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ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER TEACHER AIDE INSERVICE PROGRAM

Report on the Q.A.I.T.A.D. Project, 1977-78

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This report, which describes a highly innovative project undertaken by the two authors in full conjunction with and support of the Queensland Department of Education in the professional development of Aboriginal teacher aides in Cape York schools, is in the process of being published. It describes the project in detail, showing how the aides were able to make a considerable contribution to helping teachers understand the community, to assisting the development of the school program and devising culturally appropriate and relevant materials.

Copies of the report can be obtained from Miss M. Valadian, Aboriginal Training & Cultural Institute, P.O.Box 108, Balmain, 2041. The cost is expected to be about \$5.

I would strongly recommend this publication to all teachers who are assisted in their schools by Aboriginal aides.

*We are grateful to the Institute for allowing us to reproduce in this issue of *The Aboriginal Child at School*, Chapter 2 of the report, which analyses some of the factors affecting the school performance of students from Cape York. - Editor.*

2.1 The QAITAD project objectives

The ends and means to be employed in the QAITAD inservice program evolved very slowly. Those involved in the project were constantly reflecting upon and adjusting aspects of the aims, structure, focus and learning process. Nevertheless, the following statement of objectives indicates the broad parameters within which the project was contained throughout its two years of operation.

The broad objective of the project was:

- to develop an inservice model for Aides (QAITAD Inservice Program) that would enable schools to better adjust to local Community aspirations, life style and cultural heritage through the more effective use of Aides.

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The specific aim of the inservice model was to increase the effectiveness of the Aides' role in schools by:

- . increasing the use of the Aides' knowledge, experiences and expertise of the local Community in school policies, programs and classroom teaching,
- . increasing the awareness and knowledge of the cultural differences by teaching staff through publications and staff orientation activities, and
- . promoting the personal development of Aides (through increasing pride in themselves and their cultural heritage, their confidence in themselves and their ability to communicate their knowledge and ideas, their attitude to their work and their standing in the eyes of the teachers).

Details of the inservice program developed are set out in Chapters 3-5 of this report. However, the purpose of this chapter is to alert readers to some of the more important assumptions that underly the rationale for this project.

2.2 School performance of students from Cape York

The school performance of students from Cape York Peninsula Communities was a matter of considerable concern to parents and educators alike. Aboriginal and Islander students' performance in formal subject areas does not compare well with that of most non-Aboriginal children, especially those from the larger towns and cities. In each of the remote Communities visited there had been a small number of students sent to boarding schools or hostels to undertake secondary education. Their academic performance contrasted very poorly with that of most Australian students. This raised a number of basic questions:

- . Why should there be such marked differences and what could be done to remedy the situation?
- . In just what respect were schooling provisions for Aboriginal and Islander children failing?
- . Were the failures essentially child-centred or staff-centred factors?
- . Was it possible for concerned Aborigines and Islanders to contribute to or be involved in the schooling of their children more effectively?

2.3 Theories relevant to Aboriginal and Islander schooling

Three widely accepted theories to account for the educational difficulties experienced by students from culturally different backgrounds to the mainstream population are:

- . the deficit theory -

children suffer from poor vocabulary, limited home background and are disadvantaged socially and economically in comparison to middle class Europeans, therefore schools need to offer special remedial classes and bridging programs, provide tutors etc. The school must supplement and make up for the deficit due to a 'limited' home or 'deficient' social backgrounds.

- . the difference theory -

children are socially, linguistically, and culturally different but not deficient. Schools are geared generally to the middle class European child and often do not know how to make the necessary adjustments to cater for children coming from culturally differing backgrounds. Therefore teachers are required to understand these differences and build separate programs based on the background and childhood experiences of such children and develop teaching styles based upon the ways children have been brought up to think, remember, perceive and solve problems.

- . the conflict and repression theory -

children experience confusion arising from conflicting interests in which a school, often quite unconsciously, destroys the self respect and self image of students from culturally different backgrounds to those of the staff.¹

¹ The quote from "a letter from an American Indian mother" exemplifies the nature of the concerns basic to this viewpoint:

"Dear Teacher:

...What are the stereotypes and untested assumptions that you bring with you into the classroom? How many negative attitudes towards Indians will you put before my child? What values, class prejudices and moral principles do you take for granted as universal? Please remember that 'different from' is not the same as 'worse than' or 'better than', and the yardstick you use to measure your own life satisfactorily may not be appropriate for their lives. The term 'culturally deprived' was invented by well-meaning middle-class whites to describe something they could not understand..."

