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MY PHILOSOPHY OF ABORIGINAL EDUCATION

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My philosophy of Aboriginal Education is indebted to Brameld's *Philosophy of Reconstructionism* for helping clarify my views because, as Brameld writes -

Reconstructionism...commits itself, first of all to the building of a new culture. It is infused with a profound conviction that we are in the midst of a revolutionary period out of which would emerge nothing less than control of the industrial system, of public services, and of cultural and natural resources by and for the common people who, throughout the ages, have struggled for a life of security, decency, and peace for them and their children.

(Brameld, 1971, p.62)

This definition of Reconstructionism has been written from a Western point of view. However, with modification, the philosophy of Reconstructionism can easily be adopted as my philosophy of Aboriginal Education.

Firstly, Brameld states that "Reconstructionism commits itself to a building of a new culture". In analysing the statement it can be said that Aboriginal culture and Western culture must form a new culture through the bonding of each culture. However, it must be noted that each culture will retain its values, customs and traditions, but must readily accept and try to understand the values, customs and traditions of the alternate culture. The result will be a new cultural group.

Secondly, Brameld states that

We are in the midst of a revolutionary period out of which would emerge nothing less than control of the industrial system, of public services and of cultural and natural resources by and for the common people.

(Brameld, 1971)

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Aborigines feel that it is this statement that needs most modification, as it is presently felt that they are not included, as a race, as a part of the common people but are racially ostracized from the common people. They feel that for themselves to become accepted as members of the common people, education must pave the way in overcoming this segregation.

Thus, if racial ostracism and the lack of education can be overcome, the third part of Brameld's statement may come to fruition and this is - "a life of security, decency and peace for them and their children.

The following areas will be examined to identify the problems that Aborigines have with the present day education system.

1. Traditional education
2. Environment
3. Language
4. Government Education Policy
5. Pedagogy

NOTE: 1. Where the term Western is used throughout this paper it will apply to all nationalities forming Australian society except Aborigines.

2. The term "Traditional Aboriginal society" refers to: the lifestyle lived before European contact and the influence of technology on contemporary Aboriginal society.

1. TRADITIONAL EDUCATION

To understand why contemporary Aboriginal society should adopt this educational philosophy one must first know the educational philosophy of Australian Tribal Aborigines.

It is believed that traditional Aboriginal society would have Perennialism as the basis of its educational philosophy. The reason for this is

Perennialists call for allegiance to absolute principles. Despite momentous social upheavals, permanence they say, is more real than change.

(Brameld, 1971, p.42)

When looking at traditional Aboriginal society one soon discovers that this society based its existence around an allegiance to absolute principles. These people had a very complex and formal set of time-honoured traditions and values. These were fixed and unchangeable. The people maintained the balance of nature by performing set rituals. The education of children followed time-honoured customs such as letting the children run free until the age of about twelve; until then they received an informal education in techniques of survival, morals, values, ancestry and family. Upon reaching age twelve, the children were then inducted into adulthood by means of initiation ceremonies. This formal education system was based totally on observation and oral communication, as Aborigines did not possess the written word.

Upon colonization, the destruction of Aboriginal society and culture proceeded quickly because the cultures of Aborigines and Europeans conflicted.

Thus, the perennialist philosophy of education fell into disuse. It no longer exists to meet the requirements of contemporary Aboriginal society, but I feel that my educational philosophy could do much to alleviate the current tension felt between Aborigines and non-Aborigines living in today's society.

2. ENVIRONMENT

When contemplating the philosophy of education that is most suitable for contemporary Aboriginal society, the environment that Aborigines live in must be considered of prime importance. This is because Aborigines can be divided into four basic sub-groups which all have vastly different educational needs.

The first group to be considered is the Aborigines who are still living an almost totally traditional lifestyle. These people have little contact with Western society and still speak their native tongue as their first language and English as a second, providing they can speak English at all. However, as Western society continues to expand across the length and breadth of the nation this group will come into contact more and more with Western society. Therefore, these people must be educated to understand Western culture.

