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MEETING THE NEEDS OF ABORIGINAL STUDENTS

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Improvements to the education of Australia's indigenous people is very much dependent upon the teacher's awareness of the factors affecting their academic potential. The traditional role of schools which essentially aimed at assimilating Aboriginal children into the ways of Western civilisation has proven to be ineffective and grossly unfair. Educational institutions must be more responsive to the needs of these people so that many more will be willing to participate in Western forms of education, and at a level beyond the compulsory years. This will involve an appreciation of the cultural, social, environmental and economic factors that can seriously impair the academic potential of Aboriginal children. Moreover, the teacher may need to alter a number of specific instructional practices in order to cater for the learning styles of these children. With the release of the Federal Government's Reconciliation Policy, and the P-10 Curriculum Framework's (Queensland Department of Education, 1987) emphasis on understanding individuals and their cultural diversity, it appears that these practices will become a necessary responsibility for all teachers in the near future.

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Prior to the arrival of Europeans to Australian shores, the education of Aboriginal societies was based solely on the transmission of skills deemed necessary for survival and relevant for participating within their tribal community. Through a process of observation and imitation (and to a lesser degree, verbal instruction), the young would learn their social obligations from the older men and women of their tribe. Knowledge about the land, methods of survival, kinship and religion constituted much of the educational diet of Aboriginal children during these early times.

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Learning, although seemingly less formalised by today's standards, served an extremely important role in early Aboriginal life and was considered a major social function within all Aboriginal communities (House of Representatives Committee on Aboriginal Education, 1985).

Traditional Aboriginal education and, in particular, the transmission of Aboriginal culture became increasingly difficult and irrelevant with the establishment of European settlements. Through the procuring of land and its subsequent cultivation, Aborigines were slowly being deprived of their economic, spiritual and social base (House of Representatives Committee on Aboriginal Education, 1985, p.26). In a very real sense, they were becoming refugees in their own land. The traditional forms of Aboriginal education could not equip people to cope with the dramatic breakdown of their society and, by the 1860's, traditional Aboriginal society had been destroyed throughout most of Australia (Fabian and Loh, 1980, p. 20; House of Representatives Committee on Aboriginal Education, 1985, p. 25).

Deprived of their traditional food and cultural heritage, many Aboriginal parents lost all interest in the upbringing of their children. There were even reports from European settlers that Aboriginal parents actually showed "a strong disposition to destroy their children" (Fabian and Loh, 1980, p. 20). Subsequently, in a letter from the British Government in 1839, it was decided that "the unfortunate race of New Holland would only be saved by training the children in the ways of the superior civilisation" (Fabian and Loh, 1980, p.20). To this end, it was proposed that boys were to be taught farming and trade skills, while the girls were to make themselves "useful" by learning to sew and cook. Both would also learn a little reading and writing and be given oral instruction in the fundamental truths of the Christian religion. All training was to be carried out in government installations where children would be separated from their "uncaring" parents who apparently showed little regard for their virtuous upbringing (Fabian and Loh, 1980).

This Christianising and civilising approach to education was rarely successful, however. Parents often removed their children from such institutions and many children themselves ran away (Fabian and Loh, 1980, p.20). The schools were often second rate and reflected the view of Aborigines at that time as an inferior race. McConnochie's (House of Representatives Committee on Aboriginal Education, 1985, p.26) account of early forms of Aboriginal schooling describes the situation very clearly:

The bulk of the teachers were unqualified, inexperienced and overloaded with other administrative duties which placed them in the role of policemen rather than teachers. The education was conducted in inadequate and ill-equipped buildings, following a programme which at least fitted them to ill-paid seasonal work, and which provided no possibility for movement out of this situation.

Despite these appalling circumstances and continued resistance from Aboriginal communities, separation of children from parents, and their subsequent training in essentially labour intensive skills, became policy and remained so for one hundred years (Fabian and Loh, 1980, p.20).

PARTICIPATING IN WESTERN FORMS OF EDUCATION

The importance of Western forms of education gained repute amongst Aboriginal communities as they began to see its benefits within their restructured society. Education was the means by which Aboriginal communities could take greater control of their affairs. Moreover, it provided individuals with self help and independence skills which enabled them to live in other, less familiar, Aboriginal and non Aboriginal societies (House of Representatives Committee on Aboriginal Education, 1985, p.42).

