

The Search in Australian Aboriginal Education: Recent Developments and Bilingual Education

K. Tony Hollihan
University of Alberta

An exploration of developments in Australian Aboriginal education over the past few decades demonstrates the value of an historical perspective. Despite the important legal changes of 1967, the 1970s appeared to be a decade of inactivity insofar as the improvement of Aboriginal education was concerned. However, this did not necessarily indicate continued neglect of Aboriginals. Rather, time was required to meaningfully address the deep-rooted problems and issues of Aboriginal education. Ultimately, the educational programs of the 1980s, such as bilingual education, benefited from these years of reflection. The foundation of these programs is Aboriginal self-determination, and a fundamental objective is enhanced Aboriginal self-awareness.

Introduction

The education of Aboriginal Australians presents a strong argument in favor of nontraditional (i.e., not European) learning methods and structures. Such an analysis is developed in recognition of the fact that formal education has been thrust on a people whose cumulative wants and history have in no way suggested that they are either supportive or desirous of it. It is evident that for over 200 years various policies have imposed the supposedly interactive process of education on a rarely consulted people. Furthermore, it is arguable that the educational system that co-opted Aboriginals was never designed to maintain their culture and society, never established to pass on to the next generation those salient values and lessons of Aboriginal parents. Its creation and use were functions of the Europeans' desire to, in the very best light, assimilate an awkward presence. At its worst it can be interpreted as a racially motivated attempt at extermination. However, history has brought us to a point where neither the Europeans' best nor worst has materialized. A galvanization in Aboriginal action, abetted by a less ethnocentric generation of European Australians, and a new climate of rights-oriented thinking, has resulted in a reexamination of Aboriginal education. These efforts are beginning to demonstrate that nonformal education is every bit as valid as any formal structures, and that a generous education policy that facilitates Aboriginal identity is not only possible, but of the greatest benefit to all Australians.

Aboriginals are not homogeneous in culture. Originally they were perceived as one group only in the label provided by European settlers (Johnson, 1987, pp. 56-57). There appears to be no legal definition of *Aboriginal* commonly accepted in Australia (Sommerlad, 1976, p. 22). However, defining criteria include language, culture, group consciousness, or some combination of the three (Charles, 1981, p.

10). Although some authors have adopted *Black* as an alternative choice, *Aboriginal* remains common and is used throughout this article.

European Australians have struggled with the Aboriginal presence since the formers' first settlement in 1788. Over the past two centuries policies born of this struggle have been implemented, sometimes to be quickly discarded, while on other occasions to be improved and further developed. As education is often used to prepare children to play a certain role in an accepted society, it is not surprising that the European Australians, who quickly became the dominant group on the continent, eventually turned to education to ensure that Aborigines would play a prescribed role. Although many of the educational policies developed failed to have the desired affect, there seems to have been no dampening of the belief that education would ultimately succeed, and this seems to remain the case. The definition of success in this context changes through the course of Australian history. Although it would have originally meant total assimilation, Aboriginal education today cannot be considered successful without cultural maintenance. In their anxiety to incorporate Aborigines into their social system, European Australians forgot, ignored, or were simply unaware of the effective and efficient educational system that Aborigines had developed over some tens of thousands of years of life in Australia. Virtually since 1788 Aborigines were neglected in the processes that created and enacted educational policy. That such policies could succeed was unlikely; that they would face major difficulties was certain. Today Aboriginal input is seen by the Commonwealth government as not only necessary, but also desirable. It would appear that a new age of hope and realism has arrived.

