



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.

ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER VIEWS: ABORIGINAL PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATION

J. Budby
Department of Education
Queensland

The Aboriginal consultative group to the Schools Commission in their report, *Education for Aborigines*, made the following statement about the involvement of parents in the education of their children.

We are aware of recent research that emphasises the importance of adult and parent involvement in the educational process. This is particularly relevant in an Aboriginal context, where traditionally the education of children was the responsibility of the family. We are keen to see Aboriginal parents become more active in their children's education and in turn develop more skills and greater confidence in themselves.

These thoughts resound the sentiments of the Queensland Department of Education. We appreciate the need for parents to become more involved in education, in providing guidelines of what they feel should be taught to cater for the needs of the Aboriginal/Islander child.

At the last census, Queensland had the largest population of people of Aboriginal/Islander descent in Australia. A large number of these people live a tribalised existence on communities (Reserves) in Western Queensland, Cape York and the Torres Strait Islands. These people have developed, over the years, a strong heritage and identity. However, in modern times, they are struggling to maintain this. External forces such as the Mission and Government Departments

have been instrumental in breaking down many of the Aboriginal/Islander beliefs and culture and thus forcing them to become assimilated into the wider Australian society. Many Aboriginal people prefer to live the peaceful existence that they are accustomed to living.

The westernised educational system of the past has not been adequate in catering for the Aboriginal/Islander child's needs and aspirations and therefore some adaptations need to be made. Educational authorities need to accept the Aboriginal/Islander as a fellow human being and one who is capable of making his own decisions on education. I see the parents and adults in the community as being the key people in this regard.

TRADITIONAL EDUCATION VERSUS WESTERNISED EDUCATION

For tribalised Aboriginals confusion has occurred as to the relationship between traditional and westernised education. In traditional life, the adult and parents had the sole responsibility for education. They tended to educate the community as a whole rather than to concentrate on individuals. The living culture was passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth, observation and practical experience. Education was developed in stages and was a continuum. Education was never ending in that even the old people were involved in some form of learning.

Aboriginal/Islander people developed a heritage to be proud of, which now, because of the impact of a white, middle-class orientated educational system, is threatened.

In the westernised system of education, the teacher has the responsibility for educating the young. In many cases the new teacher is unaware of the taboos and difficulties experienced by the Aboriginal people. Many teachers do not consider the home environment and the effects that it can have on performance. Many teachers are concerned only with the teaching of the three R's rather than the imparting of knowledge that gives the child a full education equipping him for the future. The teachers' knowledge of the day to day function of the community is limited and therefore they are unable to provide this information. Because of these factors, the present educational system falls short.

In Queensland, many Aboriginal/Islander people have migrated to the cities. Maybe, for these people, knowledge of the three R's is of importance. These people need to compete with the wider white Australian society for jobs. They need to be aware of the restrictions the wider community places on the individual. Although many of these people have little knowledge of their cultural heritage, there is now a move by them to learn more about the past that is lost to them.

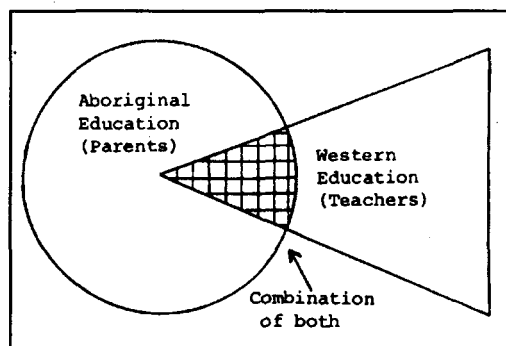
How is it possible to cater for both of these people - those who wish to stay on their home communities and those who wish to live in urban centres? Surely they should have a choice of doing either.

I feel that ideally there is a need for an educational system which will incorporate a positive outlook of both cultures. This system would need to give an overview of both cultures and not degrade one or the other.

There is an Aboriginal education and a westernised education. At present there are

people who know something about each. The parents provide input on Aboriginal education. Teachers provide the westernised education. There is a need for the middle section to be enlarged. In this way an appreciation of the good in both cultures can be achieved.

Perhaps the following diagram will clarify this statement:



There are three options:

Alternative Schooling - Teaching of Aboriginal culture only. Suitable for people who wish to live only in traditional society.

