



# 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*.

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## ACROSS AUSTRALIA.....

### FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER



#### A SCHOOL IS PEOPLE : DEVELOPING HOME/SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS

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In 1975 I was appointed to the infants section of a primary school in a Brisbane suburb with a population consisting mainly of:

- . one parent families
- . Aborigines
- . recent immigrants, e.g. Vietnamese
- . invalid pensioner families
- . itinerant families from caravan parks on the outskirts of the suburb.

The school, consisting of 700 or so children, was as you might guess, a classical 'Disadvantaged School'. The 'in' word was 'disadvantaged' and from this word came all kinds of undesirable connotations and associations, particularly for teachers coming into the school. When I told people I had been appointed to the school they threw up their hands in horror - asked when I was going to ask for a transfer and generally tried very hard to put me off. If I hadn't grown up in the next suburb and been to school with and worked with many young people from the area, I might *well have been put off*. As well as this, I had recently spent two years teaching 16-21 year-old criminals in a maximum security Borstal in England and really I could not figure out why teaching a bunch of poor little five-year-olds was so scary.

Being a contrary sort of person the sort of flak the school was copping from professional acquaintances and so on got my back up a bit. For goodness sake, it just couldn't be *that* bad! So before I even arrived at the school I suppose I'd developed a positive, even loyal feeling towards it, and this turned out to be just what I needed. It's important to make this point because, when you get appointed to a school, before you even arrive there people are going to try and socialise you into having certain attitudes about your school. When you get there it's even worse. For young teachers this socialisation process is almost irresistible.

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This is what I got when I arrived there: as I said previously, the 'in' word was disadvantaged. I was told that the children were all socially deprived, culturally deprived, language deprived and any other sort of deprivation you might like to think of. Not only were they just a mass of deprivation, it was all the fault of the parents who were also deprived. Parents were seen as incompetent, lazy, uncaring, emotionally unstable, of low intelligence, hostile (the last one undoubtedly true). Many teachers at this school thought of their role as that of carrying the "white man's burden" - bringing cleanliness, godliness and civilisation to the poor - they saw themselves as "missionaries from a different culture bringing new levels of hygiene, knowledge and morality to another race." One teacher refused point blank to start teaching reading until the children knew how to mind their manners, wash their hands and blow their noses - oh, and tie their shoelaces if they had any shoes.

*The parents:* for some reason (quite inexplicable to teachers) they seemed to feel themselves inferior, ignorant, incompetent to play any major part in the lives of their children once they entered the gates of the school or the doors of the classroom. Some, in an effort to show they were not uncaring, helped in any way they were permitted to, e.g. tuckshop.

*The children:* many were insecure in the classroom - confused, rebellious and had learned to be totally unenthusiastic about what education had to offer them. I say "in the classroom" because one of the first things I noticed was just how well little language-deprived Johnny could express himself in the playground. How come he couldn't do it just as well in class?

The infant mistress, who had been at the school only a year or so when I arrived, was well aware of the situation, deplored it and was quite desperately trying to do something about it. She was trying to make a start on developing some sort of dialogue - communication between parents, children and teachers where trust, respect and some sort of community feeling could evolve. At that stage it was ten teachers against, and her for, parental involvement. It was literally a case of truncheons out between her and her staff on this matter. She could, and did, work only through the parents of the children in her class at this stage. A Mothers' Club was established and run by the parents of the children in her class. Teachers refused to have anything to do with it. The intention of the infant mistress in establishing the Mothers' Club was to open lines of communication, to make parents feel welcome at school. It wasn't her intention for it to be a money-raising body, although the mothers involved entered this

activity with gusto and, ironically, it was this that started to break down the barriers teachers had put up.

About this time I had been in the school only a couple of weeks. It was all a great novelty having come from teaching high school for six years, where it never occurred to me to communicate with parents (bit of a problem if you're teaching 200 students in various classes). Now I had 28 children all day every day, whose mothers I saw and spoke to when they picked them up. Without consulting anyone I asked a couple of mothers to come up and help me with the reading. I found myself in the middle of a political storm and didn't know why - no infant teacher would talk to me. I had the political situation quietly explained to me then by the infant mistress. Of course, by the time she'd finished I was on side. We went on this way for a couple of months.

Then the Mothers' Club started making money - lots of it - and buying equipment for teachers and children. At this stage, too, a number of teachers felt they had served their time at this school and were granted their release from jail in the form of transfers. Remaining teachers were finding that they were very impressed with the enthusiasm and dedication of the tiny Mothers' Club, not only in fund-raising, but organising things like Sports Day and Breaking-up Day and generally making things easier for teachers at these busy times. But, my goodness, they worked hard at being the concerned parents they were - they had to - to get a foot in that classroom door, deprived, unstable and incompetent as they were.

