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Second Edition

Edited by Kaye Price

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER 1

# A brief history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in Australia

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My life began at the water's edge near a tiny town in Tasmania. I had eight older brothers and sisters, one of whom had died from diphtheria before I was born. My father was Aboriginal and my mother an Englishwoman who had moved to Tasmania while still a teenager. Her father had been a merchant mariner who sailed to Hobart on his final voyage, where he settled with his family. My dad was also a mariner, and it was probably inevitable that they should meet. The marriage, however, was pretty unusual for the times.

I was born during the Second World War. While I was still a baby, a mill fell on my father, breaking many bones in his body and putting him out of action (and income) for a long, long time. We were financially poor, but family rich. Both my parents loved reading, listening to the radio and completing crossword puzzles. Recently, I realised where my love for, and knowledge of, arcane words comes from: the crosswords in the *Hobart Mercury*.

My siblings and I received a good education throughout the compulsory years. There were very few high schools in Tasmania, and I was fortunate to win a scholarship to attend Hobart High School, as I had set my sights on becoming a teacher. However, my attendance there was short-lived, as I was incredibly homesick. When I finally convinced my mum that I needed to be at home, an area school had been built and I was able to complete secondary schooling to grade nine, leaving at 15 to go to work.

Academia was not something that members of my family really thought about; when I chose to marry young, I gave up all hope of teaching. Nonetheless, I began my teacher training on a mature-age scholarship in 1967 – the same year as the Referendum that had such an impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. I loved

teaching; it was so rewarding to watch the children progressing and finding out the different ways they learned, then adapting methods for individuals, ‘tempered to their capabilities’. I was guided at this time by the words of Sylvia Ashton-Warner, who believed that ‘real education was personal and individual, and that children learned through ideas and experiences that interested them’ (1963, p. 4).

## Uneducable?

When one thinks about the human history of the Australian continent, the advent of Western influence is but a tiny blip in its history.

If you want to put it visually, if you take the clock face of 60 minutes and give each one of those minutes a thousand years, then you have the recorded time that our people have been on this land. That means Plato was here a minute and a half ago. And because of that there are multiple ways of seeing reality, of seeing the world. Obviously the bias has been towards the Western Way that got its heritage one and a half minutes ago (Mark Rose cited in Price, 2009, p. i).

What happened between 1788 and the 1800s that led European settlers in Australia to believe the fallacy that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were uneducable?

While this chapter cannot begin to answer that question, it chronicles the nature of the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children before colonisation; early evidence of Indigenous children’s academic capabilities; and the key policies, programs and projects put in place after the 1967 Referendum to adjust Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to Western ways of learning, Western classrooms and ‘an education system derived from one culture [that] has as pupils children from another’ (Harker & McConnochie, 1985, p. 25).

## Contrasting education systems

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education is not a new phenomenon. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education is both *for* and *about* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

In the past, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people identified the skills of their young people and worked together as a community to develop those skills. In this way, young people grew with a sense of purpose about how they would contribute to the group. This was not defined for them – young people were not told ‘you will be a hunter’, ‘you will be a reteller of stories’ – rather, they were nurtured and mentored, their natural abilities honed throughout their lifetime.

This would have been much the same in Western societies; modern-style Western education is a relatively new phenomenon. Originally only for the rich, with the fall of Rome (not long after the withdrawal of Roman troops from Britain in 410 CE), most educational institutions ceased to exist. Within the next century,

teaching changed drastically, becoming focused on religion, which dictated the style and content of education for the next thousand years. Education became the preserve of monasteries and cathedrals. The majority of people had no access to education; very few could read or write, and priests were appointed to educate the sons of important men. Gradually, Latin and mathematics were added to the religious curriculum. Higher education was the province of the religious rich. The Industrial Revolution in Europe brought about a system of schooling in which the overriding factor was instruction rather than true education. The primary goal was to provide a well-trained, skilled labour force.

