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TODAY'S SPECIAL GUEST STAR :
ABORIGINAL STUDIES!

*M. Sisley

It is a western New South Wales High School with strong winter sunshine filling the classroom. The teacher moves nervously in from the brick corridor with its interchangeable Education Department prints, and stands just inside the door.

"Right, pay attention please," the Social Sciences and History teacher says. The group gives the teacher their concentration because they have come to expect interesting and controversial work in these sessions. Even though a few of them are tired and full of canteen lunch, they turn in their seats and begin to chew on the ends of biro.

"This afternoon we have a visitor to the school who I am sure most of you know. She is here to help you...understand and come to grips with the Aboriginal Studies segment of your work...and she'll probably straighten me out on a few points where I might have gone wrong, too, so I'll ask you to pay attention to Mrs Copago and save your questions up for a minute or two."

Mrs Copago is a little bit nervous, too, being in the formal atmosphere of the brick blocks, but she has known most of the students since they were drooling, so she quickly relaxes and settles into the task of talking about her culture and her people.

There is no shortage of questions from the students, and from the teacher, and they are all anxious to learn. Mrs Copago does not mind the questions that the students have heard at home, and she explains about unemployment and drinking in the light of the area's history and racism in Australia. She talks about the skills and values Aborigines have that most Australians do not have and she ends on a positive note with hope for the Aboriginal community of the area and for Australia generally. The students and the teacher are well pleased by the session and Mrs Copago challenges them to change their own values and their family's by thinking about different, equal cultures, land rights and the history of Australia.

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The teacher sees Mrs Copago out, thanks her with sincerity and the students go to their next classes, Science, Home Economics and Physical Education. It's all over, and as Mrs Copago waits for a lift and the teacher returns to the staff room, a notch is being carved into the pistol-grip of the school's social conscience. The principal can report that - yes, Aboriginal Studies is being taught at the school, yes, there is community support, and yes, the students and the staff and the Aboriginal community are happy with the results of the school's initiative.

The school is obliged to implement Aboriginal Studies across the curricula and an inspector could see that this was being done. Similarly, one of the enthusiastic young women teachers was handling the mandatory policy of sexism, Mr Lee was handling English as a Second Language, Mrs Potts with the disabled...and so on. Like most western district schools there are problems with resources, trained personnel and inservices, and the usual interested and good teachers take on more work than they should to improve the school and themselves. The Social Science and History departments worked out a six-week compulsory core of Aboriginal Studies in consultation with the local AECG member and using a modified course from the Aboriginal Education unit in Sydney. The visit of Mrs Copago was the last instalment in the program. Next week the students look at the Nuclear Debate. Aboriginal Studies has been and gone, and the next attraction will have its own star for the day, perhaps a Greenie or a linking film on Aboriginally sanctioned mining of uranium in the north-east.

Well, apart from the supposition that many High or Central schools have Aboriginal Studies in anything like a completed form in even one subject area, with the consent and participation of the Aboriginal community, is this an inaccurate picture of the way in which the better schools are attempting to cover the mandatory programs in Aboriginal Studies? Are they compacted or bifurcated to fit in with nine to three schooling in a suitably concerned subject area. If they are, and if they must compete for time and space with the other mandatory programs in schools without adequate resources, is the Special Guest Star a reasonable compromise?

Obviously an Aboriginal Studies program devised and run with the necessary aid of the Aboriginal population of that area and the AECG representative is a lot better than no program at all, though there might well be an argument outside the area of this article to say that no program at all is better than an Aboriginal Studies course run by Europeans without the advice and participation of Aboriginal education advisors. It seems obvious also that the other mandatory policies such as the discussion and necessary changes to fight sexism in schools must have its place as well. The heated

debate both inside and outside the Aboriginal community, on sexual roles in traditional and contemporary Aboriginal society would, of course, be a way of touching on both areas, and there is the backup of acceptable literature to do this, as there would be to merge all the mandatory policy areas of social issues together and have each profit from the mixture. This, though, would seem to dodge an issue: what claims can be made to give Aboriginal Studies priority in time and resources above other areas of concern, remembering that for many principals the Aboriginal population of the school can be a twentieth of the total, which might include Turkish, Italian and Vietnamese descent in far greater numbers?

