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EDUCATION -- INITIATION!

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Education as a form of initiation has severely affected Aboriginal children as they endeavour to live in 'two worlds'.

Education involves the initiation of a child into society. At an early age a child attends school where he or she learns attitudes, values and beliefs that are seen as desirable.

Australia's early white settlers saw that the Aborigines had no buildings and no formal institutions, this led them to draw a distorted view of Aboriginal education. Coming from the European situation where classrooms, boarding schools, and university buildings represented learning, they concluded that Aborigines were completely without any system of education.

As pointed out by M. Hart (1974), the education of Aborigines is deliberate, systematic, comprehensive and very lengthy. The Aborigines' curriculum has no set books but it is the living culture of their own people. This is evidenced by the fact that every aspect of Aboriginal education including philosophy, literature, art, music, drama, law, social life, economy and personal development, centre around their beliefs.

Hart found that from the Aborigines' belief in their spiritual ancestors comes their cosmic philosophy of how the earth they know is formed, and oral literature is very highly developed both in their mythology and in legends. Mythology is the unfolding and releasing of their philosophy which is brought out through story telling, songs, dances and singing, through the drama of the corroboree and through their various forms of art.

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From oral literature law is taught. There is no written law as there is no written literature, but the law is given by the ancestral spirits and is unchangeable. In the mythology and in the songs, the law is set. Without these stories and songs, there is no law.

As well as not being educated in school houses and having no text books, the Aboriginal child does not have a teacher in the sense that children attending state schools have one. That is, a teacher who conducts a class in accordance with school policy. Rather, education for Aboriginal children takes the form of lengthy training by tribal elders who do not use the same methods and techniques. They have their own style and way of teaching and are not required to comply with any policies.

Although, in both the state and Aboriginal schooling system and as part of the initiation process, the teacher passes on knowledge to the child of what is considered to be right and correct in society and of utmost importance, the Aboriginal child is taught his or her Dreamtime and spiritual work is a most essential part of every activity. In contrast, state schooling does not have a spiritual base but a secular one. In essence, these differences stem from the contrasting cultural background of Aboriginal and white Australians.

A change in cultural background and learning processes has had severe drawbacks for Aboriginal children attending state schools.

The first attempt to educate Aboriginal children according to the white settlers' system was made in New South Wales in 1814 by Governor Lachlan Macquarie. Through his efforts a Native Institution was set up at Parramatta. The system achieved some success but ultimately all the students returned to tribal life. It was familiar to them, while colonial society was alien to their nomadic existence.

From 1848 to 1866, public education in New South Wales was run by a Board of National Education which believed it was impractical to provide education for Aboriginal children. Apart from the fact that the Aborigines were discriminated against by the white settlers, it was found they had great difficulty and were generally incapable of adapting to the white settlers' way of life.

The Aboriginal Protection Board established in 1883 had similar findings. Because of such difficulties, the Board concluded that the Aboriginal children should be removed from their reserve at as early an age as possible so that they could learn the white person's way of life.

In 1936, a policy of assimilation was introduced. Under this policy, Aborigines were expected to become part of the white community and leave their past way of life behind. In practice, however, racial integration in schools was strongly resisted in many areas and, repeating past experiences, Aboriginal children found cultural differences difficult to overcome.

More recently, a multicultural policy has been introduced by the Government. That is, one that caters for those of different cultural backgrounds residing in Australia. Subsequently, Aboriginal studies are being taught in schools. The aim is to guide development of knowledge and appreciation of the Aboriginal culture.

Aborigines, however, are a minority culture in Australia. Therefore, it is not in the interest of the majority of the population to fundamentally change the State education system to cater only for Aboriginal children.

Nevertheless, Aboriginal children have performed poorly under the State system of education. In 1976, 82 per cent of Aborigines over 15 years of age had not reached school certificate level. While a double initiation process is at work, a conflict

situation arises for the Aboriginal child. This occurs as education includes one's initiation into a certain life style and distinct ways of thinking and acting.

Reference

Hart, Max, 1974: *Kulila - on Aboriginal Education*. A&NZ Book Company, Sydney.

