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AN EDUCATIONAL PATHWAY BETWEEN TWO CULTURES :
EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES
FOR ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

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The Aboriginal learning system is not a functional learning system for everything that needs to be learned in school. Whether a formal or informal style fits the task best is dependent on the nature of what has to be learned, more than on the student's cultural affiliations. Today Aboriginal children not only need to acquire age-old knowledge in traditional ways but they have to acquire new knowledge...and they need to develop new ways of learning.

(Extract from Northern Directorate News-
letter, Vol.6, No.11, p.8)

The emphasis of this paper is on the early childhood area of Aboriginal community schools, but many of the aspects raised are applicable to primary and post primary education.

Equal opportunities for Aboriginal children means the opportunity to learn in a bicultural/bilingual setting in which the curriculum and the teaching style is appropriate to the concepts and skills being taught. Where it is possible to teach skills and understandings in the vernacular by an Aboriginal teacher using Aboriginal teaching styles, then this medium should be used. When, however, the skills and understandings can only be taught in English (i.e. when the concept being taught does not exist in the vernacular or cannot be translated into the vernacular) Western European teaching styles should be used. The European teacher cannot replace the Aboriginal teacher using the vernacular and Aboriginal learning styles, but one of the main aims of future Aboriginal education is for Aboriginal teachers to take over the European teacher's role and be true bilingual/bicultural teachers. Thus, equal opportunities for Aboriginal teachers means equal opportunities for Aboriginal children.

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Equal opportunities for European children are consequently not necessarily equal opportunities for Aboriginal children. By providing well equipped expensive schools, generous European staff/pupil ratios and European curriculum, the opportunities are not automatically equalized. The days of the European philosophy of 'give us your children and we will educate them' are long past. Our current philosophy accepts the fact that it is not possible to educate Aboriginal children without the involvement and support of Aboriginal adults. With this Aboriginal adult involvement schools can become learning centres which use a bilingual/bicultural approach, have teachers who can teach in the vernacular and English, guiding children along the pathway encompassing two cultures, and design curriculum materials which encompass both cultures.

The choice to ignore the presence of the European culture is no longer an option for Aboriginal people. It exists within every community and within their wider universe. Schooling therefore needs to incorporate the skills and understandings required for the Aboriginal child to operate within both worlds, that of his kinsmen and that of European culture. Schooling designed to ignore Aboriginal cultural differences and to emphasise English and European concepts only, from as early an age as possible, does not provide equal opportunities for Aboriginal children. However, schooling designed to emphasise Aboriginal concepts, language and teaching styles of a particular tribal/language group, enhanced with watered down, token inclusion of English and European concepts, does not provide equal opportunities either.

THE IDEAL SETTING needs to :

1. Incorporate Aboriginal teachers trained at Batchelor College or on-site within the schools in their own communities.
2. Have the support of the community, i.e. acknowledgment that schooling is important for their children.
3. Have participation of adults in planning and implementing the curriculum.
4. Operate a bilingual program which allows the children to learn in their own language and transfer these skills to English.
5. Operate a bicultural program which recognises that aspects of the particular Aboriginal group have an important place in the curriculum and that some skills can be taught using

familiar physical settings and Aboriginal learning styles before mastery of English.

6. Provide learning programs which give students skills to cope in the work force of their own communities, or father afield if they desire.
7. Provide specialist European teachers who are skilled in teaching English as a Second Language, familiar with the aims of Bilingual/Bicultural education and who are prepared to stay in a community for at least five years to provide some form of continuity.

Northern Territory Education has come a long way in providing opportunities for schooling that contain aspects of the above ideals but it still has a long way to go. Some communities are meeting education half way, some are still voting with their feet and others are moving to take over their own schools in the future. Where Aboriginal people are not sending their children to school, they are not allowing their children equal opportunities to education; by the same token, where schools in communities are not providing programs that encourage community involvement, use of the vernacular, inclusion of cultural aspects and a solid formal English and Mathematics program, they too are not allowing equal opportunities for Aboriginal children.

