

NATIONAL ABORIGINAL CONFERENCE

POSITION PAPER ON

EDUCATION

The ideology of traditional Aboriginal education was based on the premise that human beings evolved spiritually and physically from infancy to old age. Aboriginal people believed in a total order, harmony should be maintained between human beings, land and nature. Aboriginal children were educated to be a proper part of this scheme of things.

This system was all but lost in the Southern and Eastern parts of Australia, and severely damaged even in the North.

The Aboriginal response in the 1940's was to try and make use of the new European systems. By the late 1950's and early 1960's Aboriginal children were attending Australian state schools, under Government policies which saw education as a method of assimilation.

A national referendum in 1967 saw the end of these earlier policies and a new approach by European educators, who believed that European schools and education were suitable for Aborigines, if improved in terms of technology and efficiency. Recent research has shown that while some gains have been made, Aboriginal schooling outcomes have improved very little. The one spectacular feature of this period has been the determination of Aborigines to enter tertiary education, and the numbers have increased from less than 100 in 1974 to over 800 in 1980.

The reaction of Aboriginal people to this situation has been overwhelmingly to demand to take responsibility as a society for their own education. They wish to use education as a device to increase their rate of economic development and self-determination. More importantly, Aborigines see education as the only real path to custodianship of their own culture, and responsibility for their own future.

This submission makes recommendations that argue for:

- a) An influential role in the writing of Australian history.
- b) Targeted programs in Aboriginal education which is Government funded.
- c) The right for those Aborigines poorly served by State education systems at all levels, to develop independent institutions.
- d) Programs which will allow Aborigines to effectively learn Australian languages, both those in present use and those which have fallen into disuse. The right to have bilingual education where desired.

THE EDUCATION OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE IN AUSTRALIA

INTRODUCTION

Human time began for us in this continent. We, are Aboriginal, like the west wind, like that wind we moved over every square metre of this land, became a part of it and impressed our mortal and spiritual identity into every element of it. In this place we built a human society. The perfection of our world was with us and with the land. Our children, conceived of the land, grew into our hands and we schooled them in our ways, and generation by generation we recreated our society and pursued its perfection.

We knew the people of Asia. They sailed their ships along our shores and at times dwelt upon them. Our contact with them was gentle and they did not disturb our world. Two hundred years ago a fierce new wind swept in upon us. It took away our isolation and almost destroyed our society, but like the mythical phoenix of the newcomers we arose from our ~~own~~ ashes and can again be masters of our own destiny.

By the 1930s it was obvious that the indigenous people of Australia were not going to die out. It was true that the fully descendant population at least in the southern regions of the country still continued to decline in numbers, however their mixed race descendants had

begun to increase and no longer suffered the ravages of the European diseases.

The newcomers had by this time developed a comprehensive system of schooling based in each of their new States. The children of the first Australians however, were effectively excluded from attending these institutions.

This process of exclusion was based on policy rather than law, where Aboriginal children were expelled from schools on the complaint of white parents. It is possible that these policies may have been able to be challenged but no challenge was ever made. Our education systems had been destroyed and if we were to survive our children would need to have the right to be educated in some fashion. The only immediate alternative was to try and make use of the alien schools, from which we were excluded.

In 1937, an Aboriginal man in New South Wales, William Ferguson made a plea to end this state of affairs, and prepared a document which he called the Aboriginal Manifesto. This was the first offer of treaty from either side. It was published in 1938 and main three main proposals.

- . to legalise miscegenation
 - . to allow Aboriginal people to assimilate into the European population
 - . to educate Aboriginal children in the same
-

way that European children were educated.

In the light of modern Aboriginal political thinking and philosophy, this proposal would seem extraordinary. At that time only a handful of Europeans were prepared to accept its propositions. Today it would be almost impossible to find an Aboriginal person who would accept them.

By 1940 one of Ferguson's propositions was accepted by the Europeans, and in that year the State of New South Wales for the first time officially allowed Aboriginal children to attend state schools and in that same year set up the first school for Aboriginal children known as the ^{Colanendabri} ~~Colorendalini~~ Annexe. Aboriginal children were provided with a State Government teacher.

Prior to this Aboriginal children had received some education of sorts from mission or other teachers in reserves. Such schooling was neither systematic or significantly productive.

