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What Entitles a School to Legitimately Call Itself an Aboriginal School?

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Introduction

According to the 1995 Northern Territory Department of Education Directory, the number of schools within the Territory which cater for Aboriginal students are as follows:

- 40 preschools in predominantly Aboriginal communities
- 67 primary schools of predominantly Aboriginal communities
- 53 outstations and Homeland Learning Centres in predominantly Aboriginal communities
- 33 Community Education Centres and other post-primary schools in predominantly Aboriginal communities.¹

Therefore, within the Northern Territory alone there are one hundred and ninety-three (193) educational institutions delivering an education service to Aboriginal students.

The term 'Aboriginal school' has usually been used to describe schools which have a student population which is completely or significantly comprised of Aboriginal children in a traditionally oriented society. In the past, it has in no way referred to the control or staffing of the school.

Questions with regard to what constitutes Aboriginal schools are beginning to be discussed. Can the majority of these schools be legitimately regarded as Aboriginal schools? Are they Aboriginal schools merely because their client group is comprised predominantly of indigenous Australians, or is there a deeper concept of what constitutes an Aboriginal school?

Aboriginal Education and Aboriginal Schools — Are They the Same Thing?

The enterprise of providing education for Aboriginal children post-Cook until recently has predominantly been one of 'Euro-based' education. That is, education was always based upon non-Aboriginal methods for non-Aboriginal purposes. This is exemplified in the policy of focusing almost exclusively upon primary aged children with mainly English-only programs. However, a more stark example is the development of bilingual education as a means of transference to the dominant culture. Although a political act, the development of Bilingual Education in the Northern Territory was the catalyst for the development of Aboriginal control of Aboriginal schools.

Bilingual Education

Bilingual education was first employed as a teaching strategy in the 1940s at Ernabella in South Australia; however, it only received government sanction in 1972 when it was established as an educational program for Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory. The then Prime Minister, Mr. Gough

¹ Numbers include government and non-government schools.

Whitlam, announced that the Australian Government would:

launch a campaign to have Aboriginal children living in distinctive Aboriginal communities given their primary education in Aboriginal languages. The government will also supplement education for Aboriginal children with teaching of traditional Aboriginal arts, crafts and skills mostly by Aboriginals themselves (NTED, 1992: 2).

At that time the Commonwealth Government administered education in the Northern Territory. Under the Commonwealth Minister for Education an Advisory Group was established to examine teaching in Aboriginal languages in schools in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. The Advisory Group's recommended approach to teaching in Aboriginal schools was reported in *Bilingual Education in Schools in the Northern Territory* and was adopted by the Minister, Mr. Kim Beazley in 1973. During this time bilingual education was defined in the same terms as the United States *Bilingual Education Act of 1967*:

Bilingual Education is the use of two languages, one of which is English, as mediums of instruction for the same pupil population in a well organised program which encompasses part or all of the curriculum and includes the study of the history and culture associated with the mother tongue. A complete program develops and maintains the children's self esteem and legitimate pride (NTED, 1992: 2).

The Handbook for Aboriginal Bilingual Education in the Northern Territory, written in 1980 and currently under review, claims that because language, culture and learning are 'inextricably related', it is inevitable that any sound bilingual program is in fact a bilingual/bicultural program (1980: 3). The document goes on to explain that it became 'obvious' that the original aims of the bilingual program needed to be reviewed and thus the aims² were revised.

The reasons for the revision were three-fold:

1. to make assessment procedures of bilingual education programs more manageable and specific
2. to respond to the presence of the core curriculum
3. to reflect more clearly Education Department policy (NTED, 1992:7).

The revised aims and the reasons for them are vitally important because it is a clear indication that the purposes of education were totally biased to deliver a non-Aboriginal perspective of the world.

As can be seen by examining the historical context of bilingual education, it was very much a top-down process. It was initiated by a Federal Government, based on an Education Bill of a major overseas Western industrial super-power. Although Aboriginal people were consulted, the establishment of bilingual education in the Northern Territory was a political act and until recently the program was centrally instigated and managed. Likewise English-only programs were designed to bring the child into the dominant culture at the expense of their Aboriginal one. These were models of education for Aboriginal students attending schools. They were not models of Aboriginal education, as the control and the decisions were not made by Aboriginal people themselves.

