



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*.

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ALIENATION IN ABORIGINAL EDUCATION IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

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In many areas of government policy there is a big gap between theory and practice, that is, there is a difference between what *ought* to occur and what actually eventuates. This is unfortunately true for education as well. That education actually alienates the young from the old and from their traditional life-style may in some way be substantiated. In theory this should not happen. Before any discussion on the pros and cons of such a state of affairs, however, there is a need to define what education is, to define some of the approaches officially accepted in Aboriginal education and to differentiate between the needs of some of the more recognizable Aboriginal groups and their life-styles.

Education can be defined as all the ways in which one person deliberately tries to influence the behaviour of another person. Behaviour may include knowledge, skills, habits, values and attitudes (Butts, n.d.). I believe education should serve either or both of two purposes -

1. the acquisition of knowledge, skills, habits, values and attitudes which can be used to assist his community/society to attain a better standard of living, that is, economic development and/or quality of life and/or
2. to enable a person to be a better and more useful citizen in his/her society.

Thus education should have positive beneficial effects upon the individual and/or his society. This statement in turn poses further questions. What are beneficial effects and who determines

that the effects are beneficial? Some definitions of community development help to clarify these issues and to highlight a very important point.

Kramer (1969) says

Community Development is a campaign strategy out of which a consensus strategy for decision making is projected for the future.

And Ross (1955) defines community development as

a process by which a community identifies the needs or objectives, orders (or ranks) them, finds the resources (internal and/or external) to deal with them and in so doing extends and develops cooperative and collaborative attitudes and practices in the community.

Both definitions are based upon the vital point that man has a say in the change of his own environment. Only he can deduce if the change means an improvement or gain which is important enough to adapt himself to it and give his cooperation to achieve this goal. The 'positive beneficial effects' or 'change' in education should be based upon the value system of the individual. Aboriginal people today hold a wide range of values and live a wide range of lifestyles. Although land rights, the Dreaming, ceremonies and respect for elders may be included as important values to be held by the vast majority of Aborigines, the importance of European material possessions, skills and technology will

vary from group to group. What will be seen by Aboriginal people as beneficial changes to either the community and/or the individual will depend upon the values of the adults of the community and this will vary both within any reasonably sized community and from place to place throughout Australia. Thus a school or a program within a school may be seen by some as a form of alienation - alienating the children from the old people and their traditions - while to others who may identify with aspects of both traditional Aboriginal customs and European technology and skills, the same schools and/or programs may be effecting the type of change that they desire.

An over-simplification of this may be to say that an education system must recognize individual differences which meet the needs of such a value system. If this theory was followed in practice there would be no alienation of young people from the adults' ambitions.

It has already been stated that Aborigines live a variety of life-styles and hold a variety of beliefs and values. In theory then, there should be a variety of educational approaches or strategies to meet the different needs that emanate from the chosen lifestyles of the Aboriginal people. The number of approaches (in theory) should approximate the number of broad areas of life-styles. This would be the ideal. In practice it is possible to isolate only a few approaches that are aimed to meet recognized categories of Aboriginal people. The categories and approaches are

listed as follows:

Before discussing whether these educational approaches are meeting the needs of Aboriginal people, or are in fact causing alienation, it seems desirable to examine more closely what is meant by alienation.

Ingram and Randall (1977) speak of alienation as a feeling of not belonging with those people around about you. For groups of people, it is a common feeling within the group that their group does not belong with the dominant group in society. There is a dominating feeling of powerlessness that inhibits all activity outside of one's own group. Alienation arises out of the 'hidden curriculum' of the affective qualities of human personality, attitudes, emotions, self-concepts, values, beliefs that are 'caught' by the student more often than consciously 'taught' by the teacher.

