

Connections in Education

Sue Atkinson

In 1839 the first school in Victoria for Kooris was opened by George Langhorne, on the site of the present Royal Botanical Gardens.

During the ensuing years, up until the early to mid seventies, the official policy of government and the agents (eg the education system), in an effort to erase Koori culture, was to disregard Koori people or to assimilate them into the mainstream community.

Putting this philosophy into practice in the education system meant ignoring and undermining the Koori students identity. The education system made non-Koori people party to this by representing Koori people and Koori culture in narrow and racist terms. The culture of the ruling majority has been presented as the culture to be imitated by Koori people and it has been the hope of many non-Koori people that Koori culture would simply blend into the dominant culture and disappear.

In 1965, the formal definition of the assimilation policy was 'that all persons of Aboriginal descent will choose to attain a similar manner of living to that of other Australians and live as members of a single community - enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities and influenced by the same types of loyalties as other Australians'.

The education policies that flowed from this assimilationist view failed to meet the objectives of the government and continued to set Koori students up for failure.

Despite these oppressive policies, Koori culture adapted, grew and survived. In the early seventies it became increasingly clear that Koori people were struggling against the policy of assimilation in order to run

their own affairs and maintain a separate identity.

Immediately before and during the Whitlam years, the struggle against the invasion that began in 1770 became more assertive and outspoken. This change was crucial for the Koori community in the effect it has on the determination to have a Koori identity recognised and respected. It was expressed, both in the public arena and in the politics of everyday individual lives. It was at this time that Koori groups became more politically active, a keener sense of identity was growing and white support was increasing.

In 1972 a group of Aboriginal people established a tent Embassy outside Parliament House, Canberra, as further protest against the denial of land rights. In July 1972, police forcibly removed the Embassy and eight people, black and white were arrested. Media coverage was extensive, Aboriginal support for the Embassy was widespread and debate amongst the general community was evident.

...the vision of assimilation failed to meet the growing demands of the Koori community.

The seventies also saw the establishment of the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service, the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency and the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service. This was confirmation that Koori people wanted to run their own affairs and that the vision of assimilation failed to meet the growing demands of the Koori community.

In 1972, the government stated that self-determination was the policy to be pursued. Gough Whitlam announced that the basic object of Labor's Aboriginal policy was 'to restore the Aboriginal people their lost power of self-determination in economic, social

and political affairs', so that they could take up 'as a distinctive and honoured component in the Australian society the position to which their rights as the first Australians entitled them'.

The announcement of this policy was accompanied by increased funding by the Labor government for all aspects of Aboriginal Affairs. According to Lorna Lippman, during this time in the area of education, attitudes were becoming more favourable towards minority groups under the influence of the writings of Ivan Illich, Paulo Freire and Marion Fantini. A whole spate of leading educators in the 1970s stressed linkage of schooling within the community it serves and ceased to regard as disadvantaged, minority groups whose culture is different from the mainstream. If such children under-achieve, then there is reason to suspect that the schools are not fulfilling needs, since it is the schools which are the formal educators in literacy and numeracy and not the parents.

The traditional approach to cultural difference had been to regard it as a disadvantage and not to highlight the strengths, the needs and the unique cultural heritage of the Koori student and build on this. The tenuous beginning of the concept of working within the context of the Koori students perspective and acknowledging Koori culture as separate and valuable, occurred at the same time as Victorian Education authorities gained access to special funds via the Commonwealth.

Education is a central strategy in relation to self-determination. If Koori people have greater access to an education system that is not setting Koori people up to fail, the Koori community will have greater access to skills and knowledge and therefore greater access to resources and facilities.

Sue Atkinson is co-ordinator of the Aboriginal Child Care course at Swinburne College of TAFE (Prahran Campus).

Over the last 20 years or less, measures have been taken to increase Koori participation and success in post-secondary education. A range of programs and measures have been developed, such as enclave support groups, group programs, bridging courses, orientation programs, modification of student entry requirements.

The author has been involved with one of these programs since 1985 – the Koori Child Care Course. This course was initiated by the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency in 1983 and the pilot course was designed and planned as a joint venture between the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency and Prahran College of TAFE (now Swinburne). A steering committee was formed in 1983.

This committee consisting of representatives from the local Koori community organisations such as Yappera Aboriginal Children's Services, Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency, Victorian Aboriginal health Service and Melbourne Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated, has overseen the conduct of the course in conjunction with Swinburne College of TAFE (Prahran Campus) ever since. The course content was developed in close consultation with the local Koori community. The curriculum is culturally relevant and all the subjects are culturally loaded. Some of the aims of the course are:

- 1) To provide training for Koori people as Child Care workers;
- 2) To help Koori people develop skills in Child Care, so they can work effectively with young children, particularly young Koori children, in a range of settings in a way that meets Koori community needs;
- 3) To provide students with the opportunity to develop an increased awareness of their own identity and pride in their Koori identity;
- 4) To provide students with an understanding of ways to enhance Aboriginal children's self-esteem and knowledge and appreciation of their own culture;
- 5) To provide access to further education, including access to the Associate Diploma of Social Science (Child Care).

These aims reflect the goals of the local Koori community in relation to education.

Koori students require an education which enhances their self-esteem as Kooris and gives them access to a greater understanding of their own culture, without stereotyping, without a curriculum that implicitly or explicitly undermines and insults Koori people and their culture, without low or negative teacher expectations, without racial tension between them and non-Koori students. These are the major problems apart from poor housing, health and poverty, that have set Koori people up to fail within the education system and still do, even though some changes have been made.

