



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

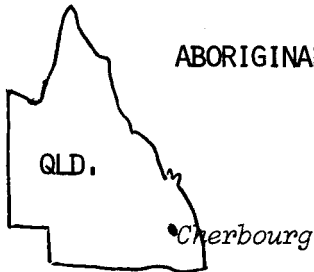
This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

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ABORIGINAL ADULTS AS CLASSROOM ASSISTANTS

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Increasing attention has been given in recent years to the effects of various factors upon the academic achievement of ethnic minority group children. In those Australian states where there are schools with significantly large proportions of Aboriginal children, special programs have been devised and implemented.

The Department of Education in Queensland has been involved throughout the past decade in the development and refinement of both techniques and materials designed to foster the academic attainments of Aboriginal children. One program involved the employment of Aboriginal adults from a local community to work along side of teachers in and out of the classrooms as para-professional teachers' assistants. This program is currently in the ninth month of a twelve month pilot study* in the Cherbourg Community School.

The role of these assistants is regarded as being essentially mediatory. Primarily the objective has been to increase the degree of home/school and parent/teacher contact with a view to closing the knowledge and understanding gap existing between the school and the community generally. It is hoped to increase parental awareness and appreciation of the aims, ideals, and processes operating within the school environment. Conversely, it is hoped to acquaint the teachers with a more thoroughgoing understanding of the cultural, socio-economic, and familial backgrounds of the children they teach.

In implementing the project it has been considered that changes within the school itself can have only limited effect on the educational development of children, and that the ultimate success of any intervention program depends on the involvement of the children's families.

Potential benefits are envisaged for assistants and parents as well as for the teachers and the children. Such benefits are seen to include a breakdown of the barriers between home and school; a mitigation of the effects of shyness; a favourable sense of self-

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**The project was started by the Department of Education with the assistance of a grant from The Bernard Van Leer Foundation; the Department of Education will continue the project.*

esteem and pride in ethnic identity; increased understanding on the part of all persons involved; extension of the image of the parental role, particularly in respect to encouragement of and praise for striving and achieving behaviours.

During this pilot period the main activities being undertaken include:-

- (i) determination of the most appropriate criteria for the selection of assistants,
- (ii) determination of the role(s) of these assistants, and the most appropriate methods of utilizing such paraprofessionals in schools for Aboriginal children,
- (iii) enunciation of the principles and practices appropriate to:-
 - a. preservice preparation of assistants,
 - b. inservice education of assistants,
 - c. extension of the professional education of teachers in view of their changed roles.

In common with overseas experience the Cherbourg project has found that many parents, young persons, and other local people who have the necessary personality qualities and interpersonal skills are available for such programs. Initial interest in these positions was high within the community and has remained so. Sixteen persons, of both sexes, varied qualifications, and wide age variability applied for these positions when they were advertised on the community noticeboards. This represents about 5% of the eligible persons on the community.

Three men and three women, with ages between sixteen and fifty years, and with formal schooling varying from fourth grade to eleventh grade were appointed. Two of the women, however, subsequently resigned for personal reasons after one school term.

Assistants' training program. Both preservice preparation and on-the-job training have been provided for assistants. A preservice course of six weeks' duration was arranged under the direction of the Van Leer Project director, and was designed to familiarize the assistants with contemporary educational developments, particularly in primary education, as well as to develop specific role-related skills and expertise.

This training program was oriented around four basic units or components: behavioural skills, interpersonal skills, basic background knowledge, and technical skills.

After school, the assistants have met with an advisor* several

**Throughout the course of the project a seconded Departmental teacher has been available as an advisor for the guidance and training of these assistants*

days a week for further training, and for the purpose of examining their roles and progress in the classroom situation and within the community. Additionally, an attempt has been made to encourage the assistants to improve their levels of achievement and personal development; one is currently enrolled in two secondary correspondence courses.

The teachers were prepared for this project by the principal of the school. They were made aware of the relevant literature concerning such previous undertakings, and involved in the decision-making processes relating to this particular project. In addition, attempts were made to foresee and discuss all possible areas of difficulty and conflict, and steps taken to avoid these.

Assistants' Activities in the School Program. The roles of these assistants have become diverse and divergent. There has been increasing specialization according to their individual talents, abilities, skills and interests. Some have proven invaluable in small group situations such as listening to children's oral reading and reading aloud to the children; others have shown marked ability in meeting with parents in school-related activities; still others have evidenced skill in preparing materials for teachers to use instructionally with children.

Assistants' tasks could be arbitrarily divided into three major (overlapping) categories: *general* duties, *supervision* type duties, both in and out of class, and *home liaison*.

With regard to the general ("*housekeeping*," *clerical*, *preparation*) types of duties, it has long been recognized that a substantial proportion of the teacher's time is absorbed by routine and non-instructional activities requiring a relatively low level of professional expertise, tasks that could just as readily and just as competently (if not more so) be performed by trained conscientious lay persons:- activities such as marking rolls, duplicating, preparing rooms and materials.

At the Cherbourg school, teachers were provided initially with list of possible duties that assistants might perform. These were suggestions only, intended as guides for teachers with no experience of this type of activity. Perceptive and enthusiastic teachers have been able to expand upon these tasks, finding new avenues for deployment of assistants as they have become familiar with the talents and abilities of their assistants.

