



# The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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## REPORTS AND RESOURCES RECEIVED

National Aboriginal Education Committee - *Philosophy, aims and policy guidelines for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.*

In the April/May issue of *The Aboriginal Child at School*, we were able to reprint part of the summary document - *Philosophy, aims and policy guidelines for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education* - published by the National Aboriginal Education Committee. The final section of Primary education is now presented, to be followed by Secondary education and Bicultural bilingual education.

### PRIMARY EDUCATION

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The NAEC recognises the need to maintain Aboriginal identity. Educators must accept that while an Aboriginal child is at school being inculcated with European knowledge and values (including urban Aboriginal children) once school is over for the day the child reverts exclusively to his/her home culture. The experiences of the child at school are generally not valued because they have not been experienced in an Aboriginal way.

Educational service-delivery agencies should accommodate the cultural differences and aspirations of Aboriginal society. Until this basic issue is resolved, very limited progress can be made in developing appropriate cognitive and social skills to a level which will promote Aboriginal students in great number as 'successes in primary schooling'.

The articulation of an Aboriginal pedagogy will challenge and enlighten established teaching ethics for Aboriginal students. Once embraced by educational institutions such as the primary school, it will also provide a broader base of understanding for those teachers who teach either Aboriginal children or Aboriginal Studies, or both.

The NAEC aims to promote a careful study and articulation of Aboriginal learning styles and methodology. Until this is accomplished no real change of either service delivery or success for Aboriginal students will become evident.

The most significant issue is the status of Aboriginal society as a whole. There is much information that is

inaccurate and undesirable about Aboriginal society in the resources available to primary educators. The historical documents on which primary educators have been informed about Aboriginal society have nurtured in them a superior, often overtly racist, philosophy. When teachers themselves use these documents it reinforces as truth what they learnt as students. A major aim of the NAEC, shared by State and Territory Aboriginal education consultative groups and individual Aboriginal educators, is the elimination of resource materials which do not provide accurate information on Aboriginal Australia or Aboriginal people.

The teacher's understanding of the 'home culture' is significant to the success of Aboriginal children in primary school. Such insight will allow appropriate personal relationships and learning environments to be established. To establish such an environment, Aboriginal parents, community groups and Aboriginal support staff must be included to provide the sound cultural advice required for significant change. There is a need for parental involvement in all curriculum areas, for greater parental involvement in schools, and for parental involvement on school councils.

## SECONDARY EDUCATION

In the past, the majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been denied secondary education; some still do not have access to it. Yet access to full secondary education is a high priority. Secondary education provisions must be relevant to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and must ensure opportunities for achievement in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander society as well as in the general community. Secondary education must develop pride in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity, continue understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander society, encourage self-confidence and personal autonomy, and offer opportunities for competence and achievement in intellectual, academic and technical skills.

Policy development, the setting of priorities, and development of appropriate programs within secondary education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, must be improved. It is essential that Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander parents, educators and community groups are heavily involved at all levels of discussion and decision making.

Access to secondary education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is limited mainly because of the lack of relevance which the existing curriculum holds for these students. Once the legal school-leaving age has been reached, only interesting and relevant programs will hold Aboriginal students beyond that point. If these are provided, the retention rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students will be improved.

Authorities responsible for providing secondary education must encompass the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in secondary schools. For instance, the realistic aims of a rural community may not be met if the curriculum and approach taken are those chosen for a densely populated, inner city area. Cultures should be maintained, and reinforced. Given the formal structure of secondary education it appears more difficult to accommodate cultural maintenance.

The principle of cultural maintenance should be included in school policy. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be involved in day-to-day school activities. Aboriginal society and issues should be promoted by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander speakers, teachers and parents who should visit the school frequently.

Secondary schools should encourage Aboriginal and Islander children and adults to succeed in personal development, academic advancement and technical skills. They should give Aboriginal students a sense of pride and identity, and an understanding and appreciation of the values of Aboriginal society.

Cultural differences are important for formulating policies. For instance, young Aboriginal boys living in traditional societies may pass through traditional rites of passage and become men at about 16 years of age. Secondary school education should be arranged around this fact.

Several strategies may result in breaking down the barriers which presently divide many Aboriginal communities and schools:

- CREATION OF AWARENESS THROUGH WORKSHOPS/MEETINGS - Aboriginal and Islander parents should be encouraged to participate in school activities including school excursions. This encouragement is occurring through the establishment of State and regional consultative groups which convene regular parent meetings to create an awareness of the value of education. Parents could also undertake the planning and preparation of excursions.
- COMMUNITY EDUCATION PROGRAMS - Further involvement can be gained by implementing community education programs throughout Australia, based on parental involvement and community consultation at the local level. Initially, these programs could be associated with the establishment of community learning centres within Aboriginal communities or local schools.
- EMPLOYMENT OF TEACHING ASSISTANTS AS A LINK BETWEEN COMMUNITY, SCHOOL AND EDUCATION OFFICERS - in addition to Aboriginal teachers, Aboriginal teaching assistants/aides play an important role in promoting wider and more effective participation of Aborigines in the educative process by providing a communication link between the school and the Aboriginal community.
- IDENTIFICATION OF SUCCESS MODELS - Aboriginal youth need to meet Aboriginal people who can be regarded as models. Administrators, professional and local community members who have made significant contributions to Aboriginal development should be invited to meet with young Aboriginal children.
- ESTABLISHMENT OF A CONSULTANCY FRAMEWORK - Local Aboriginal, regional and State groups should be involved in framing national priorities and directions. Regular workshops and meetings have been organised in a continuing process of developing co-operative effort and dialogue.
- ESTABLISHMENT OF CULTURE CENTRES AND HOMEWORK/LEARNING CENTRES - Such facilities provide opportunities for the Aboriginal community to experience cultural activities and to study. Both children and adults could meet regularly and hold educational workshops at these 'second chance' facilities.

