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EDUCATION LEVELS

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In our society education is a key factor in determining social and economic status (work opportunities derived from recognised training and accredited qualifications). The educational system appears to alienate many Aborigines. This is attributed to the interplay of poverty, communication or cultural differences, low expectations of school children, attitudes of teachers and parents (and the community in general), large unemployment and the limited scope of school curricula covering Aboriginal history or culture.¹ This had led to an upsurge of pride (in recent years) in Aboriginal traditions and a promotion of the cultural inheritance stemming from the past. The notion of 'cultural pride', clearly influences the black community and the wider society wherein non-Aborigines are increasingly being exposed to 'Aboriginality' in a social and educational environment.

Aboriginal education reflects a legacy of neglect. This legacy appears to be characterized by a general disregard for the value of education by Aboriginal adults who have limited exposure to its benefits. Unfortunately, the lack of academic encouragement by parents and teachers may perpetuate low standards of educational attainment. The social attitudes of their families, peer group pressures, and educational choices, guide many young Aborigines in the direction of traditionally Aboriginal careers (characterised by low levels of pay, status and qualifications) and once they have obtained admission to an Aboriginal segment of the labour market it becomes difficult for them to alter career paths.² There must be greater emphasis in highlighting Aboriginal achievers as role models to younger Aborigines who may doubt their own abilities and the abilities of their own people.³

Less schooling for Aborigines, compared to other Australians, effectively limits Aboriginal opportunities in further education or training and their choice of occupation. Naturally, improvements in the education system must reflect (or rather coincide with) appropriate changes in other areas of society, such as employment opportunities.

Thus, the perceived value of education for Aborigines (and all others) is a function of its utility.

The limited attainment of Aboriginal education is illustrated by the teacher aide situation whereby:

*"Aborigines are trained as aides rather than fully qualified teachers, thus maintaining the grip of white teachers over the education of Aborigines."*⁴

In recent times this situation is changing. The government endorsed the National Aboriginal Education Committee's target of 1000 Aboriginal teachers by 1990.⁵ How many Aboriginal and/or Islander teachers are allocated to your school?

In effect, the work of teachers' aides or assistants

*"are hampered in their task because of the large number of Aboriginal children that need help and the general lack of understanding by school authorities of the important role of the Aboriginal teacher aides."*⁶

Aboriginal teacher aides (and teachers) can perform valuable functions in helping children overcome difficulties in attending school and maintaining progress (by at least providing moral support or reassurance that 'blacks' can succeed in a predominantly 'white' society).

Deliberate and concerted measures by the government appear to reflect increasingly, an acceptance that appropriate training and awareness programs for non-Aboriginal personnel and for the community at large, are also necessary.

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