But the rot was setting in from behind as well. The new infant teachers, who came in to replace some of the old, had different attitudes towards parents. Two of them were locals - one of them myself - with positive attitudes towards the community. Gradually various forms of interaction increased and were initiated - open days, parent/teacher interviews. Parents were asked into classrooms to observe their children's progress or assist with reading and so on. Slowly one teacher after another began to recruit parents to assist in classrooms as voluntary aides. Parents who had become accustomed to being with their children at the new preschool, were requesting to be allowed to continue this kind of interaction in the primary school.

At the same time as teachers were becoming more interested in the idea of parents in classrooms, the feeling was spreading among parents. There was a fairly delicate stage during which:

- a) some parents were eager to take part in the program, but the teachers of their children were not ready yet.

- b) some children were putting pressure on their parents - "Why can't you come up like Johnny's Mummy?";
- c) some parents wanted to take part but felt inadequate and fearful;
- d) some teachers felt they would like to try it but were doubtful because of -
  - . parents gossiping about other children in the neighbourhood;
  - . valuable time being taken in explaining to parents what to do;
  - . insecurity in themselves - feeling that parents might criticise them or their methods.

Far from being critical of teachers, the voluntary aides who were in the classrooms came to appreciate the problems and the hard work of teachers.

Finally, at a staff meeting and a subsequent Mothers' Club meeting in early 1977, the infant mistress proposed a Voluntary Aide Course. It had taken her over two years to get to this stage. Teachers and parents were consulted about the kind of things they would like the course to offer, and the following course was mapped out on the basis of their suggestions.

#### COURSE OBJECTIVES

1. Excite in pupils a motivation to learn.
2. Bring the community and the home into the school.
3. Help every child to perform his best at his own level.
4. Provide interaction between children and adults other than parents.
5. Prevent children from experiencing failure.
6. Provide a wider variety of quality school experiences.
7. Enable the school to individualise instruction better.
8. Give each child more warmth and security in the school environment.
9. Foster a warm relationship between home and school.

## COURSE CONTENT

1. Induction talk.
2. Setting up and using the Listening Post.
3. Supervision and use of kit materials.
4. Printing and cursive writing. Correct posture. Correct formation of letters.
5. Use of spirit duplicator and electric sharpener.
6. Reading - supervision of groups; how to help.
7. Phonics and syllabification.
8. Mixing paint and glue.
9. Use of maths' terms and games. Introduction to mathematics.
10. Knowing the stockroom.

### The Induction Talk

This session was perhaps the most important one of the whole course. We came to see it as a critical factor in helping people to open up to start talking.

The session was principally devoted to explaining to parents first why we needed them in classrooms - why they were wanted. It was pointed out that parents were the first and most effective teachers of their children and that, as such, they had a lot to offer both to their own children and other children in classrooms. It was stressed that failure can be a terrible thing for children at school (and there were many nodding heads here) and that we were out to prevent failure, with their help.

Confidentiality was stressed - we told them that they would find out things about children and their parents that must not be repeated.

We needed warmth, praise, understanding, sympathy and encouragement in large doses. We explained that we wanted them to encourage independence. That often, to do this meant not telling a child the answer to a problem but to take him upwards in steps until he solved it himself.

We discussed control and discipline and how to listen a lot and not talk too much.

One course per term was conducted in 1977 for parents of infant children. At the end of 1977, during 3rd term, I took over as infant mistress at the school and, for me, some fascinating things began to happen concerning the course.

After teaching the course in 3rd term I began to see the immense possibilities for developing good home/school liaison. The first course in 1978 was vastly different from early ones. We opened the course to all parents in the school, because upper school teachers and parents were clamouring for it. Later, the course was opened to anyone who wanted to help in the school - grandmothers, friends, cousins, a couple of pensioner fathers. Community Youth Support Scheme heard about it and we then had a couple of unemployed fifteen and sixteen year olds working in the school.

About halfway through the first course in 1978 I suddenly realised that course content was, in a way, irrelevant. I could have been teaching them all how to draw Mickey Mouse for all course content mattered. Something else altogether was happening. We were all talking. I was being asked about problems at home, about children, about teachers, about school, about school work, about homework. It made me feel like God in one way, but dreadfully inadequate in other ways. I used to go home mumbling things like:

How come I didn't know Shane had an ear problem?

What will I say to Mrs Jones about whether or not she should have that operation? Good grief, how would I know? That's not my job - help!!

Teachers were coming to me and saying things like: "I don't believe it - Mrs Smith is doing the course - I've been trying to get her to come up and see me all year - grab her before the session and send her over." Suddenly teachers were talking to these people and finding out a few home truths about themselves and schools as closed institutions.