Aboriginal communities and groups have made many strong points about the pressing need for Aboriginal Studies to counter the untruths of much Australian history, to put forward the arguments for land rights, and to fight racism in schools and white Australian society, and these do not need my support. Indeed, the calls for justice for Aboriginal Australians have already changed many areas of education in schools, and may well have opened doors to other areas of concern where schools have not formerly walked.

My concern here is to show that Aboriginal Studies does indeed warrant special priority, and to argue this I will look at practical and perhaps unduly commercial reasons for the further, enhanced implementation of Aboriginal Studies. The area under consideration here is from the Junction area of the Darling and Murray Rivers up along the Darling where the Bagandji language-groups predominate, and the materials mentioned have been and are being researched by the Aboriginal Studies Unit for the Junction and from the community of Wilcannia.

Being a man of too large an appetite the first good reason that comes to my mind is that of food. When an Aboriginal group comes into a school in the west and western Riverina it is usual for some Aboriginal foods to be cooked and eaten to demonstrate cultural differences, uses of the land, and the nourishment of traditional foods. Teachers and students alike look forward to meals of kangaroo steaks and damper, and sometimes emu and johnny cakes. The worth of these foods is well known to Health Departments as is seen in their push for the reintroduction of these diets to children in the bush, and it seems strange to me that the Government still persists in classifying good and pleasant food as suitable only for pets when the Aboriginal population has been thriving on *tharlta* and *galte* for over twenty thousand years. I am not arguing against the culling of kangaroos on grazing and cropped land, but the senseless waste of good meat when Europeans go out for a night's fun with a rifle and spotlight, can be deliberate, childish cruelty.

I do not say that sheep should be abandoned for kangaroo and cattle for emu and goanna, but schools could, I believe, profitably examine the feasibility of not culling the native animals and encouraging their proliferation together with the European stock. The damage caused by European animals is well known, can be observed, and is well documented by comparison with accounts of the Junction and Darling areas when the first Europeans arrived. Together with this worthwhile social and historical study the question of why animals such as kangaroos are still classed as rodents and vermin and unfit for all but Aboriginal Australians could also be discussed. Clive James recently noted that it seemed a national group was more readily accepted into a multicultural society if its food was palatable, and if this is so, does the strong and delicious flavour of *tharlta*, *galte*, and other bush foods mean that white Australians called these foods unfitting to further exclude Aborigines in case some errant whites liked good cheap food that was readily available and good for the land, and from there involved themselves with the oppression of Aborigines?

The expertise in the cultivation of bush foods is available in these areas. Groups have documented the habits of animals, and the strong oral knowledge of breeding habits of these animals, their life cycles and wants, are all to be found within the Aboriginal communities. And it is not just a simple matter of barbecued *tharlta* steaks with damper from the ashes. There are detailed recipes of how to cook and make all sorts of different traditional foods, from river cod cooked in ovens wrapped in reeds, to a solid paste of nourishing reed fibre. Seed cakes, delicious sweet flowers, garnishings of native herbs, and even potent hot drinks, were and are known to a small group of Aboriginal Australians on the rivers. Sadly, because the mobs of cloven-hoofed sheep destroyed so much of the native flora in the dry times that their presence and their masters' practices exacerbated, only a part of the wealth of food once available remains. Perhaps, if attitudes remain unchanged and schools remain unchallenged, this surviving natural bounty will also be lost and the wealth of knowledge held by landless Aboriginal families of the area will lose its value.

The point I wish to make here is that the original culture of the Darling and Junction area was well provided with all kinds of food. The Bagandji still retain knowledge of the ways to make their land feed them. At present landholders face the spectre of salt, hard seasons for wheat, failing prices for citrus and grapes and few alternatives to the traditional farming methods. Aboriginal food cultivation and gathering is a viable alternative, given changes in attitudes and legislation. These changes can be facilitated, or at least discussed, to the benefit of the area, in schools. This, for instance, would be a worthwhile and practical part of the Aboriginal

Studies in schools in the area, and I believe that the format could be extended to other areas and other schools and communities. To my way of thinking, it would be a good change for European Australians to seek advice on practical matters from Aboriginal Australians.

