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IMPROVING THE EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES OF ABORIGINAL CHILDREN : THE KOONIBBA EXPERIENCE

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COMMUNITY

Koonibba is a non-traditional Aboriginal settlement 40 kilometres west of Ceduna. It began as a Lutheran mission in 1901, when Aboriginal people from several areas were gathered together at the foot of Koonibba Hill to live as a community. The mission operated until 1964, when the Lutheran Church officially ceased administrative control and various government departments took over. An Education Department school began then. Now approximately 100 adults and 35 children live at Koonibba. None of them are traditionally from this area, but all identify as being part of the Koonibba Community.

Kangaroo, sleepy lizard and other local native animals form a significant part of the Koonibba people's diet but they have retained few other traditional skills.

CONCERNS

At the beginning of the 1983 school year the staff expressed the following concerns:

1. The self-concept and self-esteem of Koonibba children was at a low level.
2. A large proportion of students were attending school very irregularly; some less than half of the school year.
3. Parents made little effort to ensure that children were attending regularly.
4. Most children were very actively resistant to school staff and any efforts they made to teach (or discipline) them.
5. Children were aggressive towards each other in class, in the yard and in the community.
6. Most parents had very little meaningful contact with, or interest in, the school and its programs.

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7. School staff were being regularly subjected to severe abuse by parents, both at school and outside the school, for children's behaviour. Often these outbursts were a release of emotion resulting from unrelated domestic problems.
8. Students making the transition to Ceduna Area School at Year 7 level (age 12-13 years) were experiencing many problems.
9. Maximum benefit of the skills possessed by Aboriginal education workers was not being achieved.
10. Aboriginal education workers were not involved in the day to day administration of the school.

EMPHASES

The staff agreed on the following emphases to form the basis of our school philosophy:

- * to create an atmosphere conducive to regular student attendance.
- * To promote a positive sense of identity of students as Aborigines and within the broader framework of Australian society.
- * To develop all students to a functional level of "literacy, numeracy, communication, skills for social living and the ability to solve problems." (O.S.T.P. p.11).
- * To ensure the relevance of curriculum to the children's needs while being aware of the need for additional skills and knowledge for the more general situation.

With the achievement towards the above emphases we believe we should provide experiences which will empower our students to function effectively within the framework of Australian society whilst retaining their sense of cultural identity.

STRATEGIES

Our concerns were addressed by employing the following strategies:

1. *You are individuals with a unique heritage and many useful skills.*

The children's self-concept (i.e. their perceptions of themselves as Aboriginal people in the Koonibba/Ceduna communities) and

their self-esteem (i.e., their feelings towards themselves with respect to other people) were causing them to -

- a) Be shy and withdrawn with most people; particularly strangers.
- b) Lack confidence in developing relationships with others.
- c) Lack confidence in trying to learn any new skills for fear of failure and thus reinforcing the "I'm useless" syndrome.

We felt that this problem was the underlying cause of many of the associated concerns and so it became our major aim to improve this throughout our total school program. Many of the following strategies therefore address these to varying degrees.

2. *School is fun.*

We provided a wide range of experiences and activities designed to impress on the children that by staying away they would be missing out. We relied heavily on those attending to convey their enjoyment to those who were absent. At the same time, school was portrayed as a comfortable place to be:

physically, with warm, heated rooms and children's videos, and
mentally, by staff displaying genuine affection, concern and interest for the children as they arrived at school. This involved large amounts of direct physical and verbal contact with the children.

3. *We are here to teach the attenders*

Parents were informed that the staff were employed to teach those children -

- a) who attend school and/or
- b) whose parents accepted some responsibility for seeing that their children attended regularly.

We stated that we would not neglect those attenders by going around the community looking for truants.

We relied on regular staff/parent contact (through home visits and informal means) to convey this message. We also used these to convey pleasing reports as well as to communicate problems. This

helped to combat the parent attitude of "What's wrong now?" when an Aboriginal education worker or teacher was seen.

The fact that a full time TAFE Community Education course, involving many parents, was being conducted on campus at the same time significantly increased our contact with them, and so aided communication.