(Cont. next page)

2.4 Implications of these theories

While the first of the theories regards the limited achievement in Aboriginal education as essentially a child-centred problem (e.g., the child enters school with a deficit in 'standard' English, numeracy experiences etc.) the second and third theories view the educational difficulties as essentially teacher-centred problems. School programs, based on the difference theory require teachers to learn about their students' cultural background and develop school programs based on their home experiences and life style. The conflict and repression theory also suggests that teachers are unwittingly responsible for many of the learning difficulties experienced by culturally different children because of their unawareness of the conflict in values, the impact of teacher attitudes and prejudices and the inevitable tendency to be assimilationist in programming and teaching.

Proponents of these latter two theories argue that teachers of culturally different children need to both learn about the children's background, develop a personal sensitivity to them and appreciation of their culture. Developing awareness to comments or expressions that might inadvertently destroy a child's confidence or self esteem is one example of the implications of the third theory for teacher training and orientation. Solutions to the problem of poor performance by Aboriginal children, in terms of the difference and conflict/repression theories must focus primarily upon the need to change teachers rather than focussing on the deficiencies of students.

2.5 Teacher-centred versus student-centred problems

A tendency of the past has been to interpret the failure of education in Aboriginal and Islander communities largely in terms of the quite obvious English language difficulties experienced by children who are unfamiliar with it or the 'dialect' of English used by teachers. In addition, the generally limited availability of teaching resources based on the daily experiences of these children (with the exception of the two bilingual schools at Aurukun and Edward River) suggests that schooling must be a culturally foreign experience for most students.

Another obvious and critical factor for teaching to be successful is to ensure that staff make special efforts to understand both

(cont. from previous page)

Source: Appendix - *Report of the First National Aboriginal Teacher Aide Three Day Workshop and One Day Seminar*, June 19-22, 1978, ATCI, Copies from P.O.Box 108, Balmain, NSW, 2041.

the cultural and physical world of their students. They should base initial school learning on such experiences. Without an understanding of children and their cultural environment it is unlikely that teachers will be able to develop adequate classroom experiences that utilise the knowledge children have already acquired and be able to move from the known to the less well known. Being unable to find suitable starting points in formal studies for students seems to be a serious teacher-centred problem in many Aboriginal and Islander schools. Therefore teacher-centred, rather than student-centred factors could well be the major reason for schooling difficulties experienced by Cape York Aboriginal and Islander children.

It was argued that if inservice programs were developed on this premise, they may provide a more effective and quicker solution than focussing primarily upon the deficiencies of students. Such an emphasis was also more likely to lead to an interdependent working relationship between teachers and community. In putting forward these arguments, it was not intended to advocate 'either/or' solutions but to indicate where priorities and broad emphasis in remedial efforts should lie.

2.6 Schools as 'islands' in an alien culture

On several occasions it appeared to the authors that schools were essentially 'cultural islands' in the Communities. It was as though children moved from one world to a vastly different one the moment they stepped into the classroom. Readers will recall from several quotes in Chapter 1 that some Aides had indicated that teachers kept largely to themselves after school and did not interact closely with Aides or Community.

Readers will be familiar with the concept of schools becoming integrated into the community life-pulse and drawing heavily on community resources and experiences for every aspect of curriculum¹. Attempts to move in this direction appeared to be limited to the two bilingual schools or to one or two aspects of curriculum. They often proved intermittent rather than a continuous, all pervading focus for Cape York Peninsula schools.

In addition, schools were generally limited in their ability to demonstrate that one of their prime objectives was to serve the local Community. There was little tangible evidence of harmony

¹ See for instance Beare, Hedley. *The city as a school: a plan for education in new towns and cities. Towards the Learning Society.* Australian College of Education, 1975.

between school and Community life, except in the case of the two bilingual schools.

2.7 Schooling based on children's experiences

To those involved with the QAITAD inservice program the following two assumptions seemed to be an obvious starting point:

- . that the children's schooling experiences should be in harmony with their cultural milieu; and
- . that the syllabus and associated resource materials for the lower and middle primary classes (at least) should draw heavily upon the children's own background.

