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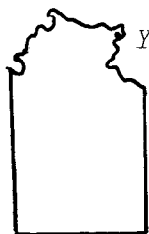


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we found that there was deprivation in the field of language and in everyday modern living. We have set up in each classroom from Grade 1 to 4, a play corner consisting of dolls, toys, household utensils and furniture and dress-up clothes. There should also be plenty of construction sets, jigsaws and games in each classroom. A library in each class is most essential so that the children may be exposed to books throughout the day. Some Aboriginal children are not ready to read until Grade 3 or 4, so these activities must be provided to develop the skills needed to learn to read.

Mothercraft Program. As there is a high drop-out rate before high school and during the first year, I feel we should provide opportunities for these children to have some basic training in living. Many of the girls will begin families in their early teens and the school is the only institution in the community that has the opportunity to provide training. The Health Department hopes to provide resource people in a program of "Growing Up". We have Grade 7 girls taking part in a very informal program with the Infant Health Sister. Once a week a group of girls join her in the Infant Health Clinic and she is able to set up a personal relationship with them and encourage them to ask questions.

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Yirrkala

A MATTER OF COMMITMENT

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During the past 18 months, one of the most obvious differences recognized between two groups of students of the same age - those I have taught in Victorian secondary schools and those I now teach at the Yirrkala Post Primary School in the Northern Territory - is a huge difference in the degree of commitment to the function of the school.

This does not express itself in an obvious antagonism of the students for the school or its teachers. Rather, while the European students would attempt to force the school to meet their needs, as they recognized them, our students place few demands.

If, in the past, I adopted inappropriate methods or irrelevant subject matter, the students would quickly and obviously let me know and in a constructive way, if I cared to listen. If the school was promoting values which clashed with the family or particular social group values of a student, then often the student and the family would engage in conflict with the school.

My present students apply themselves with almost equally stolid rigourousness, seemingly irrespective of the task. Can you imagine a class which is so docile that it will sometimes allow a new teacher to teach exactly the same subject matter as that already taught by a previous teacher? On appearances, is this a model class? Are the students and the parents so satisfied with the efforts of the school that they need never express antagonism or attempt to change what it is doing? I do not believe that this is so.

This lack of commitment is expressing itself more obviously at the present time. Attendance at our post-primary school is, by any usual standard, poor. Not only do we have an average daily attendance of fewer than 75%, but of those who do attend on any one day, several come only for some sessions. Yet, when they do attend, they are far less frustrated with what we do than were my previous students. To be frustrated suggests there is a need that is not being fulfilled. Our students remain happy because they recognize less need. I would prefer that there was more of the energy of a fight on which to build.

The explanation can perhaps be best sought in an examination of the motivations which lead students and their parents in a European society to recognize and accept a need for education in an institution. Let me isolate just six of what are many factors. I will argue that all of these factors are present to a far lesser degree in Yirrkala.

1. Success at school leads to qualifications and job opportunities.
2. Chances of further education depend on successful achievement at each successive level.
3. Parents are basically committed to the need for education.
4. Parents are either ill-equipped or totally unable to meet the educational needs of secondary-aged students.
5. Learning provides its own intrinsic rewards.
6. A school is needed as a child-minding centre.

An examination of how these factors apply to a lesser extent in our Aboriginal community may lead to the germination of plans which might help overcome the problem.

1. *Success at school leads to qualifications and job opportunities.* At the moment almost all Victorian European children complete four years of secondary school. That the extent of their education might significantly assist them in gaining better employment is only true as they progress to the senior forms or indeed to tertiary education. Without a pass at fourth form level there are minimal job opportunities for a youth. Our Yirrkala post-primary students lost the chance to attend a transitional college perhaps leading to a high or technical school as early as fourth grade level in the primary school. We offer them only three years of secondary education. Even if we rigidly applied pass and fail standards at the third year level, successful graduation from our school would not significantly assist our students in competing for jobs in any place other than in Yirrkala. And in Yirrkala itself, it is the willingness to work in the jobs that are available (and success at school in this community can militate against this willingness almost as often as it can assist) that is the dominant factor in employee selection.
2. *Chances of further education depend on successful achievement at each successive level.* Up to fourth form in Victorian European secondary schools, age rather than achievement is the crucial factor in promotion from one form to another. The reasons for this are just as valid in Yirrkala as they are anywhere else. Until students reach a certain educational and social maturity, the advantages in making them repeat a year with a younger age group are less than the disadvantages that this entails. The achievement factor is only instrumental in the jump from middle forms, past the usual school leaving age, to the senior forms and then again in the jump from secondary to tertiary education. Our education cuts out at the third form (school leaving age level). Successful completion of our senior third form year does not significantly open up any further educational opportunities. Some short vocationally-orientated courses are available in Darwin and Batchelor, but again there is no great competition for places in these courses, and competitive achievement at our post-primary school is not a prime factor in deciding who might go to these courses; and perhaps this is as it should be.

