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ACROSS AUSTRALIA,.....

FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER



SOME ASPECTS OF HOME-SCHOOL RELATIONS

D.J. Syme,
Eidsvold State School, Qld.

Our school has 30% of *culturally different* children of Aboriginal ancestry. This, in a primary school population of 180, represents a significant proportion. This group can be, and is, defined by colour of skin, facial features, and different life style. Membership of this group is decided both by public opinion and by other members of the group.

Our town with a population of some 600 people is representative of many small rural communities with a significant proportion of people of Aboriginal descent. Some of these families, about 30%, live in houses provided by the Aboriginal and Island Affairs Department which are of comparable standard to those of the white people in the town. The remainder live in shanty type settlements which are common to such towns and which are usually located on the town outskirts.

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Editorial Comment:

Mr. Syme has responded to my request to teachers to write in about attempts to increase communications between home and school. He might well have titled his article "Attending to the Morale of Demoralized Parents". Many Aboriginal parents do have low morale and a belief that they cannot help in their children's education. Approaches such as this one being tried at Eidsvold are likely to help such parents to see themselves as more competent and more involved in their children's education; the increase in their morale can only benefit the children.

This is a very good way of increasing home/school communication. There are other ways being tried. Do let us hear from you about your approaches.

In the town there is a Save the Children Fund Kindergarten established primarily for Aboriginal children, but now admitting white children on two and a half days a week. There is also a branch of the Church of Christ which caters for many Aboriginal people in the community. The spiritual work of this institution is supplemented by their work in the field of social welfare.

Involvement by the Aboriginal parents in the school was very limited up until eighteen months ago. We initiated home-school interaction by a system of face-to-face reporting to parents; this system has been carried out by teachers over the last eighteen months.

When this reporting policy was decided upon, a thorough investigation of the pitfalls involved was undertaken. The policy was designed with two objects in mind: firstly, to achieve meaningful reporting to all parents and, secondly, to foster and build up a closer rapport between teachers, pupils and parents.

In our discussions about the pitfalls, a list of questions parents were likely to ask was presented to teachers along with a list of suggestions to parents on how they can help. The origin of this document is rather obscure since it is without acknowledgement. It appears in Appendix I. We finally decided that a frank meaningful two-way discussion should take place between teachers and parents, from which both parties could profit. Teachers' skill at handling people was relied upon to ensure that parents were not *scared off* or otherwise intimidated by teacher attitudes and vice versa.

Major administrative details of the system are not pertinent here, with the exception of the method of communication with parents. Normally such communication is carried on by newsletter with pupils acting as couriers. This was not found to be very satisfactory with Aboriginal parents, so a system of casual reminders was used. When the S.C.F. bus arrived to pick up kindergarten children (and usually many school age children) a casual reminder was made about the school visit. It was arranged that discussions with the parent(s) of all the children in a family take place on the same day.

Verbal reminders too were communicated to the homes via pupils. Children from this group were very anxious for their parents to come to the school, and did deliver constant reminders. Further reminders were made by the Church of Christ workers in

the form of casual remarks. These people had cooperated magnificently. They were issued with times of appointments and helped us very greatly in our efforts to overcome the complete lack of awareness of time that we found prevalent. In spite of this, appointment times were a little confused, but our system was flexible enough to cope.

Some experts in the field of social work have indicated that a direct approach could be made to parents by teachers. In our system no direct teacher contact with homes was made. Rightly or wrongly, we considered that two reactions, both harmful, could result. Firstly, we felt that teacher visits, which are uncommon, could result in a feeling that teachers were acting as policemen. We felt that these parents, in particular, would immediately feel that their children had done something wrong if a teacher arrived on the doorstep. Secondly, the feeling of shame, particularly amongst shanty dwellers, would not have helped our case. For both these reasons we felt that our invitation, if delivered personally, could be wrongly interpreted as a summons to attend school.

The acid test, of course, was the percentage of attendance. On the first occasion our representation of Aboriginal parents was no more than 50%, but we feel it was significant that they did come, and, that they came singly. Our first invitations, however, were sent without the "spadework" in the form of the reminder system outlined above. It is to the credit of the teachers' handling of the situation that at our last reporting session, 90% of Aboriginal parents attended for interviews.

