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**Stand Up My Country, Stand Up!
Aboriginal Views on Education
Since Colonisation**

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Jack Frawley

Aboriginal artists, authors and songwriters have expressed their thoughts and experiences about Aboriginal education through plays, poems, short stories, novels and songs. Their views cover a broad spectrum of educational issues that focus on educational experiences since contact, the teaching of traditional Aboriginal knowledge as part of the school curriculum, and other issues in both ways education.

Aboriginal writers document the effect that contact had on traditional Aboriginal society, and how education was used to implement white government policies. Big Bill Neidjie expresses his feelings about the influence of missionaries and outlines how schools eroded the fabric of Aboriginal society. He pin-points the lack of consultation as the underlying reason for the erosion of Aboriginal knowledge.

Should be missionaries first they started
and asking people this culture
What they done? They run it quick!....
They bin rush in.
They took up school ... teach.

Now Aborigines losing it now.....
This story I'm telling it
because I was keeping secret myself.
I was keeping in my mind with the culture
and see other people what they was doing
and I was feeling sad you know.

White-European different story
what we new generation now, different story.
Because school doing it and something else
and our people they forget that.
They going little by little.

(from 'We like White-man All Right' in Neidjie, 1989: 165 -170)

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Aboriginal songs highlight how education was used for the purpose of Christian conversion. Education was characterised by missionaries' efforts to control, Christianise and civilise the Aborigines. Ironically violence was often resorted to as a means of teaching and enforcing Christian principles. Kev Carmody has expressed the hypocrisy of education based on Christian principles where violence was often the method used to impart Western knowledge.

And they taught us,
"Oh black woman thou shalt not steal.
Hey black man thou shalt not steal.
We're gonna civilise you black barbaric lives
And we'll teach you how to kneel."

And the racist contradiction that's understood by none,
Mostly their left hand holds the bible
And their right hand holds a gun

(‘Thou Shalt Not Steal’ by Kev Carmody, 1990)

Education and violence as tools of oppression, were resorted to by governments and white settlers in their quest to firstly dominate and then assimilate Aborigines into mainstream society. Aborigines did not have any say in the overall decision making processes. Bobby McLeod, like Carmody, has drawn attention to the way violence and education was used to dispossess Aboriginal society, rendering the people powerless and attempting to mould them into a white vision of acceptability.

But then the whiteman with his gun and education
The land they did collect
When the blackman said, "You must not take."
It was classed as disrespect
And replied with, "Blackman you are standing in the way
Of a more progressive way to live,
In a whiteman sort of way."

(‘Wayward Dreams’ by Bobby McLeod, 1987)

The Western educational system provided a vehicle for the implementation of government policies. During the protection and assimilation periods, from the 1930's through to the 1960's, Aboriginal (from 'We Like White-man All Right' in Neidjie, 1989:165 -170) children were often taken from their parents to be schooled. Aboriginal children were basically taught the 3 R's and trained in domestic and manual skills. Jack Davis comments on how Western education claimed to be based on equality, but was in fact aimed at submissiveness and assimilation.

So they said: "Go to school."
This was the rule.
This was the yard stick of advancement in a society
Which, with clasped hands and piety,
Spoke of equality within the eyes of God and the law.
(‘Whither’ in Davis, 1983: 31)

The physical separation from family and culture caused mental anguish and these experiences have been well documented by Aboriginal writers, but none more poignantly than Archie Roach. He speaks of the humiliation that Aboriginal children suffered and paints an atmosphere of grief and hopelessness that prevailed during these terrible years.

This story's right, this story's true
I would not tell lies to you
Like the promises they did not keep
And how they fenced us in like sheep
Said to us come take our hand
Sent us off to mission land
Taught us to read, to write and pray
Then they took the children away.
Took the children away.
The children away
Snatched from their mother's breast
Said it was for the best
Took them away

The welfare and the policeman
Said you've got to understand
We'll give to them what you can't give
Teach them how to really live
Teach them how live they said
Humiliated them instead
Taught them that and taught them this
And others taught them prejudice.

(‘Took the Children Away’ by Archie Roach, 1990)

The result of these policies had disastrous effects for many Aboriginal people, particularly those who had been taken from their parents and educated in a total Western environment. Many were torn between two worlds and were unsure of their identity. Davis mentions the toll that this had on Aboriginal children, as they struggled to find their identity and their position in society.

You have turned our land into a desolate place.
We stumble along with a half white mind.
Where are we? Who are we?

(from 'Desolation' in Davis, 1983: 36)

Historically schools had taught a Western curriculum that relied on culturally inappropriate educational methods. No thought had been given to the relevance of Aboriginal knowledge, and the use of appropriate Aboriginal teaching methods were totally ignored. The result was that Aboriginal children were losing out both ways. Peter Miller writing for Blekbala Mujik notes how Aboriginal knowledge was ignored and how this culturally affected Aboriginal children.

Children now are losing out,
They're not learning their old ways.
They are floating by,
In a world of their own.

('Living In the Dreamtime' by Blekbala Mujik, 1990b)

During the Whitlam era of the early 1970's Aboriginal voices called for a more appropriate and equitable educational system that responded to the requests of Aboriginal people. It was felt that it was important to be able to understand and to be competent in handling Western knowledge and society, particularly in areas which would benefit Aboriginal society. Jack Mirritji saw the underlying importance of understanding Western knowledge in the Aboriginal struggle for cultural survival, and placed the importance of the education of the young as a step towards winning the battle.

For dealing with balanda society we need assistance to learn to read and write to fight for our own rights and to be able to explain our ways ourselves. We are waiting for younger people, who have had school for long time and know how to read and write. We need our own educated people, to explain our way to the balanda, but also to explain the European way to our older people. (Mirritji, 1976: 72)

This ability to communicate with non-Aboriginal people especially through the development of English literacy skills was seen as vital. Oodgeroo Noonuccal emphasised the ability to read and write as the priority, supplanting the priorities of missionaries.

Holy men you came to preach:
'Poor black heathen, we will teach
Sense of sin and fear of hell'
Fear of God and boss as well;
We will teach you work for play,
We will teach you to obey
Laws of God and laws of Mammon ...!
And we answered, 'No more gammon,
If you have to teach the light,
Teach us first to read and write...!

(‘The Teachers’ in Noonuccal, 1990: 23)

The importance of Aboriginal knowledge in Aboriginal society and the maintenance of that knowledge through schooling, has been expressed by several Aboriginal authors. Oral traditions coupled with illustrated representations have come to the forefront, particularly with accessibility and availability of Western art mediums. Aboriginal artists have expressed their desire for Aboriginal knowledge to be part of the schooling system and have encouraged their children to immerse themselves in Aboriginal Law, lest they lose this important structure of Aboriginal society and inevitably their Aboriginality. Paddy Japaljarri Stewart emphasises this point as he explains the reasons for painting Dreamtime stories.

We painted these Dreamings on the school doors because the children should learn about our Law. The children do not know them and they might become like white people, which we don't want to happen. We are relating these true stories of the Dreamtime. We show them to the children and explain them so that the children will know them. We want our children to learn about and know our Law, our Dreamings. That is why we painted these Dreamtime stories.

(Paddy Japaljarri Stewart in Warlukurlangu Artists, 1987: 3)

The notion of both ways education has been a theme in Aboriginal writing and has been the subject for analysis by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal academics. Many Aboriginal schools focus on Aboriginal knowledge, learning styles and teaching methods to implement a more meaningful curriculum. Restrictions are placed on some aspects of Aboriginal knowledge used in the school curriculum, however the

emphasis is always on the Aboriginal way of education and its importance in shaping the children's future. Interestingly enough Aboriginal people see education as a two-way process where aspects of their culture can be shared with non-Aboriginal people and emphasise the importance of cultural understanding. Mainstream non-Aboriginal education has had a history of resisting this and in most cases are still reluctant to take up this offer of two-way learning. Eli Rabuntja, a former Principal of the independent Aboriginal school Yipirinya, stresses the overall benefit of education that consider Aboriginal and Western ways.

Education means everything... that's why you've got to learn. We just take the kids to the bush first and show them food and water, where you go to find them, and take them around. That's education for Aboriginal people. In our own culture there is a lot to teach the children about their own ways - there's both Western and Aboriginal ways. But by education in European ways, we mean schooling and stuff like that - jobs, how to survive. Today they think two ways. It's got to be like that. We have two people here - white and black. Aboriginal people can learn something from white cultures and white people can learn from Aboriginal cultures. They've got to be learned together.

(Eli Rabunjtja in Bowden and Bunbury, 1990: 40-41)

Aboriginal people have expressed this wish to continue teaching a both-ways system and underline its importance in curriculum development. The institution of school is seen as a vehicle that can be adapted to transmit this knowledge, along with the learning of Western knowledge. Tess Napaljarri Ross speaks on how traditional knowledge can be used in schools, and how Western materials can be used in the conveying of this knowledge.

Many people told the children about the Dreamtime by drawing on the ground and on paper; they told them a long time ago in the bush by drawing on their bodies, on the ground, and on the rocks. This was the way men and women used to teach their children. Now, when children are at school, at a white place, they want to pass on to them their knowledge about this place. They want them to keep and remember it. They want them to learn both- ways European and Aboriginal.

(Tess Napaljarri Ross in Warlukurlangu Artists, 1987:11)

The teaching of Aboriginal knowledge, the development of language maintenance programs and the implementation of bilingual programs have been identified as a priority in Aboriginal education. There is a certain amount of pride expressed in the speaking of one's own language.

It's important that the children learn their own language because it is their own language. Why teach English to Aboriginal kids if they've got their own language? They should learn and be taught in their own language so they can learn more quickly and it's their first language. It makes it strong with themselves. They'll be fluent then to speak and to write it. They can have anything if they know the language, make a book of their own or film, make a video ... especially in teaching their own kids, generation after generation.

(in *Being Aboriginal*, 1990: 38)

Aboriginal people traditionally relied on elders or each other as teachers, with elders having a particular and important role in teaching Aboriginal children. There continues to be a need for the involvement of Aboriginal people as teachers and tutors. Mandawuy Yunupingu writes about the value of having Aboriginal elders as teachers as they are the ones who are the keepers of Yolngu knowledge, knowledge that is important in the formation of a full Yolngu life.

You see that old man taught me things I should know
From the memories of the past
And the situation is the bottom line between illusion and reality
We have always thought of making things right
Right from the beginning
It's a big proposition from the Yolngu of this earth
How about you come too
This is my kind of life
This is a Yolngu, Yolngu way of life

(*'My Kind of Life'* by Yothu Yindi, 1991)

Aboriginal people have identified Aboriginal knowledge as a priority in education and have stressed that they are the most appropriate teachers. Big Bill Neidjie states that Aboriginal children must continue to learn the Aboriginal way and he continues as a teacher, seeing it as a traditional obligation.

We have to keep pressure on young people to learn.
They must learn these things.
I have to stay on to teach my children.

(from 'Land' in Neidjie, Davis and Fox, 1985: 50)

Peter Miller describes the pride he feels working in an Aboriginal school, and how he sees education as a means in understanding white society. He also highlights the importance of the development and ownership of an Aboriginal education system. He states that Aboriginal teachers not only have a role in education as teachers and curriculum designers, but also within the community as leaders.

I feel so proud and okay
Standing up this day.
I have been here for sometime.
What's the purpose of this game?
Our people are in need then,
Want us to be trained.
Come on let us reach out,
Call it harmony.
I'm standing here and looking,
Out across the crowd,
I'm standing here and thinking
About our future plans
Blackman's school.

I will be your leader
Through these mighty days.
Education's to be a plan
To know the whiteman's ways.
Stand up my country, stand up,
Stand up!
Support your fellow man.
We are to be equal,
Try to be good as them.
Blackman's school.

('Blackman's School' by Blekbala Mujik, 1990a)

Aboriginal schools must be controlled by Aboriginal people, if the both-ways approach is to be successful. This requires the vesting of power in Aboriginal school councils so that they can determine their children's future. Power is seen as the basis for not only the development of Aboriginal

education but also the re-establishment of Aboriginal pride and identity. Mandawuy Yunupingu writes how the homeland movement can be a way in which power is obtained so that Aboriginal people can determine their education.

Power to the people, power to their land
Power for cultural revival, power for survival
See that campfire burning
And the children are yearning
Talking about peace and harmony
Yolngu education is the key for redemption
And the homeland centre movement is here to stay

And the old men are calling seeking help from their young
Yolngu education is the key for redemption
And the old men are calling seek help from their young
Power to the people, power to their land
Power for cultural revival, power for survival

(‘Homeland Movement’ by Yothu Yindi, 1990)

Throughout Western history of Aboriginal Australia, education has been used as a means to impose a system which has not only been inappropriate but has had dire and disastrous effects on Aboriginal society. Despite this, Aboriginal people are still prepared to share what knowledge they can with non-Aboriginal society so that harmonious progress can be achieved. It calls for the understanding that Aboriginal knowledge is vital, not only for Aboriginal education but for mainstream schools as well, and that the ones who are best qualified for teaching this knowledge and for making the decisions on how and when it is best implemented, are Aboriginal people.

We are happiest
Among our own people. We would like to see
Our own customs kept, our old
Dances and songs, crafts and corroborees.
Why change our sacred myths for your sacred myths?
No, not assimilation but integration,
Not submergence but our uplifting,
So black and white may go forward together
In harmony and brotherhood.

(‘Integration’ in Noonuccal, 1990: 22)

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