By the 18th century, education was becoming more commonplace, then at the beginning of the 19th century two men, Joseph Lancaster (1778–1838) and Andrew Bell (1753–1832), independently invented similar new methods of educating the working class. In both systems the most able pupils were made ‘monitors’ and put in charge of other pupils. The monitors were taught early in the day before the other children arrived and then passed on their newly acquired knowledge.

Despite these advances in education, when the incursion into Australian lands began the majority of newcomers had little or no formal education, were ignorant of other cultures, languages and societies and were not attuned to different possibilities.

From time immemorial, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children’s education was staged so that information was given to a child when the child was ready to receive it. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have always had their own education and this education began as soon as the child moved in the womb, as soon as it was known that there was a new responsibility. Each day the child was watched to see what their contribution to the world was going to be. In the words of Eileen Lester (1975, p. 186):

This one is a hunter, quick of eye; this one a leader, reflective and perceptive; this one is a scholar, quick of brain; this one a doctor, quick in learning about herbs; this one a linguist, quick to hear the speech; this one an astrologer, eager to understand the stars.

Right from the beginning there was specialised education, and for each child there was a teacher, a mentor and a peer with whom to learn. There were ‘tutors’: wise women and men who ensured that history and the essentials of life were taught. One of the most important processes used in education was to cultivate powers of observation. Most skills were learned through this method.

The art of chipping flakes off a piece of quartz to make a stone knife or spearhead was watched by the boys who would then try out the process for themselves. If they were not successful the boys would observe even more carefully next time just how the skilled craftsman made the stone knives and then attempt to chip the quartz more effectively (Hart, 1974, p. 7).

With the advent of Western education, much of this changed; although there was change, the story remained the same. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, for many, many generations had lived by inherited guidelines. As Lester (1975,

p. 187) puts it: ‘The un–carpentered world around us was our “class room”; the “five senses” were our means of learning. The grannies were “examiners”, the elders the “masters” of our educational world’.

Western education introduced regulated rather than staged learning, and enforced participation – as well as ‘non-compliance’: failure, truancy and non-attendance. These are all negative words associated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

## Ignoring the evidence

Among the new settlers, a myth quickly developed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were uneducable. For a long time it was seen by many that our children were only fit to learn to sew, launder, cook, clean, garden, build fences, tend livestock and generally participate in more menial tasks. There was little or no formal education, and certainly little of any value. Education for Indigenous children aimed only, at the completion of their schooling, to attain the level achieved by a 10-year-old child in the state education system, with an emphasis on preparing the children for a future as unskilled workers within the government or mission communities or as cheap labour in the wider community. This was at least partly based on ethnocentric beliefs that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people lacked the ability to participate in a broader education system.

Yet this was despite evidence to the contrary. Evidence abounds in relation to the ability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were already learning – starting at a very early age – the complexities of kinship systems, which noted anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (1956, p. 28) describes thus:

In all matters touching on the organisation of the family [kinship] ... the Australian aborigines [sic] ... are so far ahead of the rest of mankind that, to understand the careful and deliberate systems of rules they have elaborated, we have to use all the refinement of modern mathematics.

In 1814, Governor Macquarie opened a school for Aboriginal children at Parramatta; the school was known as the ‘native institution’. One of the first children to be enrolled there was Maria<sup>1</sup>, the daughter of Yarramundi, a member of the Boorooberongal Language Group whose traditional lands were west of what is now known as Sydney. Maria excelled in Western studies and easily achieved higher marks than the other 100 or so non-Aboriginal students who were tested. A reporter noted: ‘...a black girl of fourteen years of age between three or four years in the school, bore away the chief prize, much to the satisfaction of the worthy judges and auditors’ (*Sydney Gazette* 17 April 1819, cited in Brook & Kohen 1991, p. 251).

Similarly, a boy given the name George Van Diemen, who was ‘found wandering close to new Norfolk’ in 1821, was taken away and sent to Lancashire to be educated. It would seem that no effort was made to locate his family either before or after he was taken away. George Van Diemen was, according to the report sent back

to Tasmania, competent in arithmetic, ‘a branch of education that he was supposed to be incompetent in’, and had an excellent memory. John Bradley, reporting on the lad’s achievements, suggested:

Let us place indiscriminately all the shades of colour in the human species in the same climate, allow them the same means for development of intellect, I apprehend the blacks will keep pace with the whites, for colour neither impairs the muscles nor enervates the mind (cited in Kneale, 2000, pp. 457–8).