The term *parent* used here requires qualification: it includes anyone who has accepted responsibility for that child. We had a married sister, aunts and grandmothers as well as real parents. The same member of the extended family group attended on each occasion.

Reactions on the part of teachers and parents or parent figures are hard to gauge, and observations have to be relied upon. Comments from teachers were very heartening. In the case of teachers the main comment was surprise. "These people really are interested in their kids". "You know Mrs. is really quite an intelligent woman. She speaks well and had a lot to say". "I expected her to agree with everything I said". Evidently the parent did not fidget nervously as she eyed the door because the teacher went on: "She explained lots of things I didn't understand".

Teachers became really aware of these people for the first time. They singled them out as personalities, related pupils to parents, learnt a lot about the complicated family relationships that exist and identified their pupils much more clearly.

Parent reaction on the other hand has been much more difficult to assess. Here we have to rely on feedback of a second hand nature. Many more acquaintances have been made. Parents know who the teachers are and are very interested in what they are doing both in and out of school. Some parents and teachers talk in the street, certainly they exchange greetings. Several parents have remarked that it wasn't so bad. The parent who said, "I've got to go and hear all about my dumb kids," was quite pleased that her "dumb kids" can do some things well.

Our greatest gains have come in the form of flow-ons. On three occasions parents have written requesting homework for a sick child. There has been a significant increase in the number of parents who do attend reporting sessions. Six different parents have visited the school to see me, to see teachers, to deliver lunch, etc. When a meeting of parents of secondary school children was called, for discussion of a secondary excursion, representatives of the three main Aboriginal families attended the meeting. Aboriginal parents also support our fund raising functions. We have the impression that these parents identify themselves, more than ever, with the school.

There has been precedent for this type of home-school interaction in our town for several years in the activities of the S.C.F. Kindergarten. This facility was provided initially only for Aboriginal children. The kindergarten teacher has held many, well attended, parent nights in association with her kindergarten work and has involved parents whenever and wherever possible in its function. This must have had some carry over since the first graduates have been at the school for some eighteen months. The kindergarten also allows us a common meeting place where we can meet Aboriginal parents on neutral territory.

Certainly the most delightful aspect of all our work so far has been the change of attitude of Aboriginal parents and children to the school. Absenteeism and behaviour problems are much lower than they were. Both white and Aboriginal children appear to feel equally accepted at school. Altercations, where ranks are split on colour lines, are becoming much rarer.

Special programs for both white and Aboriginal children are helping us to overcome the image of the "dumb" Aboriginal child who made no progress at school and was either sent to another school or left at the age of 15 in Grade 7. Both Aboriginal and white children are involved in the Van Leer Program and Mumma Moo* is equally discussed in both types of household.

Parental attitudes to the school, governed by their own childhood memories, are changing. By bringing them into the school, we are showing them that things have changed and that their children will not have the same feeling about school that they had. We hope we are overcoming their fear and distrust of school. Mainly they know that we do care about their children.

At the commencement of this article the observation was made that this was only the beginning, probably a very minor beginning. Perhaps we are reaching the stage when teachers can visit homes but we all feel that we must hasten slowly in this. It has not been our policy to enter white houses to discuss children and see how they live. Entry into Aboriginal homes, then, would create a precedent. One of our great worries is that we do not foster prejudice in either direction.

Finally, I wish to say that this article is my interpretation of a set of circumstances which we have contrived to bring about. It is merely what we, the teachers, in this school, feel is happening. My only wish is that we are not being too optimistic.

APPENDIX I

PARENT/TEACHER INTERVIEWS

Listed here are some guide lines for the interchange of ideas between teachers and parents.

POINTS TEACHER MAY WISH TO KNOW FROM PARENTS:

1. Are there any problems he has at school (particularly of which we may be unaware - bullies, dislikes, etc.)?
2. Is he happy and does he feel secure at home?