Some Aboriginal schools in the Territory have developed interesting programs through negotiations with Aboriginal teachers and the community. Each of those described is unique in character, suits only the particular community, but goes a long way towards providing equal opportunities for the children involved. At Umbakumba school, situated on the Eastern coast of Groote Eylandt, an Environmental Program based on scientific viewpoints, classifications and taxonomy of the Wanindilyakwa people was developed with the assistance of the linguist, teacher linguist, Aboriginal and European teachers and the community.

The aim of the Early Childhood section of the program was to use the familiar physical environment to teach skills and understandings from the Science Core Curriculum, using culturally specific content in the vernacular. By doing this the children were learning skills such as observing, recalling, contrasting, comparing and classifying familiar flora and fauna, in real life and classroom situations, using Anindilyakwa, their first language.

Learning activities were divided into informal and formal. The former occurred in real life situations where the children,

teachers, mums, aunts and grandmothers went to habitats to engage in sensory learning activities. On return to the school, the adults were encouraged to participate in more formal learning activities such as classifying and labelling the flora and fauna, retelling experiences of the excursion, listening to old people telling traditional stories, myths and legends, making class books of children's stories about the habitat visited, setting up mini habitats of mangroves, freshwater creeks, etc. on the nature table and following the patterns of movement of flora and fauna through the seasons. Most of these activities were conducted in the vernacular by the Aboriginal teachers. The European teacher's role was to assist the Aboriginal teacher in planning and evaluating the activity.

The environmental lessons were planned around the seasons recognised by Anindilyakwa speakers within their world view of their immediate environment. After lengthy discussions with Aboriginal teachers about the differences in conceptualisation, a seasonal calendar was drawn up which identified five seasons, described in English as, rain time, cloud time, cold time, mist time, and hot time. Each of these seasons was characterised by seasonal indicators, i.e., particular flora and fauna. For example, the red Kurrajong when flowering indicated that stingrays were fat, young sharks were being born, and a particular species of turtle was laying eggs. There arose an interesting transferal of knowledge between the bush and the sea. Once the calendar was diagrammed it formed the basis of the environmental science program that the children could relate to and that the community were prepared to participate in.

Umbakumba school's environmental science program offered young Aboriginal children an equal opportunity to learn new skills and understandings by

- incorporating Aboriginal informal and European formal learning styles;
- involving the community;
- recognising that some aspects of the school curriculum can be taught in the vernacular within the children's familiar environment;
- taking the time to plan and discuss the development of the program with Aboriginal teachers.

Umbakumba school developed a sound team-teaching approach within its program in which Aboriginal and European teachers worked hand-in-hand to prepare and present lessons. Teachers planned which lessons could best be taught in the vernacular or in English and which lessons could best be taught using Aboriginal teaching styles or European teaching styles.

The pre-school underwent a philosophical change which created a far better learning environment for the youngest children. Initially, the pre-school averaged a very poor attendance with no community support, even though a European and an Aboriginal teacher co-ordinated the program. Investigation revealed that the Aboriginal teacher had taken a secondary role to many passing European teachers over a period of fifteen years. In that time the Aboriginal teacher had developed her own operational style but was continually overlooked by each European teacher, who knew how to provide learning experiences appropriate to European children but was not prepared to accept that her program may not have been appropriate to Aboriginal children. The solution was to meet with the mums at Umbakumba and let them decide what they wanted for their children. This revealed that the four-year-olds were too frightened to come to school to spend the day enclosed within a building without their mums and with a European teacher whom they couldn't understand because their English was limited. The mums didn't come because they felt shy in front of the European teacher and didn't really understand what all the equipment was for. Neither did their children, so often they simply threw it around the room. During the meeting the mums decided that the pre-school should be a place for little children *and* their mums. They asked that the Aboriginal teacher run the pre-school without the European teacher and suggested that they would then bring their children and stay to help with the program. The pre-school was renamed *Wurriyukwayuwa-langwa akwa Wurridarrinka-langwa*, which means - 'the home of little children and mothers' - an apt title for a pre-school.

