



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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ABORIGINAL EDUCATION

*E. West

Aboriginal Studies must be developed with the regular participation of local Aboriginal communities.

The National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC) was set up in 1977. Since then it has formulated both individual and community needs in education. The NAEC is now the principal advisor on Aboriginal education to the Minister for Education, Senator Susan Ryan, and to the Commonwealth Government.

The NAEC has made significant advances in improving educational access for our people through various Commonwealth Government agencies. Over the years the numbers of professional and para-professional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women employed in schools have increased at the classroom level.

Curriculum development has always been a priority area for us. We have argued that curriculum is a significant key to unlocking learning, particularly for our younger ones. Our tenacity in demanding a voice in curriculum development led us to establish a core of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators some of whom now form an advisory committee to the Curriculum Development Centre's Council. Our responsibility is to protect the interests of Aboriginal education by giving careful consideration to existing proposals and by providing Council with recommendations, and to initiate or develop projects for positive change in curriculum for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

There has been a monumental increase in the involvement, knowledge and forward planning of our people in curriculum development. In the past (or should I say 'the bad old days') we were forced merely to react to one aspect of curriculum development - namely the content of school programs most of which (and some still do) fall into the category of 'damper day' activities.

Most of us know the type of program: the fondling of a few artefacts of unknown origin, obscure use, and unthought of value; the class reading of fictionalised Aboriginal dreaming such as, *The Rainbow Serpent* or *Tiddalik the Frog*; the quick flick through

* Mr Errol West, Deputy Chairman, National Aboriginal Education Committee. Reproduced with permission from *Curriculum Development in Australian Schools*, No.1, June 1985.

some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art books, followed in primary grades by a simple question and answer sheet or a 'join the dots' activity. I have often seen such penetrating questions for middle and upper primary grades as, "What did Tiddalik do when all the other animals spoke to him?" or "What did the rainbow serpent do when he got angry?"

While I see some limited benefit from this type of activity, I seriously question two aspects:

firstly, the quality of such a theoretical and philosophical base for a bicultural activity - which is what Aboriginal studies in the curriculum is; and

secondly, the sincerity of schools which use superficial, peripheral and fuzzy information to enhance the image and self image of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in contemporary Australia.

The approach to teaching Aboriginal studies should be bi-cultural rather than in the context, however deep, of 'Australian history' covering from Cook to today (c. 1940s) where indigenous Australians slot in with sheep, wheat, the gold rush and the White Australia policy. Some may consider that Australian education is beyond teaching those things today. I argue that not all schools are. For those who still teach Australian history of the last 200 years only, I urge you to legitimise your presence by dragging your school into the 1980s. Why, even the 1970s would do!

For those schools trying to approach Aboriginal studies with a connected, up-to-date view - and there are many, thanks to the persistence of State and Territory Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups - the field is both wide open and quite fearsome. It is fearsome because teachers are not trained as curriculum developers and they lack the necessary training to be able to teach Aboriginal and Islander children in a way that most benefits the children. I wish to indicate my respect for any teacher who wants to undertake a bicultural Aboriginal studies unit. What they have going for them, apart from their personal interest and commitment is the vast amount of quality resources both human and written that have emerged in the past few years.

In my opinion, the existence of appropriate resources available to teachers at the chalk face at present is wonderful, especially as many current resources are authored by Aboriginal people. Reading of the works of Aboriginal poets, for instance, is deeply enlightening, and the approaches teachers can use to involve all children in the spirit of such poetry are almost unlimited. To

many of us, contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander poets, authors and playwrights are consciously preserving the all pervading spirit of this continent and the children of this continent.

I offer an example of an as yet unpublished poem to demonstrate how a contemporary work through image and ethos may evoke an awareness of Aboriginal people's present-day situations and feelings.

Tired of Dying -- 4

Sitting, wondering, do I have a place here?
The breast of Mother Earth bore me, yet long
I host a shell of emptiness, a human husk
winnowed in the draught of history, my essence
ground on the mill of white man's determination.

I fight though mortally wounded, life blood and spirit
ebbing away in the backwater of despair, caused by
long winded politicians' promises and administrations'
cumbersome gait;
another realisation of my hopelessness produces another
promise, implementation of a band-aid gimmick,
you had better hurry its getting late, red tape, budgets,
strategies, RAPE!

Return me to my beloved land, let me be! don't you
understand? all I want is a private dying in the
arms of my Mother Earth, she too is suffering; as a
mother must when her children are ripped away from
her love and the safety of her arms, no more to be
cradled, tenderly caressed by her heavenly smoldering
essence.

The Gubba-ment don't try its best, it really
does reflect the spirit of the majority -
while my body complies, my spirit has unrest
and decays,
it does not matter what you say all you do is
smooth the dying pillow; an act which is
constituted of ignorance, hate, or worse - disinterest.

