



# 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.

## THE ABORIGINAL LIAISON OFFICER IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA: VIEWS FROM THREE LEVELS

*In Eastern Australia the respective State Education Departments are encouraging the liaison of Aboriginal parents with the schools. An Aboriginal person is usually employed to facilitate this important interaction and is employed under various titles - The Aboriginal Home Visitor, Home-School Coordinator, and Community Education Counsellor. The diversity of nomenclature is maintained in Western Australia, where the Aboriginal person entrusted with this demanding task is employed as an Aboriginal Liaison Officer.*

*The following articles describe the duties and performance of the Aboriginal Liaison Officers from three levels. Colin Mounsey, Superintendent of Aboriginal Education in Western Australia, provides a state-level overview, relating the history and special requirements of the Aboriginal Liaison Officer. Neil MacNeill (Principal, Roebourne Primary School) and Gladys Walker (Aboriginal Liaison Officer, Roebourne) relate the operations of the Liaison Officer from a local and personal viewpoint. (C.N. MacNeill)*

### A PERSONAL VIEW

\*G. Walker

In February 1978, I took over the job of Aboriginal liaison officer based at Roebourne Primary School. I had previously worked as a Homemaker, and at Marble Bar Hostel.

Much of my time was taken up with the problem of absenteeism. It was not unusual to have up to forty children absent from school and each child had to be found and the parent talked to about why the child was not at school.

Now parents can see that the school is a good place to be (with the Aboriginal Cultural Program for the Aboriginal children)

---

\* Mrs Gladys Walker, Aboriginal Liaison Officer, Roebourne, W.A.

and most of them send their children to school. Some families still have problems getting children off to school in the mornings, but we are working with the Homemakers to try to help them.

The first thing I do each day is to go to each classroom to check absenteeism and discuss any problems a teacher may be having with any Aboriginal children. I then go and see the parents and the children to find out if the child is sick or is having some other problem. I then go back to school and tell the teachers what is happening.

It is important that all the Aboriginal children start school and keep going regularly because, once they miss out on school, they get further and further behind and then they don't want to go at all. Also, if one child is allowed to miss school he or she usually gets some friends to stay home too, and it's not long before the absenteeism gets bad again.

The school helps by having sympathetic teachers who understand the children's home conditions and don't growl when they come to school late. The school also has clean clothes for the children whose clothes didn't dry overnight and showers if the children need showering.

One of the best things about the school, according to the Aboriginal children, is the Aboriginal Cultural Program. The Elders come to the school and take the children for dancing and tell them the Injibarndi stories. National Aborigines' Day is a big event and people come from everywhere to see the dancing put on by the children and the school and to help organize the Aboriginal Cultural Program.

Each week I visit other centres where the Roebourne children go to school (Karratha and Wickham) and see how things are going. I also liaise with Aboriginal families living in Wickham and Karratha and their schools if need be. Aboriginal parents from Wickham and Karratha attend Aboriginal Committee on Education meetings in Roebourne.

I also help to organize the Aboriginal Committee on Education which was set up in 1980 at Roebourne. My job also makes me convenor of the Pilbara Regional Aboriginal Committee on Education, which held its first meeting in 1981. We have two yearly meetings of Regional A.C.O.E., one in Roebourne and one in Port Hedland. This year Onslow and Marble Bar should set up their own Aboriginal Committees on Education and join in the regional meetings. Once a year we have State Aboriginal Committees on Education meetings which I attend along with a Port Hedland representative.

Another meeting I attend regularly is the School Children's Welfare, which discusses the problems faced by Aboriginal school children. Representatives of Roebourne Primary School, Karratha Senior High School and Wickham District High School attend with other government departments - Community Health, Community Welfare, Commonwealth Education and Weeriana Hostel.

Although it's not a part of my job as liaison officer, I am on the Roebourne Aboriginal Housing Board. The committee meets once a month with the area manager of the State Housing Department and discusses which families need housing and which houses are overcrowded. This committee lets me know if families of school children face any housing problems.

