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THE EXPERIENCES OF A FIRST-YEAR TEACHER IN AN ABORIGINAL SCHOOL



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As a beginning teacher completing my first term in an Aboriginal school, I would like to reflect upon my experiences of the last three months.

I was trained in a three year Primary course at Salisbury C.A.E. and accepted a position at Fregon Special Aboriginal School, 900 miles north-west of Adelaide. Fregon is an Aboriginal community which recently transferred from control by the Presbyterian Ecumenical Board of Missions to control by an Aboriginal Council. The community consists of approximately one hundred and fifty tribally-oriented Pitjantjatjara people and ten Europeans.

I will deal with the following points which cover my experience - personal situation, cultural factors, teaching.

PERSONAL SITUATION

Before leaving home I was eagerly looking forward to independence and find that I am enjoying it. Cooking, washing and cleaning for yourself is hard work but I soon got used to it. Entertaining other people for meals is good for interpersonal relations and helps prevent loneliness and boredom. When living in a small, isolated community it is important to consider carefully relationships with other Europeans so that personality conflicts can be solved quickly. Life can become very uncomfortable if you have an enemy in Fregon because there is no way of avoiding him. It is necessary to accept people as they are and relate to them with understanding and concern. The Aboriginal people will accept you as a person if allowed time to get to know you, and are good company on many occasions. One problem I have faced concerns the sharing of possessions. The Aboriginal people share most of their belongings and if one man asks for another's shirt he receives it. This value conflicts with European ideas of material possessions, for we tend not to give away or share most of our belongings. I have often found difficulty in refusing and controlling the use of my guitar, car and home. It is necessary to place limitations on the use of my flat and I am doing this by

restricting the number of people and the frequency of visits. I enjoy entertaining the Aboriginal people but find that certain rules are a must for my welfare. It would be easy to open the doors and have people all the time but this would destroy privacy and is certainly not for me.

After leaving the city to come to an isolated community it is helpful to maintain contact with friends and family left behind. I am not accustomed to isolation and find that my adjustment to this situation has been greatly assisted by regular letter writing.

CULTURAL FACTORS

The living conditions of the Aboriginal people shocked me when I first arrived because I hadn't realized that they still live in wiltjas. I expected to see houses of a European-type design and found the actual living conditions strange. The large number of dogs owned by the people frightened me; many are underfed mongrels that look fearsome. After several weeks I accepted the living conditions as a part of the culture and now realize their value. Wiltjas are sensible structures that can be easily kept warm at night and made waterproof. The dogs are useful for hunting and act as blankets on cold nights.

The presence of a strange language caused feelings of confusion and insecurity for some time. It can be very frustrating when you try to communicate with people and are continually bogged by the language barrier. The absence of European mannerisms such as 'please', 'thank you', 'excuse me', can be annoying. All these cultural differences assume less importance as I learn more about the Pitjantjatjara culture and accept it as a valuable structure.

TEACHING

Teaching in an Aboriginal school is a challenge to be faced with patience and perseverance. The first term has been a time of gaining the control and respect of a class of children who understand very little English. Needless to say, my Pitjantjatjara knowledge has increased and greatly assisted the development of classroom relationships. I am still struggling with the language but am determined to learn more. As a primary-trained teacher I've had problems planning work for my infant class and am grateful that the Education Department has provided the opportunity for observation of Infant Methods.

I have a class of approximately twenty children in their first, second and third years at school and have two Aboriginal women as teacher aides. The aides are good at maintaining discipline in their groups, but lack in teaching techniques. It is my task to plan the daily work for the three groups of children, supervise the aides and train them to become independent teachers. This is a demanding job as I am still developing my own teaching style and feel that it is often an inadequate model for the aides to copy.

The Pitjantjatjara child's educational level is far behind that of an 'average' European child of the same age, for a number of reasons :

1. He is learning two languages whereas the European child is learning one. In our school a child is taught to read and write in Pitjantjatjara before English. During all years of schooling he participates in oral English. Consequently there is less time to devote to other subjects, for example, maths.
2. He is likely to be malnourished and have poor health. Many children suffer from chronic chest complaints, ear and eye infections and boils. There is a significant hearing loss in a number of children.
3. His schooling is interrupted as his family moves around the countryside, for example from Fregon to Ernabella or Amata or Indulkana. During the time he is away (maybe for months) the child may not attend school.
4. His home environment is educationally deprived (in the European sense) as there is no spoken or written English, written Pitjantjatjara, writing materials or television. As a result, the child does not see a written word from the time he leaves school in the afternoon until he returns the next morning. This must have a detrimental effect upon work retention, especially with young children.
5. He must relate to a European teacher who cannot speak his language and has little understanding of his culture.
6. His school lacks sufficient Pitjantjatjara teaching materials. Textbooks supplied with English instructions are of limited use to my children who cannot read English (for example, maths books).

Despite the difficulties involved in the teaching of Pitjantjatjara children and their slow rate of progress, I am enjoying teaching here. I believe that teaching in an Aboriginal school provides you with many opportunities to learn from the people and understand their culture. In the process you gain a deeper understanding of your own culture and are enriched by the experience.

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NEWS....

FROM THE EAST ARMIDALE SAVE THE CHILDREN FUND PRE-SCHOOL

May, 1974

The average attendance is eighteen and I have two 3 year olds to replace two children who have left Armidale. The children who have been coming for a full term have matured a lot. All of the 4 year olds know the colour RED and are very proud if they have red clothing on. We are starting on YELLOW this term and Mrs. Roberts has worn something yellow each day (I'll have to buy something yellow for myself). It seems to be the NAMES of the colours NOT the colours that get confused. In this group number concept is quite good.

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