By the end of 1950, Aboriginal children were attending state schools throughout the country. Education was seen as a major strategy of assimilation, and in 1963 a Conference of Commonwealth and State Ministers in Darwin resolved that the policy of assimilation was aimed at ensuring that *all Aborigines and part-Aborigines attain the same manner of living as other Australians and live as members of a single Australian community.*

It is difficult to say whether such a policy of overt assimilation would have worked, but by the mid-60s this experiment had come to an end. The Gurinji people had walked off Wave Hill Station in the Northern Territory, and the long struggle for land rights had begun. This movement not only changed the form and nature of the politics of black Australians, it changed forever the politics and perhaps even the nature of all of Australia. The offer of covenant and treaty was at an end.

In 1967 it was clear that European Australians had had a considerable change of heart, in their attitude towards, and views of Aborigines, and they recorded this change in the form of the 1967 referendum which ushered in the modern period of Aboriginal affairs.

Accompanying this ^{was a} change in political stance, there was a significant change in official attitudes towards the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people. This change of attitude reached not only through the Commonwealth Government but also into all of the States with the exception of Queensland, which remained like a South African colony.

The Federal Government made an immediate and substantial contribution to education and during the periods following the referendum from 1969 to 1974 made some ten million dollars available to State Governments in order to make special provisions in education for Aboriginal people,

above and beyond those normally provided by the State systems. As well as this the Federal Government spent some \$20 million in special student assistance schemes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people, and funded directly the total cost of schooling for Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory.

This funding continued to rise steadily until in the financial year of 1977/78 grants to the States alone had risen over \$7 million. The States themselves contributed to these programs mainly in terms of special staff in schools.

In 1978/79, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs provided \$9.18 million in support of Aboriginal education programs. A further \$18.17 million was provided through the Department of Education for Aboriginal student assistance schemes. This financial year, a total of \$8.9 million has been allocated by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. Notwithstanding all this, by the mid to late 1970s, a series of studies and evaluations tended to paint a gloomy picture of the situation particularly of schooling. [In response to this, in 1974 the Australian Schools Commission established a committee consisting of all Aboriginal people involved in education with the purpose of advising the Schools Commission on what new or different measures needed to be taken to overcome many of the emerging problems in Aboriginal education.]

In March, in 1977, the Commonwealth Minister for Education set up a National Aboriginal Education Committee

consisting of eighteen members and a full-time Chairman. This Committee was set up to advise the Commonwealth Minister and his Department on the educational needs of Aboriginal people, and the most appropriate ways of meeting these needs. The members of this Committee came from all States, including Tasmania, and also from the Torres Strait Islands. Members are selected into the Committee for their experience in formal education and also for their value as community resource personnel and include people resident in traditional and non-traditional Aboriginal communities.

The first Chairman of this Committee was Mr Stephen Albert, a member of the Bardi people in Western Australia. In 1979 Mr Albert summed up the changes which had occurred in the 70s. He said:-

During the 1970s the role of Aboriginal people in education had changed from consultation to involvement and it was now moving to one of responsibility.

He said that the consultative phase began in 1974 with the establishment by the Schools Commission of the Aboriginal Consultative Group. The second phase, involvement, began with the appointment of Aboriginal adults into positions in education. Most worked with Aboriginal children as teacher aides but a number ^{had} graduated from tertiary institutions as fully qualified teachers and some had attained relatively senior positions in Federal and State Education Departments. These people became involved in the planning and administration of Aboriginal education.

Stephen Albert maintained that responsibility is the ultimate goal of all Aboriginal people involved in education. By this he meant responsibility for the outcomes of their plans and actions. He conceded that individual responsibility has already been achieved by some Aboriginal classroom teachers, but he said that the National Aboriginal Education Committee is seeking responsibility for Aboriginal people as a society for their own education.

NATURE OF THE EDUCATIONAL PROVISIONS

In terms of actual educational provisions, the extra money provided by the Commonwealth Government have been used for a wide variety of purposes including the following:

- (1) Aboriginal teacher aides, Aboriginal people employed in a paraprofessional capacity within the schools (between 600 and 800 people are employed in this way).
- (2) Other special staff such as linguists, resource and advisory teachers.
- (3) Special curriculum and educational structures such as language programs, and of course bilingual education.
- (4) Special in-service training for teachers involved with Aboriginal children whether Aboriginal or otherwise.