I long for my Mother Earth, though her craggy face
has altered by concrete paths, her beautiful
complexion pockmarked, scarred, ruined by white
man's highways, her enchanting brown eyes are
glazed by monolithic cataracts which reach
to the sky, yet for all her arid beauty I ache
for her embrace.

I believe there is enormous potential for sensitive use of such material in school, through analysis, artistic expression, debate and discussion, particularly at the upper primary and secondary levels.

Many of us believe that the structure, methodology and content of any Aboriginal Studies program must be developed, supported and have the regular participation of local Aboriginal communities and their education groups.

I would like to make three points myself about Aboriginal Studies.

1. I believe that in the past there has been an over emphasis on pre-contact Aboriginal society. Studies have superficially concentrated on the exotic elements of Aboriginal societies such as initiation rites or sacred ceremonies. When placed in a context of the 1970s, 1980s, or even the 1960s of Anglo Australia, they have no similarities to the accepted cultural mores of the learners. Instead, they become a spectre of past horrors rather than what they really are - legitimate expressions of cultural and personal maintenance which must never be judged alongside the traditional socio-religious mores of other cultural groups.

2. I believe that a great deal of unlearning must occur regarding Aborigines and our history. This will occur more readily if both teachers and students are able to recognise the defined social groups which constitute multi-ethnic Australia today. The theories of the 'Noble Savage' and of Social Darwinism which have permeated literature since occupation in the 1700s must be destroyed if we are to allow all non-Aboriginal people the freedom to make more honest judgements of Aboriginal people as we stand at the moment. (Not that I subscribe to the idea that judgements of any sort should be made, but they are.)

3. As I have already said, there is a vast amount of Aboriginal authored or approved resources to draw on now. Much of the material now available covers the entire spectrum of contemporary Aboriginal Australia and if supplemented with the variety of short papers, discussion papers and the numerous reports available, certainly provides ample scope for the development of suitable bicultural Aboriginal Studies programs. However, the richest resource available to individual schools and teachers are the Aboriginal people who constitute the "home community" of the area.

Important to the success of any program is the expectations of the instructors and the participants, with regard to the particular area of education. In the case of Aboriginal Studies, the

expectations of teachers towards the local Aboriginal people deserves consideration. There are many rural and urban communities who, through contact with Anglo-Australian society do not live or behave in ways which you as a teacher may expect of "Aborigines".

Given the diversity of Aboriginal Australia one must not expect any member of our society to behave in a prescribed fashion - for instance to eat kangaroo instead of McDonalds or wear fur or nothing instead of jeans, shoes, shirts, dresses. I have, over the years become aware of some educators having difficulties with what they perceive as "legitimate traditional" activities against what the local Aboriginal people consider "legitimate traditional" activities.

I firmly believe in the principle of "Want what you get and you will be happy". When it comes to Aboriginal people providing information for school programs, our people may choose not to provide information on particular aspects of their social group.

It may require the building of a number of bridges with those community members who will prove to be your richest source of cultural detail and who may be charged by the rest of the community with the responsibility of assisting and teaching you such detail.

The National Aboriginal Education Committee's long standing view of Aboriginal Studies development is based on the following steps to be taken sequentially:

- Contact with the local Aboriginal community, if possible through a local Education Group;
- Regional consultation with consultative group representatives to broaden perspectives on resources details;
- Contact with State or Territory Consultative Group, for departmental and national support such as funding, resources, etc.;
- Contact with the National Aboriginal Education Committee, for any extra support and advice on funding that may be required.

I cannot reiterate strongly enough that it is absolutely imperative for schools to have local Aboriginal community and consultative group involvement right from the outset of any program development - irrespective of the schools' preferred approach to teaching Aboriginal Studies.

ABORIGINAL STATE CONSULTATIVE GROUPS

New South Wales

NSW Aboriginal Education
Consultative Group
Aboriginal Education Unit
Department of Education
Box 33, GPO SYDNEY NSW 2000
Phone: (02) 2408870

Victoria

Victorian Aboriginal Education
Consultative Group
4th Floor Myer House
250 Elizabeth Street
MELBOURNE VIC. 3000
Phone: (03) 6691119

South Australia

South Australian Aboriginal
Education Consultative Group
Department of Education
31 Flinders Street
ADELAIDE SA 5000
Phone: (08) 2274849

Queensland

Queensland Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander
Consultative Committee
P O Box 33
NORTH QUAY QLD 4000
Phone: (07) 445371

Western Australia

Western Australian Aboriginal
Education Consultative Group
P O Box 910
WEST PERTH WA 6005
Phone: (09) 3217475

Tasmania

Tasmanian Aboriginal Education
Advisory Council
Westella, 181 Elizabeth Street
HOBART TAS 7000
Phone: (002) 306146

Northern Territory

Northern Territory Aboriginal
Education Consultative Group
Department of Education
Box 4821 GPO
DARWIN NT 5794
Phone: (089) 804211

Australian Capital Territory

Australian Capital Territory
Aboriginal Education
Consultative Group
Yarralumla Counselling Centre
Loftus Street
Yarralumla ACT 2600
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