



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*.

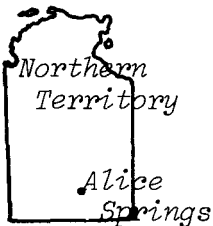
In 2022 *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* transitioned to fully Open Access and this article is available for use under the license conditions below.



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.

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".



.....

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

.....

* Principal, Yirara College, Alice Springs

College is entirely residential, and caters for male and female students. The curriculum, which follows Northern Territory Department guidelines, is aimed at adjusting students to reach Year 10 (the N.T. Junior School Certificate), and thereafter have the opportunity to enter various further education courses and colleges. Emphasis is also given to social education in its broadest sense, and vocational education. After leaving Yirara, the majority of students return to their own communities to fill positions of skill, where and when available.

"They can't be educated", say the critics. "Send them south to boarding school, beyond the influences of tribalism", say the unsympathetic. "Why try to school the young while the unschooled elders negate their new-found skills?" say the liberals. "Education is disruptive and diminishes tribal authority", say the ignorant.

Teachers of Aboriginals in general, and Yirara College in particular, have suffered these taunts over the years, emphasising the myths that linger in Alice Springs, in the minds of the ultra-right, and the ultra-left.

Yirara is a residential secondary college for 200 Aboriginals of Central Australia and was started in 1973. It has endured criticisms from the public, and politicians, and others, and survived a host of government enquiries and surveys. While Yirara is not a perfect institution nor a panacea for Aboriginal problems, those who have worked alongside students at Yirara in the past few years can supply demonstrable evidence and definable responses to this sort of moonshine.

Black

Yirara College is a bi-cultural college, with an Aboriginal half and a European half. Aboriginal students (male and female) come to Yirara at the age of 12 to 13. The majority are tribal Aboriginals. They speak their own languages (about 5 of them at Yirara), they have lived all their lives in communities where tribal outlooks and mores form the daily round, some are initiated young men, some girls are promised in marriage. Most students willingly perform their tribal obligations; many have 'skin' names which categorise the roles they are expected to play in ceremonies, at initiation, in marriage, in family duties, in death.

Yirara recognises the strength and reality of this tribal background, and deliberately sets out to maintain and indeed enhance this sense and knowledge of Aboriginal identity. This is how it is done:

- * Yirara has an all-Aboriginal council, which is an incorporated body.
- * Yirara encourages students to go home, at the appropriate time, for initiation and tribal and ceremonial learning.
- * Yirara has as many Aboriginal staff as possible - as teachers, houseparents, cleaners and so on.
- * Parents are encouraged to come and visit. Some stay a day, some stay a week.
- * Some parent-councillors stay for one month.
- * Old people come regularly to teach for a period of a week. Maybe six Gurindji men will teach dancing, or a group of Pitjantjatjara people will teach how to winnow, and make bush cakes.
- * Literacy in the 5 separate Aboriginal languages is taught. (There are about 12 sub-divisions of these languages at Yirara).
- * Yirara staff visit each of the 40 Aboriginal communities once or twice each year.
- * There is a term magazine (*Tjaru*) and a yearly one (*Mulapa*) - mainly for Aboriginal readers.
- * Some of the implicit understandings and routines of the College are geared for Aboriginals.
- * Yirara holds annual sports for bush children - Bush School Sports - 400 children, and Desert Schools Swimming Sports - 250 children.
- * Students attend bush festivals and meetings:- Yuendumu Sports Weekend, Areyonga Festival, Warrabri Pulapa Wiri, Barrow Creek Races.
- * There is classroom teaching about Aboriginals from other parts of Australia, and about current Aboriginal issues.
- * The College is developing a range of physical resources for traditional learning - photographs, taped stories, music, artefacts and so on.
- * Yirara staff who are European learn about Aboriginals - by inservice sessions, language learning, and first-hand experience.

White

Aboriginal students must not only have burning pride in being Aboriginal, but also have non-Aboriginal skills at a high level. The

acquisition of these European skills will free Aboriginal students, and their families, and communities, from dependency, and will encourage them to have the independence enjoyed by all Australians, and adopt a lifestyle of their own choosing in accordance with Australian social and legal restraints. Survival, both for individual Aboriginals and Aboriginal communities, calls for an excellent working knowledge of these skills - English language skills, social skills, vocational skills.