What is Aboriginal Education?

Aboriginal education is not a concept which was born when the first Aboriginal child attended school. Education has always been important to Aboriginal people and intricate curriculum theories have evolved in order to successfully educate people within their society. Bourke cites Sykes who claims:

In traditional life there were many highly skilled people—not only doctors and lawyers but teachers, geographers, chemists, botanists, and people trained in communications (not only with the living but also with nature and the spirit world). We had linguists, historians ... it was the lifetime duty of some people to carry the whole knowledge of each subject and pass it on to whoever would be replacing them (Bourke, 1991: 10).

Willmot (1991: 69) outlines two purposes for education. The first purpose of education is the transmission of cultural, social and technical knowledge of a society for its maintenance and preservation. The second purpose of education is to 'enable individual human beings to make unprecedented jumps in the acquisition in human abilities and hence knowledge'.

² See Appendix for revised bilingual aims.

The first purpose of education secures a society, while the second changes it rapidly. As demonstrated by the thousands of years of continuous civilisation, pre-Cook Aboriginal culture demonstrates the success of Willmot's first purpose of education. From the high sophistication of the first purpose of education, Aboriginal society can be argued to be one of the most successful nature societies (Willmot, 1991: 70) in the history of the world. Nature human groups see themselves as a fundamental part of nature, reflect the order of nature and generate a common memory and exist within the parameters of nature. Baumann (1994: 2) claims that '... the whole bush was our school. The bush was our book and we read its signs...'

An anti-nature society believes that the order constructed in the human mind is superior to the order reflected in nature, and when combined with the second purpose of education that society can become dominant and very powerful.

As with their society, each group values their own purpose of education. The first group holds the first purpose of education in great stead, whereas the second society values the second purpose of education immensely. The historical tragedy is that when the two societies meet, the first group is almost always totally destroyed by the second.

Baumann (1992: 2) goes on to explain that 'Aboriginal education is not a new thing but it is emerging, changing, adapting, becoming more suited to the present life-style of our people'. It is vital to understand that Aboriginal culture is still dynamic and probably more so now than ever before. Like all cultures, indigenous cultures undergo shifts in direction and in ideas and knowledge as people respond to the circumstances and situations in which they find themselves. Aboriginal people, according to Baumann (1994: 7), 'need to live in today's world, find their identity in this world and adapt to life at this point in time'.

The major problem for tribal Aboriginal people is summed up by McClay (1988: 403) when he states that it 'is their lack of experience and understanding of the complex social and technical systems of white society that have become part of their everyday lives'. Baumann (1994: 8) explains that Aboriginal people cannot stop at learning to read and write. 'We also have to be educated in social attitudes'. She goes on to state that Aboriginal education must therefore

be within a structure which enables Aboriginal people 'to absorb all this learning and ... adapt it to our own needs because one of the important things for us to keep and to cherish is the beauty of being an Aboriginal person' (Baumann, 1994: 4). True Aboriginal education must attempt to deliver the education Aboriginal people aspire to whilst they are in control of the decision-making process themselves.

The Structure of Aboriginal Education — Control and Decision-Making

Aboriginal education needs to occur within a framework which will deliver to Aboriginal people the support for them to successfully achieve in both the wider community and the Aboriginal community without any loss of Aboriginality. Harris (1990: 1) states that 'Aboriginal people in remote communities want their children to learn the 3Rs and to grow up Aboriginal'. They want their children to become 'fluent speakers of English and efficiently operate in the Western technological, financial, bureaucratic, legal and political systems which impinge on them every day' (Harris, 1990: 4). Black (1995) supports this when he claims that people at Strelley in Western Australia wanted children to master English so they could take over jobs and participate as equals in mainstream society.

McConaghy (1994) states that educational participants need not play separate and unequal roles and renegotiation of the educational enterprise should occur through an equal arrangement.

