



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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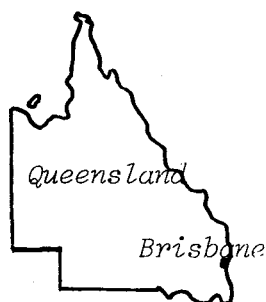


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Project Book. A variety of subject areas has been covered, including written and oral language, maths, social science and the arts, including music. Large black and white prints which have been processed in the school dark room have helped to stimulate and remind the children of experiences enjoyed. Over forty contributions to the final edition for 1976 of *Pics Paper* have been forwarded to the editors. A large number of letters have been received from children in Papua New Guinea and our children are replying with eagerness - this in itself is noteworthy. A social evening for the children who participated in the trip took place on one of the beaches, where songs were sung around the fire and New Guinea talk was the theme. An excellent display of artifacts, including gifts from the various villages we visited, has been arranged in the Grade 7 classroom, and is a constant reminder of the tour.

Because of delays in processing, the slide presentation is yet to come, and should be a major highlight for all, as it is by this means that the whole community will be able to share in what has easily been the most successful educational tour conducted so far at this school.

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THE 'DOGS' OF INALA

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In this article I attempt to point out the types of children I worked with, the problems they had, and some of the ways I attempted to overcome these problems.

The basic idea was for me to work from 2.30 p.m. to 8.30 p.m. helping under-achievers master some fundamental language skills. This appears very clear-cut. However, I think, as the article progresses, the Inala nightmare suddenly grows upon you. I write informally throughout this article - the work was much the same. Within a broad framework plan, the spontaneity and understanding needed in unexpected situations flourished best. Some incidents and sayings are dispersed throughout the work.

"Tonight Wayne, why don't you be an ordinary teacher like the ones at school? Come in and roar at us."

"It's going to be hard, we'd know it's just a game."

"Come on Wayne, it'd be good. We'll act like we're at school and you be the teacher."

"Alright, I'll go out and come back in as an ordinary teacher."

I remember going to the next room and discussing the needs of our proposed workshop with Donald. It took about ten minutes. I then adopted the requested role of 'ordinary' teacher. On walking back into the other room I stormed over to one student who was tapping his thongs on the table, laughing and chewing gum. At my harsh words he stopped all three, and it took about thirty seconds for the rest of the group to realize we had started role-playing. They quickly tormented me, as they did the teachers at school. However, the black face of the worst hit had gone red with embarrassment. The riot subsided eventually as the purpose of mucking up was exposed as naked, skeletal, purposeless.

That student didn't come back to the centre for three weeks. On the fourth week I approached him, pointing out how we were just playacting. He told me he wanted no playacting. I said it was foolish to cease his good work, and would he prefer to come an hour a week and do solid grammar. So Luke came on Thursday nights, together with Fred and Simon. For forty minutes each, we discussed casually such things as -

Pronouns (starters and finishers - 'I' and 'me'.); present tenses of verbs; simple sentence structure; compound sentences; exercises in word building.

After two months the boys were saying -

"Tom and I are going to the shop", instead of "Me and Tom is goin' to the shop"

"They are singing", instead of "Them is singin'."

"You are", instead of "You is", and so on.

After piecing together simple statements like - "I ride my bike when it is dark" and "I like to see my friend", the three of them were responding and working as keenly as any Level 1 students. Harry's face glowed with happiness as he experienced the feeling of the pirate suddenly stumbling on the treasure, - *he could learn!*

All my students came voluntarily after school until 8.30 at night. There were approximately 26 people a week with probably two-thirds of these black.

I didn't know quite what to expect when I first got the job. I felt confident I could handle any situation. However, after two weeks I was soon shocked and somewhat afraid. During the first two weeks I met my first blacks; interviewing them, testing them, finding out their interests. They were not aggressive as I had expected. As a matter of fact, some of the students were charming, some made me laugh, others made me listen closely as they dogmatically expounded their ideas. One fellow I couldn't hear well. When he spoke he turned his head away and downwards, as if I sat on the ground to the left of him. This boy, who tops his English class and has a high IQ, still speaks that way. No one has yet managed to change it.

Another came in and greeted me with, "Gee, you're spunky", and then like a butterfly, darted to a guidance officer. "I want to see you today." It was this same student who later rushed into the centre one night (opposite Inala Civic Centre) after she had witnessed a car exploding in the shopping centre. I had two gentlemen with me discussing our motorbike workshop. Our conversation was interrupted by the door being almost knocked down - "Wayne, there's been a friggen fire in a car. I spoke to the friggen gang that did it!!!". The two gentlemen looked at me shocked, as if inquiring, "What on earth are you going to do?" I knew what I wanted to say, but if I did I'd never have seen that girl again. So not knowing exactly what to say, I stammered, "Ah! John and Guy, I'd like you to meet Sarah. Sarah, this is John and Guy". She walked out saying "Hi".

My work with this girl, who took "No-doze" one night and sleeping pills the next, consisted of changing her behaviour, her speaking in every day situations, and eliminating her incessant swearing. After eight months we had favourable reports. Even Sarah was happy with her change. "I've changed you know," she said.

So too did her sister, whose main problem was the formation of letter sounds in speaking. For example, "Wat does e fink es doin'?" for "What does he think he's doing?" We often used to laugh as I taught her mirror exercises and we practised tongue twisters such as - "think thorough thoughts". Every time we talked casually I jotted down all her peculiarities of speech. We would then work on them. At the end of the year she was conscious of each word being said and would often correct herself.

These two types of students can't be placed in success statistics; no score will signify their progress.

