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INCREASED INVOLVEMENT OF YOLNGU TEACHERS IN SCHOOLS

My community is seeing an increased involvement of Yolngu teachers in schools. However, this will need to expand even more. Only in this way can the community really believe that we are playing a part and that Aboriginals can get somewhere and have a real future.

The community is expressing its support in the way in which Aboriginal teachers are becoming more involved, through training programs, through developing Aboriginal Studies and through adult education. We certainly know that the Aboriginal person is the best person to express communities' wishes on things such as hours of instruction, organisation of the school year and in taking into full-consideration the Aboriginal life style.

The community is thinking more seriously about the education of their children, but the community wants greater opportunities for the employment of Aboriginals in education (at least as many Aboriginals as Europeans in the school). It also wants commitment of staff to training and leading Aboriginals to the fore.

In keeping with a community which has a chance to make its future, my people strongly feel that the Yolngu teacher must immediately be given the opportunities, support and training to really show the way.

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MY WORK AS A TEACHING ASSISTANT



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A TYPICAL DAY AT SCHOOL

I suppose this could be any day for me, as the children at school change like the weather. Wednesdays at school are different from my usual days. I still go to Years 2 and 3 in primary every Wednesday morning at 9.30. This is my period for spelling with Year 2. Mr Mooney takes Year 3.

Then at 10.30 I go into the library room for craft with the primary children. Some knit, some are doing tapestry and some are crocheting. One day I went into the library to do craft, and honestly, I saw more tangled threads than work done. Some of the children thought they'd help by winding the thread on the cardboard holders that are made just for that purpose. Needless to say, they didn't know how to hold the thread so it could be put on to the holders. I no sooner finished getting one lot untangled than I'd hear voices from all over the room:

"Mrs Parton, I have a big knot for you too. Please will you help me with it?"

As I said, I did more untangling than tapestry that day. I work in there until recess. After recess, I go into the O.A. classroom. It was in this room that I made my fatal mistake of drawing, or trying to draw, a dinosaur. Henry had started drawing one, but had used his eraser to rub the top part away. When I came into the class, he said, "Mrs Parton, I can't draw a dinosaur."

"Don't talk rubbish, Henry," I said, "that's easy to draw." But when taking a look at his drawing, it certainly didn't look like a dinosaur. The tail end was like a fish tail, and what imprint was left on the top of his drawing paper after rubbing out, well, was anything but a dinosaur. So I thought I'd do a good turn for Henry and help him draw one. The tail I left, because Henry said he liked it.

"See, love, this is how you do it," I said to Henry. Well, when I finished that dinosaur (and I thought it was a masterpiece), Henry took one look, put his hands on his hips, and laughed and laughed.

"What's wrong now, Henry?"

"Mrs Parton, gee, that looks like a camel." So much for my drawing. I could never draw when I was going to school, but you could always distinguish what it was.

"I'm sorry Mrs Parton," Henry said, "but I can't draw a dinosaur either."

"Sweetie," I replied, "you just told me I couldn't either."

You can't win them all, even in my infants' classrooms. I came into this room after lunch. They had to draw anything they wished, but had to tell Mrs Tierney or myself about it. Trust me

to do the wrong thing. The picture that was shown to me, well, I thought it looked like a beautiful green lawn with flowers all around it. When I asked Simon if he was going to draw a lovely home in the centre of it, he said, (wait for it): "Mrs Parton, that's the football oval and all the pretty things around the outside of the lawn are people and motor cars." He even showed me the goal posts which I thought were trees. The flags on the end of each goal post looked like flowers to me. He even showed me where the ambulance car parks.

I have learnt from children more than they know, and I'll keep on learning from them. When you see some of these drawings, honestly you'd never picture what they are until you're told. But I've learnt now never to say what it is, always to ask. And when you hear the children describing their drawings, it's really lovely to listen to their dear little imaginative minds going to work, because the picture certainly doesn't look the way they describe.

That's what a typical day at school is like for me.

MY DUTIES AT SCHOOL THIS YEAR

This is my first year at school as a full time Aboriginal teacher's aide. To me, this is a big step forward in the right direction.

I sign on at 8.30 a.m. Monday to Friday, and if the teachers want duplicating done for their classes (and they usually do most mornings), I assist in every way possible. Infants classes have books made nearly every week, and this I do for their teachers when asked.

At 9.30 every morning, I go into Year 2-3 room and take Year 2 for spelling. I give them their spelling, also mark it and look at the mistakes after they are written out. With their spelling they also have two exercises sheets to do. This I help with up until 10.30. I then go into Kindergarten/Year 1. Group work is also done in this room. Sometimes I have Kindergarten and then Year 1. In this class I help with Sentence Makers, reading, or if they have drawn a picture, we sometimes have to write a little story. Sometimes they write the story and ask me how to spell different words. I help Kindergarten with their writing books. They have to trace the letters. Some of the letters are only half finished and they have to finish them. They also have pictures to trace around, and colour in if they want to. These books I make for them. I work in this room up until recess.

After recess, I go into the O.A. classroom. In here are different classes, 3, 4, 5 and 6. I assist in quite a bit of their work. I have taken at different times, groups 1, 2 and 3 for spelling, and have marked their maths and spelling. Mrs Pearson has started to make weaving boards for them and has shown me what to do and I have completed them. I also have children from this classroom for Craft every Wednesday, also children from 3-4 classroom for Craft. I have also given dictation to Group 3, and have gone through their spelling with them. This applies to each group in this room. I have helped Group 1 with their maths and the use of rods. You need a lot of patience in O.A., but I like this class very much, because they need you so much, I think more so than a lot of other classes.

