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SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT CLASSROOM ASSISTANTS IN OUR SCHOOLS



Wayne Dyer,
Advisory Teacher,
Queensland State
Education Department.

"How do you use them?" is a question I have heard often. It is asked by teachers with reference to their classroom assistants in schools on Aboriginal communities. A seemingly simple question yet it points to a whole complex of issues, all relatively minor in themselves but which in sum are apparently a cause for concern for many in these schools.

In this brief article I intend to look only at those issues which directly affect the place of the indigenous classroom assistants in education. I am concerned that although the potential value of such resource personnel in our schools could be limitless, we appear not, in fact, to be scratching even the surface of such potential in many of these schools. Ultimate opportunity and responsibility to ensure that the role of these auxiliaries is a viable and effective one is ours as teachers.

Two, three, or even four years of professional training must have taught each of us something of adaptability. I cannot believe that any teacher is incapable of playing the role of an impartial, objective observer and critically analysing his or her own classroom strategies. What I can believe, however, is that many of us do not wish to self-evaluate, knowing that we would have to face up to some pretty poignant truths.

As for classroom assistants, I believe we would have no difficulty in keeping them effectively employed if we concerned ourselves more with the goals of our work instead of constant concern with the means of attaining these as represented in our C.C.P's. and work plans. For the sincere and thinking teacher these will take care of themselves. The "how to use them" will be self-evident. The question would be, rather, "am I deploying them as effectively as possible?" To this end then, we must bear in mind the following:

1. In addition to a number of years of professional training, many of us have a wealth of actual teaching experience. We have made our mistakes and learnt from them; by trial and error techniques have been developed (sometimes slowly). What is now second nature may not always have been so. How, then, can we legitimately demand that classroom assistants coming into classrooms without similar years of experience should be able to do anything teachers can? Such expectations by teachers have no sound logical basis and are unworthy of supposedly professional persons.
2. We would all do well to recall our own early days in the classroom as teachers. Is it not possible that much of the apprehension that many of us experienced (and some still do) applies with equal relevance to classroom assistants - possibly even more so, as most classroom assistants have been "out of touch" with schools and classrooms for many years? Furthermore, most went no further than third, fourth or sixth grades themselves and are, therefore, naturally anxious of the "unknown". Negative attitudes displayed towards classroom assistants will no doubt increase such anxiety.
3. No one but each individual teacher has an understanding of how each of the main components of the teaching/learning process interrelate within his own classroom. Classroom assistants are not clairvoyant and therefore it is unreal to expect them to display initiative without a full understanding of their role. As far as I can see, the only way of ensuring a reasonable degree of initiative from assistants is to involve them in frequent chats, discussions and reviews of classroom activity and in planning for more effective activity. In this way they develop far better insights into why certain trends are evident. They become an inherent part of the life of the classroom and not simply an interloper. I certainly have no doubt whatsoever about this: I have seen highly ineffective classrooms where classroom assistants have no certain idea of what is expected. I've also seen highly effective teams where the classroom assistants are intrinsically involved.
4. It is all too easy to label classroom assistants with such epithets as "lazy", "slow" etc. In some

cases there could be an element of truth, but why don't we analyse the situation first: "Do I, the teacher, provide plenty of work to be completed in spare moments by the assistant (thus ensuring no reason for sitting about)? Have I given work that I know they understand and are capable of handling? (Have I fully trained classroom assistants for each task I require done?) Do I set a reasonable model to be followed? etc."

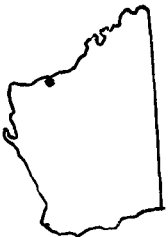
5. Many of the dissatisfactions of teachers about classroom assistants' competencies could be overcome were classroom assistants delegated only a few tasks in the early stages of their employment. As they became more practised and proficient, the range of actual tasks could then be expanded. Especially in working with groups of children, the one type of activity should be repeated continuously with *small* groups or with individual children until competence is gained. This should soon lead to other types of activities. It is also necessary to provide for much teacher/assistant discussion and to allow for some observation of assistant's performance by the teacher. Although I have suggested we should "hasten slowly" in assigning a wide range of tasks to assistants, it is pertinent to remember that over-repetition will probably breed boredom and loss of morale on the part of the classroom assistant.
6. To my way of thinking, perhaps the very basis for much of the ineffective use of classroom assistants lies in the attempts of some teachers to "fit" classroom assistants into their teaching programs. Thus we hear comments like: "It's a nuisance. I only have to find work for her to do." Should we not build our classroom strategies, at least partially, around the attributes and abilities of the classroom assistant - much as we would with any other classroom resource? Should not such abilities be honed by discussion and involvement?
7. As a teacher myself, I have been appalled to see (large) classes in which classroom assistants have no effective role; where they are no more involved than to sit in a workroom cutting and pasting (or gossiping). Surely there are numerous individual children in these classes who could benefit greatly from the carefully considered involvement of a classroom assistant (even to

the extent of all day every day)? Reflect for a moment and you will realize that in a class of 30 children, each child receives an individual share of ten minutes of your time in any one school day! Is this adequate for every child?

Despite the foregoing comments, however, I am convinced from what I have seen of classroom assistants both on our Aboriginal communities and off them, that they can, in fact, play a viable and highly effective role, a role complementing that of the classroom teacher. I am convinced that the employment of indigenous classroom assistants could be a step in the direction of providing for equality of educational opportunity for Aboriginal children.

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CO-OPERATIVE USE OF RESOURCES TO INITIATE A SCHOOL LUNCH PROGRAM



C.F. Mounsey,
Superintendent of
Aboriginal Education,
Education Department,
W.A.

Mr. