



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

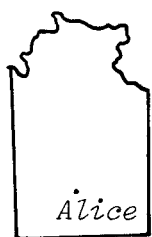
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ACROSS AUSTRALIA
FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER



EDUCATION IN A MULTI-CULTURAL COMMUNITY

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Traeger Park Primary School is situated in a community composed of white and Aboriginal cultures and sub-cultures. The enrolment is approximately three hundred and eighty and of this more than half the children are of Aboriginal descent. Approximately sixty of these Aboriginal children live in cottage homes because they come from cattle stations or they are state wards. The various sub-cultures would include -

1. Stable middle-class part-Aboriginal group.
2. Lower socio-economic group of part-Aboriginal people living in town.
3. Full blood Aboriginal people in fringe-dwelling situations
4. A transient white group who live at caravan parks.
5. People employed by railways.
6. A small group of middle-class whites.

Within the white cultures, there are many disadvantaged children from broken or disturbed homes. All these sub-cultures within the school have tended to make the middle-class white group disadvantaged. We are faced with the problem of keeping these children up to the academic standard expected by parents. In the fringe-dwelling group there are twenty-five children from one particular camp and thirty-five from other camp situations all around the town. Many of these people see this school as theirs even though they live much closer to other primary schools. The principal aim of the school is to develop in the children an awareness of themselves and their place in the community, and a self-concept that enables them to live a full and satisfying existence in the environment of their own choice.

ACHIEVING THE AIM

Orientation of Teachers. As Project Teacher, I spend a good deal of my time consulting with teachers and discussing ways in which we can work. Because of my experience with teachers and my knowledge of their families, I am able to pass information on to the class teachers, so that they may understand the needs of the children. I introduce teachers to personnel from various community agencies and help them to set up contacts in social work, health and community development.

This is particularly important with new teachers who may have had no experience of teaching Aboriginal children. I prepare regular reports on new ideas, results of new methods, and current problems. A tour of the town and fringe-dwelling sites is also important as so many teachers have no concept of the living conditions of their children. At the commencement of each year, we organize an orientation course which concerns all teachers. Local people speak on their work in the field of social work, health and Aboriginal culture and give a broader outlook on the community.

Getting to Know the Child. The development of a personal relationship between the teacher and the child is the first and most important job of the teacher. This is based on the fact that Aboriginal children are motivated to learn by a personal relationship rather than by achievement and the reward of material benefits. Every teacher must know the background of his children and this is done by consultation with me, as Project Teacher, or with representatives of agencies in health and welfare.

I encourage teachers to organize, in the first weeks of school, some outdoor activities that allow children opportunity to approach them informally. During the first term all classes above Grade 3 endeavour to run a bush camp or stay-at-home camp. All forms of excursions and picnics are valuable in that the informal atmosphere without the forbidding walls of a classroom gives the children an environment in which they feel free. Free activity time in the classroom is also a time in which the teacher can develop communication with individual children. Most classes work in a flexible way so that the teacher is among the children all the time and never set apart at the "front of the class".

Home-School Relations.

"Assisting the culturally disadvantaged child thus involves not only the provision of compensatory education but programs of social change directed particularly at the influencing of attitudes. If attitudes are neglected, compensatory education may well fail. Teachers may therefore be justified in complaining that their best efforts are nullified by society's failure to undertake the necessary "social engineering".

Nevertheless they have some part to play themselves in this 'engineering' and they constitute a body of informed opinion capable of influencing general social policy. In the policies and organization of the institution the "school", there must be an ever increasing concern for communication between the home and the school".*

As a staff member, free of class routine, I have been able to establish a degree of contact with a great number of parents. Unfortunately this is not always the best contact, as the class teacher must also be involved. The traditional school system allows no opportunity for teachers to establish and maintain contact, except in their own time. Difficulties are increased when European teachers have had no previous contact with Aboriginal people and they lack confidence in approaching them. I believe there is a great deal of work to be done in training teachers in parent contact and parent involvement. Some Aboriginal parents have a far more personal interest in the school than the white parents. We endeavour to use the parents as much as possible although this is not as regular as we would like due to transport difficulties. Aboriginal parents have been an asset on excursions, camps and picnics, either as helpers or resource people.

We hope to establish in the prep class a mothers' system as an integral part of the pre-school system. We have failed in the primary schools to capitalize on the interest of mothers at this level as Aboriginal mothers have already played a responsible part in their children's pre-school learning. Mothers in prep class will be asked to be part of a roster system to help with general housekeeping, storytelling and supervision of creative work and

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* Smilansky, M. and Smilansky, S., *Intellectual Advancement of Culturally Disadvantaged Children: an Israeli's approach for Research and Action.*

activity times. In another class, we plan to invite each parent to attend the school for a whole day or half day several times each term. The parent will join in with activity in the classroom and become familiar with classroom organization and the learning patterns of the child. Some classes have organized their own visiting time - usually between 6 p.m. and 8 p.m. so that the family can eat together and learn together. A creche is available for other children in the family and an older class caters for the meal. Reactions to these evenings have been most favourable, especially when the parents, both white and black, learn to use the new aids in the classroom under the supervision of the children.

Aboriginal Culture and Identity. There is a dearth of material depicting Aboriginal people and while the Aboriginal child sees only whites in all the pictures and books around him, his self image will remain low. We have introduced some reading schemes which are slightly more relevant to the school, but the lack of picture material is most obvious. We use the JILAP Scheme for pre-reading and early reading development, then the Endeavour Scheme for those who need a phonic approach. There is a set of pictures for language development available from Longmans called Young Australians which depicts Aboriginal people in various parts of the Territory. I have compiled a Phonic Book in the order I find Aboriginal children need to learn their phonic sounds and have used drawings that are relevant to the situation. We have begun the Van Leer Language Development Program in the First Year Class but must wait a while before we can assess its value at this school. The Peabody Language Program Kit has also been a valuable aid.

