



# The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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## PROFILE:

BETTY WRIGHT  
ABORIGINAL TEACHERS' AIDE

\*Fay Courtney

Eight years ago the Commonwealth Government appointed the first Aboriginal teachers' aides to schools in New South Wales. Their primary task was to bridge the gap between the Aboriginal community and the school. The aides also had the responsibility of encouraging Aboriginal children to gain further education.

Mrs Betty Wright of Kempsey was one of the first Aboriginal women to train as a teachers' aide. In 1975 she was appointed to West Kempsey Primary School as its first A.T.A. While working there Betty attended the first Basic Training Program in Aboriginal Adult Education at Sydney University.

People attending this course faced many problems. Most had left families behind, financial support was inadequate and, for some, it was their first visit to Sydney. Of the original twenty-eight students enrolled, only sixteen stayed until the end.

Betty found the most valuable aspect of the course was the chance to learn to develop communication skills. "Talking to white people can be difficult if you are black and have a deep, inbred inferiority complex," she says. She remembers the anxiety she felt during her first months in schools, wondering how the white staff would accept her. She also felt fear at being the only Aboriginal among so many whites.

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\* Mrs F.R. Courtney, Resource Teacher, Kempsey High School, NSW.

Betty grew up in Guyra, NSW, as one of twelve children. Her father worked as a stockman on a sheep station. Her mother died when she was eleven. One of Betty's childhood memories is unique to Aborigines. She remembers, "running off into the bush to hide when the Welfare people came." The fear of being removed from home and family and sent to an institution was always present for children of her generation.

Betty left school after second form to help support her family by working as a domestic at the station.

In 1963 Betty married Bob Wright and settled in Kempsey. Bob has been employed for seventeen years as a plant operator with the Kempsey Shire Council. They have four children. One is still at school, one is an unemployed school leaver, one has recently completed a Secretarial Studies course at Technical College and the eldest has an apprenticeship in Sydney.

Four years ago Betty and her husband obtained a Housing Loan from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. They had had their names on a waiting list for six years before that. It is only in the last nine years that this loan money has been available to Aboriginal people. The Wrights have, combined with their Aboriginality, the life-style of the white middle class. They are an Aboriginal "success story". However, being an Aboriginal "success story" isn't always too easy in Kempsey. Some Aborigines in the community accuse the Wrights of "living like whites". On the other hand, some whites blithely assume that everything the Wrights have worked so hard for was "paid for by the Government".

In 1980, Betty was transferred to Kempsey High School which had a 7% enrolment of Aboriginal pupils. At this school Betty performs the usual clerical duties of the ancillary staff, assists teachers in class, advises on Aboriginal matters and acts as a role model for

Aboriginal students. An A.T.A. in the school gives these students a sense of security.

Some of the main problems concerning Aboriginal students are related to behaviour. If teachers ask Betty for help she takes the student aside and they talk "as one Koorie to another" in an attempt to solve the problem.

Poor academic achievement in Aboriginal students is often due to home related problems. Concerned Aboriginal parents who are too diffident to approach the school alone will do so with Betty there to assist them.

Betty says Aboriginal parents have, in general, three main concerns about schools. They worry that children are being treated unfairly because of their race; they are concerned that teachers may have lower expectations of Aboriginal children; there is concern when students are harassed by teachers about their government grant money.

Betty counsels senior students and arranges tutors for them. Last year she started a successful homework centre for students in Years 7 to 10. The centre operates one night a week and is staffed by trained teachers. Betty is the supervisor. The students have homework assistance and are given extra work in language, mathematics and craft. Video tapes on Aboriginal culture have been shown and there have been visitors from the Aboriginal community.

Betty's ambition for Aboriginal students in Kempsey is for them to be educated to be "independent and proud of their heritage."

Since Betty has been working at the school there has been a noticeable improvement in the attitudes of the Aboriginal students to school. Discipline problems have been less severe. The retention rate of students at school has improved. When Betty has been called

on to mediate between Aboriginal students and their teachers, both races have known that they could rely on her to be fair.

Sadly, Kempsey High will lose Betty as an A.T.A. next year. Her work experience in this position has given her the confidence to apply to Armidale C.A.E. as a trainee teacher. Assured of acceptance, Betty hopes to start her course in 1985

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