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Section A: Schools

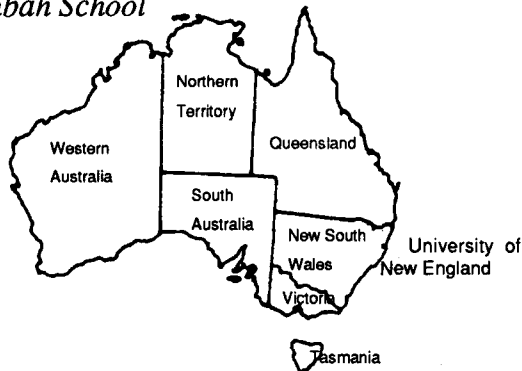
Promoting Home–Community–School Links

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Minimbah School



Minimbah is an Aboriginal word which means 'place of learning'. Since self-management in 1987 by the local Aboriginal Management Committee, the school Director, Dianne Roberts has promoted parent, staff and community input at this place of learning. Improved parental involvement in this Aboriginal preschool was essential following the policy change from outside control to self-management. This article describes current efforts to promote community links at Minimbah Preschool and:

to show that by involving parents at an appropriate level they make a valuable contribution to the preschool and they increase their own knowledge, skills and self-esteem (Roberts, 1995).

Background

Minimbah is located in Armidale, a rural city with a population of 21,500 people. For more than a hundred years it has been an important educational centre, with boarding schools, a teachers' college and a university. Over the past twenty years, the Aboriginal population has gradually increased from about 600 to 2500 at present. Most Aboriginal families live in

government or privately rented houses throughout the town, while there are twenty-four households on the small Reserve on the edge of the town where the preschool is located.

Dianne Roberts worked in the preschool as a teacher assistant for eighteen years and when she completed her Bachelor of Teaching in 1987, she was appointed the first Aboriginal Director. Even though she had worked in the preschool, this was a new situation, and she faced a challenge. She said, 'My fear was, will the Aboriginal people accept me? Will non-Aboriginal parents still send their children to the school? I still felt an outsider here. I needed to get to know the people in the Armidale Aboriginal community in a more active way'. This challenge prompted a vision of Minimbah as a community 'place of learning'.

The present enrolment at the preschool is 70 children, including five non-Aboriginal children. There are 10 Aboriginal staff members, most of whom are employed on a part-time basis. Minimbah caters for children who are of Aboriginal, Islander and non-Aboriginal descent and provides activities for cultural empowerment. The preschool activities are designed to complement the attitudes, values, and expectations of home to help children 'build their basic sense of trust, security, and stability on cultural foundations learned at home' (Phillips, 1995).

The Literacy Nest Program

The Literacy Nest Program¹ is one component of the overall curriculum. This program is an attempt to bridge the gap between the culture of home and that

¹ The Literacy Nest Project was partially funded in 1995 through the Teacher Researcher Scheme of the NSW Children's Literacy & ESL Research Network which is supported by the National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia. Kathy Watson is a lecturer in the School of Education, University of New England and was Dianne Roberts' mentor during 1994-95. Dianne and Kathy continue to work together at Minimbah.

of school by improving early literacy skills and preparing the children for entry into the mainstream school system. All curriculum is planned with staff, parents and community members during Friday Staff Development sessions. Through these sessions, responsibility is shared with parents to create ownership and promote the links between home–community–school and the preschool. During these sessions we plan curriculum based around themes that interest the community and children and related workshops to promote specific literacy skills or skills needed in the self-management of the preschool.

Shared responsibility has promoted a high level of community involvement in the Literacy Nest. The adult interactions are a major strength of the program. All of the teachers in the preschool plan together as a team and encourage parents and family members to spend as much time as they can in the program — telling and reading stories, singing, and talking with the children. Parents come to meetings and attend workshops where they learn how the Literacy Nest Program operates to help them develop their own understanding of the importance of early literacy development. The Minimbah staff take time getting to know their parents as individuals to promote a home-school team.

The general Literacy Nest objective is to support, in a culturally appropriate manner, the language and literacy development of Aboriginal children in Armidale. The aims and objectives of this project correspond to the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (1990). Specific objectives are to:

- assess the early literacy skills of children at Minimbah
- organise and implement culturally appropriate early literacy programs
- monitor children's literacy progress
- organise and implement a parent/staff program in literacy education
- increase involvement of parents, relatives and other community members in the support of literacy education for their children.