The job of Aboriginal liaison officer is not easy and although I get depressed from time to time and think that nothing is improving, I can look back to 1978 and see that progress has been made.

## A SCHOOL'S VIEW

\*C.N. MacNeill

Gladys Walker, the Aboriginal liaison officer based at Roebourne Primary School, is an Aborigine who reflects the historical upheavals of Aboriginal tribal life in her own person. She is of Bunjima ancestry, married to a Ngalyuma man, helping to promote Aboriginality with Injibarndi elders in Roebourne.

In 1978, when she took over as Aboriginal liaison officer at the school, she was one of three Aboriginal liaison officers appointed in the state at that time. The biggest problem facing the Aboriginal liaison officer from the outset was widespread absenteeism. There were some thirty to forty children missing school each day. By 1981 it became obvious that the truancy problem had been controlled in the Primary School. At this time there were only six habitual truants in the 150 Aboriginal children at school. These children could no longer take precedence over the more positive aspects of the job requirements and no improvement could be expected until Community Welfare had managed to change the children's environment.

---

\* Mr Neil MacNeill, Principal, Roebourne Primary School, W.A.

The shift in emphasis became one of counselling *all* Aboriginal parents to inform them of the good things happening at school. Initially the A.L.O. tried to go to every house and speak to the parents but this was not successful. It was decided that a parent would be invited to morning tea each day at the village centre. The school funded morning tea through a Priority Schools Program Grant designed to encourage parental interaction in schooling. Before a prearranged meeting, the A.L.O. would speak with the children and their teachers. The children's reports would be used, problems would be discussed and the teacher would communicate some good points about each child. Every parent was to be told something nice about each child.

Gladys Walker, as Aboriginal liaison officer, is convenor of the Pilbara Aboriginal Committee on Education, (A.C.O.E.). In Western Australia it was decided to set up regional Aboriginal Committees on Education which were the equivalent of other State's Aboriginal Consultative Groups.

Roebourne's A.C.O.E. commenced in 1980. It spread to Port Hedland in 1981 and should commence in Onslow and Marble Bar in 1982. The present chairman is Bernie Ryder, an Aboriginal teacher from Onslow Primary School. Within three years, most of the Pilbara will be involved in A.C.O.E. and the benefits of Aboriginal parental involvement in education should be more evident.

At a regional meeting of A.C.O.E. in 1981 the problem of truancy was discussed and an outstanding idea, which sprang from the assembly, was to involve parents of truants more in classroom activities. This would ensure that the child attended school. The A.L.O. is now organizing the roster of parent attendance in the school.

The general improvement in school attendance and the success of the Aboriginal Cultural Program enabled the school and the Aboriginal liaison officer to formulate new emphases in policy.

#### 1981-82 SCHOOL POLICY - NEW DIRECTIONS FOR THE SCHOOL'S ABORIGINAL LIAISON OFFICER

There is a vital need for the A.L.O. to be seen in a more positive light, not only in the Aboriginal Community and the school, but also by other government departments. Mrs Walker should not have to shoulder sole responsibility for truancy.

From now on Gladys will-

- a) Complete a list of Aboriginal families and work through this list by -
  1. interviewing classroom teachers, reading the child's report;
  2. interviewing and counselling Aboriginal children;
  3. interviewing the children's parents or guardians, making certain that something pleasant can be communicated to the parents. The A.L.O.'s visits should be something to be looked forward to, not avoided.
- b) Continue to collect data on absenteeism and try to remediate this positively by discussing the benefits of education with the parents.