Similarly, Bungaree, an Aboriginal man from New South Wales, took prizes at the Sydney College and spoke good Latin (Bonwick, 1884, p. 209). These are but a few examples from the 1800s, but they serve to show that learning was never alien to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s skills and capabilities. Keeping in mind that this was already clear around 200 years ago, one can only assume that soft racism became part of the curriculum – in this case using ‘curriculum’ in its broadest sense, meaning everything that takes place in the school.

The position of disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students throughout Western colonisation has been well documented in published and unpublished material.

## Policies, programs and projects

Before the 1967 Referendum, state and territory governments alone had responsibility for the education of all Australians, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

One of the results of the 1967 Referendum, which asked the Australian public to vote on two questions, was perhaps one of the most powerful influences on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education in the 20th century. The first question, referred to as the ‘nexus question’ was an attempt to alter the balance of numbers in the Senate and the House of Representatives. The second question was to determine whether two references in the Australian Constitution, which discriminated against Aboriginal people, should be removed.

The sections of the Constitution under scrutiny were:

51. The Parliament shall, subject to this Constitution, have power to make laws for the peace, order, and good government of the Commonwealth with respect to:- ...  
(xxvi) The people of any race, other than the aboriginal people in any State, for whom it is necessary to make special laws.

127. In reckoning the numbers of the people of the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth, aboriginal natives should not be counted.

The removal of the words ‘*other than the aboriginal people in any State*’ in section 51(xxvi) and the whole of section 127 was considered by many to be representative of the prevailing movement for political change within Indigenous affairs. As a result of the political climate, this referendum saw the highest YES vote ever recorded in a Federal referendum, with 90.77 per cent of people in all six states voting for change.

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'The [then] Department of Education's involvement in Aboriginal education began shortly after the 1967 Referendum, which for the first time gave the Commonwealth Government an Australia-wide responsibility in Aboriginal affairs' (CDE, 1981, p. 3). The almost immediate result of this was that the Liberal–Country Party initiated programs through Commonwealth departments and a small Office of Aboriginal Affairs.

In the years prior to the Referendum, many Australians had realised that on the whole there were very poor levels of education existing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. These poor levels continued despite the determination of parents and caregivers and the belief in the power of Western education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to create a sound basis for life within the dominant society.

With the Commonwealth assuming responsibility for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs following the Referendum, negotiations were entered into between Commonwealth and state governments (except Queensland), resulting in separate agreements being signed.

Subsequently, the new Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) had the major responsibility for funding particular efforts in the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The states' basic responsibility remained (as it does today), with the Commonwealth providing supplementary funding. The then Commonwealth Department of Education (CDE) acted as an adviser to the DAA in respect to programs in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education.

This supplementary funding and the introduction of AbStudy in 1969 under the Gorton Government with Malcolm Fraser as the responsible Minister were powerful indicators of a new light on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. Fraser's AbStudy (and later AbSeg/c) were seen at the time to be adequate in terms of policy to address the inadequacies of education systems and ensure good educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. While small amounts of money to assist with the cost of education helped keep some children at school longer rather than going out to work to help with family finances, real strategies to deal with the issues were non-existent.

Fraser had a vision that through the policies put in place during his tenure, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people would achieve educational outcomes equal with non-Indigenous Australians. Although this was not to eventuate during his time, considerable progress was made, with increased numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in a wide age range participating across all education sectors.

Yet in 1978, the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), reporting on a survey conducted in relation to the educational attainments of Australian students, noted that the differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students demonstrated a serious problem. According to the ACER report, the evidence suggested 'that many Aboriginal students would be handicapped in their progress through the school system and that many would be severely disadvantaged in their adult life' (Keeves, Matthews & Bourke, 1978, p. 43).

