



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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ABORIGINAL STUDIES AT ALICE SPRINGS HIGH



H. Payne,
Principal,
Alice Springs High School
Alice Springs, N.T.

The following article discusses how the Aboriginal Studies program at Alice Springs High School could be expanded and enriched by -

- employment of a Curriculum Development Officer;
- employment of Aboriginal teachers;
- provision of teaching resources;
- changes in the school environment;
- back-up facilities such as transport;
- in-service training of teachers.

AIMS AND RATIONALE

Immediate Objectives:

- a) To make available the following four* one semester electives:
 - i) Grade 8 - Aboriginal Studies - Traditional Society
 - ii) Grade 9 - Pitjantjatjara Language - Introduction
 - iii) Grade 10 - Comparative Studies, e.g. Maoris and hill tribes of the Philippines
 - iv) Grade 11 - Contemporary Australia and Cross Cultural - the Urban and Fringe Dwelling Aboriginals.
 - b) To incorporate, where relevant, Aboriginal elements into all parts of the curriculum.
 - c) To recognize the importance of Aboriginal culture and the sizeable proportion of Aboriginal students, in the school's decor and surroundings.
 - d) To provide resources and support facilities for all staff involved in teaching Aboriginal studies.
 - e) to produce courses which can be taught to mixed groups of Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals.
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* The order may be changed.

LONG TERM OBJECTIVES

- a) To produce a viable curriculum for Aboriginal Studies suitable, with adaptations, for use in high schools throughout Australia.
- b) To promote appreciation and understanding of Aboriginal culture amongst non-Aboriginals.
- c) To encourage an appreciation amongst Aboriginals of the worth of their heritage.
- d) To lessen racial tensions in the area.
- e) To provide a course right through secondary school, eventually including Grade 12, which will lead students on to tertiary level courses in Aboriginal Studies, which are already available.

RATIONALE

The following, from the Report to the Schools Commission by the Aboriginal Consultative Group, June, 1975 are relevant:

Page 5 *"... simply for survival the individual must be firmly rooted in his past, and his past (perhaps more than his present) is his culture.*

*... Aboriginal ... culture should be retained and...
Aboriginal identity should be developed through education."*

Page 26 para. 5.5

"Aboriginal Studies for Australian schools. We have expressed concern at the general lack of understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal and Island culture in the wider Australian society, and the incompatibility of present education systems and curricula with many aspects of Aboriginal culture

Aboriginal Studies could be promoted in a variety of ways:

- a) The provision of useful and accurate resource materials such as textbooks, instruction manuals, films, video tapes, etc.*
- b) The fostering of Aboriginality as an active part of the cultural activities of schools, for example: the dramatisation of Aboriginal legends and dances in school plays and speech nights; the encouragement of Aboriginal art such as bark painting in school art displays; the development and use of Aboriginal dances for football teams, as the Haka is used by New Zealand teams.*

"This can be achieved by proving [sic] funds to enable schools to obtain special resource materials.

There is an urgent need to provide suitable textbooks on Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders which present balanced and accurate historical accounts. All textbooks should display non-racist attitudes.

Teaching of the basic economic, social and political structures of traditional Aboriginal and Island cultures should be encouraged, especially those aspects such as the dreamtime concept, skin groupings, and kin-relationships.

RECOMMENDATION 24

"We recommend to the Schools Commission and appropriate authorities that they provide funds for supporting teaching programs within schools designed to interest and inform both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children about the history and culture of Aborigines.

RECOMMENDATION 25

"We recommend to the Schools Commission that it foster where practical the introduction of Aboriginal languages into secondary school studies, in the short term as a non-examinable elective then as part of secondary educational qualifications.

Further support should be given to the development of special curriculum initiatives designed to meet the particular needs of schools with a high percentage of Aboriginal children.

RECOMMENDATION 27

"We recommend to the Schools Commission and State education authorities that they establish units with the responsibility of developing curriculum material for schools with high percentages of Aboriginal children.

RECOMMENDATION 28

"We recommend to the Schools Commission and State education authorities that initiatives at the localised or operative level be encouraged and co-ordinated.

"Recommendation 34

We recommend to the Schools Commission that it finances State and Northern Territory education authorities to establish panels of Aboriginal and Islander speakers in each community to visit educational institutions with films, slides, tapes, etc., and speak on the Aboriginal situation with a view to creating better understanding of Aboriginal values."

It is worth noting that the Advisory Committee on the bilingual program in the Northern Territory strongly recommended the introduction of an Aboriginal language into Northern Territory High Schools.

At the beginning of 1974, the following points were fairly obvious at Alice Springs High School.

