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ABORIGINAL EDUCATION IN THE 1990s

*Ken Darvall

INTRODUCTION

1988, the year of the Bicentenary, was considered by some as the start of a new era for Aborigines. However, despite excellent media exposure on Aboriginal issues, the bicentennial year concluded with just memories of various celebrations.

We enter the 1990s at a time of increasing change throughout the world. I believe that it is necessary for everyone involved in Aboriginal education to focus on some important issues that encompass this delicate area.

1. RESPONSIBILITY

Perhaps the most disturbing dilemma that presently dominates Aboriginal education is the game of political football between Federal and State governments in terms of responsibility for Aboriginal education.

The winners in this game are the governments as they continue to buckpass policy issues and decisions. As a tight economy produces limited options for Aboriginal education, any blame for the failure of programs can be tossed at the 'other' government for funding cuts or restrictions.

The losers are the Aboriginal communities and students who desperately require the removal of politics from education. There have certainly been enough reports and studies undertaken over the last fifteen years that highlight the needs within Aboriginal education.

The issue of Federal and State responsibility to Aboriginal education must be clarified. From a personal viewpoint, the responsibility needs to be given to the Federal government so that a consistent approach can be applied throughout Australia while still ensuring the recognition of local and regional groupings. Perhaps an off shoot from this responsibility could be an effective communication network, specifically in Aboriginal education, across Australia.

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2. COMMITMENT

Closely tied to responsibility is commitment. In terms of a commitment from governments, it is critical that Aboriginal education programs be funded generally for a minimum period of seven years. At present, there are too many short term programs that are successful for their duration, then fail as a result of cultural misunderstanding. Many people are frustrated by the token attempts made in Aboriginal education through the lack of financial commitment and support by government bodies. By ensuring that programs are funded for a minimum period of seven years, a valuable opportunity is provided for adequate achievement and success to be attained in these programs.

A genuine commitment to Aboriginal education is also required from all education authorities and institutions. The tokenism approach from the dominant society needs to be eliminated and replaced by a commitment that will necessitate an increase in importance of Aboriginal communities in the decision-making processes that determine the priorities within Aboriginal education.

3. RECOGNITION

The recognition of the importance of direct Aboriginal involvement in their education is both valid and long overdue. Aboriginal community input is regarded as essential for programs to be successful. Yet this same factor is often overlooked or denied to Aboriginal communities in many education programs that operate in schools.

The ownership factor will greatly assist involvement by parents and community in Aboriginal education programs. Obviously any involvement by parents and community will greatly benefit the educational process regardless of the form or shape that it takes.

Recognition and ownership does not necessarily advocate "Black Schools". What it does advocate, however, is an educational partnership that provides an appropriate learning environment which is based on cultural need, understanding and recognition.

4. TECHNOLOGY

We have certainly witnessed a decade of change that has been dominated by technology. Aussat has brought television to remote

Australian communities. Students are using word processors for their story writing. We have the throw-away digital watch which can be cheaper to purchase than some basic food items. The video recorder can bring a movie into the home six months after its release in major city cinemas. The facsimile machines have outdated postal deliveries.

The 1900s will only replicate these changes, at perhaps a greater pace than we have already experienced so far. With these changes it is important that the benefits of technology are utilised to overcome previous difficulties within Aboriginal education. For example, communication through the technological advances by computers, modems, satellite dishes and facsimiles have been able to break down previous isolation barriers and difficulties.

Yet there seems to be a hesitancy in using this classroom technology to its optimum advantage. Schools need to utilise the benefits that can be gained from classroom technology in order to provide their students with basic experiences for the world around them. If we are to provide Aboriginal doctors, lawyers, teachers, etc., for tomorrow's world, then it is our responsibility to ensure that our students have experienced the technology of today's world.

5. Values

A real concern from this technological era is values. The changes that technology creates in today's society are changes that have not been necessarily experienced before. The resulting uncertainty places a strain on traditional values which dominate the prevailing culture. It is essential that Aboriginal communities reassess and reaffirm their values and beliefs in terms of the technological changes that are occurring around them. Importantly, values should not become like the throw-away digital watch!

6. CONCLUSION

In many respects the next ten years can be regarded as miniscule in comparison to the last 40,000 years. However, the 1900s will be a critical period if the advances that have been so often discussed and highlighted as critical Aboriginal issues are to eventuate.

"Performance indicators" is a vogue term in education circles at present. In terms of Aboriginal education, the above issues need to be carefully considered when determining appropriate performance indicators.

The complexity of issues in Aboriginal education today can be diminished once government politics have been removed. Only then will identified priorities be clarified so that a common purpose can be recognised and pursued.

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BIENNIAL CONFERENCE
REMOTE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY FUTURES
12-14 JULY 1990, Townsville, Qld

CALL FOR CONTRIBUTORS

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies will hold a conference to discuss issues related to the future of remote Aboriginal communities. The aim of the conference is to provide a forum to work out strategies to help remote Aboriginal communities cope better with the increasing pressures placed upon them, particularly in areas such as health, development, pressures of government agencies, etc.

The Institute is interested in hearing from people who wish to make presentations at the conference. This conference may be of particular interest to those living and working in remote communities, as well as advisers, public servants and academics working closely with those communities. There are currently four major themes:

- Internal Structures and Processes including decision-making;
- External Influences, such as mining and other development pressures on communities;
- Community Environment, including matters relating to health, substance abuse, violence, employment and education; and
- Communication, particularly between communities and outside agencies, in the context of delivery of services.

If you wish to make a presentation of any kind, or would like further information on the meeting please phone:

Ms Liz Lowrie (062) 494754, 492892, 494022

Written enquires should be sent to: Remote Aboriginal Communities Conference, Centre for Continuing Education, Australian National University, GPO Box 4, Canberra ACT 2601