Koori students require an education which enhances their self-esteem as Kooris and gives them access to a greater understanding of their own culture

In the ten years preceding the establishment of the Koori Child Care Course, Victoria produced only one Aboriginal graduate in Child Care Studies. Since 1983, approximately sixty Aboriginal students, of both sexes, across age groups and from all around Australia, have graduated from the Koori Child Care Course. A substantial number have matriculated into mainstream courses which provide specific support for Koori students, eg, the enclave at Melbourne University, School of Early Childhood Studies and the bridging course in the Associate Diploma of Social Science (Child Care) at Swinburne College of TAFE (Prahran Campus). These students are given additional support appropriate to their needs. Koori staff members are in a position, not only to provide appropriate support but to sensitise institution staff to the needs of Koori students and help ensure that their voice is heard.

Another consequence for education of the social changes noted above has been the education of non-Koori

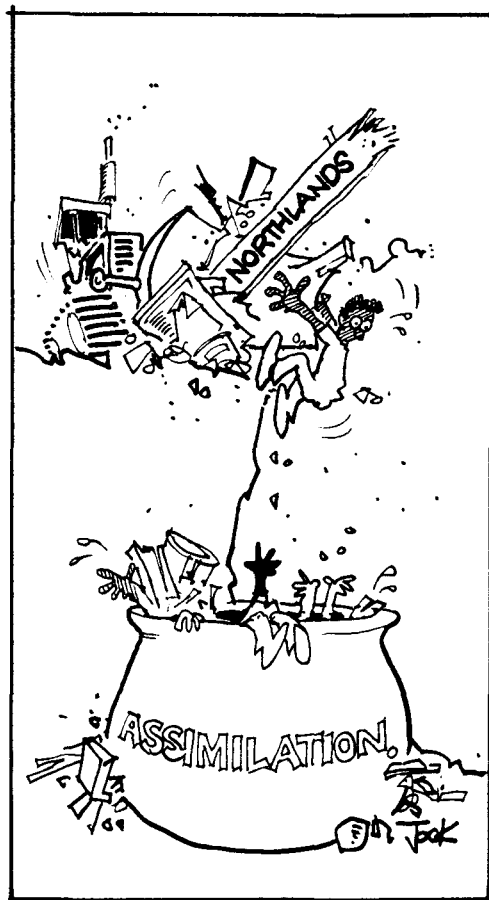
people about Koori culture. This is especially important in the areas of teacher training and training for child care. Although the number of Kooris graduating as teachers and child care workers has increased, Koori children and students, in the vast majority of cases, are still being cared for and taught by non-Koori people.

Aboriginal Education Committees have stated that teacher training should include courses or units about Koori people, history and culture and the issues confronting the Koori community today.

The University of Melbourne Institute of Education (Parkville Campus) offers subjects to teachers in training such as:

- 1) Sociology B9: Aborigines in a changing society;
- 2) Australian Studies A: Australian culture and Australian identity (including Aboriginal culture and history);
- 3) History B26: Australia before 1900 (includes a study of Koori history, the impact of convict settlement on black and white society and racial interaction).

These subjects are not compulsory.



In relation to the training of Child Care workers, there is now an Aboriginal Studies component in the Family and Society Unit of the Associate Diploma of Social Science in Child Care (Swinburne College of TAFE, Prahran campus). This is a compulsory component and includes key components that require all students to demonstrate their ability to provide programs which encourage respect for Koori culture among non-Koori children and families and which support the cultural identity of Koori children and families.

There has been some resistance amongst students to the Aboriginal Studies component. But 'preaching to a converted audience', as often happens when the subject is an elective, does not challenge student attitudes. Despite initial resistance, it is said that some students change their attitudes after debate, discussion and the exchange of information. Challenging student attitudes is an important educational process.

Although these subjects are being presented, Koori input into curriculum development and subject delivery is minimal. As we need to direct the education of non-Koori people about Koori culture, far greater input at all levels is called for - from curriculum development to delivery.

Although small inroads have been made during the last twenty years regarding Koori education and Koori studies, many Australians still hold Koori people in low regard and exhibit their ignorance and intolerance openly. This is the experience that Koori people face on a daily basis.

The retention rate of Kooris at secondary school has improved slowly and the graduation of Koori people from post-secondary courses is also slowly increasing. But the majority of Koori people are still struggling to gain access to equality in education.

The closure of Northlands Secondary College is an example of the opposition

to the principle of self-determination held by the Victorian Coalition government.

The Northlands Secondary College conducted an internationally recognised program for Koori students which evolved over a ten year period, due to the work of Koori educators with the support of the Koori community.

The dismantling of this program and the dispersal of the Koori students into other schools which do not have the established programs or learning environment that enhances a Koori identity is a step back towards assimilation.

The struggle for self-determination continues and removing the barriers that exist towards the achievement of this goal is a challenge for us all as a community. ♦



Children's Welfare
Association
of Victoria Inc.

NATIONWIDE CONFERENCE

"Change in a Volatile Environment"

Melbourne, 18 - 20 October, 1993

There is a strong sense that the present crisis marks a watershed in social welfare history, yet few claim to be able to see the lie of the land ahead.

Organisations are experiencing rapid changes imposed by external forces. How can the non-government sector regain the initiative and play a key role in leading the change process to ensure continued quality of services to children, young people and families? This conference is open to agencies and individuals interested in our child and family welfare sector.

Enquiries and information through

CWAV 1993 Conference Secretariat, Convention Network, 224 Rouse Street, Port Melbourne Victoria 3207.

Tel: (03) 646 4122 Fax: (03) 646 7737