



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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*TRAIL-BLAZING FOR ABORIGINAL EDUCATION

Moves by Aborigines to control their own education are receiving support from governments with proposals such as a National Aboriginal Teaching Service. Three Aborigines - a lawyer, a champion rugby player and an educator - told associate editor Tim Isles [of Education News] about their education and successful careers.

Paul Hughes, Mark Ella and Pat O'Shane came from different backgrounds and have chosen different careers, but each has succeeded outstandingly despite an education system which exposed him or her to racism.

The magnitude of their achievement is reflected in a survey by the Aboriginal Research Centre at Monash University, which found that by 1982 there had been only about 30 Aboriginal graduates from Australian universities.

Significantly, analysis of the survey data showed that three-quarters of those graduates were motivated by the desire to prove themselves and their race. An overwhelming majority had earlier encountered, in the words of the Director of the Centre, Ms Eve Fesl, 'the negative tastes of racism'.

There were other important findings too. Most of the respondents had graduated in recent years and had completed their studies at an older age than Australian students generally. The proportion of females was also atypically high, and 88 per cent of the Aboriginal graduates held another university qualification in addition to their basic degree.

But there are important moves under way to improve the Aboriginal education system and free it from often well-meant but damaging white control which has never fully come to terms with the structure of Aboriginal society.

The Federal Government has circulated a discussion paper to all State and national education organisations and groups, proposing the establishment of a National Aboriginal Teaching Service.

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There is a need to develop a core of highly qualified teachers who wish to teach in Aboriginal communities and who are acceptable to those communities

the paper says.

It argues that some teachers currently in schools with Aboriginal students lack appropriate training and experience, and that a number of Aboriginal communities do not wish to accept State Government-allocated teachers because they want to retain the right to choose their own teachers and participate in developing their own curricula.

The paper proposes that special emphasis be given to training Aboriginal and other teachers for work in Aboriginal schools, including specialist one-year courses for qualified teachers with recognition in salary and status, and the development of four special training programs, supported by the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission in Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory.

It also proposes the upgrading of recurrent resources available to Aboriginal education, possibly through a special Aboriginal Schools Recurrent Grants Program, aimed at schools enrolling a majority of Aboriginal students. "Because of socio-economic and cultural factors and the learning differences of the students, some equivalence to the higher resources provided for special schools could be considered", the paper says.

In this series of interviews, three prominent Aborigines discuss their experiences and views of the education system.

*Paul Hughes**

On a wall in Paul Hughes' office hang copies of two certificates exempting him and his father from being Aborigines for the purpose of the *South Australian Aborigine Act 1934-39*.

The certificates declare that 'by reason of character and standard of intelligence and development', the subjects had earned unprovisional exemption and 'shall cease to be an Aborigine for the purposes of the said Act'.

* See also *The Aboriginal Child at School*, Vol. 11 No. 4, 1983

Paul Hughes, now chairman of the National Aboriginal Education Committee, received his certificate on 3 December 1952, when he was eight years old. His father, Tim, received his at the age of 38, after he had served in the AIF during World War II and won the Military Medal during the Buna campaign in New Guinea. He served with the South Australian 2/10th infantry battalion.

The Act has long since been repealed but Paul Hughes keeps the certificate as a reminder of being born 'a second-class citizen' on the Point Pearce Aboriginal reserve. He grew up in Lucindale, a small farming centre in south-east of the State, where his father had been granted a Soldier Settler's farm on his return from the war.

He was educated in the State school system and studied education at the Western Teachers College (now the Underdale campus of the South Australian College of Advanced Education) from which he graduated in 1965 with a two-year teaching certificate.

Paul Hughes began his teaching career in Adelaide and in rural communities throughout the State, teaching in primary schools for two years and in area schools (combining primary and secondary levels) for six. In 1973 he completed a Diploma of Teaching, giving him a three-year trained qualification. In the same year he joined the South Australian regional office of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and worked as an education-project officer until late 1977, when he became co-ordinator of the Aboriginal teacher-education branch of the Underdale campus of SACAE. In 1981 he was appointed director of the Aboriginal Study and Teacher Education Centre on the campus, and was appointed Chairman of the NAEC last May.