Cultural domain and such perspectives frequently present a totalising, passive and static ... or anthropological view of culture: one in which cultural integrity is achieved through cultural maintenance-in-change strategies ... and notions of hybridity are often discussed as erosive and morally undesirable ... [It is] time for direct dialogue and the renegotiated participation of both indigenous and non indigenous educations on anticolonial and anti-racist terms (McConaghy, 1994: 82).

Yirrkala School has a two-way exchange where both cultures learn from one another. Cultural research looks for common ground and this then becomes the curriculum. Wunungmurra (1988: 69) states that, 'We cannot hold back change whether we like it or not. But as a minority society we can adapt to it by finding common ground with the majority society'.

Wunungmurra outlines that knowledge is inherently contextualised and that the learning process is part of the knowledge itself. The context is established by the Rom or law. Teaching approaches are different too, determining how primary and secondary children are taught. Primary school, it is felt, is about the concepts which overlap both cultures and Aboriginal culture that can become school knowledge. It is essential that elders and the community conduct the research into their culture to determine what can be shared. Secondary school actively involves the students in the negotiation of knowledge between the two cultures. Teachers and students learn from each other and involve cultural studies using comparative research. Schools should see the fulfilment of ceremonial duties as an on-going part of the education of a complete Aboriginal child.

This is the essence of the legitimate Aboriginal school. It is not so much what curriculum is taught but who is making the decisions and for what reasons the decisions are made. For non-Aboriginal teachers, the greatest support which can be given to the establishment of Aboriginal schools is encouraging the self-determination of the community to make the educational decisions and to promote the training of more Aboriginal teachers. Through this training more Aboriginal people will be empowered to confidently make the decisions affecting their community's education aspirations. The Aboriginalisation of schools and self-determination/self-management of Aboriginal communities can be regarded similarly.

Processes to Promote Aboriginal Decision-Making and Participation in Education

Aboriginalisation of curricula

To program for successful Aboriginal education, Brown (1995) suggests that the following must occur:

- identification of traditions as positive features of behaviour — comparison of parallel behaviour in 'balanda'³ society — both-ways education
- awareness of behaviours relating to the individual

- discrimination of the yolynu with balanda behaviour
- practices which will assist [the] individual to understand when behaviours are operating
- practices which reinforce the individual's choice of using behaviours.

Traditionally, Aboriginal children learn in what Harris (1992) has classified into five major learning processes. These are:

- 1) learning through observation and imitation
- 2) learning by personal trial and error
- 3) learning in real life, rather than by practice in artificial settings
- 4) learning context-specific skills rather than portable general principles
- 5) person-orientation learning not information-orientation (Harris, 1992).

The need for issues and delivery of education to be continually negotiated and re-negotiated is stressed by Raymattja Marika-Munungirtji (1993). Knowledge is socially constructed and therefore needs to be taught in an appropriate social context. Both-ways education finds accommodation for both cultures equally to meet the aspirations of the whole person. Ngurruwuthun (1991) outlines the Garma Project of high Aboriginal context and pedagogy and explains that the teaching of common Aboriginal clan knowledge at Yirrkala through utilising the old people as resources was very successful and highly regarded. Children were taught in appropriate learning contexts; they carefully watched and listened to the old people telling stories and imitated them during ceremonies. The formal Aboriginal education came from the old people and the dissemination of knowledge was very different from Western cultures — but highly appropriate.

Interestingly it reflects what Moore (1988) outlines as beliefs which influence how readily adults learn. For an adult to learn, it is important that the participants should:

- be respected
- collaborate with each other
- be self-directed and empowered
- reflect on their previous experiences

³ Balanda and yolynu — specific Arnhemland terms used here generically to mean all non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people respectively.

- participate fully in the process
- think reflectively and critically
- learn for action
- pose and solve problems.

Many of these beliefs are present in the traditional pedagogies of Aboriginal society and demonstrated in the way adults received the appropriate cultural knowledge.

It is crucial that Aboriginal participation in the decision-making process is not of a dependent nature, but rather a reciprocal process. McClay (1988) suggests that self-management requires Aboriginal people to participate directly in some of these systems, no matter how imperfectly they are understood. 'In many Northern Territory Aboriginal communities the policy of self-management, in practice, is largely fiction' (McClay, 1988: 417). Through the development of a successful adult education program McClay found that the central aspiration of tribal Aboriginal people is to remain true to themselves, to retain their identity by living through family, under law, free from white domination. Through workshops and adult education the central aspiration of Aboriginal people can be met.