The second group to be considered are those Aborigines who are living on missions and reserves. This group is a mixture of full-blood and mixed-blood Aborigines. Many of these Aborigines do not speak their native language as this was forbidden by Western society (when the reserves and missions were established) along with many of their other traditional practices, such as initiation, marriage and religious ceremonies. It must also be noted that these

people were taken from their tribal lands and placed in the same environment as other tribes, which caused further denigration of their self respect.

The third group are the Aborigines who are found living as fringe dwellers on the outskirts of most urban and rural communities. They are mainly of mixed blood with very few full-bloods living amongst them. These people, in common with those of the second group, speak a form of English known to Western society as Aboriginal English.

The fourth group consists of those people who are presently dispersed amongst the Western community. These people are mainly those of mixed blood who have been able to come to terms with Western education and values. They generally have a good command of English and are regarded as members of Western society. These people themselves feel that, although they are fulfilling a role within Western society, they belong to their reference group (Aboriginal society) because of the cultural ties between themselves and their relatives, who may belong to any one of the previous three groups mentioned.

Upon looking at these environments that Aborigines live in, I feel that an education policy based upon the ideas borrowed from Reconstructionism could do much to allow the Aborigines to take their rightful place in society. I say this because it is through education that Western society will be able to understand and appreciate why Aborigines wish to retain as much of their culture as possible, and why they find it difficult to adopt Western culture totally.

3. GOVERNMENT EDUCATION POLICIES

Education policies concerning Aborigines varied greatly from State to State, as there was no National policy on the education of Aborigines until 1937, when the Commonwealth Government adopted the policy of assimilation, whereby part-Aborigines were to be absorbed into the European community, detribalised Aborigines were to be educated to a level to allow them to work as domestics and labourers, and the rest would remain on Reserves.

In 1951 the policy of assimilation was given a more formal statement, to the effect that all Aborigines shall ultimately become the same as all other Australians.

(Bostock, W.W., 1981, p.85)

The policy of assimilation is not what Aboriginal society feels should happen because it means that, they as a race would have to give up their cultural identity and become the same as Western society. However, Aborigines feel that, if the right educational philosophy (or policy) is adopted, the two cultures that presently exist could form a new culture that would preserve the rights of Aboriginal society. This would mean that Western society would have to respect and understand the traditions and values that are important to contemporary Aboriginal society and at the same time, Aborigines would have to realise that it is impossible to return to the traditional life style lived by their forefathers.

Thus, they will have to recognise, respect and adopt some of the values that traditionally belong to Western society, such as 'technology'.

4. LANGUAGE

This philosophy commits itself to the building of a new culture. Therefore, if Western culture and Aboriginal culture are to form a new pan-Australian culture, Western society must first accept the fact that Aborigines speak several different languages.

Firstly, there are the Aborigines who still speak their native tongue and use English as a second language. It must be noted at this stage that Aboriginal languages are not the same throughout Australia because language varies from tribe to tribe, and it is believed that there are up to 250 dialects still being spoken today. For example, in Alice Springs region there are six different dialects spoken; these are, East Aranda, West Aranda, Walpiri, Pitjatjantjara, Pintubi, Iliaura.

Secondly, a very high percentage of the remainder of Aboriginal society speaks a form of English known as Aboriginal English. This language

differs from Australian English in its phonetics and phonemics, grammar and vocabulary. The differences are sometimes wide enough to impair mutual intelligibility.

(Bostock, W.W., 1981, p.70)

Therefore, Western society must become aware of and recognise these language differences so as not to discriminate against or prejudice the chances of Aborigines' succeeding in the Western education environment.

However, at the same time, Aborigines must try to increase their levels of understanding and competence in the use of Australian English if they are not to prejudice their own chances of acceptance and understanding in this new society. For this to happen the Western education curricula would have to adopt new methods for teaching Aborigines, such as the bilingual teaching strategies which are currently being used in a small number of schools in the Northern Territory.

5. PEDAGOGY

When considering the pedagogy for teaching Aborigines so that they will meld with Western society yet retain their own identity, it is felt that this pedagogy should be broken into specific areas to form an overall view of what is required by Aborigines to align themselves with the Reconstructionists' philosophy.