There are not the cognitive concepts of the school curriculum. These are the 'between the lines' teachings which occur. Thus while alienation may occur with an indoctrination of European beliefs in the cognitive domain, it is more likely to occur through a lack of awareness by the teacher of his teaching of a 'hidden curriculum' in the affective domain. Thus an authoritarian approach to student control as compared with a humanistic approach may cause alienation. The type of approach by the teacher influences curiosity or passivity; submissiveness or initiative; subordination or respect for self and

Categories



1. Traditionally oriented Aborigines on out stations or homeland centres
2. Settlement Aborigines
3. 1 and 2 who hold to their own tradition but who want their chance to gain the knowledge, skills, etc, of European society.
4. Fringe dwellers
5. 'Assimilated' Aborigines in towns. Part Aborigines.

Educational Approach



- Outstation schools
- Bicultural sometimes modified European programs
- Residential colleges-transition to high school. Post prim education to those communities with no secondary facilities.
- Normal European schools. Some special classes and projects.
- Normal town schools.



others; self-respect and confidence or shame and hate and fear; awareness of others and of society or alienation and a fringe existence; respect for and active acceptance of diversity, or fear and low regard for difference and non-conformity (Ingram and Randall, p. 12). If a program is to inculcate powerfulness and a sense of belonging as contrasted with alienation, then according to Ingram and Randall the following should be developed -

- identity
- self-respect or positive self-concepts
- experience of success
- personal and group goals (and hope of attaining them)
- knowledge and understanding of one's society (one's group and society in general) (Ingram and Randall, p.15).

Hence, two important factors emerge which will determine whether or not existing educational philosophies cause alienation or not. They are:

1. Does the educational program respect or reinforce the fundamental values of the parents?
2. Is the 'hidden curriculum' effective in promoting powerfulness, a sense of belonging and a strong identity.

This also highlights the tremendous influence that the personality and philosophy of the teacher plays in determining alienation or self-determination. This is because no matter how well structured, intentioned or financed a program is, the effect of the personal interaction and rapport of the teacher with his clients will prove to be the major point in determining the amount of cognitive and affective learning that takes place.

We can now turn our attention to the present education system and the different approaches adopted to meet the different education needs of Aboriginal people. Outstation education* may

be regarded as a recent innovation to Aboriginal education. Outstations or 'de facto decentralisation' of local land-owning groups has existed in many areas at least as early as the mid-fifties (e.g. in Western Australia at Blackstone, Wingellina, Giles, Mulga Queen, Snake Well, Manayin and in South Australia Pipalytjara/Mount Davies) (de Graff, 1977). The current 'outstation movement' gained momentum when Aboriginal groups perceived a liberalisation of government attitude which would allow them to move back to their traditional lands.

Having moved back to their land, Aboriginal groups needed assistance in many ways. Education was one. Most outstation groups do not want the creation of miniature European-type settlements. However they do want their young people to know the 3Rs and where possible to read and write their own language. It has also meant the recommencement of the Aboriginal traditional education, using the local known environment and elements of local mythology. Their heritage, including their oral literature, their knowledge of plants, animals and landmarks, their forms of art and craft, music, dance and drama, can be taught. The young Aboriginal can be introduced to the world as it is known by his elders so he can in turn be a full and active member in his society - that is, traditional values are imparted. Many outstations now have their own 'schools'.

Schools at these outstations or 'homeland centres' should not produce any alienation as the 'teacher' is chosen by the people as a person 'acceptable' to them - that is, he is Aboriginal and is usually one of the group. Outstation advisers (Europeans) do not live on the outstations although they may camp there for brief periods. The Aboriginal people have indicated their preference for this teacher to be married at least in his thirties. It has proved difficult to meet these criteria. Nevertheless both the type of program and the type of 'hidden curriculum' taught is most unlikely to produce alienation.

The biggest problem, however, as seen by many European educationists, is the ineffectiveness of programs designed to impart basic literacy and numeracy skills. The European adviser may produce programs, booklets and duplicated materials for the Aboriginal teacher but the Aboriginal teacher usually has had little formal training and sometimes little formal education himself. In addition, impassable roads, broken down vehicles (or no vehicles), lack of 'suitable' advisers, and lack of sufficient teaching materials at different levels all result in a very low level of standards in the 3Rs.