- .. About one seventh of the school student population was Aboriginal, ranging from the thirty-odd full-blood, tribally-oriented, vernacular-speaking contingent from Yirara College to the one hundred plus from the urban area, predominantly part-coloured but with links to their Aboriginality ranging from the most tenuous to the very close. (It should also be noted that there is a significant number of full and part Aboriginal children in the area who should be attending the high school but do not).
- .. There was virtually no recognition in the school of this significant Aboriginal component - in courses, in resources, in staff, or in the school environment.
- .. No staff, ancillary or professional, were Aboriginal. Staff were very ignorant of Aboriginals and their culture.
- .. There was some evidence that as Aboriginals became a "delicate" and "political" subject, teachers tended to shy away from dealing with them or their culture.
- .. Although the full-blood Aboriginal was receiving a lot of attention educationally and otherwise, as the "glamour" subject, the problems of the part-Aboriginal in the urban setting were largely being ignored.
- .. There was a racial problem in the area which, though over-publicized, required a good deal of cross-cultural education before a solution might be possible. There were a few overtones of this tension in the school.

- .. School was largely irrelevant to most of the Aboriginal students, and their parents, while believing the children should go to school, neither understood the school nor had much appreciation of how they needed to assist their children. Many Aboriginal children dropped out at an early age.

We decided to attack the problem in a number of ways and have made some headway.

1. In first semester, 1975, Aboriginal Studies electives were introduced to Grades 8, 9 and 10. Briefly, Grade 8 concentrated on a study of traditional Aboriginal life, Grade 9 on the Pitjantjatjara language and Grade 10 on the contemporary Aboriginal situation, particularly the urban and fringe dwelling Aboriginals.

These courses proved viable and drew heavily on local resources of personnel and illustration. They are one semester courses and class groups of 20 to 30 in each semester have included the full spectrum of the school population but with proportionally more Aboriginals.

2. Staff were made more familiar with Aboriginals in three ways:
 - a) gathering some limited resources in the library;
 - b) inviting speakers from the Institute of Aboriginal Development and Yirara College;
 - c) arranging to send teachers to Institute courses in Aboriginal Language and Social Development. Only six have attended because of bureaucratic obstacles.
3. Some resources were assembled in the library and in the Language Laboratory, but financial limitations restricted the quantity. Some books, tapes, records, periodicals and artifacts have now been collected.
4. Efforts were made to obtain Aboriginal staff. In mid-1975 an Aboriginal teacher assistant was employed, but her employment is tenuous as she is held against a teacher assistant position at Hooker Creek. At the end of 1976 the school had to take the initiative in sending her to the Pitjantjatjara course and had to find the \$60.00 fee. The opportunity to employ an Aboriginal with some teacher training was missed because of lack of funds. The Institute for Aboriginal Development provided, for one semester, a tribal Pitjantjatjara speaker.

Numerous speakers were invited for the Grade 10 courses on a voluntary basis.

5. Efforts were made to mount various excursions but were often frustrated by lack of a suitable vehicle, or rain, for example Areyonga Music Festival.
6. Camping trips were arranged involving use of Yirara students to demonstrate Aboriginal techniques. Here, again, the school was involved in heavy financial outlay to provide a minimum of equipment.
7. In 1974 the school participated in the Inter-collegiate Sports among the three Aboriginal Colleges, held at Alice Springs. In 1975, subsidised by the Aboriginal Sports Foundation, we sent a team to Dhupuma College on the Gove Peninsula and they engaged in social, sporting and learning activities with the College and Yirrkala and Nhulunbuy schools.
8. Social, sporting and educational contacts with Yirara have been expanded and a liaison teacher from Yirara works effectively in the high school.
9. Some beginnings were made in "vetting" resource materials in this often delicate area where so much is sacred or taboo. This resulted from the interest of a well qualified teacher on the staff.
10. For a while early in 1975, there was some evidence of Aboriginal parents taking a greater interest in the school, for example, first Parents and Friends meeting, Prefect Induction Ceremony with the Minister present.

At this stage it is obvious to us that we are only tinkering with the problem. We see the following needs:

- a) Greatly expanded in-service training of as many staff as possible in their knowledge of Aborigines and their ability to deal with their educational problems. The Institute for Aboriginal Development provides the opportunity.
- b) The need for expert curricula production. Having initiated the courses, we are only too aware of how much needs to be done to develop courses properly. We need a full-time specialist working in the school. The Department has seconded a Curriculum Adviser in Aboriginal Studies from our staff for

1976, but he is unlikely to be of much direct use to us, as his charter is somewhat vague and he has a commitment to working for the Arts Council also.

- c. Collection of a resource pile of materials - writing, films and artifacts - properly detailed as to suitability and acceptability. This involves purchase of materials and the use of the curriculum specialist to "vet" them so that any inadvertent offence against Aboriginal beliefs is avoided. This resource "pile" would aim at assisting teachers to incorporate Aboriginal elements in all courses of study at the school and not just be for Aboriginal Studies.
- d. Development of a fourth course to give us a course for each of the principal years of secondary schooling. We see the Year 10 course concentrating on a comparative study, for example, the Maoris, the American Indian or Negro and the hill tribes of the Philippines, while Year 11 becomes the year for study of Aboriginals in contemporary Australia. Once again the curriculum specialist is required.
- e. Recruitment of more staff with the ability to teach Aboriginal Studies. This goes beyond the effort to be made under point a) above. At present our teaching strength in the area lacks depth, and departure of some teachers has meant a serious setback to the program. The Commonwealth Teaching Service must be spurred into recruiting teachers who will meet the needs of particular schools.
- f. Employment of more Aboriginals in the school. Ideally, one-seventh of the staff should be Aboriginal. At present this is impractical because :
 - .. Fully qualified Aboriginal Teachers are not available;
 - .. As they do not possess the necessary skills, Aboriginals do not apply for (nor would they win) ancillary positions;
 - .. Most Aboriginals who might be recruited for teaching or ancillary positions would require extensive additional training. Hence there must be establishment positions to allow this.