In the case of prima facie truantism the problem will be communicated to the Officer-in-charge, the Department of Community Welfare in Roebourne, in writing. Some follow-up will be expected, particularly if there is a problem in the home.
- c) Facilitate parent school interaction (morning teas, parents' days, etc.)
- d) Organize Aboriginal Cultural Group activities with the teachers and tribal elders.
- e) Maintain contact with Karratha Senior High School and the Aboriginal parents in Karratha (38 km from Roebourne).
- f) Maintain contact with Wickham District High School and the Aboriginal parents in Wickham (10 km from Roebourne).

Gladys will continue to be convenor of the Roebourne Aboriginal Committee on Education, the convenor of the Pilbara Aboriginal Committee on Education and the Pilbara delegate to A.C.O.E. Twice daily meetings with the school principal and teachers shall continue. Staff co-operation is sought to make this new directive a success.

An integral part of the liaison officer's job is to advise and organise advice on curriculum matters. The Aboriginal Culture Program mounted by the school is largely the result of community request, presented by the Aboriginal Liaison Officer. The success of the Aboriginal Cultural Program is a positive success which has

important implications for the standing of the school, the teachers, the students and, not least, the Aboriginal liaison officer.

To conclude, the Aboriginal liaison officer's task is extremely demanding in semi-traditional societies because the sharp demarcations between sex roles are still present. A male A.L.O. would have to communicate mainly with women, which could be considered demeaning. A female A.L.O. has ready access to the women concerning children but much of the authority still lies with the tribal elders who must be included in all new policy decisions. Gladys Walker has shown true diplomatic skills in her ability to gain co-operation of all parties involved in education in this area of the Pilbara and the results are readily evident for all who have viewed Aboriginal education over the last decade.

## A STATE VIEW

\*C.F. Mounsey

A teacher of native children, especially a teacher who is not native himself, must be extremely sensitive to the importance of the family to the young native child. For many native children, the school may be the first prolonged exposure to persons outside their family or culture. This fact alone places tremendous responsibility upon the school to ensure that those initial school experiences are positive and relevant for the child. The school environment must be an extension of the home environment. The one must complement the other so that the child - and his parents feel right in being there.<sup>1</sup>

Although this was written as a guide to teachers of Native Canadians in Ontario, by substituting the term "Aboriginal" for "native", it might well be used as a principle for teachers of Aboriginal students.

---

\* Dr Colin Mounsey, Superintendent of Aboriginal Education, Dept of Education, Western Australia.

<sup>1</sup> *People of Native Ancestry* - a Resource Guide for Junior and Intermediate Teachers. Ministry of Education, Ontario, Canada, 1975 p.11.

As a further guide, the document suggests that -

the Principal and his staff must work in close collaboration with parents and leaders of all groups in the community to ensure that the school curriculum meets the needs of each child. The desirability of exposing native children to the majority culture must remain secondary to the necessity of the school being a natural extension of his home community.<sup>1</sup>

Few people would argue with the principle which is embodied in the guideline. The implementation of the ideal, however, is one which poses a challenge to educational policy makers and administrators, as well as the many dedicated and concerned school principals and teachers. While accepting that opportunities now exist for undergraduate teachers to participate in inter-cultural studies programs and that endeavours are made to provide a suitable induction and orientation program for appointees to schools which have a majority enrolment of Aboriginal students, the reality is that a very high percentage of teachers of Aboriginal children are unaware of the background experience, expectation and aspirations of their pupils.

#### LEARNING AND THE LEARNER

The degree to which a pupil learns is heavily dependent upon three related factors:

- . that what is being taught is what the child wants to learn or sees a purpose in learning,
- . the level of self-esteem and self-confidence which the child possesses and
- . the degree of harmony which exists between the parent, the community in which the parent resides and the school which serves the community. Any disharmony will adversely affect the child's learning potential.

There needs to exist a high degree of mutual understanding between the school, the parent and the community if the school is to provide a satisfying learning experience for Aboriginal children.

---

<sup>1</sup> *People of Native Ancestry* - a Resource Guide for Junior and Intermediate Teachers. Ministry of Education, Ontario, Canada, 1975, p.13.

