



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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EDUCATION THROUGH ACTION



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In this article Miss Roberts elaborates on her brief summary of Aboriginal studies at Brewarrina which appeared in this section in Volume 5 No. 1.

As the great Brazilian educator Paulo Freire¹ said, there is no such thing as a neutral education. Education is either for domestication or liberation, for interpreting our world or changing it. This is the choice which every teacher makes, whether consciously or unconsciously.

For nearly two hundred years our education system has been used for domestication and this is nowhere so obvious as in the case of Aboriginal people. The books state, and so do the teachers, that Australia's history begins in 1788, and such an idea goes unchallenged. For Aboriginal people this has meant that virtually they do not exist. If you take away a people's history, you deprive them of their most precious possession, their birthright. This has also been the case with migrant Australians and working-class Australians.

I went to Brewarrina in March, 1975, as the secondary O.A. teacher. I was confronted by a class of thirteen students, all Aboriginal. They were noisy, pessimistic and thoroughly disheartened. Amid the chaos, they informed me that they were 'the dumb class' and not to expect anything from them. A few of the boys said they could not wait to leave school and go on the 'socio' (social services). In fact, one of these very boys returned to school in 1976 and gained his School Certificate. However, then they spoke about themselves and their people in very derogatory terms, mainly as 'bludgers and drunkards'.

This was the education the school and the community at large,

*. This year, Miss Roberts is not at Brewarrina.

1. *Cultural Action for Freedom and Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Penguin Education

wittingly or unwittingly, had given those children. This was the end result of almost two hundred years of the suppression of their history and culture and the truth about the alienation of their land, the massacres, the rounding up of whole tribes and the setting up of reserves, the work and no wages, the division of the people according to the colour of their skin and the necessity of carrying passes to move around on their own land. Is this civilisation?

We launched a long and strenuous debate within the classroom on the subject of who really discovered Australia. We were lucky, because just at this time the archaeological discoveries at Lake Mungo and Kow Swamp were coming to light, and on the media there was talk of Aboriginal society dating back 30,000 years and maybe even 50,000 years. At the end of the year, Geoffrey Blainey's book - *Triumph of the Nomads* appeared, as the first admission by a historian that maybe Australia's history did not begin in 1788.

From our discussions we wrote a leaflet, which we then made into a poster, because it was too good to keep to ourselves. The title was in large letters, AUSTRALIA'S HISTORY DOES *NOT* BEGIN IN 1788. We did not file it away as happens with most reading material, or place it back in some foreign-made reading program. Rather, we kept the poster on display for a long time as a constant reminder that old and incorrect ideas are slow to die and that even teachers have a lot to learn.

This initial discovery gave us the impetus and enthusiasm to continue our studies, not from the sterile, static world of the text-book, but from the media, a world which was changing every day and constantly questioning old ideas. The ABC provided us with much of our material and we managed to video some of the more relevant material, for example, *Sister, if you only knew*, a film with Aboriginal spokeswomen from Adelaide; Wandjuk Marika talking about the exploitation of Aboriginal art by unscrupulous profiteers; *Not to lose you, my language*, a film about the teaching of Aboriginal languages in the Northern Territory, just to name a few. We missed a very important one about Wenton Rapunja and the Central Australian Land Rights struggle.

We continued making our own reading material in leaflet and poster form and at the end of last year we made a book and added our own photographs. We have sent some copies to friends we have made on our two major excursions.

However, we knew that you cannot understand the world outside without knowing your own world intimately, so we called on people and

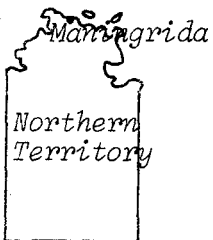
organizations in Brewarrina to help us. We took our cameras and tape recorders along, too, because there are more and better ways of recording our experiences than just writing them down. The townspeople and parents gave generously of their time and always made us feel welcome and confident that we could call back any time. When we got back to school we listened to our tapes and developed and printed our own photos in the school's dark room.

Possessing these techniques meant that when we went on our longer trips to Sydney and Central Australia we were able to record more fully our experiences for future reference. We were financed largely by Secondary Grants and to a lesser degree by the Disadvantaged Schools' Allowance.

By sincerely attempting a correct and just interpretation of Australian history, by reappraising and looking critically at our world and by ensuring that our educational experiences resulted in *action* - whether it be a photograph; a leaflet; the writing of a letter; a trip outside the school; an invitation to parents to speak to the class; a slide evening in the children's homes; videoing interviews with people down the street; but always an activity related to *knowing and acting* - this was the way my students and I attempted to overcome the problem of white teachers trying to educate Aboriginal children.

In reality, I became the student and the children and their parents my teachers. My two years in Brewarrina were most educational, so I can only assume they were very good and dedicated teachers.

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FREE TO CHOOSE -
AN ALTERNATIVE IN POST PRIMARY EDUCATION

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HOW IT BEGAN

In previous years, attendance of secondary-age students at Maningrida had declined to a mere handful. And so, at the start of 1976, it was decided to make secondary education at Maningrida a