Despite the desire by Aborigines to participate in Western schools, it was not until the mid 1960's that any provision was made for their involvement; and even then, schooling was perceived as an important mechanism for assimilating Aboriginal people into the wider European society with little regard for the transmission of indigenous values and beliefs. While most Aborigines accept that some forms of social conditioning into the ways of Western civilisation is necessary, they also recognise the need for the perpetuation of their own cultural values. The Yipirina School Council, together with the House of Representatives Committee on Aboriginal Education (1985, p.30) sum this position up rather well:

Because they live in a multicultural society, Aboriginal people accept the fact that, educationally, they need to acquire certain knowledge, skills, attitudes and perhaps even values from the dominant culture so that they can survive in it. However, it is also important to note that the urban communities with the greatest degree of embeddedness

in Australian society are nevertheless strongly Aboriginal in their identification. Education for these communities should recognise this feeling of Aboriginality.

This sentiment is reflected in the P-10 Curriculum Framework (Queensland Department of Education, 1987, p.5) which gives recognition to "the need for young people to know about, understand and respect their own cultural heritage and that of others living in Australia".

In view of this changing emphasis on educational policy and the importance placed on schooling, it is disturbing to note that participation and retention rates for Aboriginal children are significantly low. Indeed, it has been reported (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1988, p.7) that as much as 13% of 5-15 year old Aboriginal children do not attend school, and only 17% of Aboriginal youth continue their secondary education to year twelve. Inappropriate courses, poor teaching methodologies and feelings of cultural isolation have been blamed for these appalling statistics (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1988, p.8). Aboriginal children are simply not achieving at school and are consequently opting out of the system at a very early age (Queensland Department of Education, 1983, Foreword).

FACTORS AFFECTING THE ACADEMIC POTENTIAL OF ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

While all teaching should be based on the individuality of each child, this has special significance for the Aboriginal student. There are a number of cultural, social, environmental and economic factors which seriously impede the Aboriginal child's participation within the *regular* classroom. As such, these factors form important teaching considerations for all those involved in the education of Australia's indigenous people.

CULTURAL VARIATIONS

Many Aboriginal children display a different outlook on life to that of European students, due to a contrasting cultural heritage. For example, their concept of the *family* is not limited to immediate members only (i.e. brothers, sisters, mother and father). Rather, they perceive their loyalties and responsibilities lying within the extended family environment (i.e. immediate members and Aunts, Uncles, Grandmother etc.).

As such, school programmes, and the resources they use (particularly written material) must take into account the different value systems and cultural traits of Aboriginal children (New South Wales Department of Education, 1982, p. 4).

LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES

The language of instruction in Australian schools is often a second or third language for the Aboriginal child (Queensland Department of Education, 1984, p.2). Indeed, many use Aboriginal English as a means of communicating at home and in non school environments (Queensland Department of Education, 1982, p.4).

Because of the differences in phonetics and phonemes, grammar and vocabulary, the child may have difficulties understanding the teacher at times, and vice versa. Consider the following example (Honeyman, 1986, p. 24):

/ "Grani Elsi Pleis"/	=	Granny Elsie's place
/ "Gon Balon Ta Edli"/	=	Hedley's gun.

Teachers are warned against dismissing Aboriginal English as a broken or bad form of Standard English (Queensland Department of Education, 1984, p.2). Instead, they are encouraged to accept the language the child brings to class because of its spontaneity, and to offer supplementary programmes similar to any other ESL (English as a second language) student.

PERSON ORIENTATION

Aboriginal children respond best to human, personal relationships with teachers. To the Aboriginal child, it is often more important who does the teaching than what is actually taught. The transmission of knowledge is viewed as part of a human relationship and without teacher/pupil rapport, learning will not take place (Queensland Department of Education, 1984, p.3).

This personal approach to teaching can perhaps be equated to traditional forms of instruction, where the young acquired much of their knowledge from the highly respected elders of their tribe. (Fabian and Loh, 1980, p.9).

COGNITIVE STYLES

Aborigines tend to be *Field Dependent* learners who find it difficult to focus on one aspect of a situation, or to analyse a pattern into its different parts (Woolfolk, 1987, p.152). Instruction, therefore, must move from the global to the more specific, with new concepts being linked to existing knowledge (Queensland Department of Education, 1984, p.3).

