



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

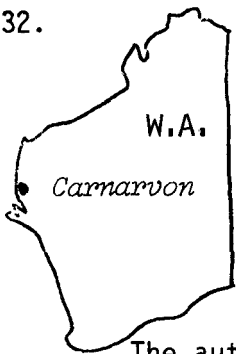
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SOME ASPECTS OF ABORIGINAL EDUCATION IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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The author of this article wishes to point out that his comments are taken from his own direct experiences involved in the Aboriginal situation in West Australian Schools. They are not necessarily, therefore, the views of the West Australian Education Department.

It appears that there are several groups when one talks about Aboriginal children in general in Australia. Any person who has any Aboriginal blood is termed an Aboriginal. These groups have different hereditary and environmental backgrounds and thus give differing responses to stimuli.

In Western Australia, Aboriginals are of either country or town origin. There are vast differences between a third generation town Aboriginal and one who has only just walked in from the desert. Again one must differentiate between town and mission Aboriginals and also between the full blood and the part Aboriginal. The situation is so vast that one can speak about Aboriginals and their education in Western Australian Schools, only in general terms.

School can have a tremendous influence on the Aboriginal child. It can be a sanctuary or a place which he tries to avoid. The task of the educator is to make school interesting, yet a useful means of conveyance into 1973. Personal experiences indicate that success lies in motivation - kindness and interest. There is a broad spectrum for Aboriginal children in academic and social achievement. Many are school leaders, have high reading ages and excel in dance, music, sport, art, crafts and written work. Under ideal situations it appears that many Aboriginal children have greater potential than some white children. There must then be other factors which cause Aboriginals to fail to make full use of their talents and abilities.

Home Life. Mission children of Aboriginal descent appear to have a more sheltered home life and are free from the drunkenness, prostitution and fighting which can surround the Reserve and town Aboriginal child. The child who is allowed a protected home environment similar to his European counterpart, who gets regular meals and does not suffer from malnutrition, and who is physically healthy usually excels in school attainment. It is obvious, however, that these sheltered Aboriginal children, on leaving the Mission situation, may have difficulty in keeping out of trouble in the towns and cities.

transport them to and from school. When a lunch meal was supplied for Aboriginal children by the school, and a variety of musical instruments, audio visual aids and sporting material provided, truancy ceased altogether. Again when two teachers took homework classes and identified themselves with the Aboriginal children, special attention was given to those teachers by the children. It appears that both created a parent image and satisfied a need for these children.

Aids. Aboriginal children take great interest in tape recorders and small visual projectors using slides and strip films. They love to see themselves on film and run the materials through the machines with great skill. They appear to have less inhibitions with expensive apparatus than white children as there is not the fear of breaking the equipment. The loud voices and excited giggles show that shyness and non cooperation are on the wane when interest and motivation are on the increase.

Hygiene. Cleanliness is a really important factor for Aboriginal children. Schools should make a greater effort to lift the hygiene barrier which exists between some Aboriginal children and some white children. Schools where hot showers are provided together with soap and towels and time given for tidying up find a queue of eager volunteers. Combs and ribbons together with clean clothes can turn a shy, reserved Aboriginal child into a confident eager child. Health facilities are available in most schools and insistence by the headmaster and teachers on clean eyes, ears and bodies lifts the morale of Aboriginal children. They appreciate medical attention.

Integration. If the school accepts all children as equal peers and not racial groups then one can have an integrated unit. Folk dancing, sport and music seem to know no colour bar and it is obvious that children set only one barrier - hygiene. No child, white or Aboriginal, wishes to dance with or sit near a child who smells, is dirty and is covered with lice and sores.

Language. Much has been discussed about the teaching of Aboriginals in their own language and letting them retain their own customs and cultures. This does not appear feasible everywhere in Western Australia as many Aboriginals drift into the town situation and want what they see there. It is obvious that language, hygiene and social education will make this road easier for the Aboriginal. The task of the educationalist should be to fit them into this new environment as painlessly and quickly as possible.

Our Aboriginal children appear to be making exciting progress in many primary schools and project classes. Giant strides are being made in the acceptance of Aboriginal children by the white community. The educationalist must encourage the Aboriginal as much as possible. He must be shown, by positive reward and

Health. Health in Aboriginal children is of the utmost importance. The retardation of some Aboriginal children can be traced to malnutrition. Health facilities are more evident on missions than around large towns. The untreated Aboriginal child with running ears, eyes and nose is in no fit state to compete or be compared with his white contemporaries. If he falls behind in his attainment one wonders if it is due to lack of intelligence or just lack of health care. It is obvious that a very high proportion of Aboriginal children in Western Australia suffer from poor eyesight and numerous other health problems. This must affect their potential in attainment in our schools.

Social Background. Few Aboriginal children have retained their own cultural background. The white community does not replace this culture with any understandable medium and thus the Aboriginal child is left cultureless and unsupported. This 'gap' has to be overcome and it usually cannot be done by the child's parents. It is up to the schools to provide a medium by which the child can identify himself. There must be an opportunity in our schools to give the Aboriginal child a chance to obtain some social standing.

Interests. Many ideas and interests have been tried in Western Australian Schools to motivate the Aboriginal child. It is obvious that allowances must be made for differing stages in Aboriginal development - from the child who is nomadic and speaks little English to the child who is a sophisticated academic. Instant photography of objects and friends in his own environment helps language and speech.

Projects. Such ideas as poultry, garden or animal projects hold Aboriginals' interest. Again special classes in domestic projects where Aboriginal students are taught house and baby-care have merit. It has been found that, unless there is actual reward in project work, interest wanes. The group who cook some of the eggs they collect and who are allowed to eat same in school time find instant reward for their labours. Their interest continues as positive instant reward is the basic motivation among Aboriginal children.

Reinforcement. Experiments carried out with jelly beans in an area where they had never been seen before showed that the children could be highly motivated by instant positive reward. As a result school results soared, while written and oral expression became a feature. Thus one could conclude that the general school standard rose in proportion to the teacher's jelly bean account. Surely this shows that children respond to motivation and that Aboriginal children want and need material reinforcement of this type.

Truancy. Aboriginal children who would not attend school showed an intense interest when a special bus was chartered to

reinforcement, that upward mobility will come only with his own efforts to educate himself.

Aboriginal children need sound knowledge of all the communication skills. The command of communication allied with hygiene acceptance puts the Aboriginal child on the same status as a white child. When hygiene comes as a natural action and communication flows freely then Aboriginals must have success. Most schools in Western Australia are trying for this end.

*"You can lead an Aboriginal child to school but
you cannot make him drink the cup of learning
unless it is slightly flavoured in his favour".*

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Mr. G.M. Hough, Teacher at St. Catherine's School, Proserpine, Qld., formerly taught Aboriginal children at St. Michael's Convent School on Palm Island. He believes that Aboriginal children have natural creative ability. These are two poems created by Palm Island children.

WHO AM I?

Who am I? Who am I?
I know I go to school and go home again
Who am I? Who am I?
When I'm angry
I sometimes yell or I go and sit alone
And think about the bad times and I think about the good times I had
Who am I? Do I really know who I am?
Who am I? I know I am an Aborigine who lives on Palm Island
We all know who we are but won't look at ourselves some times
and forget who we are
Who am I? Who am I?

I'M SAD

I'm sad, I'm sad,
walking all by myself,
As I walked by myself,
I feel so sad, so sad,
Just me walking alone,
All by myself,
I heard some bird
singing on the tree nearby,
As they sang their tune of
Sadness, they made me more sad,
more sad,
Me, Me, Me, walking all alone, by
myself, all day long.