Subsequent to this report, the CDE's submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs (1981, p. 26), affirmed that state and territory Education Departments provided for the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students by a variety of means, including:

- employing resource or remedial teachers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aides in schools
- providing for the development of curriculum materials for use specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- arranging for TAFE courses to meet Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander needs
- providing assistance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood programs.

In the majority of cases, these services were made available through financial assistance provided by the Commonwealth.

At this time, government policy emphasised 'self-management' with the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Peter Baume, stating that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be in the same position as any other Australians to take decisions about their future and accept responsibility for those decisions. The Minister stated that the aim of funding programs 'is to enable Aboriginals [sic], through trade training and vocational skills courses, to obtain skills sufficient to gain employment in the general workforce' (Commonwealth of Australia, 1981, p. 296).

The 1970s saw a significant growth in the involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in education. The Aboriginal Consultative Group to the Commonwealth Schools Commission produced its report *Education for Aborigines* in 1975 which foregrounded a number of changes that were to take place. This optimism existed despite the findings of the 1975 National Poverty Inquiry Report (Commission of Enquiry into Poverty, 1975), which stated that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people 'stand in stark contrast to the general Australian society, and also to other ethnic [sic] groups whether defined on the basis of race, nationality, birthplace, language or religion' (Borrie, 1975, p. 455).

The National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC) was established by the Liberal–Country Party, replacing the Aboriginal Consultative Group, in 1977. The NAEC's terms of reference were to advise the Commonwealth Minister for Education and his Department 'with informed Aboriginal views on the educational needs of Aboriginal people and appropriate methods of meeting these needs' (NAEC, 1980, p. 4). The NAEC consulted widely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community groups and individuals as well as non-Indigenous educators.

One of the major contributions of the NAEC was its submission 'The Education and Employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers' to the *National Inquiry into Teacher Education* (the Auchmuty Report) in 1979. The lead researchers in this endeavour were Eric Willmot (later to become a recognised author, inventor and CEO of the ACT Department of Education) and Paul Hughes, now Professor Emeritus with the University of South Australia. (Professor Hughes continues to

be extensively involved not only in the wider area of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, but specifically in the recruitment, retention and employment of teachers.) One of the recommendations from this submission – that there be 1000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in classrooms by 1990 – was achieved, in part through CDE teacher education scholarships. While the number has grown since then, a workforce analysis ‘estimates that there were 3700 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in Australian schools in 2012, representing 1.2% of the total school workforces of Australian teachers’ (MATSITI, 2014, p. 5) compared to 4.9% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Australian schools. In 2011, the Australian Government, through the Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) made funds available for the More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSITI), a four-year project hosted by the University of South Australia, aimed at increasing participation and leadership status of Indigenous teachers in Australian schools.

The NAEC was also heavily involved in organising major national conferences from 1979 onwards. These conferences engaged hundreds of delegates from a wide range of people whose main interests lay in the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. A legacy of this interaction is the current biennial Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education conferences hosted in turn by each state and territory.

An initiative of the Aboriginal Education Council (NSW), which funded the placement of a small number of Aboriginal Teacher Aides (ATAs) in New South Wales Schools, led to a key development in the 1970s: the placement of ATAs in schools where there was a high enrolment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Today, ATAs are known under the generally accepted term Indigenous Education Workers (IEWs). ATAs and IEWs not only assist/ed children in the school, but prove to be beneficial for teachers and school leaders. In the early days of this initiative, however, some schools took advantage of ‘another pair of hands’, relegating IEWs to photocopying and other unskilled tasks around the school.

In 1975, under this initiative, 23 ATAs were appointed by the NSW Department of Education. New South Wales was the first state to require training as a condition of appointment, and for this training to be undertaken in a university. The Aboriginal Teachers Aides Training program began officially that year in the Department of Adult Education at the University of Sydney (University of Sydney, 2014). Many of these first ATAs have undertaken further study to become qualified classroom teachers.