Aboriginal people have chosen to live on outstations to enable them to retain their own identity and culture. There can be little alienation and as support services improve (perhaps through the use of radio), the standard of achievement of the basic academic skills may also improve. Whether the anticipated improvement will be sufficient to satisfy Aboriginal people is a decision which will be made on an individual basis. It appears likely that some will send their children back to the settlements to stay with relatives so as to receive 'more education', while others will regard the preservation of their own identity, culture and family grouping to be more important and accept existing facilities as adequate.

Another approach to the education of Aboriginals is found on settlements. These places are European created centres for up to a dozen different tribal groups, who, over the past decades have been encouraged through different government/mission strategies to live together. The 'advantage' has been mainly one of ease of administration by the European authorities. To the Aboriginal people themselves it has been largely a period of frustration. Alienated from their own land and faced with problems arising from non-traditional life-styles they have been subservient to Europeans since the turn of the century. Self-determination and self-management have given them the opportunity to create Aboriginal townships governed in accordance with Aboriginal laws. Those who

have not moved to 'homeland centres' have accepted the challenge and a new phase of development is occurring. Schools on these settlements are trying to meet the needs of the people as expressed through the elected Councils. The expression and definition of these needs are not always clear. Some common desires are for the settlement education to be bicultural and to train the young people in the skills needed to do the balanda's (European's) work. There is the hope that the settlement school will be able to provide educational programs to meet all educational needs without the young people being sent away from home.

The ideal staffing arrangement in each class is a team consisting of a European teacher and an Aboriginal teaching assistant or teacher. In bilingual schools the Aboriginal member plays a vital role in the presentation of the bilingual program. He speaks the language and sets the model. He also plays an effective role liaising between the school and the community. Such an approach, which recognizes the most important elements of anyone's culture, that is, his language and allied concepts of the student's social environment, assists in the effective transmission of an 'acceptable' hidden curriculum of the community's value system. Instruction of literacy in the mother tongue is claimed to aid in the development of self-concept and identity. On the other hand, attempts to learn in a second language from the beginning of his school life has often led to failure, truancy through lack of satisfaction, and finally a complete rejection of the educational system. Also, 'success' (in terms of proficiency in English and the European-oriented curriculum) has sometimes been at the cost of part alienation from the traditional values and life-style of the parents.

The school also places some importance on the 'development' of the individual. In this sense the school may be thought of as encouraging girls to reject an imposed future, that is, promised marriages. Although schools do not specifically discuss such questions, the development of the

awareness of one's rights (as seen by the dominant society) as an individual can be seen by older men as the school 'pushing' the girls to defiance (Luck, 1974). These men see the school as an alien influence because it is a time when their own power is declining and because it is convenient to blame the non-Aboriginal community for what is seen as reprehensible and unthinkable - to allow girls to act independently. In this way the school's presence and 'hidden curriculum' causes some alienation.

While content of courses may be European-oriented, it is the staff member himself who is responsible for the transmission of values and attitudes. Staff in a non-bilingual school, if receptive to local desires, may cause less alienation than unreceptive staff in a bilingual school. However, generally speaking, staff in a bilingual school have more opportunity to learn which community values should be reflected in the school and are usually more able to provide an educational program which causes little alienation. High turnover of European staff poses a big problem in most settlement schools and as more Aboriginal staff are trained to full teacher status, both continuity of service and a greater input into the curriculum (overt and hidden) will manifest itself. These factors should further reduce alienation.

It may be relevant to make the observation that alienation appears greatest between the present children and their grandparents rather than between the present students and their parents. This poses the question, whose values should the school reflect - the elders who hold tribal authority or the parents and younger 'educated' Aboriginal teaching assistants? The type of identity that Aboriginal people will assume remains to be answered.

