

ABORIGINAL EDUCATION

Ian S. Mitchell,
Sydney, N.S.W.

An address delivered to the New South Wales Chapter of the Australian College of Education in 1972 by Mr. Ian S. Mitchell, Director of Aboriginal Welfare, New South Wales.

He was an alert lad with well above average intelligence, but apart from sport and a partiality for listening to good stories, he seemed disinterested in schooling. All of my motivating mechanisms had failed and while he was not troublesome, it was of concern that school was an unrewarding experience. One day as we strolled through the bush together on a class exercise, I felt he began taking me into his confidence when he shattered all propriety with - "If I go to Grade Six I will be a good drover; if I go to high school I will be the same drover, so I will stay in Grade Three!"

In this paper it is intended to discuss three principles of policy which are also appropriate as principles of curriculum. Hopefully, however, such an approach will allow for practical applications and a consideration of grass roots problems.

Policy and curriculum are combined here because the forces which motivate the administrator in his policy are similar to those which drive the educationalist in his syllabus-making, for the ultimate consideration in both instances is the Aboriginal student.

There are at least three major principles on which Aboriginal education policy should be firmly secured. Although mentally acknowledged, they bear spelling out in the hope that for some at least they will be internalized like the jingle of a radio commercial for soap.

1. *The first, and most important one, is that education cannot be divorced from other parts of living, but is complementary to housing, health, employment, welfare, identity, and so on. In turn*

this principle is a two-edged sword viz., Government must provide for programs of housing, employment and the like, together with education, and educationalists must program realistic curricula.

Anyone who considers Aboriginal education alone runs a grave risk, for education is the formal part of the total socialization process which continues throughout the business of living. Witness the pointlessness of urging Aboriginals to obtain higher grades when their homes constitute river-bank shacks, where study facilities are non-existent, encouragement minimal and a value system operates which is hostile to this intention. Such experiences only contribute to personal distress and social disorganization. Similarly, other illustrations could highlight the close relationship education has with employment, health, and so on.

That is the administrative problem. The Aborigines Act of 1969 transferred responsibilities from a centralized all-embracing department, such as the former Aborigines Welfare Board, to a number of specialist departments. Thus the Housing Commission, being the authority which has at its disposal the expertise in accommodation, now manages those homes built especially for Aboriginals. They are standard homes but are constructed with money allocated from the Aboriginal vote for indigenous tenants.

Similarly the Health Department has charge of Aboriginal health and Employment Service of employment, etc.

The Directorate of Aboriginal Welfare is a small coordinating unit which meets with these other expert authorities to plan an overall program taking into account the people of a town. Thus there is little point in building homes in centres where employment is so problematic that prospective tenants cannot meet rental obligations. However, can the people be allowed to endure other conditions which are hazardous to health?

Thus the planning of policy by administrators should, ideally, take notice of all parts of living.

What about the relationship of education to these other areas, for the educationalist?

Of course this is a truism to teachers, for the objective of education *is* preparation for living - isn't it? For Aboriginals?

Then what is the point to tooth-brush drills, and respect for furniture and stories about Prince Charming and filling up the tricycle with a make believe super or standard, all respectable preschool functions in themselves, but not for a child who lives on a Reserve with an aged grandmother, in a town where blacks and whites are "us" and "them".

Clearly, as obvious as it may appear theoretically, the fact is that our preschool programs have not encapsulated this principle, particularly for disadvantaged Aboriginals. However, I guess no harm is really done, for very few Aboriginals go to preschool anyway! There are exceptions which will be instanced later.

Yes, the relation of education to living is a truism but it is a truism like democracy and justice and religion: they all work when the advocates undertake refresher courses periodically.

In Aboriginal affairs, then, it is essential that education programs be paralleled by comparative advances in other parts of living and that the curricula be designed for the student in his environment rather than for some mythical condition which he may experience in a future dreamtime.

No apology is offered for presenting this principle first: it is crucial to education; it is vital to the student; it is demanding on the teacher; it is incumbent on the Government and/or voluntary body administering the school or preschool. If this principle fails, "I will stay in Grade Three and become a drover".

2. *The second principle is that Aboriginals have particular needs because they are Aboriginals.*

Social scientists have demonstrated that there is no difference between ethnic groups in terms of innate capacity, intelligence, ability and so on, other than that occasioned by physical variation. However, in as much as they form a sub-culture, or in some areas a completely separate culture, Aboriginal Australians have a value system which is not always consistent with that of white society. If this is placed in juxtaposition to the last principle, those factors which distinguish Aboriginals as an entity must be taken into account, in the determination of policy or curriculum. Few Aboriginals wish to return to the tribal situation of woomeas, witcheties and wife-swapping, but

even in technological Sydney there are Aboriginals working in factories, living in standard homes, speaking English, engaging in many activities similar to yours and mine but wishing to retain their Aboriginality. It is hoped that this point is so accepted now as to require no further explanation.

Of course, the principle raises its own questions - "If Aboriginals are different, do they need a special education system?" and the concomitant "Should teachers in Aboriginal schools have special training?"

