



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Involving Indigenous Classroom Assistants in Primary Schools :
Wayne Dyer (Advisory Teacher) ; published by the Queensland
Education Department through the Van Leer Foundation Project,
Brisbane 1974

J.A. Bedford,
State School,
Richlands East,
Inala, Queensland.

Involving Indigenous Classroom Assistants in Primary Schools is a handbook for teachers working with Aborigines as classroom assistants in primary schools in indigenous communities. It was compiled in relation to the experiences gained from a pilot program at Cherbourg, Queensland, in 1972, when adults from the Cherbourg community were employed as classroom assistants at the Cherbourg State Primary School. The handbook has been written as a *guide* for teachers to assist them with the development of a program involving indigenous assistants. The following are the major aspects dealt with:-

1. Getting started
2. The Classroom Assistant's Role
3. The Teacher's Role
4. Community Liaison
5. Training
6. Working Together
7. The Experience of Others

1. GETTING STARTED

This chapter deals with the need for teachers to allow for a period of trial and adaptation when assistants are first brought into the classroom i.e. for themselves as well as their assistants. Recruitment and selection of assistants are discussed and practical suggestions are provided. Of particular value is the section dealing

with the assistant's attitude towards the job, that is, towards being a member of the teaching team. Some positive attitudes considered desirable in an applicant are listed for consideration.

2. THE CLASSROOM ASSISTANT'S ROLE

This chapter stresses the need for *teachers* to decide how assistants will be used in classrooms (in consultation with the Principal and in keeping with school policy). Teachers must therefore be aware that -

- a. the role of any assistant will vary because of individual differences in personality, talents, skills and abilities.
- b. the assistant's role is that of a *member of a team*, and as such the assistant's contribution to the team effort differs from, but is not inferior to, that of the teacher's.

Three classes of duties are suggested for assistants, and these are perceived as a hierarchy of tasks categorized according to level of difficulty :

- a. non-interacting duties (no contact with children)
- b. interacting duties (contact with children)
- c. school-community liaison duties.

Competence at one level is required before progressing to tasks at a higher level. Specific activities relevant to these three classes of duties are tabulated, suggesting four levels of competence which assistants may be able to reach. Teachers who are already developing a program involving classroom assistants will find this chapter useful as a means of evaluating their programs, and should find valuable suggestions as to how their programs may be extended to cater for maximum involvement of assistants.

3. THE TEACHER'S ROLE

When assistants become involved in the classroom, the teacher's

role must change. One of the changes in the teacher's role is that he/she will have more time available for professional duties. This chapter outlines aspects of the teacher's role to which he/she will need to devote more time than previously, for example, managerial and administrative functions. The role of the teacher will therefore need to include tasks such as :

- planning the program to utilize assistants
- allocation of resources, personnel and responsibilities, and of assistants to teachers
- motivation of assistants
- co-ordination of activities
- evaluation of the effects of the assistant in the classroom.

4. COMMUNITY LIAISON

There is a definite need for the forging of links between home and school, particularly in an environment such as an Aboriginal community where non-Aboriginal teachers are usually dominant in the school situation. It is suggested that the greatest benefit and the most effective school-community climate develop when both school personnel and parents -

- are consciously aware of each other
- understand the complimentary nature of each other's role
- actively participate in efforts to work effectively together.

Specific tasks are listed to suggest ways in which assistants may carry out their role as liaison officers between home and school, for example, "taking samples of pupil's work from different class levels to the homes to show parents what is being done in the school". The need to establish definite objectives for this particular role of assistants is stressed. Examples are included which should be valuable to teachers who are involved in this aspect of the program for the first time.

5. TRAINING

Five basic modes of training assistants are outlined, with the qualification that the method chosen depends on a variety of factors peculiar to individual communities and schools. Results of overseas programs and of a pilot study in Queensland are presented, and several conclusions drawn from these results have been listed as practical suggestions to assist teachers in the training of assistants for maximum involvement. A detailed guide for developing a training program is developed around three major aims :-

- a. planning
- b. action
- c. evaluation.

Specific objectives for each of these areas have been listed, and special attention has been given as to how the program can cater for the needs of all the personnel involved in the education process - children, teachers, assistants, principals, education departments, and parents. Teachers will appreciate the concise presentation of this chapter.

6. WORKING TOGETHER

A summary of some of the main points included in the literature on the study of human relations is presented. "Working together" for teachers and assistants means clear communication between the two. It is suggested that the ability to communicate effectively is a skill which needs to be acquired by both teachers and assistants. Some principles of communication are listed for consideration, involving both the speaker and the listener. The importance of clear communication is stressed between white teachers and indigenous assistants, when it is easy for meaning to be misinterpreted by either person.

7. THE EXPERIENCE OF OTHERS

The title of this chapter is at first misleading, as it suggests that reports from teachers already developing a training program will be presented. However, the chapter deals with excerpts from the

literature available on the use of assistants in schools. The studies cited offer implications as to the value of assistants in -

- a. providing for teachers to be relieved of non-instructional tasks
- b. acting as an intermediary between two sub-cultural groups
- c. working directly with children, thus increasing child-adult contact.

GENERAL REMARKS

As a handbook for teachers, this publication should provide a cognitive framework within which teachers can prepare themselves and their assistants to enable the best possible learning environment to be created for the children in their schools. There are three outstanding features which are sure to be appreciated by teachers :-

- a. the clear and concise presentation of the subject matter
- b. the wealth of practical examples listed to explain ways of dealing with the objectives outlined throughout the handbook
- c. the inclusion of illustrations which are photographs of teachers and assistants working together in schools where training programs have already been developed.

One feature which does detract from the usefulness of the handbook is the omission of a Table of Contents, which apart from making it difficult to find specific sections, prevents an overall view of the development of the topic from being obtained.

A second feature which involves the presentation of the handbook, is the organization of the major aspects, so that the basic aims for developing a program involving indigenous assistants in classrooms - the aims which led to the compilation of such a handbook - are presented at the conclusion of the book, rather than stated at the commencement, before details of a training program are

discussed. Teachers who are being introduced to working with indigenous assistants for the first time would perhaps appreciate knowing initially what others believe to be the value of such a program, a factor which should influence the way in which they reflect on the detailed aspects of developing a program to include indigenous assistants. However, it is obvious that this handbook will be appreciated by teachers as a practical guide on the involvement of indigenous assistants in the classroom. It should be of particular benefit to teachers working with assistants for the first time. Teachers already involved in a program should also find the handbook valuable as a source of suggestions for further extension of their program (particularly in relation to the role of the assistant as a community liaison officer), and as a basis on which to evaluate existing programs.

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