



# The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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## ACROSS AUSTRALIA.....

## FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER

*Across Australia many exciting developments are occurring in Aboriginal education. This section of the journal is planned so that teachers throughout the country can share with each other their thinking and their innovations, so that good ideas and successful practices can spread. In this issue we present a variety of reports.*

## ABORIGINAL EDUCATION AT WALGETT PRIMARY SCHOOL



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In the Walgett Primary School there are 256 children who fit into the category of part-Aboriginal. This is 49.2% of the total school enrolment. In 1970 it was 42.9% and this 6.3% increase represents the trend in Walgett over the past few years. For quite some time teachers in Walgett have been conscious of the need to do something special for the Aboriginal children. Successive teachers and administrators have approached the problem with typically varying degrees of dedication, and always with what we might term a "conventional approach". Predictably, results varied, and as late as 1969 35% of Aboriginal children left the primary stage either substantially or totally illiterate. This state of affairs was attributed to a degree of mental deficiency which some believed to be genetic. I shall return to this fallacy later.

During 1969 a number of factors contributed to a change in attitude, and consequently in approach, and since then marked advances have been made. It would hardly be appropriate to examine these in detail here, but certain points can be made with a degree of certainty.

To meet successfully the challenge presented by Aboriginal primary children from *deprived* environments, a school needs:

- \* a flexible administration with sympathetic support from the senior administrative officers from district to state level;
- \* teachers who are *above all* sympathetic to underprivileged children, and who are prepared to overlook a great deal that would otherwise offend their own middle class social mores;
- \* service from teachers in excess of the two years normally prescribed for teacher in this type of situation;

- \* financial support in the purchase of specialised equipment so valuable, even vital, to real progress; and,
- \* an avenue for effective liaison between the school and the parents of the children in question.

In opening the *Workshop on Aboriginal Education* held in Brisbane during May, 1971, Dr. Coombs rightly took to task those teachers who would wean the children away from their tribal heritage and their homes. Much has been said about getting Aboriginal children away from their "undesirable" home environments, and I have observed a couple of these experiments at close quarters. I am all on Dr. Coombs' side, but there is a strategy which we employ which is a conscious exploitation of the unsatisfactory aspects of our children's home environments. The children at whom our special programs are aimed come from environments in which adult lack of self discipline is a demonstrable feature. I make no value judgment upon this situation - I simply lament the fact that it creates a situation in which children are so unsure of themselves, and so exposed to aggressiveness from others that what would normally be the place of warmth and nurture is often hostile and at times threatening. Our response has been deliberately to create as friendly an environment as is possible so that the place of learning, i.e. social and intellectual learning, is juxtaposed against the other more hostile one.

There is nothing new in seeking to make the school environment as attractive as possible to its pupils. This is surely a basic principle of education. The difference here lies in the manner in which this friendly environment has been achieved. We have gone to great lengths to avoid punitive disciplinary measures when serious problems have occurred. I would suggest that we have persisted in our restraint for far longer than would normally be the case, and this I can assure you can be very trying on any teacher, especially one in his or her early days of teaching. The individual teachers have gone out of their way to show each child that the teachers care about him and his problems. This has involved school hours activities, and many hours of activities performed by teachers in their own time. An example of these after hours activities is the school social. These have been staged as an aid to integration in a social setting away from the school.

Integration at school occurs fairly naturally. The children tend to form groups as in all schools, and a close study conducted in 1970 revealed that social status, intellectual level, and common interests form the basis of these groupings. The children of Aboriginal nuclear families mix almost exclusively with European children, and the reverse situation also applies, although extended families are rare in the European community. It would be unwise to enforce integration of the groups in an artificial way, so we have devised a number of situations in which integration occurs naturally. One such is the school social, where apart from the dancing, various activities of a

dramatic nature provide additional scope for integration. It can be said that the children of our school accept each other at least as well as those of any happy school.

And it is a happy school. The policy has paid off and we have very few disciplinary problems of a serious nature. This, I submit, is the firm base upon which the success in other areas has been founded.

Much debate has hinged around streamed classes, parallel classes, ungraded or nongraded classes, as the most effective organization for teaching purposes. We have tried these three systems and arrived at pretty definite conclusions. It is especially important for Aboriginal children to be placed in a homogeneous group in which they can feel happy and at home. So this provides the basis for home class groupings. We have found they will readily go to the other groups for skill subjects, but will strongly resist moves to place them permanently where they do not feel at home. Truancing has often resulted in these cases. The home classes, therefore, are similar in structure to the outdoor social groupings. It could be argued that by our class organization, we pre-set out-of-class groups. This may be so, but when a class is formed, close attention is given in the case of Aboriginal children to who are their friends and "*enemies*". In skills subjects we have an ungraded organization with eight basic levels and an additional eight or so sub-levels across the four primary grades. We find that while the lower groups have a large percentage of Aboriginal children quite a few Aboriginals are in the higher groups, and many of them have always worked at levels advanced on their grade norms. The overall picture in 1970 placed 17% at approximately their grade norms or better, 24% up to a year retarded, and 59% between one and three years retarded. 1973's figures represent a positive improvement on these figures, mainly in relation to the middle group, the 24%, which has now swelled to about 40%, mainly at the expense of the 59% group. Certainly this year's primary finishing group will see 1969's 35% illiteracy rate reduced to about 6%. This is due mainly to improved intensified teaching along conventional lines, and the newly developed special programs which are clearly having a tremendous impact on the retardation problem.