As Aboriginal education is a vast and complex subject with a troubled past and brighter future, constraints need be placed on the present examination. In vain do we study the present in a vacuum, as understanding is nurtured on context. An examination of traditional Aboriginal education would demonstrate that education was not an alien concept to them, and in fact was an essential component of their culture (Charles, 1981, p. 72; Folds, 1987, p. xii-xiii; Barcan, 1980, pp. 1-3). Barcan (1980) lists four general stages of learning: birth to five (toys and grandparents); five to nine (play and work); nine to 11 (peer education via physical gender separation); 11 (acceptance as adult of tribe). Each stage was marked with various initiation rites. As one progressed through the various stages, one's world view was constantly changed and enlarged (pp. 3-4). This was not recognized by the European Australians. Enmeshed in a culture of their own, they had very definite ideas about both education and the role of the Aboriginal in their new society. This is evident from the succession of policies, traditionally focusing on segregation, which were developed to deal with the Aboriginal presence. Historians outline the development of these general policies (paralleled and supported by educational policies) in four general stages (Charles, 1981, pp. 80-89): no recognition of Aborigines (1848-1880); protection and segregation (1880-1900); exclusion and segregation (1900-1940); and beginning of the end of segregation (1940-present). It appears that a more significant fifth category has emerged since 1967. Although it is not recognized in Charles' work, it may aptly be called the period of self-determination and integration. This is demonstrated in this article. The late 1960s witnessed a radical change in the treatment of Aborigines, change that was to blossom in the 1970s and bear fruit in the 1980s. An exhaustive examination of present day Aboriginal education would be impractical in this article. Rather, an in-depth analysis is presented of a critical area of that policy:

bilingual education. Many contemporary critics see the future of Australian education resting in the success or failure of this area.

Recent Historical Context

In its final report, the Royal Commission on Human Relationships commented that since European contact with the Aboriginals,

the pattern has been, at least until recently, one of successive deprivation of the Aboriginal of his land, his culture and his ideology. The dominant white European culture has imposed its law and social values upon the Aboriginal largely in ignorance of Aboriginal cultural values. The Aboriginal community has found it difficult to preserve its own values and culture. The consequent loss of identity has enhanced the difficulties for the Aboriginal in adapting his own values or in becoming integrated with white society. (Australia, 1977, p. 74)

The Royal Commission was quite blunt in its accusations, but what is especially important in this context is the reference to the recent change. Since World War II, various legislation has been passed that reflects worldwide trends in recognition of individual rights. For example, the New South Wales Department of Education decided to accept Aboriginals into schools in 1940; the Nationality and Citizenship Act (1948) gave Aboriginals citizenship; the Commonwealth Electoral Act (1948) gave Aboriginals the right to vote in Commonwealth elections if they could vote in state elections; Aboriginal Welfare Council of Ministries (1965) gave Aboriginals the right to choose to attain a similar level of living to other Australians (Willmot, 1981, p. 284; Charles, 1981, p. 78. Such legislation indicates a movement away from a policy of assimilation. Australia's participation in that trend was unmistakably illustrated by the 1967 referendum on Aboriginal rights. The positive vote affirming those rights was evidence Australians were serious about addressing past failures. The referendum posed two questions, one of which dealt with Aboriginals.

Do you approve an Act to alter the Constitution so as to admit certain words relating to the people of the Aboriginal race in any State and so that Aboriginals are to be counted in reckoning in the population? (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 1967, p. 1)

In its editorial on the day of the vote, the *Sydney Morning Herald* explained the importance of the vote.

The Yes case on both questions in the referendum should be carried today.... Today's vote will be a measure of the responsibility of our attitude towards Aborigines. Unfortunately, few of us are likely to do something ourselves for Aborigines. By voting Yes to the question affecting them, we are at least taking this opportunity of supporting their cause. And it IS their cause. Aboriginal leaders have made it plain they want a referendum carried. It would be an intolerable act of paternalism to ignore their wishes.... The Prime Minister has not undertaken to use the additional legislative power he is seeking. Yet it is vital that he should have it. The Commonwealth will then have no excuse for failing to do more for Aborigines. There have been warnings of the damage a No vote would do to Australia's image abroad, but it is as well to think first that the image would be a shamefully true reflection. (p. 2)

The recognition of the right of Aboriginal self-determination was making itself evident. The vote was carried with the support by 90.77% of the Commonwealth (Bandler, 1989, p. 115). The wave of social reform in the 1960s was clearing the

European Australian/Aboriginal playing surface, and thus presenting the possibility for fresh action.

The implications of the affirmative referendum vote were greeted with an optimism born of hope. It was commonly believed that the potential for renewed and radically different action on Aboriginal issues was about to be made manifest. Two prominent Aboriginal activists reflected on the significance of that turning point. Bandler (1989) writes in her memoirs, "In 1967, major political and social change occurred. A referendum was held from which flowed Commonwealth responsibility for Aboriginal affairs, changing forever the social and political relationship between Aborigines and non-Aborigines" (p. 1).

