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TOWARDS A HISTORY OF ABORIGINAL EDUCATION IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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A common misapprehension still prevalent in Australia is that traditional Aboriginal society had no organized educational system. This misapprehension seems based on the ethnocentric concept of British nationalism reinforced by the belief that Christianity was sacrosanct and provided an unassailable moral code. When coupled with the profit motive of capitalism, this belief justified the wholesale destruction of Aboriginal society (Rowley 1970, Reynolds 1981). Prior to European contact most of the instruction of children was carried out by women, and both sexes gained a detailed knowledge of their physical environment. Women were also responsible for the complete spiritual instruction of girls and of boys up to the age of puberty. A boy's uncle assumed a mentor role during his adolescence (Cowlshaw, 1981). These educational methods were successful in that children were prepared for the particular way of life of their tribe, and there were very few 'drop outs', or failures in this system (Hart, 1969).

The tragic deaths of the British explorers, Burke and Wills, demonstrated the worthlessness which the Europeans attached to Aboriginal knowledge. Burke habitually chased Aboriginal people away from his camp with his revolver (Woolf, 1974). The earlier explorer, Charles Sturt had been saved from death by scurvy because the surgeon, John Browne, fed him salt bush berries after observing the Yandruwandra people collecting and eating this source of Vitamin C.

The British believed English to be the language of enlightenment and viewed the 633, (Reed 1969) different Aboriginal languages and dialects as immoral and primitive. The British made little attempt to learn any Aboriginal languages and the fact that the languages did not exist in a written form further enforced the view of their worthlessness. Contemporary linguistic studies show Aboriginal languages are grammatically complex and that most species of plants and animals to be found in a tribe's country were represented in their language's detailed vocabulary (Robertson, 1983). Obviously, if Burke and Wills had been less impatient and arrogant they would not have perished even in the arid lands of Central Australia. They could have survived by developing a rapport with

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local Aborigines. However, if one's object is to take possession of a people's land by exterminating them, it is better to view them psychologically as sub-human or a relic from a different evolutionary era, as many social Darwinists did, than to develop an empathy with them (Fromm, 1942).

The social Darwinist view persisted as government educational policy from 1848 to 1866, whereby the Board of National Education viewed it "impracticable to provide education for the children of the blacks". This impracticability had little to do with logistics but deemed the children as ineducable because of inferior intelligence (Harris, 1976).

The New South Wales Public Instruction Act of 1880 heralded a new era of education in that it provided for free secular and compulsory education for all children. This was not to be the case for Aboriginal children, although 200 Aboriginal children were spread throughout New South Wales public schools by this time.

In 1883, white parents at Yass objected to the attendance of about 15 Aboriginal children at the public school. The Minister for Education set a precedent by excluding the Aboriginal children from the school and establishing a separate school on the Aboriginal Reserve. By 1940, the exclusion of Aboriginal children at the request of the white community was virtually the Department of Education's policy, and 40 separate Aboriginal schools existed staffed largely by unqualified white staff of the Aboriginal Protection Board. This policy led to the final act of spiritual murder for one Aboriginal tribe, the Wangkumara, because it forced their removal from the last remnant of their tribal land at Tibooburra, in 1937, to Brewarrina Aboriginal station. This forced transfer resulted from three years of agitation by white residents to have the Aboriginal children removed from the public school (Huggonson, 1982).

In 1940, an amendment to the Aborigines' Protection Act transferred the responsibility for the education of all Aboriginal children to the Department of Education. This was a result of a change of policy on behalf of the Commonwealth and the States, whereby detribalised part-caste Aboriginal people were to be assimilated into white society. The new assimilation policy was only partly successful (with regard to education) because of white parental pressure and the lack of voting rights of Aborigines. The Collarenebri school compromise (Harris, 1976) of establishing an annex for Aboriginal children and segregating them in slow learner classes still partially persists today. Turney (1980) showed the high percentage of outback Aboriginal children in remedial or general activity classes. The Department of Education justifies the segregation on educational grounds, but as all the educational tests are carried out by white

teachers, using culturally biased tests, the charge of institutionalized racism could be levelled.

Another amendment to the Aborigines' Protection Act in 1943 introduced Exemption Certificates for Aborigines who satisfied certain strict requirements pertaining to lifestyle. These certificates enabled the holder to leave Reserves and live in the white community.