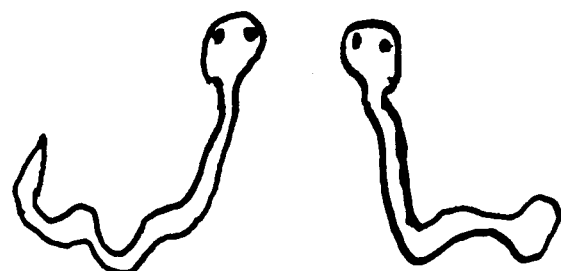
The Literacy Nest Program involves all the children at Minimbah. There are three groups of children: the Transition Class — five-year-olds (10 children), four-year-olds (30 children) and the three-year-olds (30

children). Children in these groups are of varying abilities which are catered for on an individual basis. Small groups of children (4-5) are withdrawn from their normal Preschool activities for sessions of 20 minutes twice a week in the Literacy Nest.

Activities Encourage Family Involvement

The Literacy Nest objectives include developing and organising culturally relevant literacy experiences for the children and also planning for increased parent and community involvement. The development or purchase of culturally relevant materials is an ongoing process that provides an opportunity for family involvement. We are fortunate to have talented family and staff members who can contribute personal artistic skills to create teaching materials and share artefacts and traditional stories. Few Aboriginal families in Armidale speak a traditional language, so the curriculum focuses on developing English language skills, as these skills are considered a crucial foundation for later learning.

The Literacy Nest includes many experiences to promote oral language skills, questioning, discussion and explaining. We have singing, storytelling, science presentations, cooking, art projects and field trips as 'real experiences' to develop language skills. The children hear many good quality children's stories and experience many non-fiction books relating to themes covered in the program. Through these experiences, the children become aware that books contain information and can be entertaining too. They learn skills related to careful book handling, understanding the parts of a book, story patterns, illustrations, vocabulary, story retelling, and predicting. These shared book and storytelling experiences are used to establish a warm and trusting environment for children where they can participate in discussions, questioning and story retelling (Watson, 1994).



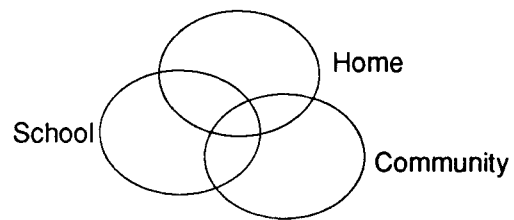
Parents, family and community members are invited to participate in the literacy program in a variety of ways, in the school and at home. We encourage parent participation in their child's early literacy skill development in the following ways:

- learning the sounds of the alphabet
- storytelling and singing
- reading stories to children
- using environmental print to encourage reading
- activities for learning colours
- recognising familiar words
- sharing talents such as cooking, painting, artwork
- sharing artefacts and cultural history
- purchasing books for children
- making visits to the library
- setting examples by reading books, magazines or newspapers at home
- visits to the Literacy Nest to observe and take part in activities
- helping children to realise that reading is fun as well as useful.

Parent Involvement and Self-Management

The children who are sent to our preschool are taking their first steps outside of their families into the wider community. Dianne felt that her first task was to build the parents' trust in her, as an Aboriginal person taking on the full responsibility of running the preschool. She then set out to design activities for parents that would raise their awareness and make the children's adjustment to preschool smooth and easy.

To get to know the people of the community I needed to get the school operating in a way that parents felt comfortable about coming into this school environment. For many years I wanted to make a shift from a hierarchical structure, where the Director took all of the responsibility, to a participatory structure where responsibilities were delegated and shared. I had to set up the school to match my vision. This vision meant a shift from home, school and community as separate spheres to an inter-related sphere as shown in the following diagram (Roberts, 1995).



Minimbah staff have consistently acknowledged the importance of parent and family participation and recognise the necessity to sensitise parents to the literacy needs of their children. Initially, the Director organised a series of five one-day workshops for parents and family members to introduce the beliefs, values, aims and objectives for Minimbah [see Appendix]. The workshop series was organised to cover a variety of topics from Otitis Media, participating in the Minimbah management committee, promoting literacy skills, to preparation of relief staff. The workshops provided an atmosphere for working together and have helped to break down walls of misunderstanding and bring the community together through their children.

Some workshops with parents were conducted concurrently with staff development activities for emergent literacy teaching. At a workshop for the preparation of relief staff, we showed them how to make play dough, how to set up a playground for the three-year-old or the four-year-old groups whose needs are different. We also invited guest speakers from the School of Education at the University of New England to discuss topics including the value of storytelling and shared book reading.

Parents and family members are invited to participate in any way they feel comfortable to maintain the links between home-community-school. They can contribute by telling stories, sharing artefacts, cooking favourite foods to share, sharing artwork or songs and assisting with field trips. These culturally relevant experiences link their lives with the literacy skills needed in school, and also help develop the idea of the preschool as the centre of three spheres — home, community and school.

Videos and photographic books have recorded the ways that parents and community members participated during the year. The videos and photos were taken during projects and activities related to each theme. Parents assisted by taking the photos and

creating photo books for teaching materials and the *LiteracyNestNews* which shows the types of activities that the children do at school. These will become teaching tools next year for new parents and children attending the preschool. The photographic books will also be used as picture books for shared reading sessions. Parent feedback at the Friday Staff Development meetings and Management meetings revealed the effectiveness of the approaches used at Minimbah for parent involvement and early literacy development.

Over the years Dianne has heard arguments against parent involvement. One of these was the negative expectation of some non-Aboriginal people and some Aboriginal staff members that you cannot get 'blackfellers' to school. Others thought that Aboriginal parents had nothing to offer. The experience at Minimbah has proved this to be untrue.

Many years of experience at Minimbah have shown that by giving families opportunities and building their trust, they will contribute to the preschool. Dianne's basic idea was to equip parents with knowledge and skills of how the wider education system operates through a growing understanding and involvement in the running of *their* preschool. As a result of personal involvement, some parents have become more aware of the value of education and have been able to assess the social development and readiness for school of their own children in relation to non-Aboriginal children of the same age.

There are many successes in this program. Through self-management, staff development workshops and many opportunities for participation, the teachers at the preschool have been encouraged to continue with their education and gain certification. Currently, the Transition teacher and the Literacy Nest teacher have four-year education degrees and all the preschool teachers have Child Care Certificates. The level of family involvement is very high in a variety of areas as a result of the workshops and policy of 'self-management'.

Dianne attributes the success of Minimbah to her belief that teachers should not be *power brokers*. She promotes the idea that more responsibility for the children's learning is placed in the hands of the Aboriginal community. The policy is one of self-management. *It is 'our' preschool, not mine. If the Program is a success, everyone is involved.*

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- Roberts, Dianne (1995). 'Parent involvement and self management in an Aboriginal preschool.' Paper presented at *21st Australian Reading Association National Conference*, Sydney, NSW, Australia.
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Appendix Minimbah Beliefs and Values

We believe in our spiritual connection with land and we value all Aboriginal nations' custodianship since time began. We value the elements fire, air, earth and water, vital to our lifestyles and those of our ancestors. Nurturing is central to our beliefs.

Our beliefs and values provide the foundations for our aims and objectives. Curriculum is developed in response to our beliefs, values, aims and objectives. We regularly review our processes to maintain flexibility of values and beliefs that we hope to continue to foster as part of our Aboriginality.

These include:

- learning about where I come from and loving 'my' country
- nurturing of each other and of our environment
- maintaining our cultural identity
- maintaining kinship and community involvement
- respecting our elders
- being aware of spiritual and guardian links with land and traditions
- honouring our ancestors and paying respect to our traditional values.

Minimbah Aims and Objectives

1. Provide a friendly, welcoming environment for students, staff, parents and visitors.
2. Provide a caring, secure environment where each individual has a sense of self worth, of dignity and of belonging.
3. Provide encouragement and opportunities for growth, change and development for all who participate in the school.
4. Provide a nurturing environment to foster a sense of self fulfilment and joy.
5. Provide positive health practices which enhance active, healthy minds, emotions and bodies.
6. Provide role models in health and education practices for community well-being.
7. Provide opportunities for a variety of interactions between Minimbah students, staff and parents with the wider community.
8. Provide a positive attitude toward traditional and contemporary Aboriginal beliefs, values and activities.
9. Provide opportunities to learn about and respect the variety of Aboriginal cultures, as well as other cultures and belief systems.
10. Provide programmes to equip us to be 'part of the solution, not part of the problem'.
11. To provide and promote all aspects of childcare and children's services to the community.
12. To operate and manage a community based, non-profit, multi-purpose children's centre within the requirements of Department of Employment, Education and Training and Department of Community Services on behalf of the Armidale Municipal Council.

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Dianne Roberts, Director of Minimbah School. Dianne received the Order of Australia Medal in 1984 and the J.A. Sutherland Award for services to education in 1993. She is a leading figure in Aboriginal education in NSW as well as being known for her work nationally and internationally. For more information contact: Phone: (067) 723 853; Fax: (067) 722 040. □

Call for Submissions

The Editors of *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* welcome submissions such as:

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- ◆ research reports
- ◆ news items
- ◆ book reviews
- ◆ notices of forthcoming conferences, seminars, etc.
- ◆ reports on relevant conferences
- ◆ information about resource centres and how to access them
- ◆ resources and materials for teachers and students.

Please see inside back cover of this issue for **Guidelines for Contributors**.

All material should be sent to:

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