



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

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* QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

In January 1985 a number of question boxes were made available to non-Aborigines who wished to genuinely ask questions about Aboriginal people from Aboriginal people but felt too inhibited to make personal contact. Predictably a number of facetious questions were submitted. The remainder are recorded below, as are our answers.

Question 1 - Do you really consider us your enemy? Why do you have a chip on your shoulder?

I can see that you have really thought very deeply about this question and I thank you. To answer this question it will be important to understand the history of the Aboriginal population and their contact with Europeans.

I know what you are going to say - "Oh no, not the history bag again." But this is vitally important for many reasons. As you may or may not know, the Aboriginal people have been subjected to a history of degrading and humiliating government policies:

- 1) From 1788 - 1856 Aboriginals had no status; they were Legal Non-Entities.
- 2) They became British subjects in 1857 - 1890s.

By the 1890s - 1930s the first phase of the Protection Era, Aboriginals became wards of the states, this meant that the legal status of these people changed from that of British subjects to that of children. This change in effect meant that the Aboriginal people lost *all* citizenship rights - the right to live where they chose, to move where/when they chose, to work where they chose, to rear their children, manage their money, own their own property. And so Aboriginal people were reduced to the status of slaves.

By the 1930s to 1950s, the second phase of the Protection Era came into being. The major thrust of this phase was the protection and training for citizenship. In New South Wales, for example, people had been able to escape the influences of the

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reserves by simply running away. Now, during the depression, they were being rounded up by police and forcibly placed on reserves.

The old Aboriginals talk about how their independence was taken away and replaced by the control of the managers of reserves. The parents and grandparents of many people presently living today were subject to these inhuman conditions. But this was not the end of policies to govern the Aboriginals of Australia. Assimilation became official policy during the 1950s. By 1967 to 1972, the policy changed to integration. It wasn't until the early 1970s that the government was pressured into recognising the injustices dealt to the Aboriginals of this continent. This pressure came not only by the rest of the world but more importantly by the Aboriginals themselves.

Now that you are totally bored, you may well ask, "Why have you spent so much time on all this history when the questions I have asked are on the present day attitudes and actions of Aboriginal people?"

Well it is important. If you look at the time span, it has been roughly 20 years since we Aboriginals have been allowed to participate as members of Australian society. We have parents and grandparents who have had to live through these hard years. My dad and mum tell us about their childhood and how they had to live. Mum was made a ward of the state at the age of 12 years and put into a home for Aboriginal girls. From there she was taken in by several white families as a servant. She did not meet her sister and brothers until she was 19 years old. Dan, on the other hand, was lucky because his parents dodged the police and reserve managers by travelling from one place to another. This is just one of the many experiences that our parents and grandparents tell us about. Some are worse, but not many are better.

We Aboriginals have come through many ordeals and survived. Some have the emotional and physical scars of culture contact, while others are trying to fit into a society to which they have had only 20 odd years of introduction.

This answer is not a plea for pity or anything remotely like that. It is a plea for you people not to generalize. Oh sure, we have our rat-bags and irresponsible people too, just like every other nationality, but please don't say we are all the same, because we are not. We are individuals. There is always good and bad in every group. And so how can you expect us Aboriginals not to feel resentment for 200 years of oppression, dispossession and bloodshed

of our people. Although you may well say that's history and we cannot hold present day whites responsible for their forefathers.

But it is not just the history. We are today oppressed by discrimination and institutional racism. And so, in finishing, I would like to say that it is difficult to ask people who have suffered so much oppression to forget so soon.

Question 2 - Why is the incidence of alcoholism higher among the Aboriginal race than the white race?

Is it really? Or is this question just another generalisation about Aboriginal people? The question I ask you is: "Do you know for a fact that the incidence of alcoholism is higher among Aborigines than whites?" Or do you assume that this is so from what you've heard in the media or from your mates at the local hotel?

Question 3 - Why do they ignore white people when they are spoken to? I'd like to speak to them all, but very few will ever answer.

Well, for a start I see that you are very confused and frustrated about why "they", meaning Aboriginal people I presume, ignore white people when they are spoken to.