In the adult area these provisions range from special student assistance schemes to assist Aborigines to attend tertiary and other post-secondary educational facilities, institutions such as the Aboriginal Community College, the Black Community School in Townsville, and courses within tertiary institutions which are associated with special support facilities. Most of these provisions, particularly those

relating to schooling were designed by non indigenous
Australians. It is interesting to ^{examine} exercise the
philosophy ^{on which these provisions were based} behind them. In the 1977-78 financial year, ~~the~~
a total of over \$5 million which had been spent on
schooling, the actual provisions made, can be analysed in ~~the~~
the following way

- improving existing systems 57.8%
- compensatory education 11.0%
- special adaptations and innovations 15.8%
- administration and support 15%

This analysis clearly shows that the European planners of
these systems consider

- (a) the education systems already provided in State schools
are capable of achieving appropriate outcomes for
Aboriginal people if they are improved in certain
ways.
- (b) desirable educational outcomes for Aborigines are more
or less the same as for non-Aboriginal people.

This tends to indicate that schooling systems developed
the idea that they can accommodate Aboriginal children within
the general systems without expecting the child to
assimilate in a cultural sense. This is a far cry from
this purely assimilation policy of the 1950s and 60s.
~~Nevertheless~~
Nevertheless for many children this can still be a destructive
process which destroys rather than ^{builds} building-on their
heritage.

Achievements

One of the few things that both European and Aboriginal
educators and educationalists tend to agree on, are the

outcomes that Aboriginal people have gained from their adventure in European education systems. In general they appear fairly dismal although there is some evidence of improvement both in schooling and in the education of adults. The Commission for Inquiry into Poverty: poverty in education in Australia in 1976, found that 22.6% of the "white population" reached senior secondary level.

Professor Watts reporting on a detailed investigation of the Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme in 1976 found that only 4.9% of Aboriginal students reached the senior levels of secondary schooling.

An even more alarming situation was found in the Northern Territory by the ACER study of numeracy and literacy carried out in 1977. The study reports that

"if successful performance of the tasks identified in the course of this study is important for leading a normal life in Australian society ... most students at Aboriginal schools in the Northern Territory would not be able to lead a normal life in Australia without sever disadvantage."

Willmot reports in a study of post-secondary school needs for Aborigines in the State of South Australia in 1978, that

"children of traditional parents ... are not at present achieving schooling outcomes which either put them in a position to enter the competitive labour market of white Australian society or enable them to take advantage of standard post-secondary education facilities."

What of the future, in 1976 statistics from the Bureau of Statistics and from the Commonwealth Department of

Education indicated that for the general Australian population 7.4% of high school students completed Year 12 and 3.8% of these entered tertiary education, whereas only 1% of Aboriginal students completed Year 12 and in fact 0.38% entered tertiary institutions. This means that approximately 51% of the general population of school children who completed high school entered tertiary education while some 40% of Aboriginal students completing high school entered tertiary education. This difference is obviously much smaller than could be expected. [This

new paragraph

determination to enter tertiary education becomes more apparent towards the end of the decade. In 1974 there were 69 Aboriginal students attending universities or CAEs, by 1980 there were 881 students attending these tertiary institutions. Although some 200 of these were in fact engaged in bridging courses, this is to say the least a spectacular expansion.

This trend is difficult to explain and certainly is not at result of Aboriginal teachers. The National Aboriginal Education Committee's Inquiry into the education and training of indigenous teachers in 1979 indicated that there is just a little over one Indigenous teacher per 1,000 Indigenous children in the country. For the non indigenous population this ratio is better than one teacher per hundred children.

Aboriginal Reaction to Education Achievements

The reaction of Australia's indigenous people to this situation has been firstly to recognise the tremendous importance of education in regaining control of our own *affairs* destiny. This vision was clearly stated by the very

educational

first Aboriginal group to come together to advise government. This was the Consultative Group which was established by the Schools Commission in 1975 and they said:

"We see education as the most important strategy for achieving realistic self determination for the Aboriginal people of Australia".

In the last six years Aboriginal people have realised that this will only be possible if we are able to take complete responsibility as a society for the education of our own people.

This indigenous reaction has lead to three specific approaches by Aboriginal people. The first is perhaps the most aggressive, and it is in the form of *independent* schools. Independent schools now exist at Townsville in Queensland, Strelly community in Western Australia, and Yiparinya School in Alice Springs. There is also a number of other groups planning such schools. [Associated with these outright attempts to operate independent schools are the particular styles of schooling that has developed in the homelands centres situations. Here the schools are conducted and virtually controlled by these Aboriginal communities. The State Education Departments in Western Australia, the Northern Territory and South Australia supply where possible, visiting the State Government teachers.

