



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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ACROSS AUSTRALIA.....

FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER



D. Road,
Aboriginal Education
Services,
Education Dept. of Victoria,
Melbourne.

ABORIGINAL EDUCATION & INNOVATION

THE DIFFICULTIES OF BEING AN INNOVATOR

All of us in the broad field of Aboriginal education - teachers, aides, administrators - are innovators. For the first time there is an effort being made to modify the school system to cater for the needs and interests of Aboriginal students and parents - individualized treatment, bilingual teaching, meaningful consultation with the Aboriginal community, new studies in Aboriginal culture and Australian history. Seminars and teacher training, consultation on books and curriculum in preparation, provision of special resource teachers and Aboriginal teacher aides and a number of initiatives begun at individual schools by resource teachers and teacher aides themselves, are the means of change.

Innovation brings difficulties for the innovators, whatever field it is in. It is rare for new ideas to go into practice smoothly, because new ideas generally replace *old* ideas and old, established ideas have their followers. Quite often there will be a vested interest involved. Vested interests in education do not often involve money or profits but they do involve time and effort, and sometimes reputations. People don't like hearing that some practices or beliefs they have spent great effort in developing, or learning, are now regarded as obsolete. So they resist. They resist change. To be able to handle such people is just one of the extra demands made on innovators. It calls for patience, the ability to remain firm in your own beliefs while trying to win people over. It calls for flexibility in your own plans where discussion reveals shortcomings.

Innovation also means an increased workload. Explaining to teachers, principals, students, parents and curriculum developers takes time. Preparing submissions takes time. Drawing up detailed

action plans for any education program takes time. As education is funded by government and as innovations create interest among colleagues, report writing becomes part of the job - far more than when well-known practices are being followed. Finding solutions to problems which arise along the way takes more time than usual because there are no precedents to follow.

There will also be frustration when the sort of equipment or materials required for the innovation are not in existence or are not available. Often there will be no established channels for getting such things.

There is often a lack of support services and people which the innovator can draw on. They do not exist because the needs of the new program have not yet become clear to the government administrators who set up support services. Sometimes the innovator will sense a lack of support, full stop. Even a likely sympathiser or constructive adviser might not be about. This is when the innovator will need to draw on his or her own vision, own private dream, of what the new program will be like when it is working well. We could say that the innovator also needs to be able to dream a bit. Yet he must remain intensely practical.

It is not easy to be an innovator. It requires much energy, perseverance and a clear vision of what you are aiming at. In Aboriginal education, we are all innovators.

JILL PATTENDEN - RESOURCE TEACHER INNOVATOR

Jill is a resource teacher at Swan Hill and one of our most experienced. She began with us after doing research on adapting school work to Aboriginal students' needs in a pilot project at Alice Springs. There she came to believe that education for literacy and other skills in European-style education would not be effectively conveyed by a teacher working from the classroom alone, but his or her work needed to relate to the Aboriginal community outside the school. Now, in her work at Swan Hill, Jill works outside the school as much as she does in it, and with the principal's support.

In recent months, she has been making a determined effort to get more contact and real communication between Aboriginal parents and the teachers. She has arranged occasions such as afternoon teas for Aboriginal parents at the school, where there was a limited amount of participation only. Better, she also organized some teachers to meet with parents away from the school following a

request from Aboriginal parents to have such a meeting. It is requests like this, coming from Aboriginal parents themselves, which make her feel there has been a measure of success. And yet, she sees that the problem of schools and Aboriginal parents not communicating still remains. In the words of her report of May, 1978:

Progress in liaison is still slow. During parent-teacher interviews, there was some response but many parents are still not able to approach the teacher in this situation. The opportunity has been made for visits at other times but parents have not taken advantage of this.

Jill has been pleased to see the progress made by Jon Kirby, teacher aide at Swan Hill, in liaison work with Aboriginal parents. Once again, the advantage of being an Aboriginal person yourself when trying to win the confidence of Aboriginal people may be the significant thing here. She does not believe it is impossible for white Australians to establish trust and communication but she finds it does take a long time.

In her own discussions with Aboriginal people around Swan Hill, she has come to the conclusion that they want their children to learn job skills more than anything else. She is not surprised at this but is disappointed that one of the aims in the field - to increase the knowledge and pride in Aboriginal culture among the local Aboriginal communities - is going to be harder to achieve than we thought. Even so, Jill can report some progress among school children. Again, Jon Kirby has brought about communication, with white students as well as Aboriginal. From Jill's report again:

Jon Kirby, Teacher Aide at North, has been taking a unit on Aborigines with two groups, one at Castle Donnington, a two-teacher school and the other in Grade 4 at North Primary. The unit consisted of five or six lessons planned by Jon with my help. It was based on Jon's family background and local Aboriginal history, and meant that Jon had to do a good deal of research and preparation. Unfortunately the compiling of local stories and history has been difficult because the old people are not yet willing to share their knowledge. The unit at Castle Donnington included a trip to Tyntyndyer Homestead as Jon wished the children to see the establishment of that property in the eyes

of the Aborigine. The children responded very well and have appreciated the opportunity to get to know an Aboriginal person.

Finally, we have wrung some advice for new resource teachers and teacher aides from the experienced Jill. She is not the type of person to push advice on to others but agreed to give some tips when it was pointed out how helpful some of them might be for others:

- .. Be prepared to know and use 'the system', play off one department against another, stand on toes.
- .. Don't talk about Aborigines to groups. Introduce an Aboriginal person and get him or her to talk wherever possible.
- .. Your social life is relevant to your job. Mix into the Aboriginal community.
- .. To get along with Aboriginal people -
 - . be prepared to listen;
 - . be patient. Give plenty of time;
 - . allow them to get rid of their aggression.
- .. Avoid organizing meetings in the hope that Aborigines will attend. Instead, get them to organize meetings and be prepared to supply information on request.
- .. Handcraft sessions are a good way to involve Aboriginal women. While there they will want to talk and discuss issues.
- .. Get potentially helpful white people on side, for example:
 - the town librarian
 - the Social Welfare Department
 - hospital sisters
 - big employers
 - special education units
 - Adult Education.

LILLIAN TAMARU - ABORIGINAL TEACHER AIDE - INNOVATOR

Our teacher aides do their job with many different emphases, as we would expect from many different individuals, in many different schools, with many different principals. Most teacher aides have not worked in a school before and so, for many, it has been a testing

time settling into the job. For those with uncomfortable, even disturbing memories of their student days, the task of pioneering a new role in the school system may be further complicated by doubts about the whole school system - its directions and assumptions. Perhaps it is their special responsibility to make teachers and principals aware of how Aboriginal students feel about school and how little it offers them for much of the time. It is not easy to persuade administrators about the inadequacies of 'their' school. It is even harder when the principal and teacher have been at the school for some time before you arrive and you are a newcomer. Teaming up with a sympathetic teacher may be a good tactic to start with for that teacher may be able to suggest who you need to influence and when and where you could best make some impact. This is only one task of the teacher aide, however.

Another part of the role is simply being an understanding Aboriginal person, willing to listen and talk with Aboriginal kids (especially) at the school. Most teacher aides have regarded this as a priority task. And there are others.

But one of the more ambitious tasks which may be easier than we think, is to introduce real Aboriginal culture and history to the school. At many schools there is already a great interest in this among *some* teachers and students, and when people are interested, it is much easier to introduce. Pam Pederson, teacher aide at Bell P.S., has done this with a flourish by organizing a spectacular Aboriginal display for N.A.D.O.C. Week 1978, involving TV and other media coverage and inviting some well known community people, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. At Bell Primary School there was not a child in the school that week who was not aware of Aboriginal culture.

Lillian Tamaru at Dandenong West P.S. has tackled the task differently. Her methods are not widely known, yet she is breaking important new ground. Lillian began at the school during 1977 and very quickly became known to the students and established good relationships with the teachers. She was worried by shortcomings she saw in the teaching of Australian history and longed to correct some of the false impressions created. It was to be some time, however, before she got the chance to talk to the children in the classroom.

How did she manage to get some Aboriginal Studies started? She noticed the interest created by an Aboriginal section in an International Day display at the school. She noticed that as an

Aboriginal person, she could make a certain impact with the kids. She tried lunchtime yard duty and found she was being asked question after question by children who came up to her. She began thinking how valuable it could be to be able to talk to a large group in a classroom. Then one of the teachers became aware of her interest and asked her to talk with his Grade 5 students in the classroom. The talk was to be about Aboriginal people along lines of Lillian's own choosing. It went well. The kids enjoyed it and were interested to learn. Lillian enjoyed it too. The hard work of preparation had paid off. That class wanted to know more from Lillian and so another session was arranged for the following week. Then another. Soon yet another teacher wanted her to extend the talks to her class. Right now, Lillian is facing up to a whole series of sessions. These will not only see Lillian talking, but the children will also be involved in all sorts of learning activities, for she realizes that kids can only listen to someone else talking for a limited time before 'tuning out'. There are other ways kids can learn, she says, and wants to get some variety into these sessions. This does require some careful planning but she was able to use the skills of trained teachers who are exercising a paid professional responsibility for their students anyway. Both the teacher aide and the teacher tend to find the whole thing a stimulating experience.

One of the observations made by Lillian is how an increased pride in her own race has come about while finding out more information about Aboriginal culture. When we have to live within a predominant European culture it is too easy to overlook the enormous benefits and attractions of traditional Aboriginal life. And we certainly fail to realize just how complex, how subtle and how sensible were its social laws and practice. The deeper you go into learning about it the greater the admiration becomes, Lillian says. This has been her experience even though, as one of Sir Douglas Nicholls' daughters, she comes from a family which was never ignorant of and certainly did not try to hide its Aboriginality. Most of all, she would love to see all Aboriginal parents in Victoria learning more about Aboriginal culture and history then, with increasing pride, telling their children about it. She tells her own kids a lot and finds they will ask questions about it when they know she will answer or find out so that the question can be answered later.

She has a few tips for other teacher aides who are trying to sort out their proper role. "We have to learn from each other", she says with typical candour, "and that includes me as a learner too."

Lillian's own thoughts:

- .. Use your own children, if you have any, as a guide how to talk to kids at the school.
- .. Expect to make some mistakes to begin with. Next time you will improve.
- .. Remember there is a telephone with which you can seek advice from friends.
- .. If you are giving a talk on Aboriginal culture or history or life today, plan out how you will speak, how to answer particular questions.
- .. Prepare answers to questions you are likely to be asked.
- .. Work at it to make it good.
- .. Don't become *too* professional though. Something valuable can be lost.
- .. Be willing to do yard duty, or help with it, so you can mix with the kids. The Aboriginal kids need you to talk with and the white kids can ask questions.
- .. There is a lot of trial and error in this job.
- .. If you cannot answer a question, tell the person you will find out and give them an answer next day.
- .. If you ever give a talk, get what help you can and prepare at home -
 - . read to find particular answers to questions,
 - . write a few summaries.
- .. Learn how to use some of the teaching equipment in the school, e.g. an overhead projector.
- .. Teachers will help if approached in the right way.
- .. It is important to have the staff behind you. It helps if you are friendly.
- .. Teaching about Uluru (Ayers Rock) is a good way to start. By insisting that the name is Uluru the students will soon refer to it by that name.

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