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ABORIGINAL PRISONERS DESIGN THEIR OWN CURRICULUM

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INTRODUCTION

Aboriginal people in Western Australia experience very high rates of imprisonment. In June 1985 the percentage of Aboriginal people in prisons in Western Australia was 32.7% (Walker and Biles 1986:23) and a large number of these were young men. Aboriginal people constitute 2.5% of the total population of Western Australia which means they are over represented at a rate of 12%(W.A.A.E.C.G. 1987:32). These figures have been extensively researched and documented (Hazlehurst 1987, Eggleston 1976 and Martin and Newby 1986) perhaps to the detriment of Aboriginal people (Parker 1987:140). Parker believes these high rates are due to the socio-economic and political status of Aboriginal people in our society, and suggests education programs about Aboriginal culture should be introduced to judicial agents accompanied by "the promotion of Aboriginal autonomy and independence in the areas of health, housing, education and employment" (Parker 1987:137). Broadhurst (1987:152) reinforces this view, asserting that the over representation of Aboriginal people in the criminal justice system is a result of deprivation and economic dependence and the development of the north-west, rather than an aspect of Aboriginality (Broadhurst 1987:179). He urges that prisons be used as a 'last resort'.

In an effort to redress this situation Aboriginal welfare officers were introduced in 1979 and in recent years Aboriginal education officers and one Aboriginal social worker have been appointed to the Department of Corrective Services. Considerable pressure is placed on individual Aboriginal people who play an invaluable role in the system providing professional and personal support to Aboriginal offenders in an otherwise alien and hostile environment. While Justice Muirhead was conducting the inquiry into Black Deaths in Custody he urged the states to go ahead with their own inquiries and recommendations. As a result of this, the Western Australian State Inquiry, the Vincent Report, recommended

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the implementation of an Aboriginal Visitors Scheme to prisons. It is hoped that this will alleviate isolation and depression that offenders feel by providing regular contact with other Aboriginal people.

Prison sentences do not prevent people from re-offending. Broadhurst concluded from his study that the rate of recidivism among Aboriginal people is estimated at around 80%, while for others it is around 50% (Broadhurst 1987:162). Many Aboriginal people at any one time are in prisons, lock-ups, remand centres, courts, adolescent homes and detention centres. "Perhaps half of them have had little or no high school, while a few have had no school at all" (W.A.A.E.C.G. 1987:34). Many left school at fourteen or fifteen in Western Australia, and even today the retention rate of Aboriginal children in schools, although much improved, is lower than it is for their non-Aboriginal counterparts. In 1974 the percentage of Aboriginal children in schools, although much improved, is lower than it is for their non-Aboriginal counterparts. In 1974 the percentage of Aboriginal children continuing from Year 10 to Year 11 was 21.2; in 1986 it increased to 39.7. In contrast, the percentage of students proceeding from Year 11 to Year 12 has decreased from 33.3% in 1974 to 31.7% in 1986, while the actual number of students in Years 11 and 12 has tripled from 89 (4.8%) in 1974 to 385 (12.7%) in 1986 (D.E.E.T. 1986:no page number).

The concern is that while there is an increasing number of Aboriginal children staying on until their final year at secondary school, very few are completing Year 12, and in 1988 no Aboriginal students gained tertiary entrance through T.I.S.C. (Garlett Pers. Comm. 7/2/89).

Many of the older, more traditionally oriented men I worked with in Fremantle Prison in 1984-85 left school at a very young age and some were illiterate. The younger men had completed primary school and within this group about half were 'technically literate' (Wilmott 1981:15). That is, they could use the tools of literacy but "were not familiar with English values, attitudes and codes which give rise to social behaviour" (Wilmott 1981:15). Access to cultural literacy enables people to communicate in a different way. Some men were highly proficient in their oral tradition and spoke two or three Aboriginal languages as well as English. The language groups of the men included Walmajarri, Nyangumarta, Djaru, Gidja, Manjiljarra, Nyaanyatjarra and Pitjantjatjara. One or two men were not literate in English at all, while others spoke Aboriginal English as well as their own Aboriginal language. Planning an education program was not easy.

There is no formal curriculum that serves or is suited to the less literate in prison, in particular no curriculum that is prison oriented, adult-oriented and Aboriginal-oriented. The courses that I looked at from various places were inappropriate for this particular group. Many Aboriginal men I knew in Fremantle said they wanted *relevant curriculum*. Most of them had sufficient English to meet their needs and where an individual did need help there was always someone to assist. They operated in groups rather than as individuals and certain people were designated specific roles. One man, for example, wrote letters, others interpreted and the older men made decisions about important matters such as who could attend class, which class they would attend, which books contained secret-sacred material and should be on closed reserve, and whether or not stories and art work were 'open' and available freely for anyone to read.

