



# The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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## ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER VIEWS :

GRADUATION ADDRESS : ABORIGINAL TEACHER AIDES,  
SYDNEY UNIVERSITY, 1977



\* Mrs Y. Bolton,  
Dept. of Education,  
New South Wales

(Mrs Yvonne Bolton was appointed in 1977 to the position of Aboriginal liaison teacher, State Department of Education, New South Wales. Among Mrs Bolton's responsibilities are - planning and helping teachers to implement programs that will be of benefit to Aboriginal pupils; liaising with Aboriginal communities.

Mrs Bolton did her own teacher training in Sydney, 1957-59, and during her period as a classroom teacher taught infants' classes and moderately mentally retarded children.

She is a member of the Adult Aboriginal Education Advisory Committee.)

" I would like to thank Mr Duncan most sincerely for the honour and privilege of being the guest speaker on this occasion. This is the first time I have ever been confronted by a microphone. They always seem to misbehave themselves by making noises at the wrong time - I hope that this one behaves itself.

I offer my very sincere congratulations to the aides who have successfully completed the course and are here today.

When Mr Duncan telephoned me and invited me to be guest speaker, in my usual impulsive way I accepted. Then my knees started shaking; thoughts flooded my brain - 'Can I do it? What shall I talk about for ten to fifteen minutes?' I thought of a letter written to Mr Duncan and his team by Evelyn Crawford, our Aboriginal aide in Brewarrina.

In Evelyn's letter there was a sentence which has remained embedded in my thoughts throughout this year, and I quote :-

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\* See cover photograph.

I feel I'm becoming a solid link in the chain of my people getting to know your people.

This is how I see all Aboriginal teacher aides, as *solid*, and I stress the word solid, (I quote again) '*solid* links in the chain of our people getting to know your people'. Unfortunately, in New South Wales there are only 60 links in the chain when there should be more. Worse still, the Teacher Aide Training Program is not to be funded next year (1978). To me this is a great pity.

For those receiving their certificates today I hold the utmost admiration. I first made their acquaintance at the beginning of the year, when I commenced my duties as Aboriginal liaison teacher for New South Wales. After each visit I made to the University, I was filled with more and more admiration for our Aboriginal teacher aides.

When I first met this group we were all very shy with one another. I in my new job meeting new people, the aides shy for exactly the same reasons. For some it was their first visit to Sydney. The majority had left husbands and children behind in order to come to Sydney to attend the course.

The Aboriginal Teacher Aides' Training Program is a very special one. It is the only one of its kind. It covers Social Science, which includes Politics, Elementary Anthropology, Communication, Educational Studies, Child Growth and Development, Child Psychology and Methods of Education.

The most important aspect of the course, in my opinion, is that of Communication. Learning to talk to other people. This can be especially difficult if the person you are talking to is different in any way from you. More difficult if you are black and have a deep, inbred inferiority complex.

The Communication Course has given the aides the confidence in themselves to be able to bridge this gap - to strengthen the 'links in the chain.' Even though I have spoken only a few times with some of the aides, I now regard them as my friends. We are no longer shy with one another. The sessions I have been able to attend with them have helped me as well. I leave the session thinking - 'If they can do it, so can I.'

The Aboriginal teacher aides are very special persons, for they have learned to cope with life in both the Aboriginal world and the European world. This is what the Aboriginal child at school

today has to learn - how to cope in two worlds. I do not envy them, especially as both worlds, white and black, look at each other with insufficient understanding as to their real values. Hence the importance of our Aboriginal teacher aides in schools where there are Aboriginal children.

The main role of the aide is to help bridge the communication and understanding gaps between teachers, Aboriginal pupils and their parents. It is only the Aboriginal teacher aide with the background of his/her own culture, who can fully communicate to the Aboriginal parent the real essence or objectives of the various things that happen in our schools.

In New South Wales, there is a need for Aboriginal people to become active participants in the community. The teacher aide is helping to lead the way. I am going to quote another teacher aide, Norma Williams. This is the conclusion to an essay Norma wrote entitled, 'What Makes Me an Aborigine?' :

There is a need for me to know more, not only in going back and learning the culture of the Aborigine, but to go forward and learn about myself as a person, and then learning more of the European culture and using it to the advantage of my people.

I agree whole-heartedly with Norma; the Aboriginal people must learn more of their own culture and the European, and be able to use the knowledge gained for the benefit of their people.

We need more Aboriginal teachers in our schools - at present there are only four in New South Wales. Fortunately more are on the way. We need more.

Aboriginal people should be encouraged to stand for election to local governmental bodies. With the aid of the Aboriginal teacher aide and suitable teacher programs within our schools, hopefully the educational standard achieved by Aborigines will soon be raised so that increasing numbers will be able to apply and be elected as members of local government, particularly in country areas where there are settlements or reserves. Then the Aboriginal people, equipped with the right education, will be able to have a say, as well as shoulder the responsibility together with the white Australians, for the welfare of their own people. More 'links in the chain.'

As part of my duties next year I am planning a Work Experience Program for a group of Aboriginal girls from Kirinari Hostel at Allambie Heights. The girls come from widely spread areas of New South Wales, for example, Bourke, Enngonia, Weilmoringle, Toomelah and Brewarrina.

Starting from last September, six of the girls have been spending every Monday at the Far West Hospital School and in the hospital section, working with the teachers and nurses aides. This program has been highly successful. The girls are no longer shy or reticent when they come to the school. They talk freely to the members of staff and mix well with the other children. Four of the girls have stated they would like to become teachers and participate in the program next year.

In 1978 I hope to extend this program further through introducing the girls to professional, commercial and manufacturing enterprises and industries. Hopefully, in this coming year, I will be able to place the girls, every Monday, actively engaged in the above enterprises and industries in the Manly area. In this way young, educated Aboriginal people will have an opportunity to see and interact with Australian urban life as it stands today. This will not only increase the aspirations of the girls, but will promote a better understanding of each other's truly compatible self, white and black. Hopefully this will spread.

Through the implementation of the above scheme we will create even more "links in the chain".

I would like to read excerpts from the letter that inspired my thoughts in writing this speech. The letter is from Evelyn Crawford, our Aboriginal teacher aide at Brewarrina Central School, to Mr Duncan and his panel, 7.3.77 :

I must write this, and after you all see this letter I hope you don't judge me the wrong way. Well I did not want to come down to do this course. So now I'll tell you my reasons why. First I said, "What's the use of a lot of learning, because I'll still end up a teacher aide?" So you see I couldn't see the sense in it. But all the teachers and my good friends kept at me and our Headmistress said, "You go and learn and then you can teach me the things I don't know. Things I must know, things I would like to know about children and people out here where we live." But I said to myself, what

could I teach her or any white school teacher for that matter?

Well, you know how long I have been down here now and so I'm happy to say I'm very glad I came down because it's from you four white people that I have found out just how important a teacher aide will be to our country schools and most of all to my people. And I feel even now at this short time I'm becoming a solid link in the chain of my people getting to know your people, and so I thank you four from deep down for making me see how silly and sorry I would have been if I would have stayed home. Even each morning when I step into the classroom I've got the feeling 'This is my room and these people are my friends'. Yes, even you four. Thank you.

Evelyn.

Our best wishes go with you as you leave the university to strengthen the 'links in the chain'. Be assured of our support in the challenges you will face. As a forthcoming Aboriginal teacher said to me yesterday :

Beautiful music will only come from a piano when both black and white notes are played.

Thank you. "

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