

# THE ABORIGINAL CHILDREN AND FAMILIES HERITAGE PROJECT

The Aboriginal people of Australia, and government departments concerned with their health, education and welfare, generally acknowledge that many problems exist for Aboriginal youngsters in today's Australia. Yet Aboriginal parents and families have raised children successfully to carry on a full and satisfying life for over 40,000 years on this continent.

Where, then, do the problems arise? Some reasons lie in the changed circumstances of their lives since whites came here, and some lie in the very programs developed to help Aborigines in their changing lives.

Programs are, on the whole designed for the wider Australian society or they are based on assumptions that Aboriginal family structures and teaching and learning processes are the same as those of other Australians.

A three-year project funded by the Office of Child Care of the Federal Department of Social Security aims at discovering how programs for Aboriginal children and families can be made more effective. Above all it seeks to make recommendations for such programs so that they can more readily serve the freely chosen objectives of Aboriginal parents by means compatible with their own social processes and aspirations.

The project does not aim at a comprehensive in-depth evaluation of government programs. Rather it seeks to show, first, that many underlying assumptions which shape government programs are inappropriate for Aboriginal children and families. Even where efforts have been made to accommodate the Aborigines, the modifications will often involve *content* (e.g., education curricula) and not *manner* of delivery.

Secondly, the project seeks to show how recognising Aboriginal learning behaviours and Aboriginal styles of social interaction can improve government programs.

In specific terms the Project aims:

- to document the socialisation patterns in two Aboriginal communities;
- to make recommendations, arising from findings about these patterns concerning government programs — such as the structure

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and manner of delivery of social security benefits. Other programs which appear relevant are any specifically funded programs under social security policy; the delivery of health services and in-school and out-of-school education programs. Others may emerge as the Project proceeds.

Aboriginal ways of passing on their heritage to their children are effective. More than this it is the role and the right of parents everywhere to pass on their beliefs, knowledge, customs, language, law and so on, to their children. In that way the culture of a group lives on and its distinctiveness, too, and consequently, the pride of the people who own it. The role and the rights of parents and families in this can become endangered when other institutions take over aspects of handing on a heritage. When those institutions and personnel within them belong to a different culture, a heritage is indeed threatened, even if that threat is unintentional.

Today it is true that the heritage of any particular group has expanded to include all kinds of new knowledge and behaviours, many of which are beyond the teaching expertise of one person, or parents or a family. So Schools and colleges and government departments share, throughout Australia, socialising responsibilities with parents of families. But for Aboriginal parents, wherever they are in Australia, these institutions ignore whole spectra of their heritage and, in some cases, threaten others.

All human cultures, like human beings, seem to share some general characteristics. Thus all humans can learn and speak languages; they can and do develop ways, social and technological, to survive in the world; they can set up systems of social behaviour, order and control; they can accept new knowledge and use it within their culture. A heritage comprehends all these capacities.

Where, then, do the differences between culture and heritages lie? All human beings, laugh, but they laugh at different things; all humans eat, but they eat some things and not others

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**The Aboriginal Children and Families Heritage Project is a three-year study which began in October 1978. It is funded by the Office of Child Care, of the Australian Department of Social Security. The Project is based at the Australian National University in its Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies, and is supervised by Dr H.C. Coombs. The Project team members are: Maria Brandl and Warren Snowdon. The Project is sited at Belyuen in the Northern Territory and Pipilyatjara in South Australia.**

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and cook them in different ways; and these choices differ from group to group. Different human groups have different styles or ways of doing things, that make what Ruth Benedict has called 'patterns of culture'. Learning the style, or the 'pattern', is as important as learning the content of the heritage itself for it to survive. Learning the style of doing things means also learning the permitted alternative ways of doing things. The human capacity to change and adapt lies within learning the style, too. And the styles of a culture are amazingly persistent through time and events which alter some aspects of the content of the culture. Thus socialisation patterns among Aborigines throughout Australia appear to be very similar and very enduring. The same styles can be observed in rural Northern Australia and in southern Victoria today, even though the languages spoken and other aspects of the culture of these people differ.

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The business of passing on a heritage which includes so much new content matter (essential for employment or to be better informed of the wider world, or to the acquisition of skills in new contexts of office, schoolroom, health centre, discuss matters of mutual concern.

