

ABORIGINAL EDUCATION: FOR ABORIGINES BY ABORIGINES?

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Over a period of 40,000 years, Aboriginal people developed a way of life in this country which was carefully rooted in a comprehensive system of education - from the cradle to the grave. This life-long education system was planned and delivered by the adult members of the community in a disciplined, caring environment.

Whilst the procedures and ways differed widely from conventional European techniques, the purpose and nature of traditional Aboriginal education was just as meaningful as any education system if not more so.

In the traditional Aboriginal society, the education system had to be structured to produce mature, disciplined and assured human beings who could participate in the daily activities, and make their appropriate contribution to the social, spiritual and cultural life of the community. Unfortunately, Australians have rarely appreciated the extraordinarily proficient nature of the traditional education system.

The impact of European colonization on the traditional education system was not readily apparent. To begin with, the new settlers and the policy makers both in Australia and in distant Great Britain, considered that Aboriginal people were not only without any social systems, educational or otherwise, but were also uneducable. This ignorance was and continued to be reinforced by the writings of anthropologists and other "professionals".

If you study the index of the major recognized authors on "Aboriginalia", rarely do you find reference to or recognition of a traditional education system.

Under these circumstances it was a simple logical step for the colonizers to impose what they considered to be appropriate schooling programs with far reaching results.

The Aboriginal community has been disanimated and the European community frustrated in its endeavours to "educate" the Aboriginal people, but now at last there are indications of change. Policy makers at national and state levels, aware of the failures of the past are beginning to recognize the necessity, indeed the value of greater Aboriginal participation in the provision of educational services for Aboriginal people. At the same time Aboriginal aspirations for increased involvement in their own education have been stimulated by recent initiatives at the state and national levels. It remains to be seen whether these initiatives reflect a genuine desire for change - a genuine desire to develop a more responsive system of education that incorporates greater Aboriginal involvement in the planning, design and delivery of education for Aboriginal people.

Dr Margaret Valadian, Wentworth Lecture 1980

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“Aboriginal Education: For Aborigines By Aborigines?”,

extract of paper presented at the Wentworth Lecture .

(a334584_ext_a.pdf)

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