Paul Hughes' experience also includes a four-year term as Chairman of the South Australian Aboriginal Education Consultative Group. He was a foundation member of the NAEC.

He has continued to upgrade his educational qualifications, completing an Advanced Diploma in Teaching at the Adelaide College of the Arts and Education in 1978, giving him the equivalent of a four-year degree. He says that because of his family background (his father, for instance, was inaugural chairman of the South Australian Aboriginal Lands Trust) he was strongly imbued with the ambition to succeed in white Australian society and in so doing further the Aboriginal cause.

All of our people have something to prove; I suppose you could say it is simply two things. The first is that we are a people in our own right and the second

is that we are second to none in our abilities if given a chance to do it. And for its part, the NAEC is determined to do its best in giving Aboriginal children the best possible chance.

TARGET

The Commonwealth Government announced in the 1983-84 Budget its commitment to a target of 1000 Aboriginal teachers by 1990 and, to that end, a special category of 100 awards to encourage mature-age Aboriginal students to undertake studies leading to formal teaching qualifications. The awards, which have been introduced this year, provide a living allowance of \$150 a week on top of other Aboriginal Study Grants Scheme allowances.

The Government has also expanded the role of the NAEC and has made it principal adviser on Aboriginal education.

Paul Hughes says the initiatives represent the beginning of a new phase in Aboriginal education - one in which Aboriginal people will assume responsibility as a society for their own education. He says the target of 1000 teachers represents the adoption of a proposal put forward by the NAEC (and later adopted by the Australian Teachers Federation) in its submission to the National Inquiry into Teacher Education (NITE) in 1979. That submission identified a total of only 72 Aboriginal people teaching in the Australian education system in 1979, and said the level was very low when compared with the national Aboriginal population.

In 1980, Paul Hughes and Eric Willmot, formerly a lecturer in education at Canberra College of Advanced Education and now Principal of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, wrote in *Education News*:

...The presence of many more Aboriginal teachers in the nation's classrooms could certainly alter some stereotypes held by white Australians about Aboriginal peoples. As far as Aboriginal children are concerned, the thousand teachers will have a profound effect on their self-image and on their aspirations towards finding a place in Australian society.

They said that this effect had become apparent with the large body of teacher aides of Aboriginal descent now employed in government schools:

...of all the special provisions made for Aboriginal children in state schools, the employment of Aboriginal teacher aides has been the most valuable in improving the educational environment for Aboriginal children.

There was a need to produce more teachers from the ranks of those teacher aides to enable the transfer of responsibility for Aboriginal education to Aborigines:

The broader social effects of the thousand teachers on Aboriginal society are more difficult to predict largely because they will be widely scattered across the continent. The presence however of a thousand educated people with well-developed communication skills could be felt through political parties and government departments and within industrial and professional groups.

But perhaps these teachers will make their greatest contribution through the multiplier effect. From their children will come the economists, engineers, doctors, politicians, journalists and public servants of the future. In one generation Aboriginal society will have produced its managerial and political head and, more importantly, an intellectual arm that will be able to contribute to the shaping of Australia's destiny.

And so the NAEC has continued its campaign for more Aboriginal teachers. "We are moving strongly now towards achieving that target and the 100 scholarships are going to be of great assistance," says Paul Hughes. "It is one of the few recommendations of the NAEC that has ever been acted on...for the first time now we have a government that is saying 'yes, go ahead', and the NAEC will do all it can to make sure that we reach that target."

EXCEL

He says a new wave is emerging in Aboriginal society, led by Aborigines determined to excel in education and all spheres of life.

"They are people who have a burning desire to become ultra-professional in everything we do because we really have to do everything better than white people before they are prepared to recognise that we can do anything at all."

He is not surprised by the current under-representation of Aborigines in higher education but believes Australian society will witness major improvements in the near future, particularly as more Aboriginal teachers enter the system.

