the past, where Aborigines are expected to throw away completely their own way of life and become black replicas of a white race has damaged the Aborigine almost beyond repair. (1969. Quoted p.18)

Against this background the six projects discussed in this book were devised and implemented. The authors claim that three major sources of influence affected their development although these influences had differential impacts on each project.

First there was the influence of the New Zealand folk movement - a family-oriented folk movement which acknowledged the central role of education in the lives of individual parents and grandparents, equally with its role in the life of the individual child, of the family, and of the community or neighbourhood (Grey, 1969. Quoted p.20). This strong emphasis on family participation and responsibility had an immediate appeal to the Aboriginal people. The movement was best exemplified in the N.S.W. Adult Family Education Centres program (A.F.E.C.) but increasingly the other projects sought to involve Aboriginal adults.

A second major influence was the North American compensatory education approach. This had grown out of the U.S. demand for 'equality of opportunity'. It was perhaps best exemplified in the 'Head Start' program which held as its fundamental thesis that educational intervention in the pre-school years can compensate for inadequate and ineffective home backgrounds and can promote intellectual development in such a way that children from such backgrounds are not disadvantaged in later primary and secondary schooling. All of the projects described in this book placed faith in the education of young children, and through them of parents and communities as a way of improving the lot of Aboriginal people. All, except the A.F.E.C.

program, started from the deprivation-compensation hypothesis. It is important to realize, however, that in the Van Leer projects this focus was, to some extent at least, an artefact of the Van Leer Foundation's funding policy at that time; funds being made available for compensatory programs. In most cases this influence weakened and in some cases (e.g. in the Queensland project) was discarded as the projects progressed. Even the Bourke project, which was based on the controversial, compensatory program devised by Bereiter and Englemann, modified its approach, clarifying it and restating it in terms of a 'pragmatic deficit hypothesis'.

The third major influence on most of the projects was the need to work within the constraints of existing structures and resources characteristic of traditional Australian approaches to early childhood education.

The bulk of the book is devoted to an analysis of each of the six projects:-

- . the Bourke (NSW) project, commenced 1969 and continuing. Compensatory education. A structured pre-school program designed to enrich children's language, number and conceptual development;
- . the New South Wales Van Leer project (AFEC), 1969-1974. Family education. Parents given support and training so that they could be fellow learners with each other and with their children;
- . the Victorian Van Leer project, 1969-1974. Home-based teaching sessions;
- . the South Australian Van Leer project, 1969-1971. Compensatory education with an attempt to incorporate family education in a conventional pre-school setting;
- . the Katherine (NT) project, 1970-1973. A broad-based attack on the problems of school failure, with emphasis on communication skills, home-school liaison, health care, and community involvement;
- . the Queensland Van Leer project, 1969 and continuing. Language development via an elaborate and carefully sequenced program of instruction covering the first three years of formal schooling; plus the development of an Aboriginal classroom assistant (teacher aide) scheme - 'one of the most successful and significant undertakings in the history of Aboriginal education'. (p135)

Each of these projects is given a separate chapter and is discussed under the headings: setting; objectives; program; evaluation; and achievements. This excellent chapter organization allows easy comparison of the various projects, while also providing the opportunity for in-depth consideration of each innovative program in its own right.

Finally, the authors provide a comprehensive appraisal of the projects, looking at their immediate impact upon the field of Aboriginal education, and at their long-term outcomes and achievements. Pointing out that all were action-research projects, with a greater emphasis on action than research, they describe effects on children, schools, parents, teachers, programs, and the community.

There is no doubt that these projects have had a significant impact on the early and continuing education of Aboriginal children. Their movement away from narrow, deficit-compensatory approaches to a cultural difference model; their developing awareness of the need to avoid ethnocentric aims and to attempt to define educational goals in the terms of culturally-different clients; their growing understanding of the significance of teacher attitudes in the teaching-learning process, particularly in cross-cultural situations; their emerging realization that *solutions* to problems experienced by Aborigines do not necessarily lie in changes in *Aborigines*; and their increasing emphasis on the involvement of Aboriginal people at all stages of the educational enterprise - initiation, development, implementation, and evaluation; are all reflected in current theory and practice.

However, the story is sobering because, by and large, the lessons of the projects have not been widely and well learned. Hopefully, this book will spread these lessons and will stimulate interest and action at all levels of responsibility.

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