Sykes (1986) concurs:

The referendum did mark a period of change, and put an end to that long history of legislative denial of the humanity of the indigenous people.... Since 1967 there has been a growing national focus on Aboriginal Affairs. This attention has unearthed, amongst other things, the result of previous policies that excluded Aboriginal Australians from the census and political institutions. (pp. 2, 6)

What were the educational implications for such a vote? A route by which one could overcome local attitudes was created. Educational policy could be unified, and innovative programs could be funded through the greater resources of the Commonwealth government. Instead of having to lobby the various state departments concerned with Aboriginal affairs, a single effort could be directed toward the Commonwealth Department of Education. As far as Aboriginals were concerned, the dawn of the 1970s appeared with a brilliance seldom seen since the 18th century.

The 1970s: The Search for Problems

Events in the late 1960s bode well for Aboriginals. It put their cause in the forefront of national affairs. In fact, it emerged in the 1970s as one of the fundamental rights-based issue movements in Australia (McInerney, 1991, p. 155; Brennan & Crawford, 1990, p. 146). Yet since the 1970s various analysts have emerged to suggest that the potential advantages, especially as far as education was concerned, were not moved upon. Despite government initiatives, funding, declarations, and agreements, Aboriginal children continue to perform poorly in the educational system. Aboriginal attempts to progress as a group have met with only limited success. What is the problem? Did something happen in the 1970s that continued to limit Aboriginal self-development? Or, especially in light of the above reflective comments of Bandler and Sykes, are some analysts expecting too much too soon? Is it realistic to think that a 200-year process that witnessed rights ignored, identities shredded, and esteem trampled can be reversed in a 20-year span? Indeed, the reversal has been time-consuming because, although the aim was known, the process to achieve it was not. The 1970s, expanding into the 1980s and on, were decades of research and study, thought and creation, implementation and retooling. Although educational problems of attendance and achievement were quite visible at a general level, educators seemed to be at a loss as to how to deal with the underlying causes. In fact, it is justifiable to suggest that the problems had to be identified prior to their being fixed.

A valid starting point for an examination of Aboriginal education in the 1970s is the *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Education in South Australia*, which sat in 1969 and 1970, and reported in 1971 (South Australia, 1971). As this article enters

into the contemporary period, it is well to note some salient points about contemporary Aboriginals. Generally researchers agree that there are three main groupings: traditional-tribal, fringe dwellers who live on the outskirts of towns, and urban Aboriginals. Cultures are different between groups, and the educational needs of each are not necessarily synonymous (Australia, 1977, pp. 73, 77). The 1981 Census indicates there were 159,897 Aboriginals (Department of Aboriginal Affairs, 1982). The remainder of this article focuses primarily on traditional-tribal Aboriginals, the group that appears to be the greatest focus of current research.) Although a State report, the document is of value because it demonstrates the infant stage of the European Australians' understanding of the Aboriginals. The Report betrays the rather defensive and bewildered approach to Aboriginal education taken by the Committee members. Although noting that the education of Aboriginals in South Australia was seriously deficient, it was added that the process was a complex matter not easily understood. Figures for 1969 were quoted: only one of 79 Aboriginal students leaving school in that year had completed grade 12 (and was thus eligible for tertiary entry); 67% of Aboriginal students left school before completing grade 9, and "many" (no number given) Aboriginals outside the cities did not even attend school until age seven (South Australia, 1971, p. 367; Department of Aboriginal Affairs, 1982, p. 64; Australia, 1989, p. 281). The committee pointed out that various agencies had been set up to help deal with the educational problem. The South Australian Department of Education had organized a program in Aboriginal education, which included liaison officers working with other departments in Aboriginal matters (i.e., Departments of Health, Aboriginal Affairs). Aboriginal aides were employed in schools. A program for the training of such individuals was to open in 1971 in Adelaide. Exposing their exasperation, the committee wrote that

Despite the efforts being made ... little is known about the school programmes and teaching methods that are appropriate to the needs of semi-tribalized Aboriginals, or about ways of overcoming the extreme educational disadvantages of part-Aboriginal children. (South Australia, 1971, p. 367)

The committee grasped the possibility that educational problems went far beyond education, involving matters of housing, unemployment, parental attitudes, and culture. Accordingly, the Report recommended that a small select committee consisting of appropriate staff from within the Department of Education, and other external experts, be appointed to undertake further research. There was no specific mention of Aboriginal input. The Committee struggled with this recommendation, as is evident in the rationale for their decision.

