



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

In 2022 *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* transitioned to fully Open Access and this article is available for use under the license conditions below.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

MICRO ECONOMIC REFORM and ABORIGINAL SUPPORT PROGRAMS

Kirk Jones *

*"Many of the problems besetting Aboriginal Students
are rooted in lack of finances". (Jordan, 1985 p.12)*

Issues of finances and resources continue to be critical in determining future directions for Aboriginal Support Programs in higher education. Full accountability for expenditure of public funds has been the 'hidden agenda' behind the rhetoric of 'self management' and 'self-sufficiency' of both the labour and coalition parties in regard to Aboriginal affairs (Sharing the Country). Yet, it is becoming increasingly evident that these political terms have economic links with 'amalgamation' and 'program rationalization'; that is, they are packaged in 'micro economic reform'.

Aboriginal Support Programs have come increasingly under scrutiny by institutions and funding bodies, in a bid to reduce program funding during the present national, indeed global, economic downturn. Simultaneously, staff in these programs have been forced to defend institutional failure to retain and graduate Aboriginal Students at a level consistent with the success rates of the wider community.

Micro economic reform is a term used by economist and budget analysts to describe the process of getting rid of 'dead weight' within an organisation, to create greater productivity and efficiency. Consequently, the pressure is on Support programs from both institutions and government funding departments to prove that they are not 'dead weight'.

It only makes good sense that institutions should review Aboriginal Support programs but the review committees must realise that Support

* Kirk Jones is an African American with training in Race Relations and Drug and Alcohol Counselling. He migrated to Australia six years ago and is a Lecturer/Counsellor with the University of South Australia.

Programs do not operate in a vacuum. If efficiency is the focus then review committees must review the institutions under which the Programs operate.

Is it fair to assume that institutions will, at a later date, be called on to demonstrate their success in Aboriginal Education Programs or, if not, lose that funding? If so, Support staff who work with Students at the 'grass roots' level must be listened to by institutions and funding bodies if they expect further and or improved success rates in Aboriginal Education.

The difficulty Support Programs have is in convincing the power structures of Australia that Aboriginal Australians are owed economic equality on par with other Australians. That there is a struggle for economic equality is denied by many in state and federal institutions, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, in spite of being reminded again and again by others in those same institutions that Aboriginal people are the most disadvantaged group of any in Australian society.

The Report of the Committee of Review of Aboriginal Employment and Training Programs, 1985 more commonly known as the 'Miller Report' states on page 83,

"The only Aboriginal people who are employed at much the same rate as the general population who are similarly qualified are those that have degrees or diplomas from universities and colleges of advanced education."

I think it is fair to say, that a university education does promote economic equality for Aboriginal people.

Taking the above into consideration, it has been stated in various reports and discussion papers that establishment of Support Programs improved and increased Aboriginal access and participation in higher education. See (Jordan 1985, DEET; A fair Chance 1989, DEET; Planning for Aboriginal Participation in Higher Education 1990 and Bourke, etal. 1991).

However, access and increased participation do not alone answer the requirements for efficiency and effectiveness of institutions and funding bodies. Support staff are expected to take total responsibility for retention and graduation rates of Students whose academic programs

they do not control, in institutions they do not control. Micro economic reform seems to motivate many institutions to unload the burden or responsibility for higher levels of success wholly on the shoulders of Support staff. Instead of being validated by our institutions we are being stripped of funding and staff that was already inadequate to do the job. Further, while Support Programs scramble to meet Students needs, Chancellors, Deans, Professors, Registrars, awards, curricula and assessments are let off the hook of any responsibility for Aboriginal Student attrition. In this 'pass the buck' exercise institutions feint a lack of understanding and knowledge about the needs of Aboriginal people and support programs. Institutions, like State and Federal governments will often set up extensive consultative procedures to address staff needs for involvement in program management. The insidious aspect of many a consultative process is that often the advice given is weakened, distorted or ignored by those with real power.

Eleanor Bourke, in her 'Toward 2000: The Rights of Indigenous Peoples', Kaurua Higher Education Journal, Issue 1, September 1990 comments on the consultative process at the top levels of Commonwealth government with the words,

"In the development of the employment and education policies prominent Aboriginal people chaired the public activity leading up to policy development. These people were well liked and were held in good esteem. However they held no official office in the bureaucracy, that is they had no power or authority to control the final outcome let alone guide implementation of policies".

Bourke goes on to say,

"Non-Aboriginal public servants, mostly male, sometimes assisted by more junior Aboriginal staff controlled the subsequent interpretation of policies into departmental programs".

In the final analysis it is s/he who has the final say who has real power. If the above is an indication of how Anglo Australian institutions operate on a national level, what faith can relatively powerless Support staff have in the consultative process?

"One of the aims of the support systems is to maintain an Aboriginal identity." (Jordan, 1985 p.13)

These words by Deirdre Jordan in her, Support Systems for Aboriginal Students In Higher Education, are weakened or ignored in much of higher education as a legitimate role of Aboriginal Support Staff. However, many of our Students have come from Adopted homes and families often with only recently finding their Aboriginal parents. Some come from communities that have strong ties. Others can be completely unsure of their home country or people. Most have experienced police harassment and harassment from school mates, teachers, counsellor and administrators. While some reject their Aboriginal heritage all together. Aboriginal Students can experience an implicit sense of rejection in curriculum and piercing rejection in their own communities for being like Anglo Australians. It is not uncommon for first year Aboriginal Students to be told that they are trying to be better than the rest. It is in this environment that Aboriginal Students must sort through their own identity, create networks with other Aboriginal Students and meet the demands placed on them by the institution.

Most Aboriginal Students can repair their relationships and find acceptance in their communities but few are ever accepted for tenured employment by the institutions where they earned their degrees. A quick glance of Equal Opportunity offices in this state reveals no Aboriginal people on staff. The state chapter of UACA has no Aboriginal people on staff. Many university awards and schools have no Aboriginal people on staff. The result of this climate of employment is that Aboriginal Students have few role models in higher education with which to identify. This serves to further alienate Aboriginal students from those institutions in which they are enrolled. What must be understood here is that this is only the tip of the iceberg.

Numerous studies have been done on the effects of teacher attitudes towards student success. Many of these studies agree that negative teacher attitudes will lower student success. Two recent studies along these lines are 'Affective Consequences of Teachers' Psychological Investment', Journal of Educational Research, Don Stephenson, V. 84 Sept-Oct 1990 p.53-57 and 'Teacher Expectations as Predictors of Academic Success', Journal of Social Psychology, Pamela Keneal, V. 131. No 2, April 1991 p. 305-306.

I raise this research to point out that many Aboriginal Education Programs across the country operate on the deficit model with Aboriginal Students. It is often repeated around Aboriginal Education Programs that Aboriginal people have poor English Language skills and therefore must have these skills developed before entering higher education. These attitudes devalue Aboriginal knowledge bases, experience and intelligence. It is also a gate to limit Aboriginal self-expression and force Students to assimilate to standards set by the dominate culture here in Australia. It also assumes that Aboriginal Students want to write and speak like their Anglo counterparts. The argument that many individuals and institutions make in defence of the deficit model is that Aboriginal Students need to earn the same qualifications as all other students. However, when English literacy criterion is the primary base for assessment it creates a narrow opportunity for Students to demonstrate the level of their learning. What is needed in Aboriginal Education Programs is a broader based assessment for all Students both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. A broad based assessment does not have to lower standards it could actually raise standards of both teachers and students alike.

It is clear that identity issues could easily be the major focus of staff working in support programs. Accompanied with identity issue Aboriginal students must have a separate space to foster peer group support. The most successful Aboriginal Education programs will be those where Support staff are 'on side' in terms of addressing personal and institutional discrimination directed at Aboriginal Students. Reluctance by Support staff to demonstrate a sympathetic understanding of the drive of many Aboriginal Students to succeed in both their own culture and that culture of the wider Australian community will lead to high attrition levels. Attrition among Aboriginal Students lead to lowered self esteem and confidence and on rare occasions to substance abuse and death. I fully understand how hard it is for many Australians to accept the idea that they are full of values and beliefs that feed their bias and cause them to discriminate unfairly against Aboriginal people. But when they do so they ignore a large body of Research by such people as Anne Glover for the de Lissa Institute of Early Childhood and Family Studies. In her report of a study of Two and Three year olds, Young Children and Race presented at the Communities Conference, October 1991 she states,

"For children growing up in a multi-racial country, awareness of physical differences and accompanying process of categorisation is not neutral. The construction of categories is done within a framework of values which is already in operation in society. Attitudes are simultaneously developing, as children receive both positive and negative messages about the differences they notice. As differentiation occurs each child learns the characteristic stereotypes attached to the groups and the behaviours usually adopted towards each group by member of his/her own group."

Glover goes on to say,

"We must challenge all negative messages and in doing so, accept our critical role in ensuring that the feelings which develop simultaneously with awareness are positive."

Glovers' observations are in harmony with those of Jan Pettman in her article, 'Racism: Attacking The Problem', Australian Journal of Early Childhood. Vol. 11 (3) August 1986. Pettman writes.

"If we are to combat prejudice and racism effectively we need to analyse our own views and where we got them from: for example to recognise that, if we have grown up in a racist society, we will inevitably hold some racist views develop our understanding of the terms of debate, including arguments which can support our efforts, rally others and challenge racists".

The implication of these writings is that the most dangerous person in higher education is the one who is not aware or denies his/her bias. Lack of awareness and denial only feeds injustice and inequality based in romanticised notions and definitions of academic excellence and the false belief that racism is not the tool of the enlightened. Rather, the enlightened person is one who can hold up his/her bias to be challenged from within themselves and from outside themselves. Also, because to look critically at self and point out short comings is a very painful experience, those who can do it well will earn the respect of Aboriginal while at the same time teach by example the very best of educational theory.

REFERENCES

'A Fair Chance for All', DEET, 1990

Bourke, E., Farrow, R., McConnochie, K., Tucker, A. 'Career Development in Aboriginal Higher Education Units', ASTEC, SACAE, 1990.

Bourke, Eleanor, 'Towards 2000: the rights of indigenous people', Kaurna Higher Education Journal, Issue 1, 1990

Glover, Anne 'Young Children and Race: A Study of Two and Three Year Olds', Communities Conference, Oct 1991

Jones, Kirk, 'Aboriginal support programs in higher education', Kaurna Higher Education Journal, Issue 1, 1990

Keneal, Pamela, 'Teacher Expectations as Predictors of Academic Success', Journal of Social Psychology, V. 131, No 2, April 1991

Pettman, Jan, 'Racism Attacking The Problem', Australian Journal of Early Childhood, Vol. (3) Aug. 1986

'Planning for Aboriginal Participation in Higher Education, A Discussion Paper', DEET, 1990

Stephenson, Don, 'Affective Consequences of Teachers Psychological Investment', Journal of Education Research V. 84 Sept-Oct 1990

'The Report of The Committee of Review of Aboriginal Employment and Training Programs' AGPS, Canberra, 1985



4th. AUSTRALASIAN CONFERENCE on CHILD ABUSE and NEGLECT

*Rights and Responsibilities :
Wrongs and Remedies*

Griffith University
Brisbane - Queensland

Sunday 11th. - Thursday 15th. July 1993

**Hosted by : Queensland Co-ordinating Committee on Child Abuse
Under the auspices of the
International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect**

For further information please contact the official conference organisers :

**ORGANISERS - AUSTRALIA
P.O. Box 1237, MILTON, Qld. 4064
Fax. (07) 367 1471 - (07) 369 7866**