



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.

MOBILE UNIT FOR ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES*

David Westover,
Principal Education Officer,
Aboriginal Education, S.A.

RATIONALE

A mobile education unit was commissioned in 1976 as a completely new concept in the education and advancement programme for Aborigines in South Australia. Previous attempts of institutionalised educational programmes had proved generally unsuccessful as adult Aborigines living in their own lands had not responded well to conventional approaches.

The Department of Further Education accepted the need to preserve and develop Aboriginal society and to provide effective training within that society. As a result, opportunities were offered to adult Aborigines in the north west of the state to acquire domestic and mechanical skills in locations of their own choosing and in a way appropriate and in harmony with traditional life styles.

PERSONNEL

The unit itself consists of a five ton Dodge truck specially fitted as a mobile workshop. It holds a wide range of hand and power tools, arc and gas welding equipment and teaching aids. The equipment was purchased primarily to meet the needs in automotive repair and maintenance and the unit is equipped with all the necessary requirements to set up a workshop either in the open air or using local workshops and facilities. The unit is attached to the Elizabeth Community College which provides an educational and material support service. The truck tows an eight metre air-conditioned caravan which provides living accommodation for the staff, Mr and Mrs R. Greaves and their family.

*Reproduced with permission from *Pivot*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1978.
Publications Branch, Education Dept. of South Australia.

Mr Greaves is a qualified mechanic with considerable experience in the field of adult education, having been involved as a garage manager on an Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory for six years prior to his appointment to the mobile unit. Mr Greaves is ably assisted by Mr Andy Sundown who, after many years as a practical mechanic, instructs in component overhaul. The programme concentrates on teaching mechanical skills through meaningful practical tasks related to vehicles and equipment.

PROCEDURES

Interested persons come to the unit with requests on how to maintain and repair their cars, trucks and mechanical equipment. These requests range through the following. How do you correct a misfire in an engine? How do you make up a gearbox out of a selection of second hand parts, fit a set of piston rings, weld-repair broken shock absorber body anchorages, solder a leaking petrol tank, make a bull bar, remove a clutch housing or broken engine securing studs? How do you get numbers and information to procure new parts?

The staff and the inquirer discuss where the instruction will take place; who is involved with the vehicle; what the person has done to the present stage; what is already known about the problem; what equipment and parts are available; and when the instruction will take place. The person is encouraged to make the decisions on what will be done by putting together his information and that of the instructors. The instructors do not work as motor mechanics fixing people's equipment but seek to assist people by means of co-operation, instruction and advice.

In a given area, the instruction often resembles a large open space method of teaching. The area can be spread over a complete community, within one group area, at one camp, or where the truck and equipment is based.

Two important factors in making these determinations are the most suitable methods of instruction for the individual or group and the best deployment of the instructor's time.

The appropriate skills are demonstrated and relative information discussed. The person is encouraged to handle the function as soon as possible and the instruction is given only for as long as required. If there are a number of people present, the matter of what operations they should perform is referred to the person maintaining the responsibility for the equipment in the teaching project.

The number of people present at any one instruction is determined by the people involved and the figure varies from one to seven or eight people. The number of instructions handled at the same time or on the same day depends on the number of requests, the type of instructions and their locality.

The hours available for teaching are modelled on the conditions existing in the group or community. The instructors are available at all times outside normal meal times and times of rest. If people in the areas do not observe the weekend the instructors attempt to take their rest in short periods at other times.

The time spent in each locality is determined by keeping in contact with tribal authorities or their representatives.

Movements, local requests and the requests received from other areas are continually discussed. Communications are sufficient between tribal groups to allow discussion about the conditions ahead, tribal business in certain areas, likely weather conditions, how many camps will be necessary, suitable places to pull off the road and who will be making contact in the next community.

Mrs Greaves is a qualified nursing sister and is involved in teaching women various craft, health and home management skills. The causes and treatment of various diseases have been discussed from cultural and medical viewpoints and treatment is often conducted in conjunction with an Aboriginal "Wgenkari" doctor.

Craft interest has generally come in small numbers, mostly from people who have had some previous interest in craft. Activities have included wool spinning and dyeing, sewing, tie dyeing and crochet.

Home management has been conducted through discussion and activity, both with individuals and small groups. Discussions have included personal hygiene such as hair care and washing, cooking of various foods and the comparative food values between introduced and traditional foods.

ACCEPTANCE BY TRIBAL PEOPLE

The mobile education resource has been successful in terms of acceptance by tribal Aboriginal people. In the places visited all have requested the return of this educational facility. The requests were made by tribal authorities or through community advisers and responsible Aboriginal people.

People realise the unit is self-contained. It can move to an area and out again as necessary. It moves to the areas on request, stays to cover the group requirements and then moves on. Since the unit moves away, the tribal people can be sure of maintaining their own affairs. People have time to assess the involvement of the unit and work out what they want from the next visit. In this way requests have tended to become more specific and allied to a wider need.

.....

REPORT:

ABORIGINAL ORAL HISTORY CONFERENCE

An Aboriginal Oral History Conference was held at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies on June 16, 17 and 18.

Aborigines and non-Aborigines active in recording and documenting oral history discussed the importance of carrying out this work. In some cases there is special urgency to record the histories of older people while they are still alive. It was also noted that history and its study are ongoing processes and that the opinions and memories of young Aborigines today are important to Aboriginal history and identity. The conference also discussed the importance of Aboriginal history to general Australian social history.

The social relevance of oral history in Aboriginal land claims, for the cultural education of Aboriginal children and in rectifying the ethnocentric slant of Australian history was discussed.

Mr Michael Mace, the Chairman of the Aboriginal and Islander Advisory Committee to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies said :