



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*.

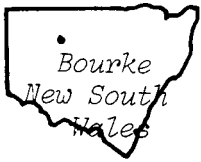
In 2022 *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* transitioned to fully Open Access and this article is available for use under the license conditions below.



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.

ACROSS AUSTRALIA.....

FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER



HELPFUL HINTS

FOR BEGINNING TEACHERS OF ABORIGINES

*D.Huggonson

The first problem that beginning teachers will face on 'day one' in the classroom is a communication barrier. Teachers fresh from universities and colleges of advanced education will find that the language they are using is too sophisticated for their students. Therefore they must be conscious of the need to simplify their own language while simultaneously improving the vocabulary of their students. The beginning teacher will also find that the majority of students use non-standard English. It should be noted, however, that the use of non-standard English is not a sign of backwardness. Peer pressure not to appear 'flash' is a strong factor in Aborigines maintaining their speech patterns.

Once the young teacher 'gets his ear in' he or she will find communication becomes easier. To speed this process I suggest that for the first few weeks the teacher spends a considerable amount of time listening to his or her students. Drama games such as 'biographies' and class debates on various topics are useful. It is also important that during this period the beginning teacher be honest and forthright about his or her own background. I found my Year 8 class extremely interested in my family and their background. A family photograph album is a good resource to stimulate class discussion. The students should be encouraged to bring in their family's photographs. (Children from particularly impoverished backgrounds can be offered the use of a camera if they don't have any family photographs.) These photographs can lead to the development of environmental readers for remedial readers.

So as not to impede the development of genuine communication between young teachers and Aboriginal students it is important that

*David Huggonson, Aboriginal Support Teacher, Bourke High School, NSW

the teacher be aware of unacceptable terms when referring to Aborigines. The following terms are racist and to be avoided:

Blackfellow, Darkie, Abo, Nigger, Boong, Coon, and Black.

The one universally acceptable term is - Aborigine. The strength of the feeling against whites using the above terms does not preclude the Aboriginal people from using some of these terms when referring to themselves. The young white teacher must be aware of this situation and must not fall into using these hurtful terms, regardless of how familiar they become with the Aboriginal community.

Another hint for the new teacher is to avoid the 'factionalization' of Aboriginal people based on skin colour. The white practice of classifying Aborigines as full-bloods, halves, quarters, eighths is repugnant to the Aboriginal community. A person is an Aborigine if he claims to be and is accepted by the Aboriginal community as an Aborigine. No other classification is necessary.

A major concern to beginning teachers is classroom discipline. For any meaningful learning to take place Aboriginal children need to be made aware of standards of and limitations on behaviour in the classroom that each teacher will tolerate. This setting of behavioural perimeters must be realistic and is harder to achieve in high schools because the students are subjected to a number of different teachers during their eight-period day.

The degree to which swearing will be tolerated is a major issue in a number of schools. I attempt to discourage swearing at school but one must realize that swearing is commonplace in many Aboriginal communities. The important point is that any teacher who does not allow swearing must not be hypocritical and must not swear in the presence of students or for that matter in the common room. I have found that as I have earned the respect of my students swearing diminishes. Also, once students know that you won't over-react to swearing, the game loses its appeal.

Often teachers are verbally abused by students because of tiredness, frustration and/or as an attention-getting process. The teacher must learn to identify the underlying cause of the individual student's behaviour in the classroom. The most successful behavioural modification technique, I feel, is to ignore deviant behaviour, where no physical risk is involved, and to reinforce constructive behaviour. Finally on discipline, a well-prepared teacher teaching a relevant curriculum and who is enthusiastic and confident should cope with most classes quite adequately. A sign of failure is when a teacher

falls into the trap of blaming the Aboriginal student for his or her own lack of understanding and preparedness.

I believe for any teacher to be truly effective he or she must become involved within the community whose children he or she teaches. This is particularly true with Aboriginal children. Unless the parents know and trust you one can't expect parental support and the Aboriginal kids exploit this lack of contact between the white teachers and Aboriginal parents to their own ends. A good contact person to introduce a new teacher around the community is the Aboriginal teacher aide (if your new school is fortunate enough to have one). The ATA is an enormously valuable colleague for the beginning teacher, not only in the classroom but also as a source of advice on many matters, from finding suitable accommodation to local culture. Other Aboriginal organizations such as building co-operatives and the legal service are also worth making yourself known to. Many of the personnel of these community organizations will have children at your school. The weekend is a good time to get involved with the kids of the local community. I found that just turning up every Sunday morning to the local sports field with a soccer ball soon led to a large number of kids and adolescents becoming involved in this activity. Helping organize discos at the local community hall is also a worthwhile undertaking which often results in informal contact with Aboriginal parents.

The Commonwealth Department of Education, which administers the Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme, has education officers in many centres in the state. The education officers have access to funds for excursions which are another way of getting to know your Aboriginal students. One tip is always to take Aboriginal parents on these excursions with you, not only to assist with the discipline of the students, but also to get to know the parents. So often the only contact the parents have with the school is when their child is in trouble. Hopefully, by becoming involved in community activities, the beginning teacher will become aware of the living conditions and the cultural differences that do exist between teachers and Aboriginal students. The quicker this understanding can develop the quicker the professional teacher can design more relevant programs for his or her class.

Finally, I would like to mention an extremely useful reference book - *Black Australia, an Annotated Bibliography and Teachers Guide to Resources*, by M.Hill and A.Barlow. If your school library doesn't hold a copy, it may be obtained from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, P.O.Box 553, Canberra, 2601.