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ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER VIEWS

ABORIGINAL HOME/SCHOOL VISITOR



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(Mr Lewis O'Brien, Aboriginal Home/School Visitor with the South Australian Education Department, shares some of his experiences and thoughts with us.)

In the time I have been employed as a home/school visitor, I have visited 55 schools and have seen about 91 Aboriginal students. I have talked to principals and have spoken about Aboriginals to groups of children in some of the High Schools. I have attended a number of committees that one finds that one gets involved in once one gets into Aboriginal affairs. In addition, I have spoken to different groups of people at colleges, at teachers' councils, and also at the Aboriginal Educational Seminar for Aboriginal children which was held in April.*

I think about 188 students attended that seminar during the three day period, and even the bus strike did not affect the children's attendance, which I thought was great. The seminar was organized by John Lunnay, a consultant in Aboriginal education, with whom I work rather closely. It was a great success, with people on the program like Wandjuk Marika and David Gulpilil, Colin Thiele and Dora Hunter, Sonny Morey, Sid Jackson, Kay Hampton, Michael Ahmad, Brian Dickson, Eva Johnson, Leila Rankin and Des Price. During the seminar, I accompanied some of the students on visits to different places, like the Aboriginal Community College, the Task Force at the South Australian Institute of Technology, Torrens College of Advanced Education where some Aboriginal students are enrolled in the Teacher Education program, the Community Centre, the Aboriginal Health Unit and D.A.A. Over all, I feel it was very successful.

In my travellings around the different schools, I have been

*See article by J. Lunnay in *The Aboriginal Child at School*, Vol.6 No 4.

to a junior primary where the teachers have been taken up with the brightness and the keenness of the Aboriginal children. However, the mothers say, "But wait until later on - they'll finish up the same." So it appears that at this junior primary level everything is O.K., but when they get further up the school they have difficulties and they do not function too well at high school levels.

I think all children, irrespective of whether they are Aboriginals or not, have different types of learning difficulties. It is only that some are given chances to get over them. Aboriginals, because of their inability to talk well, and because they come from a background where people do not talk and ask questions, find it difficult to get over their problem areas. I believe that we Aboriginal people have a different approach to thinking and that makes it a little bit awkward. Tutors should work in the primary area so that the children could be looked at one to one, to see what their particular problems are, and to see if some assistance could be given them to overcome their difficulties. Once they can overcome their difficulties they may be able to progress. Of course, there are other things that come into it, but at least help would give them a chance.

I notice in my reading that some people say that, generally speaking, Aboriginal thought is non-scientific. I always question this sort of attack on Aboriginal minds because people tend to think in terms of themselves and the way they think. We should remember that observation can also be scientific, or so De Bono says in his books. Aboriginal people observe very well.

Some people say, why don't Aboriginals achieve - if they're so bright why don't they do things? Well, I think that's the reason why I took on this job as Aboriginal school visitor. We are different in some ways. We've never been used to material things and that's why it's difficult for us to go into this other world of material thinking and progress and positiveness and fighting for positions and that sort of thing. But we *can* learn. In 1938 the Aboriginal Progress Association (I think it was in Sydney somewhere) said -

Give our children the same chances as your own,
and they will do as well as white children.

I remember, too, seeing a program on T.V. where Aboriginal children in free play time played better than white children. The white children broke brooms, and they played with guns only. By contrast everyone of the Aboriginal children played with every article in the room; they were interesting to watch and they outscored, I felt, the other groups (Australian and European) by a mile.

I have also read somewhere that in 1850, an Aboriginal at Sydney College, took prizes, spoke good Latin, and behaved as a gentleman in elegant society. But he wished he had never been taken out of the bush and educated, because he found that he wasn't looked on as a white man and he couldn't, after his training, fit in very well with his own people's way of living.

So there are problems. It's all very well to say "get educated". We must ask, "what for?".

Aboriginal parents find it hard to go up to the school because they do not understand what the teachers say. I know how they feel, because when I started this job it was very hard at the beginning, because, as always, people in different areas of work use different terminology. I had been a fitter before I came into this job, and I found the terminology a little bit bewildering at the beginning; I became used to it. It's like all things, it's just a matter of getting used to the words and of interpreting what the people mean.

At the beginning, John Lunnay worked with me and Lois, who is the other person employed as a home school/visitor in March, 1977. We met for three days with teachers' councils with all their sort of high level thinking - something we were not used to. So we could see why the parents in their turn were afraid to go to school - because they find it hard to understand the terminology that is used. However, I have taken parents to the school, and once they get used to it, and provided they are with somebody they know, they can get along reasonably well with the teachers. This, I think, is important. We have to help people to overcome these difficulties. Teachers, too, have to be able to converse ordinarily.

These things can be overcome but it has to be worked on by both sides. I think attitudes of people in general must change. The Aboriginals have to go to school and meet their commitments and see how their children are faring. The teachers believe that parents have to be involved in the schools. Part of my job is, I think, to bring these two groups together, to get attitude change on both sides if I can. I am not going to be any miracle worker, but someone has to be the link person, as it were, and help people to meet on common ground.

Apart from schools, I have visited other sections of the Education Department, and other departments, such as the Department of Community Welfare and the Department of Employment and Industrial Relations. I find it has been very helpful to get to know the people in these different departments because then you get an over

view of the systems. Problems come in all these areas and as a home-school visitor, you need people that you know to talk to so that you can phone them and help to get problems sorted out. This makes the job easier. If you don't know the people in the government departments, then you have to go through the red tape and standard formats, and that causes difficulties. For example, when children are taken off the Secondary Grants Scheme, there is a six weeks period before they are placed back on the grant, and this is a difficult and a long time for the child. I think people have forgotten that in their youth, days were years, and that as we get older days become minutes. And the children do have other problems. For example, a child can't go to school because he hasn't any shoes. I always feel there is a bit of a 'Catch 22' about that, because if they go to school then they can receive the grant and buy shoes, but before they can go to school they need shoes. Also, some of the children are frightened of school. There is no one simple reason; -it is a multiple thing. Perhaps the children have never been to school much and they are pressured into going. Then, when they go, the teachers probably comment, "Ah, you're here at last!", or "How long are you going to stay today?" These things do occur, and the students do get upset.

We all get teased, and probably Aborigines get teased just the same as anyone else, or maybe even more so, but they have to get used to it, I suppose, and that is the sad part, the getting used to all the jibes that are made at school.

Finally, I would like to say that I have found that teachers are very concerned and helpful. If it wasn't for them I think the job would be very difficult. But they all try to help their students as much as they can, which I think is great. I always get a bit amused when they say "I've never heard that before", showing that there is a definite need for knowledge on Aborigines and, I think, a need for more liaison officers. The Department started by employing two, but now there are four of us, which is good.

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