



# The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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## Section B: Early Childhood Education

### Interactions Across the Generations — Australia: Learning from Elders

Veronica Dobson, Rosalie Riley, Jeanette McCormack and Debbie Hartman



#### Introduction

This article is based on an interview conducted with four of the central figures in the development and operation of the *Arrernte* Early Childhood Project. The project works with Aboriginal families in the centre of Australia and is developing culturally appropriate curricula for children aged from three to six years, in the *Arrernte* language.

The project stresses the need to involve grandparents, aunts, uncles and elders in the development of curricula so that the *Arrernte* culture can stay alive alongside other Australian cultures.

#### ■ Why work across generations?

**Veronica:** Older generations have knowledge about things like survival skills, culture, morals and religion. Elders are our teachers and they seem to teach us a lot. We go to them for advice and we go to them when things are wrong. And they have had a big input into the *Arrernte* curriculum for young children: they have been at the centre of visits to our traditional country, and have been involved in the meetings, discussions and consultations.

We have also involved different families in the *Arrernte* social structure. This brought in things

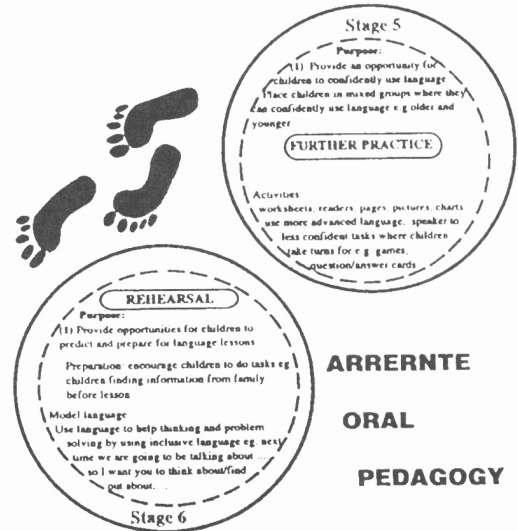
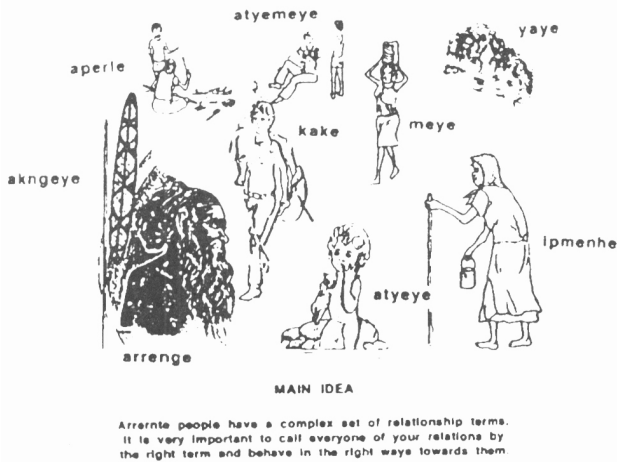
like respect for elders, relations and land, and use of the curriculum has led to others learning as the children are learning. For example, the non-*Arrernte* teachers are still learning, learning how to fit in and learning how to belong to the countries — the Aborigines ancestral lands.

#### ■ How do country visits fit in?

**Rosalie:** They involve all members of the family, from babies to old people. They offer a chance for children to experience real life and to learn to respect the elders as number one educators. The elders tell the stories, show the important sites, help us look at stones that have a special meaning, and investigate trees and animals and creeks. They all contribute a story that is communicated from one tribe to another tribe, and the elders make the connections between everything.

The country is important to us because we belong to the country and the country is part of our culture, language, and our spirituality. We believe that our children are the product of our metaphors and our ways of understanding everything and where we fit into it.

One result of the visits is a kind of magical bonding within the family groups. The children learn that the elders are very important members of the family who are respected for their knowledge. We teachers also learn from the country visits, take the experiences back into the classroom and do follow-up lessons: we teach maths, language, literacy and science. all of this is based on the very important places that we visited and the things that we learned.



**Jeanette:** When we get back in the classroom we use the older kids from the group to teach the younger ones. Then there are the materials that have resulted from the visits. We've developed a lot of videos and photos, books, flash cards, story books, tapes and paintings from the countries.

■ *How did you develop the curriculum?*

**Rosalie:** When we developed the curriculum, we got two strands out of it: the family and *Arrernte* values. A lot of the input has come from elders and parents, and from the schools when we did our curriculum workshop.

