



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*.

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PUPIL POWER*

J. Coker,
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Teachers of Aboriginal children have very special responsibilities. You and I know that Aborigines are the poorest, worst housed, least healthy group of people in Australia. More to the point, they are the least educated group of people in the Australian community. Our challenge is to rectify that situation.

We will not get very far if we delude ourselves into thinking that we are working *for* the Aborigines. We have gone past that stage. You and I work *with* Aborigines. That is why we are so committed to the employment of Aboriginal teacher aides; why we have pushed Aboriginal Teacher Training; why we employ Aboriginal home/school co-ordinators; why we have Aboriginal school councils, and why we are forming a State Aboriginal Education Consultative Committee.

It has not always been like that. Let me illustrate the point. Nearly ten years ago, South Australia initiated the first Aboriginal teacher aide employment scheme. The Superintendent of Aboriginal Education at that time invited each of the Principals of the Aboriginal schools to nominate suitable persons to be employed as teacher aides. One Principal responded in this way:

I have contacted the Superintendent of the reserve and together we have agreed that at the present time there are no Aborigines on the reserve whom we could recommend for employment as Teacher Aides.

We both agree that this is an excellent scheme and if suitable persons do become available I will forward their names to the Education Department for immediate registration as Teacher Aides.

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*From a paper presented to teachers of non-traditional Aboriginal children.

Amazing isn't it? "...there are no Aborigines on the Reserve whom we could recommend for employment as Teacher Aides"!

I do not want you to think that I am casting aspersions on the Principal or the Superintendent. The Principal's reply merely reflected an attitude prevalent at that time. Teachers and Superintendents were working *for* Aborigines not *with* Aborigines.

If I asked the current Principal of the school to nominate suitable persons for teacher aide positions, he would respond by the afternoon with a list as long as your arm. We are employing three Aboriginal teacher aides at this school and one of the aides previously employed there is now undertaking a teacher training course. I believe that this is a good example of a significant attitude change.

I now want to discuss your work with Aboriginal children. Those children are the hope of the Aboriginal community. Collectively you have a lot of pupil power in your hands, and I want to suggest how you can work with them for the advantage of the Aboriginal communities.

Too often, in the past, there has been an acceptance of second best from the children because some teachers have been unconvinced of the children's ability. Occasionally it has been an excuse for some superficial teaching. Aboriginal parents want their children to read, write, sing, gather social concepts, spell, draw and compute as well as other children. In our schools we have the quality of teachers, the class sizes, the facilities and the equipment to achieve that result.

You cannot, however, do it alone. You have got to work with the parents, and just as importantly, the parents have to work with you. This isn't easy. Many of you work in Aboriginal communities which are battling to establish some form of self management. Alcohol may be a problem. Often there are many one-parent families or children may be living with grandparents or other relatives. High unemployment is likely to be a demoralizing force which spawns boredom problems like vandalism. And saddest of all, too many of you know communities which, already alienated against the 'outside' world, are often ripped apart by savage inside faction fighting.

How can you work with people in these circumstances?

I would like to suggest that you have a powerful force at your disposal, a phoenix force, for those communities which show some of the symptoms described in the previous paragraph.

Children in South Australia have demonstrated their fire power on many occasions. They have spear-headed the state's successful anti-litter campaign. And when the state was in the grip of a severe drought it was kids who scolded the adult water wasters and pulled us through without overly oppressive water restrictions.

Is it possible that you and the children, working together, could revitalise a community? Could children learn some of those skills of leadership, of group co-operation which appear to have been forgotten?

Where would you start?

Perhaps you could look at ways of increasing child leadership opportunities in your school!

Your school! What about converting *your* school into the children's school? Here is a 'conversion kit' of questions to set you thinking.

- . Do your children conduct school assemblies, have policy meetings, meet visitors and conduct them around the school?
- . Do they mount school displays and identify themselves with particular projects in the school grounds?
- . Do they compose and write out invitations to parents, big brothers and sisters and other school visitors?
- . Do they thank them for visiting?
- . Do they organise music concerts, mini-olympic games, duty rosters and clean-up campaigns?
- . Do your children, even in years two or three, discuss social issues?
- . Do they learn how to work, co-operatively in groups, or is this left to chance?
- . Do they learn how to use each other's strength and how to help the slower or weaker so that the whole team can prosper?
- . Do they set themselves work targets?
- . Do they talk about the responsibilities of citizens?

- . Do they discuss pensions and social services - what they are, who pays for them, who gets them and why?
- . Is budgeting, saving and banking given a practical application?
- . Do children talk about solving problems without aggression?
- . Are alcohol and related problems discussed?
- . Do the children look at litter control problems and set an example in their school?
- . Does the curriculum reinforce positive esteem?
- . Do the children meet and talk with Aboriginal leaders, with Aborigines who are holding down good jobs?
- . Are photographs of nationally or regionally important Aborigines displayed?
- . Do the children have pride in their own personal appearance, and are they encouraged to do so?

I am certain that you could list dozens more questions. And I am certain, that if you have the appropriate percentage of chalk in your veins that identifies you as a teacher, you will have a score of embryonic schemes buzzing around inside your brain at this moment.

Can your pupils lead their community?

I'm sure they can, provided that they are able to identify themselves with *their* school - not your school, or my school, or the Education Department's school.

From their school, the children can learn community skills which will be transmitted through them to the wider Aboriginal community. Most of you are already following these principles but I'd like to see additional emphasis placed on them. You have an opportunity of engaging in a social experiment which could make a significant contribution to Aboriginal society and indeed, to Australian society at large.

REMEMBER! Mobilized pupil power will take a lot of stopping.

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