



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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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.

AIMS

In general terms the aim of the tour was to provide the students with experiences which they will be able to draw upon in future High School studies. The High School curriculum in all study areas makes basic assumptions about the students range of experience which often just do not apply to students in isolated areas. Ten days away is obviously too short to completely fill in the gaps in experience taken for granted by students in more populous areas. Here I am not suggesting the students in Weipa lack a range of experience. In some fields their experience could be richer and more varied than urban students. (In fact I have often amazed them by my ignorance in some areas.) It is more an indictment of the inflexibility of the High School system that this experience is largely ignored.

It has also been pointed out that European students in Weipa are just as isolated as the Aboriginal and Islander students. This is so, and I would have been delighted to have taken a mixed group had this been possible. However, in Weipa, employees and their families have access to air travel vouchers, so each year most of the European students do travel to east coast towns and cities. Aboriginal and Islander families who are employees of Comalco have the same opportunities but often do not have the personal and family contacts to facilitate travel in southern areas.

FUND RAISING

The final cost of the tour was \$332 per student, so extra funds were needed. Although it seemed difficult at the time, I feel it was one of the most important aspects of the tour that the students felt they had made a large contribution to their travel costs. They also undertook the trip with a realistic view of the costs involved.

The money was raised by running raffles, selling lucky number tickets, selling food at the Weipa South Community picture nights and holding disco nights at the High School. Each family donated \$40 and the Weipa South Council made a generous donation from the community funds. Other help came from the Principal of the Weipa North State School, Mr R. Phipps, and members of the community. A donation was made by the Weipa Lions Club, which we put to use to pay for tickets to *Storm Boy*, and an evening at a Chinese restaurant.

SUPERVISION

Two teachers accompanied seventeen students. A teacher aide from the Jessica Point State School, whose son was one of the

students involved, was going to be the second teacher, but unfortunately she was unwell, and Mrs Joyce Charger from the Napranum Kindergarten stepped in to save the day. In retrospect, some situations would have been easier if there had been a male teacher to supervise the boys. However, on the whole we found two teachers quite adequate.

ITINERARY

All bookings and accommodation arrangements were done by the Queensland Government Tourist Bureau in Cairns. Their assistance was invaluable. They prepared the itinerary in time for us to submit it to the Education Department as part of the grant application.

THE TOUR'

On Thursday 20th October, we flew from Weipa to Sydney, and were collected by a bus at Mascot Airport, from where we were taken to the Commonwealth Hostel at Coogee. The students were impressed by the distance we had covered in a day. The Ansett hostesses provided each with a large map of Australia showing Ansett's air routes. They also gave the students the cream cakes left over from First Class.

Everywhere we went people took an interest in the students. By the end of the tour I could see what I can only describe as a *remarkable* increase in self-confidence and self-expression in a number of the students - one girl from Weipa South in particular. I can only put this down to the fact that for nine days they had VIP treatment and not once were they made to feel they did not come up to the mark (except as a result of my disciplinary actions, which, under the circumstances, did not worry them unduly). This in itself was a unique experience for some of the students who live as they do on the edge of an affluent mining community.

That evening at the hostel we found many people from all over the world, including many from Black nations, were also staying there. Fijian, New Guinean and African people, among others, befriended the students during our stay. The students were able to see Black people succeeding in a wide range of roles from workers and university students to business-men and scientists. The students were obviously awed by the stature and dignity of these people, and the obvious pride they had in their own heritage. This was made apparent by the way they talked about their homes, the languages they spoke and the beautiful clothes, often traditional dyes and fabrics, they wore. There were also large numbers of

European migrants speaking foreign languages and obviously from different cultures. This is an important experience for people who often are made to feel they are different from the 'norm', to find that there is no norm, and to discover the basically multi-cultural nature of modern Australian society.

For some students on that first night, it was enough to stand at the windows and be amazed by the sea of lights going to the horizon. A couple of students were quite afraid and had to be reassured.

The next day, the Sydney branch of Comalco's Public Relations took us out to their Yennora plant where the refined aluminium is rolled and extruded, and where countless soft drink cans are made. It was interesting to see where Weipa Bauxite ends up. The mountains of Coke cans and the conveyor belts carrying them, were an exciting sight. There was also an interesting and well-made film on the collection and recycling of used soft drink cans.

We then visited the Aboriginal and Islander Dance Program at their City Road studio. The dance students performed for us. We had met a couple of them before when they had visited Weipa - one was the sister of one of our students and from Weipa herself, so it was good to see familiar faces, as well as their high standard performance to a Marcia Hines record.

Comalco then gave us a wonderful evening on their boat, taking us around Sydney Harbour at sunset. As well as the familiar sights of Sydney, we saw two navy submarines, and some students tried skippering the boat. Margaret Valadian joined us for the boat trip and beautiful meal on board, and we were pleased to see her. This was also our first experience of real cold, and some students took off their coats so they could feel it better!

