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TEACHER EDUCATION COURSES : IMPROVING THE EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES OF ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE

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A dramatic increase in the number of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders undertaking teacher education courses in Colleges of Advanced Education and Universities has occurred over the past ten years. In 1976 it was estimated that there were approximately 59 Aboriginal Teacher Education students throughout Australia (Anderson & Vevoorn, 1983:122). Today, in one institution alone - James Cook University - there are almost double this number. It is estimated that there were approximately 400 Aboriginal/Islander student teachers in 1985.(See note 1).

Such an increase has come about through the establishment of support programs (or enclaves) for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in teacher education institutions. The main features of such programs are briefly described in this paper, in general terms only. The programs naturally vary somewhat from institution to institution, but the general features are similar.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROGRAMS

Tertiary education in Australia has traditionally been the preserve of the white middle class. According to Anderson and Vervoon (1983:15), the justice of this was not seriously questioned until the sixties. Since that time, there has been increasing awareness, both on the part of the people excluded from higher education, and on the part of those who make decisions about it, that social justice demands that all segments of society have right of access to all the privileges of society, including tertiary education. Towards the end of the 1970's three colleges in Australia independently decided to set up programs to attract and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student teachers: Townsville CAE (Qld), Torrens CAE (S.A.) and Mt Lawley CAE (W.A.). (All these colleges have since been renamed.)

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The National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC) quickly realised the value of the new programs, and gave great impetus to their development by advocating their expansion in its report to the National Inquiry into Teacher Education (1979). The NAEC considered

that a critical situation exists in regard to the need for training Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers. (P.66)

and it suggested that a target of 1,000 indigenous teachers by 1990 be set (p.69). As one of the ways of achieving this goal, the NAEC recommended that there should be an increase in the number of 'enclave' programs.

The NAEC provided philosophical guidelines for those involved in designing such programs, by stating that the aim of education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be to develop:

a) a knowledge of, and pride in, their own cultural heritage

and

b) the academic and technological skills for them to gain equality within Australian society.

(P.VI)

The NAEC recommended that indigenous people should be substantially involved in all aspects of decision making for such programs (p.77). In addition, the Committee stated that any course for Aboriginal people should provide exit qualifications acceptable to teacher employing authorities (p.74).

The enclave programs set out to achieve the NAEC's aims by assisting Aboriginal students to gain the competencies required to complete a tertiary course successfully, while at the same time, endeavouring to assist the educational institutions to become more responsive to the needs of Aborigines. The enclave programs themselves are part of the new responsiveness.

SPECIFIC FEATURES OF THE PROGRAMS

In order to accommodate the needs of Aboriginal and Islander students, the colleges have made a number of changes, which are described below.

A. ENTRY PROCEDURES

Because the participation rate of indigenous Australians in the final years of schooling is lower than that of other Australians, alternatives to the method of selecting on the basis of matriculation results have been developed. Applicants are tested to determine academic ability, and interviewed to determine personal suitability for teaching.

B. EXTRA TIME TO COMPLETE STUDIES

In some institutions, students take an extra semester to complete a Diploma of Teaching. Thus a three year or six semester course is taken over seven semesters. In every other way, the course of studies is the same as that undertaken by the non-Aboriginal students in the institution (see Jull & Loos, 1984:18).

C. SUPPORT STAFF

Staff are employed to cater to the needs of the indigenous students in a number of ways:

i) *Academic Support*

The students may be offered bridging courses, study skills classes, individual or group tutorials.

ii) *Social/Emotional Support*

Staff are available to assist students with personal or social problems. Aboriginal students have special needs in this area because some of them feel culturally isolated in the alien environment of an academic institution. Many of them have family obligations which can conflict with study commitments. In general, it is felt that an Aboriginal person is able to provide assistance more effectively than a non-Aboriginal person whose life experiences are likely to have been very different. An important element of social support arises from the cohesion which develops amongst the group of students.

iii) *Liaison with Staff*

The support staff must maintain good relationships with the teaching staff in order to be able to provide the academic assistance required. The necessity for good communication goes beyond this, however, because many of the academic staff have had little experience with Aboriginal people. They may be eager to help, but

be unaware of the best ways of doing so. Therefore, the enclave support staff play a major role in sensitising other members of staff to the requirements of the Aboriginal students.

iv) *Administration*

This is not an aspect of the job which is welcomed, however, efficient administration is essential to the smooth running of such a program.