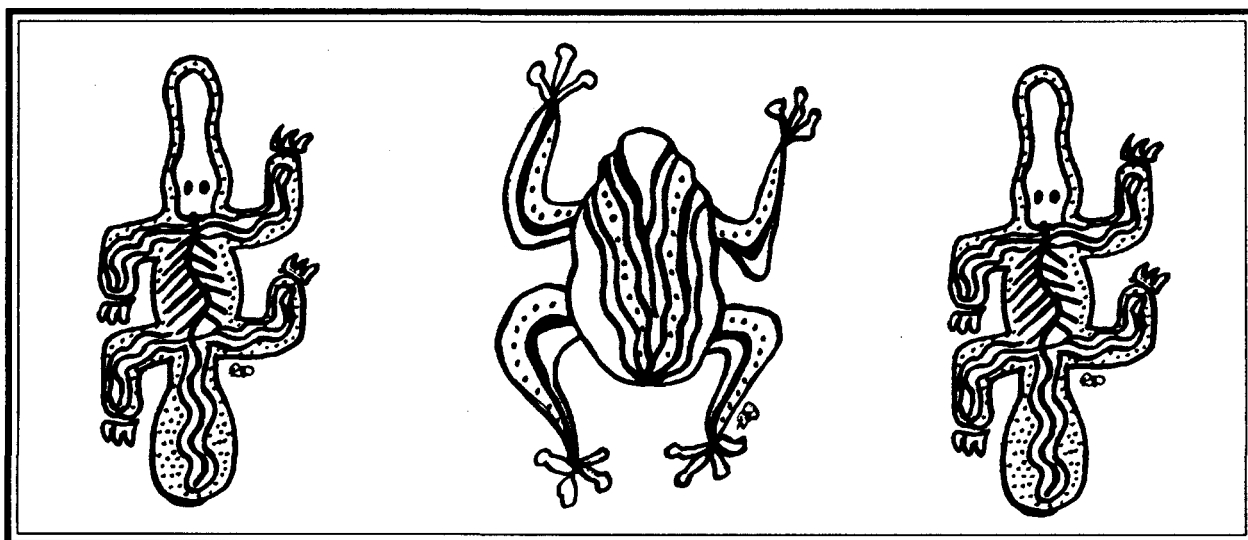
Dudgeon *et al.* (1991: 3) supports the active involvement of the Aboriginal community in all areas of consultation. Although specifically discussing tertiary education, the essence of what is outlined is the same for all levels of educational discussion. Baumann (1994) continually advocates the total involvement of the community in the educational program, not just at school, but emphasises

the importance of carrying the enterprise on outside in the community in areas of environmental health, infant health and further education into the workforce.

Appropriate secondary and further education

'Secondary education often requires the Aboriginal student to move from their homeland to a foreign environment far away from support and love of their families' (Baumann, 1994: 8). The attrition rate of Aboriginal secondary students is alarming. It is clear that this type of education has failed Aboriginal people and instead of bureaucracies talking about the retention rate of Aboriginal students, it would be more fruitful to discuss rejection rates of the system. Baumann (1994: 9) goes on to explain that 'in the teen years, children find it difficult to cope with the environments of secondary school but may pick it up later when they are adults and "calmer and more ready"'. Education needs to be freed up so that it is available when the time is right for the student to come to the system rather than when the system is ready for the student.

The development of community-based programs such as adult education workshops assists in meeting the needs of Aboriginal students. Randell (1990: 1) advocates workshops as a culturally appropriate way to develop and conduct educational programs in Aboriginal communities because workshops are active and rely upon small groups or teams of learners co-operating, sharing and discovering insights. They also depend upon the participants' ability to identify the directions which should be followed, rather than the knowledge and planning decisions of workshop leaders.



The final learning outcomes are often the products of raw data, information and experiences fed in from many sources and steadily refined by workshop participants to achieve the desired end. In this sense workshops draw upon the knowledge of all the participants and the trainer too (Randell, 1990: 2).

