

## 1. AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF ABORIGINAL EDUCATION POLICIES IN THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

### INTRODUCTION

The history of the education of Aboriginal children in NSW since 1788 and in other states of Australia, covers periods of major policy shifts that until the late 1960s saw Aboriginal children suffer under a system of discrimination that variously separated, segregated, excluded, 'protected' or removed them from their families. It is important to revisit this history by highlighting aspects of these policy shifts, as they provide the context for a deeper understanding of current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education programs and policies that seek to enable Indigenous children and young people to gain access to educational opportunities offered to all students.

It is well established that before colonisation Aboriginal peoples maintained complex social, political and cultural kinship systems encompassing customary laws, lore and learning that explained their conceptual understandings of the intricate interconnections between their world, their land and their environment. As Allison Cadzow from the Board of Studies in NSW (2007) saw it, Aboriginal people had "sophisticated education practices and systems based on spoken knowledge and teaching by experience and observation". Yet throughout the 19th and first part of the 20th centuries, Aboriginal lands were forcibly taken away and Aboriginal ways of life destroyed, with little respect, recognition or valuing of Aboriginal cultures, languages, histories or ways of education and learning.

Aboriginal peoples' histories, cultures and experiences, and most importantly the impact of invasion on their existence has often been written out of the Australian historical record in what the anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner in his seminal Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) 1968 Boyer lectures, *After the Dreaming*, noted was underpinned by a 'cult of forgetfulness':

What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale (Stanner 1969, 2009).

We cite this because it was at this point in history, following the success of the 1967 Referendum that enabled constitutional recognition of Aboriginal peoples as part of the Australian nation, (Calma 2009), that federal and state governments were empowered to address the rights of Aboriginal children to education and develop more inclusive and progressive policies towards this end.

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In Australia's federal system, education has always primarily been a state responsibility. This chapter details in brief, a number of the distinct policy periods in the state of NSW, from the early years through to the key policy developments since the 1980s to illustrate the discriminatory policies that existed in all Australian states related to the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and subsequent policies to correct this injustice. The aim is to place in a historical context, current Aboriginal education policies and the attempts to 'close the gap' between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students' attainment rates. In this way the policy review provides a view into how this gap has developed. But more importantly it sets the scene for the chapters that follow, which showcase examples of school education initiatives that are consultative and seek to incorporate Aboriginal people and Aboriginal cultural knowledge and protocols into their teaching and learning.

### POLICY PERIODS

The history of Aboriginal education policies in NSW in the years after colonisation, from the early 1800s through until the mid 1960s can be categorised into a number of distinct periods described by Partington (1998) as the Mission period, the Protection era, and the Assimilation period. These periods were marked variously by concern for the well being and welfare of Aboriginal children, based on a belief in the need to teach and civilise Aboriginal people, while at the same time implementing policies of exclusion, separation, segregation, and forcible removal of Aboriginal children (Parbury, 1999). In keeping with colonial attitudes of the day the education of Aboriginal peoples was initially linked with a missionary zeal to 'Christianise' and 'civilise', in order to eradicate the vestiges of what were seen as 'primitive' cultures and replace them with a European way of life (Partington, 1998). This led to a set of misguided policies that saw first the creation of Mission schools, then after a brief period of improved access to government schools in the 1870s the passing of restrictive regulations in the 1880s, into a period that is called the Protection Era, and from the late 1930s into what was described as the Assimilation period.

Over this time other policies were also put in place that allowed for the forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their families, as well as the removal of Aboriginal children from schools under the essentially racist 'clean, clad and courteous' and 'exclusion on demand' policies that began from the early 1880's (Fletcher 1989). Removal of children from families was sanctioned under the *Aborigines Protection Act of 1909*, and together with the ability of schools to exclude Aboriginal children this led to the creation of a separate and inferior system of education for Aboriginal children across NSW. This system sanctioned a debased curriculum that focused on teaching manual skills under the assumption that Aboriginal people would be better suited to work as domestic labour for 'white' masters or employers. It is important to note here that the capacity for principals to exclude Aboriginal children from schools was in place

in NSW until 1972, when it was finally removed from the NSW Teachers handbook (Parbury, 1999).

