



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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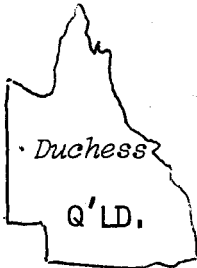


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Because of several restricting factors, for example, time available for filming, weather, ceremonies and availability of actors, I am planning to have the first unit with its accompanying material ready by the end of the year. Should time permit I will start a second unit.

I hope to write a final review on the project after it has been completed, looking at the values it holds for the children, parents, community and education to see if my objectives were realized.



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EDUCATION FOR WHAT?

J. McMaster,
Duchess, Q'ld.

Let me first explain my situation. All the people in Duchess are involved in some way or another with the Queensland Railways. Duchess is a railway town, supported by the Queensland Railways and existing only because of them. The majority of settlers are Islanders, with a few Aborigines. These people live harmoniously side by side. All the fathers have jobs. The children thus have the necessary monetary backing to encourage development. These people are not poor, though their conditions may indicate otherwise. All the children are clothed reasonably well, and fed reasonably well. Most of the children are scrupulously clean.

It is wise to keep in mind the fact that regardless of what my successes and failures are, each one of us has a special situation, which differs vastly from everyone else's. It is therefore necessary for us to be continually trying, adapting, and changing, in order to achieve any measure of success.

In the small school, the teacher is faced with a number of problems which perhaps appear unique or magnified by virtue of the fact that he is on his own. Multiple grades, voluminous workloads multiple cultures, remoteness and lack of finance are amongst the greatest problems facing me personally, and no doubt many of you at present. But the small school also offers unique opportunities to teachers to experiment and implement new ideas and methods.

The relative freedom of working alone offers unlimited scope for development in every field. Numbers are fewer, and parental contact is more practical and rewarding. In every field our freedom to work is limited only by our capacity. I believe that the small schools are more effective amongst these people, simply by virtue of the fact that contact and discussions with both parents and children are more intimate, and therefore more successful. Of course, initially they are shy, but eventually we can reach them, and once their confidence is gained, they will make every attempt to help us. This is a big advantage to have, and very necessary if any program is to achieve success.

Perhaps the greatest single problem in my situation is parental apathy. This factor alone accounts for the lack of achievement among 80% of my pupils, even though the potential for success is there.

The question then, "Education for what?", as it applies to my situation, leads me to suggest two possible answers:

1. Education for awareness.
2. Education for adaptability.

These may appear at first very vague and general aims, but there is a specific in each that I hope to make clear to you shortly.

Over the past three years that I have been teaching Aboriginal and Island children, a definite pattern in their educational achievements has emerged. I have found that these children progress well through school up to about Grade 6 or 7 and from here their progress becomes regressive. They are presented with a secondary scholarship at the age of fourteen and off they go to high school, all potentially successful pupils. After about six months at high school I suddenly find them roaming about the town when they should be away at school. What happened? What has been achieved in seven years of schooling? In these cases, nothing. Here are these children who have had the benefits of Peabody, Van Leer, New Maths and Science, the new Social Studies syllabus, in fact all the benefits of the new education, wandering around with nowhere to go, and no incentive to try to better themselves. I find myself the creator of an ethnic group of Cinderellas, but I neglected to find out what happened after they went off to live happily ever after. Somewhere along the line there is something that everyone has overlooked. Somewhere, somehow, these children are being faced with a problem

to which no one to date has provided an answer. What brings them back to the communities and settlements to a life of nothing when there is so much to be gained by a little effort? Are they afraid of what they see? If so, then I believe that our efforts in primary school have been fruitless. Are they simply inherently lazy? I don't believe so.

EDUCATION FOR AWARENESS

What then are we doing that we should not be, or what aren't we doing that we should be? This is where I believe we should be educating for awareness and adaptability. Awareness, in order that on leaving primary school, these children know exactly what is in front of them, what they can expect and what is expected of them; and adaptability so that when these expectations conflict, they can rationalize the available information, and make a choice which corresponds to this rationalization. Is this too much to expect of these children? In my situation, I don't think so. My program is aimed at developing the individual, his line of thought and his rationality. If this, then, is my program in school, at the end of primary school I expect that those pupils who are capable will be able to rationalize situations, at their level. If not, then I haven't done my job properly.

