



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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been collated and presented in leaflet and poster form together with photos printed by the students themselves.

Two major excursions have been undertaken using Secondary Grants' finances and to a lesser extent Disadvantaged Schools' money. The first was to Sydney in October last year to visit Aboriginal organisations in order to assess what urban people are striving for. The second was to Central Australia this year in July. It was a camping trip which lasted for two weeks. It enabled us to look at what Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory are working for in this year when Land Rights should become a reality. The highlight of the trip was a meeting with Wenton Rapunja, the leader of the Central Australian Lands' Council. It took place in the dry river-bed of the Todd. For the forty children who went it was the educational experience of a lifetime.

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PALM ISLAND STATE SCHOOL COMMUNITY BASED WORK EXPERIENCE PROGRAM

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HISTORY AND ORGANIZATION

I arrived on Palm Island on the 8th September, 1975, and faced 24 Aboriginal children who could barely write their names, didn't seem to understand basic computation and were too self-conscious to draw. What on earth was I to do?

The children were most willing to colour in, do simple addition, copy from the blackboard, look at pictures in books or listen to stories, but when I tried to extend this into more complicated work I found a brick wall - they wouldn't respond. So I gave them what they wanted. We did simple additions for whole sessions, copying writing for whole sessions, and some simple phonic card games.

The kids and I were bored, but boredom was preferable to a battle. Then I tried educational games. All day we played with different kits. The children reluctantly went along. The educational

worth was minimal. The old saying 'You can lead a horse to water...' was constantly in my mind. Then I tried various projects. The girls worked on a food unit and this had a little success. The boys went netting fish and we made a book. This was very successful and is still read with interest today. Four boys, the manual training teacher and I went camping one weekend, shot a goat and cooked it. On returning we made a book. This also was successful.

During all these experiments my ideas about the children were gradually changing. Instead of 24 black children, I saw 24 vibrant children who, through the various hopeless grades had failed, and now had extremely negative feelings towards school and worse towards themselves.

Attendance improved, but the change was hardly significant. I was searching for something that would give the rest of the children's school life (only one and a half years before some would be fifteen) some enjoyment. I had also to keep in mind that some children would be doing their Grade 8 year twice. I knew I had to spend more time out of the classroom; 24 children who don't want to do anything can be a handful in one room. I also had to consider that none of the children would be going to the mainland to attend school, owing to the very poor academic level, which would make it impossible for them to adjust socially. In fact, going to the mainland might be a traumatic experience and add to their poor self-esteem. The alternative to going to the mainland is to leave school and hang around Palm Island doing nothing - delinquent material. As well as giving the children an enjoyable year and a half remaining, I had to contribute some relief to the enormous problem of school leavers.

After much talking with various people - Principal, J. Price, advisors C. Ling and S. Renew, and my classroom assistant Katie Castors, the idea of the children working in the community started. I asked the children if they would like to work in the community and they seemed very keen. So the two problems could be met. One, the children would enjoy themselves, and two, the different jobs would teach them directly and indirectly various skills and attitudes necessary for when they leave school. The jobs would also give them an idea of the jobs available and what was involved with each, and also perhaps act as a guide when they decided on a job at the end of school.

I approached the Island Manager, Nigel Tillet. He was enthusiastic but added two provisos; one, the overseers had to be agreeable, and two, the children would not hold up the island work program. Both of these were reasonable requests. Letters were sent away to the Department of Education and the Department of Aboriginal and

Islanders Advancement, seeking permission. The overseers were approached and they too were enthusiastic, with few reservations. Everybody is aware of the problem, not just with my class, but with all the children who return from the mainland and find nothing to do.

Katie and I approached all the parents and told them what we planned and asked for their approval. They were pleased with the proposals.

Half the class, the girls, were to start first to ease the confusion. The various jobs were listed and the girls chose those which they preferred. Two children only worked at each job. The jobs available were - Kindergarten, Hospital, Baby Welfare, Guest House. The success and failure of these jobs can be seen in the girls diary.

A fortnight later the boys were given their choice of jobs - Sewerage, Garage, Store, Powerhouse, Baker, Carpenter. The success and failure of these jobs can be seen in the boys' diary.

As the term progressed, various jobs were disregarded because the children refused to go for various reasons - too hot, too cold, too hard, nothing to do, being 'growled at'. Once one group refused a job the others caught on and this job then became untouchable. (These 'untouchable' jobs include the hospital, bakery, powerhouse, guest house). New jobs were found: Waterfront, Fencing, Classroom Assistant, Feeding Centre, Health Team, Old Peoples' Home. Some of these were successful, others didn't even get started.

HOW THE PROGRAM RUNS NOW

Two days a week, Tuesday and Wednesday, the whole class goes into the community to work. Each of these mornings the children come to school and read or do a little maths or just talk with Katie and me and then at 9 o'clock we all walk around depositing children at their jobs. I have given them the choice of going to the job first thing, rather than coming to school, but they prefer to come to school first. For the rest of the day Katie and I walk around spending time at the jobs, talking to the 'employers' and parents we meet and taking photos of the children working. On Wednesday, time is spent preparing for Thursday when everybody is back at school.