#### *The Native Institution and the Mission Period*

Schooling as we know it was not seen as one of the responsibilities of government during the early part of the colonial era in NSW. Any schools that were established at that time were set up and operated by churches or charities. So it comes as a surprise to discover that the NSW government, under Governor Macquarie, set up in 1814 one of the first government funded educational organisations in NSW, specifically to provide an education for what were then described as 'Native' children. Called the *Native Institution* it was built at Parramatta where it operated until it closed in 1821, and was rebuilt at what was then called Black Town, before it was finally closed down in 1830. The transcript of the legislation to establish the *Native Institution* shows that the Governor saw the Native Institution as a way of improving the living conditions for Aboriginal people (State Records NSW, 2003). Children were to learn reading, writing and arithmetic, with boys being instructed in agriculture, mechanical arts and manufacture, while girls learned needle-work. An important feature of the *Native Institution* was that it ran as a boarding school for children aged between four and seven years old on entry. Often these children had been removed from their families and placed in the care of the Superintendent of the Institution (Brook & Kohen, 1991).

One of the remarkable stories from this time was that of young Maria Locke. According to the Australian Dictionary of Biography (2006), Maria was born at Richmond in 1805, the daughter of Yarramundi who was the chief of the Richmond Tribes. Maria was sent to the *Native Institution* when it started. Aged 14 in 1819 she won first prize in that year's school examination competition, ahead of twenty other children from the *Native Institution* and the European school students in Sydney who took part.

After this early attempt by the government to provide schooling to some Aboriginal children, schooling in general remained in the hands of church run and charitable organisations. During what is called the Mission period, which Partington (1998) dates in NSW from the 1830s, various charitable and church run mission schools were set up in a number of locations across NSW. Among the aims of the Mission schools were to teach Aboriginal children basic literacy skills, some work skills and more importantly for the children to learn about the Christian religion. Education in this period was seen, according to Partington (1998), as a way of civilising Aboriginal people. "to teach them Christianity and the Western way of life and to rescue them from their heathen ways" (p. 33).

Even so, this period also saw the first moves by the NSW government to take on a major responsibility for school education, alongside charities and churches. It did this in 1848 by establishing a secular Board of National Education that operated alongside a religious schools board. From the beginning, a striking feature of the

Board of National Education's policies was its exclusion of Aboriginal children from all government schools. Aboriginal people were referred to as 'Blacks' and the Board noted that it regarded that under the existing Colonial situation, that it was "impracticable to provide any form of educational facilities for the children of the Blacks" (Parbury 1999, p. 67).

#### *Access to Schools and the Protection Era*

The policy of exclusion of Aboriginal children from government schools continued for the most part up until the next major policy period, the Protection Era, which began in the early 1880s. Although according to Cazdow's timeline (2007) there were some examples of Aboriginal children gaining access to government primary schools. As early as the 1870s there were examples of Aboriginal children being enrolled successfully in government schools in NSW, for example at Rooty Hill in Sydney where at least 25 Aboriginal children lived (Fletcher, 1989). Then for a short time, limited new opportunities emerged following historic legislative action taken by the NSW Government led by Henry Parkes. It passed the *Public Instruction Act 1880* which for the first time introduced free, secular and compulsory, primary school education that was meant to be open to all children in NSW.

The *Act* resulted in a rapid expansion in the number of children attending school overall, including an increase in the number of Aboriginal children enrolled in local public primary schools. Figures from a census conducted by the Protector of Aborigines in 1882 showed that out of an Aboriginal school aged population of 1500, about 200 Aboriginal children were enrolled in schools, including government and Mission schools across NSW (Cazdow, 2007). For example, Aboriginal children were admitted to Botany Heads School at La Perouse in 1883 and Wallaga Lake Aboriginal School in 1887. A number of Aboriginal schools were also established, such as Warangesda Aboriginal School in 1880 and Brungle Aboriginal School in 1883 (Cazdow, 2007). While in some localities access was being expanded, in other localities public schools could at the discretion of the school principal, or as a result of objections by parents, exclude Aboriginal students, simply because of their racial origin.

