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AN ANALYSIS OF THE ABORIGINAL EDUCATION POLICY DOCUMENTS OF QUEENSLAND#

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The analysis examines how the documents approach - if at all - several different aspects of Aboriginal education as expressed in particular by Aboriginal women, the traditional educators of Aboriginal children (Gale, 1983). These aspects include:-

- Aboriginal Learning Styles
- Parental and Community Involvement
- The Child as an Individual
- Teaching Staff - Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal
- Curriculum Content - Aboriginal History; Aboriginal Studies (general); Integration into Other Subjects: and Relevance of Content
- Research-based Teaching
- Languages
- Racism
- Misinterpretation of Basic Aboriginal Philosophies
- Resources

The Queensland documents are not presented as a complementary set. There are four separate documents which address the issues of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy goals, aims and objectives; Aboriginal education strategies and guidelines and the reflection of racism in Australian history and in literature about Aboriginals. These documents were not designed to be complementary although they each cover different aspects of Aboriginal education and need to be read as a unit to get an appreciation of the Queensland educational position.

ABORIGINAL LEARNING STYLES

Aboriginal learning style is the way in which each Aboriginal child absorbs and retains information and/or skills, and

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these are considered by the Aboriginal community to be greatly different from the non-Aboriginal learning styles (Brandl, 1983; Christie 1988). It is widely recognised that "children with different needs (such as Aboriginals) need to be taught differently" (Kalantzis & Cope 1988, p.56; Dunn, 1986, p.12).

A summary of these learning styles includes:-

- *Informal setting
- *Non-verbal communication - observation/modelling imitation
- *Personal trial and error - "mastery" before (learning by doing) performance; practice alone or with peers
- *High degree of perceptual curiosity
- *Strong interest in the familiar
- *Wholistic approach to learning (global)
- *Motivation - person to person
- *Co-operative group workers
- *Strong affiliations with adults of community experimenting and investigation (particularly their environment)
- *Inhibited by the classroom environment
- *Respond to setting own learning agenda (Eckermann, 1988, p.17; McRae, 1988, p.149)

The Queensland document "Strategies - Teaching Aborigines & Islanders in Urban/Rural areas, Queensland" includes many of the above learning styles. They are, however, categorised in terms of "field sensitivity"; "external locus of control"; "person orientation" and "global to particular". It gives clear and sensitive recommendations for the implementation of Aboriginal learning styles but in the context of the existing classroom oriented learning environment. There is a feeling that the teacher is to use the learning styles as a means of adapting the Aboriginal/Islander child to this environment. This is clearly demonstrated through the continuous references to the classroom as the learning forum, in the pictures on pages 5 and 6, and in the closing recommendations of helping the children make the transition from "one teacher, one room...of primary school to secondary."

Case studies cited in "We Are Bosses Ourselves" suggest that Aboriginal children benefit from being removed from the classroom environment (Gale, 1983). Christie (1988) suggests that the restrictive environment of the classroom conflicts with the Aboriginal sense of personal freedom and does not allow "for learning through responding intelligently to the

world around them, and no chance for learning how to respond intelligently" (p.6).

PARENTAL AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Adults play a crucial part in successful education. The influence of the Aboriginal adults is far more powerful than any (non-Aboriginal) teacher's. Therefore, to help children you must work through the Aboriginal adults. If the Aboriginal adults are convinced that what you are doing with the children is important, meaningful and good for them, you have a great chance of succeeding.

The documents do not reflect the depth of involvement in the educative process traditional to the Aboriginal community and specifically the Aboriginal women, nor the depth of involvement which many Aboriginal people would prefer to have in the education of their children. The General Information Booklet of the Aboriginal and Islander Education Branch in Queensland and the Guidelines for Studies about Aborigines in Queensland Schools both make reference to community involvement on a consultative basis. The Guidelines Document comes closest to reflecting the Aboriginal position with their stipulation that Aboriginal Studies be taught by Aborigines, and their recommendations that Aborigines be involved in many areas of the education process, and also that the Queensland Department of Education employ more Aboriginal staff.

Christie believes "We always need to be looking for ways to involve the families and other Aboriginal community members in school activities" (1988, p.10). Some of the ways which the documents neglect to make reference to are:-

- Story telling by grandparents
- Excursions into the Aboriginal environment
- Language programs
- Traditional craft activities.

THE CHILD AS AN INDIVIDUAL

Individual freedom is a precious and central part of Aboriginal life. An essential part of learning responsiveness is learning to be independent from the manipulations of other people.

