

THE STRELLEY MOB

Introduction by Ardyn Masterman

In the mid 1980's in Western Australia the "Strelley Mob" were concerned that their children gain the skills of western education without subjecting them to the biases that sometimes accompanying it. The Montessori method of education was introduced to this end. The materials intrigued and engaged the children who were reported to be remarkably attentive. They responded very positively to the materials and the respect shown by the Montessori teacher for each child's unique capacities.

Researchers, Dr. Jim Breadmore and Dr. Jan Currie, from Murdoch University documented many similarities in cultural factors and learning strategies of the Aboriginal community and those fostered by the Montessori approach: non-interference, peer teaching and learning, personal independence, observation and imitation, trial and error, understanding rather than rote learning, real life learning, the learning environment as a homely place, person-oriented (respect gained more by how they relate as a person rather than how they perform as teachers) rather than information-oriented.

Unfortunately, continuation of the approach suffered because of lack of secured funding. The photo shows part of the prepared environment where materials are displayed on shelves at child's height. It can be seen that the children are working independently on floor mats. In the foreground the tip of the constructed pink tower can just be seen (material demonstrating discrimination of form and exactness of movement). On the mat, the young boy is working with the constructive triangles, exploring the makeup of a hexagon, constructed of isosceles obtuse-angled triangles. The child behind is exploring solid geometric shapes and matching them to their bases. These are indirect preparation for later geometry. The cabinet at the left is the sets of bead chains which are used in consolidating the sequencing of numbers and counting by ones, twos, threes and up to tens. It is indirect preparation for multiplication, squaring and cubing and later geometry work.

In this photo from Strelley, the teacher has completed a demonstration to a group with the maths materials called the "Teens boards" and is observing the child working with the material by himself, associating the written symbol, the quantity (the beads at the left of the boards) and the name. There is a young child looking on, observing closely. When it is the younger child's turn to be shown the work, he will already have some prior knowledge of the material from watching (but will not necessarily be able to do it himself yet). Observing the older children at tasks provides a motivation for the younger children to progressively take on new challenges.

The following article, written by Dr. Jim Breadmore, was published in the Newsletter of the Canberra Montessori Society in June 1986.

MONTESSORI AND THE OUTBACK

Dr. Jim Breadmore

In many areas in the U.S. and Europe, school districts offer parents the option of sending their children to Montessori schools at no extra cost... Also there are instances of North American Indian children, on reservations, attending Montessori schools. It is reported that the success of the Montessori classroom at Red Cloud School (a Sioux culture in South Dakota) are most impressive. The person in charge of the programme, Sister Eileen Gran, was struck by the parallels between Montessori's ideas and the ways in which the young are taught in traditional Sioux families, where the

child is left to develop freely and whenever s/he expresses a keen interest in learning a new skill or a new topic, s/he is guided by example.

In reading about the Red Cloud school, Dr Jan Currie (Murdoch University) wondered whether the Montessori Method, or aspects of it, would interest Aboriginal groups who wanted to have their children taught in their own language as the Sioux children are at the Red Cloud School.

Through one of her graduate students, Ray Butler, Dr. Currie heard of a group of Aborigines running their own schools with a bilingual programme on Strelley Pastoral Station just north-east of Port Hedland, Western Australia. After some further enquiries, my wife (Jan Currie) and I were extended an invitation to visit the schools by the Aboriginal elders and the white husband and wife school directors, John and Gwen Bucknall. Unfortunately space does not permit the deserving description these two remarkable educators deserve, nor does it permit even an adequate account of the struggles the local group of Aborigines have endured over the years in their attempts to determine their own lives and educate their children in their own language. These attempts, according to Donald McLeod, (the white adviser adopted by the Aboriginal elders to act as spokesperson for the group) incurred floggings, jailings and even neck irons. "The Strelley Mob" as they are often referred to, know what sort of education they want for their children, but what they have achieved so far, has not been easy to come by. They like so many small alternative schools, were, many times, almost stifled in the labyrinths of government bureaucracies.

First and foremost, "The Strelley Mob" wanted their children to receive instruction in their own language, whilst English would be taught as a second language. They saw this requirement as imperative for the preservation of their culture and in the maintenance of "The Law". The John and Gwen Bucknall team work very closely with the Aboriginal elders and Aboriginal educators and in a very friendly, warm, cooperative and often humorous way they have all developed a most remarkable bilingual programme. The storybooks are published on the station and authored by the educators. They deal with life which has meaning and relevance for Aboriginal children and does not offend Aboriginal law. Children now read and write Nyangumarta, Manjilyarra or Wolmajarra, depending on the location of the school. The older school children also speak, read and write English. White teachers and linguists have roles as advisers while Aboriginal teachers actually teach the children.