Fortunately for me there was a man there from Strelley Station (where I had previously worked) in the north west of Western Australia, and he established links for me in terms of my kinship relationships. This at least meant that I was not a total outsider.

The question I faced was - what is relevant curriculum?

RATIONALE OF PRISONER EDUCATION

The rationale that most educators use in prison is that education is, or can be rehabilitative. Ekstedt says that at the turn of the century, 'reading the Bible was an appropriate punishment for misbehaviour' (Ekstedt 1986:4). Therefore basic literacy courses were justified as 'contributing to the proper punishment of the offender' (Ekstedt 1986:5). He maintains that the more reading came to be identified with rehabilitation and less with punishment, the greater resistance there was towards it as a proper activity. Punishment was seen as a tool for maintaining good order, whereas rehabilitation techniques were for the benefit of the inmate.

Ekstedt has developed this idea of education as rehabilitative, believing that education contributes to an individual's ability to choose not to commit crimes (Ekstedt 1986:5). Education programs came to be acceptable by being viewed as a reward for good behaviour. This was indirectly acceptable because it contributed to the good order of the institution. Now education is seen to be more in keeping with concepts of educational psychology. It is viewed as contributing to the ability of the offender to grow beyond the need to commit crime. Consequently the individual chooses not to commit criminal offences (Ekstedt 1986:6).

Ekstedt states this is difficult because education cannot be separated from inmate management, and it requires a substantial course structure and a conducive environment.

The provision of education is permitted under the Prisons Act in Western Australia. The Department of Corrective Services Corporate Plan states that offenders are to be 'encouraged to participate in self-improvement activities and programs suited to their individual needs' and to 'develop the work and other skills necessary to participate as constructive members of the community' (Steadman Pers. Comm. 4/11/87). Offenders can choose specific activities which give them skills to operate effectively in the wider community. The Department has also identified as a key task understanding and addressing the special needs of Aboriginal offenders. Historically the education budget has not been at the top of the list when it comes to allocating funding, but perhaps this will change.

In day to day terms the Education Branch offers a voluntary adult education service that attempts to give full weight to the student's own needs and goals. Programs and practices are defined to be non-exploitative, self-directed and meaningful. The Director's Rule 40, under which education activity operates on a daily basis, protects access to education as a right for all prisoners and recognises full-time education as a form of prison work for which a gratuity is paid. Whilst education is a right, in practice there are various pressures placed on individuals to deny them access to education, sometimes for the protection of people in the school, and at other times because of work commitments. For example, there is a limit to the number of students in the school at Fremantle Prison at any one time, and some people have been banned from the area because of previous escape attempts.

From the point of view of the prisoner, Duguid argues that there has to be a direct link between educational content and individual and collective action. His idea is that 'situations build character' and people need to participate in 'real situations, real decision-making and consequential situations to bring about an internalisation of democratic ideals and ideas' (Duguid 1987:59). The idea of situations building character is difficult to quantify, but action is quantifiable. It is compatible with Paulo Freire's idea of conscientisation, whereby people need to be motivated to read and write; they must have a purpose, whether it be political or otherwise.

Prison centred, adult centred, Aboriginal centred curriculum is appropriate because it begins with *dialogue* and becomes a *productive process*. It is not something that is imposed from outside. It allows people to set their own goals and make decisions for themselves. In this way it can be rehabilitative and fulfil the goals of the education policy. It begins with communication and necessitates the facilitation of the process by the Education Officer in order for people to achieve desired goals. Within this process people make decisions about choices and take responsibility for their actions within the group. It is curriculum as process as distinct from imposed curriculum. It is ideal for adults because it takes into account the wealth of experience that people bring with them to an Education Centre.

PART 1 : BOOK PUBLISHING PROJECT

In July 1984, I was employed by the Western Australian Department of Corrective Services as a full-time education officer at Fremantle Prison. The majority of my time was spent working with Aboriginal men. During several discussions within the classroom environment it became apparent that the men had doubts about the relevance of work achieved in the literacy and art classes.

The men expressed a strong desire to learn and use English for a purpose. They believed that they could achieve this by producing reading material of a high quality for Aboriginal children and their communities. If such a project were approved the men believed that:

- a) they would gain purposeful skills in English and art.
- b) they would have some input into their own communities.
- c) as the focus was on children, the material would be 'open', thus avoiding problems of unintentional exposure of 'secret - sacred' knowledge.

