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ACROSS AUSTRALIA

FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER

BUILDING BRIDGES ACROSS A CULTURAL CHASM *



Jervis Bay

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VICTORIA

At the Jervis Bay Primary School there is in progress a project which is designed to involve the Aboriginal children at the school (about 25 per cent of the total enrolment) in some educational decision-making. The program is being funded by the Australian Government's Schools Commission Innovations Program.

It was judged that in the total school environment the Aboriginal children were followers and not initiators and that this was in part attributable to the skills-oriented competitive structure of the classroom system that exists at the school, and in which leadership and success fall largely to the non-Aboriginal pupils.

Just as the Aboriginal children opt out of leadership roles in the school, so too are their parents put off by the European, middle-class orientation of the parent bodies at the school - the Parents and Citizens Association, and the school board.

Aboriginal parents have stated that, at P. and C. meetings, they know what they want to say but that they "do not have the words". It follows that these parents do not seek executive positions on the parent bodies.

There is a strong case for the alteration of the regulations that govern the composition of the interim school boards in Commonwealth schools in order to ensure parent representation on ethnic grounds whenever the school's population contains a significant ethnic minority.

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Until 1965, the children from Wreck Bay were educated at the Aboriginal school at Wreck Bay. In 1965, the Wreck Bay Aboriginal School was *integrated* with the Jervis Bay public school at the Jervis Bay site within the environs of the RAN College at HMAS Creswell.

At the physical level *integration* was complete; the Wreck Bay school building, as well as the children from Wreck Bay, moved into the Jervis Bay school grounds. However, at the educational and philosophic level little adaptation took place.

The school at Jervis Bay continued to function as it had done before the arrival of the Aboriginal children. By and large, this meant that the acceptance and success of the Aboriginal child within the school structure depended upon his assimilation of the European middle-class modes for which the school is agent.

Success was interpreted in terms of the extent to which the Aboriginal child conformed to the expectations, modes and values of the school.

In the initial stage of *integration*, emphasis was placed on *assimilating* the Aboriginal child into his new school environment. These attempts were fairly successful at the playground level where European and Aboriginal children mix well together. But a similar success did not penetrate the scholastic side of school life (most Aboriginal children are reported as performing below expectation), nor was it evident in the parent bodies at the school.

In this stage, little consideration was given to the fact that policies of assimilation make a great many demands upon the Aboriginal child but that they make little or no demand upon the existing school structure.

The present project is attempting to make three modifications in the school as it has hitherto existed.

Firstly, the project seeks to foster a sense of identity in the Aboriginal child by providing special group activities for him within the existing school structure. These activities take the form of a creative-arts-type program - clay, screen-printing, drama and music. As well, there are practical construction projects in which the children decide upon, construct and administer their own plans.

For example, the construction of an adventure playground was

undertaken with the help of students from the School of Teacher Education at the Canberra College of Advanced Education. Incorporated in the arts program are aspects of Aboriginal culture; Aboriginal motifs are used in clay and screen-print work and the stories of myths have been painted on an old shed in the playground.

The group activities and the construction projects give the Aboriginal child a focal point within the school environment with which he can identify or which he can reject. Membership of the groups affords each child the opportunity to assert his Aboriginality in a positive way.

The decision to join a group is the free choice of each child. Children drop in and out of particular groups, but so far each child has chosen to belong to one group or another on a fairly regular basis. By providing the group activities within the framework of the school, the project is trying to emphasise that the educational needs of the Aboriginal child are a school responsibility rather than the personal problem of the individual child.

At present, progress in having the school assume this responsibility is slow. The group system has advantages for the Aboriginal child.

By having the groups within the school, the child is confronted with options of identity, a choice which the school did not previously offer him. The experience of achievement and self-direction by the child in the group situation can increase his confidence in positions of leadership. Further, the construction projects permit the Aboriginal child to act in the role of host as opposed to that of receiver.

For example, the work on the playground was done for the benefit of the whole school. This technique provides a neat twist to the pattern of receiving or being received, which is the usual lot of the Aboriginal child. Still film is used as a means of recording the efforts of the children in their group enterprises, and the photographs are used as stimulus materials to encourage the children to reflect on their efforts and achievements.

At first, there was concern that the separation of the children on ethnic lines - even for short periods in the school week - would break down the *assimilation* process which had been so carefully nurtured during the preceding nine years, and this is still a concern.

It is too early to judge conclusively in this matter, but indications are that the separate groups are not a major threat to the good relations that exist between Aboriginal and European children in the playground situation. The advantages of the groups from the Aboriginal point of view have already been stated.

Secondly, the project is designed to foster the involvement of the Aboriginal adult community in the school life of their children. Classrooms, teachers and the paraphernalia of education can be off-putting to all but the most expert, literate or intrepid of parents.

It was hoped that the informal structure of the group activities would encourage the parents of the children to participate in the activities and this has been the case. Mothers supervise activities on a regular basis and many other adults call in and help.

The presence of Aboriginal parents within the school serves as notice to teachers and children alike of the interest that these parents have in their children's schooling. The parents are part of the whole school *scene*.

The view that sees parents as being reinforcing agents in the classroom situation is consistently rejected. Parents should not be used as aides to the teacher in his questionable pursuit of maintaining the smooth functioning of the classroom system. The role of parents in education is much wider than that.

