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ACROSS AUSTRALIA

FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER

A PRACTICAL ACTIVITY APPROACH
TO TEACHING ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

*M. Rooney

The following ideas on how to introduce and teach topics, concepts and skills to Aboriginal children are the result of my being posted to a small three teacher Special Aboriginal School. The school, Yandeyarra, is an Aboriginal pastoral lease/reserve some 140kms south of Port Hedland. I am prompted to write this account because I feel that throughout various states of Australia there must be many young teachers who have gone through three to four years of teacher training expecting a European school appointment, only to find themselves in an Aboriginal school wondering what to do with all the good ideas their lecturers gave them and how to use the Departmental texts provided. The answer is simple -either throw the ideas and texts away or modify them to meet the particular needs of your children.

The following suggestions are unique to my situation, but they give some idea of why I chose the title, "A Practical Activity Approach". I believe that many Aboriginal children are not exposed to many of the concepts and experiences that we can take for granted in the lives of most European children. Many children at Yandeyarra have never seen a train, plane (at close range), beach, circus, zoo, powerboat, electric toaster, etc. Too often we ask them to spell words or write stories about things they have never experienced.

In my spelling program I try to instil some understanding of the word in question by getting the children to

- a) draw it if possible, e.g. elephant;
- b) use the word in a sentence and draw the action of the sentence; e.g., 'Speak'. The man from Perth came to speak to the people. This activity is done on cards which are prominently displayed.

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If you are studying the human body and how to care for it, compare it to something the children know - a Toyota Landcruiser. It is interesting to compare the differences and similarities between the body and a vehicle. Both need water, air, fuel (food), maintenance and filter systems to keep them going. In these schools the opportunity to compare the anatomies of a mechanical and an animal body presents itself fairly frequently: the filters (lungs, liver, and intestines), the pump (heart) and fuel tank (stomach) make excellent examples.

For Social Studies it is difficult to teach from a text, especially if the material is of little relevance to the children. I believe Aboriginal children live in a very small world and while it is hard to talk about other countries and famous explorers, it is possible to show them the things that make their world go around. I am attempting to get my children to understand the significance of local industries such as cattle, iron ore, solar salt, fishing. To do this I had to embark on some very practical mapping activities as a build-up. Excursions are difficult to organise when you are 140 kms from town, but we soon hope to visit the Mt Newman Mining complex and town power station using the borrowed station truck. I wonder how many children have had the opportunity to take the guided tourist boat ride down the local gorge in some of Australia's northern towns?

On the maths side of the mapping exercises the children must have an appreciation of how long a km. is. There is no better way to demonstrate it than by getting into a vehicle and watching the numbers turn over on the odometer. While on maths, I believe the practical uses of mathematics are far more obvious to European than to Aboriginal children. The practical uses of maths must be demonstrated if they are ever to be appreciated. This is why my maths program is in two main sections - the operational and the practical. A good way to spark interest in maths is to present every-day problems involving measurement, e.g. calculating how much petrol one needs to get to town. Tables should not be presented for learning on a chart but should be made up by the children in a practical activity, e.g. five containers each with two rocks equals ten rocks. The wall chart of tables will then have some significance.

Studying something as scientifically complicated as 'The Water Cycle' can be made easy if some of the concepts can be demonstrated. The water dripping from the refrigerative air conditioner is an example of condensation; a boiling kettle is an example of rapid evaporation and our local solar salt industry is an example of massive evaporation. All aspects of the cycle can be demonstrated

by simple experiments or demonstrations. Indeed the evaporative air conditioner of our classroom is a miniature water cycle, complete with salty water in the reservoir. In the natural science area, the children fully understand the term 'Life Cycle' after watching tadpoles mature into frogs.

In the physical education area we found that most of our children were proficient in many of the skills areas, so something different was looked for. We chose archery because of its value as a disciplined, skilled sport. Folk dancing and tabloid sports were also very popular. The after-school activity of aero-modelling and flying was a very successful recreational venture.

Music becomes more than just 'singing' if one also learns an instrument. The recorder is a very popular choice in this state and I saw no reason why Aboriginal children couldn't try it. The results have been encouraging so far. If anyone is interested, I recommend detracting from the traditional "learn the note, play the exercise" approach. My pupils and I sit down together and work out our own tunes for which we write the music. Any exercise or tune then has more appeal - you only need three notes for "Mary Had a Little Lamb", but once the pupil has written and played this tune his enthusiasm is assured.

Enough has been said and written about the values of the 'language experience' approach to creative writing and meaningful reading, but there is just one point I feel is worth making. My wife, who teaches the junior grades, found that it was not necessary to dream up some fantastic activity as the basis of the experience readers. Instead she discovered that the simplest things, that we take for granted, proved to be the most stimulating for her children; e.g. making, buttering and eating a slice of toast proved to be a real thrill when the toast was made with an electric toaster. It was obvious what a novel experience this was for the children when one of them asked, "How do you light the toaster?"

Letter writing becomes an exciting classroom activity if you are writing to a real person. My pupils correspond regularly with their pen pals at a Port Hedland school.

The art/craft session at school can be used to provide the children with some much needed toys. While collage, silk printing, line drawing etc. are all very *nice* activities, there is a finality about them because the children haven't the opportunity at home to indulge in anything learnt at school. I have noticed that Aboriginal children in the Pilbara and Kimberleys have a passion for

rolling around a tin can filled with sand, on a piece of wire. Why not get some piping (for the axle), cement (it won't run out the holes), cans and wire and make a superior version of this toy in the craft session at school? Other practical ideas include making fishing poles, kites, percussion instruments, windvanes, toy guns, canoes (the old sheet of iron type), paddles, etc.

If you want to do silk printing, then at least make sure the children have the opportunity to print their own T shirts.

These are just isolated examples of what I am trying to say about teaching Aboriginal children. The concept of "seeing is understanding", is not a unique educational idea but with reference to Aboriginal education I believe it is crucially important. If one seeks wherever possible, in all subject areas, a means of explanation which is not just verbal, then I believe a much better understanding is assured.

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ABORIGINAL PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOLING : ROEBOURNE

*C.N. MacNeill

In 1980 a study was made of Aboriginal parental involvement in education at Roebourne Primary School. Parental involvement, while important in 'white' middle-class schools, is considerably more important when considering the aims and strategies of education to be used in schools with a large proportion of Aboriginal students.

In the multicultural ethos which is being promoted at present, it is easy to forget the callous bigotry so prevalent in Western Australian education policy until the mid-1950s. 'White' Australian pressure, particularly from those benefitting most from the Aborigines' uneducated state, had effectively prevented Aborigines receiving government education in the Pilbara.

The history of the Roebourne area which has moulded the Aboriginal people's personalities and lowered their self-esteem has had an important effect upon their willingness to approach the bastion of European culture - the school. The extended family situation which dilutes parental responsibilities too has had an important effect in

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