A great deal has been written about the problem of language in sub-cultures of poverty. The Bernard Van Leer Foundation has done some most interesting research into this problem in Queensland, and our experience confirms what they have discovered with perhaps the exception of the development of tense. Language, or more specifically concepts in language, is one of the four major problems which confront us and which we have begun to attack in a big way. It never ceases to amaze me, just how poor the Aboriginal child's concrete concept array very often is. Unfortunately in the past effective word attack skill teaching has masked this problem. The following is an example of many such examples which could be given

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to illustrate this point. Two twelve year old boys were sent into the yard to collect some "soil" for a Natural Science experiment. They returned to report there was no soil in the yard. Sent back to get some "dirt" they had no problem. These boys could read and spell the word "soil" but had no idea of its meaning. As functional intelligence is very much the product of the use of the symbolism of words, it is no wonder that the higher mediating processes of these children do not measure up to the language enriched or normal language environments of other children. All our teachers are making an attack on this problem by taking care that the language of the classroom is intelligible to all pupils.

But this, in itself, does not seem enough. Nor did waiting for the graduates of the new pre-school kindergarten seem a fruitful sort of exercise, so I embarked on a language experiment at the beginning of second term, 1971. I had felt for some time that an integrated approach to language was needed, and this, with the invaluable assistance of my assistant Bruce Grey, I set out to develop. We were somewhat influenced by Sylvia Ashton-Warner (*Ashton-Warner S.: Teacher - Secker and Wainburg. 1963*) and by the developers of the "Breakthrough to Literacy" scheme (*Mackay D. et al : Breakthrough to Literacy : Teachers Manual - Longman for the Schools Council. 1970*). Obviously language should have organic roots (to use the Ashton-Warner term) so this is how we proceeded.

We took the children on walks around the school and town and identified elements in the environment which we labelled. These words then formed the basis of the language (both reading and writing) material. From this we moved to acting out sentences, sequential sentences, stories with special reference to verbs and prepositions. This introduced the sentence structure, composition and spelling elements, and so the scheme developed.

The effectiveness of the scheme was greatly improved by the introduction of portable video-tape equipment. It enabled us to record the experiences for use back in the classroom. Instant television produces a focus of attention which cannot be obtained in any other way. The experimental group when tested twelve months after the introduction of the scheme scored 10.8 I.Q. points higher than any previous comparable group. This result is most significant as the measuring instrument was the TOLA group intelligence test. Several children made remarkable progress indeed. This matter of intelligence will receive further attention later.

There is an aspect of the above language program which ties in well with another approach to Aboriginal education which is proving beneficial, though not yet as significant as it seems likely to become. I have felt for some time that a great deal of our primary school curriculum is not relevant to the needs of the Aboriginal children. I have felt, too, that the minimum stimulation provided by

Walgett environment depressed the neurological development necessary for the physical basis of higher mediating processes. This is perhaps a controversial viewpoint with evidence for and against. I read recently that the stimulus input from even the most mundane environment is far greater than one would suppose. This is probably so, but I remain convinced that low level environmental stimulus is a very real problem for the Walgett children in general, Aboriginal and European alike. From these two factors, that is, deficient stimulus input and curriculum irrelevance, has arisen the concept of what we term "*depth studies*".

The attention span of an Aboriginal child in the quite foreign formal situation of the classroom is very short indeed. However, like any child, given the right situation, a primary level Aboriginal child can be involved for an hour or more in a specific activity. We have moved a long way towards perfecting these depth studies in which there are four major elements. There is concept development; there is enriched stimulus input; there is a broadening of the mental horizon; and there is controlled development of thought patterns with abstract concept formation where possible.

An example of an actual lesson in this category might be of interest. A teacher had been trying to deal with electricity as a power source in Australia with a group of senior primary pupils. The exercise was proving unproductive until she attempted a depth study. The class used light bulbs as a base for maracas made from papier mache and whilst the construction was in progress a discussion on the use of electricity was initiated. The next step was to deal with the generation of electricity and where and how this is done in Australia. Then came the thought provoking questions on such points as how a light switch works, why there are two wires in an electrical system, perhaps even why the school lights keep blacking out and so on, and the teacher directed the pupils to the answers which she wanted. All the time the pupils worked with their hands and incidental use was made of the blackboard to explain where necessary, and pictures were introduced to illustrate the types of power stations, transmission lines, etc.