During 1980 Bamyili community (situated north-east of Katherine) introduced a new program in the pre-school which encouraged the mothers and three/four-year-olds to meet the teachers at a chosen place within the community rather than at the pre-school building. Lessons and activities were conducted in the selected place until a child-parent centre was built which provided some facilities for mums to make tea, cook, read (in Kriol) write, draw and play with the children. Once the children became used to this sort of informal learning environment which fostered Aboriginal cognitive processes, they moved into the pre-school where there was a gradual introduction of European cognitive processes and European learning styles. Formal learning did not commence until children

reached five years of age. *Bamyili recognised that education for little children was dependent on the combined efforts of the mums, Aboriginal teachers, European teachers and the school.*

Milingimbi school and community, situated on an island north east of Darwin, developed a new approach to pre-school education when they discovered that there wasn't a building in which to hold pre-school as the old building was undergoing major repairs. It was decided to introduce a mobile pre-school which consisted of a four-wheel drive truck that was loaded up each morning with all the equipment and resources needed for the day. The Aboriginal teacher would consult with the mums to decide on a suitable meeting place and the truck would be driven to the chosen venue. At the end of the day the equipment was loaded back into the truck and returned to a lockable storeroom. The European teacher's role was as a facilitator, the Aboriginal teacher had the face-to-face contact with the children and mums. The equipment was carefully selected so that children would gradually be introduced to such things as blocks, jigsaw puzzles, threading beads and so on. The European teacher didn't assume that the Aboriginal teacher knew what every piece of equipment was for, and made a point of explaining terms such as manual dexterity, eye-hand coordination, fine motor skills, etc. The Aboriginal teacher then explained the purpose of the equipment to the mums. Activities were planned to be a mixture of the two cultures. One of the activities that the women engaged in was making string patterns which involved a lot of skill. This activity was mastered by the children at a very early age and was excellent for developing fine motor skills and eye-hand coordination skills.

The use of the truck meant the mums and children could go on excursions to nearby habitats and engage in a multitude of sensory experiences and language development in the vernacular, Gupapuyngu. The program was so successful that the community started to question the advantage of having a pre-school building.

Equal opportunities for Aboriginal children means providing a pathway between two cultures. It entails a recognition of the fact that young Aboriginal children enter the school system with a set of beliefs and knowledge of an Aboriginal World view. Cognizance of these entry behaviours is of fundamental importance in planning appropriate strategies for learning. By ignoring these beliefs and substituting them with European beliefs is the best way to destroy learning opportunities for Aboriginal children. The learning must be a dual pathway, not a game of substitution.

In conclusion, equal opportunity for Aboriginal children is dependent on cognizance of entry behaviours, quality of instruction, and cognizance of Aboriginal adult input into the school system.

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REVIEWS

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Return to the Islands: the story of Aborigines and the tradition of mutton birding. Hobart, 1984. A.B.Claudell, Govt. Printer. 52pp. b&w photos, maps & tables. ISBN 7246 0617 3.

CONTEMPORARY - This book is an excellent narrative about the adaptation of a traditional Aboriginal Tasmanian occupation to the contemporary situation. The book gives an enlightening insight into the lifestyle of a select group of Tasmanian Aborigines. The photographs contained in the book belie the belief that there are no Aborigines in Tasmania today.

The accompanying *Handbook for Teachers* increases the value of the book to school librarians

Upper Primary, Secondary, Upper Secondary, Tertiary.

Highly Recommended.

* Further reviews by Davina Barry, a qualified Primary teacher who, as an Aborigine, has a special interest in the education of (and education about) Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.