The moment one suggests a separate education system for Aboriginals, there is a cry of "apartheid". But if an ethnic group wishes to pursue its own objectives in life without disrupting other groups in the community, what justification is there for refusing? For decades white Australia has tried to suppress Aboriginality but, surprising as it seems to some, the indigenes will not die out nor will they go away and get lost. Believe it or not, one lady harangued me on one occasion, demanding that all Aboriginals should be sent home!

I am not so naive as to believe that for some the cost to a community of supporting another system will appear prohibitive, but generally those who are so concerned are nevertheless agreeable to increased Government assistance for independent schools. Politics do not enter this argument, and in fact, it is not intended to resolve the question here. It is raised for serious thought.

What is more important, however, in the present system, is to accept that our present curriculum is not favourably disposed towards descendants of Originals.

Our history books suggest that Captain Cook discovered the continent; that Wentworth, Blaxland and Lawson crossed the Blue Mountains first, and that conservation projects are modern practices in Australia. This is offensive to Aboriginals, who know otherwise, and it is one of the contributory arguments in favour of an Aboriginal-oriented system. True, there is still need to learn three lots of two make six, and the fact that the world is spheroid, but there is an Aboriginal point of view in the more subjective disciplines.

Even the priorities of subject matter presented in a pre-school may not accord with Aboriginal opinion. Learning nursery

rhymes about an idiot who attempted to pinch some Christmas pie in a corner, or the community who constructed a well on top of a hill so that a character could fracture his skull with a bucket on the way down is hardly information that is likely to appeal to children for whom Christmas is a white man's word for a beer party, or hill tops are all used for housing by non-Aboriginals while the water points are in the valleys.

I am not advocating a separate system, nor ruling it out: there are substantial reasons in favour of it and equally valid ones for its rejection. But the matter must be thought through carefully. The New South Wales Government supports ideologies in relation to preschools, viz. wholly or almost wholly Aboriginal preschools, and for want of a better phrase, encouraging attendance at "normal" preschools. In fact there are three preschool systems for Aboriginals.

- (i) Some schools are conducted under the auspices of voluntary associations, employ trained teachers or preschool teachers and adopt a relatively formal program. The great majority are conducted by the Save the Children Fund, whose major aim is to offer the deprived Aboriginal an early introduction to formal schooling practices. Children so assisted are acquainted with some of the social demands and disciplines before they reach the compulsory school entrance age. As a preparation, the scheme is meeting considerable success and there is evidence that those who have attended any of the Fund's ten schools have a considerably better chance of attaining some academic success in the early years of formal school than those not so fortunate.
- (ii) The second type of all-Aboriginal preschool training requires greater parental and community involvement and introduces a program which follows Aboriginal values. Organized as Family Education Centres, there are no trained supervisors, but children and parents share together in an environment which, while inviting flexibility, leads to the formalities of learning through parental motivation. It, too, is valuable in making children and parents aware of themselves and it fosters confidence and creativity which can be built upon in subsequent years in the more disciplined situation of school.

Both are legitimate and both are supported by Government and yet in some ways they seem antagonistic. Is a compromise possible so that the valued features of each are employed? Frankly, it may not be possible for they are polar opposites: either the program is Aboriginal-oriented or non-Aboriginal-oriented. However, each is aware of the advantages of the other; the Save the Children Fund is increasing its Aboriginal involvement at every level while concentrating on those children about to enter the infants school. The Family Education Centres, on the other hand, recognizing the need for a more formal introduction to a schooling system as is presently operating, are concentrating on younger children, and this I see as an admirable solution - not in any dispute between the systems (that is not necessary) but in resolving the conflict in the child, for the existence of two distinct approaches is symbolic of the problems. The Aboriginal child is suspended between a socialization experienced in the sub-community, and the expectations and impositions of a wider unsympathetic society, and somehow in the midst of this turmoil he must find himself. After all the child is a member of society - even apathetic, self-made, white society.

- (iii) A third preschool system for Aboriginals is supported by Government. If a "normal" preschool will accept a number of Aboriginals as a proportion of its enrolment, that ratio of operating costs will be met by the Department. These are standard centres not built particularly for Aboriginals but which accept them into the everyday activities. Clearly this type applies to towns where Aboriginals do not opt for a separate existence.

Each of these instances embodies a distinct policy and, of course, each example warrants its specific curriculum.

In the introduction of this second principle, two questions were posed - "If Aboriginals are different, do they need a special education system?" and "Should teachers in Aboriginal schools have special training?"

The first one was not answered but a number of matters were raised to provoke thought on the matter. The second needs no such uncertainty. Even if a separate system is not feasible, the fact that Aboriginals are sufficiently distinct as to be a sub-community

necessitates that all who seek to work with them have special training.

Again you may rebuke me with the charge that this is so basic as to require no further argument. But, of course, why not? A little under two years ago a survey of all teacher training establishments in Australia was taken, to determine what facilities were available for those teachers who could be asked or could volunteer to serve in schools with a high Aboriginal enrolment, or preschools established for Aboriginals. The results, published in a recent issue of "Race", are revealingly disappointing. At the time it would be generalized that few had even considered it and one only had made any provision. Since then, the Western Teachers College of South Australia and the Armidale Teachers College of New South Wales have launched extensive and exciting programs, the Save the Children Fund has pressed for training for its Aboriginal assistants and the Family Education Centres project has organized an introductory course for its parents.