(Christie, 1988 p.13)

This is just one interpretation of individuality. Another interpretation as described by Eckermann (1988, p.4) is the

difference *within* cultural groups; even when generalisations may describe group tendencies not all members of a group reflect these group characteristics.

The Queensland documents are not designed to look at the child as an individual and therefore there are limited references to it. However, the strategies document does state

The teachers who are most effective with adolescent students, who cater effectively for individual difference...are usually most effective in the multi-cultural classroom (p.2).

Basically this document focuses on the generalisations of group tendencies. The Guidelines document makes reference to the "variety of difficulties" (p. 32) which confront the Aboriginal child which alerts the teacher to the necessity for individual consideration in relation to these difficulties and how they affect the child. The other two Queensland documents make no reference to individuality of the child but the "What's being written about us" background paper does illustrate common stereotypes associated with Aboriginal children, e.g. "Aboriginal children's favourite lessons are singing and drawing, at which they are often better than white children" and, "like many Aborigines, Graham loves to draw and use coloured crayons" (p.24).

TEACHING STAFF

Aboriginal

Members of...Aboriginal communities who are expected to share in educational decision-making should also be given access to training programs that will help them understand the education system and identify key areas requiring change.

(Andreone & Nihas, 1986, P.18)

This sentiment is included in the objectives stated in the Queensland policy document General Information Booklet. It aims:-

- a) to maximise the employment and training of Aboriginal and Islander people in all facets of the education system...

b) to ensure the professional development of all persons working, or intending to work in areas concerning the education of, and education about Aboriginals and Islanders (p.2)

The guidelines reference to Aboriginal staff does not convey the above sentiment but stresses the need for Aboriginal Studies to be taught by Aboriginals.

The Strategies document (Qld) makes reference not to training Aboriginal personnel but to the Aboriginal Counsellor or Teacher's Aide being part of a support team for the "teacher".

Non-Aboriginal

White teachers have to remember that they always have a lot to learn about themselves and their world from Aboriginal teachers who can be both children and adults...white educators need to start listening, and looking around them to find what it is that Aboriginal people, children and adults, urban and from remote places, are saying about themselves, their world, and their education.

(Christie, 1988)

The fact that the policy documents exist attest the validity of the need for non-Aboriginal teachers to become aware of the Aboriginal society and culture. All the documents are written to the non-Aboriginal teacher and make specific references to the need for this awareness as the principal educator. However, some all-Aboriginal schools see the role of the non-Aboriginal teacher not as principal educator but as "facilitator/advisor" who assists and guides the Aboriginal teacher (Mcrae, 1988; Gale, 1983). At least the Queensland Guidelines document makes a reference to Aboriginals as the principal teacher, but there is no reference to the non-Aborigine, specifically, being used as a guide.

CURRICULUM CONTENT

Aboriginal History/Aboriginal Studies

So important is the need for all Australian children to acquire an understanding and appreciation of the Aboriginal way of life, both traditional and contemporary, as well as urban and tribal, the QATSICC considers that

Studies About Aborigines should be an integrated-graded subject from Years 1-10.

(Guidelines Doc., Qld, p.8)

So strongly does the QATSICC feel about this they stress that Aboriginal Studies should be compulsory (p.9). This attitude is widely accepted in most readings which discuss the need for Aboriginal Studies (Gale, 1983). The other Queensland documents refer generally to the need for Aboriginal Studies and in particular the "What's Being Written about Us" paper warns teachers to approach the history aspect with consideration of the Aboriginal perspective. The guidelines document provides specific details of an integrated program from Year 1-12 which it proposes as a replacement for the existing program. The existing Aboriginal Studies program is an extension of the Social studies Curriculum and focuses most of the learning time in the primary years. The Guidelines document believes that this gives insufficient exposure to the complexities of Aboriginal culture and does not allow enough depth. It provides specific details of programs available at the tertiary level. It also makes good recommendations for 'camp facilities' to be established in both rural and urban settings to aid, firstly, Aboriginals from the alternate setting to get an understanding of what life is like in Aboriginal communities different from their own. Secondly, once the 'camps' are established, for all children to be given a chance to experience Aboriginal culture first hand. Funding for these camps is all laid out in a simple and concise form and appears to be not extravagant.

Integration into other subject areas

Another frequent complaint of teachers is that Aboriginal children appear to have little or no mathematical understanding. Although this contention can be disputed, it is still a widespread misconception which leads the integration of Aboriginal Studies to encompass the language/arts subjects and with brief reference to science (Qld Guidelines, p.5). The Queensland Guidelines document does address seriously the extensive integration of Aboriginal Studies into all subject areas. However, it does not include mathematics. This integration is demonstrated in their proposed specific programs, pages 14-23.