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**Mumma Moo is a puppet used in the Queensland Van Leer program in the infant school. A report on this program will appear in the next issue.*

3. Has he any special talents that are not used to advantage at school?
4. Is the family interested in what he does - does he seem to want to talk about his successes and failures?
5. Do you encourage self-reliance and throw him on to his resources?
6. Does he follow a wholesome education program - a balance between TV, books, comics, school work, etc?
7. What attitudes does he have to school?
8. How does he fit in with the family, friends and neighbours?
9. Are there any physical handicaps of which we are unaware?
10. What are his everyday health habits like?
11. Does he have any deep fears or emotional problems?
12. Does he have access to good facilities for doing school work and/or study at home?
13. Do you feel qualified and happy to help with his work?

SIX QUESTIONS PARENTS ARE MOST LIKELY TO ASK:

1. How is the child progressing? (Be careful to keep in mind individual development and children's differing capabilities).
2. How can parents assist at home?
3. What are the relative values of each "subject" and activity?
4. How much help should a parent give - if any?
5. How popular is the child?
6. How is the child succeeding or failing in overcoming problems?

MOST COMMON QUESTION: HOW CAN I HELP?

Parents have helped when they have -

1. Showed patience and waited for "him" to finish speaking.
2. Read a goodnight story especially to young.
3. Answered annoying questions (gladly, promptly and honestly).
4. Explained current happenings.
5. Posed problems.

6. Encouraged a daily routine (bed, rise, wash, eat, etc.).
7. Thrown him on to his own resources (use initiative).
8. Allowed him to do large painting and drawings.
9. Provided "dressing up" materials.
10. Spoken clearly and carefully.
11. Corrected speech errors (without "nagging").
12. Used the correct names for things.
13. Listened intelligently to his comments.
14. Explained desirable behaviour.
15. Helped him to understand that there are usually two sides to any argument, dispute or discussion.
16. Given positive praise whenever possible.
17. Given him opportunity to play with other children. Taken their children on trips, holidays and excursions.
18. Showed that ordered and cooperative family living is necessary and that certain rules and regulations are necessary.
19. Refrained from criticising others in front of him.
20. Respected his property (and encouraged likewise from him).
21. Taught him to appreciate what others do for him.
22. Accepted him as he is.
23. Encouraged him to face realistic facts.
24. Taught him healthy attitudes to competition and to be a good loser.
25. Let him know (constantly) that he is loved.
26. Developed the questioning mind - by a word or comment that "challenged" his thinking, that is, not always a simple answer.
27. Arranged suitable study facilities.
28. Encouraged an interest in books - if not a home supply, at least the use of libraries.
29. Talked about school activities with him.
30. Made direct efforts to communicate with the school so as to develop some understanding of current "methods" and

- materials to give confidence in helping with "home-study".
31. Worked with the teacher in carrying out recommendations for home help.
 32. Actively involved themselves in community activities, for example, School Committees, Mothers' Clubs, Working Bees, Service Organizations, etc.
 33. Attempted to encourage a wholesome educational program (selection of books, comics, TV programs, etc.).
 34. Attached value to money, for example, in pocket money.

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ABORIGINAL TEACHER AIDES: BENEFITS AND UTILIZATION*



C. Cameron,
Headmaster,
Coober Pedy Area School, S.A.

There are many benefits gained by employing Aboriginal Teacher Aides. These include:

1. (a) The employment of such people as Yvonne Walker at this school, to undertake work of an experimental nature, in teaching untried courses in language to Aboriginal children.
- (b) The self-respect gained by Aboriginal people in working with teachers in responsible organizations.
- (c) The decreased reliance on Social Services and consequent upsurge in desire to obtain responsible

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**This extremely interesting commentary on the use of Aboriginal Teacher Aides has been reproduced, with permission, from the South Australian Education Department's publication, T.A.B.S. (Teachers in Aboriginal Schools), May, 1973. Use of Aboriginal adults in the education of children will obviously vary from situation to situation. We have now had enthusiastic reports from Cherbourg, Queensland and Coober Pedy, South Australia. Are other schools finding other ways of involving Aboriginal adults? If so, we would like to hear details from you.*