4. *Genuine, consistent forms of affection and discipline.*

Our students are very open in their relationships with people. Whereas it is not unusual in any Junior Primary school to see a teacher on yard duty with a string of 5 and 6 year-olds holding his/her hand, such a display is generally unheard of in the upper primary section. This is not the case with Aboriginal children. They are very aware of the importance of body language, and open touching, jostling and affection are displayed by all of our children towards anyone with whom they feel comfortable and respect.

They respond very quickly (as do all children) to positive reinforcement. An important factor in this, though, is to gain their respect. They are very perceptive towards those who put on a false show of interest.

Widespread acceptance and use of Koonibba Aboriginal English by staff as an accepted classroom language, both oral and written, was also an important factor in establishing an atmosphere of trust. To dismiss a group's language as being inadequate or 'wrong' is to degrade their whole lifestyle and destroy their self-concept immediately.

Concurrent with the establishment of a trusting atmosphere of mutual respect we also clearly and consistently enforced discipline for unacceptable forms of behaviour such as swearing, name-calling, temper tantrums, etc. The main emphasis of the discipline methods was to show concern for the child and his peers as a result of his behaviour, rather than outrage or disappointment from teachers and Aboriginal education workers for his not measuring up to our expectations.

The extreme form of discipline, and possibly the most effective, was physical exclusion of a child who was being disruptive, for a 'time-out' period. The child was then invited to rejoin the class after considering his/her behaviour and agreeing to be more responsible.

5. *Koonibba kids should stick together.*

Much of the children's aggression towards each other was in the form of taunts and annoyance, particularly from the older ones. We placed emphasis on the responsibility of the older children to protect and look after the younger ones.

Many of the strategies mentioned in 3 above were also effective in dealing with this concern.

6. *"Open door" policy to parents.*

Regular, open contact with parents and community members through home visits, parent meetings and informal social contact helped to communicate more effectively the aims of the school and the sorts of programs we were running. All staff, particularly Aboriginal education workers, were involved in this communication process.

Adults were encouraged to come into the school at any time for a cup of coffee, talk, look around, etc. The full-time TAFE Community Education Course operating during 1984 helped immensely in this, as many parents were constantly at the school mixing with staff, watching us teach and play with their children.

Parents were also encouraged to become involved in school programs or make suggestions for improvements. Parent meetings, conducted towards the end of each term, proved an interesting forum for many ideas. It was from one of these meetings that a request for some provision for computing arose.

7. *Direct confrontation of abusive parents.*

Parents storming into the school grounds and shouting abuse were directly dealt with in a similar manner to their approach. (While I would not usually adopt such an aggressive approach, the frequency of these outbursts warranted it on this occasion.) Through the Koonibba Aboriginal Community Council (the administering body for the Community) we informed parents that we were constantly available to discuss any problems occurring at school but that we would not accept the role of scapegoats for excesses of misguided aggression. The strong support of the K.A.C.C., a couple of well-timed examples of parents getting totally the wrong stories of events which, in fact, turned against them, and the benefits gained by much more open communication significantly reduced the incidences of abusive parents.

8. *Transition and after-hours tutoring.*

The transition from a school of 20-25 children and four staff to a school of 750 children and 70-80 staff is a daunting prospect for any child. When you have to organise your clothing, lunches, homework, and catching a bus at 7.30 a.m., the problems are increased.

We established regular contact with Ceduna Area School staff in matters which concerned children from Koonibba. Through this a transition program of regular visits on a "buddy class" basis was begun. This is explained in more detail later in this paper.

At the same time, an after-hours tutoring program at Koonibba School was begun whereby children attending Ceduna Area School could have a suitable area for, and some help with, their homework. Some other special interest projects under this scheme helped considerably with its success.

9. *Aboriginal education workers provide continuity in schools.*

This aspect of their role was made clear to our AEWs at an early stage. They usually were the longer term staff members at the school, the initial contact person from the parents' point of view, and the most significant role-models for our children in the learning situation. They were involved in any plans for changes to school programs, decision-making and equipment purchase. Their positive support of the school and their standing in the community helped our school-parent liaison immensely.

