



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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- 41 -

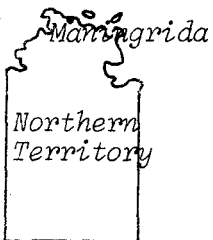
organizations in Brewarrina to help us. We took our cameras and tape recorders along, too, because there are more and better ways of recording our experiences than just writing them down. The townspeople and parents gave generously of their time and always made us feel welcome and confident that we could 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

priority within the school.

To this end, money and effort were directed towards the setting up of a secondary unit. The main objective was to increase the number of secondary students attending school. We tried to do this by encouraging those adolescents who were not otherwise employed in the settlement to come along to school, and to see whether or not the secondary unit offered them a desirable alternative.

Of first importance, we wanted to create an environment which would be pleasant for adolescents (and not necessarily so for the teachers!). In order to achieve this, the following facilities were made available in the classroom:-

1. A pool table.
2. A music area with electronic organ, guitars and drums.
3. A lounge area with comfortable chairs and settees, and coffee making facilities.
4. A work area, with groups of desks arranged.

Posters, comics, cassettes and records have further enhanced these facilities.

HOW IT WORKS

Since the initial outlay of money for the pool table, electric guitar and organ, the class has become self-supporting. The students achieved this by deciding to charge twenty cents for each game of pool, and hence they have been able to save enough money during the year to buy cassettes, records, extra pool cues, more posters and comics, and to replace drumskins and guitar strings as needed. The decisions concerning the running of the unit, (that is, what to buy, how much to charge for pool, how to organise the classroom, etc.) were made by the students.

Within the secondary unit, there are three teachers - one Manual Training, one Domestic Science and one General Studies. However, that is not to say that we confine our activities to our own particular subject areas. Rather, we have tried to work in as much flexibility as possible to our programs. Hence it is not uncommon to see the Domestic Science teacher taking a group of girls fishing, or either the Manual Training or Domestic Science teacher assisting in the classroom.

The class program is worked on an 'option system' for those core subjects of Maths, English, Manual Training and Domestic Science. This system allows the student freedom to choose and plan his own work and to cater more fully for his own particular preferences. At option sessions, the student is free to choose whether he stays in the classroom to play pool or relax, or to do some Maths or English. However, each student must do a set amount of academic work within the week.

Thus, during a typical morning, there may be a group of secondary students cooking in the Domestic Science room, while others are working on their current creation in the Manual Training Workshop. Meanwhile, in the classroom, there may be a couple of students playing pool, a few more playing on the guitars and organ (sometimes with headphones, so that they disturb no one else), and somebody practising their typing. There may be a group relaxing, reading comics and listening to cassettes while at the other end of the room a group is working on Maths or English.

In order to provide for wider interests, three class projects have been set up:

- a) fishing
- b) garden
- c) chickens.

As part of the fishing project, four students and one teacher fish for a day and then sell their catch. After deduction for diesel, the profit is shared among the students - this project has had several set-backs, with difficulties over available boats, fishing licences and so on. However, the school has now bought a boat which the students are currently making ready for sea. The boat will be on the water after Christmas, and then the Secondary Fishing Business will become a more regular thing.

The garden was started with the intention of encouraging the students and thereby also others in the Aboriginal community, to take an interest in market gardening; and having realised the worth and profit in it, it is hoped they will then extend it to their own family groups. Naturally we are a long way off achieving this - things move slowly. But the garden has produced much already; and the students are quickly learning which vegetables and foods are the most successful and easily grown.

Adjacent to the garden is the chicken pen. The students take it in turns to feed and water the chickens each day and to collect the eggs, which they then either sell or use for their cooking. We are expecting a brood of young chicks to hatch out soon - these may be sold to outstations or reared to replace our older hens.

As a fourth project, each fortnight there is an excursion for half a day to a local billabong or fishing spot for those who wish to go.

With so many additional opportunities for other projects and activities, there has been necessarily less academic work than would be in a traditional class. In order to try and balance this situation for the more academic students, we started them off on a high school course. But, lack of materials made this only partly successful. However, we have recently enrolled these students with the Correspondence School to do English, Arithmetic and Clerical Studies. The material contained in these is modern and well presented, and it seems that this course will prove most suitable.