We do not wish to convey the impression that, in failing to make specific recommendations concerning Aboriginal education, we have not accepted the urgency of the social responsibility involved in the matter.... Such a conclusion [by the select committee] should not be seen as an alternative to action, but as a basis for widespread action of an experimental nature, as it cannot yet be said that any clear-cut solutions have yet been worked out. (pp. 375-376)

The committee members were cognizant of the new relationship between Aboriginals and other Australians. At this time they were simply unable to utilize it for the country's benefit.

Still, the ground had been broken. To suggest that it was yet fertile enough for rapid growth in education would be to underestimate the depth of the historical

roots. The 1970s witnessed the pulling up of those roots, the shaking of barren dirt from them, and their subsequent replanting. From the Aboriginals' point of view, before they could deal with problems of education, they had to be sure they were on firm ground. They had to reestablish their identity. The decade was dominated by their active pursuit of this cause. The success of this chase was critical for Aboriginal education, for without such a focus, an aim, Aboriginal education could be nothing more than the European Australian education. Although self-determination, land rights, and dignity through the erasure of poverty pushed education into the background, education was always intimate to the solution. For example, in 1973 Labour Prime Minister Gough Whitlam announced the new official policy of Aboriginal self-determination. Although the policy was taken without Aboriginal input and has since been subject to a less official but powerful policy of mainstreaming (which would ultimately result in assimilation), it was a start (Mowbray, 1990, p. 20).

Fortuitously, the appearance of a sympathetic and high-minded Commonwealth Labour government that addressed the above list enabled education to come once again to the foreground (Clark, 1987, pp. 275-279). As Aboriginal identity became stronger, and their newfound voice became more confident and articulate, they and their supporters began to focus on the failing educational system. It was difficult for anyone to argue that Aboriginal education was not a national concern of critical proportions. A continual flood of research beginning in the 1970s all seemed to flow in the same direction. The formal educational structures that the dominant majority of Australians put their faith in were not educating Aboriginals. The school attendance and achievement of Aboriginals remained poor, and was certainly not up to European Australian expectations. Aboriginals consistently ranked "at the bottom of the pile on every meaningful socio-economic index" (Harker & McConnochie, 1985). Keeffe (1989) states that "Aboriginal rates of academic underachievement, school dissatisfaction, and school-leaving remain higher than those of any other identifiable group in the Australian population" (p. 36). Folds (1987) notes that Pitjanjatjara schoolchildren were far below European standards: "the bulk of students including teenagers in the senior classes were judged to be in the second to fourth grade range [in 1971]" (p. xiv). These revelations were not new, and they probably raised few eyebrows. What emerged as different was a change in understanding why such was the situation.

As Aboriginal education was more closely analyzed, case study after case study began to point fingers away from supposed innate Aboriginal inability to learn, and toward the failing school systems. Statements such as "Indeed, the Torres Strait Islanders, like the Aborigines in their communities through Queensland, have been partially crippled by the failure of the educational system to provide them with the basic competencies necessary to function in Australia's complex society" became increasingly common (Loos, 1987, p. 68). A blunt critical style became the norm.

This [poor Aboriginal achievement] has widely been interpreted as individual failure on the part of the children, and has been attributed at various times to the inevitable effect of belonging to an inferior species, as well as the pernicious influence of parents, genetically determined low IQs, and the inadequacies of the home environment. Rarely has the failure been attributed to the inadequacies of the education provided, to the discriminatory nature of society or to the active resistance of ... Aboriginal communities to the cultural destruction implicit in many of the educational programs. (Harker & McConnochie, 1985, p. 18)

Some researchers even implied that there may have been something of a conspiracy—or at least a blind ignorance born of a desire not to know—on the part of educational administrators. In an examination of Aboriginal motivation, McInerney (1991) argues the seemingly obvious point that the tests used to measure motivation (on which Aboriginals consistently did poorly) were standardized on a different population: “middle class, Protestant white Americans or their European counterparts.” From this he concludes

Such deficit explanations of minority group “poor” performance ... were particularly unsatisfactory (although common) as they diverted all attention away from one major element in the underachievement of minority children—namely, those inadequacies within the education system itself that failed to take account of the particular needs of minority children. (p. 154)

If the children were deficient, why alter the system? It was becoming increasingly difficult to argue with Folds’ (1987) statement that “there is a tragic failure in which ... the schools are deeply implicated” (p. xiii).