The lesson was highly successful, as a month later recall was particularly good especially on the technical questions covered. Now this type of lesson strategy would work with any children. The difference here lies in the need to adopt this technique to achieve what could be done with other children in a more straight forward way, and to do it far more frequently than would be desirable in other circumstances.

Four teachers are working on the development of depth studies. These lessons may go on from four to six hours over two or three days. The teachers are, and have been for some time, free from timetable and curriculum restrictions. The best of what might be termed the

base subjects for the studies are Natural Science, Art, Craft, Drama and Music. Unfortunately in the case of the last two we lost our teacher with great expertise in these subjects at the end of 1970. This highlights one of our major problems - retaining staff who have developed the, if not unique, then highly specialized skill of being able to interact effectively with Aboriginal children. The man to whom I refer had done some inspiring work upon which some of our later successes have been founded. We sorely need his services for twelve months more in a specialist role to get our programs in these areas onto a dynamic footing, but what incentive can we offer him at present to give these services? At best a normal teaching load in skills subjects, and not even clerical assistance to print the necessary results of his projects which he must rough out in his own time, while putting up with the rigours of second class accommodation in the harshest summer climate in the State of New South Wales. Our great Australian egalitarian concept of equality of education often looks rather sick out on the sunburnt plains of the New South Wales North West.

Initially the language program was tried with one group and depth studies with another. This was done in an attempt to gauge the effectiveness of each teaching strategy. Now two groups are receiving both types of compensatory programs. It became apparent after both programs had been running for a while that while such things as reading skills were greatly improved it was evident that many children were not "*thinking*" better. Their functional intelligence (*Hebb's B*) was markedly poorer than the majority of Europeans. By the beginning of 1972 it was agreed that the lifting of the culturally deprived child's functional intelligence should be the superordinate goal. This required a change in planning and something additional. By the use of concrete examples and judicious use of the video-equipment a method was devised to train thought patterns. In almost Skinner-like fashion the children were conditioned to use specific thought procedures in approaching different problem situations. Initially this has proved effective and could ultimately be the key to the problem of regression that people like Nurcombe have observed when compensatory programs are withdrawn. Unfortunately the method is too complex to be explored in any meaningful way in this paper. The first results of this strategy positively indicate that our Aboriginal children have as much innate potential as the European counterparts and do not suffer significant genetic defects. There is, however, another unfortunate side of the story.

Another project at Walgett will be of some interest to you. It relates to other matters I have mentioned. We were of the opinion that between twenty-eight and thirty percent of Aboriginal children were exogenous brain damage cases, due to a variety of factors. A base line study into this whole area seemed desirable and Dr. Lindsay Edwards, who conducted a most valuable study into nutritional deficiencies in pre-school Aboriginal children in Walgett area has

begun a longitudinal study with me of a group of children whom we have selected on the basis of their much smaller brain size than the norm for their age, and whose history would strongly suggest possible brain damage. The first results from this study are to be published in the Medical Journal of Australia sometime this year. This study, which when it is published will be seen to have disturbing implications, has provided us with a fairly simple method for screening the brain-damaged children from those merely needing compensatory programs at a Grade 1 (*second year of school*) level. The brain-damaged children will go into special classes for intellectually handicapped children where they will be taught basically through special techniques and adaptations of the compensatory programs. The ability to screen these children at an early stage represents a significant advance in our educational techniques.

At this point I might briefly mention an unusual project which has created considerable interest, and which seemed to interest most the Four Corners' team which visited the school during 1971. To cater for what she considered a serious need, our sewing teacher instituted a mothercraft course for the older primary girls who are often called upon to bath and feed younger members of the family, and the babies in particular. We cannot say just how successful it has been, but great interest has been shown by the girls. We are certain that the girls have at least a much better appreciation of the seriousness of malnutrition.

We look on education as being a process rather than a product, and hence not all of what we do is measurable. The social aspects of our work which I mentioned at the beginning are a vital part of our educative program, but the results of this work will not be fully known for another decade or so. However, though there are aspects of our work, the effectiveness of which we cannot assess at all, and some only imprecisely, nonetheless I feel that the situation at Walgett is *positively* promising, and to those involved, even exciting. We certainly lack the pessimism so prevalent even five years ago. Of one thing we are certain: Aboriginal children are like other children. They have the same needs as other children; the same innate altruism of the human species which both cultures so grossly defile through ignorance; the same capabilities and capacities as other children; and above all they are potentially just as good Australian citizens as any.

*(This paper was originally presented as an address to the A.C.T. Chapter of the Australian College of Education in September 1971.*