D. A ROOM OF THEIR OWN

The colleges have recognised the value of giving the Aboriginal students a space which they can identify as their own. Thus a place is provided where students can meet with enclave staff, participate in tutorials, study, or just simply interact with the Aboriginal students. As a result of this, group cohesion is strengthened, thus improving the support network for students. Some college staff have expressed a sincere concern that the provision of such facilities could create an Aboriginal 'ghetto'. Experience has shown, however, that students who feel confidently supported by their Aboriginal peers are better able to integrate with the wider college community than students who feel alienated and culturally isolated.

D. RECOGNITION OF ABORIGINALITY

The four special features of the support programs which have been described above (special entry, lengthening of the course, support personnel, and their own space) were discussed first, because they are relatively simple and straightforward. What is much more difficult for Australian tertiary education institutions to achieve is the NAEC's first aim of education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people -

a knowledge of and pride in their own cultural heritage.

Colleges of advanced education and universities in Australia are part of the Anglo tradition of education: a tradition which is reflected in course content, assessment methods and teaching styles. Whether it is possible genuinely to integrate Aboriginal values into such structures is a matter for debate. The challenge has been taken seriously, however, and a variety of ways has been adopted by the institutions to recognise and foster Aboriginal identity:

1. Aboriginal participation in decision making through the mechanism of advisory or consultative committees.
2. Aboriginal involvement in the selection of students and staff.
3. Commitments to employing Aboriginal staff wherever possible.
4. Maintaining links with the local Aboriginal communities.
5. Making available units of study on Aboriginal culture, history, education, and so on.
6. Teaching practice in Aboriginal communities.
7. Professional development programs for non-Aboriginal staff on issues relating to Aboriginality.
8. Involvement in extra curricular activities such as Aboriginal Week.

Despite the problems associated with trying to integrate two very different sets of traditions, it appears that some success has been achieved. Loos (1984:17) reports that some of the graduates from the Townsville Aboriginal/Islander Teacher Education Program have become "cultural innovators", able to deal with white Australia on its own terms, while also being confident and proud of their identity as Aborigines. It has been the experience in Townsville that, as the number of Aboriginal/Islander students on campus grew, so their influence increased. Many lecturers responded by introducing changes in subjects as diverse as physical education and maths (Loos, 1984:7-8). Similarly, at the CAE in South Australia, many lecturers have

deliberately and diligently set themselves the task of understanding and appreciating Aboriginal students and have incorporated their concerns into many units studied by all students.

(Williams, 1984:14)

Such a process has been enriching for all: Aborigines and non-Aborigines, students and staff.

Support programs have now been established to enable Aboriginal students to complete a wide range of courses. Initially, the programs were set up to facilitate the entry of Aboriginal/

Islander people into teacher education, and that has remained a major focus, because of the priority set by the NAEC. Having seen the success of the programs, the NAEC has encouraged their establishment in other disciplines (NAEC, 1984). One notable achievement is that the University of Newcastle has developed a program to enable Aboriginal people to qualify as medical practitioners. Other institutions which have programs for Aboriginal/Islander students at the time of the writing of this article are listed in Note 1.

For anybody concerned about the issue of equality of access to tertiary education for all segments of society, the Aboriginal enclave programs must be seen as a significant innovation. They challenge the traditional structures in a number of significant ways:

- . by-passing the standard entry procedures
- . providing extra academic and social support

and most importantly -

- . acknowledging that a specific group of people has cultural differences which must be recognised and respected in the educational process.

The Aboriginal enclave programs have led the way in providing a model which could be followed by other groups in society who find themselves excluded from higher education.

NOTE 1

The following institutions provide support for Aborigines/ Islanders, though not all programs could necessarily be described as 'enclaves'. In the first group the bulk of the students are in Teacher Education:

Armidale CAE, Ballarat CAE, Bendigo CAE, Brisbane CAE, Capricornia IAE, Darwin IT, James Cook U, Macarthur IAE, Newcastle CAE, Northern Rivers CAE, South Australian CAE, Western Australian CAE.

The following institutions also provide support:

Adelaide U, Monash U, New England U (from 1986), Queensland U, New South Wales U, South Australian IT, Tasmanian U, Tasmanian IT, Western Australian IT, Wollongong U.

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