Of further interest is the problem of school attendance. Into the 1970s the Commonwealth government’s stated policy with regard to Aboriginals was to assimilate them (see Mowbray, 1990, p. 20). The school was to be a primary tool in this process. However, if the students were not attending, the use of the schools for this purpose was limited. The case may indeed be that Aboriginals feel constrained by their low academic expectations for themselves, and the belief that European type education has little to offer them (McInerney, 1991, p. 168). However, researchers are now suggesting that it may be less lack of interest in education per se than an act of resistance on the part of Aboriginals. As such, it is a form of self-assertion well rooted in Aboriginal tradition, a part “of the real story of the settlement of Australia” (Folds, 1987, p. 1). It may be more accurate to interpret low attendance rates to an active choice on the part of Aboriginals that rejects a white world of meaning and the Aboriginal identity that is offered (Gale, Jordan, McGill, McNamara, & Scott, 1987, p. 274). In his study of the *Yanangu*, Keeffe (1989) is even more direct. He states that “there is little indication that *Yanangu* believe that western culture is unambiguously worthy of emulation and imitation. Certainly, the role of the school as Western cultural transmission agent seems to be largely unappreciated” (p. 40).

What these new interpretations reflect, what they have in common, is an acknowledgement of Aboriginal self-awareness and a need on their part to be active in the education of their children. Aboriginals are becoming more vocal in their demands to participate in the educational system. They are making the decisions. Brady (1990) analyzes the contemporary realities of researching and finding solutions to the problems of Aboriginal education. She notes that what researchers define as problems may not (and often do not) correspond with Aboriginal definitions. Furthermore, even if Aboriginals accept the problem as defined by researchers, there is little guarantee they will work in a concerted or predictable manner to alleviate the situation.

Bilingual Education

It should be noted here that bilingual and bicultural education often go hand in hand. “Policies and educational programs which actively operate to protect the continued use of living Aboriginal languages necessarily imply ... bilingual and bicultural education programs” (LoBianco, 1987, p. 108). Although this article

refers primarily to bilingual programs, the type of comprehensive bilingual education that Aboriginals are seeking implies a certain measure of Aboriginal cultural education.) The assumption that an improvement in Aboriginal self-esteem will improve academic achievement underlies Aboriginal educational research. It is generally believed that self-esteem will improve with a stronger Aboriginal identity. If one feels oneself to be worthless, improvement through education (or any other means) is usually not an individual's priority. The question then becomes one of facilitating identity. Researchers have repeatedly concluded that for Aboriginals there is an intimate connection between identity maintenance and the development or use of Aboriginal languages (LoBianco, 1987, p. 58; Gale et al., 1987, p. 272). Although this is not a unanimous view, even critics suggest that bilingual education is a policy worth pursuing. Folds (1987, p. xvii) comments that there is not much evidence to suggest that bilingual and bicultural schools when compared with English schools produce superior learning outcomes. Perhaps this poor comparison is a result of increased Aboriginal awareness (identity) due to the bilingual program, and a conscious decision that the concept of formal schooling is undesirable. It was on the basis of such research that, in 1972, Prime Minister Gough Whitlam announced the launching of a campaign "to have Aboriginal children living in distinctive Aboriginal communities given their primary education in Aboriginal languages" (Mills, 1982, p. 42).

Bilingual education refers to programs established for bilingual children or children who will become bilingual. In Australia it would involve the use of both English and the child's mother tongue. There are four types of language programs, and they cover the broadest scope of bilingual language use: transitional (premised on an eventual shift to the majority language); monoliterate (in which any non-English language maintenance is short term); partial (some language will be maintained, and cultural development is utilized and fostered); and full (language maintenance is expected, and there is full cultural development). Language programs are either used to facilitate English language development, or to ensure that independent thought can occur in either language (McInerney, 1991, pp. 7, 9). The choice of program type by Australian schools has often been determined by whether the local Aboriginal language had been analyzed by linguists. If it had, a partial model would be adopted, whereas if it had not, the Aboriginal language was soon replaced (though use in oral Aboriginal language arts and Aboriginal studies was continued), as happens in the monoliterate program. Most schools in the Northern Territories have adopted the partial bilingual model (Mills, 1982, p. 42).

