

Meeting the educational needs of Aboriginal adolescents. [= Commissioned Report No. 35]. Written by H. Groome, A. Hamilton, April 1995. National Board of Employment, Education and Training. Commonwealth of Australia. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.

Reviewed by Gerhard Leitner, Freie Universität Berlin <Ed_AbAd.doc>

This report focuses on educational needs of urban Aboriginal adolescents, viz. those living in centres with more than 1000 inhabitants, in the age group of 10 to 15 years. That segment requires attention because of its extreme failure rate, its substantial growth (around 26% by the year 2000 as against 1% of the total population in that age group), and the fact that schools are unsuccessful in meeting their needs. The report is based on interviews with teachers and students around Australia and the relevant expert literature. Starting with the premise that educational success or failure results from a combination of factors, it situates needs analysis inside the entire socialization process. The respective roles of the individual themselves (ch.s 1,2), extended family and peers (ch. 3), school administration, teachers, and parent involvement (ch. 4), as well as curricula, school policies, staffing and expectations (ch. 5) are discussed.

The report paints a depressing picture of the lives and educational experiences of young Aborigines. Poverty, illness, pressing family needs, a high death rate of adults, the peer pressure not to succeed are main negative factors. Harrassment in schools, demands to justify the 'differentness', low expectation attitudes accentuate that facet of multicultural Australia. As a result, Aboriginal adolescents confront acute uncertainties about personal and community identity. And, as a response, there is a strong tendency in major urban centres to cultivate Aboriginality, enrich it by Black American cultural patterns, use Aboriginal English as an identity marker. Those who succeed in this context do this despite and very much against such circumstances.

While Aborigines are no longer concentrated in particular suburbs in major cities, in rural centres they are often segregated out into fringe or town camps and are at the very bottom of the social ladder. Employment is scarcer still, racism stonger, and group identity even weaker. There are exceptions when community structures and indigenous languages have been maintained. And those groups are very able to cooperate with, and influence, the schools and their curriculum.

The report suggests a steps to improve the situation, including the establishment of Aboriginal Studies in the curricula, a greater awareness of communicative patterns, the use of Aboriginal forms of English, and the connotations associated with standard Australian English. It is of interest to research in Australian, particularly Aboriginal, education, minority group education, social sciences, and also bears on applied linguistics and sociolinguistics.