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STUDY CENTRES FOR ABORIGINAL CHILDREN IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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Over the last decade a number of study centres for Aboriginals have been established in both urban and rural situations. Most of these centres have not been able to continue for long beyond the initial burst of enthusiasm which brought them into existence. Others have failed for other reasons. Most were established under the aegis of the Aboriginal Education Council (N.S.W.) and in 1973 the President of the Council was unable to say whether or not any of the centres, apart from the one at La Perouse, were still in existence.

A statement made in 1971 serves to emphasize that the voluntary creation and maintenance of study centres is at the mercy of a number of factors.

"I have had little contact with other study centres. However, I do know that the inner city centres closed up rather rapidly during the year. The major reasons were the shortage of reliable skilled staff and reasonable premises. ... In my estimation, the A.E.C. should look very carefully into the success of the La Perouse venture and any more limited centres which may be established elsewhere. The problems of finance, staffing and premises offer such barriers as to make study centres a situation lacking in viability and justifiable returns for time and money expended. I feel that avenues should be explored within the structures of the Education Department, Department of Child and Social Welfare and the Commonwealth for greater financial aid and official patronage." (1)

As the La Perouse centre has survived the vicissitudes of a decade it merits examination. The analysis of its past and present modes of operation should be viewed side by side with the stated rationale for its existence as propounded by its sponsors.

"A study centre aims to provide, on a community basis, study facilities and tutorial assistance to Aboriginal students in an atmosphere congenial

to successful learning, with parental support in organizing, conducting and maintaining the centre. The basic purpose is to provide the student with successful learning experiences with the help of tutorial and parental interest and guidance, and thus to help him regain or reinforce his (or her) own confidence in his ability to learn and to stimulate him to take full advantage of the educational opportunities open to him.

... The parents play a key part. A strong parents' committee is the backbone of a successful study centre ... by their involvement, also, the parents clearly demonstrate their interest in their children's education, thus providing direct encouragement to their children to take advantage of the educational opportunities open to them." (2)

THE LA PEROUSE STUDY CENTRE : A RETROSPECTIVE ACCOUNT

In 1963 the La Perouse Study Centre was established.

For about four years the study centre was housed in a large hall on the reserve and it was the policy of the centre that it should be almost solely devoted to assisting the school children with their homework and with the provision of compensatory education. During this period considerable difficulties were experienced. There was a lack of tutors and frequently five tutors were asked to handle about sixty children in the one hall. The venue was totally unsuitable and as one tutor (still working at the centre) described the situation, it was open to all manner of disruptive activities by the children.

In 1968 Miss Foster, a La Perouse Aboriginal, made her home available as a centre. The house had previously been a hostel and the floor plan, with eight small rooms, proved to be more suitable.

The study centre also received a further impetus at the beginning of 1969, when the University of New South Wales Branch of Abschol supplied tutors for the centre. At this time from twelve to twenty-two tutors met with a group of thirty to sixty children for a two hour period each Tuesday evening during term time. The group was divided into a number of smaller groups of secondary, primary and pre-school age children. A rather formal

mode of operation was adopted and the children were allocated to tutors in groups of five, which sat together at small tables and moved as a unit from one activity to another.

At about this stage in the development of the centre it was decided that children should have personal tutors with whom they could readily identify; this procedure, however, soon aroused the disapproval of the parents who considered that this implied a form of preferential treatment. This opposition by the parents was in part a reflection of the continuing latent and frequently manifest hostility that exists among the groupings of families at La Perouse. The system of personal tutors was abandoned when it was recognized that it served only to militate against the smooth operation of the centre.

The Tuesday nightschool children's session has been the constant and stabilizing element in a complex of activities which have been associated with the La Perouse Centre, over the intervening years, with varying degrees of Aboriginal involvement, of varying periods of duration, and with varying levels of success.

A library was established by 1967 and has always been under the direction of Miss Joan Humphries, the Librarian at Theological Hall, St. Andrews College. Miss Humphries believes that an essential purpose of the library is to facilitate the children's access to books, and to make them feel that there is no reason why they should not go freely to books. She has developed a policy of allowing the children to arrange the books, to catalogue them and to have the full use of them for pleasure reading or for use with their school work. No overt endeavours are made to constrain the children to use the library and pre-school children may be observed browsing through picture books or asking Miss Humphries to explain pictures in books or to read to them.

At different times the centre has provided for a very wide and diverse range of activities. These have included woodworking and cooking, and an attempt was made to introduce traditional Aboriginal crafts as it was considered that this would provide the young people with an interesting and profitable activity particularly if the parents also were to be involved. Typing lessons were also sponsored by the centre at a local evening college for six of the older girls who had either recently left school or planned to do so in the near future.

One of the principal areas of concern for those interested

in the operation of study centres is the matter of parent involvement and commitment to the study centre concept. The 1969 Report on the La Perouse Centre indicates some aspects of this concern.