The white teachers (advisers) are employed by the Nomad Group and these people are obviously dedicated and know that they are engaging in a vitally important enterprise. These white teachers were not appointed to the schools by any government agency, but they chose to teach in these schools because they believe in what this group of Aborigines is doing. "The Strelley Mob" is successfully running its own pastoral lease while at the same time protecting itself from the many disadvantages of the white person's society. No alcohol is allowed on the station.

It is obvious though, that no group in Australia can live in total isolation, also it is not the ultimate desire of the Strelley Mob to do that. They want to interact with the white society and they

obviously know that to be commercially successful they must interact with white society at various levels. It is at this point that skills in European education become important to the group. They know that they must interface with white governments and white commerce at various levels of numeracy and literacy. The question is one of how to gain such skills without having their children subjected to the biases of government trained white teachers, who often do not want to teach Aboriginal children and only take "country appointments" as a step towards further promotions.

To this end, Jan Currie and I introduced the Group to Montessori Education because we believe that, with Montessori's insistence on less teacher involvement than occurs in traditional education, this method could well be useful to the "Strelley Mob" in their efforts to say what the content of their children's minds will be.

There is considerable professional debate on the learning styles of Aboriginal people, but it is not the intent of this article to touch on that debate. Suffice to say that when Jan and I introduced some Montessori materials to the Aboriginal children they, like most children anywhere in the world, were intrigued by them. My guess would be, off hand, without any testing whatsoever, that the particular children I saw handling the materials, possessed remarkable powers of observation and were also remarkably attentive.

The demonstration of the materials was given, by force of circumstances, under contrived conditions, but even so, the feedback was most rewarding. Gwen and John Bucknall were most helpful and hard working. They organised everything so that teachers, mums, dads, kids and pet kangaroos could travel hundreds of kilometres into the main Strelley school centre to attend the Montessori workshop. The workshop also included the showing of the Montessori film "Help Me to Do It Myself". (The Strelley School, although isolated physically, has its own printing press, projectors, photocopier, video recorder and many other aids which are deemed necessary for education today. There is also a computer which is not yet used in the classroom, but it facilitating school administrative matters.)

The day following the workshop, Gwen Bucknall, with what seemed to be perpetual energy, organised a seminar with the white teachers. The discussions were outstanding. Both Gwen and John have amazing amounts of knowledge and understandings of the "Strelley Mob". Gwen pointed out that the word "or" did not exist in the local language as it does in English. This point, when you think about it, has enormous ramifications. Not only does it do something to "odious comparisons" that the 16th century poet, John Donne spoke of but one must speculate that without an "or" concept in a language, the individual's observational powers could well become more centred. With just that one revelation, it became immediately obvious to me that subtle language nuances and conceptual arrangements could well be lost to the human experience forever, if Aboriginal languages are allowed to die. Not only will subtle language and thought processes go forever, but the dignity of fine people will also die. I believe that I fully experienced the authentic meaning of "dignity" when I met some of the "Strelley Mob" elders and the ordinary mums and dads.

The lady with "perpetual energy" also organised a trip for us to one of the outlying schools. The location reminded me of Samuel Butler's novel, "Erehwon" which means "nowhere" back-to-front. Annette, the white teacher at that school is an Olympic champion of teachers. She has the female stamina that Australia, over the years has survived on. Annette had organised a school picnic. The truck, carting the school population plus, did not start! Battery Flat! Annette advised ... "Start thinking, kids!" They did! They switched the radio battery to the truck within about three minutes. We travelled to the Shaw River, kilometres and kilometres into the inside of Erehwon. There was water in the river (desert people understand this statement) and within seconds the ladies had their fishing lines out and the kids were giggling, shouting, whooping it up and swimming. Fires were lit and damper was prepared. Those kids came running and shouting back to the picnic spot. From the distance it was obvious that they had captured something. The something was twisting and

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turning as the kids held it high above their heads Two huge eels, as thick and as long as a man's leg.

The kids rubbed sand on them to kill them - "not proper to stick them with a knife or bash them dead."

Fred, a most beautifully-natured, gentle man prepared a fire to burn into just-right embers. A steer's head was suddenly carried forth by a couple of kids holding its horns. It was put into the hole of embers then covered with the embers and sand, and it then roasted. While Fred sat cross-legged in the sand bed of the Shaw River and slightly waved a leafy twig up and down and chanted, "Njargh-njargh-njargh-njargh", little two and three year olds ran and laughed around him, and right out there in the desolate scrub-lands of Western Australia, I thought about Montessori when she talked about the "soul of children and the man within the child".

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