"The NAEC recognised at a very early stage that we had to develop this intellectual arm of our own teachers in the classrooms of our people and that has always been the main reason behind our campaign for more Aboriginal teachers, because if you look at any developing country it is the people from the teaching ranks who have always been the prime movers in educational development for indigenous people."

Paul Hughes says the Government's announcement of the expansion of the NAEC's capacity to fulfil its role as chief adviser on Aboriginal education will also enable it to rapidly improve the system of consultation it has developed within Aboriginal society through its network of State consultative bodies.

The NAEC, he says, has devoted a great deal of its energy assisting in the development of such groups, which now exist in all States except Western Australia (which has Aboriginal representation at the regional and local level as a branch of the WA Department of education).

The 'consensus' network is essential to the committee's advisory role because of the fragmentation of Aboriginal society, says Paul Hughes. It is important for white Australians to realise that Aboriginal society is unlike whites' pyramidal, class-structured society in that it consists of very different communities.

In its submission to the NITE inquiry, the NAEC identified four main categories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander society:

- Traditionally oriented communities separated from Australian society by the greatest degree possible of geographic and social isolation;
- Rural communities living on Aboriginal reserves;
- Urban societies economically dependent on Australian society but showing a considerable degree of social separation because of their community organisation; and
- Urban communities that are highly socially, economically and geographically embedded in the white society.

"There has always been a wish by Aboriginal people that they have a direct input into what is happening in Aboriginal affairs

generally, and particularly in the field of education. So naturally, Senator Ryan's statement in presenting the education Budget that the NAEC should be the principal advisory body was certainly welcomed by the Aboriginal people", says Paul Hughes.

"We believe we have always had a right to have a very major say in what happens in Aboriginal education. For many years now we have been working to develop a very strong network of consultative groups throughout Australia that can provide realistic, practical advice to the relevant educational authorities. For the last six or seven years of our existence we have worked at strengthening the relationship between the NAEC and the consultative bodies; trying all the time to avoid the barriers that often arise between Commonwealth and State bodies. In that respect I suppose we are like a political party trying to develop its representative functions at both the Federal, State and local level. Although we now have strong network with all the major links in place, there is still room for improvement. In some States, for example, the consultative groups have developed as departmental bodies rather than separate advisory bodies with direct access to the Minister."

ADVISORY

"Although all of them play a role to the Minister, ideally what we would like to see is a recognisable advisory body which is accepted and known to the community in each State."

To carry out its expanded role, says Paul Hughes, the NAEC is preparing a submission to the Government pressing for changes to the committee's structure, which now comprises 18 part-time members representing Aboriginal communities, relevant education authorities and government bodies throughout the country. The committee's chairman and deputy chairman are the only full-time members.

He says a third 'target' of an expanded NAEC will be the increased acceptance of Aboriginal studies in the Australian education system. "Aboriginal Studies will be a major focus of the Curriculum Development Centre that the Government has reactivated, and it is already producing some valuable materials in the field. For our part, we will continue to try and establish Aboriginal Studies programs as an integral part of every child's education in Australia. From our historical perspective, the history of Australia, or at least the major part of this country's history, is the history of our people and that is something that has to be recognised by the education system. Until this country is able to recognise properly the history, culture and prior ownership of the Aboriginal people, we will not get anywhere in overcoming the widespread ignorance about Aboriginal people."

"I think personally that this country won't achieve real nationhood until it fully recognises its responsibility to the indigenous people."

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Mark Ella

Floodlights on, grass shining bright green, goalposts gleaming - Latham Park at Maroubra waits for the Randwick players to take the field on the eve of their rugby-union grand final.

Mark Ella is among the first to arrive for training. He sits in his white Sigma in the car park listening to the radio. On the other side of the square redbrick clubhouse, a mobile TV studio from Channel 10 is setting up, watched by a radio interviewer from 2GB, the 'talk' station.

"I remember your letter...look, jump in the car and we'll do the interview in here or we won't get any peace", he says.

The first Aborigine to captain the Australian Wallabies, Mark says he is 'certainly no expert on education' but he is willing to do the interview if it is of some use.