One of the biggest issues that came up was that of homework. Lots of teachers at so-called disadvantaged schools run around saying, "The poor little deprived kids never get any help at home - no books, no back-up - incompetent, uncaring, unstable, lazy parents, etc. etc.". What I discovered was that, it wasn't that the parents didn't want to help with homework, they felt inadequate to do so. Many of them had experienced failure at school and had hated their own school experience. Methods of teaching reading and maths had changed. They couldn't even help with simple operations like addition, subtraction, sounding

out words phonically, and this had only increased their feelings of inadequacy. There was an overpowering desire to know how to help the kids, to be shown how to help their children become good readers. There was no way you could say they didn't value education, or want their kids to get on. There was no way you could say they were uncaring parents. At this stage I must emphasise that the parents who did these courses, for the most part, were *not* those ones who, in a normal school situation, you see around at the tuckshop and at the P & C. They were those parents who *wouldn't* come up for parent interviews, those who had difficult children and those who had big personal problems of their own. I don't know to this day why they were attracted to the course initially, but I'm sure that their response was certainly an indication of their need.

To mention something frequently bandied about - "instability" in parents. Many of these people were suffering poverty, broken marriages, drunken husbands, dreadful loneliness and isolation, had moved from place to place. Teachers had talked to these people as if they were sort of subhuman. I found, however, that in every single case these parents were well aware and very concerned about the effects of these kinds of happenings on their children. They literally demanded coping skills. By this stage I was getting a bit frazzled - what to do about all this? - we seemed to be becoming a referral agency for social welfare, a shoulder to cry on, an information agency. And the trouble was that I could see just how appropriate a place a school was for parents, children and teachers to work together for themselves as people. My ideas about schools existing for children did a smart turn about.

One of the first things we did was to expand the course to encompass some child development lectures (see Appendix A). The discussions were incredible - how much easier it was, they said, to cope with little Johnny who said "no" to everything and tried you out in every possible way, if you just knew he was going through a perfectly normal stage of development, and it wasn't necessarily because he didn't have a father or because you were being a bad mother. The range and depth of discussion was wonderful. The thirst for knowing things about their children was enormous.

We also included a number of sessions on how teachers teach the basic maths operations and advice on how to help with homework. A social club was set up for single mothers. It turned out they'd like some hobby classes. They themselves ran these in the school, using the kinds of skills they had themselves. They made them into family affairs, bringing their children to learn with them of an evening.

The other big thing that came out of these sessions was the adult literacy classes. After a session one day a lady, who had a child in kinder, asked very apprehensively to see me. She explained that her husband couldn't read or write and could we help him. Before we knew it, we were doing one to one literacy tutoring. This I consider to be a major breakthrough in home/school relationships. If you've been a big failure at school, so big you couldn't even learn to read and write, you've got to feel pretty good about your child's school to be able to front up, admit you can't read and write and ask for help. The first man I tutored was literally so scared I could see his knees knocking. He badly wanted to be able to read stories to his little girl who had just started school. There was no way *his* child wouldn't learn to read and write. He painstakingly worked his way through every Dr Seuss book we had, week by week, and he would take them home to read to his little girl. After that we got on to reading the words written on cartons where he worked, and so on.

All this is a long way from a Voluntary Aide Course to help in classrooms. By the end of 1978 we had over 60 people working in classrooms and were averaging about 20-22 people every course. Many were finding satisfaction and reward in listening, reading and talking to children. Teachers reported increased motivation in many children, in particular those whose parents were working in classrooms. We couldn't supply enough aides for teachers - demands greatly outstripping supply. Teachers could see concrete evidence of the benefits of establishing good relationships with parents.

I think that one of the reasons so many other issues came to light was the fact that the school had established, in a non-threatening environment, an acceptable channel of communication which couldn't possibly be provided by institutions such as the P & C and the Mother's Club.

In conclusion, I think we can learn some very important things from an experience such as this:

- . Don't have, or let yourself be socialised into, preconceived ideas about parents or children from an area such as this.
- . Keep a weather eye open for ways of exploring and building on the kind of home/school relationships you already have in your school. If you think about it - up until the Voluntary Aide Course was introduced, the things that were happening in the school were not unusual things - they weren't fantastically innovatory and the problems were similar to those in many schools. What it took was someone, in this case the infant

mistress, to take that situation, explore it and use it to go further. And that was all that *I* was doing when I carried her ideas and those of the parents even further.

This course cost nothing to institute and maintain except time. You don't need grants and extra personnel to get good home/school relationships, if you really want them. You need to be a respecter of people. You also need to be an expecter. I expected only small things from those people initially. I expected them to be concerned parents - to be parents who loved their kids. I got a bit more than I bargained for. They lived up to those expectations and way beyond.

Schools have effectively excluded parents from their children's school lives for a very long time. Teachers, too, have considered schools to be *their* province for a very long time. For these reasons it will be necessary to build into the fabric of the school appropriate channels of communication with parents.

#### Appendix A - Child Development Talks

1. EARLY SOCIALISATION
  - importance of strong early attachments
  - social development within the family
  - the carry over into later childhood.
2. SOCIALISATION IN MIDDLE CHILDHOOD
  - relative importance of all socialisation agents.
3. ADOLESCENCE
  - the search for identity based largely on the success of early development.
4. PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AT SCHOOL
  - effects on children
  - the first day at school, possible effects.
5. GETTING READY FOR READING
  - concepts about reading, visual and auditory discrimination, hand-eye co-ordination, etc. The link between reading and writing.

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