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AN OUTSIDER'S VIEW OF ABORIGINAL EDUCATION IN ARNHEM LAND

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INTRODUCTION

In 1986 I was successful in my application for an award under the Schools Exchange and Travel Scheme (a Commonwealth Schools Commission project). As I had expressed interest in visiting small schools with predominantly Aboriginal enrolments, arrangements were made to visit four schools in the East Arnhem Region. During the two weeks of my visit to Arnhem Land I was able to visit Numbulwar, Umbakumba, Yirrkala, Ramingining and Gapuwiyak schools, as well as two outstation schools, Raymangirr and Dhamiyaka.

My visit to these schools left me with a positive impression of the scope and direction of Aboriginal education in the Northern Territory. Each school had its own individuality and character: Numbulwar and its school-based post-primary curriculum; Umbakumba and its strong emphasis on community involvement within the school structure; Yirrkala and its innovative leadership in Aboriginal education within Australia over the years; Ramingining and its uniqueness in school community¹ morale; and Gapuwiyak and its positive role in the development of local outstation schools.

With the constant criticism of education in general that occurs through the media, it was most pleasing to witness the many positive programs operating in these schools that emphasised relevant and meaningful learning experiences for their predominantly Aboriginal clientele.

1. THE PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM

The most noticeable feature of the public education system within the Northern Territory is its size. There would appear to be far fewer public schools to administer within the Territory.² The Territory is divided into administrative regions, with each region headed by a regional superintendent. Another noticeable feature within the system is the abolition of school inspectors. Once again, the size of the regions allows the system to function smoothly without the traditional role of the school inspector. In

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comparison, as each of the school administrative regions of New South Wales is much bigger in area, as well as the number of schools that each region administers, the individual district inspectorates actually form sub-regions within each region. Administratively, the New South Wales public education system could not function effectively without these district inspectorates.

Another feature of the Territory's education system is the status of the Northern Territory itself. Over the years, Commonwealth funding would appear to have been generous or adequate. (This would depend, of course, on what side of the fence you were sitting.) Whilst there are some aspects which appear to contradict this statement (for example, caravans used as classrooms) I believe that the resources support that the system has given to each of the schools is highly commendable. This sufficient funding aspect has been an important catalyst to many innovative programs which operate within the system. For example, the sheer costing of outstation education would be enormous, yet, in these more stringent financial times, the system is continuing to develop these outstation schools rather than cut back or even eliminate the program as larger bureaucratic organisations would tend to do.

2. THE SCHOOLS

A variety of teaching experiences could be found among the staff of each of the schools. A feature of the Northern Territory Department of Education is the recruitment from other States of teachers and principals to fill vacancies within the schools. Due to the very nature of the Territory, the Department is attracting young and committed teachers who are prepared to face the challenge of teaching in a complex, challenging, yet rewarding field. I was very impressed with the quality of the teaching staff and principals at each of the schools that I visited.

Whilst the remoteness of each teaching situation is something which the individual teacher must be prepared to cope with and accept, there are adequate financial benefits given to teachers to cope with the reality of the situation.

Fortunately, each school reflected the individuality of the community which it served. This is mostly achieved by the school funding situation as it occurs within the Territory. Whereas, in New South Wales school funds are issued to schools for specific purposes, for example, postage, school maintenance and primary grant, schools in the Territory are given their total allocation at the beginning of each year. It is then left to each individual school

to determine its own priorities in funding for each year. It is this decentralisation of school funding which promotes individuality within the schools. Once again, I believe this method of school funding succeeds in the Northern Territory due to the size of the public education system.

A positive feature of ancillary staffing in the schools was the position of caretaker. If the 'right' person is selected as caretaker then the concept of school community is enhanced, as the caretaker soon complements the role as school liaison officer as well as general trouble-shooter within the school.³

It was very pleasing to see the recognition given to the importance of Aboriginal personnel within the teaching-learning environments. Both assistant teachers and teachers aides can be found within the school classrooms. The Remote Area Teacher Education Program, designed to give initial on-the-spot teacher training to Aboriginal trainees is certainly trying to achieve an increase in Aboriginal teachers in Northern Territory schools.