Twenty-four-year-old Mark and his brothers Gary and Glen, who make up rugby football's famous Ella Brothers, are part of a family of 12 children from the southern Sydney suburb of La Perouse. Mark says he has always been sports oriented, mainly towards rugby union, which is the major code played at Matraville High School where he studied to Year 12.

"Matraville High has a great, long history of fine rugby players and winning sides", he says. "It was the sort of place where you could easily fall into that trap of living Rugby and I would have to admit that my education suffered a little because of that."

The Ella Brothers' innate sporting talent shone through early. They represented Matraville High and played in State competition, and when they were selected in an Australian Schoolboy touring side, says Mark, they "had a pretty good idea that we could be a success in open grade. We knew we had the potential and from then on it was just a matter of applying ourselves to the game."

After leaving school, Mark studied Surveying at the University of New South Wales for about 18 months.

"The idea of working outdoors for a living had a big influence over me and the only reason I left was probably due to rugby", he says. "At that time I was just starting to play representative rugby and so more and more of my time was being taken up with training and also trips away overseas. I knew that things weren't going to get any easier and so when the opportunity arose to join Rothmans as a management trainee, I jumped at the chance.

"So I left university to join a company willing to train me as a future executive and at the same time continue to play rugby at the highest level and without the worry of missing studies and exams. I don't have any regrets about leaving university, although when I finish playing Rugby I hope to go back and continue studying."

MOTIVATED

He says he was never pressured to study at the tertiary level. "I always wanted to finish sixth form at school and I always wanted to get to university...I was always self motivated, I wanted to do it for myself, so in that respect I never needed to be pressured into anything."

Did his large family grow up poor, and how did his parents manage?

"Well, to answer that I'd simply have to say I don't know. Mum never had the time to work after Viv, the oldest member in the family, was born, so I guess that most of the supporting was done by Dad. We were never a poor family to the extent that we were ever taking handouts as such, but Mum and Dad have lived a terribly hard life to make sure we are what we are today. We virtually lived in a three bedroom shack so to speak for most of our lives until about seven or eight years ago when we moved into our new house which was built on the same spot as our old one.

"Dad had a good job in those early days as well as fishing on the side, so we survived, although as you could imagine we went without many things as I guess many other Aboriginal families do.

"I really don't know of any Aboriginal families who were termed 'well off' when they first started a family, and especially in the days when Mum and Dad first started a family. I would never say we were poor people because there were always others worse off although we were never well off. I really don't know how they did it..."

Has he ever encountered much racism against him?

"Yes, I suppose we have struck a little bit of racism in our careers and as kids, but we have always been able to cope with it because we were really brought up in a way that taught us not to get upset about it. As far as our sport goes we really only have to show our ability to prove our point, and as far as life is concerned we just laugh and mind our own business."

Has he ever thought of lending his support to the Aboriginal movement?

"I have never been asked to be a focal point in the Aboriginal movement although I am asked to attend a few functions now and then but only as a participant. I suppose that up to now I have not had much to do with the Aboriginal community really."

"I think I do more to benefit Aboriginal people now by always being in the sporting limelight than I could do otherwise. But I have not been asked to become involved and I could not say I would even if I was approached."

Mark Ella says there is a need for Aboriginal children to be kept in touch with their culture and that Aboriginal studies programs in schools are useful in meeting that need. However he does not think the courses should assume a major role in a child's education.

"I think we are Australians and Aborigines, not just Aborigines unique and set apart from Australians."

Training is beginning. Our interview ends, and I take a seat on the side of the hill to watch. The 'backs' go to work and I see Mark Ella surging over the field in powerful bursts of acceleration ...much better than television.

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Pat O'Shane

Advancing Aboriginal Australia has led Ms Pat O'Shane through many walks of life as a teacher, lawyer and executive public servant. Her motivation has always been the same - to effect changes in 'the system' as it confronts Aborigines - and with every speech she makes, every conference and seminar she attends as Secretary of the NSW Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs, she works at change in important areas - like the 'fundamental attitude' Australians have to Aborigines.

* See also Vol.4 No.2 1976 - *The Aboriginal Child at School*.