Taking another simple and readily implemented part of Aboriginal Studies, I would turn now to drugs and useful cultural systems.

The best shampoos now mix aloe vera with their petrochemical detergents. Henna, marshmallow, ginseng, balm mint, fennel, mistletoe, and oats are in the more natural detergents. Australian society seems to be turning to herbs and traditional European healing and cleansing rituals to cure dandruff, headache, bad breath, split ends, and wind. Where are the Aboriginal cures and cleansing systems? Even though most of our tastes are undoubtedly dictated by European and American advertising companies, if there is any worth in turning back to traditional cures, more natural foods, and changing attitudes to disability and disease, would not an overseas visitor expect at least some part played by Aboriginal cultural systems? Again, has the neglect of Aboriginal knowledge, derived from the very land and climate that now shelters us all, made us view Aboriginal systems as unfit for human beings? Like most white Australians, it might be a matter of attitudes changing only when an individual tries Aboriginal systems and finds them good and valuable.

There are Aboriginal groups in Wilcannia, Dareton, and other areas that know which bush can be cut to provide a cure for stomach cramps and menstrual cramps. Individuals can point out a bush or flower that will stop pain or cure a headache. The list goes on, for Aboriginal Australians were perfectly adapted to most of humanity's vexations through knowledge use of their land. This knowledge is not only held orally by individuals in overcrowded Mission blocks. Aboriginal Studies programs have noted down, photographed plants and areas, and fully itemised systems of dealing with problems. Schools tend to place this aspect of Aboriginal culture alongside kangaroo and damper as evidence of the use of the land, but it goes well beyond this. Investigating Aboriginal herbs and medicinal practices might well show all Australians new and better ways of solving problems, from brushing teeth without nylon bristles and sugar-rich green paste, to finding alternatives to nicotine and tobacco, without the tar and carcinogens. Early Missions at Yelta, Reserves at Carowra Tank, Menindee, Wilcannia, Government officers - all noted down Aboriginal systems of health and care - usually with accompanying derisory comments. Must Australia, like many other nations, wait until the last minute or after the last minute to take advantage of the knowledge available on how to live in this continent?

Surely many areas within Science, Home Economics, Personal Development and Health Education could deal with this available guidance and information, as long as schools could fit it in to their formal, European boundaries?

These, then, are the two broad areas which offer real and practical rewards for schools, students, teachers, the community, and perhaps even Australia's economic and actual health.

As I am sure you are aware, my own expertise in the areas of bush foods medical systems is minimal, but I have seen enough to know that a great deal of material has already been gathered by Aboriginal and white Australians, and that it is not being put to use. To stop this waste would mean giving more time to research, money for development of bush food and bush medicines projects, greater emphasis on Aboriginal community knowledge and input, and resources and aid to schools. In other words, it would mean giving a greater educational priority to Aboriginal Studies. I have not mentioned other areas within these Studies that can also lay claim to more expansion, such as indigenous languages, Aboriginal numerical and time/space systems, Aboriginal art and religion, and Aboriginal family systems. If the practical rewards of using Aboriginal knowledge for Australia now are not enough to warrant placing Aboriginal Studies above other competing policy areas, then I believe that there is an axiom that must be plainly stated:

Aboriginal Australians know more about this country than anyone else. Aboriginal Australians can teach us more about Australia and Australians than anyone else.

It is abhorrent to think that areas of great concern such as sexism, racism, and views of the disabled have to compete for time and funding in schools' programming. This would seem to be the case at the moment.

If Aboriginal Studies is to become anything more worthwhile than a compacted entertainment featuring a Special Guest appearance, if the school has done even that much, then the whole area of mandatory policies needs to be rethought with a greater commitment of funds and resources than at present. There are positive and practical rewards waiting from the proper implementation of Aboriginal Studies. Let's ask the Special Guest Stars to make their own show, or better still, to go out live and nationwide in every school, every day.

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