Local people making use of the scheme are offered occasional opportunities to meet with the Co-

ordinator and Contact Person in each area to discuss the services offered, and means of improving them.

#### ROLE OF THE CO-ORDINATOR

I see my role as offering non-threatening support to care-seekers and givers involved in the scheme. Feedback so far received would suggest that we have gained the support and confidence of all

participants and there is no doubt that this has been made possible by the professional services offered by the Shire.

The Co-ordinator's major role so far has been to visit with playgroups, home visits, records and other administration, meetings, talks to interested groups, conferences, provision of emergency care (evenings and weekends).

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garage, etc.), would be easier if non-Aborigines involved recognised Aboriginal styles, respected them and ensured them a more overt operation than at present.

One way of perceiving Aboriginal styles is to observe contrasts between Aboriginal styles, respected them and of learning and doing things and those of their non-Aboriginal workmates, or teachers, or employers and employees.

The examples here come from Yirrkala in north-east Arnhem Land, Melville and Bathurst Islands off North Australia and Belyuen, near Darwin. Yet they appear to hold for Aboriginal learning styles everywhere in Australia.

1. For an Aboriginal person learning to perform a task, *the social cost of making a mistake is greater than that of admitting ignorance.* An Aboriginal person who says, "I don't know," is not taking the lazy or easy way out. He or she often means precisely what is said and, additionally, "I am not ready yet". He or she can also mean, "It is not my right to speak on this matter," or "You are the teacher. You know the answer to this question. Why embarrass me by asking me to emphasise that I know less than you?" This stands in stark contrast to the often heard European-Australian contention that one can learn only by making mistakes. Individual children will have their own inclinations, of course, which will vary within and sometimes differ from a prevailing cultural style. My point is that in the wider social context, European-Australian parents and families value one behaviour and Aborigines the other. This kind of emphasis is a cultural value, one of the cores of any heritage.

It is critical to recognise this particular Aboriginal value in any

teaching and learning situation where they are involved.

2. *Another crucial emphasis is that many rural Aborigines have not, as Western Europeans have, 'invented childhood'* (Plumb, 1978:4). Their children still live in an adult-centred world. Elaborate mass produced trips, games, books and entertainment are not needed in Aboriginal socialisation (although, of course, children enjoy them). Children throughout most of human history have not been kept separate from the world and activities of adults and many Aboriginal settlements and camps are like this today. Perhaps the need for literacy and numeracy in a rapidly changing social and economic environment — like the industrial revolution — initiated the custom of keeping children secluded from adults, for learning the skills is a long-term task. But we can still ask if children, even in wider Australia, need to be separated from adult activities as much as they are in the modern world?

3. *Aboriginal children are socialised not only by their own parents, but by a wider extended family.* The structures of social service benefits in Australia assumes a nuclear family usually with a male bread-winner. Most Aboriginal families are of the wider, extended family type which includes grandparents and grandchildren and cousins and aunties and uncles and even more distant kin. Moreover, it is Aboriginal women who have always been the stable bread-winners, and whose responsibility it is to feed and clothe children. When jobs are offered only to men, or when unemployment benefit cheques are paid to fathers, the rights and responsibilities of women are ignored. Yet the

expectations of their own family remain and women and children often face great hardships as a result in trying to meet them (Bell and Brandl, 1980).

#### SUMMARY

The heritage of Aboriginal children throughout Australia is endangered. Today it is not often a deliberate threat but is nonetheless damaging, perhaps especially, because it is unacknowledged. New skills and knowledge are not, of themselves, a danger, but the ways and contexts in which these are imparted can create problems. Aboriginal people everywhere state the need for new skills and new information for themselves and for their children, but they are not asking for the cultural styles and manners that almost everywhere inevitably accompany and impede the teaching and learning of new information.

In the styles of learning and doing, of living and dying, lie a people's heritage, their distinctiveness, those traits that enable them to be able to state like Lorna Tennant of Belyuen:

*My father could not read or write the white man way as we do today. He was proud to call himself a Kiuk, as we are proud to be called today.*

To enable more Aboriginal people to feel like this, government officials, teachers and workmates are needed who, like a European-Australian teacher at Yirrkala, are able to recognise that:

*Aboriginal parents want new skills for their children, but above all, they want them to grow up to be Aborigines.*

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