SIGNIFICANT CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENTS

1. CULTURAL STUDIES

Any meaningful attempt at improving the self-concept of Aboriginal children must surely focus initially on their Aboriginal heritage and attitudes of contemporary Aboriginal culture. This can then be used as a basis for much wider application. Much harm is done in the education of Aboriginal children when -

schools take little notice of what Aboriginal children 'have' and put the major emphasis on what they 'have not' it is often interpreted by Aboriginal children as "NOTHING I have is important, and I must do everything your way". Consequently many Aboriginal children suffer a loss of self-esteem and dignity.

(Teaching Aboriginal Children, p.13)

(Of what value are a chartered accountant's skills at Inala Rock-hole?)

We also acknowledge that although students in non-traditional situations such as Koonibba have been largely removed from the traditional way of life for generations -

they still bring many different values and perspectives to school due to their Aboriginal heritage and upbringing. These and other external forces can affect the child's participation in school. Consistently low levels of employment, health and housing generally produce feelings of powerlessness and alienation which hinder children's progress at school. To go beyond the compulsory age for schooling they need a great deal of continuing support and encouragement from teachers, schools and the Aboriginal community.

(Teaching Aboriginal Children p.7,8)

In fact, some children at Koonibba were beginning to opt out by 10 or 11 years of age.

One parent recently remarked on our Cultural Studies program -

I learnt nothing about Aboriginal culture and I am not accepted by the White culture, so where do I fit in?
My children have a much clearer idea of themselves as Aborigines and some pride because of it.

Basically our Cultural Studies program involves instruction in Traditional Aboriginal culture and looking at successful contemporary Aboriginal people as role models.

Regular excursions are held to local scrub areas for experience in Aboriginal history; bush survival (environmental knowledge); collection, preparation and sharing of foods; tracking; traditional beliefs; traditional art and music; Pitjantjatjara language; traditional social organisation.

Teachers, AEWs and parents are all involved in this program which, because of the nature of our Aboriginal population, is of a non-specific nature in the areas of art, music, Dreaming and history. A calendar of significant local conditions during the year has been developed with the community and this forms the guideline for emphases in the program throughout the seasons. Many experiences from these excursions are then used in the classroom setting to ensure that our Cultural Studies program does NOT develop as just a non-mainstream subject.

2. LANGUAGE

The experiential language approach is widely used. Acceptance of Koonibba Aboriginal English as a conversational language was an important step towards improving children's confidence in expressing their feelings. Invented spelling techniques also developed strongly once that confidence became more evident.

3. INTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS

A number of activities have been initiated which are designed to increase the interaction between our children and those in other schools in this area -

- A comprehensive transition program involving 5 to 6 regular visits to Ceduna Area School, where our children and staff work for the day with a 'buddy class'. These classes also visit Koonibba to get a better idea of our school and environment.
- We were invited to participate in the Ceduna Lutheran School sports day: not as a competitive school but mixed in with children of the same age and year levels.
- A series of activity days involving the other small schools in the area has also helped our children see the other schools and become acquainted with those children.
- A significant confidence-boosting program of interaction was experienced when classes of children from other schools asked to accompany us on our Cultural Studies excursions. Our children were then placed in the role of instructors and leaders as they demonstrated their cooking, collecting and building skills to their visitors.

All these programs helped to increase our children's confidence in relating to others while also increasing awareness for all concerned.

CONCLUSION

The results of this school's overall program have been:

- a) ALL staff are confident and comfortable with each other as colleagues.
- b) Children are attending more regularly and happily.
- c) Children relate more easily with other children and adults, and are more at terms with their Aboriginal heritage.

- d) Students are happier in their transition to Ceduna.
- e) Parents are more involved in the school and less aggressive towards staff.

It has been a consistent and at times taxing program but one which, with total staff commitment, has been very satisfying for all.

Perhaps the best statement to summarise the program's success is that made by a temporary relieving teacher who had been coming to this school for six to seven years, and returned after a twelve month break:

"It is now a real pleasure to take these children rather than a challenge. The first thing I noticed... was how well they spoke and how polite they were."

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