On Saturday we braved the Sydney public transport system on our own and travelled to the city by bus. We were very lucky to be accompanied by two men from New Guinea who were also staying at the Hostel. They helped in the rather difficult bus-catching and shopping expedition. The size of Sydney, the high and crammed buildings, going up and down David Jones' escalators, and the quantity and quality of things to buy in Sydney were all noted. We then took in the matinee of *Storm Boy*. We had read the book at school and the students really enjoyed the film. There was comment on the parts that departed from the book. An exciting trip on the double-decker train to Circular Quay was next. We were lucky to be joined by members of the dance group by then, and they helped the students with this very new, and for some, frightening experience.

After lunch at the Rocks, a ferry trip to the Zoo was very popular. We went out for dinner at Dixon Street's Chinatown and caught taxis back home. On this day more than any other, the students were made aware of the need to be able to read maps, timetables, signposts, menus and other kinds of written directions.

After the first two busy days we needed to slow down, and spent a restful Sunday morning catching up on washing, and talking with other residents. I think we should have put aside even more time for rest and reflection, but this is difficult to do in such limited time.

Some of the students wanted to come with me to a Pop concert held at Sydney University. Mrs Charger remained with the rest at the Hostel. At the concert we saw some favourite Countdown stars, and also shared the feeling of community and excitement which is generated at these huge gatherings. It was also exciting to be part of a live show done by and for young people. We met members of the Dance group there and enjoyed the concert with them.

Early on Monday morning a bus arrived to take us to Canberra. We were very fortunate to have a very helpful and experienced driver who was able to draw the most out of the time we had.

Everyone noticed the small farms, with grain crops, dairies and sheep - for some, the first sheep they had ever seen. We visited "Tralee" Station on the outskirts of Canberra, where they showed us a sheep dog at work, shearing, and many native animals, including wombats. There was also boomerang throwing.

On Tuesday, we saw the sights of Canberra, the War Memorial, Serbian Church with its magnificent painted ceiling, the Mint and the National Library. We also drove past the Embassies with their various styles of national architecture. A student from the Australian National University came with us and he helped make it a very interesting and lively tour. The students tired easily of looking at buildings and things, but they never tired of meeting new people and trying them out, plying them with questions about themselves, and getting to know them. I would have liked very much to have visited a school so that they could have seen other students of their own age. There seemed to be a growing awareness that Weipa was not typical of the Australian 'Experience', and that being an Australian can mean any number of things.

Also on Tuesday, we were invited to have lunch at Parliament House with Mr Viner, the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, at the invitation of Mr David Thomson, the Member for Leichardt. Brushed

and dressed up, we arrived at Parliament House for a VIP's welcome and an enormous meal in the member's dining room. The students were not very awed by the dignitaries they were meeting, though as usual they took a great interest in observing, and for the less shy ones, meeting and talking to new and different people. The most exciting thing at Parliament House for some were huge silver bowls filled with beautiful roses. The girls could not resist the colour and perfume (tropical flowers rarely have any perfume and never a strong one) and they put the flowers in their hair. This turned heads and drew a lot of admiration when we later entered a packed King's Hall, though I think the girls were largely unaware of the effect they had.

Although I had talked in class about Parliament and the Federal Government, and given them notes and diagrams, most of the students had obviously found it all too complex and did not really appreciate the significance of Parliament and Parliamentarians. They have been terribly confused by the media and it was all I could do to convince them that John Kerr was not the Prime Minister. Seeing Mr Fraser and Mr Whitlam seated opposite each other at least cleared this up when we went into Question Time for a short while. A few boys fell asleep with the effects of a busy day, lots of food and long words, but for many of the students it was an enlightening experience. The debate was fairly trivial, mainly election speculation, but the more aware students were interested in a question put to Mr Viner about Aboriginal people in Redfern, and a few began to grasp the principles of representative government.

I could have done far more preparation on Government, but without confusing them, it was almost impossible to go further than Government versus Opposition, and Prime Minister versus Leader of the Opposition. The Senate was far beyond them, and although we had the opportunity, I did not even attempt to take them in there - it would only have produced a lot of confusion in their minds at that stage. I became convinced that the principles of Government must be clearly presented to students all through their school studies, to create educated voters. I was not aware of the great difficulty they found trying to understand it all.

The bus driver then took us to see the view of Canberra from Mt Ainslie, which precipitated discussions on town planning as they noticed all the ordered lines and circles. Comparisons were made with Weipa, perhaps even more 'planned' than Canberra. Some students felt Canberra was inferior to Sydney because it did not look enough like a city. It had too many trees and gardens.

In the evening we went to a circus with some local Canberra school children. The students were very pleased to be independent of their teachers and to have some locals to go off with. When the monkey got out, some ran back in a hurry. Some weeks later in Weipa, the students rushed to tell me that the same circus was on TV. It thrilled them to have seen something in the flesh that others were seeing on TV. Seeing elephants, camels, tigers, trapeze artists, donkeys, clowns etc. also opened to reality a whole vocabulary and situation often taken for granted in school material. This was apart from experiencing the timeless delight of circus entertainment.