The Queensland Strategies document states

it is important that there be a school commitment to incorporation of some Aboriginal/Islander content across all curriculum areas.

It goes on to say this is part of ensuring "adequate Australian content" (p.17). Such a general recommendation does not emphasise the extent to which Aboriginal content can be incorporated. However, the Queensland Guidelines document suggests

Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are not always given credit for the specific skills they possess (p.2).

Relevance of Content

Meaningful knowledge is taken home and re-explored and evaluated in terms of its usefulness in the ongoing business of Aboriginal life.

(Christie, 1988, p.7)

Christie alerts us to the very real need for the Aboriginal child to be able to use what he/she learns and extends from this with the suggestion the "Aboriginal learners must have freedom to choose the circumstances of their own learning" and that this may lead to the need to develop genuine learning experiences as alternatives to the academic experience (p.10). The significance of this is highlighted in the selection of courses requested by one school, which included agriculture, animal husbandry, cooking and nutrition (McRae, 1988). The Queensland consideration of the relevance of content is found in the very specific recommendations for the 'camps' (pp.32-37, Guideline). One of the aims of the camps is to assist rural students to develop social skills appropriate for the urban context.

RESEARCH BASED TEACHING

Christie believes that we need to look at the way things have been taught, are being taught and then develop strategies from what we learn (p.7). The only reference to this basis for teaching is found in "What's Being Written About Us" where the author suggests twice that "Books can be a vital tool in combatting prejudice" (p.31 and introduction page, 1984).

LANGUAGES

The Queensland Strategies document (p.9) refers to providing opportunities, where appropriate and approved by relevant Aboriginal communities, for the maintenance and development of Aboriginal languages. The Queensland Guidelines document gives details of incorporating the studies of Aboriginal languages from Year 1-12 (p.14). This would involve

in the early years such things as learning Aboriginal place names, listening to tapes, and discussions about Aboriginal languages. In the Years 11-12 the document proposes a more detailed examination of Aboriginal languages with the possibility of learning one (p.14).

None of the documents look into the necessity for the continuance of the 'home language' as an aid for ensuring the cognitive development of the child. This totally disregards a vital factor that research clearly sees as affecting the child's educational development (cited Gale, 1983) i.e. the "translations of English curriculum materials into Aboriginal languages did not necessarily transfer concepts" (Gale, 1983). This is considered to artificially disrupt and retard the child's development. It also disregards the utilisation of a viable resource and the deeper involvement that could be made possible by including Aboriginal women to teach/assist in Aboriginal languages.

RACISM

Prejudice must be taught and taught early. If you don't corrupt the children early they are in danger of growing up without prejudice.

(Grassby, p.9)

The "What's Being Written About Us" paper (Qld) focuses solely on the historical development of the racist attitude in Australia and how it was justified and influenced by economics, science and politics. It also has an extensive section on material written about Aborigines with regard to language used e.g. primitive, alco, Abo and derogatory stereotypes. It concludes with a detailed bibliography of resources related to racism and the Aboriginal in Australia. The other Queensland documents express hope that education will make non-Aborigines aware of the complexities of Aboriginal society and put an end to racist stereotypes.

MISINTERPRETATION OF BASIC ABORIGINAL PHILOSOPHIES

Interviews conducted by Eckermann with Aboriginal people indicate that some of the terms associated with Aboriginal philosophies have been too simplistically interpreted (1988, p.8). These include "Past/Present Orientation", "Group Orientation", and "Time Orientation". The Queensland Strategies document repeats these misinterpretations. If these are

not remedied teachers can easily fall into the trap of categorising a trait in an Aboriginal child and providing inappropriate teaching. (I personally do not like to categorise children as this takes away their individuality.)

RESOURCES

Books are a vital tool in combatting prejudice. They can influence teachers, students, and eventually the community at large to more positive attitudes.

(What's Being Written about Us p.31)

The resources listed in the Queensland documents - General Information Booklet and "What's Being Written about Us", are not extensive. However, the General Booklet focuses on materials and people related to the study and teaching of Aboriginal people and culture of Queensland.

CONCLUSION

The documents help the teacher to focus attention on the concepts of Aboriginal education and the Study of Aborigines but the implementation of successful teaching programs will be better accomplished by ensuring that these documents are fully explained and all implications examined in inservice courses. I would urge that the relevant Government departments look more closely at the specifics of Aboriginal learning and the implications of having a deep involvement of Aboriginal parents and community members working with the teachers and the children to ensure that the Aboriginal child is given the best chance at succeeding at school.

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