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CHILD INVOLVEMENT IN TRIBALLY ORIENTED SCHOOLS



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Teachers of Aboriginal children have been concerned with the eventual end results of their teaching efforts for some time. We have probably all asked ourselves the impossible question, "Where are we going in Aboriginal education?" I remember attending a conference at which we were to discuss the topic, "Where are we going and why aren't we getting there?" Needless to say, the discussions were as vague and undirected as the topic. Surely this will always be so whenever we attempt projecting our thoughts into the future of another culture. We simply cannot predict what the future holds for the children we teach.

I would suggest it would be more valid and beneficial to our students if we carried on more discussion about Aboriginal children's *needs* and abilities *as individuals*, then design our programs to suit the child and his environment. I believe generalizations have helped in creating the situation of deprivation we see on any reserve or mission, town or city. Generalizations have probably helped in making the school day utterly irrelevant for many Aboriginal children. Specifically, this is more likely to be so wherever Aboriginal schools have either adopted in toto programs designed for other schools or have been instructed to follow a program written by educationists who have perhaps only a shallow appreciation of a particular area. It is probably true to say that in most areas people who don't live on the reserves and missions simply do not know what is happening on these places. They cannot know of the personalities involved in the programs they write. One wonders if the Watergate scandal would be with us if Richard Nixon had spent more time than the reported three days a month in the White House. He simply didn't know what was happening either. So then, we cannot afford to generalize in Aboriginal Education and we need the autonomy necessary to enable the staff on the particular mission or reserve to create what *they* consider to be a relevant program. And within that program, the optimum development of the individual student must be catered for.

Teachers are professionals. We possess the experience and

skills necessary to design our own programs. The skills include the important factor of *research*, for we do need to study what is happening in other schools and what other people are saying and writing about Aboriginal education. "Going it alone" does not exclude using outside references. It is important that we (and our aides, trainees and students) travel to other schools to see new ideas in operation, some of which we may be able to adapt to our own school. It is true to say that we probably all need to go to more Aboriginal communities than we do, our aides and trainees especially. We all tend, perhaps, to be rather narrow-minded in our thinking about Aboriginal education. Yet we probably all agree that we perform better after a stay away from the usual teaching area; a certain rejuvenation occurs. The autonomy for us to design programs and travel to other settlements is an important consideration when discussing the relevance of our programs.

The previous issues have largely been matters of administrative co-operation. We have this co-operation, but I wonder if we take full advantage of it. The real "down to earth" work occurs at the local level - in our community; and before we can sit down to discuss actual curriculum we should have a closer look at that community, then at the school policy.

Here lies our greatest hope, as I see it, in making the school day relevant to the children we teach. Whilst most of what follows is directly applicable only to one tribally oriented school, it may apply to others. I am not generalizing, merely suggesting some principles.

I firmly believe the sooner we think of our schools as community schools, and support the concept with active programs of community involvement, the sooner we will be able to present the children with a relevant school day. In the past we have tended to think of our local community as being base one in the development of the Aboriginal student, looking towards some rural town or city as his eventual living community. We have ignored what is at our own back door, or have been told to keep our noses out of the affairs of the Department of Community Welfare, Public Health Department and/or other Departments. This attitude directly opposes the concept the Aboriginal parents have of us. We are there to help them, regardless of what Department we represent. Perhaps we need to learn more about what the community thinks of us.

The Aboriginal population we live with is extremely community-minded; more so than any European teacher can ever hope to be. We may appreciate the infinite relationship the Aboriginal has with his land, but we cannot *feel* this relationship as he does. The majority of the Aboriginal population are on their land to stay. A sector of the younger male group want to travel, but they will always have that bond with their land.

What are we doing as a school to develop the local community and to make it a more pleasant and realistic place to live? I say "realistic" because I believe too many European administrators and local staff take their dealings with the local community as being some sort of personalized chess game. Instead of creating job situations, hand out unemployment cheques. Give juvenile offenders a holiday at McNally Training Centre instead of dealing firmly with the matter locally. The Aboriginal population will only co-operate with us in our efforts when we take them seriously. The game should stop.

If the school staff and other settlement staff could work out settlement policy with the local council and *adhere* to that policy, then the life of the community would take on more meaning for all. So I put forward the principle that if the community has any relevance for the children and the school is an active force within that community, then the school itself will assume relevance. But we need local inter-departmental co-operation before this is possible.