I have, at times, helped in the school office by answering the phone and supplying school requisites. I have a certificate for First Aid and this gives me the competency to assist with administering first aid to children whenever needed.

Once a fortnight, a community nurse comes from Moree to Mungindi. This gives me another job to do within the school - acting as liaison officer between her and the community of Mungindi. I also do this for officers of Commonwealth Education, and also of Youth, Ethnic and Community Affairs. This is all new work for me and I like doing it very much.

On Wednesday mornings I assist with Craft. This I do with primary and infants at different times. This way I am doing Craft with both and learning as I go. It's funny, you know, children think because you're a teacher or teacher's aide, you can't learn any more. Little do they know, a teacher or aide learns something new from them every day.

During the secondary science lessons, I have been called on occasionally to give assistance - group work. In one class, Mr Harris had four groups; we took one group at a time. Of course, he told me what to do with my group, and the children and I got along well.

Since I began working at school, I have become a liason worker between Aboriginal children and teachers, and teachers and parents. This I do by seeing the teachers and parents together, the parents, and I speak to the children myself. I know all the Aboriginal families in Mungindi, so therefore don't find this a difficult task. Not only the Aboriginal parents speak to me about their children, but the white parents as well. I have been asked how their children are progressing at different stages.

This year the O.A. class held an Open Day. This is when the parents can come and see their children working in class. As nearly all the children are Aborigines, Mrs Pearson thought she wouldn't have any parents in class at all. The Principal told me about this. When I came home from school, I saw and spoke to some of the parents and told them what day and time they could come to the school.

Open Day, and it was really wonderful to see the smiles on some of the children's faces when their mums came through the door. Mrs Pearson was very pleased with the ladies for coming to school, and she also spoke to them and explained how the children were progressing with their work. It was very rewarding for me, because I've been trying for years to get parents to come like this, or even come to a P & C Meeting, but to no avail. So this mission I won. The parents saw me after school and told me it was really good to go and see their sons and daughters working, and the work they do. Whatever question they asked Mrs Pearson, she explained. They were very pleased. It's really a shame to think that the Aboriginal women and men don't participate more often.

On Friday afternoons we have sport for primary. I assist a teacher with a group of children. We have groups all over the playground playing different sports, football, softball, and netball. Some children go to the tennis courts straight over from the school for tennis. The secondary children do a lot of tennis playing. The boys also use the town's football oval. Secondary children have their sport on Wednesdays. I have also assisted in both secondary and primary P.E. During athletic carnivals I am a recorder. It was new to me last year, as this was the first time I had occupied the position.

Last year I accompanied two other teachers and thirty or so children on an excursion to the Warrumbungles. This was an eye opener to me, seeing how the children react on these excursions was really something. They had their own cabins; and were responsible for the up-keep of them, and for cooking their own meals. There were four in a cabin, and honestly, they kept them spic and span. Some of the children used to have barbecues with the teachers at night, but the majority of them liked to cook their own meals and did a very good job. This I found a very rewarding trip. A few of the children didn't go on the big hike, so those children I took sightseeing around the creek and on short hikes, which they enjoyed.

At school there are quite a few films shown. I have learnt to operate the film projector, and have assisted with this.

One day, Mr Mooney and I took a cricket and softball team to Boomi, a nearby town. It was a very enjoyable day. Our girls won the softball game, but our boys lost to Boomi. However, all had a wonderful time.

So far this year, these have been my duties at school. They have meant a great deal to me. I am involved with the children and teachers all through the day, from the time I sign on in the morning until I sign off at 3.30 p.m.

THE COMMUNITY OF MUNGINDI AND MY PART IN IT.

The Aboriginal people of Mungindi have a Committee. We call it the Mungindi Aboriginal Advancement Committee. I am the Treasurer of this Committee, and have been President and Secretary.

We Aboriginal people worked hard towards a school bus for the children to bring them to and from the reserve, as it is a good distance from the town. This object we achieved by fund raising, street stalls, dances and so on. The bus was brought from Canberra, so this was one goal we reached.

Then we helped with the mortuary that we have at the hospital. We held dances, raffles and street stalls. Our donation was very much appreciated. This led to another turn out, for which we were very pleased to do our part. The Matron of the hospital held a Cancer Campaign, and again we turned out in full to help with this very worthy cause. The Matron and staff who could attend patronised the dances we put on. Each function we held gave us a wonderful feeling. We knew that our hard work was well rewarded.

When the Aboriginal people had a Pre-school going, I was one of the main women in this group. I'd walk twice a week from my home to the reserve. The little ones loved the activities. After they had finished their paintings or drawings or whatever, I always made them wash their hands, (I bought hand towels and soap just for this purpose) and we all had drinks and biscuits. Some of the children's mothers came to help. This was really the idea, to get the mums and littlies together, so the mums could see the progress themselves instead of me telling them.

A Mungindi man (a shearer), and a grazier, held the first ever Shearing School in Mungindi for eight Aboriginal teenagers. This was a great success, and since then we have held two more Shearing Schools. (At present they are in the middle of the third one.) I am Treasurer of the Shearing School.

I am Vice President of the Mungindi Parents and Citizens Association at the Central School, and of the Far West Childrens Health Scheme.

All through my younger son's school days here in Mungindi, I helped at the canteen and was on call if the ladies who were running the canteen needed another helper. After Kevin left school in 1972, I helped on canteens right up until last year, when I took up my present job.

I also assist with our football club. I help in the canteen and help get the raffles ready for drawing.

This is my part in the Community of Mungindi, besides being a teachers' aide.

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(Mrs Parton presented the above article while attending an In-service Refresher Course for Aboriginal Teaching Assistants arranged by the Department of Education, New South Wales, North West Region)

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