*How
does it
work?*

[The second reaction came from the National Aboriginal Education Committee. This group has called for the focussing of resources on specific areas of education. The most important drive at present is in the education and training of teachers. This Committee has called for the production of 1000 indigenous teachers by 1990. This

is a practical target and easily within future student and *financial* resources. A 1000 highly skilled teachers will have a profound effect on Aboriginal society, if not all of Australian society.

The third concern *among* Aborigines is that of custodianship. This problem was first articulated by Colin Bourke, an Aboriginal educationist. He said that to be dispossessed of ones homeland is a serious blow to any society, but to be dispossessed of ones culture can cause the society's death.

Custodianship is a subtle and complex idea and poorly understood even among the best of white Australian scholars. For Aboriginal people it means the ownership and control of the perfect knowledge and information of our culture. ~~To be, and to be seen, as the keepers of that knowledge.~~ This can only be achieved by our own scholars and there are pitifully few of them.

This is not to say that many Aboriginal people do not already hold or understand the knowledge of our culture. Our problem is that few of us can articulate it, and can be seen by other scholars throughout the world as being the keepers of this knowledge.

These concerns are reflected in the objectives stated in the National Aboriginal Education Committee's rationale, aims and objectives in Aboriginal education.

1. To work in close consultation with the National Aboriginal Conference, State Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups as well as Aboriginal committees and organizations.
 2. The urgent setting up of a National Inquiry into all aspects of Aboriginal education under the auspices of the N.A.E.C. in consultation with State Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups.
 3. To work towards the establishment of a National Aboriginal Education Commission. The proposed Commission should be a Statutory Body established by an Act of Parliament. This would place the funding, administration and responsibility for Aboriginal education under the direction of Aboriginal people.
 4. The establishment of an Aboriginal Education Resource and Curriculum Development Unit which would produce materials for Aborigines and non-Aborigines. The Unit, through the N.A.E.C., would develop links and working relationships with State and regional Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups and the existing Curriculum Development Centre.
 5. The immediate implementation of steps to increase, substantially and quickly, Aboriginal involvement, influence and participation in education programs
-
-

at all levels offered to Aboriginal people throughout Australia. This will require the provision of large scale training programs, manpower planning, understudy and planned academic study. Preparation of Aborigines for participation in these ways should include Aboriginal education philosophy and community-influenced curriculum content.

6. The implementation throughout Australia of community education schemes ^{based} bases on parental involvement and community consultation at the local level. Initially these could be associated with the establishment of community learning centres within Abroginal community groups.
7. The establishment of a National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander College of Advanced Education with campuses located in several different areas of Australia. The NATSICAE could offer a wide variety of courses at all levels.
8. The establishment of appropriate teacher education courses apart from the present schemes so that Aboriginal teachers will receive accredited teaching qualifications and training in Aboriginal philosophy, teaching methods and curriculum development.
9. Any research discussions or activities in the area of Aboriginal education must be conducted in a

manner which is consistent with our policy of Aboriginal decision-making in the provision of educational services to Aboriginal people.

~~DRAFT~~

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For the indigenous people of Australia the latter part of the 20th Century has truly become the age of responsibility. This is the period in which we intend to become again masters of our own destiny. Education will be one of the most important strategies in making this possible. Through the power and human development that education can make possible, our people can become once more the custodians of their own culture. We can achieve a level of economic development which will allow us to step into the 21st Century as complete human beings.

We don't seek help as much as we seek our dues, we are no longer concerned about our indentivity, for this is a battle we have won. This is a time when we are concerned about our humanity and as an Aboriginal writer, Kevin Gilbert once said,

"It is not so much my black Aboriginality that you deny me but rather my potential for growth as a human being while you deny me this you can build me all the mansions in the world but my spirit will inhabit none of them."

For us humanity means more than simply citizenship. We are

the first Australians. We have an inalienable right to this continent, and to the status that that right can afford us.

Recommendation 1

We recommend that the Australian Government should ensure that any official history that is used in educational institutions in Australia, describe modern Aboriginal people as the descendants of the first human society in Australia and the traditional owners of the continent of Australia. Further that history relating to the last 200 years accurately report the invasion of Australia by the British, and their failure to recognise the rights of Aboriginal people as indigenous and the owners of all Australian land.

One of the most significant areas of study that is being undertaken by young Aboriginal scholars has been that of history. Both the approach and the style of research ~~and writing~~ done in this area by Aboriginal scholars has a distinct character, and differs in significant ways from the way in which history has in the past been presented by Europeans in Australia.