Westernised Schooling - For those not interested in Aboriginal identity.

Integrated Schooling - Learning about both Aboriginal and Western education. How to adapt in an urban area and still keep Aboriginal identity.

EDUCATION FOR WHAT?

In Cape York Peninsula and in the Torres Strait Islands, the people are becoming more and more depressed because they see that the skilled and professional positions are occupied by non-Aboriginal/Islander people.

A recent survey of these communities showed that there were at least sixty positions held by non-Aboriginal/Islander people which could be held by local people given some training. This

situation has helped to confuse Aboriginal parents as regards the value of the white man's education. They see their children attending school for a minimum of seven years, yet even after this time they are unable to be employed on the community. In traditional life, after completing a stage in the educational process, the child took on a particular role. This, the parents feel, is apparently not the case in the new educational system.

Another concern that parents tend to have is that the new educational system is taking their children away from them. Their children are not interested in learning about their own culture. They do not want to learn about the law, art and craft and other facets of Aboriginal education and traditional beliefs.

In Queensland, we are aware of these conflicts between the two educational systems and are therefore in the process of remedying this situation. Our focus is placed on the involvement of parents.

We feel that many of these dilemmas can be solved by obtaining advice from the parents and the community as a whole.

INVOLVEMENT OF PARENTS IN EDUCATION

As I see it, what one should be attempting to do as regards education is to devise a program incorporating both cultures. The parents are the key people in providing information on Aboriginal culture.

We have attempted to involve parents in several ways:

1. Employment of parents to teach culture
2. Variation of role of teacher assistants
3. Vacation camps and excursions
4. Adult education programs
5. Aboriginal community education committees

As previously stated, the educational system at present being used does not adequately cater for the Aboriginal child, because it does not focus on a positive overview of Aboriginal culture.

What we are doing in Queensland to overcome this problem is to devise new or adapt existing programs, so that the emphasis is placed on the specific needs of Aboriginal children. Parents are involved in providing guidelines as to what could be taught. Parents are employed by the school for three to four hours per week. They teach parts of Aboriginal art and craft.

In urban areas where Aboriginal/Islander people have tended to lose their identity and where their culture has become latent, the Aboriginal school visitor program attempts to give urban people an understanding of the way of life of their ancestors.

At present two Aboriginal people are employed. One gives a general overview of Aboriginal culture, the other talks on contemporary Aboriginal life. These people visit all schools in the metropolitan area, though many of the classes they talk to have only a sprinkling of Aboriginal children. Both speakers transmit a positive viewpoint on Aboriginal life and because of this they have a twofold effect, in that:

- a) they give Aboriginal children a pride in their own culture;
- b) they give non-Aboriginal children first-hand accounts about Aborigines, something that is lacking in most text books.

This particular program is to be extended to other parts of the State.

Perhaps, as regards the teaching of culture, the programs that we are using are not enough, for they do not adequately teach about specific elements of culture such as the best place for hunting and food gathering, the laws and beliefs of our people.

To overcome this problem, the Education Department is considering the setting up of vacation camps. These vacation camps would be situated in country areas. They would be very similar in structure to a typical Aboriginal camp. They would be run by Aboriginal parents who would teach the children about the different cooking methods, hunting and food gathering etc. This vacation camp would be made available for all children - black or white - in urban schools. A similar set-up could be arranged in the urban area where country children could experience city life.

For those children on communities, consideration has been given to the variation of the school terms, so that time within a school year can be allocated to the teaching of culture by the parents in the community. Many parents have expressed the desire for this to be organised. They would like to continue such rituals as initiation - when the young men of the family are taken into the bush and told all the parts of traditional life - that are missed out on in modern society. Again the focus is on parental involvement, for surely they are the best people to teach this.

In involving parents and adults in education we have been confronted with two major problems. They are:

- a) Reluctance of Aboriginal/Islander people to become members of committees and to approach the school.
- b) Lack of understanding of the educational process.

How does one overcome these problems?

Emphasis is placed on the Aboriginal/Islander teaching assistants in this area. We consider them the key people in our schools and the once missing link between the school and the community. Previously the teaching assistants principal role was that of helping the teachers in

the preparation of teaching aids such as the making of charts, marking of the role and the making and running off of stencils. We in Queensland are varying that role, so that the teacher assistant's role becomes one of obtaining and encouraging parental involvement in the school.