Wednesday was the trip to the Snowy Mountains to look for *SNOW*. We were lucky to find a big drift left in the Perisher Valley, and the students had a wonderful time playing in it and enjoying the new sensation of being icy cold. The high mountains impressed them, but "seeing snow" was the biggest talking point after we came home.

That evening we went to a barbecue in a private home with a big garden. This made a very strong impression on the students. They had met some of the family at the circus the evening before and felt as if they were really among friends. We had a lot of trouble convincing them it was time to go home. One boy, who has really just become an independent reader this year and can be quite difficult in class, was taught to play chess that night, and when he returned was seen concentrating for quite long periods of time playing chess with teachers and students at Weipa.

On Thursday we had to drive back to Sydney and catch the plane to Cairns. We drove to Sydney via the spectacular Macquarie Pass on the Illawarra Highway. Some were worried that we would go over the edge. Such mountainous country is such a direct contrast to the Weipa landscape.

They also had a swim in the surf at Wollongong, which was a very new and exciting experience, and a lot of fun once the fear of the breaking waves was overcome. We had driven through the huge BHP complex at Pt Kembla and, although not over impressed with the steelworks (Weipa's plant had taken the edge off that) one boy was heard to ask whether "that dirty air" didn't make people sick when they breathed it.

Returning to Cairns we were back in home territory. That night some students visited relatives and friends and we had a relaxing day on Green Island looking at coral and fish to buffer the return to Weipa on Saturday.

COMMENTS

Two difficulties arose as far as discipline was concerned. The first was that most of the students, especially the boys, would not be convinced that to get up at 6 or 7 a.m. it was necessary to be in bed by 9 or 10 p.m. Also, that staying up late often disturbed others in a hostel living situation. Obviously they were not used to these hours, and had not developed sleeping habits to make it easy to operate to this timetable. Some just could not fall asleep before 1 or 2 a.m., even if they were trying to be obedient. Perhaps some of the school problems of the Weipa South students can be traced to a lack of regular sleeping hours. The other problem was that some students did not realise that you do not wander off in an unknown city alone without getting lost. But this was, after all, one of the things they had to find out.

They also often could not regulate their eating habits and filled themselves with soft drinks, chips and the like, and often could not eat the more than substantial meals provided by the hostels. Even though we pointed it out to them, they could not understand how much time and money they were wasting on very poor food when such a better alternative was available.

Not all the students were from the Weipa South Community. Some lived in Rocky Point. Invariably these students approached everything with a greater confidence and knowledge of what was expected of them. All these students were girls, and they made a great effort to make the girls from Weipa South feel at ease, and they succeeded. This was good to see, because there is quite a large social gap between the Aboriginal and Islander children of Weipa North and those of Weipa South. Some of the over-exuberance of the others could probably also be put down to the fact that they were boys.

FOLLOW UP

Before we left, each student was given an itinerary and so were their parents. These were prepared by the Queensland Government Tourist Bureau. I also prepared a workbook for each student in which there was space to write down the activities and impressions of each day. All were enthusiastic and attempted to do this. A few were very successful and were very proud of their record when they returned. Others regretted not making a greater effort at the time, as those with completed books were continually reminded of things they had forgotten about. The workbooks also had maps showing the part of Australia we were in, and also maps of the cities.

Most students attempted a project book made up of material from their workbooks and from pamphlets, maps etc. they had picked up en route. A couple of these were excellent. The students were able to make up a whole display of their work, associated with the tour, for Open Night held at the High School towards the end of the year.

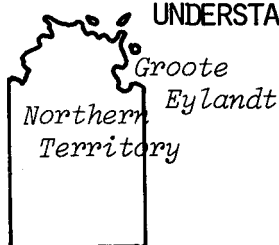
At times, carting around the bulky folders was a nuisance. One or two were lost. Late at night after a big day, having to sit down and write was a trial, but it was an important aspect of the educational nature of the trip. Although at times some were irritated by my insistence, none questioned the importance of doing it. For one particular boy, it was the first time he saw any reason to use writing as a means of keeping a record of something interesting. Perhaps some other teacher could devise some more efficient way of achieving these results.

Probably the most important educational result is the widening of real vocabulary and their stock of references. More generally still, they broadened their impression of themselves as members of a widely-based Australian society and as people with something to offer, as well as being able to learn from others. Some returned critical of their own education, although they could not articulate these new feelings and ideas very well. Above all, many teachers commented on an increase in self-confidence and contribution in class, although a new restlessness had more negative effects on some individuals.

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SPEAKING ENGLISH -

UNDERSTANDING THE ABORIGINAL LEARNER'S PROBLEMS



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In areas where children's first language is an Aboriginal language, the very nature of the Aboriginal language itself poses complex problems, not only for the child learning English but also for the teacher whose basic first step in solving these problems is