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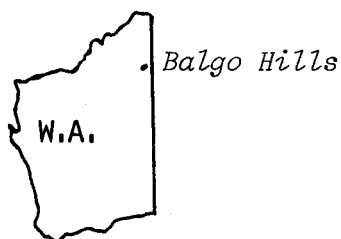


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ACROSS AUSTRALIA

FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER

ABORIGINAL CULTURE CLASSES AT BALGO HILLS SCHOOL



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There is much discussion today of the need in education to recognize the culturally pluralistic situation in which many Aboriginal children find themselves. Balgo Hills school shows one effective way of implementing this recognition. What approaches are being taken in other schools in Australia?

BACKGROUND

It has been evident that few of the eighty-five children, on average, enrolled at the school knew much of their own culture.

A major factor in this was the dormitory system where children were accommodated for the greater part of the year. This lack of contact with their people limited their knowledge of customs and skills, including language.

The recognition by mission staff of the need for Aboriginal parents to accept responsibility for their own children, and the commencement of a scheme to phase out the old dormitory system have provided a basis for change. There have also been changes in government policy. These factors, as well as the particular interest of Professor Berndt (of the University of Western Australia and Father A.R. Peile at Balgo, provided for the implementation of a program within the school to extend the children's knowledge.

ESTABLISHMENT

Finance for the establishment of Aboriginal culture classes was made available through the Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority. This provided for the payment of Aboriginal staff and for the purchase of equipment.

We were particularly fortunate to have the assistance of Father A.R. Peile at Balgo. His understanding of the vernacular and his knowledge of the people were invaluable in obtaining Aboriginal staff who were willing and able to conduct classes. His help overcame the difficulties faced by teachers who were new to the area, and communication with the people was made much easier.

Two men and two women were employed. The criteria for selection were their knowledge of their own culture, their ability to speak enough English to be able to communicate with class teachers, their ability to work successfully with children (as closely as could be assessed by Father Peile through his knowledge of the people), and their willingness to work with the children.

Two Aboriginal men and two women were selected, as one provided the other with moral support which overcame any embarrassment experienced in front of comparative strangers, in a situation away from the camp.

ORGANIZATION

All sessions were conducted out of doors, either on the school lawn or out in the bush near the school.

Sessions taken fell into three categories:

1. The first type of lesson was conducted with a time allocation of half an hour per class group per week, with class groups segregated according to sex. Most of the work done in this type of lesson involved the retelling of stories from the Dream Time, excerpts from song cycles, and associated dance steps. In addition some work was done to extend the vocabulary of the children in their knowledge of the names of plants and animals in the environment.

2. The second and third types of lessons were taken with the senior boys only, the lessons being alternated week about for one hour sessions.

In the first of these sessions the boys were taught traditional hand-crafts. They were taught how to use traditional tools with westernized variations (for instance, the substitution of steel for stone) and were shown how to make boomerangs, spears, woomeras, firesticks and firesaws.

In the alternate week the lesson dealt specifically with ethno-flora and fauna. The group went for a walk in the bush and learnt the correct names for the plants and animals which they saw or thought of. In addition they discovered the properties of the plants - whether they were edible or had medicinal qualities.

ASSESSMENT

All sessions, with the exception of that taken with the senior girls, were successful. The children in the remaining groups demonstrated total involvement through their enthusiastic participation in the lessons. The lessons carried over into the classroom situation where teachers did much valuable work in oral English using the carry-over motivation from the cultural group sessions.

The senior girls showed very little interest in learning anything about their own culture. It seems that this arose out of an unwillingness to 'perform' in front of their elders or peers, and partially out of a general lack of cooperation developed through peer group attitudes. Questioned alone, many of the girls claimed interest, but as a group they could not be motivated to participate to any great extent.

The culmination of the program for the year ending in December, 1973, was a children's demonstration at a corroboree of some of the dancing they had learnt during the year. This performance was held in the school grounds and was attended by all of the Aboriginal people and the mission staff. It also included dances by the men and women of the tribe. The overall success was emphasized by the fact that the older men of the tribe had to be asked to assist in getting everyone to go home as the evening showed signs of turning into a full scale corroboree which would have carried over into the early hours of the morning.