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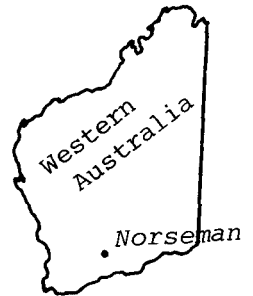


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ACROSS AUSTRALIA.....

FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER

THE ABORIGINAL CHILD NOT AT SCHOOL



* W. Kerr

A recent educational report acknowledged that in Australia, or at least, Western Australia, Aboriginal people were the most single disadvantaged group in Australia at both an educational and socio-economic level.

The group this article concerns itself with is the children of the Central Desert area of Western Australia and in particular those children who are eligible to attend high school. Because few facilities exist for high school children in the Central Desert, the children are relocated away from their homelands in order to attend high school. Norseman supplies the facilities to cater for the needs of some of these children and for the purpose of this article, enrolment figures of the Norseman Project Centre will be used to exemplify the issue of the Aboriginal child *not* at school.

At the beginning of 1983, seventeen students (11 girls, 6 boys) enrolled from the Central Desert. This represented approximately 15% of children eligible to attend. In term 2, seven children returned to school and in term 3, six children returned. This represents 5% of total eligible to attend - not a very impressive figure. There are many reasons responsible for this low retention rate -

1. *Homesickness* - the children who attend in Norseman enjoy school but, because of the distance away from home (1000km) and because of the intensity of their family and community links, they feel both emotionally and culturally deprived.

2. *Peer group* - because such a small percentage of children elect to go away to high school initially, there exists in the communities a group who exert pressure on the children not to go back to high school. One can hardly blame them. Firstly, they are taken from home away to a different social and cultural environment. When they return home they find their friends out hunting, at play or driving around. They must wonder what point is there in an education?

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3. *Community apathy* - surveys have indicated that the parents and elders of the communities concerned see education as a vital link in the progress of their people. They see high school as being very important and encourage the children to attend, but they will not insist that they attend. Some communities have similar problems with their own primary schools. They want education but will not insist upon their children attending school. This apathy is understandable when one takes into consideration that a school with its four walls and fence is the European idea of a learning institution. This learning concept goes against that of the Aboriginal people who have the land, the sky, their culture as their learning base.

4. *Culture* - Aboriginal law does not operate in accordance with school terms and at times children do not return to school because important ceremonies may be taking place elsewhere which require the attendance of the whole community. Cultural events have precedence and rightly so.

5. *Bureaucracy* - many government departments are involved in initially allowing children to go away to school and arranging transport and accommodation whilst they are away. Some departments have eligibility requirements which restrict children attending. In the past even quotas have been set which allow only certain numbers of children to attend.

Educators concerned with the children of the Central Desert find themselves faced with the dilemma of dealing with a culture which is only now reaching out from its traditional base to explore the concepts and values Europeans have brought to this country. Much has been written and spoken about education for Aboriginal people but now is the time, with the emergence of Aboriginal people, for educators to combine, analyse the needs of specific groups of Aboriginal people and implement policies and change that will ensure the progress of Aboriginal people in the directions and at the rate which the Aboriginal people themselves require.

It is my belief then that in some parts of this country, the Aboriginal child is not at school. It is obvious that present methods in my instance are unsuitable. The courses the students undertake while at school are viable and do achieve results. For example:

ENGLISH - as the English language is in the main the second language, problems of communication can occur. It is necessary for teachers therefore to be traditional teachers, or at least have a language background. The children from the Central Desert, as part of a Christian revival, have learnt many English hymns. These hymns, when transposed into reading books, make for exciting singing readers. This technique is also used with a range of popular songs.

Writing skills are developed through the language experience approach, whilst reading skills are developed through the students' sequencing a range of pictures and then supplying the story line, thus creating a range of readers geared to their own levels.

SOCIAL STUDIES - the problem existed of what students should do in Social Studies, taking into account the limited time spent at school and the distinct possibility of the students not attending on a consistent basis. It was decided to formulate 10 week units of work which were self-contained. Each unit would be of value, therefore students completing only one unit gained educationally along with those who completed six units. The course was adapted from the K-10 Social Studies syllabus. Units covered are -

1. *Family* - make-up, health, seasons, clothing, rules.
2. *School* - comparison: traditional - European, rules, use of schools, why have schools?
3. *Traditional Life* - plan and make-up of traditional communities, comparison of traditional life with European life, future of traditional life, decision making, role of Aboriginal bodies, land rights.
4. *Law* - carrying it out. European law, tribal law, co-operation and conflict, the law in the future.
5. *Communities* - change in communities, the changing world, technology, living in a harsh environment, farming in a harsh environment.

The whole course is approached from a remediation viewpoint with emphasis placed on oral contribution and hands-on activities.

Whilst the examples given are only brief outlines and cover only two subject areas, they do not, to coin a popular phrase, "keep bums on seats". The retention rate is still poor.

If education is to become viable for the teenage children of the Central Desert, then a system has to be devised that takes into account Aboriginal lore periods, the times when lore dictates moving on. Until teachers of Aboriginal children combine to confront and develop systems to cater for the vast cultural differences still separating Aboriginal and European education, the Aboriginal child will NOT be at school.