Returning to these adolescents wandering around the town aimlessly, this is the breeding ground of parental apathy. When these children have children, they will make out somehow, so why worry with education? They have to go to school until they are fifteen, but that doesn't mean that school is good for them, or that school will get them a better way of life. This is the train of thought. Obviously, it is too late to overcome the present apathy of the existing parents, but it is now that we can change the attitudes and values of their children, so that with a little luck, when the children are parents they will have different views on the importance of schooling. I feel that if I can awaken these children to the potential they do possess, if I can make them fully aware of the fact that they can do almost anything they wish to do provided they are prepared to work for it then I will have done my job.

In our aim of developing awareness, we teachers in small schools have a considerable advantage in our degree of freedom. We can organize tours and field trips to suit ourselves, having

only to consider transport. Project clubs offer another field in which considerable freedom is available. We have at present two calves, two pigs, one dozen chickens and a sheep as projects, and we are in the process of developing a museum for the town. It is amazing the amount of assistance that is available to you if you ask. Much of our museum equipment consists of bulky or heavy outdoor displays such as horse-drawn graders, steam engines, old cars and trucks etc. When we finally get around to building the building to house the museum, the children will play a big part in measuring, drawing plans and actually helping to construct it. These types of activities allow for natural outlets for the theory they absorb in school, though they are still considered as part of school activities.

Tours are an excellent way of awakening the children's minds to job opportunities, as well as providing an insight into industry and commerce. I have found that the Commonwealth Employment Service is always ready to help organize such tours for the whole school, where small schools are interested. Adult Education films offer another fountain of mind-expanding ideas. The ones we have been fortunate enough to see have brought the world to the children and have let them see that there are other ways of life, other people, and other ideas in many ways different from their own. Films may not be a novelty to many, but since we have power only at the hotel, a film evening presents a major job of preparation in Duchess, and is always appreciated.

EDUCATION FOR ADAPTABILITY

Another disturbing aspect of my situation is the fact that none of the children seem to understand that they don't have to do exactly the same job in life as their fathers. I believe that they are not adaptable. This can be seen in the school. Any slight change, and especially the instituting of such devices as multiple area techniques almost immediately results in resistance in one form or another. More than European children, I feel these children need some type of pattern to keep to. If I can reduce this adherence to a pattern and thus make the children more adaptable, then I will feel I have achieved something of value.

To foster adaptability, I have tried to introduce as many and varied tasks as possible. All the card material is so constructed that as far as possible there are at least three

ways of approaching any one card. Obviously this takes a lot of work, and in two years I am still only partly finished. It is not a task to be set upon with visions of finishing for the day at 3.30 or 4.00pm. I find myself jumping out of bed during the night to write down an idea, to the detriment of my wife's nerves. I have found that the more involved the children become, the more involved I become, and I end up running out of ideas. Whether or not my methods are successful, only time will tell. Only when each child reaches the blockage that I mentioned earlier will the real test of my methods occur. If they decide to go on, I have succeeded; if not I'll try something new.

Thus, combining the two aims awareness and adaptability, I hope to overcome the obstruction that seems invariably to occur in their middle education.

HOW TO ACHIEVE OUR AIMS

The means of achieving these aims are many, varied, and the majority are already in existence in most schools - even the small school. Perhaps among the most effective of these are multiple area techniques. In the small school this means a great deal of work, but it is more easily instituted in the small school, since we only have ourselves to please, and, perhaps as a disadvantage, consult. I have found that the Van Leer Program, though I have modified it in places to suit myself, is a tremendous advantage, in as much as the guide lines are there for me to begin with. The small school is also more adaptable, with a little work on the part of the teacher again, to multiple area teaching. Even the old style buildings are ideal. Use can be made of almost anything that everyone else considers junk, and it is terrific what a splash of paint will do.

I don't believe that with such aims as I have already suggested, traditional techniques achieve much; they are not completely out, but they are now only secondary techniques, to be used as backstops, for reinforcement of an idea, or for straight out teaching of a concept when it is necessary. There is still room for traditional techniques, in a multiple area situation. The beauty of the multiple area situation, in my mind, is that it takes the school out into the lives and experiences of the children, and to achieve those aims I spoke of originally, it is necessary to relate to the children in their own realm, in an effort to make education a real and

living thing that happens twenty-four hours a day, every time they perceive, think, state, or question something, not simply that which automatically occurs at school when they attend. I am drawing on the everyday situations of the children, and it is to these that they can relate. By moulding these situations to suit our aims we can mould the values of the children to suit our objectives.

