



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

SCHOOL PROFILE - AURUKUN STATE SCHOOL

J.S. Beasley



Aurukun State School, on the Gulf coast of Cape York, is one of the most complex for its size in Queensland. Situated in a community that is arguably the most traditional in orientation in this state, the well equipped and staffed school is a symbol of cultural change. Children, who at home lead largely unregulated lives centred on their families, encounter in the school another language, another culture, another set of values and attitudes - often very different from those they have learned from birth. The school's achievements are defined and its goals shaped by its adaptation to this clash of expectations in forging an education that draws on the best of both cultures.

THE BILINGUAL PROGRAM

Ten years ago Aurukun was one of the first schools in Australia to commence bilingual education, using Wik Mungkan, the first language of the children, to teach reading and writing in the lower grades. The program has been much changed and developed since those early days, and is now firmly established in Years 1 to 7. Teacher aides play an important role in teaching language skills, especially in the lower grades, where the children have little English. Once basic literacy is achieved in the child's first language, it is relatively easy to transfer these literacy skills to reading in English, and this normally occurs at about Year 4 level. Wik Mungkan remains the appropriate language for much speech and some reading and writing throughout primary grades, though with a decreasing time allocation for formal Wik Mungkan instruction.

Bilingual education is demanding of teachers, and requires the teacher and aide to work closely as a team in the classroom. Meg Evans, the bilingual advisory teacher stationed at Aurukun, functions

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as a teacher linguist and resource person in the school, with added responsibilities for programs at two other schools, as well as doing much of the work associated with the production of classroom materials. She has developed, with the assistance of classroom teachers and aides, a set of detailed teaching guides for Years 1 to 7, as well as a series of primers and much supplementary material in Wik Mungkan.

To assist in this work, the Education Department in 1979 installed a small offset press and quality photocopier in the school. Aides were trained in production techniques, and a great deal of material has been processed since then, though the need for a full-time printer to oversee this work is acute. The school is committed to producing truly bilingual students, and not just using Wik Mungkan as a stepping stone to English, (though this is part of what happens). To maintain reading competence in Wik Mungkan, children in upper grades require an adequate body of Wik Mungkan literature suited to their skills and interests. Much remains to be done in this area. Some school staff have produced a local bilingual newspaper, *Wik Inana*, which has been printed fortnightly during term time in Aurukun for the past four years.

BILINGUAL AND BICULTURAL?

While language is an important part of a culture, a bilingual program does not make a school bicultural. Aurukun school seeks to develop a genuinely bicultural education, but progress remains slow in many areas. With the likelihood of Aurukun people becoming teachers in the school in the near future, we may start to see real progress in this area. The increase in the number of teachers staying for more than one or two years in the community will also help as we seek to develop programs in Social Studies, Science, etc., that are based on local knowledge and experience. Teacher aides have made a major input into the Social Studies program in 1983.

A bicultural program will seek to break down the barriers between the school and community. One pleasing development has been an increasing involvement of parents in the classroom. Starting with the preschool, more and more parents are coming along to school; sometimes to actively assist with the program, at other times just to be with their children. Teachers are encouraged to move out into the community and to involve parents where possible in class activities.

Biculturalism also means taking account of Aboriginal teaching and learning styles in the way we teach. It can and should lead to teaching of traditional skills where the community feels this is

appropriate. In Aurukun the school has been involved in teaching craft skills, but dancing is mainly taught at home by the children's relatives.

THE OUTSTATIONS

Aurukun people have participated in a widespread move away from missions and communities and back to outstations on traditional lands. At present, one teacher at Aurukun provides lesson materials to families on the several outstations, enabling children to continue a correspondence style education while away from the school. A pleasing result has been the obvious commitment of many outstation people to this form of education. While outstation children cannot hope to cover the range and amount of school work that a classroom provides, there are compensations in living a happier, healthier and less stressful life close to nature on land that is traditionally their own. The outstation teacher's work is strenuous, involving much travel by small plane, boat and four-wheel drive vehicle, and the production of vast quantities of work sheets.

THE SCHOOL ADVISORY COMMITTEE

An advisory committee has existed in Aurukun for several years with Departmental support. Recently, this committee has begun to take initiatives: appointing and funding (for some months) a school counsellor in 1982, and arranging in 1983 for a community representative to visit students who have completed Year 10 in Aurukun Secondary Department and gone out to schools near Cairns. As well, the committee has tackled the difficult problem of absenteeism amongst Aurukun children, showing itself prepared to make hard decisions where necessary.

As all shire councillors have a seat on the Advisory Committee, there is an informal link between school and shire that can help break down the divisions between departments that are all too familiar in small communities. The Advisory Committee meets regularly to discuss problems, makes day-to-day decisions about such things as school uniforms, appoints teacher aides, discusses curriculum matters and has, on occasions, acted as a pressure group on behalf of the school. An article by the present principal¹ describes the issues to be considered in setting up an Advisory Committee, and ways of facilitating its development.

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Beasley, J.: Developing Aboriginal community involvement in education. *The Aboriginal Child at School*, 10:4, 1982, pp. 39-41.

THE SECONDARY DEPARTMENT

A secondary program is provided to Year 10 level, using programs adapted from standard secondary courses in Queensland. There is extra emphasis on Manual Arts and Home Economics courses, and all students learn typing. Home Economics is also taught in Years 5 to 7. A music specialist takes music throughout the school, and this has proved popular at the secondary level. Traditional craft skills are taught by skilled adults from the community as part of the Art program. Initial pupil rejection of this program has now changed to enthusiasm. Early problems with discipline in the Secondary Department have largely disappeared and the current emphasis is on achieving better communication in classes where peer group pressures strongly inhibit free communication. Academic standards are rising, and a variety of attempts have been made to cater for those students who are not academically inclined, though this remains an area of difficulty. Numerous students continue to Year 11 at boarding schools throughout Queensland, with the first Aurukun student completing Year 12 in 1982.

TEACHER AIDE TRAINING

1982 and 1983 saw strong emphases on the training of teacher aides in the school with John Adams, an adult educator employed by the shire, running in-service courses on-site. Three aides have also commenced studies at Cairns TAFE and should qualify in due course as assistant teachers, while others have been interviewed for possible inclusion in the Townsville Early Childhood Course.

This year the emphasis was on Social Studies, with aides programming and teaching much of the Social Studies in the primary school. As well, there is a team of three production aides, working as printer, artist and writer on literacy materials. Much training is required by these people in the early part of the year. The school administration sees the development of local expertise in areas such as these as crucial if the school is to become Aurukun's school, and not just a school at Aurukun.

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