



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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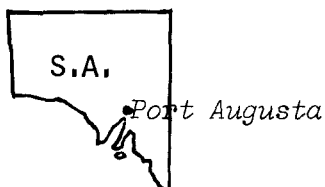


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ACROSS AUSTRALIA

FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER

SECONDARY SCHOOL ADJUSTMENT AND EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES



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Most of the discussion on the topic of Aboriginal education until recently has largely focused on primary education, and not without ample justification. This is without doubt the crucial stage in education. But, as the primary section becomes increasingly more successful with its Aboriginal pupils, so it becomes increasingly imperative for secondary education to respond adequately to this new challenge. The exact nature of this challenge is the concern of many teachers involved.

UNDER-ACHIEVEMENT

Although this may be somewhat of a contradiction, in a number of cases what we term as under-achievement could well be regarded as over-achievement when a particular student's background is taken into account. Herein lies one of the dilemmas of Aboriginal education, especially when it is being viewed in an urban or transitional context. In what framework should the school operate when the cultural point of reference is neither truly Aboriginal nor very close to the European norm, but somewhere in between - a result of social and cultural change? What common ground is there in values, attitudes and understanding to build upon?

However, from the standpoint of academic potential, there is a seemingly high proportion of under-achievement amongst Aboriginal students. At Port Augusta High School Aboriginals number a total of ninety-six out of an overall school enrolment around eleven hundred. Almost one third of the Aboriginal students find themselves in the lowest streams, whereas the figure for the school as a whole is approximately ten per cent. At the other end

of the scale, only five have been placed in an "0" track, top stream. As an indication of retention rates, there are six students at the fourth year (Leaving) level, none of whom is in "0" track; none therefore is considered as being of university potential. No Aboriginal student is attempting Matriculation, but this is only a matter of time. Since 1966, when there were only eight Aboriginals in attendance (1.1% of the total enrolment), numbers have steadily risen to the current figure which represents 8.4% of today's enrolment.

TEACHER OPTIMISM

A survey of class teacher assessment and opinion of their Aboriginal students indicated a further level of under-achievement, that is, relative to the grades received within the particular stream to which these students have been assigned. In short, then, they are performing at a lower level in the lower streams. However, when teachers were asked to make an assessment of what they felt lay within the student's capacity, a very optimistic picture was revealed. The negatively skewed curve became positively skewed for potential. Not surprisingly, a certain casualness about punctuality and the bringing of appropriate equipment to class was revealed by the survey, but it was also indicated that the actual work accomplished was of average neatness or better. An observed reluctance to tackle more difficult tasks accompanied by a need in many cases to seek more individual assistance has received some attention through securing the services of two Aboriginal teacher aides and by providing some remedial instruction, especially in reading. Certainly these are avenues worth pursuing.

SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

The racial composition of the Port Augusta community along with an on-going process of integration and assimilation, create the ingredients for tension and misunderstanding. Recent figures indicate an Aboriginal population of around six hundred in a city of at least thirteen thousand. Much publicity has been given to current problems concerning Aboriginals on the one hand and the law, the police and their neighbours on the other. But what has the greatest impact on the Aboriginal high school student must obviously be the employment situation, the positions that are open to young Aboriginal school leavers in

the town. The typical student lives in the town and relates to an urban environment. Only a minority of students come from the all Aboriginal community at Davenport Reserve and Umeewarra Mission. In many cases friends may be non-Aboriginal. In this way the school could be seen as an agent for the lessening of any racial tensions that may exist in the general community. Yet, it is against these friends that a young Aboriginal may have to compete on the labour market, possibly at some disadvantage because of attainment and because of discrimination. Only two Aboriginal people, part Aboriginal girls, are employed in Commercial Road, the business heart of the town.

EMPLOYMENT GOALS

Expanding employment opportunities are frequently seen as a motivational force towards higher achievement and higher levels of study. Port Augusta shares a dearth of employment opportunities with many other country centres. Proposals for the establishment of a petro-chemical plant may favourably alter the present limited situation. Some Aboriginal lads have their sights set on apprenticeships with the town's two big employers, the Commonwealth Railways and the Electricity Trust of South Australia. Three lads who were experiencing difficulties in adjusting to the high school environment have been able to secure station hand or stockman jobs on properties to the north. Openings for girls seem to be more restricted. To assist these people, the community is fortunate in having the services of a vocational officer specifically appointed to work with Aboriginal people even before the decision is taken to leave school.

PRE-EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM

Under the sponsorship of the Department of Labour a program was designed, with the involvement of the students themselves as far as this was possible, to encourage them to set realistic and worthwhile employment goals. In the first phase the students were taken on a camping trip to the nearby Flinders Ranges. It was hoped that self-reliance and a cooperative group spirit would result from the self-service meal arrangements, dish washing and other chores such as collecting wood and erecting tents. Leigh Creek was visited to view a mining operation and the diversity of employment it offered. During the second phase, visits were paid to industries in Port Augusta and Whyalla, including workshops, a library, a laundry, the local hospital, the post

office and a steel fabrication plant. As a follow-up, the third phase began with the completion of an interest inventory which revealed on the part of the girls a marked inclination towards social service type employment. Then followed the writing of a letter of application, mock interviews (which proved very successful), discussion of ways of finding a suitable job and the assessment of employment opportunities on leaving school at ascending levels. A talk was given by an Aboriginal community welfare officer regarding openings in the field of social work for Aboriginal people. Questionnaires taken on the final day revealed an interest in similar excursions, especially to Adelaide, and, of particular note, the possibility of trial employment, an idea which has been successfully implemented.

BENEFITS

In the long term I think we can look to pre-employment training as one means of gaining some improvement in the school retention rate. Some immediate benefits may be noted. A girl planning to become a social worker learnt of the necessity of completing her Matriculation year. The three students, already mentioned, took positive action to secure jobs that suited their temperament and capacity. One Leaving student is giving serious consideration to attempting her Matriculation. However, there have been one or two students who have unexpectedly cut short their school careers.

Obviously secondary schools can and must do more, but their success or failure will be determined in no inconsiderable measure by the degree of acceptance from employers met by Aboriginal students on leaving our classes. Pre-employment training is a special responsibility that should not be overlooked.

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