Wartime labour shortages made employability the chief criterion for exemption from the terms of the Aborigines Protection Act. The *Education Gazette*, 2nd October 1944, proclaimed that "the Department had decided that children of any aborigine securing an Exemption Certificate were to be admitted to the ordinary public school". The production of a medical certificate stating the Aboriginal child was generally healthy and clean gave unexempted children admission to New South Wales schools from 1946. By 1950, all Aboriginal children were admitted to New South Wales schools but, with streaming, many were relegated to low ability classes. A 1964 survey by the New South Wales Teachers' Federation showed only 9% of Aboriginal children proceeded beyond 2nd year and 58% were rated as slow learners. A second survey in 1971 revealed a limited improvement - 38% of the Aboriginal secondary enrolment were in slow learner classes and only 27% of the Form One enrolment stayed at school until Form Four. There has been no recent survey of the number of Aboriginal children in remedial classes, but it is a priority of the New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group to investigate why so many Aboriginal children persist in lower stream classes.

The right of access to schools (which was finally guaranteed under the Commonwealth's Racial Discrimination Act of 1975) does not automatically lead to success for Aboriginal children in the white dominated education system. In 1981 only 14 Aboriginal children in New South Wales passed the Higher School Certificate with more than 50% of the marks (*Aboriginal Quarterly*, March 1982:9) and only 2% of Aboriginal children reached Year 12. This is in spite of the introduction of an Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme in 1970 to financially encourage parents to keep their children at high school past the statutory school leaving age.

What then are the reasons for this failure? The traditional answer has been the "blame the victim" approach, with school programs aimed at compensating for impoverished family backgrounds. However, many of these programs have served to further denigrate and demoralize Aboriginal families by deriding their cultural heritage. Almost simultaneously with advances in civil rights for Aboriginal people there has been a loss of the dignity and respect gained by meaningful

employment. In country areas of Australia, Aborigines have, since white occupation, provided almost all the labour force for white property owners. But new industrial awards required employers to end the monetary exploitation of Aboriginal workers by paying them the same rate as white workers. This increased expense, coupled with technological advances such as road trains, trail bikes and aeroplanes, has resulted in a loss of jobs for many Aboriginal workers to the extent that many western towns have an Aboriginal unemployment rate of 80% (Windschuttle, 1980). This redundancy has resulted in many Aboriginal families being locked into a cycle of welfare dependency with a high incidence of alcoholism. Most Aboriginal families live in the classic "culture of poverty" as described by the American anthropologist Oscar Lewis (1965).

The "blame the victim" approach attempts to better equip the child to the system rather than changing the system to meet the particular needs of the child and his or her community. This compensatory approach is judgmental and indirectly says the home culture is inferior to the white middle class culture which is the basis of the educational system. Contemporary Aboriginal culture in rural New South Wales is a blend of the remnants of tribal culture and the values of the itinerant white rural worker (Coombs, 1972:16). Both Aboriginal children and poor white children suffer from failure and alienation in the education system but irrational racial hatred, as the recent incident at Moree demonstrated, continues to divide these two groups. In times of economic hardship racism appears to increase and "well meaning" welfare programs, such as the non-means-tested Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme, has fuelled race hatred, because many poor white families are ignorant of the aims and benefits of the scheme and the education programs which are available to their children (Watts, 1976).

Recently, educationists (Eckermann, 1982:26, Turney, 1980:120) have been blaming systemic bias for the failure of Aboriginal children in the education system, particularly in isolated country areas. The extraordinarily high proportion of first-year-out teachers and the lack of training for school staff in Aboriginal Education is one of the prime factors accounting for the failure of Aboriginal children to benefit from schooling. Every year hundreds of city-bred middle class teachers embark on a two or three-year stint in outback schools. The cultural shock for most is horrific. Horin, (1980:16) and Eckermann, (1982:24) cite the lack of preparedness of the young teachers who constitute the bulk of western teaching service, as another example of systemic bias in the New South Wales education system.

Most of these teachers perform their duties to the best of their abilities, given the clash of cultures and values, but some fall prey to the complacency syndrome described by Gates (1982:47)

whereby the work level of the individual teacher meets only the minimum level of acceptance. Innovations, pre-set goals, and high expectations are virtually non-existent. Unfortunately, to assist in breaking of the cycle of poverty, all the above characteristics are desperately needed.

Many teachers and rural residents see the recently announced changes to the transfer and seniority system (SMH 3.5.83) which were introduced to eradicate bias against women in the promotional stakes of the educational system, as increasing the problem of staffing isolated rural schools, where half the Aboriginal population of New South Wales live. The Department counters (*Perspectives*, 28th Feb. 1983) that the incentives under the new Locality Award, once fully understood by teachers, will more than compensate teachers working in isolated multi-racial towns. While unemployment remains high for teachers obviously these positions will be filled. Eckermann (1982) argues that training and motivation will continue to be ignored.