**Jeanette:** The curriculum workshop meant working with the teachers and some of the elders and some of our staff. Out of that we've picked up a lot of topics that are needed, things like feelings, identity, environment, water, dogs, safety, foods, shelter and homes. We've categorised a lot of it and have also found better ways of communicating, participating, understanding and investigating. Then we had to organise it all into a curriculum that the youngsters could use.

■ *What about the successes so far?*

**Jeanette:** One success is that there's more community understanding about skills now and there's more participation in the schools. People are getting other understandings — they get to know what the kids are learning, because they see some of the kids take it to the elders to discuss. The kids also take back home what they learn in the

classroom so parents are learning it there and getting their own understanding; the kids are almost teaching the parents. The parents are also getting more interested in what's happening at the school.

■ *But there must have been problems too?*

**Jeanette:** Well, we've had quite a few problems. There's the problem of working within school rules. Each school has different rules and some don't fit with ours, but we have to stick to *Arrernte* rules. Also, during the year there may be deaths in the family on just the days that we were supposed to be having follow-up meetings.

**Rosalie:** And there has been an issue about having too many family groups involved. There are an awful lot of family groups and we can't do everything at once to please them all. So we have to take it easy and try not to disappoint everybody.

Then there are problems of miscommunication with families. We've also had problems with the non-Aboriginal staff in school. It's taken a bit of effort to get people to understand that our curriculum is important for our children, so we can keep our culture and language in the classroom.

■ *What are the attitudes of the non-Aboriginal teachers?*

**Rosalie:** They are actually opposed at times and they think we are the problem. But they are the problem because they do not understand what we

are all about. The solution, to some of it, anyway, is to be flexible. We can explain *Arrernte* rules and get schools to change to accommodate *Arrernte* ways and pedagogy, methodology and teaching. It's changing the schools to suit the community. But schools like to have so-called standards by which they can be measured — that's part of the problem.

- *What about the nature of the Arrernte culture? It must be changing so that must affect intergenerational relationships and work?*

**Jeanette:** Well, we see that each generation is changing the language. So each generation has its own language, its own slang. Our elders have been concerned for a long time because they see that the younger generations now are losing that strong *Arrernte* that we have. That is why they are interested and very involved in this curriculum development.

There's also been a problem with alcohol abuse by parents — especially fathers. Also children are losing their contacts with their parents and families who are no longer around to tell stories. So children sit in front of television all the time and learn the western ways of life and use a lot of English in between the *Arrernte*. They are creating their own *Arrernte* ways of communication with one another.

When we talk they look at us and say: 'I hear you talk like old woman or old man'. But we are not. We still have our own strong *Arrernte*. The best way to tackle this is through the young ones, using the *Arrernte* early childhood curriculum. But as soon as they grow into their teenage years, that's when it breaks down. That's when they lose their touch and contact with their parents and families, their culture, and their language.

- *What happens when your work on the Arrernte language and culture comes into conflict with the predominant 'western' culture in Australia?*

**Jeanette:** We went to a meeting with the Northern Territories Board of Indigenous Australian Studies to talk about our curriculum and while we were there we sort of developed a pathway that we could carry our curriculum into, to get it accredited. They started out by trying to fit us into little boxes, you know: Australian; Indigenous. But we strongly wanted our curriculum to be taken as a holistic thing so now it's been taken up by the Education Department. It's compulsory and can be taught to any Australian kids who want to learn *Arrernte*.

- *Wouldn't some people now say that is artificially preserving an old culture and that the 'western' culture is going to win in the end?*

**Jeanette:** Teaching the way we teach has a positive impact on the kids in the classroom, while there has been a lot of criticism about kids learning literacy in the Western way now. So I can't see how they can criticise ours when their's don't work so well. Some of the teachers who have been working with us, they learn how we teach the kids, and how we have an impact on things like running the class, and working with behavioural problems.

*Arrernte* is contemporary, it's not that we're going backwards. It's not a matter of artificially conserving something that should be dead; it is actually something that is very important and has many lessons for other people too around the world.

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The Caterpillars

In the dreamtime the caterpillars got together and came to Emily Gap, one of the gaps in the ranges here in Central Australia. When you look at the ranges from the plane they look like the Yipirinya caterpillars lining up and going to meet one another at the waterhole as they did in the dreamtime. The caterpillars still come; generation after generation they come, turn into butterflies and then go.

Intelyape-lyape is the butterfly from these caterpillars. That's why we called this project Intelyape-lyape for our kids. If they learn the *Arrernte* curriculum they will come out of their cocoons strong and beautiful and be able to reach their full potential in both ways, our way and the whiteman's way.

Then we can wipe out the racism. No more terra nullius feelings for Australians — white or black.

by Rosalie Riley