If this was to be true, why do you go on to say in your question "but very few ever answer". This implies that some do, so therefore you have contradicted yourself. So it seems that "they" aren't the only things that confuse you.

Nevertheless I do think I get your meaning. Perhaps Aboriginal people are shy and do find it hard to speak to white people; but is this the case for all Aborigines? From the way I see things, I don't believe Aboriginal people in general would ignore you if they were spoken to. It must be true, however, that some Aboriginal people must have ignored you. But if they did ignore you, then I don't really blame them at all. Aboriginal people have been ignored for generations by white people. Is it any wonder something doesn't rub off?

Question 4 - Please explain why, when Aborigines educate themselves, go to work to keep themselves, the Aboriginal community pulls them down?

Only some of the Aboriginal people get pulled down. It also happens to other groups of people too!

There are not many Aborigines who have succeeded in their education but the few who have succeeded and the ones who are trying to succeed are sometimes being pulled down by their Aboriginal community because this community is frightened of losing that person. They think that person may not talk, drink, go out, and mix in with them anymore. A few of the Aboriginal community may get jealous and some start being trouble makers. The person they make trouble for just has to ignore them to go on or fail in what he or she is doing.

Question 5 - I heard that when an Aboriginal family move into a new home they are given an amount of money to help with furniture, etc. Is this true? White people don't.

No, this is not true. When Aboriginal families go into a new Housing Commission home they move into it with barely anything. They struggle to get what they want. The only assistance they get is for buying a new home. The new home loans scheme applies to both white and black if it is the first house they are going to buy.

With Aborigines, most of them get their loans through the Aboriginal Development Commission and it is usually the first home they ever buy.

Question 6 - Why, after 20 years, are homes for Aborigines renewed with brick homes, the solid weatherboard homes being sold to the white Australians?

Aborigines can get housing loans through the Aboriginal Development Commission to buy homes. They are able to choose their own homes. That is why they buy brick homes, because of less maintenance. So why shouldn't blacks have good brick homes? They had to put up with poor housing for a very very long time.

Question 7 - Why should your Aboriginal children receive money for attending school and not white children?

Because Aborigines have been deprived of education for hundreds of years, ever since Captain Cook arrived here in Australia. So we like to think of it as compensation. Our children at high school are paid by the Aboriginal Studies Grant. This is for their school fees, excursions, etc. This is to encourage and help our children to see their way through high school, for a better education, so they can have a chance at good employment. Aborigines have a high rate of unemployment - there are not many doctors,

lawyers, nurses, teachers that are Aborigines. They have not succeeded or have the qualification as many Europeans have, but we hope that our children in the future will achieve better jobs and status.

Question 8 - Why should Aboriginal people have use of a car to drive them home after being in hospitals or attending medical clinics? White people don't.

Within the hospital system everybody is eligible for help. The Ambulance is usually there to service these people who have no means of transport. Welfare agencies such as the NSW Home Care Service, Y.A.C.S., APEX, Lions Clubs, all these services help the communities with transport to hospital and medical clinics.

But because of the appalling conditions of Aboriginal health in Australia, some communities are lucky enough to have Aboriginal health workers in the hospitals. Part of their job is to provide Aborigines who can't afford taxis, or who find it hard to use public transport because of health or social issues, with transport if they are sick.

Question 9 - Do you feel that the Aborigines are more prejudiced towards the whites and get too much given to them?

Because Aborigines are a minority group, in some areas Aborigines feel that they need to fight back if in the past they have been discriminated against. They are likely to become defensive when fronted with white people. The prejudice that I think you have come up against from Aborigines is more a defensive attitude. Aborigines do not get too much. Take a look at some health statistics of Aborigines and you will clearly see that they don't get nearly enough help.

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ERRATA - Vol.13 No.2, April/May 1985, p.52

Change Simpson, Colin, 1983, to Johnson Colin, 1983.

Margaret Vasey, author of "Some Aspects of the Position of Aboriginal Women in Australian Society" apologizes for the above error in the references.

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