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ACROSS AUSTRALIA.....

FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER

THE HOME SCHOOL

*L. Hall

With regard to the editorial in the October/November 1981 issue of *The Aboriginal Child at School* concerning successful approaches to the education of Aboriginal children, I thought it may be of some interest to readers of the journal (especially those teachers transferring to schools serving significant numbers of Aboriginal students) to read about The Home School's approach to education. This approach does not cater for any special needs of Aboriginal (and Islander) students - indeed all of its students are treated and taught in the same way - but for some reason Aboriginal children appear to be happy at this school, want to continue their education there next year and/or in years to come, and are generally motivated enough to achieve at least a pass level in most of their subjects.

The Home School is a small, non-denominational, private, secondary boarding school and it has had fifteen students of Aboriginal descent enrolled as full boarders since 1978. They have mostly come from Aurukun, Laura and Mornington Island, and a grant from the Commonwealth Government covers their school fees. Eight of the 1981 Aboriginal students intend to return to this school in 1982, two of them to do Year 12 and four to do Year 11. All of these students are quite definite and enthusiastic about returning in 1982, which, in itself, is a success story, especially as many of them have been 'cast-offs' from the large state secondary schools in the local area. Either they had been truanting (in one case two girls had been at a local hostel for eight weeks before the hostel management found out that the girls had never attended the high school in which they had been enrolled) or they had been problem students and The Home School had been approached as a last chance for their successful education. (One boy who had been expelled from one of the local state secondary schools gave, a year later, The Home School's major speech at the annual Speech Night, and a very impressive speech it is reported to have been.)

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While most of the Aboriginal students have rarely received above a 4 rating (on a 7 point scale) for their courses, the Principal, Mr Ian Falk, points out that another 3, say, a year later in the same subject indicates that the student has successfully advanced a further year in that subject. Generally speaking, a lot of The Home School's Aboriginal students have exhibited, and do exhibit, some basic problems of grammatical structure which make it difficult for them to always express themselves fluently and accurately in writing, but their oral expression is usually clear and confident, and their motivation to succeed is noticeably high. Actually these basic grammatical problems are also seen in the writing of our Papuan and New Guinean students, and we feel that these problems are largely the result of the students not having learnt English as their first language. Our Grade 11 student from Aurukun is evidently multilingual, having two Aboriginal dialects as well as English; most of the Aboriginal students, though, like the Papuan and New Guinean students, are bilingual. Interestingly three of the Laura Aboriginal students the school has had (one of them is going on to Year 11 next year) had few problems in this area owing to some thorough drilling they apparently received in English at the Laura State Primary School. (Their handwriting and numeracy skills were likewise above average.) The Year 10 Laura student, who is going on to Year 11 next year, recently handed in a ten foolscap page assignment and, although sections were heavily plagiarised, it represented a terrific effort.

I have been asking myself if it is possible to analyse The Home School's approach to education to determine what the factors are that contribute to the school's success in educating its Aboriginal students. Perhaps it isn't possible to do this - perhaps this school's approach is a particular synthesis of many factors, a synthesis or whole approach that resists analysis. However, this school's approach does differ from the approaches of most other secondary schools in Australia in certain marked, definable ways, and it may be possible to analyse these ways in order to pinpoint the factors leading to the successful education of Aboriginal students.

On the whole, The Home School has a relaxed, friendly and home-like approach to education. This is partly the result of the boarding situation in home-like surroundings (for example the dining room doubles as a classroom and all of the students are rostered on various home duties such as clearing tables), but it is, as well, the result of students being able to dress casually (there is no school uniform), to address teachers by their christian names (thus making them more approachable), and to participate in the activities of a very small school which is able to provide a ratio of one teacher to every ten students. (The total enrolment for 1981 averaged 50 students and there were five teachers. Next year the school is to

expand, but in order to preserve the family-like structure, the senior school will separate from the major portion of the school for most of the school week, but not all of it, and additional staff will be employed). Because of the small number of students per teacher, most classes are generally conducted as friendly tutorial groups: tutorials, however, are regularly interspersed with traditional 'teacher at blackboard' lessons.

The thing that strikes the newcomer to The Home School most forcibly is the family feeling the students radiate. Irrespective of race and socio-economic stratas, the students overtly demonstrate affection for, and tolerance of, each other. (The students recently worked out that at least ten races of people were represented at The Home School. It is a truly harmonious multi-racial community.) It is possible that this family feeling contributes greatly to the psychological security of the Aboriginal students in particular.

The staff, too, must inevitably be a factor in the successful education of Aboriginal students. There is nothing casual about the commitment of The Home School staff to education - they believe in its benefits and hold high expectations of all of their students.

In essence what I have been saying is that The Home School has a successful recipe for educating Aboriginal students, but whether or not it is possible to identify all of the separate ingredients that make up the total success, or even whether or not adopting just some of the definable, replicable ingredients will lead to success, is impossible to say. Certain unique features about the school, such as its small, extended-family-size, and its boarding facilities, could not be replicated in the present large state secondary schools, but other features or factors, such as being on friendly first-name terms with teachers, equal treatment of black and white students, equal expectations, and small group work could be.

Perhaps some of the foregoing will be of interest and help to teachers who will this year find themselves in schools serving significant numbers of Aboriginal students.

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