After what turned out to be a very brief period of improved access to school education for Aboriginal children, government policy turned towards the notion of 'protection'. The Aboriginal Protection Board was established in 1883 giving it the power to control Aboriginal people. Once enacted into law, this policy led to further separation of Aboriginal communities onto segregated government run stations or reserves. It also impacted on schooling, with Aboriginal children on reserves being required to attend Aboriginal only schools established on the reserves. The experiences for those outside the reserves varied, with some children, while being able to enrol in a local school, were still placed into a segregated class. Others were able to attend other Aboriginal only schools. Even so there continued to be examples of Aboriginal

children being expelled, excluded or prevented from attending school. Cazdow's timeline shows that while Aboriginal students were able to attend schools at Botany Heads, Rooty Hill, and Sandringham, among the many expulsions and exclusions noted was the case at Yass Public School in 1883 where 15 Aboriginal students were expelled after complaints were made by parents at the school (Cazdow, 2007; Fletcher, 1989). The NSW government further increased the protection powers in 1909. Under the *Aborigines Protection Act 1909-1936*, the NSW Aboriginal Protection Board was allowed to focus on what were described as 'neglected' Aboriginal children and given the power to forcibly remove these children from their families and place them into institutional care.

In reflecting further on Cazdow's timeline of key NSW schooling events, in what is overall a very bleak history of Aboriginal schooling from the colonial era through until the 1970s, there were a number of notable moments of struggle, resistance, and achievement by Aboriginal children, families and communities. In some cases Aboriginal parents struggled openly against school policies or moved their families to communities which were more accepting of Aboriginal children attending the local school.

By the mid 1920s in NSW Aboriginal people began to organise, speak out and argue for their rights. Some took part in community based actions, such as those organised by the first politically active Aboriginal group to emerge in NSW, the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association (AAPA). Formed by Frank Maynard in 1924, the Association set out to fight the NSW Protection Board and its role in the taking of Aboriginal reserve lands and to secure basic civil rights for Aboriginal people. The AAPA was well organised and publicly vocal for about three years, holding street rallies, meetings, conferences, writing letters and even sending petitions to the NSW government and the King of England (Maynard, 1997). Among its concerns was the struggle against the removal of children from their families and the exclusion of Aboriginal children from schools.

At that time Aboriginal people on the south coast of NSW were also involved in a historic protest at Bateman's Bay Public School in 1925. After Aboriginal children were excluded from the school, local Aboriginal people wrote a protest letter to the King of England George V (Cazdow, 2007; Fletcher, 1989). Although only short lived, the AAPA ceased operating in 1928 and school exclusions continued, these kinds of actions were an important step along the way towards greater recognition of Aboriginal rights and access to a better education for children.

#### *The Assimilation Period*

The Assimilation period emerged following the first Commonwealth and States conference on Aboriginal matters in 1937, which concluded that "the destiny of the native of Aboriginal origin, but not the full blood, lies in their ultimate absorption

by the people of the Commonwealth, and it therefore recommends that all efforts be directed to that end" (Parbury, 1999 p. 71).

The policy was adopted in NSW following a NSW Public Service Board inquiry in 1939 that identified major problems with the education for Aboriginal people. The Board recommended that assimilation as opposed to segregation policies were needed in school education. A year later the abolition of the Aboriginal Protection Board saw the responsibility for Aboriginal education formally transferred for the first time to the NSW Department of Education.

Towards the end of this period, according to Cazdow (2007), from the mid 1940s through the 1950s and early 1960s, resistance to segregation continued to grow and Aboriginal communities began to publicly struggle, organise and campaign for the acceptance of the rights of Aboriginal people, including the end of educational segregation and exclusion of Aboriginal students from NSW government schools.

Aboriginal people also started to make a series of notable achievements in the education field. In 1956 the first Aboriginal teaching graduates in NSW began teaching in government schools on the north coast. Important community led education initiatives also followed. A year later in Sydney in 1957, Tranby Aboriginal College began as the first Aboriginal community based co-operative centre in NSW providing adult education and training for Aboriginal people. The first Aboriginal Education Consultative Committee (AECC) in NSW was formed in 1963 to consult and lobby on education issues on behalf of Aboriginal people.