3. *A third principle which must be recognized by policy-makers and curricula draughtsmen alike is the need to stimulate Aboriginal education with resources additional to those being expended on the more affluent segment of the Australian population.*

At present, as a generalization, Aboriginals are at a distinct disadvantage in the community and therefore they require what has been called "overcompensation". Despite the fact that all ethnic groups are adjudged equal in intellectual potential, nearly all tests carried out in Australia, including those ostensibly culture-free, show that the Aboriginal scores much lower than his white counterpart. If a graph depicting overall achievement in school could be drawn, for example, it would be found that the European population in Australia is distributed pretty well across the familiar bell-shaped "normal curve" but that in the same measure the Aboriginals predominate in the lower sector. There are still non-Aboriginals in that lower part of the range but, whereas they are a minority, the Aboriginals there constitute the majority.

Let me illustrate by using housing conditions as a further example. Again the normal curve ranges from poor sub-standard shack-like dwellings right up to eighty-five square dwellings. The vast majority live in middle class, brick and tiled, front-lawned homes. Consider Aboriginal accommodation: the clustering

is down at the one end.

If we appreciate that Aboriginal intelligence and capacity also have the same ranges as for white Australians, it is logical to assume that the Aboriginals should be scattered pretty evenly through the normal curve of education in these terms. At the moment there are about five Aboriginal students in New South Wales Universities and then only because of a particular condition by which the Universities of New South Wales and Macquarie waive the quota system in the case of these Aboriginal students. Yet Aboriginals constitute 1% of the population, and 1% of any of the State University numbers could be counted in the hundreds.

To ensure that Aboriginals are sprinkled more equitably through the educational range it is necessary to overcompensate through the infusion of funds, and services, by which the Aboriginal can obtain more than normal opportunities to fulfil his every potential.

In preschool terms this means the provision of enrichment programs, both formal and informal, for every Aboriginal child from birth to six years of age and then a continuing interest through the other stages of schooling. As impracticable as it may sound, it is nonetheless necessary if the present perpetuation of a depressed minority is to be reversed. This is no emotional outburst from a professional salesman but a careful assessment from one whose own efforts were rewarded with the reminder that with a Grade Three education one can still be a good drover.

Once the principle is grasped, however, that a massive expenditure is required, another conflict looms. Why discriminate in favour? What about the poor non-Aboriginals? White reaction to the steadily increasing national budget vote for Aboriginals is one of the present problems besetting Aboriginal Affairs departments. There is valid argument for so assisting all those without the personal resources but our answer must be in terms of the normal curve construct, referred to earlier. Not all Aboriginals are potential tertiary students but until numbers in these institutions are approximately the ratio of Aboriginals to non-Aboriginals in the total population our argument stands. Certainly that proportion does not even attend preschools.

A further reaction to the policy of overcompensation is the allegation of "handout", "waste", and "dependency" and this, too,

has an element of validity. While conceding that some of the monies will appear to be wasted, it is submitted that until this measure of generosity has been achieved the deprivation cycle will not be collapsed.

In addressing this subject of stimulation, emphasis has been given to money, but cash is not the only resource. Teachers, buildings, conditions, and so on are others. It could be argued strongly that Aboriginal children need the best in teachers, for example.

Nor should this principle of stimulation, or over-compensation, be restricted to policy-determination. The curriculum, with all its ramifications, could be enriched.

In summary, because preschool years are the critical years, it is essential that those in the fields of administration and education internalize the principles being advocated: that education cannot be separated from other aspects of living; that Aboriginals have a particular need; that compensatory assistance is vital to break the present deadlock.

APPLICATION

All very informative! Rambling, complex, but speculative and therefore something which will tickle our fancy.

As a professional body we are all very pleased to be acquainted with specialist areas of education.

Unfortunately, like the armchair anthropologists of the last century who mused on kinship concatenations of the Hottentots and Amazonians from the warmth of a London fireside, it is comforting for most of us to be untouched by the realities of the problem.

May I suggest that our concern could be demonstrated more enthusiastically and more really in moral, financial and organizational support for existing endeavours, and pressure for filling present gaps. In the field of preschools, the Save the Children Fund would welcome professional advice from our membership. In the field of primary schools, we should persuade the Education Department to appoint a specialist officer in Aboriginal Education. In the field of tertiary education the

work of Miss Douglas at Armidale demands our encouragement.

Curricula - particularly in the social sciences - some of which have been changed recently, could be scrutinized by our members. Text books are radically anti-Aboriginal and our influence could be used effectively in such an area.

Far less time has been devoted to practical issues as it really warrants another session - which I'm not offering to perform - but until the principles are grasped and internalized the practices will not be meaningful.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I spoke not as an outsider but as a colleague, and my plea is that we stop playing at recess and begin studying seriously. Initially, our principles must be determined and then the application followed.

.....