



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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ABORIGINAL PERSPECTIVES IN CHILDREN'S SERVICES

*Maxine Mackay **

Within the multi-cultural society of Australia, Aboriginal people have a special place because of the part they have played in the history of Australia, and because they are the indigenous people of this country.

We believe Aboriginal people have a right to an education that promotes their own identity and respects their cultural and spiritual values and traditions, side by side with those of other Australians.

We see a need for all those involved in Aboriginal Education to develop an understanding of the socio-historic factors which have shaped, and continue to shape, the self-concept of Aboriginal people, and which underlie their response to/in our educational system. We see the need for the provision of personal and professional support for people working in this area to enable them to develop necessary skills.

We believe that the influence of the family is of critical importance; it precedes that of school, and continues to enhance, to limit and to qualify what a school may do for a child.

- from Wilcannia-Forbes Diocese, Aboriginal Education guidelines.

We need to develop a trusting and working relationship with the families in order to benefit the children; this takes a lot of foot work and initiative on your part - you are the visitor and the professional, so you must take the first step.

It is most important to get to know the local Aboriginal history in order to understand more about...

- * **displacements**
- * **role reversals**
- * **handout mentality**
- * **alcohol and domestic violence cycles**

* Maxine Mackay is a pre-school teacher in Bourke, and presented this article at a special training program for Australian Remote Area Mobile Services in Birdsville 1991.
CONTRACT Inc.c/-Projectfor Isolated Children, 23 Mary St. Surry Hills N.S.W. 2010

Aboriginal people don't see the future as being important, they live from day to day, tomorrow will take care of itself. So when there has been a history of ridicule, denial, ignorance and negative everything, it's no wonder Aboriginal parents are hesitant and not very confident in becoming involved or see themselves as not having anything to contribute. Different priorities for their children doesn't mean that they don't want the best for their children, they want their children to achieve and succeed. But most important is if the children are happy and contented and interested; if so, then their parents will be the same. Cultural acceptance is imperative, please always accept as is what you see is what you get. We are different and have different needs. Never pass judgement on home environments, hygiene, dress, living conditions etc. **Empathy is needed as opposed to sympathy.**

WORKING IN THE COMMUNITY

- You are the visitor, firstly work with what you have, then see what is available.
- Always have achievable goals and expectations - not low levels either.
- The time you spend in the community is quality time
- children know when you're half hearted.
- Although Aboriginal parents tend not to be "actively involved" they still like to be aware of what is happening. They prefer to be behind the scenes. This isn't to say they are not interested.
- Use your assistant to help you get to know the families.
- develop an awareness of communal and family cliques and faces.
- Always recognize the parents as being the first educators of the children,
- and that you and your service are complimenting and supplementing.
- A lot of Aboriginal parents have been token members on committees with no previous experience and the language levels way over their heads. Speak in everyday language, with no professional jargon, but not to the point of being condescending.
- There are many ways parents can help; junk material, containers, foam trays, material scraps etc. Once you have asked for them, never refuse these items, even if you are overflowing with particular items.
- Some parents might have skills to offer :
- drawing, access to ochre, johnny - cake making, storytelling, etc.
- Face to face contact is very important.
- Make a point of visiting at least one home each time you're there, just to introduce yourselves. Drop off some of the work the children have done, inform them of any concerns or monitoring of children;
- tell them if the children have enjoyed particular activities.
- Some children might comment on negative happenings at home, never stop them. Always let them talk about it and acknowledge it. You can't solve a lot of the problems, but you are helping the children by letting them talk about it. - Never condone it.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF.

- How many of the Aboriginal parents do you know or have spoken to?
- How do they feel about the Mobile - are they happy with what's being offered - do you need to change the content?
- How aware are they about the Mobile?
- Do they know what you are doing with their children?
- Have you visited any of the homes?
- Does your visit day suit them?
- Do they consider the Mobile as being an important service?
- Does your Mobile offer other services? e.g. Professional support
Speech, Health, Behavioural, Toy Library borrowing.
- How do you publicise your service - radio, local paper?
- How do you think you could get the parents involved?

LANGUAGE ENRICHMENT PROJECT

The Language Enrichment Project was an Arid Zone Project based on USA's Headstart and originally sponsored by Comalco at the Bourke Pre- school. Parents consider that Koori Kids play all the time so they want them to attend Preschool to be equipped with the skills to survive in a non- Aboriginal world. The children were tested on entering the program. All traditional activities were run in twenty minute blocks, however at the introduction and finale the children come together in a horseshoe group for cuddles, for announcing their names then the special intensive language drill about the things they know, see or do. A longitudinal study by the University of Wollongong showed that the majority of the children entered school with high social and language skills. The home language is favoured in the program.
