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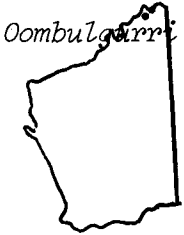
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SCHOOLING AT OOMBULGURRI AS PART OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF A COMMUNITY.



D. Dowsett,
Headmistress,
Oombulgurri School,
W.A.

In October 1973, a small group of about 30 Aboriginal people moved from Wyndham, Western Australia, forty miles across the Cambridge Gulf, to establish the community of Oombulgurri on the site of the now closed Forrest River Mission.

The move was from the 'futurelessness' of existence on the Wyndham Reserve to a chance to build their own future as an autonomous community living on tribal land. A Mawaba (Executive) was elected. The Oombulgurri Association employs an auxiliary staff whose role is to advise the community. The Auxiliary has no decision-making power.

Just twelve months later, Oombulgurri has grown to 200 people, of whom 60 are school-age children, with an additional 30 below school age. From the outset those moving back to Oombulgurri - most of whom made little real attempt to ensure their children attended school regularly in Wyndham - insisted that a school must be included in the community plan. The school functions as a community school. Two qualified teachers are employed by the Oombulgurri Association. They work in the school with four Aboriginal teaching assistants selected from the community. Each of these assistants is involved fully in planning and decision making, and is totally responsible for the day to day teaching and disciplining of various groups within the school. It has become very clear that the students gain a great deal by having some of their own people involved in actual teaching and curriculum building. The school has become much more than an institution imposed on the community. Women from the community are also involved in the pre-school and child care centre. Working with a member of the Auxiliary, the women plan the curriculum and carry out the daily program.

Planning of each term's school curriculum is carried out by the entire teaching staff within the context of the whole

community's development, with suggestions from the Oombulgurri adults and older students being incorporated.

The curriculum includes both formal and informal learning situations. During the morning, the emphasis is towards formal learning, with a more informal program in the afternoons. However, the two types of learning are interwoven as much as possible in an attempt to increase the relevance of formal education. For instance, the Senior girls (aged about 11 to 15) spend one afternoon a week cooking. As part of the activity, they purchase the ingredients from the local store, calculate the cost of what they have made, sell the finished products (cakes, sweets etc.,) calculate the profit - or occasionally the loss - and bank the money in their own account. They are using the money to pay for repairs and improvements to the school.

Science and Social Studies at all levels of the school are taught in the context of the environment in which the students live. For the younger children, Social Studies moves from 'our home' to 'our store', 'our office' and 'our clinic', with visits to all of these being an important part of the curriculum. Stories about community events are written and illustrated by the Juniors, and displayed at the Community store. Senior students are at present involved in building up a map of Oombulgurri, including both natural features, village layout, and family groupings. The older students also are responsible for writing, typing, duplicating and distributing the 'Oombulgurri School News Letter', through which much of the written English course is taught. A Polaroid camera has become an important piece of equipment as the students begin to take photos and create their own books based on people and events in Oombulgurri. Some of the Junior students have had books made about themselves and their families.

The change in attitude about going to school has been achieved gradually as the image of school has altered from being something imposed by white society and having very little relevance to the realities of life, to something which has become an important part of community life and growth.

Each group within the school is scheduled to visit one of the work areas of the community once a week. The groups visit such areas as the office, the store, the centre where the elders work on artifacts, and the horse yards. Within the community

there is a group of women who, working with a trained nursing sister, form the Health Team. This group has worked out a health curriculum involving charts, role plays and demonstrations, and assigns members to teach the health lessons throughout the school.

During second term, the students began to take responsibility for repairs and improvements to the school. They have painted the furniture, the blackboards and 'trimmings' in each of the two rooms, as well as carrying out various minor repairs. The Seniors are saving to buy school curtains, one of the girls being elected to travel to Wyndham and select the material.

Student involvement has not been without its hazards. A section of fly wire put on a door lasted only for a few weeks. Paint accidentally left in an unlocked cupboard encouraged the Infants and Pre-school children to add their assistance. The result is a climbing frame painted red and purple to a height of three feet! The significance, though, is that the school is beginning to belong to the children and the community. Serious vandalism has reduced to being almost non-existent.

The school faces many problems. It is lacking in material assets, although the financial situation is improving. Its students range in achievement and ability from average to those whose truancy combined with an ability to 'turn off', have enabled them to reach high school age without being able to read or do basic maths, despite at least average intelligence. It's hope for the future lies in its acceptance by the Oombulgurri people as part of their own community, and in a flexible community-oriented curriculum that enables the students to integrate their school experiences with their home life and their day to day living.

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