The school children will work anytime any day on a community project they are interested in. They will build playgrounds on Saturdays and make sports grounds after school. So this community school concept is largely the state of *our* minds.

The actual drafting of school policy should involve teachers, aides, trainees and interested parents. I wonder how many parents really understand why we persist with bilingual education. A clearly stated school policy would enable any literate parent to gain an appreciation of what happens to his child at school. The parents *are* interested, but do we take full advantage of this interest? Open days are a means of enabling the parent to see what is happening at school. But I think it goes deeper than merely seeing. I would like to hear parents talking about what *we* are doing to *their* children. There is a danger that the parent-child gap may be further widened by the very nature of our school programs. More effective communication with and involvement of the parents will help narrow this gap.

I'm sure many parents have the belief that the school is taking their children from them, teaching them disrespect by ignoring the parents and eventually deceiving their children by not finding work for them or not keeping them away from trouble. So to what extent are we working against instead of with the parents.

Parents can be of great use during the school day. If the atmosphere is amenable most parents can tell fascinating stories, most can help with direct communication between teacher and child, all can sing and lead dancing, all are interested in activity sessions and all will help on excursions, camps or sports trips. Certainly adult education is more than just teaching parents to speak English. To some extent we have to "sell" our schools to the community.

Now what do we actually teach to make our programs relevant for the children? We are fortunate in the tribally oriented schools because there exists such a vast body of knowledge to pass on to the students. We can learn of what they need and want to learn and because these are so basic we have little trouble filling our programs with various topics. We teach basic facts about health, the local community, Australian society, current events, other cultures, science and, of course, we develop language skills in a bilingual program. The bilingual approach helps make what we are teaching relevant for the children and parents. But whatever program we have is only as good as the teacher and his aide and depends on the receptiveness of the children. The children are receptive to things they want to learn, and they do want to learn about social issues and acquire social skills. These skills include a working knowledge of such things as money, cooking, home care, mechanics, gardening and sport.

In short, the more *active* our program is the more relevant it seems to the children. We all know of the interest involved in such projects as preparing for trips. In fact it may be an interesting exercise to teach from day to day along "project" lines. Monday may involve the children in a project to learn all they can about the store. Tuesday may see the children preparing a school garden and community sports area. Wednesday could be a talk and write day where the children write letters, practice language drills, make readers for the younger children.

Perhaps we have been over-zealous in our efforts to develop

language skills at the expense of developing the Aboriginal social being. We could take the emphasis off language in Aboriginal education and place it on social studies and health. I think the children would appreciate this because they could see the immediate benefits.

Since federal policy is to encourage programs whereby Aboriginals contribute to the development of their own "towns" on the settlements*, the time is probably right for us to look at our social studies programs and to apply them to the general development of the community.

The one thing which makes our schools unique is the degree to which our students are governed by tribal obligations. Much of the behaviour for which we cannot find explanations is totally justified when seen from the child's point of view. It is very easy to offend senior students by forcing them to sit with girls or certain boys, by abusing them for lateness without knowing the reasons, by eroding the influence they have with the younger children, generally by not fully respecting them. A lot of the senior students refuse to attend because they have been offended at school, probably by a seemingly innocent action or statement from a European teacher. It is most beneficial to have a young initiated male trainee or aide on the staff as well as an older influential married man. In short, if we respect the obvious and subtle tribal obligations the older students have, the more likely we are to have a group of keen, consistent, older students *contributing* to the school. If we don't respect this group, we tend to find them asserting extremely negative influences on younger children, leading to truancy and anti-social behaviour.

In summary, I have suggested six principles to keep in mind when designing a program necessary to involve children in tribally oriented schools :

1. consider our students as Aboriginal individuals;
2. use our professional autonomy to design our own program;
3. strive for local inter-departmental co-operation;
4. consider parental involvement as an integral part of our programs;

* *Advertiser*, 6th September, 1973.

5. consider the social welfare of the student as the main area for development;
6. familiarize ourselves with each student and his/her culture.

Arising from this paper, are four areas which could be discussed at length. What can be done to :

- a. involve segregated youths in our educative programs?
- b. learn more of programs used in other schools, states and countries?
- c. ensure the parent-child gap is not further widened because of our educative process?
- d. obtain maximum working co-operation from the various departments on settlements and missions?

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