



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

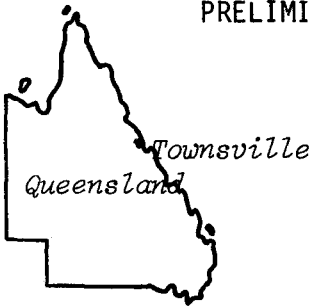
This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

In 2022 *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* transitioned to fully Open Access and this article is available for use under the license conditions below.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT OF ACHIEVEMENT LEVELS
IN AN ETHNIC COMMUNITY SCHOOL



M. Reynolds
Townsville, Qld

Townsville, North Queensland is the setting for a unique innovation in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island education. A number of parents have opted out of the State education system in favour of developing a school which reflects their culture and which aims to provide a program better suited to black children.

The Black Community School was established in October 1974. Initially it aimed to provide for children late in their primary schooling because parents recognised this as the most critical stage. However, by January 1975, it was realized that it was difficult to finance the extensive resources required at secondary level. Therefore the school amended its original aim and now operates to provide the best possible early education up to secondary level, by which time it is hoped successful transfer can take place. The school's aims are :

- a) To give black children an alternative education more suited to their needs.
- b) To involve the children's parents and the community in these children's education.
- c) To avoid the post Grade Four slump in learning by substituting a schooling which will give encouragement and hope, not indifference.
- d) To substitute teachers who have an understanding of Aborigines' difficulties and differences in outlook and aspiration.
- e) To provide a satisfactory climate for the tuition of children who are academically oriented and motivated towards eventual tertiary education.

Much could be written to describe this alternative school. It impresses as one of individuality and innovation. Children work

basically in two groups, the infants occupying one section of a large open area and the primary the other. There are small carpeted areas for individual study and group work. Effective use is made of screens, display areas and shelving. The school appears to be well equipped with a variety of resource materials. The atmosphere is friendly and supportive so children appear well adjusted to the school's program, which aims to provide individually for its pupils. There is outstanding co-operation between staff, parents and pupils. There is a deliberate effort made to surround children with pictures and books depicting a variety of cultures. Parents teach ethnic arts, crafts, music and dancing. At the time of writing, plans were underway to introduce the teaching of Miriam, the language of the Eastern Torres Strait.

EVENTS LEADING TO ASSESSMENT OF ACHIEVEMENT LEVELS

It was inevitable that the Black Community School would be required to give an objective account of academic progress being made. Educators have been somewhat sceptical about the overall community school movement, seeing it as a rejection of the proven academic system. It is not surprising then, that those in authority were even more sceptical about a community school established by black parents, the majority of whom have limited educational background. It was for the purpose of assessment that I was invited to the school. In accepting the role, I had certain reservations about the use of traditional test materials in order to assess the basic skills of children.

American writers claim that minority groups do not respond well to testing procedures. Minority children tend to have less experience of test situations, lower motivation to succeed, less competitiveness and often perform poorly where the tester belongs to the dominant culture.

Fishman et al (1967) are critical of American national norms which do not provide adequate differentiation at the lower end of the ability scale. It certainly appeared that assessment procedures for my work at the Black Community School should be influenced by this awareness of problems associated with testing minority group children.

In order to familiarise myself with the school and the children with me, I spent two days observing at the school. During this time I was able to discuss educational methods with staff and gain insights, which enabled me to select the most appropriate test materials available. Furthermore, I was able to spell out my purpose to children several days before actual testing commenced.

ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES - JUNE 1976

The pupils at the Black Community School were considered in two groups -

1. INFANT GROUP - Children aged 5 to 7 years whose performance levels could be equated with those of Grades 1 and 2.
2. PRIMARY GROUP - Children aged 8 to 12 years whose performance could be equated with those of Grades 3 to 7.
 - Grade 1 only - Reading Readiness Test. This test was devised in co-operation with teachers at the Central State School and incorporates Frostig, Wepman and Tansley sub-tests.

Sub-tests. Fine Motor Skill, Visual Discrimination, Auditory Discrimination, Auditory Memory, Phonic Knowledge, Spatial and Number Concept.
 - Grade 2 only - St Lucia Word Recognition Test
Schonell Spelling Test.

For the Primary Group the following tests were chosen -

Concise Word Reading Test, Forms B and C.
G.A.P. Reading Comprehension Test, Form B.
Schonell Spelling Test.
Moreton Maths Test, Metric Revision, Level II,
Form N.

ASSESSMENT RESULTS

Grade 1

The average chronological age of this group is 5 years 6 months. All children exhibited an average reading readiness level when their results were compared with those attending the Central State School. No child failed any of the eight sections of the test compared with seventeen who had failed within six weeks of starting at Central State School and seven who had subsequently failed after intensive readiness work. Certainly this result was gained after mid-year testing, when children had completed readiness work and were beginning more formal reading. However the result showed significant success of children within their first months of school.

Comments

Children showed average ability in visual discrimination, auditory discrimination and auditory memory. Above average ability was exhibited in fine motor skill, phonic ability and number and spatial concept. Results indicated that children were ready to commence formal reading instruction and that they could be expected to complete their Grade I year without difficulty.

Grade 2

The average chronological age of this group is 7 years.

Results of testing indicated that the average spelling age is 6 years 4 months with a range of 6.3 to 6.9. In basic word recognition skills, the average reading age is 6 years, with a range of 5.8 to 6.8.

Comments

These results revealed that some children are below average in reading and spelling. However, only two children could be considered as in need of remedial work. Testing has provided teachers with information which will enable them to plan remediation.

Grades 3 to 7

The chronological age of this group is averaged at 10 years with a range of 9 to 12 years.

The average spelling age is 9 years with a range of 7.4 to 10.11.

The average word recognition age is 9 years 7 months with a range of 8.0 to 11.10.

The average reading comprehension age is 9 years 6 months with a range of 7.11 to 12.6.

The average maths age is 9 years with a range of 7.2 to 10.11.

Comments

Overall, these results indicate that children are achieving a variety of levels in basic subjects. While some children are performing at a level beyond class level expectancy, others require

remediation. In spelling and reading I have suggested development of phonic and word attack skills for weaker pupils, and extended reading, writing and study skill activities for those more advanced pupils. Several Torres Strait Island children require instruction to further their understanding and usage of English. In mathematics, the main emphases would appear to be in the teaching of fractions and metric measurement.

CONCLUSION

Given my experience of Aboriginal children's problems in primary schools, together with the depressing documentation of Aboriginal failure within the regular school systems of Australia, these results would appear to give encouragement to those intent on furthering the education of Aborigines.

The Coleman Report, *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (1966) found that -

...of all variables measured the attitude of student interest in school, self concept and sense of environmental control showed the greatest relation to achievement.

It would seem that the Black Community School has succeeded in providing an environment where such factors are more likely to develop.

Emotive criticisms have been levelled at the Black Community School, because people have misinterpreted the importance of segregation as a short term experimental measure at least. Aboriginal children have been attending the same schools as white children for between thirty and forty years. They have been taught using the same methods and materials. But few have experienced success and then only at the expense of being isolated from their own culture. It is too soon to accurately measure the long term success of the Black Community School, where children have been enrolled for only 6 to 10 months. Preliminary assessment of achievement levels is limited and reveals only very basic information. However, educators should closely watch the future progress of the Black Community School to see if its priorities of ethnic pride and parent involvement do, in fact, produce significant gains in educational achievement.

.....

Reference

Fishman et al.: Guidelines for testing minority group children. In Passow et al. (Eds), Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc. New York, 1967.