Another approach to meeting the educational needs of Aboriginal students in the Northern Territory has been through residential colleges which provide transition type programs of access to European high schools as well as post-primary

education for those students who don't have access to post-primary facilities in their home settlements. The potential for alienation is far greater in these institutions, as part of their program involves the student in a wide range of (European) social experiences which are aimed at preparing students to cope with the social setting of a European high school. The living away from home means many social links of kinship are weakened and cultural influences are not readily reinforced. This is despite opportunities for students to be actively involved in campfire song and dance and other cultural craft hobbies and interests. However, although the potential for alienation is greatest, it is, nevertheless, a very valuable option for Aboriginal people.

The values held by many Aboriginal parents include desires for their children to acquire the skills, knowledge and attitudes of European society that are necessary for Aborigines to become a self-managing people. In acquiring this type of education it is realized, by some parents, that it will cost their children some participation in normal cultural activities. Some parents are prepared for this. Indeed many make the necessary arrangements for important cultural ceremonies to be held in school vacation time. However, this awareness by parents of what will give their children the best of two cultures is held by only a few parents at this point of time. For other parents, withdrawal from college for ceremonies occurs frequently. Alienation does not become a problem in these cases but the effectiveness of efficient learning is very seriously threatened and often leads to premature termination of studies through frustration on the part of the students to be able to cope with the level of work they find themselves faced with.

A third group of students are those whose parents neither withdraw their children for ceremonies or make provision for them in vacation time to learn their culture. The potential for alienation in these cases appears to the writer to be highest. Generalisations are dangerous, however, as many

of these students have adjusted well to college life and show no signs of identity problems. They regard themselves as Aborigines, proud of this, and with a knowledge of some important ceremonies and customs, but very much oriented towards many European values such as property, importance of fulfilling allocated duties, punctuality, and holding an appreciation of European music, films, entertainment and technology.

Administrators of the transitional colleges (Kormilda College, Darwin; Yirara College, Alice Springs; Dhupuma College, Nhulunbuy) are very conscious of the need for the colleges to be bicultural and to have their colleges staffed by people who are sensitive to the feelings and culture of Aboriginal people. The educational philosophy behind the social development program reflects this consciousness by its emphasis upon the type of humanistic pupil control ideology, self-help and student involvement approach to decision-making in and out of school hours programs. I believe that such attempts are, to a large extent, reasonably successful. Nevertheless, the potential for alienation is present, and for those young people with weak self-concepts who are insecure within themselves, the experience of life in a residential college may well 'make or break' them. Careful selection of students to attend residential colleges is thus essential and must take into consideration not only the academic ability of the student but also their psychological make-up as well as the parents' ambitions and the students' wishes. The potential for alienation and identity problems when these precautions are taken is minimized.

In the main centres of European population (rural and urban) there is a range of life-styles of Aborigines from the traditional to the assimilated.

In the rural centres Aboriginal families live in camps on a river bank a short distance out of town, in shanty-type huts on the fringe of the town, in suburbs or streets that are predominantly populated by Aborigines, and occasionally are

assimilated into the white community. The majority of Aboriginal and part-Aboriginal children face similar problems - to a greater or lesser degree - in schools. These include lack of clean clothing, inadequate or no footwear, lack of motivation to leave home on a cold morning, transport difficulties and numerous other physical and social problems. Absenteeism and a general lack of motivation may be seen as arising out of rejection of a European-oriented institution. Aboriginal students identify with the values and life-styles of their parents. Schools in rural and urban Australia are based upon a different value system. Colour, language, a spirit of competition, a different standard of material well-being, health standards and environmental background collectively enhances insecurity within the Aboriginal child. The degree of this insecurity is largely dependent upon the child's home environment. Identity problems are closely linked with these security problems.

