

ABORIGINAL VIEWS

*BALANDA EDUCATION A MIXED BLESSING FOR ABORIGINES

*W. Lanhupuy

It is important that we all recognise the historic significance of the occasion we have just witnessed. That is the presentation of university degrees to Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory. And also the fact that *traditional* Aboriginal people have received university degrees.

I would like you to reflect on the Aboriginal experience of Western education in Australia and, in particular, the Northern Territory.

Schools have been part of the process of colonisation of Australia and its original inhabitants. Schools were introduced and imposed on Aborigines following the fierce struggles between Aborigines and the new white settlers, for the land. This occurred in a predictable pattern as each State and Territory of Australia was progressively colonised over the past two hundred years. This colonisation process has taken place within living memory in the Northern Territory and, unfortunately, continues in many of our schools today.

These have been difficult times, in which schools have been used quite openly to capture the minds of Aboriginal children and to turn them towards the dominating Western (Balanda) culture. So schools have been most significant in the attempt by non-Aboriginal Australians to assimilate Aborigines into the Balanda society.

* Balanda - White or Western.

* Mr Wes Lanhupuy, Member for Arnhem, N.T. Occasional address at a graduation ceremony for Aboriginal teachers at Batchelor College, Northern Territory.

However, it is a testimony to the cultural strength of the Aboriginal peoples of Australia that the Government policies of the past have not succeeded in totally obliterating Aboriginal cultures and knowledge. But, sadly, much has been lost in areas of Australia where colonisation took place last century. For example, languages, ceremonies and traditional knowledge.

To the credit of Aboriginal people much has still been retained in the face of continual pressures to undermine and undervalue the intellectual tradition of Aboriginal Australians.

It is of utmost importance that there are changes in the roles of schools so that Aboriginal community interests may be better served.

Schools, as places of education for our children, have been a mixed blessing for Aboriginal parents.

The dilemma for the Aboriginal communities has been whether to support schooling and expose our children to the processes of cultural alienation and confusion, or to turn our backs on these Balanda schools altogether.

The dilemma arises from the recognition that our communities need young people trained in the Balanda way for the employment positions now available in Aboriginal communities and to fulfil our aspiration of self-determination.

The current Government policies of self-management and self-determination for Aboriginal Australians represent a marked shift in thinking in Australia. However, against the historical backdrop of cultural assimilation, it has proven difficult to shift the assimilationist attitudes and practices amongst many non-Aboriginal Australians.

It should come as no surprise that schools and education systems have been slow to embrace cultural self-determination for Aborigines. These are difficult issues for both Balanda and Yolngu. We have both experienced the social and political dimension of schooling, the underlying and all-to-often unspoken function of schools in the Western society. As a result it is sometimes very difficult for people to recognise how their own attitudes and values, as revealed through their interactions with Aborigines, could be denying the cause of self-determination - a cause that they may consider themselves to be espousing.

This is often the case in schools where the strong Balanda cultural orientation of the institution, and the dominating position of Balanda teachers and administrators inevitably work to influence the minds of children in ways that undervalue the Aboriginal heritage.

Aboriginal people now understand that if schools are to serve the political, social and economic purposes of their own people, the school, as an institution, needs to be accommodated within the Aboriginal society itself.

Only when the cultural orientation of the school becomes Yolngu, will schools become integral to the movement of Aborigines towards self-determination.

The decolonisation of schools in Aboriginal communities is the challenge for Aborigines now. This will be done through careful and prudent action by the Aboriginal community members themselves. It will not commence in the same way in the many different Aboriginal communities across Australia. People will respond to the challenge in ways compatible with the skills, training and experiences located in each community.

Developments will take form in response to the support offered or denied by the existing Balanda school systems across Australia. But in all cases it will be the Aboriginal people themselves who will ultimately decolonise their schools and create a new form of this social institution for modern Aboriginal Australians.

In this process it will be the Aboriginal teachers who will be the people exploring new forms of educational practice. These Aboriginal teachers will develop curriculum and teaching approaches that are respectful of, and informed by, the cultural heritage of Australian Aboriginality. Through close liaison with prominent community members, Aboriginal teachers will begin to teach in ways that are uniquely Yolngu, while incorporating those elements of Balanda knowledge and culture needed to function in modern Aboriginal communities and in the broader Australian context. In this sense, a bicultural or 'both ways' education for Aboriginal children will emerge. Success depends on the education system being compatible with Yolngu culture.

Aboriginal people must have the opportunity to provide much greater input into the curriculum and other facets of the education systems.

The challenge for tertiary institutions enrolling Aboriginal students into Teacher Education programs, or other professionally-oriented programs for that matter, is not to repeat the assimilationist practices of the primary and secondary schools. The issues are the same. Tertiary institutions in Australia derive their meaning from the traditions and culture of Europe. Exposure to tertiary study for Aborigines could mean that one's Aboriginality is weakened and devalued.

When Aboriginal professionals return to their communities, it is essential that they be able to embrace the culture of their clans and continue their intellectual development within that Yolngu cultural tradition. In this way these Aboriginal professionals will become important people in their community's struggle for self-determination.

Tertiary education programs established to provide access for Aboriginal students must themselves be experiments in bi-cultural education. This will not be a simple matter, especially while the lecturing staff in contact with Aboriginal students remains Balanda.

The challenge for tertiary and TAFE institutions funded to enrol Aboriginal students and to implement programs for these students, is to develop courses of study that begin with the knowledge and skills that the students bring with them from their communities, and then develop the students' study programs through continual reference to their society, their culture and their communities' needs.

Programs developed in this way should not be thought of as parochial or limiting. It is an irony that the best of Balanda programs for Balanda students are constructed on these same principles oriented towards the Balanda society and culture.

Further Education programs for Aboriginal adults at places like Batchelor College must also embrace the aspirations of Aboriginal people for self-determination. This will be achieved through programs that are based on bi-culturalism, through on-going consultation by staff and students with Aboriginal communities and educational organisations, by giving students a more active role in their own learning, and by a policy of rapidly increasing the proportion of Aboriginal lecturers on academic staff.

Graduates of Batchelor College (including the D-BATE students) have an important role in the future development of the college and Aboriginal Education in the Territory in general. Contributions from these graduates should be consistently sought by curriculum advisory committees working in the broad field of Aboriginal Education. These graduates form a professional group in the Northern Territory and are a significant resource for Aboriginal Education organisations such as FEPPi and NAEC.

They are equally a significant resource for Government education policy makers. These graduates must come into the vanguard of Aboriginal self-determination through our own schools and colleges. Through their involvement as teachers, lecturers, consultants and researchers, the education of our children and young adults will once more return to our own people.

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RESOURCES

Primary Perspectives - Aboriginal Studies Ideas for the Classroom.
Aboriginal Studies Cluster, ICEC, 1987 - \$8.00.

The Inner City Education Centre, Sydney, have advised that the above is now available. It is designed to give primary teachers information and ideas to assist them in incorporating an Aboriginal perspective into their classrooms. It features -

- ideas and lesson plans for infants and primary classes in the major subject areas;
- strategies for implementing the Aboriginal Studies policy in schools;
- a comprehensive resource listing of available materials including books, wall charts, videos and audio cassettes and a list of relevant organisations;
- information on the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG), the Aboriginal Education Unit (Dept of Education) and the Catholic Education Office policy. It is available from:

Inner City Education Centre, 37 Cavendish Street,
Stanmore, NSW 2048 Phone (02) 516 3550