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ACROSS AUSTRALIA.....

FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ABORIGINAL EDUCATION :

Using the Past to Plan Brighter Futures

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past 15 years the voice of protest in Australia has come to be linked synonymously with the black Australian. The nation's indigenous people have progressively united and, in the strength of unity and growth of support for their claims, have met increasingly resistant Federal and State governments. Unfortunately, the "land rights" issue has dominated the public Aboriginal doctrine, preventing white Australians from being exposed to and appreciating the other important needs and opinions Aboriginal people have.

One of these needs is an education system sympathetic to: past, failed attempts at educating indigenous people; the importance of Aboriginal culture as a socio-cultural identifier and educational issue; and the needs Aboriginal children have in terms of curriculum and pedagogy. These fundamental elements are the counterpoints from which any study of the development of Aboriginal education, within Australia, must proceed.

ABORIGINAL EDUCATION : Historical perspectives

Prior to European settlement the Australian Aboriginal people had evolved, over thousands of years, an education process which successfully prepared Aboriginal children for life in a harsh, natural environment. The proliferation of Aboriginal society under these conditions reflects favourably on the efficacy of pedagogical techniques used in traditional Australia. Willmot (1986:1) identifies three modes of instruction used in traditional Aboriginal education, recognised commonly as "apprenticeship; schooling; and self-tuition". Furthermore, the traditional curriculum was not limited to physical skills regularly perceived as hunting and gathering. White (1981) suggests that a complete knowledge of internal social relationships, rules and laws governing cultural

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and spiritual entities was passed from the elders to the children. Indeed, under a now modern conception of education, Aboriginal children were brought together in small groups with the purpose of learning specific bodies of cultural and religious knowledge. Knowledge, which Willmot (1986:2) describes as "...at least as large and intellectually rigorous as most modern complex societies."

The fundamental idea of education, in traditional Australia, was the transfer of knowledge from person to person; from the developed understanding and memory of adults to the developing minds and memory of children.

European settlement inextricably changed the Aboriginal condition. Foremost was the decline in use of traditional educational methods. As the influence of the new society spread, Aboriginal labour used, European laws economies and conditions imposed and technology advanced, so proportionally the bonds to traditional methods receded and the socio-cultural fabric was destroyed. Evident is Willmot's (1986:3) support:

The entire social order of old Australia was virtually destroyed within fifty years of the European arrival on the east coast.

While the colonizers were willing to offer systems of law, economy and technology, they did not construct an adequate educational process for the indigenous people. Indeed, these cogent reminders from Gale and Brookman (1975: 53-56) lend insight into thought about Aboriginal education at the time.

...the aboriginal native, as far as our observations extend, makes no effort to attain the advantages of civilization; and it is extremely probable that no human efforts, however well directed, will conquer the adult black's attachment to his wild though miserable mode of life; something perhaps may be done with the children, particularly half-castes...

...we (proprietors) cannot give any advice that would assist the Committee in its endeavour to promote the welfare of the aborigines; every exertion having been made...to make them useful, but without success.

It does not appear to me that there is much hope of effecting any general improvement in the moral condition of so scattered, disunited, and indolent people as the Papuas of Australia...

(Gale and Brookman, 1975:53-56 from minutes of the Select Committee on Aborigines, NSW 1845)

Finally, the trenchant remark of an early settler, 1846, regarding state funding of Aboriginal education:

...unless the civilization and education of the natives, both adult and child, can be carried on, on a sufficiently extended scale, to include both parent and child within its sphere, it is a flat contradiction to...spend large sums in useless attempts to teach a half-dozen children to spell...whilst hundreds of wretched outcasts are wandering through the country unheeded, uncared for, without food, clothing, or home, who might be both fed and clothed with the money.

