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-22-

the extent of all day every day)? Reflect for a moment and you will realize that in a class of 30 children, each child receives an individual share of ten minutes of your time in any one school day! Is this adequate for every child?

Despite the foregoing comments, however, I am convinced from what I have seen of classroom assistants both on our Aboriginal communities and off them, that they can, in fact, play a viable and highly effective role, a role complementing that of the classroom teacher. I am convinced that the employment of indigenous classroom assistants could be a step in the direction of providing for equality of educational opportunity for Aboriginal children.

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CO-OPERATIVE USE OF RESOURCES TO INITIATE A SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM



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At the beginning of 1973 staff, students and parents were all most concerned with a general escalation of aggression, threatening behaviour, stealing and high tension between a large group of Aboriginal children who live at the 12 Mile Reserve, and the balance of the school population. Complaints were received daily of money being stolen from lunch bags, cases, desk trays, the teachers' desks. In addition whole lunch packs, articles of fruit, or biscuits were removed from children's cases and consumed. At recess and lunch times children were threatened with violence unless they yielded up tasty items from their lunch,

or alternatively they had pies, apples or pieces of cake snatched from their grasp and watched helplessly while the aggressor greedily consumed the article.

A survey soon revealed that a significant number of our "12 Mile" children had little or nothing for breakfast before boarding the bus at 7.15a.m. Some brought money to purchase their lunch from the canteen or a can of soft drink from a shop nearby, while others were faced with the prospect of a hungry day at school. Seldom did children receive lunch every day of the week. Little wonder, then, that they resorted to patterns of unacceptable behaviour to satisfy one of their basic needs - adequate sustenance.

SEEKING A SOLUTION

Port Hedland is very fortunate to have a band of dedicated, enthusiastic and energetic Home Makers. Two of these women visit the 12 Mile Camp daily to aid and advise mothers and guardians. They were to become, and have remained, a very valuable means of communication between the school and the Aboriginal parents.

As a first effort to alleviate the problem, we endeavoured to use the school canteen resources to provide lunches. Home Makers would collect sufficient money from parents on Pension or Endowment day to cover the cost of lunches for the fortnight. Later, one of the tribal elders assumed this responsibility. Debits were made daily against this amount according to the purchases made by each child.

Our scheme soon foundered for a number of reasons :-

- a. Great difficulty was experienced in collecting the money.
- b. Not all parents agreed to become a party to the scheme, so that some children were still without lunches.
- c. There was a vast inequality between the amounts of money and the types of lunches purchased by different children.
- d. Most children tended to order items which were more expensive than their resources and resented being given cheaper alternatives.

- e. Book-keeping in the canteen became very complex and time-consuming.
- f. The final blow was dealt when the parent-helper, who collected the money, spent the lot on his own pleasures.

What we required was a scheme which was easy to administer, which ensured that every child received a comparable lunch, and which was acceptable to both the parents and the children. Once again our Home Makers suggested a solution.

PARENT-HELP SCHEME

If the children were all to receive regular, nourishing and comparable luncheons, then they must be prepared in bulk, preferably at the same centre. Because we required parental support and approval for the scheme, then it was desirable that the parents should be involved. From these basic ingredients our current luncheon program evolved.

A supplementary attendance roll was compiled listing the names of each child from the 12 Mile camp. Each morning selected students work in conjunction with a Home Maker to ascertain the numbers and names of children who are present that day. Knowing the numbers of lunches required, the Home Makers collect the individual lunch boxes and class luncheon baskets from school and purchase the ingredients which are required to make the necessary sandwiches before travelling to the 12 Mile.

At the Camp, the Home Makers have a building in which they assist mothers and guardians in the skills of sewing, and cooking on conventional stoves. They also have a group of parent-helpers who make up the children's lunches and pack sandwiches and fruit in appropriate boxes ready for return to school.

It is the children's own responsibility to supervise the distribution of lunch boxes at the beginning of the lunch period and repack them into the baskets before moving away to play.

This has been and is, a most fruitful and valuable project. Parents have had costs reduced to one dollar per child per week for lunches, while having the assurance that their children are receiving an adequate and balanced meal. Probably the two most important aspects to school administration have been the establishment of a dialogue with the people and our being able to establish

a "back-up" role for the Public Health Department team which operates in this area.

Many obvious and desirable results have been observed as a consequence of the scheme. As one would anticipate there has been a marked reduction in tension, aggression and stealing. The Aboriginal children take great pride in owning their lunch boxes like a vast number of other children. They have accepted their role in the scheme and perform it with diligence and reliability.

We have also noted with great interest some less predictable results. A study of absenteeism amongst the children of this group has shown that whilst a figure of 18% was evident before the introduction of our lunch scheme, this was reduced to 11% during a whole term following its introduction. This improvement was largely attributed to the regular attendance of a small group of children who had previously made only a token appearance.

A general improvement in the Aboriginal children's attitude to school has led to a corresponding improvement in performance levels. It is felt that the introduction of our functional and successful lunch scheme has been a significant contribution to these trends.

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