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THE MANINGRIDA OUTSTATION SCHOOLS RADIO PROGRAM

* Murray Garde

BACKGROUND

Children living on a number of remote outstations or homeland centres in Central Arnhem Land have had access to European style education for nearly twenty years now. The Northern Territory Education Department employs visiting teachers who make regular visits to some outstations to work with Aboriginal teachers and children in these small 'remote' communities. The visiting teachers mostly live in a central larger community and use the central hub school as their base. A number of these hub schools or C.E.C.s now have homeland centre education resource buildings which provide the base for the provision of educational services to homeland centre schools.

Maningrida Community Education Centre services the needs of ten outstations in the central Arnhem Land district; Buluhkaduru, Borlkdam, Korlobirrahda, Wurdeja, Yilan, Ji-marda, Mumeka, Yikarrakkal, Ngankorlord, and Marrkolidjban. The foundation of the curriculum for outstation schools is 'School of the Bush' which is a highly structured and sequenced program suitable for Aboriginal teachers with limited teacher training. The visiting teacher usually extends the bush book program by doing demonstration lessons for the Aboriginal teacher and sharing a variety of extra activities such as games, art, music, sport, new books etc.

Regular delivery of a program to an outstation is often difficult. There are many unavoidable interruptions to a regular school program and the challenge for visiting teachers has been to respond to the request from outstation communities for more and longer visits. At various times of the year, access to some communities is very difficult. For example in the wet season at Yilan outstation on the Blyth River, the visiting teacher must fly by chartered light aircraft to a neighbouring community which has an airstrip and then walk with a packback a couple of kilometres across a flooded plain. Needless to say, school visits are a trying experience for the visiting teacher in the wet season.

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As a means of dealing with this educational isolation, visiting teachers at Maningrida C.E.C. have implemented a radio program which is ideally designed to provide daily contact with every outstation school student serviced by the C.E.C. As well as dealing with educational isolation, the radio program provides regular and concentrated exposure to oral English and provides an audience for each child's reading on a daily basis, something which in the past has been unachievable with semi or untrained Aboriginal teachers and visiting teachers who may only be able to visit a school for a day or two every few weeks. These are communities who have decided they want their children to learn English for a number of reasons. There are of course, outstation communities who do not want schools. The choice rests with the community. For those homeland centres who have decided they want school and an English language program, we are seeing for the first time in many years, outstation children making noticeable although not exceptional progress with the development of their reading skills in comparatively short amounts of time. Before the radio program progress was extremely slow.

THE PROGRAM

Every morning a teacher appointed to the position of radio program operator commences the program at about 8:00 a.m. from the radio room in the Outstation Education Resource Centre. In some ways the program is a 'school of the air' type operation but there are differences. The teacher-operator calls each outstation to see which communities are ready to commence and then marks the roll for the first school, with each child greeting the teacher and then handing the microphone to the next child. The children then start their reading one by one. Mostly children use 'Tracks' reading materials which is the accompanying reading scheme for the 'School of the Bush' curriculum. Sometimes children may read examples of their own writing also. The daily routine proceeds school by school and at the end aboriginal teachers pass on messages, requests for equipment or information about student whereabouts. The base school can also broadcast school news such as the dates for the visiting teacher's next visit, future inservices and workshops, sporting events, excursion arrangements and so on.

SUCSESSES

Most other approaches to the teaching of reading on outstation schools have had little success. The daily, regular contact with each child on all outstation schools is producing moderate success in improving children's reading. Children are starting to learn to read at an earlier age, even if at first they are only repeating the texts read to them by the aboriginal teacher who sits at the radio with the younger children during the radio session. Children seem to enjoy using radio equipment possibly because it provides a genuine and purposeful opportunity for them to imitate their adult relatives who use their own community radios on Aboriginal chat frequencies daily.

It was originally thought that it may be difficult to get children to overcome shyness and speak to a stranger over the radio. This has not been the case. Despite the technology involved, Aboriginal children seem to find the use of radio in school a comfortable and acceptable activity. Pre-recorded oral English resources played on a cassette have always been of some use in the outstation classroom, but the use of radio with a person at the other end to speak to is much more engaging and therefore more effective. This allows reading and language lessons to become more 'people' oriented rather than 'task' oriented and therefore more culturally appropriate for Aboriginal students. There is no visual contact and therefore no unfamiliar balanda face to have to cope with. In fact many children are very keen to take their turn to read and they stand in line, book in hand ready for their turn. Such eagerness was surprising at first, particularly when a number of pre-school aged children started to utter what was probably their first English as they repeated sentences read to them by their parents or teachers over the radio.

The radio program has also encouraged parents to become interested in their children's reading skills. Often, parents who have some literacy skills will tutor their children at home to ensure that they know how to read their radio program materials for the next day. Also more parents are coming into the school buildings (all of the outstation school buildings in the Maningrida

C.E.C. service area are designed for community access (e.g., few walls) to sit and work with their children when they do their radio work.

Having all of the ten outstation schools connected to the outstation education resource centre in Maningrida has created a network allowing all the schools to listen to each other every day. This provides encouragement to teachers who may easily become professionally isolated. The network also helps to create a sense of teamwork allowing teachers and communities to know that support is constantly available. It is often a difficult task and demanding expectation for partly or untrained aboriginal teachers to daily run a school program which has as part of its curriculum the teaching of skills that belong to another culture and world view.

TECHNICAL DETAILS

The following details about the equipment we use may be of some assistance to other schools servicing outstation communities who may want to set up a similar program..

We use Codan HF radios and dipole aerials. We also use a frequency which is exclusively for the Maningrida C.E.C. Outstation Schools radio program. The radios are powered by 12 volt batteries which are kept charged by solar power. This involves single solar panel on the roof of the school, a regulator and battery suitable for photovoltaic use. We use 'Solarbloc' batteries which are low maintenance batteries designed for use in remote area solar power systems. Telecom also uses solarbloc batteries in some of their remote area applications.

We have encountered problems with reception in Maningrida, but not out on the outstations. The reception in Maningrida is affected by the proximity of our aerial to power poles. There are days when the crackling becomes unbearable and reception is limited to about an hour. We only have reception in the mornings and we are presently trying to deal with this problem by installing a repeater station on a tower just outside of Maningrida. The Maningrida base radio now transmits in UHF which unlike HF is not affected by proximity to power lines. The

repeater on the tower then converts the signal back to HF and vice versa for signal reception from outstation radios. The system has just been installed and we are presently testing it to see how successful it is. Hopefully this will allow us to run the radio program throughout the day. There are plans to run a correspondence course for secondary aged students and also teacher training activities by radio in the afternoons.

Recent discussions with Telecom consultants have revealed that there may be the possibility at some time in the future of upgrading the program onto a telephone line link-up or conference system. This would eliminate problems with reception and also be easier to use as children would not have to hold a microphone and transmission button whilst doing their reading. Our only concern about this setup would be cost. At present, now that we have purchased all our necessary radio equipment, our only costs are occasional maintenance. The cost in setting up the program was considerable but funding came from a number of sources including the outstation communities themselves. The program is producing results and we feel it has been worth the cost. Further details about the radio program can be obtained by contacting Maningrida C.E.C, PMB 67 Winnellie, Northern Territory, 0821.