In addition, Aboriginal students have an *External locus of Control*. They see factors outside themselves controlling their lives and directing their successes and failures (e.g. parents, peers, religion, government practices and policies etc.). In terms of instruction, this means that the Aboriginal student appreciates a structured approach to learning, and looks to external references (e.g.. teachers) for guidance and motivation (Queensland Department of Education, 1984, p.4).

LEARNING DIFFERENCES

From research into traditional Aboriginal education in the Northern Territory, Harris (House of Representatives Committee on Aboriginal Education, 1985, p.25) was able to identify a number of dominant learning styles for Aboriginal students. Essentially, he discovered that much of the Aboriginal child's learning occurs through observation and imitation rather than verbal, oral or written instruction. Also, learning through trial and error and real life experiences were other important means by which the young learned how to survive and function within their tribal community. These findings shed much light on the preferred learning styles of Aboriginal students, and their absence within western curriculum possibly contribute to the noticeably poor levels of academic achievement amongst Aboriginal students.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES

It has been said (Honeyman, 1986, p.27) that Aborigines occupy the lowest socio-economic standing in Australian society. As a consequence, it is not uncommon for students to go to school tired and listless because their home environment has prevented them from getting a good night's sleep (due to substandard living conditions), and because in many cases they have had little food to eat.

Poverty also means that many are unable to buy books or other equipment that would assist them in their studies (House of Representatives Committee on Aboriginal Education, 1985, p.40). Government allowances such as Abstudy do try to provide for these basic necessities, but such benefits are only made available when the child turns fourteen.

EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

While the importance of education is perceived by Aboriginal people as a means of gaining worthwhile employment, the reality is that even with an education, their prospects of securing employment are significantly lower than non-Aboriginal people. The most recent employment figures for Australia show that 37% of Aborigines eligible for work were unemployed, in comparison with 9% of unemployed non-Aborigines (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1992). These figures represent a significant bias, and when taken in consideration with the National Aboriginal Education Committee's comment (House of Representatives Committee on Aboriginal Education, 1985, p. 41) that children lose all incentive to do well at school when they see their brothers and sisters unemployed, it's clear to see why so many Aboriginal children are failing to make satisfactory progress within our educational institutions.

SOCIAL PRESSURES WITHIN THE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY

Aborigines are a minority group and, therefore, have a tendency to stick together within the school setting. As a result, a number of negative consequences can arise. Held together by strong peer pressure,

Aboriginal children who do well at school are often heckled by their ethnic cousins. Moreover, because Aboriginal children will often work in group situations which consist of a large number of indigenous people, these better students may be held back by their more common, under-achieving peers out of a sense of loyalty to stick together (House of Representatives Committee on Aboriginal Education, 1985, p 43).

HEALTH PROBLEMS

Aborigines suffer from a multitude of health problems, some of which can be attributed to malnutrition (e.g. internal infections) and many more which are congenital in origin.

Ear malfunctions are perhaps the greatest complaint amongst Aboriginal people. In fact, it has been suggested (Hayhurst, 1991, p.13) that as much as 25-50% of all Aboriginal children in schools will at some time suffer from significant hearing loss. The educational disadvantages to arise as a result, are disturbing to say the least. It is now a widely recognised view that fluctuating hearing loss over a period of time can seriously hinder a child's developing behaviour, language competence and overall educational performance (Hayhurst, 1991, p.13).

In addition to hearing problems, double vision and impaired sight are also common amongst Aboriginal children and serve as additional barriers to their success at school (N. S. W. Department of Education, 1982, p.6).

ILLITERATE PARENTS

There is a strong possibility that even in today's highly educated society, many Aboriginal parents may in fact be illiterate. Schooling has only been compulsory in the last few decades, and even now there is little incentive for Aborigines to participate. Experience has proven that even with an education, it is still difficult for them to compete against Europeans in the job market (refer to Employment Opportunities p.5). As a result, many opt out of the school system at a very early age.

In view of the minimal standard of education attained by many Aboriginal parents, a number of educational disadvantages become

apparent for their offspring. Such children can not rely on their parents for help with school work or for the motivation and encouragement that is needed to succeed at school. Furthermore, the children themselves may begin to question the validity of schooling due to a lack of significant role models in their life. These factors represent further considerations teachers will need to keep in mind when educating Australia's indigenous people.