There are very well documented educational grounds for bilingual programs. The *National Policy on Languages* (LoBianco, 1987) commissioned by the Commonwealth Minister of Education gave full support to such programs. The report expanded on four reasons why a bilingual policy should be implemented. Increased educational effectiveness, a result of the learners' familiarity with the values and contexts of their first language, is complemented by psychological benefits such as heightened self-esteem and self-motivation. Critics could be soothed by the fact that a second language is most effectively learned "when the learner's cognitive and linguistic skills in their first language have developed sufficiently to form a sound basis of existing knowledge." Regardless of educational soundness, the report urged that Aboriginal children simply have the right to such knowledge (LoBianco, 1987, pp. 109-113). There were also very practical

reasons for bilingual education. It has been demonstrated that in the cross-cultural environment of monolingual classes, different cultures have different meanings for the same words and have different reactions to the same situations. Harkins (1990) uses semantic analysis of the word (and concept of) *shame* to demonstrate that it has totally different connotations for Aboriginals than for European Australians. These connotations contribute to a negative self-concept and poor academic achievement due to uncomfortable and difficult school situations. Bilingual education may be more receptive to such subtleties.

The development of bilingual policies progressed through the 1970s and 1980s. In 1977, the Royal Commission on Human Relationships commented favorably on bilingual education. "For Aboriginals, education can be an equalising factor, helping to overcome disadvantages and laying the basis for opportunities in many fields. As yet, the potential of education has not been realised." To remedy this, the report suggests that the early education of Aboriginals be in their own language. However, there was no mention of language maintenance. Use was to be merely of a transitional nature, ultimately leading to knowledge of, and operation in, English. One might infer that eventual assimilation was still a goal. By 1979 the Australian Ethnic Affairs Committee on Multicultural Education was reaffirming "the very special responsibility" that fell on Australian schools to maintain and further develop bilingual education for Aboriginal children. It elaborated that

The ideals of maintaining the cultural and linguistic heritage of non-Anglo-Australian groups [including Aboriginals] and of providing opportunities in educational progress and achievement to children whose mother tongue is other than English, equal to the opportunities available to children whose mother tongue is English.

The Australian Ethnic Affairs Council (1981) further reiterated the educational basis for bilingual education:

The rationale for bilingual education has been based upon the recognition that school experience should be a continuation of early childhood home experience and should build on pre-school experience rather than discard it; that children learn better when they understand clearly what they are being taught; that entering school should not represent a break in the child's life experience; that adjustment to a school by a young child is difficult enough without the additional trauma of having to cope with the new experience in an unfamiliar language; and that learning the national language may, in fact, progress more satisfactorily if the child is allowed to build on the experience gained in his or her first language than if that first language is disregarded or even suppressed. (p. 9)

A consensus is emerging that bilingual education is the route Aboriginal education should take. However, the Committee's lengthy defense might also suggest that there were still some disbelievers.

A 1981 draft paper by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs stated as one objective for Aboriginal education that "Aboriginals receive an education which is in harmony with their cultural values and chosen lifestyle and which enables them to acquire the skills they desire" (Charles, 1981, p. 89). This signifies a recognition on the part of the Commonwealth government that Aboriginality is a conscious choice made by Aboriginals and can be facilitated via language education.