Provision for the education of such students is not heartening. Most teachers in most schools are either not familiar with the problems of the Aboriginal child or are not trained to cope with the situation. The numbers of Aboriginal students involved in each class are small and this poses another problem in attempting to meet the educational needs of these students. While there are many practical problems in meeting these needs some attempts have been made. Special programs at Katherine Area School (K.A.S.) and Tennant Creek Area School (T.C.A.S.), recognizing the importance of self-concept - crucial to the success of any program - have had partial success.

In 1974 in Katherine a project team of three teachers was formed. Dr. D. Hordern, a teacher at K.A.S., says that the project group obtained a vehicle to bring the children from the camp. The teachers earned acceptance by the parents. Welfare lunches were issued. The children were showered and dressed in uniforms before school. They were specially helped and encouraged to join the out-of-school competitive sporting teams

as well as cubs and brownies. During the school day small groups were taken from class and given remedial tuition, especially in reading, spelling and maths.

As a consequence, today there is less discrimination with regard to ability, dress or nutrition at K.A.S., on the basis of colour. The project group is actually concerned today with more disadvantaged European children than Aboriginal (Hordern, 1974).

Mr B. Aumann, from Tennant Creek Area School, speaks of the introduction of a special Aboriginal class. Attendance is voluntary and is directed by a committee of empathic teachers who are attempting to devise curricula to meet the educational needs of the Aboriginal students. Aumann (1978) concluded:

Perhaps one of the greatest contributing factors that this classroom may provide is one of IDENTITY. If it is established correctly, then the Aboriginal people may take a pride in what their children are doing.

Without much thought and a lot of effort to devise appropriate programs for Aborigines in town areas such as the attempts at K.A.S. and T.C.A.S., it would appear that the majority of Aborigines would feel alienated from the majority of students in these town schools. The exception would be the 'assimilated' Aborigine or part-Aborigine.

The values accepted by the 'upper-class/white-living' assimilated Aborigine include thrift, cleanliness, acceptable manners, moderation in drinking, regular well-paid employment, marital constancy and care for person appearance (Eckermann, n.d.). Identity is with those Europeans who have no racial prejudice and with other assimilated Aborigines. They rarely mix with the 'lower-class' Aborigine for fear of white criticism or being stereotyped with the

characteristics often associated with the unassimilated.

Except for some special programs in some schools and special efforts by individual teachers in some schools there appears to be no defined philosophy of education for Aborigines in rural and urban European schools. Education based upon white middle-class values is available and Aborigines are expected to 'fit in'. Where the value system upheld by the parents is different from the dominant society and hence the school in that community, the school may well be a place of alienation for Aboriginal children in these areas, alienation being due to the affective 'hidden curriculum'. The Aboriginal child is forced to accept either the values of the dominant society or his own parents. In either case he will feel alienated from one group or the other.

In summary it can be said that although there are many different types of educational programs and institutions available for different groups of Aborigines, it unfortunately appears that all approaches either alienate the students from their parents or their European peers or, if the approach manages to avoid the affective 'hidden curriculum' as in outstation education, it fails to be effective in terms of the provision of knowledge, skills and habits which can be used by an individual for the betterment of himself and/or his own community.

Although difficult, with our present knowledge of the educational needs of Aboriginal people, it does not appear to be impossible both to substantially reduce alienation and to improve the effectiveness of the educational programs available. To some extent this may mean the need for the availability of additional resources (manpower, teaching aids, communication facilities) but it also means challenging the non-productiveness of many useless and damaging (to self-concept) programs that are presently in use. The reallocation or deployment of staff to devise programs that make the recognition of

Aboriginal identity one of the main focal points of its planning should assist in alleviating both the problems of alienation and the ineffectiveness of many of the existing educational programs.

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* For more information on outstation education see Haslett, R. and Whiteford, R.: All responsibility will be with the parents. *The Aboriginal Child at School*, 8.1.

This article originally appeared in Volume 8 Number 2 (1980) pages 41-51