SELF ESTEEM

It is fair to say that in today's modern society, Aboriginal people are still faced with many hardships and disappointments. They have had to surrender many of their traditional customs in order to survive and function within a Western community, only to be rewarded with poor employment prospects, ridicule and bias from their European counter part. Low self esteem is therefore characteristic of many Aboriginal students (Honeyman, 1986, p.17).

CLASSROOM IMPLICATIONS

In the preceding section a number of teaching considerations were identified or implied which could help Aboriginal children attain their optimal potential at school. However, there are some specific instructional points which also need some attention within the classroom.

THE TEACHERS

Teachers are warned against presenting a depersonalised image of themselves to parents and students alike. Attempts to establish warm and friendly rapport with all children, and especially the *person orientated* Aboriginal child, will permit for greater success and enjoyment in the classroom (Queensland Department of Education, 1984, p.7).

In most cases teachers will need to initiate the involvement of Aboriginal parents in school. Many Aboriginal people have had unfortunate experiences through contact with non- Aboriginal society and are often reluctant to become involved in the school community.

Therefore, some effort needs to be given to breaking down these barriers so that all parents may begin to participate in their child's education (New South Wales Department of Education, 1982, p.8). According to Harper and Triggs (1984, p.16), parental involvement is vital to learning because children do their best when they know their parents are interested in their work.

TEACHER EXPECTATIONS

Teachers must set high standards and stick to them, while giving recognition to the individual differences of all students, both black and white (Queensland Department of Education, 1983, p.23). Negative expectations from the teacher have adverse effects on the child's achievement at school, because sooner or later they will begin to conform to these expectations (Basset and Smythe, 1979, p.66). Therefore, it is particularly important that a teacher should not have preconceived notions about Aboriginal children and their abilities (New South Wales Department of Education, 1982, p.9).

STRUCTURE AND DISCIPLINE

A set routine and clearly defined rules about expected behaviours are very important to a student with an *External Locus of Control* (Queensland Department of Education, 1983, p.23). In an unstructured situation, an Aboriginal child is likely to feel insecure and anxious, and may resort to disruptive behaviour as a consequence.

EVALUATION AND TESTING

Appropriate methods of evaluation and testing have been areas of debate in education for some time now. In a pluralistic society such as Australia, care must be taken to ensure that any test administered to children is relevant to their culture, language and experience (New South Wales Department of Education, 1982, p.7). Indeed, such instruments should only be employed when the teacher is absolutely certain that they measure the areas of achievement for which they are designed, and not merely Standard English competency (Queensland Department of Education, 1984, p.10). I.Q. tests in particular should be avoided due to their cultural bias and dependency on good standards of English.

LESSON STYLE

In any instructional situation, the lesson planned and implemented by the teacher should focus on the following seven (7) principles (Queensland Department of Education, 1984; New South Wales Department of Education, 1982). These will ensure greater opportunities for involvement and success in the task at hand:

1. Lessons should be structured such that they allow all children to experience success at some stage. This will promote the self esteem and confidence of the Aboriginal child to pursue other related studies.
2. Aboriginal students should be permitted to take some control in learning situations where success is assured. Promoting a transition from *External Locus of Control* to *Internal locus of Control* is a valid instructional goal for teachers of Aboriginal children.
3. Rather than leading children through a series of individual component skills to develop an all embracing concept, the *Field Dependent* Aboriginal child needs to be aware of this final global outcome at the onset of the lesson.
4. Aboriginal children work best in cooperative learning situations as opposed to competitive ones.
5. *Field Dependent* students are more likely to react favourably to one-on-one interactions for both praise and discipline.
6. Be aware that many books and audio aids have been based on an egocentric viewpoint which may be perceived as racist material by a person of another culture.
7. Ensure that the curriculum makes use of the cultural background of the children being taught.

A WORD OF WARNING

Many of the above classroom implications appear rather obvious at first glance. However, it should be remembered that failure to comply with any one of these will seriously hinder the educational progress of Aboriginal children participating in Western forms of education.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD ?