Teacher training courses offer the major opportunities for further education. But there is a trial period in the school first, and personality and character factors are dominant in keeping these opportunities open for the particular student.

3. *Parents are basically committed to the need for education.* European parents generally believe that the vocational and academic skills which secondary schools teach are skills which their children might at least harmlessly learn. Again the socialising function of schools is largely accepted as valid by European parents. And yet one of the key issues concerning Australian secondary schools today centres on problems associated with this socializing function. Diana Heath of the Faculty of Education at Melbourne University wrote in the 1973 Spring edition of *Dissent* that :

"The high administrative personnel in the state system, including school principals, tend to share a value orientation which could roughly be described as 'lower middle-class' - politically conservative, highly authoritarian in their conceptions of appropriate teacher-student relationships, and in their conceptions of appropriate sexual, religious and work behaviour. They assume a consensus of such values in the 'expressive culture' of the schools, a consensus which does not, in fact, exist."

In our community of Yirrkala, there is a great deal of discussion about what are basic European values and how these are different from the values of the Aboriginal people. There is also the opinion expressed that if the Aboriginal people are to learn European skills, own European possessions and successfully conduct economic enterprises, then they must simultaneously adopt certain basic European values. Some of these include reliability, punctuality, commitment to work (in most cases wage-earning), cleanliness, neatness of dress, attitude to authorities, a style of social behaviour especially in relation to drink, God, and care of material possessions expressed, for example, in the statement "If you want to own a car you must be prepared to look after it like we do." Now if you take any of these values and examine a cross-section of Australians, you will find differences that vary from one extreme to the other.

To learn European skills even at an advanced level, to make use of a variety of possessions, even successfully to make money and so economically to survive does not depend on the adoption of the values at either extreme, or indeed of what Miss Heath has in mind as lower-middle class values. It is not my purpose in this paper to justify what I am saying along these lines any further. The point I want to make is that if there can be some debate about the values which State European schools are transmitting to European students, then what of the situation where European teachers, recruited primarily from State education systems, are teaching Aboriginal children? While many European parents might be basically safe in the thought that the school is inculcating those values of which they approve (to which they presumably subscribe themselves), most Aboriginal parents must be insecure in experiencing the very reverse of this thought. Therefore, what might contribute to a commitment in a European community works against such a commitment in ours.

4. *Parents are either ill-equipped or totally unable to meet the educational needs of secondary aged students.* To a lessening extent, Aboriginal children are still taught and are still expected to learn what their own culture has to teach. That all that is necessary and fine could be taught without institutionalized education was the case until the recent past. Indeed, even today, if our school did not take children from their parents each and every day for six hours, parents could cope with the responsibility for their traditional education without a school. European culture, however, because of its technological complexity and vocational variety, depends on the secondary school and then, of course, tertiary education to teach new and specialized knowledge and skills. Obviously if it is accepted that Aboriginal children, if they are satisfactorily to relate to white Australia, must learn basic European skills, then the Aboriginal parents here cannot cope without the institution. However, it is the extent of the impact of the school which many Aboriginal parents might see as unnecessary. Children can learn to read and write English and learn basic mathematics in the first few years of primary school. Should they, by the time they reach secondary school age learn such skills more thoroughly, or

rather should they be learning skills which their own culture has to teach?

Most European parents may well see themselves as ill-equipped to teach what is important and necessary for their adolescents to learn; it is very doubtful if many Aboriginal parents would feel this way.

5. *Learning provides its own intrinsic rewards.* It is quite possible that today, many European children attend school and achieve well at school because they find school enjoyable. If a teacher provides the materials and plans the experiences in a way that allows individuals to discover things without the pressure of competition, then it is likely that his students will enjoy what they do. Quite often, irrespective of what the school or teacher attempts to do, children can still find a way to learn from the materials and students around them. To take Aboriginal children away from the materials of the land and from their parents and elders who are manipulating these materials in a way such that the children could learn by simply watching, and to place them in a classroom, is to some extent like taking a baby and placing it in a humidicrib for 6 hours every day for about 10 years. The materials for artistic expression, the land and nature providing an earthly purpose and a spirit meaning, are replaced by books, writing implements and European materials for artistic expression. What a student needs to be able to do is manipulate the materials at his disposal with a level of skill which will match his intellectual and social maturity. For children who do not have European materials at their disposal except in the school, a classroom which might be quite well equipped from our point of view, might remain a desert for some Aboriginal children.