Yirara systematically sets out to teach these indispensable skills of survival. If they are taught and learnt adequately, the Aboriginal student has some chance of being bi-cultural - a proud Aboriginal, skilful in two cultures. These are the elements which make up the core of European skills taught at Yirara:-

- * The ability to hear and speak English, and understand it, act upon it. English is a foreign language to nearly all students.
- * The ability to read and understand written English, and also to write it.
- * The ability to understand and utilise the decimal number system, and to apply it in everyday life. The decimal number system is foreign to Aboriginals, and was not used traditionally.
- * The social skills of the European culture - the customs, expectations, implicit values, etiquette, etc.
- * An understanding of cleanliness, tidiness, healthiness.
- * Awareness of the Aboriginal's place in Australia, and how to use European institutions.
- * A range of vocational skills for male and female students, which can profitably be used in Aboriginal communities, or in Northern Territory towns, e.g., building, driving, office work, shop work, typing, motor mechanics, health work, pre-school teaching.
- * A wide range of skills necessary for more creative living, and for leisure and unemployment:- music, singing, drumming, bands, choir; art and photography; woodwork, metalwork; cooking, sewing, nutrition, mothercraft; practical education (St John Ambulance, Duke of Edinburgh Scheme, gardening, etc.); recreation (trampolining, cycling, ping pong, etc.); sport (12 different sports are played at Yirara.

People

After that rather turgid discourse on bi-culturism, let us turn to human beings. For that is our *raison d'être*. The most important truth about Aboriginals is taught to us by Aboriginals, namely that they are motivated not by power or principle or pay, but by people. They lovingly do work with those they like and trust, and are indifferent to those on the other side. This indispensable precept of life has coloured our thinking at Yirara, and the result is a very happy multi-cultural community of students and staff, Aboriginals and Europeans, young and old, teachers and houseparents, dogs, babies, visitors, and the vast ever-extended family of Central Australia. The Aboriginal students and staff have forced us to recognise that good relationships are *the* key to discipline, and *the* key to motivation. Armed with this vital clue, there is no turning back. Moreover, the deliberate forging of a community spirit, based upon caring cross-cultural relationships, has been our policy, and though jealousy, pride, and pettiness occasionally mar our performance, the foundations remain unmoved. For when Aboriginals and Europeans work side by side, whatever the strength or weakness of a policy or project or institution matters not, if relationships between Aboriginal and European people are the cornerstone. The most brilliant plan, on the drawing board, is foredoomed without cross-cultural understanding; the most ill-conceived institution can be rescued by the close affinity of its black and white colleagues.

Now let us take a bird's eye view of one particular Aboriginal community. This is a crucial exercise, for the genius of an institution lies in its ability to accurately reflect the prevalent tone or sentiment of a community. If we can discover the needs of each community - there are 40 in Central Australia - by weaving threads of understanding between us, then we can more likely meet those needs, at the same time making secondary education away from home a positive and unifying step for the student in his or her bi-cultural pilgrimage. If Yirara does, in fact, reflect the sentiments of Aboriginal communities, and then amply fulfils those sentiments by relevant and culturally supportive education, then the fruits of the labour should be visible. This should be the case, not immediately, but after a significant number of students from one particular community have left Yirara for some years. So back to that bird's eye view. It is of Lajamanu.

Lajamanu is a pinpoint of 600 Warlpiri people in the flat and scrub of the Tanami desert. It is a vivacious community, with a vibrant council of nine who recently asked how Yirara could best serve their aspirations to go it alone, in practice as well as in theory. We spoke of the skills such as radio-use, typing, book-keeping, and

accountancy which they needed as the fulcrum for their trio of responsibilities - council, cattle company and shop. They pinpointed present Yirara students whom they had earmarked for specific council jobs, on graduation, and in general terms, emphasised their need of young people with genuine school and vocational skills. In a fit of euphoria, they even talked of Aboriginal graduates of the new N.T. University. But their actions matched their words, for in every area of the community, Yirara graduates are helping the council to achieve a *de facto* non-dependence on outsiders:

- . two girl graduates work the cash registers at the shop;
- . one is on the council of nine, and is the council secretary;
- . a brother of his runs the YMCA at Lajamanu;
- . another graduate does the council book-keeping;
- . many of them work for the housing association with one graduate as the clerk;
- . one handles all the social security work, and some C.E.S. (unemployment) work;
- . there are a handful of graduates at the school, working as teaching assistants.

These examples are enough to show that the bond between council and young people and Yirara, between employers and school leavers, is stout and healthy. Each needs the other. What more can a school ask for, or deserve?

Satisfying employment is one target, further post-college training is another necessary but more elusive target. However, eight graduates are currently at Batchelor Teachers' College, a further two are on the first N.T. Police Cadet course of two years, after which they become constables, while another two are in their second year as apprentices with N.T. Electricity Commission. They hope to become the first tribal tradesmen in the N.T. Mark Twain makes the point nicely: "Training is everything. The peach was once a bitter almond; cauliflower is nothing but cabbage with a college education".

Young Aboriginals have made gigantic strides and can be expected to make more. But the desire to change and to understand must be shared, and patiently practised, by European and Aboriginal alike. Hence Mark Twain's equally apt epigram: "A round man cannot be expected to fit into a square hole right away. He needs time to modify his shape". All residents of a bi-cultural college should heed this advice. Others too.

.....