



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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§ THE IRRELEVANCE OF LITERACY

*E. Fesl

A research report published last year has shaken the very rationale for Aboriginal literacy programs. Eve Fesl says that for the first time, Aborigines have had the chance to say what they want, and that their views are very different from those who have sought to educate them.

Copies of the report, *Bala Bala: Some Literacy and Educational Perceptions of Three Aboriginal Communities* are available from Australian Government Publishing Service bookshops in all States.

There was incredulity in education circles late last year when *Bala Bala: Some Literacy and Educational Perceptions of Three Aboriginal Communities* reported that many Aborigines rejected literacy.

The project, instigated by Anglo-Australians, began with the assumptions of an Anglo value system. There was an assumption that, just as literacy in English had aided, for example, the peasant classes of England in their efforts towards upward social mobility, it would also be the panacea of Aboriginal social ills. That Aborigines might not concur was never questioned.

Even non-Aborigines on the steering committee, who had some inkling that literacy would not be warmly embraced by *all* Aborigines, were surprised at an overall rejection of English literacy per se.

Yet Aborigines were not surprised, and if one cares to look closely into the past, one sees many abandoned literacy programs - testimony that Aborigines have never wanted them.

Because of the Anglo value-bias, the failure of such programs was always attributed to 'Aboriginal cognitive deficiencies'. Attempts

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* Ms Eve Fesl is Director of the Aboriginal Research Centre, Monash University, Melbourne.

at rectification were, and still are, centred around 'remedial English for the target group, with most available research being focussed upon 'Aboriginal cognition' and 'learning styles'.

Bala Bala is an important document for Aborigines for it provides the empirical data, researched in a manner acceptable to education authorities, to substantiate what Aborigines have said and demonstrated for decades:

- That Aborigines are not particularly interested in becoming 'assimilated' into a society which has signified it does not want them anyway;
- That the written word, though holding much of interest for Anglo-Australians, contains little of relevance to Aborigines and their life-styles. Thus, little motivation exists for such skills which are not prized as they are in the non-Aboriginal society;
- That the external view of a community's needs may differ considerably from the internal - the polarity is evidenced here by the different values placed on literacy in English between the Anglo and Aboriginal groups; and
- That the tradition of oral transmission had served Aborigines well for 40,000 years, and was continuing to do so.

On the latter point it should be emphasised that oral transmission is the most effective communicative medium throughout Aboriginal Australia, from the suburbs of Melbourne to the rainforests of Northern Australia. Technology such as radio, television, STD telephone and telex has nurtured the maintenance of this tradition.

It is surprising that at a time when Aborigines are indicating less need for, and interest in, literacy, educationists persist in spending the scarce resources available to Aborigines on the imposition of English literacy and the pursuit of means to achieve it.

Not only has *Bala Bala* relevance to Aborigines, but those involved in educational programs for non-Anglo immigrant groups may have something to learn from the philosophical attitudes that it represents. It should be a warning that the imposition of a rigid Anglo-system upon a different cultural group risks failure.

Immigrants, having elected to come to Australia to shelter under the umbrella of an Anglo-Australian system, may be overtly more willing to attempt assimilation into the system than Aborigines who had no choice in the matter. However, *Bala Bala* points out that within the survey, even those Aborigines who saw value in attaining English literacy mostly considered it useful for others, not

themselves. Thus, the ideal of participation, and actual deed of participation, in programs could differ considerably.

Those willing to be participants might decide, on entering a culturally irrelevant program administered in an alien environment and manner, to opt out, just as Aborigines have done.

One of the most important areas to highlight for those involved in Anglo-education for Aborigines (not to be confused with education by Aborigines for Aborigines) is the diversity in needs and services expressed by superficially similar Aboriginal communities in Dandenong and Shepparton in Victoria, and Bourke in NSW. This highlights the need to avoid applying the term 'Aboriginal education' to all Aboriginal communities and then prescribing rules for its accomplishment. The need for consultation with the target group before implementing a course was an important finding of the study which, as well as looking at attitudes to English literacy, sought information on preferred educational programs.

If a survey is to be relevant to a group, much attention needs to be given to instrument design. In this case, existing instruments had been designed by and for Anglo-Australians, and therefore questions were based on the experiences of a culture alien to Aborigines. For instance, although it may be relatively unimportant to non-Aborigines, it was known that class size, location and the identity of the teacher, would be meaningful for Aboriginal participation; consequently, questions referring to these factors had to be included.

The results show how important their inclusion is, particularly concerning the teacher; all three communities were adamant that the Aboriginal community should have a say in teacher selection.

In instrument design the involvement of Aborigines, particularly those from the survey areas, was essential. Knowing how to put the question in a given social situation with a particular individual, even if the instrument design had been carried out by Aborigines, was also vital. Aboriginal field researchers working with their own people thus became key elements in eliciting accurate responses to Anglo-Australian education and its systems.

Whilst rejecting English literacy per se, some Aborigines were interested in it for specific purposes only; for instance, to read a motor mechanical manual or recipe books. This attitude is comparable with that of some immigrant groups, who also see literacy only as a means to a particular end.

When participants were asked what sort of course would help them most, the most popular choice was Aboriginal Studies - an indication of the need for culturally relevant educational programs.

It was obvious that this topic meant different things to different people - some saw it as Aboriginal language classes, others as looking at contemporary issues, while others again wanted to learn about other Aboriginal groups. This again underlines the need for consultation with prospective students.

Interestingly, the type of cooking classes chosen by those interested in such courses reflected middle-class values in cuisine, such as French and Cantonese - a sharp contrast to the scones-and-baked-pumpkin-type courses dished up in the past.

Aborigines belong to a kin-based socio-political society. The area of politics is dynamic, with alliances in a constant state of flux. These factors must be considered in establishing courses. A course for one group of people but located in a community centre run by an opposing group may not even get off the ground.

It should not have taken nearly 200 years for someone to ask Aborigines what they wanted. Nine Aboriginal groups have established their own schools because their needs are not being met in the existing system. Perhaps the introduction to Bala Bala sums it up:

Like faded dots of confetti strewn along a path from the altar to the car, lie the skeletal remains of a succession of Australian education programs.

The High Priest of Knowledge has watched the marriages and divorces between 'Perceived Educational Needs' and 'Social Realities' since the arrival of the First Fleet - through the early days of 'moral' education for the convicts; through the battle of the churches for control of the education system, the temporary Anglican victory (whose monuments - Geelong, Melbourne and other grammar schools - still stand); tugs-of-war between the free, compulsory and secular systems of the latter part of Nineteenth Century; the Twentieth Century's reforms in teaching methods, curricula and schools; and now he anxiously presides as the bride approaches her latest marriage with - Multicultural Education.

Suffering far more than their white counterparts, whose own systems are still unsettled, are the Aboriginal

people of Australia upon whose lifestyles and own education system have been imposed the assumed needs and experiments of the ruling classes of the white society.

The attempts at imposed Aboriginal 'Education' can be roughly summarised as follows:

Elimination - of language and culture

Assimilation - into Christian ideology and the white man's way of life

Integration and acquisition - of enough literacy skills to make Aborigines useful tools of the white economy.

Successive attempts over nearly two centuries to interest Aborigines in the white education systems have failed - failed because Aborigines' interests and goals were neither sought nor contemplated.

It is hoped that the present project will contribute usefully to change long overdue; a closer involvement of Aborigines in the shaping of their own education.

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Aboriginal Education (Munro Street)
University of Queensland, St Lucia, 4067