In addition to the three projects mentioned above, there have been other vocational projects. For example, several students have worked as 'teachers' in other classes, alongside the classroom teacher - usually for about an hour each week. Thanks to the help and guidance of the teachers involved, these students have gained much valuable experience and have further developed their self-confidence.

There was an obvious need, moreover, for some sort of vocational training for those students who wanted to seek full-time employment in the settlement.

We arranged a clerical course for one such student, and eventually obtained an Aboriginal Study Grant for him through the Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme for the duration of his course. Another student is training to be a Radio Operator, while five others have trained as drivers.

These vocational courses have not been entirely successful owing to red tape involved in organization, for example, the implications of Workers' Compensation, the reluctance of employers to use the N.E.A.T. Scheme, and the delays which occur in obtaining Study Grants through the Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme. Also, on occasion there has been a lack of follow-through in those areas where the school does not have training facilities of its own - because the community members involved, although very willing, have at times been heavily committed elsewhere.

Next year we hope to overcome some of these problems and to lay greater emphasis on this aspect of secondary education. This should be even more viable since we have an Adult Educator appointed to Maningrida for next year, who will undoubtedly be of great assistance in such projects.

A large part of the social development of the students this year has been the advancement in their decision-making abilities, and their use of the democratic process to do this, to the extent that, towards the end of this school year they have made decisions relating to their program for next year and have signified which subjects they want included and which others are to be scrapped or made optional.

PROS AND CONS

Overall, we can be said to have succeeded in our main objectives, since the number of secondary students has increased considerably, averaging about 30 over the year. But more than just numbers, we feel it is significant that we have attracted both young and old students who, lower down the school, have been poor attenders.

There has been a gradual development of initiative as a result of classroom democracy; and decision making, usually as a group, is now an accepted part of the students responsibility.

Many students have become more open and communicative and there is more socialising between and acceptance of both younger and older students. How much this is due to the system we have used, and how much is the natural result of maturation, cannot be guessed.

On the debit side, it is a fact that we have lost some students by insisting on even the minimum of academic work being completed in the week; and, in this respect, the system has not developed far enough to cater for these individuals.

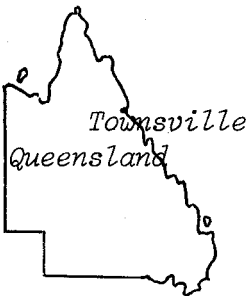
Also, at the beginning of the year, there were problems with care of equipment, for example, guitars, drums, pool cues etc. However, this has largely cured itself, as the students have experienced the inconvenience that is subsequently caused by their misuse, they are now accepting it more as their own responsibility to see that equipment is used properly.

POSSIBLE CONCLUSIONS

It is not certain which of several factors have indeed contributed most to the probable success of this system. Some of these factors may be :

1. That the 'freedom of choice' system is more acceptable to adolescents than the traditionally rigid timetable.
2. That the programs and projects offered are more varied than before.
3. That the excursions and recreational facilities offered are sufficient enticement in themselves.
4. That the personalities involved have helped to create a suitable atmosphere. The three teachers in the unit all work closely together, so that students are never in the position of having to relate to one teacher only.

Above I referred to the 'probable success' of the system - I say 'probable', because as yet it is not fully proven, despite the very large increase in numbers of students attending - this year has been experimental, and to claim complete success therefore, might be somewhat premature. The next twelve months will be a better indication of whether it has succeeded this year merely because of the novelty, or because the philosophy behind their freedom to choose is, in fact, a sound system for Aboriginal adolescents.



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HOME/SCHOOL AIDE PROGRAM - GAR BUTT, 1976

E.Kennedy and C.Ling,*
Garbutt, Townsville.

It is intended that this program will be in keeping with the recommendations of the Report to the Schools Commission by the Aboriginal Consultative Group. In particular we refer to Recommendation 8 :-

"We recommend that a variety of means be examined for involving Aboriginal parents in their children's education."

*Chris Ling, Advisory Teacher, Department of Education, Townsville.