The assistants have variously provided teachers with opportunities to diversify instructional/learning materials, to work with individual children requiring extra attention, to utilize playground and environmental resources more appropriately and more fully, to use assistants' particular skills (such as story-telling) to encourage their more active participation in learning. By and large their contribution to the instructional/learning environment

has been positive, substantial and worthwhile.

Most activity with children has been in the small group situation, or in tutoring individual children and recording levels of achievement against teachers' checklists. It is in these small group situations that assistants have brought their own personalities, their own heritage and their own community backgrounds to bear closely upon the learning experiences of the children.

A most exciting phase of the program has commenced more recently. This involves the deployment of three male assistants in a specific liaison role with the local community. Not all assistants have wished to be involved in this aspect of the project, preferring to *"bridge"* the school/community gap by less formal methods such as incidentally talking with people about the school when walking home or in the local store.

Various approaches have so far been attempted, each with apparent resounding success. On the one hand, community noticeboards have been used to display the work of the children at each of the grade levels through the school, a new level each week. Parents have made specific reference to these displays in discussion with assistants and with the principal. They refer to the variety and the quality of the work, and explicitly to its value, often reminiscing about their own school days and how different *"education now is"*. Certainly there has been a substantial increase in community knowledge and awareness of the types of materials produced by the children at school.

Another program of interaction with parents has involved assistants going into the homes of parents or guardians, inviting these people to visit the school, on particular afternoons to meet the principal and staff, to see the children working in class, to see the variety of instructional and learning strategies being adopted, to examine and see used some of the instructional media in use - particularly those purchased with Parents and Citizens Association funds.

As a third effort, but by way of *"follow up"* activity, the assistants have been subsequently revisiting the homes of those parents who have been to the school taking with them materials produced as part of their normal activity. The materials taken vary between grade levels, but include group reports of field work and of activity work, models, woodwork and pottery.

Feedback from parents is highly encouraging and suggests strong community support for and interest in these projects. It has become commonplace for parents to express a wish to be able to visit the school. *"When is it my turn?"* Moreover, many parents are asking: *"when is Mr. (the principal) coming to visit us?"* Other parents tell us that their children often talk about the work of certain of the assistants in their classes. Comments such as: *"My child now comes home talking about school."*

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I can't keep her home any more." from a parent who has in the past developed a reputation for abusing principal and teachers alike would appear particularly significant.

Especially pleasing has been the fact that many of the fathers and paternal guardians are asking if they too can visit the school, and they are, in fact, arriving. Some have gone to the extent of obtaining release from their jobs for the afternoon.

As the assistants walk to the homes of parents with examples of pupils' work, they are frequently called over by other parents and asked to show these samples. In this way, a knowledge of the aims, strategies and ideals of the school has been (and is being) rapidly and continuously disseminated.

Where teachers have been able to deploy their assistants as they have wished, and where they have been convinced of the effectiveness of such a project, and where they have carefully considered the capabilities and limitations of the assistants, a fair measure of success has been achieved. The learning and instructional environments, and sometimes both the physical and social environments also have been improved.

Problems have certainly arisen at various stages of the project. Several of the problems have been related to the definition of the roles of the teachers and classroom assistants. Problems such as this are to be expected when teachers for the first time in their professional careers have had responsibility for the direction of paraprofessionals. Our experience suggests that it is best to let these role definitions evolve rather than to define them too specifically in advance.

It would appear then that:-

1. Each assistant's role can be varied and diverse. It can be constantly changing albeit in terms of overall aims and objectives.
2. Perhaps there is a need in this type of program to prepare these paraprofessionals for specialization of tasks, according to their individual talents and skills.
3. It is possible that some assistants will be more skilful than others in home/school liaison. Particular personal and interpersonal skills and sufficient understanding and perception of school life through all grade levels are requisite skills.
4. Where assistants are required to work in class with the class, as part of the "*instructional team*", it seems that such a satisfactory "*team*" could include no more than two teachers utilizing the assistance of one paraprofessional.

5. Parents in this type of community are apparently far more interested in the education of their children than many would suspect or accept.
6. Many parents have shown a reticence to visit the school previously, possibly because they have not been really sure of it; the school has not been perceived as a part of their community. In a group, and with assistants present, they will visit the school quite readily and frequently.

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R.J. Havighurst: The Education of American Indians - continued from p.21

ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

ESL, (not TESL) is a program designed to teach the English language, while most of the instruction in the class is given in the home language of the pupils. English is taught to English-speaking students. The advantage of this program is that the skills of reading and the other school subjects can be taught in the native language, without forcing the child to try to learn those skills in a strange language. Also, this is not a cultural program. It does not make use of the cultural heritage of the minority group. The Commission on Civil Rights found that in the Southwest, in 1969, some 5% of Chicano (*Mexican-American*) pupils were receiving some type of ESL instruction, more than twice the proportion receiving bilingual education.

REMEDIAL READING

Remedial reading is a long-established procedure used with pupils who are far below average in their reading skills. It pays no attention to the home language of the pupil, and is generally used in all kinds of schools. The Commission on Civil Rights found that 10% of Chicano students, both elementary and secondary school levels, were getting remedial reading instruction.

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Editor: In the next issue I would like to focus special attention on the various attempts that are being made in Australia to increase communication between home and school. Contributions on this topic, which should reach me by July 20th., would be very welcome.

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