Another essential program supported by the Department is the Outstation schools. These clan groups who have re-established themselves on their traditional lands have requested schooling for their children. The teacher is a member of the local community and is supported through the education system by an Outstation supervisor, a teacher based at the nearest school. These schools resemble the old bush school in many ways. They have an important role to play in each community and are being allowed to develop as each community sees fit. On my first visit to two outstation schools, I was fascinated to see children working on their "Bush Books" for over an hour, contented with sitting on the ground outside the school among the flies, dogs and heat.

It was very evident from various Departmental publications that Aboriginal perspectives across the curriculum had been well researched, prepared and distributed to all schools. In fact, the whole range of Departmental publications dealing with the various aspects of Aboriginal education amazed me. There would appear to be such a lack of publications dealing with Aboriginal education in certain areas of southern Australia and yet there appears to be such an abundance of materials on the same topic in the Territory. It is a great pity that such publications are not more readily available across Australia.

3. THE COMMUNITIES

The communities in Arnhem Land are certainly a contrast to similar Aboriginal communities elsewhere. The traditional cultural aspects of their heritage have not been lost. The language, music, hunting, dancing and clan organisation, just to name a few aspects, stands in stark contrast to Aboriginal groups in other areas of Australia, where their culture and heritage have almost been lost or destroyed. It was no wonder that the children at Raymangirr out-station school worked as well with a background of didjeridu music and chanting.

The set-up of these remote communities with their own power stations, banks, post offices, council offices, general stores and health clinics certainly emphasises the need for essential living skills as part of a school curriculum. If the ultimate aim is for Aboriginal communities to be able to operate all the essential services within the community (including the school), then the acquisition of the necessary skills to undertake these tasks must be given a high priority in the post primary educational program.

In contrast to many southern situations, it was most gratifying to witness the positive effects of the leadership of clan elders within the local community. Whereas there appears to be a lack of respect for elders by youth in the southern communities, this is certainly not the case in Arnhem Land.

The effect of the introduction of Kava within Aboriginal communities was interesting. I certainly came back with the viewpoint that Kava should be introduced into communities where the consumption of alcohol is a problem. The fact that Kava tends to make people lazy and content rather than violent and aggressive, as is usually the case after excessive consumption of alcohol, should be considered carefully by communities which face the situation.

Weilmoringle school will be piloting a satellite dish for television and radio reception in New South Wales in 1986. It is something to which the local community has been looking forward. Yet, having visited Ramingining where there is no television within the community has certainly changed my enthusiasm. To witness a community without television, with strong family units and with children enjoying doing activities together around the community, made me feel that some day family structures and lifestyles are going to be affected by the introduction of television within the community. With the current trend of authority-bashing by the

media, under the guise of investigative journalism, it was so pleasing to see the lack of discipline problems within the community, with no television.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

For anyone involved with Aboriginal education, a visit to schools in Arnhem Land is a must for your own professional experience and development. It is not the backwater of development in Aboriginal education, but rather the forerunner. This is evidenced by the many programs that have been undertaken that other states are now contemplating.

My recommendation to education authorities around Australia is: that all Aboriginal education within Australia come under the jurisdiction of the Commonwealth Government. Teachers for Aboriginal schools/education should be part of an Australian Teaching Service (on secondment from their own State Education Departments). By doing this, it could create a pool of experienced and dedicated teachers who would be able to share their experiences throughout Australia, rather than locally or within their own State system.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ I use the term school community to indicate the oneness of these two entities, the school and the community. All schools attempt to achieve a school community. However, for traditional or other reasons, these two groups tend to remain apart as a school and as a community.
- ² For example, in the North East Arnhem Region, there are about 11 schools. In comparison, the Western Region of New South Wales comprises 206 Government schools. Although this comparison may be unfair in terms of relative areas covered as well as the development of both regions, the point being made is the smaller number of schools which comprise each region within the Territory.
- ³ The situation was clearly illustrated with Phil, the caretaker at Umbakumba. Phil, who is an influential and highly respected member of the local community, plays a vital role at the school. Phil follows up incidents of vandalism and graffiti and is quick to chastise children who have done the wrong thing at the school. This role of school community elder was appreciated by everyone at the school. The very nature of the role Phil had within the school community definitely enhanced a positive school community relationship.

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