Generally, Aboriginal/Islander parents are reluctant to visit the school even though they have an interest in the welfare of other children. Their natural shyness when confronting a white person is multiplied when reaction to the parents visit is unfavourable. Allow me to describe two instances where this situation has occurred.

Firstly, a parent plucked up enough courage to attend a parents and citizens meeting at a local school. On arrival she was stunned because she did not know anybody. The principal of the school was too busy to notice that she was sitting by herself. The other parents knew each other and also neglected her. When the meeting commenced the Aboriginal parent was too flustered to participate in discussion even though she had something of importance to offer. She felt she was being ignored and left before the end of the meeting.

Secondly, a parent visited a school to talk to the principal on a matter that he considered to be of utmost importance. When greeted by the jovial principal, who made a comment about the parent that embarrassed him, the parent was offended and left the school without discussing the problem he had. Apparently the principal was not aware that by joking with the parent he was being offensive.

I feel that these sorts of situations can be overcome with the help of an Aboriginal assistant on the staff. An Aboriginal person would gain more confidence when greeted by another Aboriginal adult or parent. The teaching assistant would have the duty of introducing the visiting parent to other staff in the school and thereby breaking the ice.

Aboriginal teaching assistants perform another major role. They organize morning teas, cultural days and open days. Parents are encouraged by the assistants to attend these functions. By visiting the homes they ensure a large Aboriginal participation in such activities.

The Aboriginal assistants, by becoming members of educational committees and P&C committees, can become aware of what is being planned in a school and pass this information on to the parents in the community. Training programs have been devised to provide the assistants with skills and confidence to fulfil these roles.

Lack of understanding of the educational system is another factor which inhibits parental involvement. Many Aboriginal parents, because of past situations, have had very little schooling. They know that their child has to attend school, but they are unaware of the values of attending. Because of this, a major development in adult education is in process. A unit has been set up in Cairns, and it is hoped to extend this to other provincial cities in the state. The unit has employed an adult Aboriginal who is in the process of being trained as an Adult Education field officer. His duty is to visit Aboriginal communities and to discuss the needs that each particular community feels are necessary. A suitable program is then organized by an adult education officer.

Teaching assistants also play their part in adult education. In many schools assistants visit the homes of parents with a scrap book, displaying examples of children's work. The assistants explain to the parents the significance of such work. Thus they gain some understanding of what is being taught in the school.

Many parents become frustrated because, although they wish to take an interest in their child's work, they are unable to do so because the methods of teaching have varied and they need

training in the new methods. To remedy this situation, Family Education Centres are being set up.

At Inala, in Brisbane, the Family Education Centre is controlled by an advisory committee consisting of parents. They advise on how the centre should be utilized.

The Inala Centre concentrates on career guidance. Two Aboriginal people are employed and they discuss with parents and children the courses which need to be taken to achieve certain vocational goals. In this way parents are able to obtain assistance as to what is required of their children in school.

The Centre is also giving lessons on literacy and numeracy to help the parents assist their children.

Perhaps the most important step being taken by the Queensland Department of Education in involving parents in education, is the setting up of community advisory education committees. As a pilot project they have been set up at two community schools in Cape York. These communities, which have a large Aboriginal parent representation, have certain roles which include:

- a) Deciding on suitability of new educational programs.
- b) Ensuring continuity of established programs.
- c) Making decisions on day to day functioning of the school.
- d) Being a link with the State consultative committees and eventually with the National Aboriginal Education Committee.

In the future, I see these committees as forming the interviewing panel for all new staff in their respective schools.

In conclusion, parents have goals for their children. The school also has specific goals. Previously these were not always the same, but with parental involvement, one can ensure that the goals for the individual child are the same and that they are satisfactorily achieved.

Educational change is necessary in our schools if full advantage is to be taken by Aboriginal people. Parents are the ones who can force such change, and that, only by their involvement and interest

Unless parents force change, education for Aboriginals will remain as it always has been, for those so-called 'super blacks' who have had the drive, determination, ambition and personality to overcome all the obstacles that do exist in the present situation. These people have lost their identity and are neither Aboriginal nor white.

*This article originally appeared in Volume 6
Number 4 (1978) pages 45-53*

