



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*.

In 2022 *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* transitioned to fully Open Access and this article is available for use under the license conditions below.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

Innovative Links Action Research at St Paul's School Nightcliff

Sharon Pinson

St Paul's Catholic School, Nightcliff



St Paul's Catholic School was established in 1967 and provides primary education for children around Darwin from Transition to Year 7. The present enrolment is 270 pupils coming from the immediate areas such as Nightcliff, Coconut Grove, Rapid Creek, Millner, Alawa, Jingili, Moil, the northern suburbs, and even from as far as Palmerston and the rural areas beyond. There is a very diverse population of students from various cultural backgrounds attending St Paul's. Approximately 20% of the children currently enrolled are Aboriginal, and there is a considerable representation of Greek, Italian, Filipino and Chinese family backgrounds.

When the Northern Territory University called for schools to submit proposals for collaborative action research in may 1994, St Paul's identified three main areas it wanted to address:

- wide-ranging implications of educating our multi-cultural children;
- staff stress level due to high achievement expectations within the school; and
- difficulties presented by many students and their families due to socio-economic factors.

After gaining acceptance into the innovative Links Program in June, these concerns were refined into three main aims:

1. increasing staff awareness and sensitivity to multicultural aspects of education, starting with a focus on Aboriginal culture;
2. determining how school practices may accommodate and be enhanced by Aboriginal culture; and
3. developing resolutions and strategies to address possible conflicts between school practices and Aboriginal community expectations in dialogue with the Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA) Committee and others.

In addressing the first aim, five workshops for teachers were conducted during third term, involving guest speakers (Mrs Maria Stephens, Catholic Education Aboriginal Co-ordinator and Father Saibo Mabo from Nungalinya College) and videos ('Back Trackers' and 'Telling It Like It Is'), with suggested professional reading and discussion.

These led to the consensus to address the second aim by co-operatively planning, teaching and evaluating an integrated unit of work on family heritage across all grades in the school early in fourth term. Teacher evaluations indicated how positive this exercise was for staff team-building and collaboration. Parental involvement was considerable and the newly appointed Aboriginal Resource Officer (ARO), Marian Patterson,

helped all the Aboriginal children decorate tee-shirts, paint handprints and make crepe paper skirts to wear at a multicultural lunch.

In order to develop resources and strategies, staff from St Paul's visited other schools and spoke with teachers, administrators and Aboriginal Resource Officers to learn how others catered for the diverse needs of their students and families. Schools consulted were Manunda Terrace, Moulden Park, Daly River, St John's College, Alice Springs Catholic High, Alice Springs Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, and Yipirinya Pirara College and Ltyentye Apurte Community Education Centre. The ASSPA Committee was consulted about expectations and communication with the school, and as a result of collaboration with the ASSPA Homework Centre a submission for an Aboriginal Resource Officer was successful. This led to Aboriginal family groups feeling encouraged to come to the school to assist in classroom projects and activities and the ARO doing a great deal of home liaison visiting outside of school hours. Desired outcomes for Aboriginal

students include regular and punctual attendance of community-based children, and improved health care (diet, skin problems and hearing problems receiving prompt attention and appropriate follow-up). We concluded that an unhurried and personal approach is the most desirable way to communicate.

The steps taken in 1994 form a valuable foundation for moving on to focus on other cultures represented within the school. For example, it is planned to explore how staff and students with Greek cultural background can help expand horizons and deepen understanding.

Staff working on the Innovative Links project during 1994 under Principal Kathleen Duffy included Pamela Templeton, Suzanne Brogan and Sharon Pinson, with Academic Associate Stephen Harris. However, all teachers participated in the professional development workshops and co-operated in planning and teaching. A real team effort from the whole school community! □