Naturally, we are faced with the problems of a very different and a very real environment at home. Even children understand the realities of hunger, sickness and cold and it is difficult to persuade them that these things we show them at school, these opportunities we offer them, are not fantasies available to others but not to them. I feel that though this is at present a disadvantage, it can also be used as an advantage. If we can make these opportunities real enough, and if we can contrast them strongly enough with the home situation, then perhaps the children will start desiring these new opportunities, and in doing so, striving towards their achievement. This alone would be a terrific start.

I am also fully aware that we cannot overlook the tremendous difference in our cultures, and that we can't expect centuries of inbred culture to give in overnight to a new and different culture. Unfortunately, too much of their own culture has been lost, and in most areas it is too late to try to relate the two cultures, in search of a successful compromise. So we are left with finding a completely new solution, and to achieve this will take many decades of constant searching, and adapting on the part of both peoples. Again, whether my methods are achieving what I hope them to achieve, only time will tell.

A RELEVANT EDUCATION

How can we make our school more relevant for these children? This is a big problem, but I believe that I can supply a partial answer. Let us assume that these children return to their communities at fifteen. What types of jobs are available to them? In my area, they could be stockmen, mechanics, truck drivers, station cooks, governesses and probably many other things that I haven't thought of. What prerequisites would they have to fill any of these jobs now? Absolutely none. I believe that in schools with Aboriginal pupils, we don't cover enough relevant

fields. It was purely by accident that I came to this conclusion. Our Regional Maths Advisor sent us a few ideas on how to conduct a maths store. There were four shops covering length, capacity, mass and time, and the children and I went ahead and made up the necessary cards and materials to suit each level, so that the shops would be operational for all levels in the school. At first the shops worked well, but gradually interest lagged and I started searching for something to rejuvenate it. I decided to actually build some shops in the lunch room, rather than have the children pretend they were there. I initially started the work, sawing, nailing, painting, etc., until some of the children asked if they could help. So I let them do it. Believe me, they learned more about lengths, angles and measurements in that two week period than they had in the previous two years. The painting was as good as I could have done myself, and there were no fights, or squabbles; everyone worked harmoniously. This episode caused me to install all my meagre collection of carpentry tools in the school, for the children's use. We now have shelves, trolleys and shops, all built by them and all very good. In the shops we set up selling real eggs from the project club which the parents bought from the school shops. I decided to try another experiment with the girls. This time we collected cake recipes and all the necessary ingredients, and sold the required amounts through the shops, made the cakes and baked them in my wife's oven, to her amusement. Though some of the cakes would have made good patches for tubes, enthusiasm was higher than I had ever hoped for. Initially the mess was pretty widespread too, but they soon learn that they have to clean up when they are finished.

My point is, however, that the majority of these children are very clever with their hands. So why not capitalize on this? Why not get an old car from somewhere and teach basic mechanics, or why not teach cooking and carpentry, and rewarding sewing - not stitches, but dresses and things they can use? I feel that this type of extension of my school can only be beneficial. Some will say that these things cost too much, but why not do as I am doing? Approach Service Clubs and Councils, and anyone at all, and ask for what you need. Believe me, you'll get help and plenty of it. From this, the children are being readied for jobs which are available to them.

Prior to the seminar*, I made a survey of some fifteen to twenty stations in my area, and I was assured by *every* manager, even those whom I had never met, that *anyone* with *some* training

in *some* field which they could use - for example, mechanics, carpentry, cooking, household duties, welding etc., would be able to walk into a job, the minute he applied. This held true for everyone, so long as the basic training was done and there was something to build on. Men are so scarce out here that jobs are available all the time. The major requisite is reliability. This is yet another field, but I am convinced that if I had the means, that is, tools, equipment, etc., I could have every Aboriginal or Islander or European child able to handle a worthwhile job competently by the time he was ready to leave school.

I think that a taste of what these jobs involve will aid these children in furthering themselves. I am convinced that the more we relate our schools to the possible aims of these children, the more we take the school into community life, the better chance we will have of success. I think that the closer we approach a Boys Town type situation, where these children are doing and actually physically reaping the benefits of doing, not merely hearing about what they can expect to get in ten years' time when they are teachers or doctors or anything else, the greater success we will achieve in improving their lot.

To conclude I hope that what I have said has contradicted a few people's ideas, as this will stimulate discussion, and possibly bring us all a bit closer to a better understanding of our responsibilities.

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**Inservice seminar for teachers in schools with significant numbers of Aboriginal pupils conducted by the Queensland Department of Education, July, 1973. This paper was presented at the seminar.*

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