It was decided that stories and illustrations would be developed in twice weekly classes (I discuss the process in Part 2).

The Aboriginal Education Branch of the West Australian Education Department was approached to see if they were interested. It was suggested by Glenys Letchford, the Aboriginal Education advisory teacher, that the men produce reading books for Aboriginal children in schools. In July 1985 they provided a grant to

develop the work, and later three stories were accepted for test piloting in the classroom. I also put forward a submission for assistance in publication to the Aboriginal Arts Board in November 1985. The Board approved funding for publishing subsidies and other costs in May 1986. This money was held in trust by the Institute of Applied Aboriginal Studies, W.A.C.A.E.

Funding primarily provided both initial payment to the men for the work, and high quality colour reproductions of three books: *The Lost Pup*, written and illustrated by Johnny Lurda, *Emu Hunting*, written by Olly Cameron and illustrated by Jack McArthur and *The Fastest Bird*, written by Wally Juboy and illustrated by Geoffery Lindsay.

Favourable responses were received from schools (for example, Mount Margaret and Wiluna Primary Schools) participating in the piloting of the reading books. During this phase an educational kit comprising a 'Big Book', a child written book, a board game, sequencing pictures, black line cut-outs and teachers' notes was suggested and developed by Glenys. *Emu Hunting* was the book upon which this kit was based. The material and teaching method formed the basis of a paper presented to the 12th National Conference of the Australian Reading Association held in early July 1986.

PUBLISHING

We considered publishing the books independently but decided to approach an established publisher for two reasons:

- a) distribution would be undertaken by them;
- b) a high quality of printing would be assured.

Glenys and I approached a number of publishers and met Desney Rees, Senior Editor with Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich Group. She was attending the Annual Australian Reading Conference in Perth and contacted us to discuss the project. Chris McGuigan from the Aboriginal Arts Board had contacted her and shown her copies of the books. We held talks and gave her copies of the work to take back to Sydney. She advised us on 31st July 1986 that the work was reviewed enthusiastically and she had approval to proceed to formal negotiations for publication of the works on a national basis. This included the three books mentioned previously and the kit based on *Emu Hunting*.

It was agreed that we would use the grant from the Aboriginal Arts Board to purchase X copies of the books and kit so as to guarantee required minimum sales figures. It was further agreed that the Institute of Applied Aboriginal Studies (I.A.A.S.), as the men's trustees, would have exclusive distribution rights throughout Western Australia.

CONTRACTS AND ROYALTY PAYMENTS

The Prisons Department (now known as the Department of Corrective Services) gave their approval and we began to negotiate contracts with HBJ. The men read through their copies of the contracts and suggested changes to some of the clauses. For example, they wanted to ensure that the artwork was not altered at all and that it was left complete with pencil lines and finger prints. The royalty agreement is such that each man receives a percentage of the publisher's net receipts, to be divided equally (where there is a different author and illustrator in one book).

The real problem occurred when we came to the issue of who owned copyright. Rod Broadhurst, Principal Education Officer, with the Prisons Department began negotiations with Crown Law on our behalf. Initially it was thought that the Crown owned copyright and we asked them to waive it. In the final analysis, after lengthy discussions with the West Australian Crown Law Department it was decided that the *men* owned individual copyright for the following reasons:

1. the project was one defined by themselves,
2. my role was facilitative not directive,
3. some of the work was conducted in their own time.

Anything done totally in prison work time is owned by the Crown.

This was a major breakthrough, not only as it created a precedent but in addition, it acknowledged both the men's right to own their work and their right to contract themselves directly with the publishers. New contracts were drawn up and distributed to the men. All contracts were signed and posted to HBJ along with the work on May 8th 1987.

It was decided on the basis of this that Wooldridge Dominie Centre and the Department of Corrective Services (on behalf of the Institute of Applied Aboriginal Studies) would be distributors of the material in Western Australia. Any profit from the sale of

books sold by the latter group will go into a trust fund held by the Institute of Applied Aboriginal Studies to provide finance for ongoing projects of this nature. A number of the books for sale in Western Australia will have an accompanying text in an Aboriginal language/s.

PART TWO : THE PROCESS

Writing and illustrating the stories occurred in the literacy and art classes in Fremantle Prison. Initially we favoured Aboriginal English but as the Education Department did not believe this to be the appropriate format for the intended readers, we decided to develop the stories in Standard Australian English, with a provision for an Aboriginal language. This was a difficult decision to make. On the one hand the men wanted to write in Aboriginal English which the children would identify with, but on the other hand they wanted the children to be able to use the books in schools.