"The identification of the Aborigines in their study centre has been shown by a donation of books to the library by the La Perouse Aboriginal Women's Association. Aborigines have expressed interest in fund-raising for the homework centre on the reserve. *However, those Aborigines experienced in fund-raising are already overcommitted, while those with more time who have expressed interest may need organizing.*

The Aborigines wish, where possible, to pay their own way or at least pay part of the expenses incurred in outings and special courses. One Aboriginal father expressed this sentiment as follows, "If we can't pay our way, then we are not worth tuppence or as they now say, two cents." (3)

In 1969 the study centre was jointly run by the Study Centre Parents' Committee and by the Study Centre Tutors' Committee.

It is obvious that the tutors-in-charge at this time were able to give a considerable amount of time to the project, and that the parent organization took a close interest in it.

1969 marked the appearance of plans for the proposed redevelopment of the La Perouse Reserve, and those connected with the study centre made a submission which included the proposal that a new study centre be incorporated into those plans, and that the new site be an integral part of the new plan, with the study centre amongst the houses and either near the centre or at some focal point. The slow pace in the past at which improvements were made for Aborigines is illustrated by the fact that in 1973 the centre is still housed in make-shift quarters on the periphery of the settlement.

The 1970 Report of the Study Centre and Coaching Scheme Committee of the Aboriginal Education Council (N.S.W.) shows the manner in which innovations may be introduced into the study centre concept. At this time specific attention was given to the principle of intervention to overcome language disabilities and

a language laboratory was lent by the School of Languages at the University of New South Wales. In this report the first mention is made of any meaningful dialogue between the centre and the local schools which the majority of the children attend. It must be conceded that the continuing tenuous nature of that dialogue may be seen as a major deficiency in the operation of the centre.

"An attempt has been made to follow the progress of the children at La Perouse Primary School and Matraville High School after their attendance at the study centre but, unfortunately, both headmasters were contacted late in the year and although they are very interested and willing to cooperate, so far, no meeting has been arranged." (4)

1971 saw two significant developments which did much to sustain the study centre project. The centre was housed in part of the buildings of the United Aboriginals Mission; funds for maintenance of the centre became available from the Norman Catts Trust and an honorarium was paid to a tutor, who assumed responsibility for the coordination of the activities of the centre.

"From a situation of chronic chaos, La Perouse has gradually transformed itself into organized chaos. The children can now be seen working in relative peace, attention and accuracy on a variety of tasks. Senior girls have been making fashionable clothing under the direction of a sewing teacher; some senior boys and a few junior boys have made simple models and coffee tables. Other children of varying ages have been painting, modelling and learning a number of craft skills under the guidance of two highly skilled occupational therapists. The junior section has been involved with a variety of educational games, some reading and some social studies work." (5)

A shift of emphasis had taken place with more attention being paid to craft and social activities and with a lessened concentration upon the extension of school classroom tasks. The same report echoes the constant dilemma of the study centre about the type of tutor who worked with the children.

"The successful running of a study centre rests on the skills and dedication of the people involved.

Willing amateurs are of little value and political activists are a positive menace. University students, if they are dedicated and willing to learn, can be of great value. However, we have learnt from rather bitter experience this year that many of them are not mature enough or humble enough to accept advice and refuse to cooperate."

(6)

THE LA PEROUSE STUDY CENTRE IN 1973 : AN ACTION REPORT*

1. THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

The centre is still housed in the premises at the rear of the United Aboriginals Mission, La Perouse. This area is on two floors with a narrow staircase, the rooms are generally too small to comfortably handle the considerable variety of activities, the wall of the partitions are unpainted and profusely covered with a plethora of graffiti.

2. EQUIPMENT

a. *Library* - there is a substantial collection of books, many of the secondhand "hand-me-downs", a large collection of National Geographics and a considerable collection of picture type books suitable for the small children, and some reference materials, encyclopaedias, dictionaries.

The principal deficiency would seem to be of the type of book in which the older children expressed interest - profusely illustrated books, particularly about topics germane to their living style and about their own race. Several girls are very active in helping the librarian, who has worked in the centre since 1967.

b. *Toys* - the children, especially at the pre-school and kindergarten ages, show great interest in the educational toys (peg boards, form boards, puzzles, etc.), but there are insufficient of the toys to meet the needs

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**This report on the La Perouse Study Centre arises from personal observations made during four visits in 1973.*

of the children and often they wait patiently for their turns to use the equipment.

c. *Educational Aids* - there are several sets of learning programs in reading and mathematics, and tutors are finding that several of the children make fairly frequent use of these programs on a demand basis.

d. *Activity Resources* - the teaching of typing has ceased. Three dilapidated machines are in a small room, alongside an electric kiln, which also appears to have ceased to be functional. The younger children play with the typewriters spasmodically. A range of craft activities are conducted by the tutors; the materials used depend upon the individual interests of the tutors concerned. Some of the materials and equipment are supplied by the A.E.C., some by the children and some by the tutors.