In order to fully appreciate and provide for the needs of the students, teachers must be sensitive to a number of factors. They require an adequate insight into and appreciation for:

- the aspirations of parents and students and their expectations of the school,
- the social and cultural ties and responsibilities which exist for Aboriginal parents and their children,
- the values and belief system and code of ethics which bind a child to his culture.

In addition, they must have -

- a knowledge of the total set of experiences, including the normal medium of oral communications, which a child brings to school, and be able to build upon that experience.

Conversely, it is important for parent groups to:

- become familiar with the organization and operation of a school,
- gain an awareness of the levels of attainment which are a prerequisite to the entry into specific vocations, or to progress into higher secondary, or tertiary institutions of education.
- understand factors which will assist their children in attaining the levels of achievement to which they aspire.

#### SCHOOL/COMMUNITY INTERACTION

To achieve these ends requires an effective and ongoing dialogue between teachers and parents - an unusual phenomenon in any community. It is obvious that in most communities an additional element is required to establish and maintain effective lines of communication. A most effective facilitator for this has been the involvement of Aboriginal liaison officers

The Aboriginal Liaison Officer Program was initiated in 1975, when appointments were made to three large rural-urban centres - Derby, Port Hedland and Kalgoorlie. It was originally conceived that liaison officers would perform four clusters of tasks:

- a) to counsel school staff on matters relating to the educational needs of the community;
- b) to work in harmony with teachers to identify the causes of irregular attendances and unsatisfactory performance of students;
- c) to assist parents to understand school organization, policy and programs;
- d) to liaise with the various agencies within the community to increase the level of support for Aboriginal parents and students.

During the initial stages of the program early difficulties were experienced by both the appointed liaison officers and the staff of the school. Role guidelines were loosely defined because it was considered that the task of the officer would evolve from the needs of the community. As each community was quite different so too was the task of the liaison officer. Whilst flexibility was and is highly desirable, more clearly defined guidelines and support systems were required. These have now been developed for, and with, each individual officer.

Two officers were attached to the staff of the Regional Education Office and a third as supernumerary to a school staff. The needs of the locality being served and the perception of both the principal and/or the responsible departmental officer and the liaison officer determined the focus of the role. The operational patterns in each centre became quite distinctive and varied in their degree of effectiveness.

#### RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Changes have occurred in the number of positions, their location, the personnel employed and the role which they perform. Needs based priorities are subject to change in proportion to the economic and social changes which occur in various centres. The resignation of several liaison officers, changing patterns of need and the increase in the number of positions has enabled variations to occur to the program. Five positions now exist:

- a) in metropolitan Perth, where the officer operates from the Head Office of the Education Department;
- b) in the Upper Great Southern Region, centred in Narrogin;
- c) operating from Kalgoorlie in the Eastern Goldfields Region;

- d) attached to the Roebourne Primary School and assisting in the Roebourne, Wickham, Karratha area;
- e) and recently a new position was created at Pundulmurra Vocational Training Centre, South Hedland.

A most encouraging feature of the program has been the self-generated expansion which has occurred to the role which the liaison officers perform. Apart from the original cluster of duties, liaison officers are now taking a leading role in widely divergent activities:

- . as stimulators and executive officers to regional and local Aboriginal Committees on Education;
- . as program developers and consultants for special cultural programs and special day celebrations;
- . as staff developers;
- . as spokespersons on committees which consider the welfare of Aboriginal people;
- . as educational stimulators.

The barometer of the effectiveness of the officers can be gauged by the positive response which they generate amongst the general population of schools and communities. The vastly increased degree of school/community interaction which is occurring, improved attendance patterns and levels of attainment of students, and the changing of attitudes amongst teachers and principals, are but a few of the indicators. There is no questioning the contribution which Aboriginal liaison officers are making to the quality of education which many Aboriginal students are receiving and the progress which they are achieving.

.....