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Section C: Schools

A Personal Story of School Development in a Remote Community¹

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Introduction

Between 1978 and 1979 I taught in a number of small newly established schools in some of the communities of what was then referred to as the Central Reserve (now called the Ngaanyatjarra Lands) in Western Australia. I had recently graduated from college and was very uncertain about the content and methodology required to be an effective teacher of Aboriginal students. This general lack of confidence was compounded by my lack of experience in interacting with Aboriginal people, especially those who spoke little English. Moreover, there was no support service from the regional education office in Kalgoorlie (about 1000 kms to the south) and I generally taught in one-teacher situations with little opportunity to share with other colleagues. In general, I found my professional life in the Central Reserve to be quite dissatisfying and disillusioning.

Within the communities, basic services (such as electricity, shopping and accommodation) were lacking and this created a number of difficulties in conducting my domestic life. Coupled with having no family at the time and with communications relying on an inferior two-way radio system between the communities and Kalgoorlie, my personal life

in the Central Reserve was often lonely and uncomfortable.

Knowing that I was struggling to provide a sound teaching service to the students, the Aboriginal people helped me as much as they could. A partnership based on mutual survival gradually emerged wherever I was based. For example, in one community the Aboriginal people occasionally provided me with food, grass was planted around the school shelter to make it look attractive, two assistants helped with the teaching (especially translating between English and Ngaanyatjarra), and community meetings were held to reinforce the school rules with the children. My role in the partnership was to be the 'expert' teacher. I think the community saw me as a form of reassurance in that the young people were being schooled in a proper way by someone who had been trained as a teacher. Towards the end of 1979 as I prepared for a transfer to a location out of the area, I concluded that I had got more out of the partnership than I had given. I felt that I had done very poorly in a professional context.

Changes Over a Decade

Following a period of about a decade during which I enjoyed varied professional opportunities, I transferred back to the Lands (to Warakurna community) in February 1992. Early impressions were that:

- the community was now well-established, with buildings, facilities and services
- the school was no longer a 'brush shelter' but consisted of modern transportable air-

¹ Warakurna lies within the Ngaanyatjarra Lands approximately 1200 kms north-east of Kalgoorlie (Western Australia) and 800 kms west of Alice Springs (Northern Territory). It lies at the eastern end of the Rawlinson Ranges in the Gibson Desert.

conditioned buildings surrounded by reasonable gardens

- learning standards of children were still very poor, but some English was used by many Aboriginal people, especially the young
- previous teachers had left very few documents that described what they had attempted and so there was no description of the type of curriculum that had emerged over the past few years
- there were considerably more non-Aboriginal people employed to carry out various tasks in the community. My recollection is that, in 1979, there were three non-Aboriginal people employed in Warakurna. In 1992, there were 11 non-Aboriginal employees in the community and at the nearby roadhouse. No Aboriginal person held a position of active responsibility.
- there were large numbers of non-Aboriginal people moving through the Ngaanyatjarra Lands (including tourists) and the area was far more accessible to individuals and organisations than it had been during the 1970s.

While life was more comfortable than a decade before and there had been considerable progress in the physical development of the community, I was, however, dismayed that the partnership that had existed between the school and the community when I left in 1979 was no longer apparent. It seemed to me that as the buildings went up (along with the fences that surrounded them) and as grants came in to establish a modern and sophisticated community during the 1980s, the role of the Aboriginal people in helping the place to function and in making the major decisions quickly diminished. This certainly appeared to be the case in regard to the school because very few Aboriginal people were interested in attending meetings or playing a role in the development of the school.

The school was in the community but not part of it. As an example of the apparent irrelevancy of the Aboriginal people to the operations of the school, when I arrived at Warakurna, the Aboriginal Student Support Parent Association (ASSPA) had a tradition of being run with the principal informing a small committee of Aboriginal people as to what he/she wanted and the committee agreeing and signing the appropriate documents. Very little follow-up reporting occurred and the Aboriginal people played no role in administering any of the projects.