In particular, the presence of Aboriginal parents in the school should provide the opportunity for interested teachers to discover exactly what the Aboriginal parent desires from the institution to which he has entrusted the education of his children. Previously, the school has not sought this information from the Aboriginal community and this lack of communication has been responsible for much of the school's failure.

Thirdly, the project is concerned with the development of a strand of Aboriginal studies which is to be incorporated into the school's social-studies curriculum (infants to sixth) in 1975. The Aboriginal-studies strand aims to acquaint the Aboriginal child with the rich cultural heritage and history to which he is natural heir. It seeks also to foster in each child at the school a respect for the achievements of the Aboriginal people and a sympathetic understanding of their life styles and culture.

It was only when I started to seek out resource materials for this strand that I began to have a glimmer of what it must be like to be an Aboriginal child in a school dominated by European culture, or to be an Aboriginal person in a European dominated society - and I do not speak for the tribal Aboriginal, I mean urban Aboriginals who are generations removed from the tribal state.

Books entitled "Australian Art" mean "(European) Australian Art". The "First Hundred Years" means the "First Hundred Years (*post-Cook*)".

Viewed as a whole, our school literature denies the worth or existence of an Aboriginal heritage. There is a dearth of material which is suitable for use at the primary-school level.

Some material which is available and is in use is insulting to the Aboriginal. One film strip on the Northern Territory which is designed for use in primary schools advances twenty-one frames before any mention is made of an Aboriginal, and when the face of an Aboriginal man is shown on frame 22, he is judged as a killer of a European explorer with the words of the sub-title which read, "killed by a warrior such as this, perhaps".

Such materials impose on the Aboriginal people a collective guilt for the death of Europeans, yet they make no mention of the achievement of the Aboriginal people as the first settlers of this land, or of the disruption of their life-style by the coming of the European colonists. These materials are unfair to the Aboriginal people and pupils, yet they are prepared out of government funds and are used in government schools.

Not all material is grossly insulting. Some of it is merely subtly patronising. One social-studies book describes the relationship between "Jacky Jacky" and "Mr. Kennedy". Jacky Jacky describes to his new-found explorer-friend the country as "very bad country" which is "full of fierce natives too". One wonders what moved the faithful Jacky Jacky to leave his fierce compatriots and befriend the European intruder.

The book offers no explanation of Jacky Jacky's motives, but he is praised as a "faithful friend and a great Australian". The lesson is spelled out clearly for the Aboriginal pupils: "*If you want to be a success, then be like us*". And for the European child

it reads, *"The Aboriginal person who is any good is the one who joins and serves the European society"*.

We are all convinced at the end of the lesson that the fierce natives who defend their own bad country are in no way to be trusted. The attitude is no different in our schools today than it was in the unexplored continent over a hundred years ago. It is little wonder that Aboriginal adults report that they hated history at school, and felt *awful* when blacks were mentioned because they never did any good.

The greatest condemnation of resource material for Aboriginal studies at the primary level is not that it is insulting or merely patronising, but that it is largely non-existent.

In the social-studies curriculum, history is not viewed as being continuous with Aboriginal history and pre-history. Hence the first explorers are Dutch on the western coast and British on the eastern coast. In the standard-type social studies text there is no reference to the coming to this continent at least 24,000 years ago of the Aboriginal Australians, or of the impact that the recent European settlement has had on the life-style of the ancient settlers.

It is of greatest importance that at the upper-primary level all children are asked to consider the present condition of the Aboriginal people and the situation of European settlement in an extended time dimension. Children would then be in a position to debate such issues as land rights, housing, education, employment, and racial attitudes and prejudices in a more informed manner.

One of the most subtle yet powerful factors which affect the educational experience of the Aboriginal child is the attitudes, stated or implied, of those persons who teach him. In this area, school authorities should act to ensure that only teachers who are sympathetic to Aboriginal children are permitted to teach in schools where there are a significant number of Aboriginal children.

The setting-up of the resource materials at the school and the introduction of the Aboriginal-studies strand is meant to demonstrate to children and teachers alike that both the Aboriginal children who attend the school and the Aboriginal culture itself are valued. By having this third element in the project, this belief is not merely stated but it is seen to be so.

The school structure is a kaleidoscope in which facets of varying intensity - teachers' skills and attitudes, children's responses, parents' participation - converge and separate with remarkable rapidity. What appears as an organized and efficient pattern of timetables and class order is no more than a grotesque distortion of all that is natural and human and true.

The present project is an attempt to develop from these ever-moving parts a pattern which provides greater justice and better educational opportunity for the Aboriginal child.

PROJECT



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EIDSVOLD Q'land.

We decided to institute our Project Program because :

1. a considerable number of our pupils both in the upper Primary and lower Secondary schools have had a record of failure for most of their school career, and
2. the results of both aptitude and attainment tests indicated that the existing school programs were unsuccessful in alleviating this pattern of failure.

In all, twelve children were involved from Grades 7 and 8 for fifteen - thirty-five minute periods per week. The group was made up of white children and children of Aboriginal descent and had equal representation of boys and girls. Pupils then returned to their normal class where they took part in the lower stream. The pupils involved would obviously terminate their studies in Grade 10, since they were already eighteen months to two years behind their peers in grade status.