3. STAFFING OF THE CENTRE

Two tutors receive honoraria to supervise the study centre. One, a woman school teacher, has an overall responsibility but mainly confines herself to the supervision of the young adults, who attend on Monday evenings. The other supervising tutor, a woman student from Macquarie University, has responsibility for the Tuesday evening activities. The staffing is no longer in the hands of the University of New South Wales Branch of Abschol. It seems that the present band of tutors have been recruited as a result of personal approaches. The Tuesday evening staff now may include eight to ten students from Macquarie University. Some have been going to the centre for eighteen months or two years and included in their number are two teaching nuns, who are taking courses at Macquarie. A married couple, students at the University of New South Wales, devote themselves to craft activities and on a recent evening other tutors present included a primary infants teacher and a teacher trainee from William Balmain College. The tutors are acting on a philosophy which allows them "to do their own thing" and they allow the children to come to them for guidance and assistance. One tutor remarked, "they teach us, we don't teach them anything." The tutors receive from the A.E.C. out-of-pocket expenses to meet travelling costs. It is a long journey from Macquarie to La Perouse but Alan Duncan, the president of A.E.C., reports that the tutors frequently return these grants to the study centre to purchase equipment.

4. THE CHILD PARTICIPANTS

Children of all ages pass through the study centre when it is in session. Babies in arms mingle with youths in their late teens and although the children arrange themselves in peer group preferences, many activities take place over a wide age spectrum. It is difficult to estimate the number of children who use the centre of an evening but it must be in the seventy to eighty range.

Earlier in the year it was decided that the large numbers were impeding the work of the centre and that Tuesday evenings should be restricted to primary and pre-school children only and that the other children should attend on Mondays. This led to considerable friction and aggression. The older children resented being excluded; they felt that the centre offered them some avenue of social activity on Tuesday evenings and on several occasions they burst into the centre and a great deal of mayhem ensued. The tutors also realized that the apparent logical division into primary and post-primary groups cut across family grouping and was a further cause of friction. The age restriction was lifted and the young adults have returned. The bigger girls play with the little ones and the young males gather in a corner where they chat and joke, play guitar and drum on improvised percussion instruments. The air of aggression in the centre has now evaporated.

5. ACTIVITIES AT THE CENTRE

The range of activities at the centre seems to have filtered out into four distinct layers, which seem to have been largely determined by the children themselves and which distribute themselves along a continuum with an interest in school-centred learning activities at one pole and a social experience situation at the other.

- a. *Pre-school and kindergarten children* - the interest here is in playing with educational toys but it is doubtful whether these children are aware of a formal educational connection as it is not stressed in any way by the tutors.
- b. *Lower grade primary school children* - a number of these children seek further assistance with school-centred activities particularly with the mathematics and reading programs.

c. *Upper primary and secondary school children* - although some children do seek assistance, particularly from the librarian, with school projects, by and large their interest is in craft activities and they are frequently involved in painting, clay modelling, copper working, collage work, the construction of match stick models, sewing and rug making. When questioned, these children predominantly indicated that they see the centre as a pleasant place to spend an evening rather than a place where they can enhance their academic standing.

d. *Young adults* - between twenty and thirty young adults circulate through the centre and they say that they see it as a good meeting place to yarn, to play music, and for the girls, to mix with the children.

6. PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

At the present juncture it may be said that parental involvement in the centre is virtually non-existent. At the same time the A.E.C. authorities also admit that because of the pressures emanating from other projects little attention is given to the study centre. The present successful operation of the centre obviously depends upon the enthusiasm of the tutors, especially the group from Macquarie University.

7. MEDICAL SERVICES

A doctor and nurse come to the centre on Tuesdays and make themselves available to all Aborigines on the Reserve. Many children receive treatment at these sessions.

7. FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

The continued progress and course of development of the centre are now contingent upon two factors. First, the planned re-development of the Reserve may mean that the centre will need to be rehoused and second, the Aboriginal Education Council is seeking financial support which would enable them to employ a full-time Study Centre Director. The latter development, if it is achieved, could lead to an expansion of the activities of the centre and to the possibilities of greater community involvement.

THE PRESENT SITUATION AT LA PEROUSE STUDY CENTRE

1. Obviously a full assessment of the value of the centre would require an extended longitudinal study which would need to

assess the objectives of the centre in social, cultural and educational terms.

2. Although the employment of part-time tutors presents certain difficulties, the present group of tutors, at least, seemed to have established a happy relationship with the Aboriginal children and to have developed worthwhile activities based on their own enthusiasms and interests.

3. There seems to be a good case for providing some constructive activities for the young adults, with some skilled instruction. Typing, woodworking and metal working would seem to be suitable activities to be considered.

4. At La Perouse, experience seems to indicate that centres may be more successful if a wide age spectrum is catered for.

5. At La Perouse Study Centre the physical appearance of the centre could be considerably improved by painting the walls and displaying pictures and posters of interest, especially material about Aboriginals in both the traditional and contemporary situations.

6. The stock of the library at the centre would be enhanced by an infusion of well-illustrated books of interest to the upper primary and secondary school children.

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