



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.

ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER VIEWS

WORKING AS TEACHER AIDES AT MURGON STATE HIGH



*M.Mathieson, A.Landers,
B.Costello

Cherbourg is situated on the Barambah Creek, about 300 km north west of Brisbane. The area of the reserve is approximately 4,000 hectares, adjoining 11,000 hectares of state forest. Cherbourg is 5 km from the township of Murgon and is the third largest Aboriginal settlement in Queensland.

Since 1973 Aboriginal teacher aides have been employed at Murgon High School in a variety of roles. Our jobs have included supervision in various classes and playground, helping small groups of students, resource work (cutting, stapling, cataloguing various materials for teachers), but our most important job is working on behalf of the Aboriginal students, with parents, council, principal and staff. This is part of our liaison work. This year there are about 100 Aboriginal students attending the high school in Murgon.

During 1979, with the help of some staff teachers, we worked on producing two booklets for teachers new to Murgon High. The first booklet, *Cherbourg*, looks at early history, facilities, industries and employment, as well as entertainment, places to visit and some of the local foods. We gathered information from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, as well as from interviewing people at home and at work. We also discussed a lot of ideas at our meetings, held three times a week. Bevan learned to use the S.LR camera, as well as to develop the photos, so he could look after the photographic aspect of the booklets. Students contributed written ideas and sketches.

The second booklet, *Learning Together - a handbook for teachers new to Murgon High*, looks at the Aboriginal aides' role, students, teachers, aides and parents getting to know each other, as well as some "starting hints" for those teachers beginning a teaching career, or those who have had little or no experience working with Aboriginal students before.

* May Mathieson, Alex Landers, Bevan Costello, Murgon State High School.

At the beginning of the school year we met with the new teachers to hand out the booklets and talk to them. They seemed happy to get the information. This year we are working on a 1981 calendar, which will include some of the local and seasonal history of the Murgon and Cherbourg areas.

We would like to include some of our ideas from *Learning Together*, to share with aides and teachers at other schools.

The way we think teachers can learn more about Aboriginal people is to get involved with some dark people. Ask them about old times as well as today, and how students act. As one student wrote,

If a new teacher comes and he doesn't know much about Aboriginal kids, we should give him a good chance and he should give us a good chance. A good teacher is one who is kind, understanding, has an ability to be patient, and who can put his foot down if necessary. The teacher aides can explain a lot about Aboriginal kids to the teachers.

Teachers must remember that the Aboriginal students are coming in from an all-Aboriginal school at Cherbourg, to Murgon High, for the first time. You will find that the Aboriginal students will stick together in one group, with their friends from the same school. A new teacher should leave them together for a couple of weeks, until they get used to the new school, then place them with a non-Aboriginal child. You will find that most Aboriginal students will be shy in the classroom and are not inclined to talk out. They get embarrassed if they are asked a question, and may not answer. It might take a little time before the students will feel free to answer a question in front of other students. If a teacher speaks harshly the child will get upset and then might not say anything for that teacher.

Teachers should start off the year in a firm, but relaxed manner. In this way a student will get used to the teacher and will appreciate it later on if the teacher gets angry with the child. They will know that they have done something wrong, instead of thinking the teacher is picking on them because they are dark.

Once students get used to new teachers and accept them, they may be inclined to play with, hold, touch and put an arm around the teachers. The girls are often taken with hair that is long or eye-catching. Do not be offended, because this is how Aboriginal students are inclined to show their affection.

When you give your instructions to students, explain yourself slowly. Keep it short and simple. Write on the board what you want students to do, so they can see it. Don't ask by just talking. Show that you are willing to go and give individual assistance when students are troubled or confused.

Co-operation and sharing is a habit from home. You will find students will share books, ports and other property. Students like to be with each other as they are shy on their own. As well as individual work, group work should be included in the programme.

Most students can communicate without talking. Sometimes you may find a child giving a movement with his head, hands, eyes or fingers to another child. This might be a sign for friends to join together to do a message for a teacher, to look at something outside, or it may be to tease another student. This may make him wild, even in the classroom.

Students do not like to be called 'black'. They are Aboriginal students ('dark' or 'coloured' are words sometimes used), but in the classroom they should be spoken to by name. Some students may refer to themselves or friends as 'black' but may take offence if they are referred to as 'black' by someone else.

Aboriginal students are frank, forward and open and will sum you up quickly. They support each other in situations, and have a good sense of humour. Be patient and you will see the difference between how Aboriginal children act and how other students do. We can give teachers information about students, or we can find out from the community or parents, if we are unsure ourselves. Often students can give you information about other students.

The students at Murgon High School seem to appreciate having us here at the school. As one student wrote,

It is a good idea to have Aboriginal teacher aides because they help the Aboriginal children with their work, and if he/she has a problem, the student can talk to a person of his own colour, because you are more relaxed. They are understanding, too.

Since Murgon High School started, quite a few students have gone on past Year 12. Of these, some are kindergarten teachers, teacher aides, at Colleges of Advanced Education, doing liaison work, police work, as well as qualified nurses. Often the work takes them away from the community, but many more return.

Since the school encourages both groups of students to work and play together, you see the Aboriginal children mixing in with other students. With Year 8 students, a Social Development Camp is held each year. This year the students went to a Flat Camp at Gallangowan. It is a good chance for students to get to know each other. They are involved in a variety of activities such as orienteering, damper making, bridge building and work in small groups for washing up and room tidiness. Concert and dress-up night is always fun for everyone and this year's Grade 8 Corroboree team performed. A lot of friendships are started at these camps.

Sports and discos have always been a good way for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students to get to know each other. On sports trips, where Aboriginal students are billeted out with non-Aboriginal families, they have no worries fitting in at all and some are invited back to spend holidays with these families. Football and basketball are strong favourites, with state representatives in both school and community teams.

Mr Jim Hamilton, Aboriginal school visitor, visits the Grade 8's each year, to talk about Aboriginal way and life. All of the students enjoy his talk very much.

This year Murgon High School is trialling a Grade 8 social science course, looking at the language and customs of north-east Arnhem Land Aborigines. The students are taking the subject seriously and enjoy learning the language, as well as working on project work.

There are other things happening in the upper school, such as the Year 10 Career Week in Brisbane and the Year 11 Bridging Course, begun this year, which help Aboriginal students gain confidence and a sense of achievement.

Since the school has begun, a lot of things have been learned by everyone. For a happy place, people must learn to co-operate, and in this way we, as the teacher aides, hope to help students, parents and teachers know each other better.

.....