The difficulties these ^{young} year scholars face, relates mainly to their dispersal throughout this large continent. If Aboriginal people are truly to become the custodians of their own culture then history forms the most important part of this and it is a matter of urgency that our own historians be placed in a position where they have the productive power to make their ideas, their research and their

writings to become part of both the Australian and the international academic world.

Recommendation 2

We commend that at least one Australian university should create a chair of Aboriginal history, and that this chair should be occupied by an appropriate Aboriginal scholar. We appreciate that universities may need time to establish the necessary infrastructure and courses to make such a thing possible but we would recommend a target date of 1985 for this project.

It is not only history that Aboriginal scholars have become concerned with but also linguistics, ^{law} anthropology, ^{education} and sociology and economic development.

The National Aboriginal Education Committee has recognised the need for Aborigines to be trained in these and other disciplines, ~~in particular in teacher education.~~ ^{This} ~~This~~ ^{The} Committee strongly supports the establishment of an independent Aboriginal college of advanced education. Such a college would offer courses with strong orientations towards Aboriginal styles in both pedagogy and scholarship in a variety of academic disciplines. This college should be controlled by an Aboriginal council, but would be available both to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

Recommendation 3

We recommend that the Australian Government through the Tertiary Education Commission provide funds necessary to establish a college of advanced education controlled and administered by a council of Aboriginal people. This college would specialise in areas of academic studies related especially to Aboriginal Australia. We envisage such a college to be a multi-purpose CAE with some specialisation in training of teachers, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal who will be involved in the teaching of Aboriginal children and other specialised areas such as teacher linguists and special administrative personnel.

The National Aboriginal Education Committee and the National Aboriginal Conference and other Aboriginal bodies have clearly recognised the need for Aboriginal people to be able to take responsibility for their own affairs at all levels. If education is to be effective for Aboriginal people then it is plain that many more Aboriginal professional people must be involved in positions within education systems and in the operation of independent education facilities to ensure that Aboriginal society as a whole is able to take responsibility for the education of its own children.

Recommendation 4

We recommend that the Australian Government recognise the importance of the recommendations and findings in their own National Inquiry into Teacher Education known as NITE and that they support strongly the National Aboriginal Education Committee in ^{its Target} ~~the production~~ of 1,000

Aboriginal teachers by the year 1990.

Recommendation 5

We recommend that any authorities involved in the provision of funds for the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people in Australia resolve to proceed in highly goal ^{oriented} ~~or entered~~ or targeted programs that can be monitored in simple terms of their targets and the quality of their output by Aboriginal bodies. That the Australian Government recognise the need to approach both the education of Aboriginal people and Aboriginal economic development as being necessarily requiring a focussing of resources in certain special targeted areas.

While most Aboriginal children attend State Government schools in Australia, we recognise a clear need for the existence of some independent Aboriginal controlled schools for certain sections and groups within Aboriginal society.

Recommendation 6

We recommend that the Australian Government through the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and the Department of Education support the establishment of Aboriginal schools which are able to demonstrate the support of significant Aboriginal organisations such as the NAC and the NAEC and the ADC.

Aboriginal people in Australia recognise, as do other indigenous people of the world that language is a fundamental part of any culture. One of the tragedies in modern Aboriginal society is that at least two thirds of the society have lost their mother tongue, and feel this loss acutely. We are

aware that academic organisations and institutions such as the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies have managed to analyse many ^{of these} Australian languages to a degree where they could be prepared for teaching.

Recommendation 7

We recommend that where Australian languages are requested by their owners or the descendants of the owners that they be prepared in a form where they can be learned by non-linguists, that such preparation be carried out and that these languages be offered as special parts school curriculums and the curriculums of other institutions for Aboriginal people who request them. We recognise that bilingual education has become an important part of the schooling system for traditional Aboriginal people in the Northern and Central parts of Australia. We consider that where languages are still used and known by communities that it is their rights as human beings and citizens of ^{this nation} a country that their children be allowed to become literate in these languages as part of their normal schooling. We also recognise the great importance that these children also become literate in ^{the} *Lingua franca* of modern Australia which is English.

Recommendation 8

We recommend that education authorities in those States where Australian languages are still used by certain traditionally oriented communities promote and properly support bilingual education for children as the communities request it.

Eric W. Hill
Professor
Illinois