Not surprisingly, there have been problems in the implementation of bilingual education. Program costs are high. Where programs have been implemented, cultural and social gaps between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals have not been reduced. Administrators have been reluctant to accept basic education in a non-

English tongue (Stevens, 1981, p. 37). An indication of the high cost and logistical problems is evident from the fact that in the late 1970s there were 138 Aboriginal languages or dialects spoken and few communities where only one Aboriginal language was spoken. All of the 138 languages had not been analyzed by linguists. Finding competent teachers has proven to be a challenge. These obstacles seem to be crumbling. Certainly the fact that national public opinion supports Aboriginal language maintenance helps. There appears to be a shift from assimilationist attitudes. In an era when self-determination is seen as a right, there is increasing recognition of the desire of Aboriginals (at the very least) to aid in the formulation of the policy that educates their children. Bilingual education appears to indicate Australia's acceptance of this inalienable right (Mills, 1982, p. 53; Johnson, 1987, pp. 54, 57; Folds, 1987, p. xvi). Increasingly, the debate has moral overtones. "Since schooling is compulsory, children of non-English-speaking Aboriginal background are entitled to expect the positive affirmation of their linguistic and cultural background, and effective education will require this," stated the *National Policy on Languages*. It later added that although it supports action, public policy development through further research is also necessary (LoBianco, 1987, pp. 73, 107). Even in the early 1980s the relatively extensive bilingual program in the Northern Territories was still innovative and experimental. It had only been in place for less than a decade. However, governmental commitment is there (Mills, 1982, p. 45). Such comments are indicative of the trend toward well-constructed solutions.

Conclusion

Self-determination is essential for existence. Without choice, one's life becomes another's. A result of this is cultural disintegration. This has been the plight of the Aboriginal. There is insight in the comments of John Burless.

The role of education in Aboriginal Australia should be to provide an intellectual and emotional basis for decision making. Education should foster understanding of other people, and enable a sense of pride in one's heritage. It should develop a sense of security, and belief in the equal contribution of all members to Australian society (Brennan & Crawford, 1990, p. 96).

If Aboriginal education is going to work, Aboriginals must desire it. Success must incorporate their definition, as well as the remainder of Australia's. This can only happen when there is equal input. The evidence suggests that time is near.

Ross (1973), in a study for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, laments

Almost nothing has succeeded in solving the problems of Aboriginal children in education. We have had two centuries of failure and it is only recently that Australia has started to try seriously to solve these problems. (p. 6)

Since that statement in 1973 there has been action. If a consensus has emerged on any matter in Aboriginal education over the past 20 years, it is that Aboriginal education has not been successful. Repeatedly researchers have demonstrated that Aboriginal education is deficient, and as such, failing all involved. In 1978 the Australian Council for Aboriginal Research reported,

Differences in performance between Aboriginal students and the overall Australian samples were large enough to make it clear that a serious problem existed. The evidence suggests that many Aboriginal students would be handicapped in their progress through the school system, and that many would be seriously disadvantaged in their adult life. (Harker & McConnochie, 1985, p. 7)

Such an outcome benefits no Australian. Knowing that the problem exists, the question becomes one of remedy. Increasingly researchers have questioned the value of the school. "Its dual tradition of cultural transmission and social control" cannot seem to avoid such negative outcomes for Aboriginals (Keeffe, 1989, p. 39). The solution seems to lie in the hands of the Aboriginals. Sommerland (1976), characteristic of many researchers, contends that in an ideal situation Aboriginals would control their own education (p. 144). This assumes bilingual education, curriculum suited for local needs, and Aboriginal teachers.

Education is culturally bound.

I'm what I appear to be: The Boss.

Nobody in the Jambadjimba clan of the Wailbri tribe tells Johnny what to do. I give the orders around here, without "please" and "thank you."

It's not that I'm deliberately rude. Our language simply does not contain such words. There is no need for them in a society in which every person's duties are clearly defined.

"Please" and "Thank you" are the words which our children are finding it most difficult to absorb in the education they are now being given in the schools.

They have no trouble learning and pronouncing them, but they cannot understand why anyone who is entitled to give an order should say "Please," or why "Thank you" is politer than a grunt. (Lockwood, 1963, p. 173)

The obstacles imposed by culture can be formidable. The hurdles can seem all the more high because it is difficult for people to understand the unfamiliar. There is an all too natural tendency to reject what is different as inferior. Often such a rejection includes efforts to "improve" the alien situation, primarily through assimilation. Ethnocentric views have traditionally assumed that this is the noble, the best, the proper approach. Historically, when dominant groups have attempted to assimilate, it is well to note that motives were not always sinister. Similarly, in recent times (since 1967, in this case), it is all too easy to direct criticism toward a Commonwealth government that acts slowly on Aboriginal issues. Such criticism is invariably cloaked in the suspicion that government inactivity is the result of an ambivalence toward the plight of Aboriginals. Perhaps a paternalistic attitude born of assimilation desires continues to exist. This may be the case, but these may also be rushed accusations. It seems likely that government sluggishness is less a result of disinterest or paternalism, but more characteristic of the uncertain direction that is to be taken. By the mid 1980s it was increasingly clear that any direction will have some Aboriginal guidance. The studies and research in Aboriginal affairs (including education) of the 1970s appear to be paying off in the 1990s.