(Gale and Brookman, 1975)

As European social, political and numerical dominance prevailed in Australia, extensive state education systems were developed, and until 1940 generally excluded Aboriginal children. The exclusion policy was not one based in law but, instead, enforced through expulsion on the protest of white Australian families. Willmot (1981) notes that, had these decisions been contested by Aboriginal parents then they may not have been maintained under laws set down in various State Public Instruction Acts. It was, however, never challenged.

Perhaps the first publicly successful protest by an Aborigine came in 1937, when an Aboriginal man, William Ferguson, produced and published (1938) a document known as the "Aboriginal Manifesto" (Willmot, 1981). Although meeting considerable resistance to the integration of State schools, the New South Wales Department of Education accepted Ferguson's main proposals and implemented them in 1940. They were, as Willmot (1981:284) reports, firstly - "To allow Aboriginal people to assimilate into the European population", and secondly, "To educate Aboriginal children in the same way that European children are educated."

It may be argued that Ferguson's proposals were foremost a public plea for the equality of opportunity: that Aboriginal people should have the same rights to improve their life chances through education as Europeans did. Unfortunately, too literal an interpretation was placed on Ferguson's proposals, especially his second point. Aboriginal children were taught and expected to succeed within a system established by white Australians for white Australians. However, it took 27 years before officials realised that Aboriginal children could not be educated the same way as European children and be expected to attain the same outcomes.

Willmot's (1981:284) cynical, though accurate summation of this experiment in educating black Australians, concludes:

By the mid-1960's it was clear that the experiment had failed. In 1938 white Australia had rejected Ferguson's proposition, and by 1960 black Australia had rejected it also.

A 1967 referendum signalled the first politically positive moves in Aboriginal education for almost three decades. Increased levels of Commonwealth funding and the newly established portfolio of Aboriginal Affairs were designed to give the Aboriginal condition the national recognition and status it appeared to deserve. The assimilation of Aboriginal people gave way to the accommodation of black Australians within established systems. To this end, education funding was predominantly used to employ indigenous teacher aides, language programs and bilingual education. Importantly, the period from the late 60s to the mid-70s was marked by two common assumptions: that existing institutions provided an appropriate education (provided some changes were introduced) for Aboriginal children; and that the educational models adopted for white Australians would produce equal outcomes and advancement in the Aboriginal child.

The 1967 referendum was politically positive, but a study of the Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme by Professor Betty Watts in 1976, was to prove that the educational and social advantage to Aborigines had been limited. Watts' data (reported in Willmot: 1981) showed that nationally, only 4.9 percent of the Aboriginal student population was progressing to senior high school levels, compared with a recorded figure of 22.9 percent for white students at the time. The common assumptions about the appropriateness of existing institutions and methods of education were brought into question; increased funding and commitments to existing programs compounded the complexity the issue now assumed.

The search for new theoretical positions, program directions and political policies on Aboriginal education began in earnest and characterised the final years of the 1970s. It was also accompanied by the first financial restraints placed on the development of Aboriginal education since the commencement of Commonwealth funding in 1967. White Australians were, it seems, unwilling to continue increased funding for another failed experiment in Aboriginal education.

One of the major developments to stem from the 1970s was the need, recognised by the Federal government, to incorporate Aboriginal decision-making groups into the advisory committees of the Commonwealth Department of Education. Chief amongst them, and appointed by the Minister of Education in 1980, was the Commonwealth Aboriginal Studies Working Group (CASWG). In turn, this group was supported by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and had members drawn from various support groups working in Aboriginal education.

A report from John Budby (1982), then Chairman of the CASWG, suggests that courses in Aboriginal studies were best regulated on a national level. However, national co-ordination of programs in Aboriginal education has not eventuated. Rather, the 1980s has been an era of State government intervention and planning, with only the broadest policy guidelines being conveyed by national interest groups.