Such assumptions take a school program well beyond any superficial level of offering dance, song, art and craft programs based on the local traditional activities. To apply these principles raises specific questions such as:

- . What experiences have these children had in language and numeracy which could form the basis of their reading and mathematics program?
- . What relationships are there in the children's homes and communities which provide the basis of an appropriate social studies program?
- . What experiences of the local environment have children had that could become the basis for a science curriculum?
- . What other experiences have these children had that could enable schools to establish programs in other areas that would proceed from the known and familiar?

As already indicated, in two of the schools a carefully constructed bilingual program for teaching reading has been developed and these certainly met the above criteria in several of the curriculum areas.¹

¹ In addition, the Queensland Van Leer Language Development Program was specifically based on a knowledge of the language that children brought with them. However, many teachers in the project schools were not familiar with the program; some questioned its appropriateness to Cape York schools; and on the whole it had not been widely or successfully used in these schools.

2.8 Learners of the local culture

In terms of the local culture, non-Aboriginal or non-Islander teachers are very much 'foreigners' in these outback Communities. As one educationist observed, the non-Aboriginal or non-Islander teacher is "at a tremendous professional disadvantage from the outset: he doesn't know what, as a teacher, he needs to know;..."¹ This places staff in the difficult situation of not knowing whether to proceed immediately to teach what they have always done in the past or to acknowledge that there are differences and try to develop new and more appropriate programs and teaching techniques. This latter course naturally involves frustrating delays before the teacher can proceed with any degree of confidence. With appointments generally being for two school years, time is at a premium. Thus being a stranger to the Aboriginal or Islander community milieu severely handicaps staff in their capacity to undertake their professional responsibilities. In addition to these problems, many of these teachers have never taught before, or at the best had only very limited teaching experience.²

One of the Cape York principals vividly described the 'culture shock' experience common to so many new appointees -

...they have never been on an Aboriginal Community and probably imagine a small town. Dismayed at what they find. A lot of Aboriginal people aren't friendly or 'open', 'loving', 'gentle', 'kind', 'welcoming' etc. The first time teachers are sworn at by children knocks them. Photos of the place are glamorised - the reality is - drunks, horrible houses, language that they cannot understand. The teachers get no feedback from teaching and there is no communication - no reaction, just dead silence. Isolation is also a factor - no mail, no radio. For a lot of teachers it takes at least six months before anything rewarding comes out of general teaching.

¹ Hall, L.: Teaching skills in an Aboriginal school. *New Education*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Oct. 1978, p.99.

² In 1980, thirty four out of forty two new teachers for Cape York schools were graduates in their first year out of College. Queensland Department of Education has since introduced a policy to ensure this cannot happen in the future.

2.9 Staff awareness and understanding of children's life and world

Following on from the issues raised in paragraph 2.7, a third assumption can be listed:

- . that teachers need to recognise their own limited understanding and knowledge of the children in these Communities; the limitations of most current curriculum resources; and their need for special help to overcome these professional deficiencies.

While many teachers are fully aware of the implications and the need for cultural knowledge and sensitivity, the reality is that without a teacher inservice program deliberately designed to promote awareness and learning in such areas, little is likely to happen. Many teachers feel reluctant to be seen spending too much time 'down in the camp or village' sometimes fearing that any initiative on their part may be interpreted by the Community as prying and interfering. Learning the local language also has difficulties as it is time consuming and offers little in the way of immediate rewards unless the teacher intends remaining in that particular community for several years. Then too it takes time to become sufficiently conscious and knowledgeable of a cultural world vastly different from one's own. This is especially true of people brought up in a monocultural society or for teachers who only intend remaining in an Aboriginal or Islander community for one or two school years.

Nevertheless, schools have a great deal of professional autonomy in the area of programming. Departmental policy encourages staff to develop learning experiences and materials that utilise children's background. It is therefore somewhat disappointing to find so many teachers using syllabus and materials more appropriate for English speaking children from town or city homes than for the children in their classes. However, this is understandable in the light of the youth and inexperience of the majority of staff appointed to Aboriginal and Islander schools in remote areas. At the stage when staff are still 'learning to be teachers', it is difficult to also expect them to be effective curriculum developers.