FUTURE CHANGES

A month ago we tried working half the class Tuesday, Wednesday; the other half Wednesday, Thursday, thus lightening the load on

Thursday and giving time for more personal instruction. This didn't work. The confusion involved didn't pay for the small benefits.

If the children want to change their jobs they can. I insist on their giving a reason for wishing to change. If the situation is not 'fixable' they can try a new job. By 'fixable', I mean that in some cases the cause of complaint can be dealt with - somebody growling at them, nothing to do etc. Some of the children are contrary and it takes a lot of patience to get them to work. Some days, for inexplicable reasons, nobody will go to work, while on the other days all want to go and are impatient. I have to be very patient and understanding.

In the next year I can see the program extending to three days a week in preparation for leaving school. As the year progresses, school work becomes more irrelevant, while work becomes more important. The program is extremely flexible - as the problems arise the program changes to accommodate them:

Mon.	Tues. Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.
English, Maths	Work Days	Food making Activities	English, Maths Films 10.30
Craft		English, Maths	Craft 1.00
Art, R.I., Art		Library, Art	Sport

Craft: The boys do Manual Training and the girls Homecraft.

English: Various activities have been tried, all with limited success. The ideas that do work, after a month lose all interest for the children. On Monday and Friday I have the more capable ones working through 'Lively Reading' Book 3 and Book 4, while the others are trying, through varied activities, to learn some of the Dolch word list. These activities include: making flashcards and playing games; cutting from newspaper and making sentences; circling words in newspaper; copying. The activities are repeated often. The top half of the class is involved in this.

On Thursday, after morning tea, the whole class is involved in writing stories using photos taken while they work. The children write the story on a piece of paper; this is corrected and written

again by Katie or me, and then the children either put it into their special book or into the photograph albums. Flash cards are made individually and put into the back of the book. Lists of words are displayed for reference. Also on Thursday we have library. The children choose a story for me or Katie to read for half the time; for the other half they 'read' (look at photos and drawings) themselves. Most of the individual reading is done with the photo albums which are very popular. At any time during the day children are reading, over and over, their own stories of themselves. Any unknown words are asked unhesitatingly. Discussion, a most important part of the English program, is heavily emphasised.

Maths: On Monday and Friday we do many stencils from the maths books which the children never seem to get tired of. The areas of maths covered include addition, subtraction, fractions, and I am trying with limited success to push into the tens in addition. The children's stencils are kept in their own folders. As well as the stencils, we do money sums concerning the food buying and selling. This very important subject is being more competently handled each time.

Food Making Activities: This enjoyable activity has much educational value. Maths are used in buying of materials and selling to other classes. English is used in making shopping lists, materials used, for example, knives, breadboard, and in making signs for advertising. Discussion comes freely and is very important, for these children would not often hear Standard English out of the classroom. Health is involved while we make the food.

Art: This is important not only for its inherent value but as a means of gauging the children's confidence. They are all encouraged to draw their work situation and this, if desired, is displayed. Other art activities include construction with straws and boxes (limited success) and various painting techniques. Mosaics have been tried using natural objects.

Films: The children are very visually orientated and I see films as a major contributor to their education. No matter what the film, something can be discussed, enjoyed, hence expanding and enriching the lives of the children who live in an isolated area.

Morning Session: This is used for a number of activities and is important. There is no program for this. Depending on the number of children, we discuss T.V., films, work, Aborigines, in fact everything. Sometimes we read, or I read, or we do maths - it depends on the mood of the morning, but as I said, it is valuable, it gives me

a chance to say "I care", and then a chance to respond in any way they feel fit.

SCHOOL FOLLOW UP

This entire program is experimental, hence very flexible. Each week I find myself considering new ways of improving the work and school program. Many ideas have been used and discarded in relation to school and I am still not sure *what* I should be doing and *how* I should be going about it. My ideas range from a complete break from any formal school learning to a rigid disciplined approach to use the remaining two days of the week to try to teach the children to read.

I am finding that the program lies in the middle of these two approaches. I offer the children the opportunity to read, to improve their maths ability, to be involved. If they choose to work then they work hard until they decide to stop. Katie and I are always there to give a little pressure to make everyone work harder, but we do not force them. This is important - after seven, eight, nine years of school with little accomplishment, they effectively block out any school work if they are forced. As well as this, I do not want to place in jeopardy the relationship that I have built up with these children by playing the tyrant. It is important that they trust, like and confide in me, not only for the job situations but also for their personal development. Details of English and maths covered have already been dealt with. The school program is constantly changing - this could be the most important aspect of it.