For example: a Queensland Education Department initiative saw the official establishment, ratified by State Executive Council Meeting 85/200 on 16 December, 1985, of the Aboriginal and Islander Education Branch as a functional planning section working within the Department of Education. The genesis of this branch can be traced to the mid 1970s when, considering the need for action, Bill Hamilton, then Deputy Director General of Education and John Dwyer, a seconded principal whose task it was to oversee the development of Aboriginal and Islander education programs (and later appointed the State's first Primary Inspector of Aboriginal and Islander Education) began to gather personnel in an attempt to redress shortfalls in specialist staff and planning in Aboriginal and Islander education. The work of this group of seconded teachers, known until 1985 as the Aboriginal and Islander Education Group, laid the foundations for the relatively successful approach to indigenous education being developed and recognised in Queensland today. Evidence to support this claim will be tendered later in this paper.

Willmot (1986) contends that the drift away from national planning can be attributed largely to the evolution of three different philosophical views during the late 70s and early 80s. Basically, the three philosophies proposed alternative views for the direction of Aboriginal education into the 1980s and beyond. They may be summarised, briefly, in this way: Separatists called for an independent education system with funding and administrative support to develop a total and unique Aboriginal education suited only to Aboriginal children; Integrationists promoted existing

systems with a revised needs-based curricula for the Aboriginal child; Evolutionists argued that Aboriginal society was evolving and education should be seen as a fundamental key in the outcome of that development and the maintenance of a definable identity.

Based largely on integrationist philosophy, Willmot (1986: 11) reflects positively on the Queensland Department of Education development of Aboriginal education:

It should be noted that during the 1980s it became clear that the outcomes of Aboriginal people from Queensland State schools exceeded in success, not only any other State, but almost all other States put together.

The obvious alternative interpretation is that for the majority of black Australians education remains, into the mid-1980s, a failing experiment. Without objective data, Eric Willmot's assertion of Queensland's success remains, essentially, a comparison of failure.

In supplying the statistical data which Willmot (1986) neglected, one can only support, comparatively, the relative success of the Queensland case. Consider (from McGarvie, 1985: section 3) using the Year 8 Aboriginal student population cohort as 100%, retention rates of students entering Year 12 in Queensland show: 1975 - 1.5%; 1979 - 10%; 1981 - 16%; 1983 - 21% and 1986 - 36.6%, compared with a measured national average in 1986 of only 17%. Furthermore, of the national total of 1104 Aboriginal Year 12 students in 1986, 622 or 56.3% were in Queensland High schools. One may argue confidently that any system which leads in policy and program development will be the yardstick which others use in comparing and evaluating their own systems. The Queensland success has, ironically, left the Department of Education in Queensland few options other than rigorous self-evaluation. The question is not how advanced Queensland Aboriginal and Islander education is, but rather, how much better it can become?

Unfortunately, these figures also confirm my original assertion that failing systems throughout Australia deny the majority of black Australians a useful and encouraging education.

ABORIGINAL EDUCATION : Cultural Perspectives

In attempting to reconcile a failed history in the provision of indigenous education, with possible causes, one starts with culture as the greatest obvious difference, apart from skin colour, existing between Australians.

In defining cause and effect relationships in Aboriginal education, many writers (McMeekin, 1971; Tatz, 1980; White, 1981) label culture as the key issue preventing greater relevance and the acceptance of education by Aboriginal people. The difficulty of cultural adaptation, it is suggested, is one of the main obstacles in 'white' thinking on 'black' education issues. McMeekin (1971: 239) notes :

The basic issue in providing an effective education is that of a cultural barrier that makes it difficult... for the child to respond to the variety of experiences and activities provided by the school...

What is culture? Moreover, how necessary is this element in the planning of workable Aboriginal education programs?

Definitions of culture vary. However, the general reference by theorists is to a universally shared system of existence, ranging widely to cover elements of: religion, social custom, rules and laws, general knowledge and the arts. Importantly, culture is an ecumenical experience, actively developed and commonly sought by a society's members to reinforce societal bonds and establish an identity one can claim as his or her own.