In mid 1991, the Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Mr. Robert Tickner, outlined a national reconciliation policy in which schools are to play a key role in promoting an awareness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues. The policy, in direct association with goals 20 and 21 of the National Aboriginal and Islander Education Policy (Appendix One), aims to develop appropriate Aboriginal and Islander studies for the compulsory years of schooling. Moreover, through extra moneys made available by the Government, provisions will be made for the establishment of pre-service and in-service training courses for specialist teachers who are capable of delivering these studies to both indigenous and non-indigenous students across all schooling sectors (Wood, 1991, p.13).

This initiative, in combination with the P-10 Curriculum Framework's (Queensland Department of Education, 1987, pp. 1 & 5) emphasis on understanding individuals and their cultural heritage, will undoubtedly ensure that the school experiences of Aboriginal children in the future are more culturally balanced and educationally sound:

Understanding individuals....emphasises the role of the P-10 curriculum in catering for the commonalities and variabilities within and among children during the P-10 years....The P-10 Curriculum Framework promotes the need for young people to know about, understand and respect their own cultural heritage and that of others living in Australia. In this way, the P-10 curriculum reflects the acceptance of cultural diversity and acknowledges the important influence home cultures have on the process of schooling.

CONCLUSION

European settlement has had an enormous effect on the traditional life style of Aboriginal people. This is perhaps no more evident than in the changes to the education of their young. No longer can parents rely on traditional forms of teaching to adequately prepare their children for the future ahead. Australia has become a modern industrial society where one's ability to obtain food is measured by academic credentials (necessary for obtaining employment), rather than skill in hunting and gathering.

While most Aborigines today recognise the importance of schooling, statistics have shown that, as a group, they are not achieving as highly as their non-indigenous counterparts. This article has attempted to identify a number of cultural, social, environmental and economic factors which can affect an Aboriginal child's learning. Moreover, it has suggested some helpful classroom implications which may overcome these apparent inequalities.

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APPENDIX

Goal 20 and 21 of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy Wood, reads as follows (1991,p.13):

20. To enable Aboriginal students at all levels of education to have an appreciation of their history, cultures and identity.
21. To provide all Australian students with an understanding of and respect for Aboriginal traditional and contemporary cultures.

NAIDOC WEEK

NATIONAL ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDERS' DAY OBSERVANCE COMMITTEE

4 - 11 JULY 1993

ABORIGINAL NATION :
OWNERS OF THE LAND SINCE TIME BEGAN

A celebration of events organised by
Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders
to create a greater awareness and
understanding of their heritage.

"COMMUNITY IS UNITY"

4TH JULY ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER SUNDAY
9TH JULY NATIONAL ABORIGINAL & ISLANDER DAY

FLAGS



A number of flag raising ceremonies will take place around Australia during 'National Aborigines and Islander' (NAIDOC) Week. The Aboriginal flag will be flown singly and with the Australian national flag.

ABORIGINAL FLAG

The Aboriginal flag as depicted here was first flown, as far as can be ascertained, at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy on the lawns of Parliament House, Canberra in 1972.

It was decided at the Embassy that the Aboriginal nation needed a flag. A number of designs were submitted. That of Harold Thomas, an Aranda elder from Central Australia, was selected.

The three parts of the flag represent the People, the Earth and the Sun. The black at the top represents Aboriginal people whose ancestors have lived in Australia for tens of thousands of years. Yellow represents the sun, the giver of all life. Red represents the colour of the Earth.

The Aboriginal flag is not recognised at present as an official flag under the Flags Act 1953-1975. This Act recognises and protects only the Australian national flag and the Australian red and white ensigns. The flag is, however, symbolic to Aboriginal people and their supporters.

TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER FLAG

The flag features three colour stripes, divided horizontally, with green at the top and bottom and blue in between—divided by thin black lines. A white dhari sits in the centre, with a five pointed white star underneath it.

The colour green is for the land, blue for the sea, and the dhari is a symbol of all Torres Strait people. The black represents the people and the five pointed star represents island group's: eastern, western, central, Port Kennedy area and Northern Peninsula area.

The flag was designed by Bernard Namok from Thursday Island. The ATSIC Board of Commissioners at its June 1992 meeting noted that the Torres Strait Island flag will symbolise the unity, identity and struggle of Torres Strait Islander people. Commissioners noted that the Torres Strait flag, with the Aboriginal flag, completes the symbolic identity of indigenous Australians.