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A SEARCH FOR RELEVANCE IN TRANSITION FROM POST-PRIMARY TO SECONDARY

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OVERVIEW

At St Therese's Girls School, we have initiated what we believe to be a more meaningful and more relevant utilization of our resources in producing a secondary program that is more appropriate to the needs of our students.

During 1980, the program was organized in a similar manner to previous years. Each grade - eight, nine and ten - was in the charge of grade teachers. We were fortunate in having a specialist art teacher, but basically the Post Primary section was organized in the typical primary style.

After much consideration, in 1981, we decided to try a different approach. We were prepared to do some experimenting but we were not prepared to upset our students with too much unjustified change. We spent considerable time in consultation with our Tiwi staff members. We wanted to use the resources of both our European-Australian and Tiwi staff members far more effectively. Also we wanted to provide a program that would cater for the needs of our students in a far more meaningful way. We didn't feel that we were meeting these objectives with our past mode of organization. Previously our two Tiwi teachers were acting in the capacity of mere teacher aides without any real responsibility. We knew that they had far more to offer and that our Tiwi students had far more to gain by their effective participation in the program.

We also recognised that each teacher had been trying to teach an extremely broad range of abilities in her students, as well as a broad range of subjects (some, like Home Economics, that teachers had no training in at all). We faced the fact honestly that we had not been able to meet the needs of all our students. While every

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teacher faces a broad range of abilities in her students, it seems true that teachers of Aboriginal students find this range of abilities even greater than her counterparts in non-Aboriginal schools. With this problem in mind, we decided to try streaming the whole of the Post Primary students into three ability groups. The girls were to attend only four of the basic skills subjects in their streamed groups and they were to attend all of their other subjects in their age grades.

This limited degree of streaming has been highly successful. Each teacher is now specializing in one or two subjects, teaching all the ability grades. However, with a more uniform set of abilities in each group, each teacher is able to meet much more effectively the needs of the students. As well, because each teacher is specializing, she is able to offer a more relevant and meaningful program to the students.

Because the students have known all the teachers before this year and before this new mode of organization, they are not made anxious by the changes in teachers. Being part of a fairly small group each student has the opportunity to form a secure relationship with each of her teachers. The change from seeing one teacher all day to seeing possibly three teachers each day has not caused any of the students any tension, (except after an initial period of being unsettled). In fact, seeing a different teacher for a different subject and moving to change rooms at the end of a one hour period seems to have increased motivation and the standard of work rather than detracted from it.

Similarly, the fact of streaming for four of the basic subjects has not added any confusion or detracted from the students' motivation. In observing the students this year and evaluation of their work, the results show a much greater enthusiasm for their studies, and much better quality output. Both results and enthusiasm increased greatly in the second semester.

The use of streamed groups is not wholly alien to the girls in their non-school groupings. That is because we have found that there are many incidences of kin relationships in the one ability grouping. The students in their non-school activities do not associate with each other by age criterion but rather kin relationships.

As a staff we had spent much time considering and discussing our proposed changes. We had already good rapport with our students and they supported the changes which we proposed.

We organized the timetable as simply as we could, but found that in the second semester we did have to make more changes (expanded later). Crucial importance was given to English and Maths skills. After consultation with our principal and our Tiwi staff, we assigned the subjects of Social Studies and Science to our Tiwi teachers.

We were giving recognition to the fact that in some parts of the curriculum, the Tiwi teachers were able to meet the needs of our students far more effectively than we could. But also in considering the expertise of our staff, we ourselves also had a very significant part to play.

Programming in all of the subject areas of the secondary school was supervised both by the secondary co-ordinator and the principal. The same expectations for programming were placed on all the secondary staff.

The streamed ability groups in the first semester attended the subjects of Maths, English, Science and Social Studies in these groupings. We classified these subjects as 'academic'. We did not use this word to mean some of its usual connotations. The focus through the academic program was on basic skills teaching. For example, the Maths program, though drawn from the Western Australian curriculum, concentrated on areas of application to real life. The Maths program incorporated such areas as activities based on telling the time on the clock, activities based on the use of the calendar, use of time-tables, programs and schedules etc.

In the English area, again the focus was on functional English. Examples are - reading tables, following directions, filling in forms, use of newspapers etc.

In the areas of Social Studies and Science, during the first semester, prime focus was placed on Tiwi learning. In Social Studies, many different aspects of Tiwi culture were treated. In Science, aspects of the local environment were covered. Although the girls had lived in the local environment all of their lives, we found that there were just so many things about the girls' own culture and environment about which they were ignorant. Our Tiwi teachers were experts when it came to these areas.

