



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*.

In 2022 *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* transitioned to fully Open Access and this article is available for use under the license conditions below.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

BOOK REVIEW

Max Hart, *Kulila*. A.N.Z. Book Co., Sydney, 1974. Paperback, 134 pages, 20 photographs, 15 diagrams. \$5.95

L.J. Dwyer,
Inspector of Schools,
Education of Indigenous Children,
Queensland Education Department.

"*Kulila* in the Pitjantjatjara language often prefixes a speech and means 'listen' or 'take note' but can also have the meaning of 'think' or 'consider'. ... *Kulila* meant not only letting the words fall on their ears, but savouring their sound ... and unravelling the symbolism and meaning that lay hidden in the entertainment and enjoyment of the hearing." (P.1)

There is much in Max Hart's book to entertain and to enjoy. There is also much that can be savoured and unravelled.

Addressing himself to non-Aboriginal teachers of Aboriginals, he elaborates four major themes which he sees as axiomatic.

1. It is necessary for the teacher to have a clear understanding of the Aboriginal people's culture, (interpreted as the whole way of life of a people).
2. It is essential to create a vital personal relationship between the teacher and the child.
3. It is vitally important that Aboriginal parents should feel involved in the education of their children.
4. It is imperative that the education of the child from birth until manhood should be one of continuous and unbroken progress where the school takes up naturally from the home and the sections of primary, secondary and tertiary education should have no gaps, nor abrupt changes of emphasis.

His first theme, the need for a clear understanding of the Aboriginal people's culture, is developed in chapters dealing with traditional Aboriginal education, culture contact and culture change, and the value of Aboriginal identity.

Describing traditional education as circular, as a fully integrated unity of experience, he points out that it was more than a preparation for life, it was life itself. Non-Aboriginal teachers might do well to consider the significance of 'relevance' in this context. They might give some thought to traditional teaching methods - of developing a strong pupil-teacher relationship; of using the out-of-doors environment whenever possible; of learning through practical experience; of suiting the curriculum to the environment; of using travel as a means of education; of encouraging the powers of observation; of using carefully varied repetition and incremental methods of teaching and learning; and of presenting a challenge tempered to the capabilities of the learner.

Claiming that a dominant culture always tends to destroy a minority culture, not to change it, Hart argues that the attitude to Aboriginals, that they are primitive and incapable of taking responsibility, is part of a national trait that boosts our achievements but fails to see the value in others of a different culture. Thus, he sees one of the most important tasks of the school as encouraging Aboriginal initiative, resourcefulness, and leadership. This cannot happen if the school is a place where Aboriginal children are made to feel inept and inferior, where their culture and their skin colour are sometimes subtly and sometimes openly derided. Because every teacher affects race relations by the way he teaches Aboriginal children and the way he teaches about them, there is every reason why all teachers should be well informed about the culture of the past and the changes taking place in Aboriginal attitudes at present.

This leads Hart to his second theme; the importance of a vital personal relationship between teacher and child. In a somewhat scrappy chapter describing the teacher's many roles, Hart stresses the need for the teacher to develop an understanding of the children and of their environment, and above all, to become known as a person in order to be accepted by the children and the community. Discussing Aboriginal children in the urban school, Hart again stresses the importance of this teacher-pupil rapport, urging teachers to discover the background of the child; to gain acceptance through interest, concern, and good race relations; to know about Aboriginal culture and to teach about it in a way that gives the Aboriginal child dignity and identity; to assist the child to find his place in the school; to get to know Aboriginal children in situations away from the school; to ensure that

the Aboriginal child has a chance to display his special capabilities and to make a worthwhile contribution; to be aware of the effect of teacher expectations on pupil performance; to diagnose and assist with areas of need; to help without patronising; and to see equality of educational opportunity in terms of individual need.

The third theme, the need for Aboriginal involvement in the education process, permeates the entire book but is given particular emphasis in chapters dealing with Aboriginal identity, the Aboriginal teacher's role, the bilingual school, Aboriginal family education centres, and community schools. Hart argues that the Aboriginal parents and community have a right to decide the kind of education their children should have and to have some respected place in the management of the schools their children attend. He sees signs that more decisions in Aboriginal education will be made by Aboriginals themselves. Indeed he foresees that schools may be run entirely by Aboriginals and that they may ask for autonomy as well as finance to run their own schools. It is interesting to note, as an aside, that the Aboriginal Consultative Group to the Schools Commission, in its recent report, argues for just these things, and while opting to stay within the provisions of the established government and non-government systems, is nevertheless prepared to support the few independent schools which have already been established.