Aboriginal people have introduced their painting and crafts to the children and story tellers from settlements have made visits but the local people are reluctant to use their skills within the school. We will just have to go on asking. Within the Electives Scheme, which is held once a week, there is a unit of Aboriginal studies. In this, the opportunity is given to study the language, stories and arts of the people and we do much of this through the Institute for Aboriginal Development.

We have employed two Aboriginal aides in the school for the last 2½ years. It is difficult to gauge the effect on the children but I am sure it has been easier for Aboriginal parents, when they enter the school, to find people of their own heritage involved there. In 1973, two camps were held in Aboriginal communities. These were the most successful camps due to the involvement of Aboriginal people and the close contact made with them. For the

Aboriginal children, it was a great boost to self concept, in that we were dependent upon the help of these people. For the white children, it was an experience in learning to live with another culture.

Meeting the Needs of the Child.

- Physical

We work in co-operation with the school sister and camp sister. There is a system of free lunches provided by Welfare, but rather than remove this responsibility from the parent, we help them to work out some method of providing the lunches themselves. Several parents pay for lunches in a bulk sum when their pay is received. Others are encouraged by the Social Worker or myself to cut lunches - this has proved successful in several cases. A close watch is kept on the lunches for deprived children and the diet is supervised by the nutritionist from the Health Department.

- Social

I try to be aware of the family life of the children and any disturbances in the home are related to the class teacher so that the child may be helped through difficult periods. Because of constant contact with Welfare Agencies the school is able to assist families at these times.

- Emotional

Many of our children have been emotionally disturbed either by social pressures or learning problems. We have been able to use the resources of speech therapists, psychologists and social workers and in order to get the most value, we plan consultations with these people, parents and teachers so that the child may be assisted more effectively.

SOME INNOVATIONS:

Work Training Program. The aim of this program was to give some Grade 7 children opportunities to be involved in the community as workers, to learn social attitudes needed for work, and to show them the possibilities of employment. The children chosen to participate were either potential drop-outs of the high school system or had reached the limit of their academic achievement. The positions available were in a supermarket, a plumber's business, a joinery and on a farm. The times of employment varied from one day a week to five mornings each week. One or two boys failed to

keep the jobs and were fitted back to the school situation. However, in several cases, the attitudes of the boys to adults and their peers changed remarkably and their self-image developed.

Unfortunately this program is not continued into the high school, so that, in some ways, in the primary school it is only an exercise without further development. This year we hope to continue the scheme and in consultation with parents and teachers, one boy has already been placed in a job situation for two hours each day.

Extended Day Scheme.

The aims are:

- to provide a more flexible learning situation;
- to give opportunities for those children who need extension and those who need remediation;
- to provide a greater period of time for those who need the security of the school.

At present two teachers work with approximately forty-five children of ten to twelve years of age. The teachers work two shifts so that the class is open from 7.30 a.m.- 5.30 p.m. The first shift begins at 7.30 a.m. and finishes at 2 p.m.; the second shift begins at 11 a.m. and finishes at 5.30 p.m. A meeting of parents was held in which they actually participated in activities. This gave people a greater understanding of the scheme and they were able to take advantage of it. After three months, the teachers have found many problems but feel themselves that it is worthwhile continuing. Most of the children work normal school hours, but from six to fifteen make use of the early period - 7.30 a.m. to 8.15 a.m., and from ten to fifteen use the late afternoon period - 3.00 p.m. to 5.30 p.m.

A double and single class room are available but this is not as satisfactory as the set-up that is available in Open Space Schools. The scheme would work more effectively if there was an extra part-time staff member to ease the load from 8.30 - 10.30 when all the children are in attendance with only one teacher. The children who come to school by bus are not able to participate fully, due to the bus system. However, some enthusiastic parents have overcome this by assisting with transport.

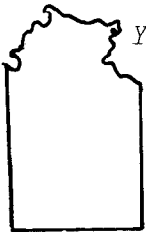
Provision of Experimental Material.

In considering the needs of children entering this school,

we found that there was deprivation in the field of language and in everyday modern living. We have set up in each classroom from Grade 1 to 4, a play corner consisting of dolls, toys, household utensils and furniture and dress-up clothes. There should also be plenty of construction sets, jigsaws and games in each classroom. A library in each class is most essential so that the children may be exposed to books throughout the day. Some Aboriginal children are not ready to read until Grade 3 or 4, so these activities must be provided to develop the skills needed to learn to read.

Mothercraft Program. As there is a high drop-out rate before high school and during the first year, I feel we should provide opportunities for these children to have some basic training in living. Many of the girls will begin families in their early teens and the school is the only institution in the community that has the opportunity to provide training. The Health Department hopes to provide resource people in a program of "Growing Up". We have Grade 7 girls taking part in a very informal program with the Infant Health Sister. Once a week a group of girls join her in the Infant Health Clinic and she is able to set up a personal relationship with them and encourage them to ask questions.

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Yirrkala

A MATTER OF COMMITMENT

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During the past 18 months, one of the most obvious differences recognized between two groups of students of the same age - those I have taught in Victorian secondary schools and those I now teach at the Yirrkala Post Primary School in the Northern Territory - is a huge difference in the degree of commitment to the function of the school.

This does not express itself in an obvious antagonism of the students for the school or its teachers. Rather, while the European students would attempt to force the school to meet their needs, as they recognized them, our students place few demands.