The non-academic program (again a very loose term) in the first semester included the following subjects: Home Economics, Art, Typing, Music and Tiwi Literacy, plus Religion. We have classified these subjects as non-academic simply because the students were taught

then in age grades rather than ability groups. There is no implication that these subjects are less academic than our core four subjects. In fact, we made changes to the classification of the subjects - that is, to which subjects were best to be taught in ability groups and which subjects were best taught in grade groups.

Initially we believed it to be important that all the students participate in all the programs offered. We knew that it would be impossible for the students to choose their careers while in the secondary school and hence we had hoped to offer them every opportunity to be as adaptable as possible to job opportunities.

However, for the very pragmatic reason that there was not enough time in the school day, we had to become more restrictive in the number of subjects we could offer each student.

For this reason we introduced in second semester two more dimensions in the form of a system of electives. These electives are as follows :

Guitar, typing, physical education, loom weaving, crocheting and Tiwi weaving and basket making. Other electives such as photography, printery and traditional dyeing hopefully will be introduced in our fourth term.

By choosing two of these electives, students have the chance to specialize more in either the home economics, music or traditional areas of the curriculum. The girls were also able to choose areas that they were interested in - not ones they were forced to do.

The fourth dimension in the program affected Year 10. The more gifted half of Year 10 combined with the more able boys from Xavier Boys Schools in a co-education class. The subjects studied are Maths, English, Science and Typing. When these students are not with the co-educational class, they are with their Year 10 grade class doing non-academic subjects. First reports show that this class is operating highly successfully. Such a class gives a chance for more advancement of these students plus a higher work output.

Having given the outline of the organizational side of the secondary program, we shall include a copy of the policy which at least in part helped motivate the changes outlined.

We must point out that it was the needs of the students and the community which were the prime motivational forces in the changing of our educational structure, and in the creating of new ones.

We believe that the fact of our living and working among Aboriginal people has allowed us to identify some of the needs of our students. These changes were made in an atmosphere of mutual trust and dialogue with Tiwi parents, Tiwi teachers and Tiwi students and the school authorities. We believe that we have created new educational structures that enhance our work as teachers and facilitate more creative learning on behalf of our students.

We write this paper in the hope that any change in curriculum and organizational patterns will be guided by the needs of the Aboriginal students and their community. If Aboriginal schools are coerced into transforming into duplicates of European-Australian institutions, then Aboriginal communities will be destroyed.

POLICY CONCERNING THE SECONDARY PROGRAM AT ST THERESE'S SCHOOL

OBJECTIVES

By the end of Year 10, secondary students should have developed the appropriate degree of physical, mental, social and spiritual maturity to facilitate their active participation in the Tiwi community as young adult, catholic, Tiwi women.

To this end, it is envisaged that the secondary program will be flexible enough to cope with both the changing need levels of the secondary students and also the requirements of the community.

It is also envisaged that the pupils will become increasingly aware of the requirements for normal social interaction with Australian institutions and other Australian peoples.

For this reason emphasis in the secondary program should be given to the acquisition of the oral and written English skills that are necessary for interaction with other Australians.

As well, it is important that the students acquire the ability to perform the basic operations in mathematics, and the mathematical knowledge and techniques needed in the adult work and home situations.

Also of major importance are the subject areas of home science, health and nutrition. In a very short time, our secondary students will become wives and mothers in the Tiwi community and they should leave school equipped with the practical skills to enable them to take care of their families.

The subject areas of science and social studies are important from two perspectives. It is both necessary to study these subjects using the language and understandings of Tiwi and the language and knowledge of the wider world.

It is always to be remembered that the students derive their life view and dignity from their Tiwi culture and Tiwi community, and respect for their Tiwi traditions should be one of the most important principles underlying the secondary program.

The teachers and students are working in a bicultural, bilingual situation, and it is expected that each group will respect the life views, needs and expectations of the other.

The teachers, as well, are expected to impart a knowledge of the wider world to their students. It is of prime importance that the students recognize the existence of other values, attitudes, life-styles and ways of acting.

AIMS

1. To educate the girls so that they can participate within the wider Australian society and at the same time retain Tiwi identity.
2. To encourage the girls towards self-sufficiency within their own community.
3. To give opportunities for the girls to be able to develop in spiritual, creative, practical, and academic fields.
4. To teach relevant and practical topics which can be immediately applied when the girls leave school (and become employed in various occupations).
5. To encourage the girls to think and act as responsible members of Tiwi society and also the wider Australian society.

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