Now that we have one part-Aboriginal teaching assistant, the next logical step is to seek a tribal Aboriginal to teach, act as a resource person and as an identification figure.

For all students of the school it is important that they come to see Aboriginals functioning successfully as full members of the school staff.

Aboriginal staff can also be used to improve school/home contact. They should be used to improve contact and facilitate it, not just when a student is in trouble or has a problem.

- g. One Aboriginal person at least, should be appointed to the School Council. In view of the nature of the Council's business, this will probably have to be an Aboriginal with some sophistication in European ways. However, there should be scope on many of the proposed sub-committees to co-opt Aboriginal members.
- h. There needs to be much more recognition of Aboriginal culture around the school. This involves things such as decorations, paintings, ornamental artifacts, landscaping of selected areas, use of Aboriginal names, etcetera. Some funds are obviously needed.
- i. Much greater contact is needed with Aboriginal groups through frequent excursions to fringe camps, settlements, missions and stations, and through bringing Aboriginal groups to the school. Additionally, the school camping program needs expansion to ensure every student is given the experience of camping in a cross-cultural situation and of learning bushcraft, etc., from fellow students of Aboriginal heritage or from recruited Aboriginal instructors. Already we have done survey work and carried out preliminary discussions for establishing a permanent Aboriginal studies camp site at Oonaminna Rock Hole, about fifty kilometers from Alice Springs. The area there is rich in Aboriginal history and artifacts. It could develop into a very attractive camping site, rich in teaching resources especially as it also has extensive historical associations with early white exploration and settlement. Also, frequent excursions should be made by many groups to resource places available locally, for example, Aboriginal Art Galleries and Arts and Crafts Centres, Institute for Aboriginal Development. Attendance at Aboriginal festivals is essential, for example, Yuendumu Sports, Areyonga Music Festival, Warrabri Weekend.
- j. Greater involvement of Aboriginal leaders on the local scene in development of our approach is imperative. We have already

had a most useful one day seminar along these lines, and it is obvious more would be profitable. The thrust should be towards the more articulate Aborigines. Similarly we should expand our contacts with the Non-Aboriginal experts and leaders in the Aboriginal area.

- k. Courses of greater relevance to our Aboriginal students will need to be introduced, or existing ones expanded. Here we are referring to established electives such as Rural Science, Child Care, Plastics, Film Making, Photography, a whole range of art and craft options, Motor Maintenance, Driver Training, Recreative Studies, Consumer Education, Typing, Trade Mathematics, Workshop English, Technician Science, Science by Choice, Local Studies, Work Study etc. In many of these we have had to use make-do facilities with very limited support from government sources. Considerable building extensions were cut from this year's budget. Our general school fee of \$40.00 (\$45.00 in 1976) has been of great help, particularly as ABSEG ensures payment of Aboriginal students. We do need additional funds for further expansion, for example, the very popular Rural Science needs outdoor classroom facilities and more equipment. We have had a proposal for purchase of a farm rejected by our Department. We would hope to expand it into the area of Farm Mechanics, Pasture Management, Ecological Control, Pre-history etcetera. Similarly we have spent some \$8,000.00 on the basis of a printing plant but need further funds to provide the equipment necessary for full scale teaching in areas such as graphics and printing.

RESULTS OF THE PROJECT

1. It is hoped that Alice Springs High will become a truly multi-racial school and not the instrument it often is at present for alienation and indoctrination.
2. It is hoped we will see improved racial harmony through better understanding.
3. Immediate practical importance would be improved education and social attainments by Aboriginal students.
4. Recognition of the worth of Aboriginal culture as an object of study should flow from the changes envisaged.
5. We anticipate eventual amelioration of racial tensions.

It is probable that the school could develop as a model for other communities with a similar racial mix. Certainly the Australia-wide interest in our initial courses in Aboriginal Studies indicates educators are looking for models.

We would hope to complement moves being made elsewhere to improve the educational attainments of Aboriginals as well as fostering respect amongst the general population for Aboriginal culture. Programs developed at our school will be available to any others interested. It is also to be expected that the project will attract the attention of many educationists who will want to visit us for the first hand experience of our approach.

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COVER PHOTOGRAPHS

Once again we appeal to readers to submit photographs for possible reproduction on the cover of the Journal.

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