Describing the Aboriginal Family Education Centre at Ernabella as an example of Aboriginal initiative, Hart points out that this was not a place where a white teacher instructed Aboriginals. In this centre Aboriginal parents educated their children through games, stories, and activities, and learned about the methods and theories of education in the process, as well as gaining a greater awareness of the knowledge developed by their children. But they taught the children in their way, in a happy, pleasant, enjoyable way, retaining their own values and building up their own ideas on the pre-school.

Similarly, at Hermannsburg, the Aboriginal people stressed the need for the community to discuss ideas and policy and to have a say in the general running of the school. It was not so much a drawing of the community into the school as allowing the school to become part of the community. The difference is of major importance.

That Aboriginal adults are capable of teaching their own children has become abundantly clear in schools where bilingual programs are being developed. Aboriginal teachers in these schools play a multi-faceted role, a role that complements that of the non-Aboriginal teacher, with some areas of responsibility overlapping and some quite distinct. Their strengths include a keen awareness of the progress of children (both in traditional and school lessons) with an emphasis on how the child is responding rather than on how the teacher is performing. This awareness is built on a knowledge of the background and family situation of each pupil. While being the natural teachers of the Aboriginal culture, they are also living models who present alternative cultures to the child. As well as reinforcing the traditional code of moral behaviours through stories and legends, they introduce the younger children to the European concept of school and thus act as a bridge between home and school, providing emotional security for the children. As a bridge between the parents and the school, they interpret the community's ideas, especially its ideas on education, to the non-Aboriginal teachers.

While the Aboriginal teacher or aide in an integrated school performs a different role, he still has a very important function as the representative of the Aboriginal community in the school, a person whom the children know and trust. Through him they can feel emotionally secure in the classroom. Here also, his major role is to foster two-way communication between the home and the school so that each comes to value the other more.

One of the greatest dangers in our present system of education is that Aboriginal parents feel redundant. They are given the impression that their way of life, their culture, and their values are superseded and that the giant machine of schooling will take care of all the education the children need. The child's pre-school knowledge is overlooked or ignored and not used. Parents are soon convinced their contribution is unwanted and so they hand over *all* responsibility. When similar policies are pursued in areas such as housing and employment it is easy to find the source of the syndrome of powerlessness and the seeds of failure to accept responsibility when it is offered. Hence the importance of Hart's fourth main theme, the need for an 'enculturative continuum' for the child growing up in the community and proceeding to school, instead of a wide gap between the two. This theme, too, permeates the whole book. In fact, the purpose of the book is to help bridge this gap. Unless an answer is found to meet the rapid changes of

the present, this destruction will continue and increase, as the feelings of frustration, powerlessness and purposelessness increase in the Aboriginal communities.

"It is not sufficient to pour more money and more effort into the wrong kind of schools, staffed by teachers unacceptable to the Aboriginal parents, using programs and books unsuitable to the children. The effort to change Aboriginal education needs planning, research, and the assistance of Aboriginal parents to give the children a gateway to the future." (P. 126)

People working in the field of Aboriginal education will find that they support most of the ideas presented in this book. However, those with some experience may feel that certain sections are given fairly shallow treatment and that Hart has failed to come to grips with a number of issues. The book has a heavy emphasis on schooling in tribal or semi-tribal areas and the chapters on the Aboriginal child in the urban school and in the secondary school have little to offer, despite the fact that these are areas of major and increasing concern.

In spite of these criticisms *Kulila* is a very good 'first book' for those who are teaching (or who are about to teach) Aboriginal children for the first time. It is likely to make teachers more aware of their own attitudes and expectations and to alert them to the powerful effect that such factors may have on pupil performance. It is attractively presented with a number of fine photographs and some particularly effective diagrams. Its lack of jargon will appeal to the practicing classroom teacher. For these reasons it is worthy of a place in the teachers' reference library in all schools with a significant number of Aboriginal pupils.

It is hoped that *Kulila* will achieve its major objective —

"... to help those who teach Aboriginal children to take time to listen to them, to think deeply about their education and to consider ways in which our lack of success in Aboriginal education can be changed into a worthwhile, interesting, and successful education. ... May it encourage teachers not only to find ways of getting the attention of children, but to actually listen to what children want to say. Two-way communication has been a neglected essential in Aboriginal education." (P.2)