Plans to facilitate the training of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to become teachers were initiated in the mid 1970s, when there were three tertiary institutions offering enabling programs under an ‘Enclave Support Program’ beginning with the Diploma of Teaching program at the Mt Lawley (WA) College of Advanced Education. This initiative received academic, cultural, social and financial support, but in every way was the standard three-year primary program. In these programs, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were offered the same range of studies, given the same assessment and graduated with the same

award, a three-year Diploma of Teaching (Primary). Other similarly supported programs were initiated at the Townsville CAE (now James Cook University) in 1977 and at the Adelaide CAE (University of South Australia) in 1978.

The Townsville program was designed to cater for mature age students, and students who had completed Year 12 with a lower ATAR than was required for standard entry. These students undertook a two-semester program over three semesters and thereafter the same program as all the other students (NAEC, 1979).

The Adelaide program ran an orientation course for one term, in which students did some of the work required for a diploma before commencing the standard diploma course. Enclave support was provided by specialist staff who met with students to provide counselling and tutoring services at a designated area away from the rest of the college.

The Aboriginal Student Teacher Intake (ASTI) at Mt Lawley College provided alternative entry for students, orientation and ongoing support for students on courses (Sherwood, 1982). The three-year course involved 34 different units, including a total of 17 Teaching Practice and Teaching Laboratories. According to the Blanchard Report, 'The success of these programs lies in the fact that they provide a supportive atmosphere for Aboriginal [and Torres Strait Islander] students in what is a very competitive ... and often very alien atmosphere' (Commonwealth of Australia, 1985, pp. 151–2).

In 1979, the NAEC declared: 'it is of fundamental importance, for both the social and economic development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people, that Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders be significantly represented in the professions' (Commonwealth of Australia, 1980, p. 196). At the time the NAEC was preparing its submission to the *National Inquiry into Teacher Education*, 'there were only 72 qualified and practising Aboriginal [and Torres Strait Islander] teachers identified' (NAEC, 1979, p. 16). The Auchmuty Report found that 'The Aboriginal community desires that many of its people who are both willing and able should gain entry to various professions' (Commonwealth of Australia, 1980, p. 196). In 1980, there were fewer than 300 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander graduates in tertiary education in any degree program (Lane, 2009). Interestingly, the Auchmuty Report (1980) recommended that the NAEC should evaluate the enclave programs 'with a view to discussing the feasibility of establishing further such programs in the other states' (Commonwealth of Australia, 1980, p. xxix).

At the time enclave support programs were established, limited numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were completing secondary schooling, a prerequisite for accessing tertiary education. Most enclave support programs required potential students to leave their home communities, but this excluded a large group of potential students who were unable/unwilling to leave their communities for any length of time. Relocating to another 'country' posed (and still poses) a sometimes insurmountable problem (Chappell & Price, 2009).

The NAEC was heavily involved in consultations in all aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education and was instrumental in developing the legislated National Aboriginal Education Policy (later changed to National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy), colloquially known as the 'AEP', in 1989.

The AEP has four major goals (see below) and 21 long-term goals (DEST, 1989).

1. Involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in educational decision making
2. Equality of access to education services
3. Equity of educational participation
4. Equitable and appropriate educational outcomes

Various strategies have been introduced and implemented with majority Commonwealth funds in a bid to reach these goals. These include the following.

**Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA) Program**

Developed as a component of the AEP, this program provided per capita funding to ASSPA committees comprised of:

- parents and caregivers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander preschool children
- primary and secondary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school students
- representatives of their preschool or school
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community representatives (DEET, 1993).

These committees decided on and undertook activities that were deemed to enhance educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and that involved Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and caregivers in educational decision-making.

The objectives of the ASSPA program were to:

- increase the participation in education and attendance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth of compulsory school age
- encourage the establishment of effective arrangements at the local level for the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, caregivers and other community members in decisions regarding the delivery of pre-school, primary and secondary educational services to their children
- promote increased awareness and involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and caregivers in the education of their children
- develop the responsiveness of schools and their staff to the educational needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- encourage the participation and attendance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in preschool education programs
- achieve the adequate preparation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children through preschool education for their future education (DEST, n.d.).

**National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy**

In launching the NIELNS in March 2000, the Prime Minister John Howard, said: