



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*.

In 2022 *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* transitioned to fully Open Access and this article is available for use under the license conditions below.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

A NEW PROJECT

FOR THE ABORIGINAL EDUCATION COUNCIL

The following article is reprinted with permission from Duran-Duran(Messenger) - Newsletter of the Aboriginal Education Council (N.S.W.), November 1977.*

In the last issue of *Duran-Duran* there was information given on a new project for the Council. The A.E.C. has now applied for an Innovations Grant from the Schools Commission so that this pilot project can become a reality. Hopefully the members of the Innovations Committee of the Commission will recognise its worth in terms of benefits to Aboriginal students and recommend that the project be funded.

For your information we print details of the project as presented to the Commission.

AIM AND RATIONALE:

The aim of the project is to demonstrate the contribution which can be made towards overcoming many of the educational problems encountered by Aboriginal students by providing an effective link between home and school through the employment of Aboriginal Home-School Co-ordinators.

Because of socio-economically depressed home conditions and associated problems, Aboriginal children usually enter school disadvantaged in the crucial areas of language development and other pre-reading skills, and there is plenty of evidence to indicate that this initial retardation becomes progressively worse as they proceed through primary school. A considerable amount of money and effort is now being devoted to assisting Aboriginal students at secondary level, and some innovations have been introduced in an effort to overcome the problems evident at the primary level. In particular, the Aboriginal Teaching Assistants Scheme recently introduced in New South Wales appears to be having very beneficial

The Aboriginal Education Council (N.S.W.) is a voluntary organization, non-political and non-sectarian in character, which was formed in 1964, being then known as the Consultative Committee on Aboriginal Education.

effects in those schools where Aboriginal Teaching Assistants are being employed. Many, if not most, Aboriginal students continue to experience serious learning difficulties, however, and there is clearly a need for further innovation if the basic problems of Aboriginal students are to be overcome.

The Aboriginal Education Council (N.S.W.) has been involved in work with Aboriginal students and their families since 1963. During this time, the Council has initiated a number of innovative projects designed to mitigate the disadvantages suffered by Aboriginal students. These have included:

- an incentive scholarship scheme
- a coaching scheme
- study and homework centres
- a compensatory assistance scheme for schools with a high proportion of Aboriginal students
- a pilot project, which was the fore-runner of the Aboriginal Teaching Assistants Scheme mentioned above.

In the Council's experience, one of the key factors contributing to the perpetuation of learning difficulties amongst Aboriginal students, is the lack of communication between home and school, which results in inadequate understanding on both sides about the nature of the difficulties involved. This problem is not confined to Aboriginal students, of course, but it is particularly marked in their case, not only because of the great gulf between the socio-economic circumstances of most teachers and their Aboriginal pupils, but also because of the very significant cultural differences involved. Our experience has indicated that many of the difficulties encountered by Aboriginal students could be avoided or minimised if more effective links could be established between home and school.

There are, however, formidable practical and attitudinal barriers in the way of achieving such an effective relationship between home and school. Bridging the communication gaps between Aboriginal parents and school staffs is an exacting and time consuming task involving considerable sensitivity and tact and a deep understanding of the cultural and social factors involved. In our opinion, effective communication between home and school concerning the problems of Aboriginal students, is only likely to be achieved in most cases through the offices of Aboriginal persons who have the trust and confidence of both sides, and who are suitably placed to provide the necessary communication linkage as and when required.

In this respect, we have been pleased to observe significant changes in attitudes in schools where Aboriginal Teaching Assistants have been able to make home contacts. The capacity of the Aboriginal Teaching Assistants to become involved in home/school liaison activities is often very limited, however, because they are trained for a role within the classroom, and the demands placed on them within the school setting often leaves them with little or no time available for liaison activities outside the school. In addition, there are many schools with smaller numbers of Aboriginal pupils, which do not have an Aboriginal Teaching Assistant.

There is thus a real need for the services currently being performed by Aboriginal Teaching Assistants in New South Wales schools to be complemented by the appointment, in many areas, of Aboriginal Home-School Co-ordinators, whose primary role would be to establish and maintain liaison between Aboriginal families in the area and the school their children attend.

It is envisaged that, rather than being attached to the staff of a particular school, as is the case with Aboriginal Teaching Assistants, each Aboriginal Home-School Co-ordinator would be responsible for liaison in relation to Aboriginal students enrolled at all the schools (both government and non-government) in a specified geographical area, and would be available to school staffs, school counsellors etc. as required, to assist with the problems of Aboriginal students. This work would undoubtedly involve them in frequent contact with other community agencies, e.g. health workers, housing officers, relevant voluntary organizations.

Although their primary task would be in 'casework' with individual Aboriginal students, there is no reason why they could not be involved in the classroom from time to time, on matters relating to Aboriginal culture, or where such involvement might contribute significantly to overcoming some of the problems of Aboriginal students.

To be really effective, the Home-School Co-ordinator should be regarded as a representative of the Aboriginal community, rather than of the educational establishment. It is desirable, therefore, that the persons appointed as Home-School Co-ordinators should be members of the local Aboriginal community, and that representatives of the local Aboriginal community should have a say in their selection. For the same reason, it is desirable that the Home-School Co-ordinator should remain outside the 'power structure' of the education systems as far as possible; it is therefore proposed that each Home-School Co-ordinator should work in close collaboration with a local School Counsellor - probably the person best able to provide the Home-School Co-ordinator with advice and

assistance, without causing her/him to become too closely identified with the authority structure of the systems.

In the selection of Home-School Co-ordinators, the emphasis should be placed on personal qualities such as sensitivity, interpersonal skills and motivation, rather than on formal educational qualifications. After appointment, it will be necessary to provide them with both informal and formal training, to enable them to cope effectively with the tasks in which they are involved. It is proposed that persons appointed as Home-School Co-ordinators should attend the Aboriginal Teaching Assistant Training Course at the Department of Adult Education, University of Sydney, if they have not previously done so, whilst on-the-job guidance and support will be available from the Aboriginal Education Council on the one hand, and from the local School Counsellor and the various school staffs on the other.

It is of considerable interest to note that a strategy similar to that proposed above has been adopted in the Western Provinces of Canada in dealing with the educational problems of Native Indian students in that area of Canada. In addition to employing Native Indian Teaching Assistants in specific schools, the practice has developed over the past 7 - 8 years of also employing Native Indian Home-School Co-ordinators, whose task is to maintain liaison between the Indian community and the schools in a particular area, along lines generally similar to those being proposed here. The effectiveness of this strategy is attested by the fact that, in British Columbia where the movement started, the number of Native Indian Home-School Co-ordinators has grown from one in 1969, to some 120 in 1977, and that the idea has also been widely adopted in the other Western Provinces of Canada. (The foregoing information was provided by Associate Professor Arthur J. More, Ph.D., Chairman, Native Indian Teacher Education Program, Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia, who is currently a visiting scholar with the Department of Adult Education, University of Sydney.) Although the plan for the present project was originally developed without prior knowledge of these Canadian developments, it is reassuring to know that the basic strategy proposed has already been tried out in closely parallel circumstances elsewhere and found valid.

DESCRIPTION AND PLAN OF THE PROJECT **

The plan is for a pilot program to demonstrate the value of the Aboriginal Home/School Co-ordinator concept. Two Home/School Co-ordinators have been appointed at this stage :

*Mrs Avis Ivanoff, (formerly Aboriginal teaching assistant at Marrickville Girls High School and previously at Narrandera Primary) was appointed Home/School Co-ordinator for the Redfern/Marrickville area on 20th March.

**Mrs Mary Button, (formerly Aboriginal teaching assistant at Kempsey South Primary School) was appointed Home/School Co-ordinator in the Kempsey area on 7th April.

Both Home/School Co-ordinators spent the first weeks following their appointment in establishing contact with the departmental and non-departmental schools and with the other Aboriginal community services in their respective areas. During the week 24-28 April they attended a special training course conducted for them at the Department of Adult Education, University of Sydney, by Dr Art More.

No firm decision has yet been reached on the most suitable area for the appointment of the third Home/School Co-ordinator, and discussions are continuing with a wide range of people on this matter.

Provisional arrangements have already been made for the Home/School Co-ordinator in the inner city area to work in conjunction with School Counsellors in the area who enthusiastically support the project and who have both volunteered to accept such involvement. Similar arrangements will also be made in the country areas selected for the project.

Each of the Home/School Co-ordinators will be required to keep a detailed record of her activities, and regular reviews will be made of progress and problems by the Project Director with each Home/School Co-ordinator and also with the School Counsellors and school staffs with whom they are involved. The reactions of Aboriginal students and parents to the program will also be obtained through the medium of a brief conference, which will be conducted in each area where a Home/School Co-ordinator is located, in the 3rd term of each year.

*Anyone wishing to contact Mrs Ivanoff or to obtain further information about the project should ring the Aboriginal Education Council office (660-5696) Tues-Thurs, 9am-5pm, or outside these hours, the Project Co-ordinator (John Skelton) on 41.6707.

**Anyone wishing to contact Mrs Button or to obtain further information about the project should ring South Kempsey Primary School (065) 62.5303.

The Home/School Co-ordinator should be seen as working in close collaboration with a local school counsellor, but servicing all the schools and Aboriginal families in a given geographical area, as the need arises. Other school counsellors, school principals, and individual teachers could request the services of the Home/School Co-ordinator. The duties of the Home/School Co-ordinator would need to be organised in such a way as to allow a flexible response to the needs of Aboriginal students as they arise, and they should be allowed a high degree of autonomy in structuring their work so as to best meet the needs of Aborigines. The range of duties could include:

- 1) Home visits.
- 2) Encouraging Aboriginal parents to make contact with the school and so help them to reach an understanding of the educational aims and objectives of the school.
- 3) Helping in the transition from primary to secondary school.
- 4) Assisting newly arrived Aboriginal families to make the necessary arrangements for enrolment at schools.
- 5) Making contact with mothers of pre-school children and helping them to make the necessary arrangements for enrolment at school.
- 6) Working with Community Health Workers, Departmental Education Officers, relevant voluntary organizations and others, to assist the Aboriginal parents to develop a greater understanding of those agencies which are available within the community and which can assist them.
- 7) Helping to overcome the natural Aboriginal suspicion of authority and helping the teachers to better understand the behavioural problems and home values of the Aboriginal students.
- 8) Any other general community contact as thought to be desirable.

*** The description and plan of the project did not appear in Duran-Duran but was supplied by The Aboriginal Education Council (N.S.W), so that we could present an up-to-date report on the project.*

.....