Educationally the lead up to the 1967 referendum was also notable because a year prior in 1966, Charles Perkins became the first Aboriginal person in NSW and Australia to graduate with a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Sydney. While this was a major achievement at the time, as Tom Calma, the Racial Discrimination Commissioner reminded us in 2009, Australia still lagged behind many other countries, including New Zealand, where in 1893 the first Maori University graduate, Apirana Ngata, had gained a degree in political science.

#### STRUGGLE AND ACHIEVEMENTS AFTER 1967

A major turning point for Aboriginal people came with the passing of the 1967 federal referendum, when for the first time Aboriginal people were accorded full citizenship rights, including an important right related to education. For the first time the Australian government had the power to legislate and provide program support for Indigenous students across the country (Calma, 2009). This led in 1969 to the establishment of the first Commonwealth Aboriginal Secondary School Grants Scheme that provided a Commonwealth scholarship to Aboriginal students to assist them to stay on at primary school (Partington, 1998). Following the federal election of the Labor government in 1972, the scholarship program was expanded to include students at secondary schools. At a state level another major administrative step was taken, finally in 1972, school principals in NSW government schools were

no longer allowed to exclude Aboriginal students from school, because of their conditions at home or because of opposition from the local community.

Actions at a federal level also led to further empowerment of Aboriginal communities and the emergence of Aboriginal voices working for educational change. An important role in the development of Aboriginal education policies was played by members of the Aboriginal communities through community based advocacy organisations. In 1975 as a result of efforts by the Commonwealth Schools Commission an Aboriginal Consultative Group was set up to advise the Commission on Aboriginal education. This then led to the formation in each state of state Aboriginal education consultative groups, including the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) in NSW.

#### *Policy Firsts*

In the period that followed the steps taken in the 1960s and 1970s, a number of education policy firsts were achieved. In NSW the first Aboriginal Education Policy (AEP) was issued in 1982. As a policy document it was seen at the time as controversial and revolutionary, having its roots in the activism of the 1960s and 1970s, and driven by what was seen as the need for strong affirmative action to be taken to tackle the evident levels of Aboriginal educational disadvantage (Parbury, 1999).

As the first policy of its kind in Australia it was developed in collaboration with the NSW AECG and set out guidelines for the use of more appropriate pedagogical practices when working with Aboriginal children, emphasising the need for schools to consult with their local Aboriginal communities. This policy was complemented by support documents to assist teachers to implement the policy in their schools. In 1987 it became mandatory for schools to incorporate the policy into their curriculum (Parbury, 1999). An investigation of the policy's implementation in schools was conducted by the NSW Department of School Education. While the results were never officially released, unofficially it was noted that very few schools had engaged with the spirit of the policy and in its implementation (Crawford et al., 1992).

It is important to note that during this period the first National Aboriginal Education Policy (NAEP) was released by the Australian government in 1989. It sought to co-ordinate responsibility for Aboriginal education between the various States through cooperative, long term strategies that were linked to federal funding (Paterson, 2002). The goals of the NAEP were similar to those of the NSW policy in seeking to improve educational outcomes for Indigenous students across Australia. An extensive review of the policy was conducted in 1994 that included a set of 44 recommendations on specific directions for actions across all educational sectors. Under the auspices of these policies, both State and Federal governments produced additional and more specific policy documents that were geared to identified needs of Aboriginal school student populations.

#### *Policy Revisions and Reviews*

After the first state and federal policies were put in place during the 1980s a number of major policy revisions followed. A revised Aboriginal Education Policy was released in NSW in 1996. It was developed after a very critical report on the implementation of the 1982 policy in schools conducted by Charles Sturt University on behalf of the NSW Department of School Education in 1992 (Crawford, 1992). The new policy was directed at all students, all staff and all schools. It also provided allocated funding to schools for the professional development of teachers to assist them with the implementation process. There was also funding for the education of parents – both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal parents – on the place of Aboriginal education and culture in the curriculum. Importantly the policy required principals to report back to the Department on its implementation over a five year period.

The policy was again reviewed in 2004 by the Department together with the NSW AECG (NSW DET & AECG, 2004). The report concluded that while there are some schools and communities where “good things are happening, where Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people work together to prepare the next generations for positive futures” (p. 181), there were many others where the attitudes were “defensive or ambivalent” (p. 181). The report tabled recommendations surrounding the following nine themes that needed urgent attention:

- strengthening policy, planning and implementation
- extending quality teaching and learning
- fortifying identities of Aboriginal students
- engaging Aboriginal students
- applying Aboriginal Cultural Knowledge
- collaborating in partnerships
- building community capacity
- challenging racism
- advancing leadership and accountability.