Clearly, the dominant culture within Australia today is an Anglo-European one. Over the two hundred years of white settlement, cultural dominance has been both passively and actively secured through various means, including: legislative and judicial power, economic systems and schooling. With all useable systems of power vested in the dominant culture, other subsistent cultures will always remain on the periphery of white Australia's socio-cultural dominance.

The institutions which actively maintain cultural order are schools. Jones (1987:2), in examining the role of cultural dominance through schooling, reaffirms:

...through its control of education the dominant group's culture becomes the culture of the schools. You have to assimilate dominant culture to become 'educated'.

It is Jones's final point, education based on the assimilation of another culture, which has been a historically neglected and, until recently, underestimated concept in the education of black Australian children, and remains today a fundamental (and because of the nature of cultural dominance) permanent obstacle to the increased success of those children within the schooling system.

However, new sensitivities have developed to culture as an issue, particularly during the 1970s and early 1980s. The following comparison illustrates the development of thought on culture as it relates to Aboriginal people: McMeekin (1971:243) states - "In an integrated school situation he [the Aboriginal child] is a culturally deprived child of a culturally deprived home and, in rural areas, usually living in a culturally and socially deprived environment." White (1981:241) states, on cultural pluralism in schooling, "...a recognition of inherent value in Aboriginal society...which foster bilingualism and 'cultural activities' - traditional stories, dancing, songs and art - in the schools." The changes in thought may be characterised as a move away from the view of culturally deprived to the now accepted 'culturally different', an appreciation of Aboriginal culture and cultural pluralism within Australia, and consideration of the special needs of children raised within an Aboriginal culture. It may be argued that these fundamental changes in the way educators perceived culture have precipitated what success can be found in current educational systems.

In drawing support for my assertion that new sensitivities to the link between Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal education have developed, the following points are offered to plot the changes which have occurred:

1. Total assimilation during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s meant Aboriginal children experienced the pedagogy and curriculum designed for white children. Cultural needs of indigenous children were neglected or denied.
2. During the early to mid-70s, accommodation policy sought to cater for the learning needs of Aboriginal children within the established system. In an attempt to make schooling more relevant and widely accepted, financial investment addressed some of the cultural needs (mainly language development) which were recognised.
3. The late 70s and early 80s were marked by changes in philosophy on Aboriginal education. On accepting the permanence of established institutions and the participation of Aboriginal children within them, the Queensland Education Department seconded specialist staff to write and implement programs for schools with large indigenous populations. These programs were closely linked to the cultural backgrounds of the children and compensated for some of the imbalances found in 'white-oriented' content and skills development.

4. The current trend remains one of program development for special needs groups, for example, the newly developed Aboriginal Tertiary Aspirations Program (ATAP). However, the Aboriginal and Islander Education Branch has also moved into a higher degree of pre-service and in-service work with teachers and paraprofessionals destined to work or already working with Aboriginal and Islander children. Moreover, all sections within the Curriculum Planning Branch are encouraged to consult with the Aboriginal and Islander Education Branch in producing curriculum documents.

The relevance and importance of Aboriginal cultural content in the development of Aboriginal education cannot be underestimated. Firstly, it promotes a socio-cultural identity which is vital for the acceptance of academic learning by Aboriginal people as a thing of value. Secondly, it helps give perspective to the cultural assimilation which occurs within the dominant culture's schools. Finally, it will make learning a more realistic, experience-based task for black Australian children.

ABORIGINAL EDUCATION: Curriculum and Pedagogy

It was widely considered, during the mid-1800s through to the early 1930s, that the indigenous people of Australia would eventually die out (Willmot, 1981). Certainly, it was perceived that the demise of the Aboriginal cultural identity, in the face of an ever-growing European dominance, would lead, along with disease and racial violence, to the ultimate destruction of the race.

