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ACROSS AUSTRALIA...

FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER

THE PRACTICES OF A PRACTISING TEACHER



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I came to Australia in 1972 after teaching Nigerian boys in West Africa for thirteen years. My first experiences suggested to me that many slow learners and children with different cultural backgrounds from the majority were inadequately catered for at the standard Queensland high school.

When a scheme was proposed to aid such children (mainly Aboriginal) in our school, I volunteered to be one of the teachers. The scheme involved creating two small classes for the beginning Grade 8 students, with each class having a home room, and spending core time each week on English, Maths and Social Studies with one teacher. The core subjects took up about 25 periods each week. I was initially thrilled by the thought that at last I could begin tackling problems which had previously aroused in me feelings of defeat.

Our experiment is now in its second year and has been expanded to three classes, one in Grade 9. The background is this:

Cairns High has about 1240 students on roll, more than 200 of whom are of Aboriginal or Island descent. 70 of the latter are in Grade 8, which totals approximately 300. The Aboriginal and Island group is not homogeneous. We have students from the settlement at Yarrabah who come 40 miles to school by bus. We have students from Kuranda, a two hour train journey away. Other students live nearer school, but come from the Cape, from the Torres Strait Islands or have an urban background. The children for our classes are chosen because it is thought that they would be unable to make good progress in the standard classes because of learning difficulties or attitudes to organised school life.

This year I have 18 on the roll. They are between 13 and 16 years of age, and on entry, reading ages ranged from below 7 years 3 months to 10 years.

I have chosen the title "The Practices of a Practising Teacher", because the articles which I have found most interesting and useful in *The Aboriginal Child at School*, are those which have been directly concerned with what happens in the classroom, and I hope that my thoughts may similarly strike a chord in other teachers. I think that a teacher in a job such as mine needs a lot of love, the ability to understand individuals and endless patience. I am conscious of making mistakes, but learning from them.

I am also conscious of, and grateful for, support, for this is essential. The three of us teaching core subjects to our 8A, 8B and 9/3, vary in personality, strengths and methods, but we all care about our children, and have come to respect each other because we contribute different abilities and ideas for our mutual benefit. In turn, we are grateful to the two Aboriginal aides, one of whom is mainly concerned with counselling, and the other giving practical assistance in the classroom. One of my colleagues has introduced the tutoring of our children by older Aboriginal and Islander students, and this is proving very successful. The administration is approving, and the inspectorate approachable and positively helpful.

At the beginning I soon realised that many of the children had had so many failure experiences and the school environment was so alien, that they were almost invariably disinterested in what I had to offer. I found day to day teaching very hard; I had at least brought the children out of the situation in which they went to a new room and a new teacher for each subject, but I had to school myself to adopting new approaches to teaching, and I had very few materials.

I have found it necessary to treat each child individually, so that at times 18 on roll is far too many. In Maths for example, I go back to basics and find what each child can do. Then, because so many have been unable to cope at primary school, I need to be sure to provide plenty of work at which they can succeed, even if this means, as it has in a couple of cases, simple addition only at first. In teaching new stages, say, subtraction with a carrying figure, I not only have to find a time when I can teach a child on his own, but also a time when he is positively receptive. I have discovered that most of my children need one-to-one assistance. Sometimes they will respond to small group teaching and sometimes to whole class situations, but this is after several months together.

At the same time, they all like to do the same general work sheets, and will often help each other.

The patience, of which I wrote earlier, is necessary in explaining many times what seems obvious to most adolescents. Sometimes this is a language barrier but not always. My most capable girl, who can now write a three paragraph composition with few mistakes, said during a discussion after we had read a play about Snow White, "Oh! I thought it was a true story". I am matter of fact and welcoming about all enquiries and problems. The first thing I had to teach one 13 year old boy was how to tie his shoe laces - mummy always did it until then.

I hardly need add that I came to understand that I had to teach my children to do things which we take for granted in the standard secondary classroom in an urban area. For example, only one child could 'read' cinema advertisements in the local newspaper. I have produced worksheets (I produce endless worksheets!) designed to teach them to find their way about the local paper, the telephone directory, T.V. and radio programs, the city (with street maps), the Post Office..... We had a visit by an Islander health officer, have been shown round the Base Hospital, and have attended the Blood Bank, where I donated blood with the class grouped round me.

I try to teach along lines of practical application, approach-decimals through money, for example. I have also discovered that I can teach a receptive group (this year's class but not last year's) some of the standard Grade 8 work, such as Greeks and Romans in history, through work sheets which are of the word game type coupled with the use of film strips and cassettes and other audio visual aids provided by the library which has given me magnificent support. My problem now is, not that the students are apathetic, but that they are clamouring for guidance and become impatient if my immediate attention is not forthcoming.

I also have to tune in to their states of mind, individually and collectively. I always have several pieces of work prepared and am ready to change direction at any time. One 'bon mot' I heard from an experienced teacher at the seminar I attended just before I took on this work was, "*Let the children teach you*". I bear this in mind daily.

Work programs are organized - plans in plenty - but these, in my experience, must go hand in hand with a willingness to adapt,

hour by hour, day by day and term by term, as understanding increases.

Training in standards acceptable in an urban community is an endless task too. Very few say, "Please" or "Thank you", without being reminded. Not pushing, not snatching, not interrupting (teacher or other pupils), not quarrelling, not teasing hurtfully, not shouting, not swearing, even not spitting (fortunately in one case only) have to be reinforced constantly. Sorry to sound so negative here, but the ploy of redirecting attention is not always the answer. We work daily towards an awareness of the need to care for possessions, our own and other people's, but still, lesson by lesson, have a lost pencil problem!

My job is not easy. My social life has narrowed since 1975 and the number of my recreation activities has decreased. Frequently I arrive home exhausted - which is probably why I have taken nearly two years to put pen to paper. However, I enjoy a degree of that elusive sensation, job satisfaction. I feel that I am at least trying to do something which badly needs doing - fulfilling a need in a neglected area.

This is very subjective, but I make no apology, because teaching demands personal involvement, and I am daily and deeply concerned with and about my children.

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EDUCATIONAL TOUR OF SYDNEY AND CANBERRA



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The tour was undertaken to take advantage of the \$200 per head travel allowance allotted each Aboriginal and Islander student as a part of their yearly Federal Grant. As the majority of Weipa North Grade 8 Aboriginal and Islander students are in a special class, we felt we were not going against the aims of the grants system, which is to ensure the Aboriginal and Islander students the same chance to join school tours as other students.