



# 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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## FROM OUR MAIL BAG

The Editor -

Firstly, I'd like to say how interesting and helpful I've found many of the articles in your journal.

I've had 22 years of face-to-face teaching experience - two in Queensland, two in London, England, and eighteen in New South Wales. My qualifications include a Diploma in Art Education and have success in both the Primary field and Secondary Art. My first training was Primary training. For the last seven years I have taught at Moruya Public School, which has a modest population of 500+ students.

My knowledge of Koori history up until 1985 was about zero. When Koories were in my class they were being taught by a person with vast teaching experience, who had no idea of urban Koori culture. I judged them to be not interested in learning and they missed too much school.

In the staff room, debate on education for Koories was non-existent, and being such a vulnerable group it was easier to ignore them. It was convenient to judge them as not being interested - their parents never turned up for parent interviews, etc.

All this time *The Aboriginal Child at School* kept turning up on the staff room table. I used to flip through it but never read it.

I live in a small coastal village called Congo, near Moruya. One of my interests is the local environment. My wife, Louise and I walk along the coast often.

In early 1985 curriculum documents started arriving at school on Aboriginal Education, including *A History of Australian Aborigines*. The history just astounded me. At an environment centre I discovered a small well-illustrated booklet - *Aboriginal Sites in NSW*.

About a week later we went for one of our usual walks. We walked over an area we had been walking for years. For the first time, I noticed that in one section we were walking over, lots of rocks were in the grass. With the site book in mind, it wasn't long before we realised that what we were walking over was an extensive Aboriginal quarry site. I contacted the National Parks

and Wildlife and the Koori site officer, and as a result the site was recorded.

These events created a real shift in my thinking. In my area was a whole group of people, very evident in Moruya, with whom I had no relationship - Koories.

During 1985 I did a two week-end course in Sydney called "The Forum" by Werner Erhard and Associates. Put simply, it's an enquiry into what it is to be a human being. What I got from the course was to be free, for the most part, of forever judging people and making assessments. It created an opening.

In 1986 I was given a Third Class, which included three Koori students (a fourth was to arrive later and then leave again). I was very excited.

Early in Term One, the three Third Class teachers met with parents. There were at least seven Koori students in Year 3. At the meeting, which was to discuss programs for 1986, there was a Koori mother. I suggested that at least part of the program must be centred around Aboriginal Studies. All the parents were very enthusiastic, as also were the other teachers and the supervisor.

I was given the task of compiling the ten week program, so I based it on the local Koories.

Suddenly I had created a situation where I could meet Koories without imposing myself on them. Part of the course was to have local Koories come to the school and have Year 3 children ask questions.

What I discovered was that by simply asking who I should contact and having questions suggested by children prepared, I was able to ring up and arrange a meeting at a Koori house. The meeting was great, with three people volunteering to partake in the course.

I then began to notice *The Aboriginal Child at School*. Extended families and kinship began to make sense. I discovered Aboriginal English and sharing. It was exciting! Suddenly, I realised how magnificent these Koori children were, and I don't mean that in a patronising way.

One Koori girl in my class was the eldest of five children. Unlike most of the children in my class who went home every night, there often wasn't enough room for her at her place because of the

size of her house. She'd run home first. If she couldn't stay, she'd run back and get the school bus to her grandmother's house. Sometimes she would stay with her cousin and on other occasions go to Mogo. Naturally there were times when she couldn't get to school. Other times she had to look after her sisters. She would lose her homework sheet. Suddenly, for me, there was no problem. Not only was I able to respect the enormous efforts she made to get to school - it was great to talk about her experiences and she got to realise that I understood how it was for her. This created a great bond of friendship.

Once the Koori course got under way I noticed an astounding shift in the class. Suddenly the Koories' self-esteem took a steep climb upwards. This happened in all three classes. A Koori boy in my class suddenly joined in and gave oral news with his group each week. It's an experience I'll never forget - the whole class spontaneously cheered him. Racist attitudes in the class seem to have evaporated.

This same Koori boy discovered reading, with the help of the resource teacher, and began to gain confidence in his school work. He'd come out to the teacher's table, if I were sitting there, and quite naturally put his arm up and lean on my shoulder.

I had an opportunity to visit this boy's parents. What they'd noticed was that their son, who often didn't want to go to school, was getting up, making his own lunch and heading for school.

I asked the Koori students if I could come home with them and meet their parents. They were delighted, so I made it my business to do so. Another break-through for me - what I noticed showing up for me was friendly relationships. Being a small town you often met people in the street and that included Koories.

My father was Greek. Because of the racism and prejudice in this country in the fifties he anglicised his name. I could also understand a very European looking person who had Koori ancestry, being secretive about the fact because of the racism that exists in this country still. However, about seven weeks into the course in my class, a group came out to give news -- one girl, who considers herself to be European, proudly announced that her grandmother was a Koori. The class thought it was great. I thanked her. Her mother came up the next week with stories of her mother, and a stone axe to show the class.

*I guess what I'm trying to say to teachers is, as far as Aboriginal Studies is concerned - go for it. For the first time in my life I feel completeness about being an Australian. Discovering Koori culture has been a real break-through.*

*I also discovered that on school staffs there are many teachers, including executive staff, who are very racist. What education needs is teachers who are willing to make a difference for both Koori and non-Koori students*

*Although I've resigned from teaching to become a full-time artist potter, I'm involved in recording Aboriginal sites, and look like being invited to join the Moruya A.E.C.G.*

*What it's all about is - making a difference!*

*Jim Simms,  
Congo, NSW*

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SCHOOLS LIAISON OFFICER - ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER STUDIES UNIT -  
UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND, ST LUCIA

Cliff Watego recently took up the newly-created position of Schools Liaison Officer at the University of Queensland. The position is part of the Aboriginal and Islander Studies Unit. Duties include - visiting schools throughout Queensland with large numbers of Aboriginal and Islander students, and communities, to encourage people to consider study at the University of Queensland; organising seminars in cities where there are large numbers of Aboriginal and Islander public servants or community organisations workers. These seminars would be aimed at attracting mature-aged students to study at the University of Queensland; develop awareness of accessibility of external studies; develop follow-up support in consultation with other staff in the Aboriginal/Islander Student Support Program.

Cliff is presently establishing contact with as many educators, secondary school institutions, community groups and individuals as possible, with a view to arranging a suitable time when he can visit such people and make his services available to them. He can be contacted at:

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