2.10 Staff turnover is high

While the limited use of children's language and heritage in school programs is one key factor that almost certainly affects school performance, high turnover of staff is another. In the past, many of the teachers posted were not volunteers and found the professional and social isolation very difficult to handle. As a

consequence one or two schools have experienced up to one hundred per cent staff turnover during a school year. The general average for the isolated Aboriginal and Islander Community schools at that time varied between 70-80% annual turnover.¹ Continuity of programs, in these schools, was a major concern for all educators. High turnover of staff obviously created enormous difficulties and creative programs developed by some teachers were quickly forgotten when they were transferred away. Furthermore any long term benefits accruing from inservice activities for teachers also tended to be lost when the latter were transferred 'south'. Generally speaking few teachers had stayed (or later returned) for a second term of service in these isolated areas.

In view of the many difficulties teachers were experiencing, it seemed appropriate to closely examine the potential of the Aides in terms of their providing continuity in the form of being a core of long term members of school staff.

2.11 Contribution of Aides considered

Many aides have provided an important stability of staffing to their Cape York schools. Each Community school on the Cape York Peninsula employs a number of Aides and in most cases these positions were filled by Aborigines and Islanders recruited from the local Community. Numbers varied according to size of school.

While many Aboriginal and Islander Teacher Aides have stayed for relatively short terms, in all but one school there were small cores of Aides who had been working in their local schools longer than any other members of staff.² Several had worked in these or nearby schools for ten or more years. Many had been untrained classroom teachers for the missions in the pre-government school era. No core of non-Aboriginal members of staff could match such a record of

¹ By 1978 this rate had fallen to figures closer to 50%.

² In a survey of Aboriginal & Islander Classroom Assistants & Urban Aides in Queensland Primary Schools, L.J.Dwyer (Queensland Dept. of Education, Oct.1976), noted that there was a considerable core of Aides who had been employed for two years or more (see Table 4.8) "An examination of this sample reveals that, within this 'core' group there is a very high rate of job retention". (p.23). Table 4.9 also indicated 71% of the sample were twenty six years of age or more.

stability.¹ It therefore seemed that a stable nucleus of long term staff was more likely to be achieved with local Aborigines and Islanders than with non-Aborigines.

Some of these long serving Aides who had worked during the mission era, had carried considerable responsibilities within the schools and in many respects were very experienced members of staff. Furthermore, all Aides had a far better understanding of the cultural and family background of their students than teachers and spoke the children's language fluently or could communicate effectively. The Aides also revealed a significant understanding of the teachers culture and background through a number of their written exercises and workshop discussions.

It was factors such as these which made those involved in this inservice project re-examine the role of the Aides and question whether the emphasis could be changed sufficiently to enable Aides to play a much more central part in schools. For example, could Aides be used to create programs and materials much more responsive to existing community life? Or could Aides play a more significant role in helping new staff adjust and come to grips with the new cultural setting.

2.12 Aides' role in schools is generally limited

At present there are no fully qualified Cape York Peninsula Aborigines or Islanders working in these schools. A number of the Aides are interested in further study opportunities in order to become qualified teachers and it is likely that with Aboriginal and Islander students now graduating from Bamaga High School there will be a steady increase in the numbers entering teacher training programs.² This may also create its own problems. For instance, the general emphasis of formal training may well inhibit many of the strengths Aides already have; it is doubtful that it would acknowledge them or be in a position to give credit for them.

In Cape York schools involved in the QAITAD project the degree of professional involvement and responsibility varied from school to

¹ Average stay of non-Aboriginal and non-Islander staff is two years or less. A few remain for three years or seek another Aboriginal or Islander Community appointment. However, such teachers are relatively few in number.

² There are three high school graduates enrolled in the Teacher Diploma Course in 1979: two at Townsville CAE and one at Torrens CAE.

school and Aide to Aide. In some situations Aides were totally responsible for certain teaching areas e.g. in the two bilingual programs. In one school an Aide worked exclusively with a small group of struggling students and was responsible for the daily programming and instruction of that group. In a few cases, Aides were required to run classes during the absence of staff.

However, a large proportion of Aides played a relatively minor role in schools, serving as helpers for classroom preparation or for limited supervision of small groups of children or for liaising with parents and community from time to time.