It recommended that an Aboriginal Education and Training Action Plan should be developed in collaboration with other agencies of government and Aboriginal organisations in order to address these key issues.

In 2009 the policy was again revised and launched as the *Aboriginal Education and Training Policy*. It defined the NSW Department of Education and Training's commitments to Aboriginal education and training in schools (including where relevant, preschools), TAFE Institutes and community education settings. It was developed in collaboration with key partners, including Aboriginal communities, to provide policy advice for all employees of the Department (NSW DET, 2009).

*National Policies*

During this period the Australian government in conjunction with state and territory governments, revised its Aboriginal policies several times, carrying out major investigations into improving the educational attainment of Aboriginal students at all levels of the education spectrum. At the time of writing the major initiative the *Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-2014* was being implemented. The Plan identifies national, jurisdictional and local action in six priority domains that evidence shows will contribute to improved outcomes in Indigenous education. The diagram below taken from the *Action Plan* illustrates the six priority areas to be targeted by governments.

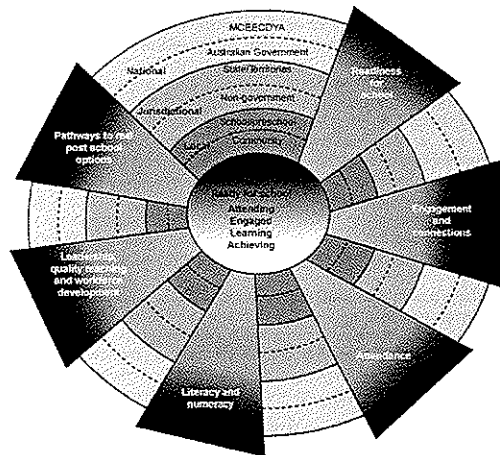


Figure 1. Conceptual overview of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Action Plan 2010-14.

In contributing to the goals of the *Action Plan* governments across Australia have agreed to take urgent action to try to close the gap between the life outcomes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, including a special focus on pre-school and school education. To help drive the implementation of the Closing the Gap strategy, the Prime Minister, Premiers and Chief Ministers agreed through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) to six ambitious targets of which the *Action Plan* is one. These targets aim to:

- close the life expectancy gap within a generation
- halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade
- ensure all Indigenous four year olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education within five years (by 2013)
- halve the gap for Indigenous students in reading, writing and numeracy within a decade (by 2018)
- at least halve the gap in Indigenous Year 12 attainment or equivalent attainment rates (by 2020) and
- halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade (by 2018). (MCEECDYA, 2010).

CONCLUSION

This chapter outlines the relevant early education policies related to the education of Aboriginal children in NSW as an example of what was generally happening in all states and territories of Australia. Many of the early policies were laden with preconceived colonialist, ethnocentric and civilising notions of race and culture, their implementation proved very detrimental to the well being of Aboriginal people. More recently, however, the policies of the latter part of the 20th Century were developed in a more consultative way, inclusive of Aboriginal voices, and were therefore more responsive to the needs of Aboriginal children, communities and protocols.

There have been many revisions and updates of Aboriginal education policies since the 1970s, at both a state and national levels. These policies were designed to provide the policy frameworks for academics, teachers and school leaders to implement successful education programs related to Australia's Aboriginal histories and cultures for all students. As they are such an essential part of Australia's unique national identity, it important Aboriginal histories and cultures are valued, recognised and respected.

Recent policies have also been designed to assist teachers to gain a greater understanding of the complexities of teaching Aboriginal students in ways that:

- value their cultural heritages
- are collaborative and inclusive of their local Aboriginal community, and
- most importantly, they teach in ways that value what Aboriginal students bring with them into their classrooms.

Finally it is intended that these policies will be implemented through a whole school approach to develop schools as learning communities that are embedded in their local neighbourhoods, who work together with their local Aboriginal communities to enhance the wellbeing of all Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

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