The Plan of Action

In 1992, Warakurna school was staffed by two graduate teachers and myself to look after about 24 students. We quickly identified a number of fundamental problems in the school and decided on the following broad plan of action.

- To write down everything that we did in our classes. First, we recorded 'Benchmarks of Student Progress' that identified what the majority of students in each year level learned. Over a period of three years of recording specific areas of student success (1992-1994) the benchmarks had been sufficiently refined to provide a more accurate representation of what students should be able to do in each year level at Warakurna.

We concluded that a teacher coming into the school in a few years time (probably a recent graduate) could find such a document very useful at least at the start of the year.

Another writing task was that we collated some content into themes. For example, a document on 'Work' was written where teachers from all year levels contributed ideas on how to teach the topic of 'Work'. The role of community members was also included in this document.

A third task was to keep professional journals where we recorded something every day about how our classes had functioned. We used the journals in an attempt to isolate critical incidents that we could learn from in order to improve the running of the classrooms and the school in general. The journals gave us a thoughtful analysis of classroom and school tone and helped us to understand the various social systems that were affecting the school's capacity to encourage sound learning to occur.

- To encourage community members to attend meetings with a view to establishing a governing council of parents and teachers. Initial meetings (February–July 1992) were quite disappointing. With the help of a few significant people whom I had known during my first stay in the Lands, however, attendance at the meetings increased during the second half of 1992. The teachers showed that they respected the role of the

meetings by reporting to them on class progress and requesting assistance to resolve problems.

In the early days of partnership development, the teachers did most of the talking and few Aboriginal people would respond. As the teachers learned how to ask questions in a more appropriate way, however, and as the Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal teachers formed genuine friendships, a mutual dialogue emerged and discussions began to flow freely. Topics of discussion included organising school camps in the area, ways to deal with substance abuse, the aspirations of parents for their children (to remain in Warakurna to look after the place), and general problems within the community.

Responses to Change

A Parents' Council was formed early in 1993, and a genuine partnership developed in running the school and in determining the overall philosophy. A group of us visited some schools in Arnhem Land and other places between August and October 1993 in order to collect ideas on how the partnership could operate to benefit the students within the context of overall community objectives.

An interesting point to note, however, was that as the partnership between the school and the Aboriginal members of the community developed, conflict that occurred in other sections of the community was often attributed to the role of the teachers in promoting Aboriginal activity within the school. On more than one occasion, I was told by various non-Aboriginal employees within the community to keep my activities to the school and not to stir up trouble in other parts of the place.

It may be suggested that these employees found it difficult to cope with the change process whereby a number of Aboriginal people were increasingly demanding the right to be part of the community decision-making process. As the partnership between the school and Aboriginal community developed, there was a shift in the location of power from non-Aboriginal to Aboriginal hands and the Aboriginal community wanted to see this occur in other areas of community business. From the feedback I received between 1992 and 1994, this shift in power challenged many of the strongly-

held beliefs of some non-Aboriginal employees in the community and caused them considerable concern.

The tasks of fostering community involvement in the school and curriculum development and documentation made my three year period in Warakurna (1992-1994) the most professionally satisfying of my career. Commencing with two graduates and myself to teach 24 students in February 1992, the school grew to be staffed by four teachers and myself to care for about 72 children in February 1994. I like to think that the people 'voted with their feet' in sending their children to the school at Warakurna because they had a high opinion of what we were trying to do. I have no firm evidence, however, to substantiate that belief.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe that what we commenced at Warakurna was quite modest. We took conservative risks in designing learning programs that were specific to the needs of students at Warakurna and we recorded everything that we did so that we could leave a tradition of critical thinking to our successors. We also started a process whereby the 'secrets' of the school could be shared with the community and encouraged a shift in decision-making power from the non-Aboriginal teachers to the Aboriginal community.

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