2.13 Aides' potential for a more significant role

Ultimately establishing a nucleus of fully qualified Aboriginal and Islander staff in each school appears to be an appropriate solution to the problem of high staff turnover with its associated consequences for curriculum and quality schooling. But in 1978 there were less than 100 Aborigines and Islanders enrolled in teacher education for the whole of Australia. Therefore this approach will take time. In looking at the Aides in these Cape York schools the first significant question raised was:

- . Could Aides become a stable nucleus in each school until professionally trained Aborigines and Islanders from these Communities are available for appointment?

Staffing trends while showing considerable improvement on earlier days still suggested that non-Aboriginal and non-Islander staff would continue to turn over rapidly. Two to three year terms in a Cape York school seemed to be all that might be anticipated. However, many Aides were married and settled with no desire to leave their Community. It seemed more likely that locally recruited Aborigines and Islanders had the potential to become a core of long term staff serving for periods of ten or more years particularly if job satisfaction could be increased.

The second question that was raised was:

Could Aboriginal and Islander Teacher Aides be used to provide the knowledge and expertise about the students' home background and culture so urgently needed in classroom teaching and curriculum development?

The obvious contribution being made by Aides in the bilingual schools supported the view that this was possible. However, many staff did not share this optimism. It appeared that this type of

contribution might only prove acceptable in the bilingual schools where, because of the language barrier, teachers were totally dependent on the Aides.

Nevertheless, in mounting this project, the cornerstone was the firm conviction that:

- . given the provision of appropriate training, Aides had the potential for a much more significant role in schools than was currently the case.

It was felt that Aides could make at least a major input into curriculum resources and greatly assist in providing effective orientation for new staff. Thus, it was hoped that the overall quality of schooling would be enhanced significantly.

Finally, the question of whether Aides wanted a more significant role and were really interested in training opportunities, had to be considered. From the brief pre-project contacts with Aides, the authors were convinced that they were vitally anxious to be involved in training programs.

2.14 Other potential benefits of inservice training for Aides

Inservice training for Aides was viewed as having many benefits other than those already discussed in the previous paragraphs. It was likely to lead to greater job satisfaction, encouraging the more able of the Aides to regard their work as a long term career. It was also felt that Aides could be helped to overcome problems of low self esteem and shyness in order to be able to make a much greater professional contribution. Regular inservice activities for Aides were seen as having a potentially positive contribution to:

- . school programs - staff being able to draw more heavily on Aides' knowledge of the local background and culture of the students;
- . communication with students - staff being able to use Aides more effectively to ensure staff and children understand each other satisfactorily;
- . the provision of more appropriate curriculum resources and student materials - Aides being able to write experience readers and 'translate' texts into local idiom and experience;

- . the provision of more appropriate orientation and inservice activities for new staff.

2.15 Special nature of inservice training for Aides

It was recognised that most Aides would not be able to cope with a normal teacher education program because of their considerable academic limitations. Therefore it was further assumed that:

- . a special approach to the training of Aides was necessary.

Such training need not be inferior producing inferior results. Indeed, because of the necessity to embrace more imaginative programming it could in fact prove to be superior to current pre- and inservice education.

The main features of the special approach to the training of Aides were thought to include at least the following:

- . training should be non-formal in approach - i.e. not requiring literacy or other academic training as a prerequisite for participation or involving formal assessments or certification;
- . training should draw heavily on Aides' and Communities' life and cultural experience - i.e. those aspects of daily life and heritage that were familiar and well understood by trainees;
- . training should be achievement orientated - i.e. challenging Aides to do and achieve tangible goals which are held in high regard by teachers, community and themselves;
- . training should be short and intensive creating as little disturbance to daily school operations as possible.

2.16 Summary of rationale

It summary, it was believed that Aides in the main were capable of making a significant contribution to the schooling process although it was recognised that the nature of contributions would vary significantly between Aides and schools. However, it was considered that their potential for contributing would lie firstly in their knowledge of the local children, community and culture and secondly in their capacity for linking school and community in such a way that the

schooling process would prove very much more responsive to community needs and aspirations. The rationale can therefore be set out as follows:

- . Community life and culture should be the major resource for curriculum development and teaching.
- . Learning in schools and Community should be in harmony and complementary.
- . Teacher-centred problems are more critical than student-centred ones.
- . Teachers need to stay longer in Communities and become serious learners of Community culture.
- . Aides have the potential for a significant role in schools.
- . Aides are interested in personal and professional development.
- . A special approach to the training of Aides is necessary.

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