- ARTS EDUCATION - it is desirable to promote an awareness of the value of art and craft as a productive leisure activity and as a possible income-producing activity. Aboriginal and Islander craftspersons should be recognised and then be employed as teachers so that they can pass on their skills to young people.

## BICULTURAL BILINGUAL EDUCATION

It is essential that cultural maintenance for Australian Aboriginal society be given a priority in contemporary multicultural Australia.

In education intensive interest and work is required in the areas of bicultural and bilingual education program development for Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal people have experienced cultural and linguistic genocide as a result of the past policies of church groups, government agencies, such as former protectorates, and State and federal government. While little can be done for those whose languages are lost, it is of paramount importance that the remaining cultures which have retained Aboriginal languages be maintained.

It is commonly believed that 'education is enculturation'. This principle obligates the agencies responsible for education service delivery to recognise the need and right of Australia's indigenous people to bilingual and bicultural education.

The notion of bilingual and bicultural education for Aboriginal groups who have maintained their own language is a concept easily accepted by educators generally. However, the same notion applied to rural or urban Aboriginal people who have no language other than Aboriginal English is more difficult to grasp.

It must be realised that *all* Aboriginal groups maintain specific cultural rules which govern all aspects of life. Education must accommodate this knowledge and break away from the stereotyped notion of Aboriginal identity. If education is enculturation, the present system of education, for the majority of Aboriginal people, is assimilative and demoralising, for it pays no respect to cultural values and aspirations other than those of the major society.

The National Aboriginal Education Committee is committed to promoting the awareness, even the inculcation, of Aboriginal social values in *all* Australians. The mono-linguistic approach of classroom instruction for Aboriginal children in most of Australia has resulted in many children leaving school earlier than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Maintaining one's first language is essential to normal cognitive development and language competence. The teaching by Aboriginal speakers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages must begin in pre-school and continue through primary and secondary school. The use of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language speakers in those programs is crucial. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must also have access to quality English language programs which are appropriate to their linguistic environments and educational, social and cultural needs.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students whose first language is English must be given access to learning an appropriate Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander language as part of the daily school program, where there is community and parental support. While this aim may not produce fluent speakers, the benefits gained within the context of learning the language are significant both personally and socially.

The NAEC accepts that generally Aboriginal people separate Australian society into two segments, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, hence the strategy required for bilingual and bicultural education services must follow that cultural perception of the world.

The development of bilingual and bicultural education programs has a number of dimensions. Consultation, involvement and support of the school's home community are essential where there is a first language other than English. To develop such programs and exclude general community involvement is inappropriate. Another dimension is the development of bicultural and bilingual programs in those schools which have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children whose first language is English. These programs must also involve consultation with parents, children, and the State or Territory Aboriginal education consultative group and its network.

Aboriginal children should learn to speak and become literate in their own language. English should be taught as a second language so that Aboriginal people can have access to mainstream society. We should encourage the use of the mother tongues initially, and then introduce English so that eventually Australia will be a bilingual country in which we are allowed the freedom of choice to use whichever language we choose.

To be successful, bilingual programs must incorporate the cultures associated with the languages. Languages cannot be fully appreciated or understood if they are separated from the culture of which they are part. Activities that are designed to promote a greater understanding of the cultures involved are therefore essential aspects of bilingual education programs.

NAEC investigations have established the following provisional guidelines for the development of bilingual and biliterate educational programs:

\* BILINGUAL EDUCATION SHOULD EXTEND TO YEAR 10. In general bilingual education does not continue beyond Year 7, or if it does, little emphasis is placed on it. Yet, the most appropriate time for an Aboriginal youth's Aboriginal education is from Year 7 to Year 10. It is at this time that a boy, through initiation ceremonies, becomes a man, and a girl becomes an adult member of the community.

\* NEED FOR MORE RESOURCES. To become literate in any language, one needs exposure to that language in its oral and written forms. Since Aboriginal languages were in the past orally transmitted, the languages first need to be recorded by a linguist. An orthography needs to be compiled, a teacher-linguist needs to develop a teaching methodology for the orthography, and written materials need to be developed by Aboriginal assistant teachers. The production of suitable reading material in the home language is an expensive operation. Additional funds should be allocated by State and Northern Territory education departments, to support communities in their quest for bilingual education.

\* NEED FOR TRAINED ABORIGINAL STAFF. Additional Aboriginal staff should be employed and trained as teachers, linguists and teaching assistants.

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