"And at present, education authorities are not prepared to substantially re-order their priorities away from those who already enjoy social and economic privileges in this country."

Pat O'Shane graduated from the Queensland Teachers College at Kelvin Grove in 1960 and returned to her former high school in Cairns to begin teaching. Her decision to become a teacher was motivated by the fact that she was determined not to "accept a home duties role or an office job". She had always wanted to study medicine but her parents could not have afforded to support her studies, and she was able to study education with the assistance of a teacher's scholarship.

"I certainly liked teaching; I worked hard at it and I thought I could make a useful contribution to society generally and the Aboriginal community in particular as a teacher", she says.

Teaching mainly at the secondary level in Cairns, she continued her career in education for the next 10 years and many of her experiences reflect issues focused upon in today's research literature. The high school at which she taught had a high proportion of Aboriginal students - between 65 and 150 at any one time. Racism in the school, in which words like 'black sluts' and 'boong' were commonly used by students and some staff, was a problem.

"Most of the Aboriginal students were located in classes designated 'S' for slow learners or for kids whose primary school experience was lacking", she recalls. "A very basic problem in helping them was their lack of self-esteem - so many of them had no sense of their own worth or any historical identity with their culture."

The lack of self-esteem was reflected in an exaggerated need among the Aboriginal students for role models, and she concentrated on developing a sense of pride in their culture by teaching their own history and by discussions on the nature and implications of racism.

"Another problem, which still remains as one of the major problems confronting Aboriginals in the Australian education system, is its lack of relevance to their everyday life. I think that one way to overcome the problem is to construct curricula that are more meaningful to their everyday experiences and I think that can be done only by the people in local school communities", she says. "I am always aware of demands by authorities to set down some kind of blueprint that is to be translatable into every community life in Australia, but this is made impossible by the enormous fragmentation of Aboriginal life. For example, a curriculum designed for

a school on Elcho Island will simply not be relevant to kids on Palm Island or Point Pearce. So whilst we can generalise about the problems that exist in all those Aboriginal communities, it seems we must have curricula designed to meet the needs of these communities which they themselves have identified. And this really leads to the need for more Aboriginal teachers in schools where there are Aboriginal kids; all kids have to get used to the idea that there are Aborigines in our society in all spheres of life."

There is, she says, also a need for more Aboriginal Studies programs in schools, "...because it is essential for Aboriginal children to learn about their own history and establish their identity. If we don't have a sense of history then we don't have a sense of ourselves in the context of contemporary Australian society."

Developing a stronger Aboriginal presence in the Australian education system would also counter an 'assimilation' attitude that Aborigines are no different from other Australians, when in fact their cultural needs and aspirations are removed from those of most whites.

This year, Pat O'Shane expects to complete her Master of Law degree through the University of Sydney, having graduated with a Bachelor of Laws from the University of NSW in 1976. Her interest in law began at an early age: "When I was 21 years old, an incident occurred on an Aboriginal reserve at Mareeba involving a couple of Aboriginal women which resulted in two police officers being charged and convicted of aggravated assault...the hearing took 10 days and I sat in on it each day, and by the end of it I felt such a sense of outrage at the court process that I can remember then thinking that I should do Law. I thought I would become a criminal lawyer and so that formed my original motivation", she says, "but while I still have that motivation, I have to say that my career has taken a very marked departure."

On graduation, she worked as a barrister in private practice until 1981, when she was appointed Secretary of the NSW Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs, heading a staff of about 13. The Ministry is particularly involved in key areas such as housing, health and education.

"I suppose I have got to the point where I have developed certain skills and qualifications which enable me to do work in areas where there are no other Aboriginal people working, and now as there are enough people who have the skills to be effective advocates for Aborigines in court, I feel I can get on and do this job", she says.

Her work has involved her most closely in the field of administrative law as it affects the right of Aborigines and other minority groups within Australian society. Her thesis towards her Master of Laws degree is devoted to the subject.

Education represents a major role in the Ministry's work, and it is charged with monitoring and co-ordinating programs introduced by the State Department of Education.

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The Fish Traps at Brewarrina, N.S.W
Drawn by Billy Reid, 1983