



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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ACROSS AUSTRALIA.....

FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER



EXCITING DEVELOPMENTS AT YIRARA COLLEGE#

*D. Odling-Smee

THE SURGE IN LEARNING

Yirara is a very exciting place to work in at the moment; no Yirara teacher would dispute this. This is because we are on the crest of a large wave, and the surge ahead, in all directions, is so momentous and dramatic that there are many emotional experiences for staff and students involved. It is akin to being a witness to child-birth, or to seeing a child master the art of walking, or overcoming a long felt fear. We all rejoice in the joy of the achievement.

How can I best explain it? It's hard, because it's best experienced. However some clues are that:-

- students are talking, with little fear of ridicule, in front of their 200 peers, at assemblies. Such is their confidence, and their spoken English.
- there are clear signs of some incipient abstract thinking, and problem solving. Some students' study skills and conceptual understanding are such that they can indulge in discussion of problems and experiences beyond their own environment. This is the mark of secondary education proper, and it is the first time I have experienced this in Aboriginal education, apart from notable isolated individuals.
- there is a lust for learning. This is apparent in the 90 minutes of almost total silence which engulfs the 200 students doing homework. It is clear from the oblivion of students to the lunch bell, because of engrossment in a novel, or cleaning the cylinders of a V8 motor.

 #This article is from *Yirara Newsletter*, 6th April, 1981.

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Yirara College is a secondary college in every sense. We are doing the core curriculum in English and Maths at secondary level - though not finally determined, sufficient of the syllabi is known to us - and this is being fast followed by Social Education and Science. We have specialist teachers in English, Maths and Science, and Social Education; their expertise is invaluable. We have every confidence that tribal Aboriginal students will be able to achieve the N.T. Certificate of Competency (or whatever it is named) when first introduced at Year 10 level in 1984.

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Our work experience programs which involve work at the Community College and places of employment in town (and occasionally the bush), having started in 1974, are now so well entrenched that, to us, they barely seem notable. But they are. Students in Years 10 and 11 go on 2-week blocks, and overcome enormous personal hurdles - fear, shame, inadequacy - and consequently gain skills at a rate far greater than before. As an example, one girl, aged 16, worked on the checkout at Egar Beavers every morning last week. Not bad for a tribal girl of 16, in a town like Alice.

READING

There are very few more important keys to literate and technological cultures than the capacity to read, at a high level of comprehension. There is currently at Yirara a zeal for reading which is the result of, and the cause of, unprecedented staff efforts to imbue students with the love of books. The results are astonishing; some students read and finish a novel over the weekend.

- reading occupies the first 45 minutes of every school day - that is, reading for comprehension.
- 50 students are now *regularly* using the Alice Springs Public Library (i.e. one book per week). They have outgrown the Yirara library!
- The Yirara library opens after school for 1½ hours every Wednesday. A 1981 innovation.
- There are reading areas in the Recreation Hall - one for blokes, one for girls.
- There is a system for dormitories to borrow books from the library, for evening reading.

The results of all this activity are very exciting.