The following areas shall be looked at:

- 5.1 Adult Education
- 5.2 Curricula
- 5.3 Open School
- 5.4 Bilingual Teaching
- 5.5 The Teacher

5.1 Adult Education

As previously stated under "Government Education Policies", it was not until the mid 1900s that the education of Aborigines was given any formal recognition. Previous to that date, it was not compulsory for Aborigines to attend school. Thus, many of the older generation who are today's parents either had no formal Western education at all, or their education was limited to very basic elementary levels. This then led to the Aborigines being exploited and discriminated against in the work place because of their low academic achievements. Furthermore, it produced low self esteem.

This also has a detrimental effect on the younger generation who are presently in the Western education environment, because many parents do not understand, as a result of their own negative experience, why it is so important for their children to succeed. Without that education the Aboriginal Race can never take its rightful place in contemporary Australian society.

Therefore, it is felt that a program of education aimed at adult Aborigines to sensitize them to education could do much to promote their awareness of the need for the younger generation to succeed at education. TAFE is presently doing this by offering courses aimed at the adult community which promote as their main objective a good experience where there are no failures. This then creates an atmosphere in the adult learner's mind that "I can achieve at education, I am no longer frightened by education" and, hopefully, has the side effect of parents encouraging their children to succeed at education.

5.2 Curricula

For Aborigines to succeed in Western Education it is felt that the curriculum must be changed to include Aboriginal Studies. The reason for this is that Aborigines have occupied this land for approximately 40,000 years. Their traditional life-style followed very strict and time-honoured rituals which catered for the preservation of the land's flora and fauna and a life of relatively little conflict with their peers. However, since colonization very little has been included in the Western education curriculum to inform Western society of the Aborigines' traditions and values.

Thus Aborigines feel that Western society is trying to ignore their identity and to rob them of their rightful place in today's society. They also feel that many people in Western society are making ill-informed judgements about Aborigines based on what they see in the media and they feel that Aboriginal Studies could do much to right this injustice, as people would be able to make more informed judgements for themselves.

5.3 Open School

When selecting the type of school that would be most suitable for Aborigines, one must consider the school environment, the short period of time that Aborigines have been included in the Western education system and the influence of traditional education.

In traditional education people were educated in the natural environment, as there were no formal institutions such as schools and colleges. The environment that Aborigines live in today varies greatly from that of the past, and Aborigines now live in what can be defined as four vastly varying types of environments, as previously discussed in Section 2, Environment. Each group has different educational requirements so the type of school must take this into consideration. The fact that Aborigines have only been included in the Western education system for approximately forty years has

inherent problems for the students in this system. This may be because many of the students today do not have the support of well educated parents; after all, their parents were in the past treated as social outcasts in the education system, and did not receive the support required to master Western education.

Therefore, it is felt that the type of educational institution that would be most conducive to learning would be an open school system. The reason for this is that students would be free to decide when the time was right for them to attain education. A decision like this would relieve the students of many of the social problems they face in present day institutions.

5.4 Bilingual Teaching

As previously indicated, Aborigines have vast language problems to overcome if they wish to compete equally with Western society in the area of education. Therefore, for an education philosophy to be complete it must introduce a bilingual teaching program which allows those Aborigines who still speak their own language to retain it while gaining mastery in Australian English.

5.5 The Teacher

When instituting an education philosophy it must be realised that much emphasis will be placed on the teacher to allow a smooth melding of the two cultures in question.

Therefore, the teacher must have a good understanding of both cultures: must not promote one culture above another; must try and elevate the minority students' status to the level of the other students; must strive to develop interpersonal relationships between teacher and student and between student and student. The teacher must also try to structure classes to meet the needs of the students.

SUMMARY

This new pan-Australian culture would be comprised of a minority group (Aborigines) who would retain as much of their traditional culture as possible but at the same time would realize and accept that it is impossible to return to the traditional values of the past because of the influence that Western technology is having on their everyday lives. These people would then have to strive to become Brameld's "common people" in this new society through education.

The other group to make up this new culture would be Western society, and this society would be striving, through education, to understand and accept the values of contemporary Aboriginal society which in turn would allow Aborigines to become "common people" in this new culture, thus allowing for a life of security, decency, and peace of both present day cultures.

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