The first attempts to provide for the needs of the Aboriginal people came by way of racial segregation. Considered appropriate because of the protection it would provide Aborigines, the rationale was also based on furthering the assimilation of European culture through training and patronage by white overseers. Gale and Brookman (1975:56-57) record the comments of the Catholic Archbishop of Sydney given in evidence before the New South Wales Select Committee on Aborigines in 1845:

...if the Government were to take care of the aborigines, and give them tracts of land on which they might congregate, and where they would be in safety, much good might be done...They might be encouraged to have little gardens, and gradually be brought into the habits of civilization...Instead of protectors...industrious simple minded married men might have the care of them, to prevent the intrusion of whites, and look after their well being and concerns.

The policy of segregation was prolonged and even supported by a Royal Commission as late as 1927. The segregation policy may have originally developed from genuine concern for the Aboriginal condition. In a time of limited options, the kindest interpretation is that the policy was perceived as the most efficient way to help Aborigines cope with the inevitable onset of Anglo-European development. However, without adequate provisions for education, housing, schemes to provide employment, or sufficient medical care, the policy can only be exposed as one of racial neglect.

The Ferguson proposals (documented herein) precipitated the first chance Aboriginal children and the Aboriginal race had at advancement through education. However, the constraints and bias of a curriculum designed for white Australian children and pedagogical techniques strictly covered by white teachers, negated the chances of Aboriginal advancement. Curriculum and pedagogical issues were never brought into question. Rather, the common assumption at the time was that Aboriginal children did not achieve because of a generally limited learning ability.

Indeed, curriculum and pedagogical issues, like cultural issues, have only, and increasingly, been considered over the past 10 years. Academic research has actively sought to explain the learning deficit and provide options for overcoming it. For example: Seagrim (in Willmot, 1986:11) studied a traditional and non-traditional group of Aboriginal children in terms of development from a Piagetian perspective. The traditional group was shown to have developed, cognitively, in a different way from that proposed by Piaget's model, while the non-traditional children showed no significant deviation from the developmental path.

Furthermore, certain writers have sought to provide equally relevant cultural explanations for failed learning outcomes (White, 1981; Mullard, 1974). White (1981:244-246) in examining the perceived difficulty of Aboriginal people to comprehend and retain mathematical concepts and operations, explains:

Given the lack of counting and calculating in Aboriginal culture, what is learnt in school is by rote.

The conflict between cultures is no more evident than in this example. Simply, mathematics is a process necessary within an economically oriented, material, class-based albeit Western society. Mathematics remains culturally irrelevant for members of a subsistence oriented, resource sharing society.

Others have focused criticisms at pedagogical issues and the processes of education. Observations from the mid-1970s by Mullard (1974) clearly suggest that the educational problem is essentially also a cultural one. He points out (pp.21-22) that the majority of teachers of Aboriginal children at the time were white, and had little appreciation of Aboriginal culture. The pre-service and in-service of teachers and para-professionals who work with Aboriginal children now gains higher priority within Education Departments around Australia. He also raises some other important, perhaps less 'repairable', issues within curriculum and pedagogy, especially for integrated schools:

Through the ordinary English-oriented curriculum children are encouraged to absorb and relate to things and concepts which are foreign to their actual or even potential existence.

Also, relating to teachers and the processes they employ:

They transmit an entirely different set of values; a white way of understanding and doing things.

(Mullard, 1974:21-22)

The basic concern underpinning curriculum and pedagogical issues, and perhaps Aboriginal education as a whole, is finding ways to make education a relevant and valued commodity. To do this, schooling must provide increases in the cultural and social mobility for the Aboriginal children who participate.

CONCLUSION

Developments in Aboriginal education, nationally, over the past 10 years, has gone some of the way to redressing the imbalances and neglect indigenous education experienced in earlier times. Responsibility for the development of better programs has always been and will always remain with the dominant culture. However, increased planning and input by groups aligned with the needs of our socio-cultural minorities, will help create more equitable education systems. Several generations of Aboriginal people were denied a useable education. This can never be repaid. Therefore, the challenge is to use past, failed attempts and present successes to prepare and ensure brighter educational futures for Aboriginal children.

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