LEARNING OUTCOMES FROM EACH JOB

As would be expected, there are certain outcomes common to all jobs. Some of these outcomes are :

SOCIAL

1. A chance to see Aborigines of approximately their own age working, thus giving good job models.
2. By working with Aborigines at manual occupations which the children can competently handle, their self-esteem should grow far more than it would if they were at school still struggling with basics that the majority of Grade 3 have mastered.
3. Through job experience, the children can gain an insight into the relevance of education and be more interested themselves, and also change their attitude

towards school when they have children of their own.

4. Most of the jobs have white overseers who give directions personally. The children have an opportunity to hear Standard English in a meaningful situation.
5. The children have relationships with white adults, hopefully to improve and make realistic their personal view of this tricky situation.
6. The children observe black-white interaction at a meaningful level.

ACADEMIC

1. An awareness of what certain jobs entail and the necessary qualifications, skills etc. for attainment.
2. A new, relevant vocabulary.
3. Real money situations.
4. A chance to observe the organization and structure of
 - a) their particular job
 - b) the whole island.

Some outcomes are specific to that job.

FUTURE OF PROGRAM

If I had been asked at the beginning of the program how it might develop, I would have had no idea whatsoever. Now, one and a half terms later, I am surprised that it has survived and is still popular with the children. In fact, there seems to be less trouble now and more enthusiasm and interest on the part of the children. I am not saying I have no problems, or that as the year continues problems will decrease. I am completely open to the future of this program, whether it succeeds or folds, both being possible at this point. At the moment it looks as if the program will expand to include two children from the Convent School. Next year I can see children from other classes being involved. One problem arises here, in that the number of jobs available is limited. Another problem involves the frequent changing of jobs. Each overseer has been very kind, generous and patient with the children. Understandably they have become a

little less so because of the many changes. This is unavoidable on both counts. My job is to try and encourage the children to remain for a significant period in each occupation (4 weeks at a minimum) and also to encourage the bosses and give them an understanding. This is important. Katie and I have to be constantly at hand in case of fights, accusations of theft, loss of confidence and many more examples that need a teacher at hand. These cases are gradually declining as the children's self-confidence increases, thankfully.

EVALUATION

Before I list the evaluation techniques, I would like to mention that for the first time in my short teaching career I have noted the value of a certain amount (or perhaps type) of evaluation. I was having a particularly discouraging day at school when I came across a diary with anecdotal records of the children, which I had made soon after I arrived. The comments were mostly negative, and for each child I said something about poor self-concept, low self-esteem, needs lots of encouragement, too shy, etc. Now when I look at my children it is as if they were different persons - they have changed radically in their approach to school work, to me, to their jobs, and consequently their view of themselves has also changed. My basic aim, to improve low self-esteem, has been, in part, accomplished. In some cases this change has been dramatic - whether long or short term change I cannot foretell. It is enough that, while at school, they have a little more confidence and pride.

EVALUATION TECHNIQUES OF WORK EMPLOYED ARE :

1. Most importantly, observation while at work, noted in the boys' and girls' diary.
2. Interviews with employers, noted in the diaries as well.
3. Interviews with individual pupils, with me drawing out a type of self-evaluation.
4. Discussions with whole class of the hows and whys. In this way the children come to help in the planning of the program.
5. Roll book with attendance graphs.

EVALUATION TECHNIQUES AT SCHOOL ARE :

1. Work folders holding progressive maths sheets and English examples.
2. Knowledge of labels in photographic albums.

3. More self-reliance in handling money situations, for example, selling food on Thursday.

The degree of interest and enthusiasm to go to work in the community and to work in school is an excellent guide for me in the planning and changing of the program. The diary also showed me how my first impressions of the children as slow and incompetent had changed. I now see them as vibrant, exciting, with much ability, yet handicapped by an inadequate education system. The program has now been going for a term and a half. Is it working? Results speak for themselves when I look at the attendances and compare Term 1 with Term 2 for this year. Have the aims been met? Yes, to some degree. Could it be improved? As I have said, the program is continually changing for improvement.

WHAT I FEEL ABOUT THE PROGRAM.

At this time I am pleased, even surprised, at the success of the work program. The children are still keen (with few exceptions) and when no jobs are available for a time, those affected are impatient to return. New jobs have been added in the last fortnight and these look as if they might be successful.

As I am sitting at school writing this, a tractor drives past with five adults and two children, mine, on the back. They see me, wave and yell, wide smiles. It occurs to me that this isn't what school is about - riding on tractors, and I remember my first term of fights, tears, angry words and failure, and know that this is preferable for them and for me.

The program has allowed me to know individual children in the 'real' world and to bring this relevance to the classroom and to school work. My class has always been known as the 'dumb' class. Now for the first time other classes are interested in ours and a little envious of our program. This must contribute to the children's self-concept. Very seldom do I hear, "your class does easy work - dumb class".

Katie and I both care and are interested in our children's development much more than if we had stayed in the classroom and treated them as a class - a class of failures.

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