One of the most memorable time slots of the week, and one which I sometimes detested, was the Wednesday night discussions. This was an hour in which anything could happen, and usually did. It was useless and frustrating preparing work, since the kids were faced with prepared work at school. With the slightest hint of school, the kids wouldn't come. Somehow I was selling education through the 'back door'. If I thought of an activity which they might enjoy, I devised language activities which aligned with my course goals, and which I hoped would motivate the students. So, from a trip to a huge drain where my kids played on weekends, a vocabulary list eventuated. They knew the words "slime", "tins" and so on, but new words suddenly popped up in new expressions. In our walking in the drain, finer details appeared - "The red stain of rust in the coating of green slime". Not very appetizing, but the type of detail asked for in essays in prepared lessons in class.

I think the hardest part of the job was the continual appreciation of unexpected situations and manipulating them to favourable outcomes. Even the concept of favourable outcomes was nebulous. One often felt as though one was drifting with the current, not knowing when and where to throw the anchor; such an example would be a proposed serious court case, which, through the students' humorous ad libbing, turned into a lively comedy. Or a vocal sentence building game with three students sitting in front of a group, consecutively saying a word which had to follow on from the previous one and the whole had to make sense. The students were so keen, I thought it was a teaching gold record. However, the next week no one was interested in that game.

At one stage I couldn't persuade the kids to write. As soon as I asked them to write they became restless or I didn't see them for two weeks. Since I was imbued with this idea that they must start writing, I took them to Lang Park. We sat in the grandstand and started copying the ads on the billboards around the ground. We were going to make a model for spastic and blind children, who would have liked to visit the ground, but were unable to. That idea was good. The students wrote willingly, but in all the rush it was one of many ideas which I didn't have time to pursue. In retrospect, I see the desperate times as stemming from another white syndrome, that of the need for immediate success.

It is little wonder that my kids, "who were born in a suburb that failed", "who were born in a so-named 'failing' race", "who saw failure in their families, for example, brothers in prison, dads not working", and "who then went to our schools where mistakes, unexpected behaviour and errors immediately place a person in the failure concept",

had no interest in that system, were not inspired by that system, and often failed to arrive at that system (truant). How would a kid who looks on himself as a 'living failure', fit in harmoniously with a system that sees failures as 'dead'. It was this alienation that caused the wanting to escape from that 'system'. This desire to break out was a very strong feeling amongst the kids. Within most of them there was evident a searching for a better deal, or a new hope.

This negative self-image was like a living cancer permeating their speech. It was unlikely that a conversation would flow without phrases such as the following cropping up :

"You're always making fun of me.....How can you help me?.... Why should I try - I'm not going to get anything out of it....Can't you just listen to me....I don't want you to talk to me anyhow.... You make me sick....Why does everyone pick on me....Nobody ever likes what I do."

A poem written by a boy exemplifies this low self-image :

I just live in Inala
Go to school,
Come home, that's it.
I want a real good job
a carpenter apprenticeship.
I go places, swimming, play sport, anything
I reckon everybody's better than me
I think they're better than me
How? That's hard - I muck around too much.

I often remember the astonished looks when I asked them if they would like to act and produce a film. "Who? Us?" they asked, and to 'bury the bone' of the self-image part, the kids wanted the film called "The Inala Underdogs". They claimed they felt like dogs, were worthless, and that people looked down on them.

During our Wednesday discussions we practised such things as handling a reluctant white landlord, the running of court scenes, and word games. With each session they could see a goal within reach, and on some occasions, if one of the group misbehaved, he was quickly told by the others to be quiet. This might sound rather mundane, but considering the types of students who were asking for discipline, I found it remarkable.

The natural flair for sketching and drawing eventually aided me in discussing poetry. One Grade 8 student with a very low reading

age opened a Senior book one night and stumbled through, "We are the Hollow men"... "This is the way the world ends". I remarked that they drew images in my mind of certain scenes. I asked him if he thought he could draw scenes of these written images. Enthusiastically he wanted to draw scenes for any poems that I cared to discuss with him! He even wrote two poems of his own.

As well as the flair for sketching, there was the ever present ability to express vocally and play act. Competitions of concentration were enlightening; the easy movements, the quick outbursts - I couldn't help feeling sometimes, that Shakespeare wrote "All the world's a stage", just for these kids.

Over the first four months the students worked on themes of their own group creations. The work they produced was to be put in a book - this was incentive for them. In the themes that the students chose there was a strong association with violence and mystery. Murders, U.F.O.s and incinerations etc. abounded. Some drawings were even 'edited'.

The association with violence was expected. The children roam in gangs, they fight continually, they frequent the courts, some of their friends are maimed, some relatives suicide. Aggression is part of their lifestyle. Some of them fight because they are picked for 'colour' or being 'dummies' or 'mental'. One such 'dummy' was Harold. He was always in fights; he was always name-called; he would practise phonic sounds; and as a seventeen year old, Harold had many phallic words which he thought of when an ordinary word was given to him. You can imagine what 'bells' and 'tall' were. The amazing thing was that if I wrote 'bum' he'd say 'bun', give a laugh and then tell me how he built bicycles from scratch in his workshop. That's Harold, the dummy.

Amidst the jokes and neuroses, the arrivals and disappearances, the swear-words and the apologies, the laughs and sighs, I sometimes felt that I was almost becoming a black, but then I thought why 'become a black', why not just 'one of the people in that situation at Inala'. We all seemed one in the end. We were all working; I was learning as I taught; everyone was contributing in his own way, and we all felt we were getting somewhere. I don't know how far we got, but it seems a long way.

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