Culturally biased curricula is another factor not only contributing to Aboriginal educational failure (O'Shane, 1982:28) but significantly adding to the problem of low self-esteem of the entire Aboriginal community, because the skills that did and do exist in that community have been continually ignored or made to appear as redundant and risible

Since first contact the only language of instruction in New South Wales schools has been English. No public school in this state has ever attempted a professionally prepared bilingual educational program. It was only with the election of the Whitlam Government in 1972 that bilingual educational programs were established in schools in the Northern Territory, where there were large numbers of Aborigines who did not have English as their first language. There are some Aboriginal languages in New South Wales, such as Bandjalang and Wangkumara, which are not yet extinct and are capable of being taught. It will be interesting to see if the New South Wales Department of Education will agree to their introduction, given their new and first ever policy on Aboriginal Education which was released in March 1982. The Department's policy claims to be concerned about the programs which will enhance cultural identity of Aboriginal children.

Systemic bias in language is not only limited to what is the language of instruction, but is also concerned with the type of English used. Swearing, though commonplace in Aboriginal communities, is frowned upon at schools where "standards must be maintained". Paul Wilson (1978:46) showed with his survey at Moree the hypocrisy

of the law in New South Wales relating to swearing. Because Aborigines learnt English from itinerant rural workers (Coombs, 1972:16, Eagleson; 1981) and the English of the teacher is middle class, there is a tendency to deride Aboriginal English and the child's home environment. In fact, many astute Aboriginal children speak of "home talk" and "school talk" (Burne, 83:28). Regrettably it is not an uncommon school experience for white working class children to have their language ridiculed, so that they avoid formal speech as much as possible. While teachers are traditionally recruited from homes of clerical workers and tradesmen, (Jones, 66:106) Karmel pointed out that they

are socialized through their professional preparation into what are essentially middle class attitudes and expectations. In general they value achievements like their own and are unappreciative of other types of talent and achievements. The bias of materials used and issues considered as important reflect values which are essentially middle class.

(Karmel, 1973:21)

Furthermore, as Anderson (1966:38) states, teachers are expected to conserve and transmit culture, therefore the values and rewards of the New South Wales education system are essentially the values of the dominant class, in this case, the white Australian middle class. Is it any wonder that Turner (1980:120) concludes, in his report on isolated western schools, that "the education of Aboriginal children has all but failed"? Rowley's (1981:34) comparative surveys of 1965 and 1980, showed the failure of the education system to make any considerable breakthrough with regard to Aboriginal children.

The stereotyping and derogatory references to Aborigines in Australian literature should be of particular concern to teachers when it exists in school text books (Lippmann, 1973:37). Two excellent bibliographies now exist to aid teachers and school librarians to avoid racist material when selecting books. They are entitled *Black Australia*, Hill and Barlow, 1978, and *Audio-visual Resource Materials Relating to the Aboriginal Australians*, Coppel, 1978. Furthermore, environmental readers such as the Western Readers are now being produced which show contemporary Aborigines in more positive roles. Unfortunately the writing and layout of new readers is a very time consuming task and generally has to be done in the teacher's own time. This task is obviously not being undertaken by teachers suffering from "Complacency Syndrome" and can only be done by teachers who have developed a genuine rapport with their Aboriginal students.

The National Aboriginal Education Conference has called for the training of 1000 Aboriginal teachers in Australia by 1990. This would

mean 260 teachers in New South Wales proportionate to its Aboriginal school population. However, in May 1980, there were only 43 Aboriginal trainee teachers enrolled in New South Wales Colleges or Universities (Keane *et al.*, 1981). Obviously the normal training procedure for teachers will fail to achieve the 1990 goal. Therefore some Aborigines are attempting to have established alternative teacher training programs (Geason, 1981:56). A petition presented in the New South Wales Parliament requested

a local training course whereby Aboriginal trainee teachers could work in their home community under a trained teacher, being visited periodically by itinerant tutors and attending intensive residential courses of four weeks duration within a tertiary institution.

The petition also asked for the trainees to be paid a first-year teacher's salary. This innovative proposal has numerous benefits. Firstly, an Aboriginal adult presence would reduce the overt racism which unfortunately still exists in many schools (S.M.H., 19.7.82, p.3). Secondly, it would provide Aboriginal children with a role model with whom to identify, and they would see their own people occupying a position of respect, teaching both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children. Thirdly, a local training scheme for Aboriginal adults to become teachers would help break the cycle of welfare dependency into which the bulk of Aboriginal families in Australia are now locked.

The cost of introducing an alternate method of training Aboriginal teachers in money terms would be small if one considers the difference between Social Security payments and the salary of the trainees. The advantage in social terms would be that Aboriginal adults would have the opportunity to engage in meaningful employment, rather than be the passive recipients of Social Security payments.

Aboriginal children in Australia are not denied access to the public education system, but the system does little to recognize their cultural differences or to adjust itself to meet these differences.

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