This way a greater emphasis can be given to 'designing some programmes that meet Aboriginal terms of reference under the auspice of Aboriginal direction and control' (Dudgeon *et al.*, 1991: 9). By more thorough co-ordination with secondary and tertiary courses, community-based programs would necessitate the community making decisions on where, how and what learning would take place. This process of empowerment would increase Aboriginal input and determination over educational issues in the future. The design of culturally appropriate programs which still met University standards and that could be delivered in a manner that not only encouraged participation but allowed for the wider community to have a larger say in how the programs were designed and delivered could address the problems associated with Aboriginal success in further study.

Special usage of higher education and or tertiary institutions remains paramount if Aboriginal educators and designers of programs are going to be successful in creating courses that take on board cultural differences and then allow for programs to be delivered in a manner that may sometimes be out of the norm for what institutions deliver as standard practice (Dudgeon *et al.*, 1991: 10).

Morgan reiterates that a re-definition of Aboriginal higher education must incorporate:

principles, policies and systems which will help us achieve a real sense of control and self-government over our higher education needs and future. Education principles, policies and systems which allow us the time and pleasure to enjoy the rights and entitlements we have achieved, rather than having to continuously defend them (Morgan, 1993: 52).

Conclusion

Schools which can be legitimately called Aboriginal schools, rather than schools which have an Aboriginal population, have a number of things in common. True Aboriginal schools are controlled by Aboriginal people themselves. The educational decisions are made by the community.

This is not to say that the schools cannot employ non-Aboriginal staff, as it is well within the right of any person or group to seek out the skills which they may consider are in deficit within their own community. It also does not mean that the school curriculum must be based in Aboriginal topics or areas, as some Aboriginal schools may choose to proceed in the mainstream as the people may consider that cultural education can continue outside the classroom and leave the school to impart the Western concepts.

As Dudgeon *et al.* (1991) explains, Aboriginal people should have a choice whether they participate in mainstream programs or in other programs that reflect the cultural values of Aboriginal society. The crucial factor is that the control of the educational enterprise should be in the hands of Aboriginal people themselves and that they take the initiative in the decision-making process.

It is important for non-Aboriginal people to act as a scaffold of support if so desired by the community because, as Baumann (1991: 8) explains, some communities 'are only qualified to do so much and we have a long way to go before our people will be sufficiently educated and experienced to a standard where they can handle all their own affairs'. Therefore the appropriate support networks and structures need to be available for utilisation if required. The essence of Aboriginal schools is control.

If Aboriginal people have real control of the decision-making processes and the school is meeting their aspirations, then the school can legitimately be described as an Aboriginal school.

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- writing) and in mathematics to the level required on leaving school to function without disadvantage in the wider Australian community.
- Aim 2**
To foster greater proficiency in school work through the use of Aboriginal language where appropriate.
- Aim 3**
To develop a more positive self concept in each child through systematic use of the Aboriginal language as well as English as a medium of instruction, and incorporation of studies of other aspects of traditional Aboriginal knowledge.
- Aim 4**
To develop skills in oral English that by Year 5 English becomes the major language of instruction and of literacy, with the vernacular maintained for continued literacy development and for the teaching of both traditional and modern knowledge where appropriate.
- Aim 5**
To promote the development of teaching skills, teaching responsibility and formal educational leadership in Aboriginal staff.
- Aim 6**
To develop competency in reading and writing in the Aboriginal language.
- Aim 7**
To develop closer communication, involvement and mutual understanding between the school and the community it serves and promote in the children and their parents a positive attitude towards education and school attendance.
- Aim 8**
To develop a better understanding of both cultures — that of the Aboriginal people themselves (and not only a particular community) and of the non-Aboriginal society.

(NTED, 1992: 7-9)

Paul Buckley has taught in Aboriginal schools in Central Australia for almost ten years. He has been involved in policy and curriculum development committees and working parties examining a wide range of issues, from pedagogy and curriculum implementation to incentives for remote teachers. He is presently head teacher at Wallace Rockhole, 120 km east of Alice Springs. □

Appendix

Revised Aims of the Northern Territory Bilingual Education Program

Aim 1

To develop competency in English (reading and