

THE BALGA VENTURE

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Balga Senior High School is located in the Perth suburb of Balga and draws many of its students from surrounding areas which are made up of Homeswest flats or Homeswest Housing Estates. Many of the students who attend Balga Senior High are from low income single parent families and as such the school is mindful of the program it offers. Out of a school population of about 900, seventy would be Aboriginal. The reasons behind the initial move to appoint a teacher with special responsibility to Aboriginal students to Balga Senior High School can probably be traced back to 1984, when Aboriginal parents in the Balga area expressed concern about current education trends and their implications for their children.

This concern reached through to the Education Department, who appointed me to the position in January 1985. The appointment was made over and above the standard staffing formula and was designed to trial a new approach to Aboriginal Education in an urban area. As the appointed teacher I was given a virtual free hand by both the school's administration and Aboriginal Education in assessing the needs of Aboriginal students/parents at Balga and in putting into place an effective learning program that could enhance the image and achievement levels of students. The total support of the school and the Education Department was a vital factor in ensuring that this program was going to be effective.

My initial aim was to find out what Aboriginal kids and parents needed in terms of school and where they were currently at. I examined school records, spoke to staff members and then went and visited every parent of every Aboriginal kid who attended the school. From this it became apparent that a communication gap existed between children - parents - school, and that some children at the school were in need of more assistance than others. I was able to identify a group of 16 students (male and female) in the age range of 14 to 16 years whom I saw as being at risk. This group of students had a high profile within the school but it wasn't a profile that was readily acceptable by school staff and other students. This group had an absentee rate which was significantly higher than the school average and often presented discipline problems which reflected in the achievement levels. It was

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significant that even at this early stage of the project inappropriate curriculum and teaching strategies were affecting both student progress and attitude.

I undertook to assume responsibility for all Aboriginal students in the school by choice to direct my main thrust at the 16 students who were deemed to be at greater risk. To do this I set up a class made up of these 16 students and spent time with them discussing the reasons for the class and possible programs it could offer.

Having an enclave for Aboriginal students within the school did not have the immediate total support I anticipated, with critics claiming that by separating these students from the mainstream I was, in effect, compounding the problems not alleviating them. They also claimed that many non-Aboriginal students could benefit from the program but were being denied access. These claims were acknowledged, but I stressed that this program was a trial and its results could lead to expansion of ideas.

I established a permanent home room for the students and laid down a timetable which saw the students together with me in the home room for core subjects (English, Social Studies, Maths, Science) and dispersed into mainstream for option areas. I undertook the core subjects and offered support in the option areas. It immediately became apparent that the students were going to respond to this close knit program. They had a classroom which belonged to them and which they could totally relate to. It meant they had a place to leave all their school equipment and where they could display their work and invite friends. The importance of having a home base and a place where a considerable amount of their school time was spent cannot be underestimated. In effect it gave the kids a positive school identity. The enclave had another immediate effect in that this group of students, who had in the past presented problems to the school, were taken out of circulation for large blocks of teaching time, given that time normally spent with a whole range of core subject teachers was now solely being spent with me. Because I was now working with them for large blocks of teaching time I was able to develop a close working and personal relationship with them, which meant issues such as discipline, attitude, etc., could, in the majority of cases, be handled at a classroom level.

The second stage of the program involved parents - parents who had indicated to me some concerns about school and their children. Luckily for me I was able to tap into a resource in the

form of a very active community person, Mrs Marian Kickett. In conjunction with her, an Aboriginal action group was formed called *Coolunga '85* (Coolunga is a Ngoongar word for children). This group met on a regular basis to discuss school issues and wider education issues. The response to the formation of this group was amazing, with an average of 15 parents attending each meeting. I found that when the onus of responsibility is placed back onto Aboriginal parents they respond in a very positive manner and I doubt that without their support the project would have succeeded.

Prior to the establishment of the parent group parents were reluctant to come to the school. By meeting as a group they were able to raise issues knowing full well their concerns would get back to the school via myself. The large parent network set up by Marian Kickett ensured that parents were kept well informed of new developments at the school. The group issues regular newsletters which also serve to keep the Aboriginal community well informed.

The students themselves had a self perception which indicated failure and it was necessary to reverse this in order for the students to feel they were part of a system that offered reward and success. To do this I adopted the CBS approach (Common Bloody Sense) and put into place Science and Maths programs which reflected the interest and the needs of the students. More important was the English/Social Studies course which was the vehicle by which self-esteem was enhanced. The whole of the English/Social Studies course was interlocked so that one merged into the other and was initially aimed at getting students to discuss and evaluate their role in the school and in the community. The course had a definite Aboriginal bias to it and a topic that was dealt with in depth was Aboriginal history, which required the students to research their families' background by reading available material and talking with family and relatives. The parent group was always made aware of the programs in operation, which enabled them to assist their students.

An essential function of the enclave was to hold regular counselling sessions where students were encouraged to look at their own performance and the performance of the group. These sessions, which were held weekly and were loosely titled "The Week That Was", were invaluable in that students were able to highlight both the positive and negative aspects of their week and were able to support each other in the quest for continual improvement. The results were fascinating, with a whole new school attitude being developed. The parent group responded to this positive attitude by seeking more involvement in determining the future of their children. To this end they instigated and set up several one day parent

seminars that discussed issues related to children. One of these seminars was titled "Are Drugs Killing Our Kids?" and, like all of our parent seminars, the response was incredible, proving that Aboriginal parents are prepared to become involved and, more importantly, are more than prepared to tackle complex issues.

It would be wrong of me to suggest that the Balga program overcame all the issues confronting Aboriginal people and education. We didn't overcome the attendance problem associated with Aboriginal children and we only went part of the way in addressing many of the social issues, but we did put into place a structure that worked for the school, the students and the parents. The administration of Balga Senior High School now has had the experience to become a leader in Aboriginal Education in urban areas, and Balga parents now have the confidence and the capacity to become a powerful lobby in determining the future of their children.

The students of Balga Senior High School have had an experience that for once took into account their needs both at a personal and academic level, and I like to think have gained something from it. The critics of enclaves would no doubt find much to criticise but they would not be able to deny the success of the Balga Venture or the motives behind the setting up of the venture. Over a twelve month period it was evident that with supportive parents, school and kids we were able to make dramatic changes in student attitudes which reflected in their achievement levels.

The Aboriginal enclave was never thought of as a long term proposition. In fact, a major aim of the project was to make sure that the participants were encouraged to slot back into the mainstream of the school as soon as possible, using the enclave as a support unit to support students in time of need. To an extent this aim was achieved, although the program did not run long enough to ascertain its long term effects.

Maybe the Balga Venture contains a message for educators who have to deal with minority groups and maybe, all too often, that message is being ignored. The message to me is quite clear; the message from Aboriginal people is quite clear - *they want the opportunity to participate in the education of their children, and they want their voice to be heard.*

The opportunity to participate both as a student and at parent level came about with the inception of the Balga Venture, and it wasn't through my endeavours that the project was successful but more through parents and children seizing upon an opportunity and making it work.

Education Departments throughout the country are now moving towards increased community participation and maybe the Balga Venture has unlocked a few of the doors that will lead to more understanding of the needs and desires of Aboriginal students and parents. When I left at the end of 1985 the structure of the program was changed somewhat, but even now the school is still mindful of its obligation to Aboriginal students and still runs a very supportive Aboriginal student support program.

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