



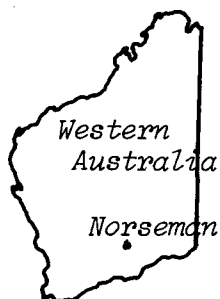
The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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A DIFFERENT APPROACH

*B. Kerr

Teaching Aboriginal children often conjures up thoughts of being stoned or speared alive and many people contemplating a career in teaching, or actually teaching, shy away from the thought of teaching Aboriginal children. But do they really know what they are missing out on:

- . The countless hours of fun you have learning how to communicate with your charges.
- . The times when you laugh with your black friends and the times when you cry with your black friends.
- . The times when you have to be severe yet all is forgotten when the big beaming smile crosses the face of the culprit.
- . The times when the old men nod at you and say 'keenpi', (Aboriginal word meaning 'good').
- . The times when, in the middle of the night, a knock at the door means one of your charges is in trouble and looking for a place to camp.
- . The times when you have to repair cut feet and dig splinters out of hands - yes, Aboriginal kids do get cuts and splinters.
- . The times when you sit in the sand and listen to stories of home and mum and dad and brothers and sisters.
- . The times when you reply with stories of your own that are close to your heart.
- . The times when one of your students shows you for the hundredth time something he has made or written, because he is genuinely proud of his achievement.
- . The times when students you taught in the past stop you in the street and tell you about the job they have just got.
- . The times when you try hard to admonish a student but can't because his smile is beaming out across the room.

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- . The times when you cry as another old man is buried and you know that with him another piece of tradition and culture has disappeared forever.
- . The times when they hold your hand or wrap their arms around your shoulders in a genuine show of affection.

Yes, some people really don't know what they are missing out on.

It's not easy teaching and it's certainly not easy teaching teenage tribal Aboriginal students. After seven years of teaching Aboriginals I still put in 60 hours a week but in return I get more than 60 hours of satisfaction from my students. To teach Aboriginal children it is essential to have compassion and feeling.

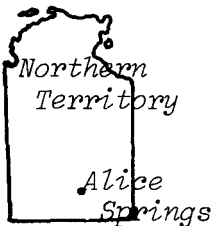
The Aboriginal students who attend the Project Centre in Norseman come from a variety of backgrounds. Some come from Warburton which is 1000 kilometres away, while some come from Cundeelee, near the Trans-Australian Railway. The majority are still very much tribally oriented and supply us with their own unique problems. We have no text books to follow. We have no set curriculum. Instead, we have to pick bits and pieces out of different reading and maths kits. We have to improvise, invent and develop curricula and teaching styles that will suit each individual child.

In Norseman we have, over a period of ten years, developed what we believe is a course that is functional, stimulating and above all of benefit to the student. Our English and Social Studies is a combined ACCESS course developed by the Aboriginal Education Branch and adapted to suit our own particular needs. Topics covered include the individual, families, communities, advertising, communication and current affairs. The approach used is one of total student involvement. Because there is a vast ability range the work has to be geared to suit both the under-achiever and the student who is wanting to progress. Levels of expectation differ with each child and all we ask of them is to make a conscious effort to improve on their previous performance. Humour is a keynote in most aspects of the work. The students' ability to laugh along with their friends and teachers breaks down the barriers and develops a very friendly and, to say the least, a fun work situation.

Mathematics is covered in the old-fashioned style. Basic number facts and knowledge of tables are constantly reinforced. Students take great delight in singing through their times tables.

All students are restricted to academic studies for half of each day. The other half of each day is spent on practical activities. The boys are taught manual skills such as welding, concreting, carpentry and vehicle maintenance, plus the very important work-habit skills. The girls have their own house and are taught house management skills plus cooking, sewing and craft, etc. All of these things are quite common in educating Aboriginal students. The difference lies in the method of approach. Heavy emphasis is placed upon the pastoral care aspect of education. We believe that to sit and talk to the students before school, during breaks and after school, is of paramount importance. To sit in the sand and tell stories, to walk in the bush, to kick a football, to sit and have lunch with the students not only makes you, the teacher, approachable in the eyes of the student but builds up a firm, friendly relationship that breaks down communication barriers and help in times of crisis.

Finally, to sum up, I must revert to what was written in the beginning. There is nothing frightening about teaching Aboriginal students. They are a warm, friendly and unique group of people whose sense of humour is unparalleled. The enjoyment to be derived from a total commitment to these people far outweighs the hard times and often the isolation one finds oneself in. In fact, as an insight into what education is all about, I would and do encourage people to become involved with Aboriginal children. To use an old adage, I would say to all intending teachers with a sense of humour and an honest desire to teach, "go bush young man, go bush".



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YIRARA - A BI-CULTURAL COLLEGE

*D.H. Odling-Smee

Yirara College is a secondary boarding school for tribal Aboriginal students from throughout Central Australia. The College is 8 kilometres from Alice Springs but takes students from 40 separate communities, in a radius of about 800 kilometres or more from Alice. This includes the southern two-thirds of the Northern Territory, and some communities in South Australia and Western Australia. The

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* Principal, Yirara College, Alice Springs