Unless books and other materials can be obtained which are designed to be used by students of an older age level with a younger skill level, and which are designed to make use of the outside and childhood experiences of the students, the extent to which learning becomes enjoyable in itself will remain less than for European children.

6. *A school is needed as a child-minding centre.* For many European families, economic and social needs demand that

both parents work. If school were not compulsory by law, it is likely that parents would send their children to school irrespective of a lack of any other commitment to the need for it. Schools keep students safe, and more appropriately for the secondary level, out of trouble when the parents are not around to fulfil this task. In this community, responsibility for children does not fall heavily on the shoulders of one mother and father. In terms of protecting the child from trouble, the smallness of this community and the variety of uncle and aunt and older brother and sister relationships ensures that the child is cared for in much the same way, whether his natural parents be near or not.

That these motivations therefore do not apply to the same extent, if at all, in this community can partly explain the comparative lack of commitment to the purpose of the school.

What can be done? Taking a lead from the motivational factors I have isolated and discussed, the following short and long term measures could be offered:

1. Post-primary education could be extended from the present three years to at least five (to match the S.A. system). The opportunity to study in forms four and five could be conditional partly on a competitive achievement level and partly on effort and improvement relative to the particular student. Where the present system (division of students at the end of primary school into those who may go to high school and those who go to post-primary school) fails in one respect miserably, is that many students do not begin to achieve at anywhere near their optimal level until they reach upper secondary school age. Teachers should be recruited for these schools in specialized fields. Such a school does not want a General Subjects teacher whose best claim to success might be in consolidating the socializing functions of the primary school. Rather, specialist teachers in English as a Second Language, Drama, Music, History, Geography, Art, Maths-Science-Economics plus the present specialist teachers in Manual Training and Domestic Science are required. With five age levels and fewer students attending transitional colleges than post-primary schools, many of the post-primary schools in the Northern Territory would not be overstaffed with five

teachers. As almost all teachers can offer at least two secondary subjects and have probably studied others at an advanced level, it wouldn't be impossible to supply schools with specialists in all of the subjects mentioned. All of the teachers employed should have experience with or be trained to teach secondary-aged students and the key point is that each must be highly trained and a specialist. Their aim should be to teach skills while doing as little damage as possible to the values of the people.

2. Considerable efforts could be made to open more doors to study on graduation from post-primary schools. As well as courses of 10 or 12 weeks duration, extensive courses running for two or more years could be conducted at centres in Darwin and Batchelor. These courses may well be vocationally-oriented. As European tertiary institutions are unlikely to recognize graduation from a five year post-primary course for the purpose of entry to the institution, then perhaps tertiary colleges or places within them, designed specifically for post-primary graduates could be created. Entry to teacher training courses should depend on successful completion of a number of years of post-primary education plus the recommendation of teachers. Aboriginal youths should not be called on to prove themselves within the school without the training which we were all given first, and certainly before we were expected to play any kind of teaching role in a school.
3. Teachers employed in our schools must continually re-assess the validity of their own values. They can avoid damaging student motivation by consciously attempting to avoid any unnecessary socializing role where ever possible. Moreover Aboriginal elders and artists must be brought into the school almost whenever or wherever they are willing seriously to participate, so that through a teaching of social studies, music, dance, song, art appreciation and practice, hunting and bush-craft, the students will learn the values appropriate to their own culture. If we can clearly see that these Aboriginal teachers are teaching certain values, then we, irrespective of our own views, could attempt to avoid conflict with these values in our own classes. Employment of these large numbers of teachers should not be conditional on any kind of training, although this might usefully follow. The simple fact remains that what they can teach are things that should be taught and

which we, with all our training, simply cannot. What also follows, of course, is that the number of European teachers employed will depend on the number of specialist European subjects to be made part of the curriculum. Many classes will be small. If in Victoria schools can make possible classes of fewer than 10 at matriculation level (and this was the case in all three high schools I taught at before coming to the Northern Territory) then here, with the special educational needs of these students, the same is possible, forgivable and even good.

4. If learning is to provide its own intrinsic rewards, extensive efforts first in creating the books and materials appropriate for use by Aboriginal students in the Northern Territory, and second in buying such materials, need to be made. While parents remain less committed to the need for the school while there is simply less money around in comparison to a European community, the educational authority will need to supply that money for post-primary schools which might normally be provided by parents for high schools. The Secondary Grants Scheme which now attends to post-primary students is making extensive inroads into the need for money. It is in what is available for purchase that efforts must still be made.

With efforts in some of these directions, the commitment of the Aboriginal community to the need for school may increase. Hopefully a kind of love-hate relationship may develop. This would signify a degree of caring and commitment infinitely better than the present situation where the secondary school is tolerated merely because its work is not regarded as important.

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