The men had targeted Aboriginal children as the focus for the books and drew on stories they had told their children and stories that had been told to them as children.

Topics included weekend outings, daily events, stories that contained a moral, camping trips, stories about animals and their children, and stories with unusual outcomes. Initially we sat around the table and told stories to the group in a very informal atmosphere.

We decided to concentrate on the stories first, followed by the illustrations. The process that evolved in my literacy classes followed these steps :

Stories

1. Stories were gathered in many ways - through taping them on a portable cassette recorder, telling them as I wrote them down verbatim, and choosing stories already written in class or newly composed.
2. Taped stories were then transcribed.
3. The stories were conferenced with me, and one or more of the following occurred :- adding, deleting, clarifying, reorganising or punctuating. I talked with individuals on a one-to-one

basis about the sequencing of events; sometimes the reader had to infer what happened in the story to understand the next event. When the writer understood this he could add information for the reader to make his 'meaning' clear. When the story concerned a place he knew well, I asked him to describe it carefully and to add detail. If excessive repetition occurred I read sections aloud and asked him what he thought. If he couldn't identify the repetition I pointed it out and we made changes together. We talked about whether the title matched the story - often it did and sometimes it didn't. Because the stories were to be in Standard Australian English, conferencing was very demanding for some individuals.

In particular, issues of punctuation needed to be addressed. The clearest way I found to explain the need for full stops was to ask the writer to read the story aloud himself. I told him to place a full stop wherever he took a breath. Also, close attention was paid to keeping the stories in the same tense. In other cases there needed to be more continuity in the use of terms, e.g., when the gun and rifle were used interchangeably we needed to agree on one term.

4. Stories were re-written.

5. They were checked for simplicity and clearness of images, bearing in mind that children constitute the audience. Then stage 4 was repeated where necessary.

6. Final draft. Some stories were written twice and others were written three times.

7. The final draft was typed. Each person's story was read to the group, with the author's approval.

Emu Hunting, *The Lost Pup*, and *The Fastest Bird* were submitted to readers in the publications branch of the Education Department and to Jack Davis for appraisal, and they suggested minimal changes.

ILLUSTRATIONS

These followed the same process as the story writing had. Some writers chose to illustrate their own stories while others asked a friend to illustrate them. Steve Culley, the art teacher, was involved initially and we worked together in the art class as well at the literacy classes.

1. Each story (text) was read aloud by the writer, illustrator or myself.
2. Each text was broken up into images, bearing in mind that they had to constitute multiples of four to fit the book format.
3. Ideas for illustrations were written next to the text.
4. The illustrator and I kept two copies of the text, the whole text and the divided text, e.g. rough layout of each page.
5. Emphasis was placed on using bright colours, strong images and lots of movement.
6. Images were discussed in relation to each page of the text. We talked about each main idea and what sort of picture suited them.
7. Rough images were drawn for each page of the text as well as a cover page.
8. The images were conferenced in the same way as the stories had been. Johnny Lurda wrote and illustrated his own story. He needed little conferencing initially but at a later stage we looked at ways of improving the original images of *The Lost Pup* to give them extra strength, for example, the trees were given more definition, the mother dingo was enlarged and the landscape was given an orange wash to give more dimension to the illustrations.
9. A variety of media were used: crayons, pencils, black ink and washes. Then the images were checked with the text. Perfection of the images was an arduous task for some and easy for others. People tried out different ideas, changed, added, deleted or enlarged illustrations.

Having completed the illustrations, the one task remaining was that of layout. The text and illustrations for each book had to be placed in the correct order and in the most appropriate position on each page.

CONCLUSION

Some efforts have been made to redress the fact that, not only do Aboriginal people experience high rates of imprisonment, they also experience a high rate of recidivism. The education system has failed many of these people and is continuing to fail

young Aboriginal people generally. Hopefully, relevant curriculum such as the one outlined will go some way towards meeting people's needs inside and out, whilst fulfilling the requirements of prison education policies. These policies sometimes conflict with the management of inmates.

This curriculum has a number of general characteristics. Firstly, it is locally produced and not imposed from outside. It is based on choices made by the people involved. It is owned by the students and not the institution or an outside body. It is a process that can be utilised in different situations. It is Aboriginal in design. It doesn't threaten Aboriginal identity, and it is open-ended. There are some difficulties. It takes too long! It doesn't fit the acceptable format and requires flexibility on the part of the educator. It could become a one-off exercise rather than an ongoing process, or it could collapse if support isn't forthcoming. It is not relevant curriculum for all Aboriginal prisoners, but the principles of productive dialogue could and should apply to many other activities in prison schools.

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