References

- Australia. (1967). *Yearbook of Australia, 1967. No. 53*. Canberra: Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics.
- Australia. (1977). *Royal Commission on human relationships—Final report Vol. V*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
- Australia. (1989). *Yearbook of Australia, 1989. No. 72*. Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics.
- Australia. *Constitution*. Part V, sec. 51 (xxvi).
- Bandler, Faith. (1989). *Turning the tide—A personal history of the Federal Council for the Advancement of the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Barcan, Alan. (1980). *A history of Australian education*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.

- Brady, Maggie. (1990). The problem with "problematising research." *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 1, 18-20.
- Brennan, Frank, & Crawford, James. (1990). Aboriginality, recognition and Australian law: The need for a bipartisan approach. *Australian Quarterly* 62(2), 145-169.
- Charles, Roger. (Ed.). (1981). *National education policies for Aboriginal peoples*. Ontario: Ontario Indian Education Council.
- Clark, Manning. (1987). *A short history of Australia* (2nd ed.). Scarborough: The New American Library of Canada.
- Department of Aboriginal Affairs. (1982). *Annual report, 1981-1982* Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Services.
- Folds, Ralph. (1987). *Whitefella school*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
- Gale, Faye, Jordan, Deidre, McGill, Graham, McNamara, Natascha, & Scott, Carol. (1987). Aboriginal education. In J.P. Keeves (Ed.), *Australian education: Review of recent research* (pp. 269-285). Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
- Harker, R.K., & McConnochie, K.R. (1985). *Education as cultural artifact: Studies in Maori and Aboriginal education*. New Zealand: Dunmore.
- Harkins, Jean. (1990). Shame and shyness in the Aboriginal classroom: A case for "practical semantics." *Australian Journal of Linguistics*, 10(2), 293-306.
- Johnson, Steve. (1987). The philosophy and politics of Aboriginal language maintenance. *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 2, 54-58.
- Keeffe, Kevin. (1989). Curriculum development in Aboriginal studies: A Yarrangu case study. *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 1, 36-44.
- LoBianco, J. (1987, May 4). *National Policy on Languages*. Parliamentary Paper No. 132/1987. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Services.
- Lockwood, Douglas. (1963). *We, the Aborigines*. Melbourne: Cassell Australia.
- Loos, Noel. (1987). Teacher education for the Torres Strait. *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 2, 66-69.
- McInerney, Dennis M. (1991). Key determinants of motivation of non-traditional Aboriginal students in school settings: Recommendations for educational change. *Australian Journal of Education*, 35(2), 154-174.
- Mills, John. (1982). Bilingual education in Australian schools: A review. *Australian Education Review*, 18.
- Mowbray, Martin. (1990). Mainstreaming as assimilation in the Northern Territory. *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 2, 20-26.
- Ross, Brian. (1973). *Report of the New South Wales Bernard Van Leer project: Aboriginal family education centres (AFEC)*. Canberra: Department of Aboriginal Affairs.
- Sommerland, Elizabeth. (1976). *Kormilda, the way to tomorrow?* Canberra: Australian National University Press.
- South Australia. (1971). *Report of the Committee of Enquiry into Education in South Australia 1968-1970*. Adelaide: Specialty Printers.
- Stevens, Frank. (1981). *Black Australia*. Sydney: Aura Press Party.
- Sydney Morning Herald*. (1967, May 27). Editorial.
- Sykes, Roberta B. (1986). *Incentive, achievement and community: An analysis of Black viewpoints on issues relating to Black Australian education*. Sydney: Sydney University Press.
- Willmot, Eric. (1981). Recent trends in Aboriginal education: An experiment in association. In S. D'Urso & R.A. Smith (Eds.), *Changes, issues and prospects in Australian education* (pp. 284-287). Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1981.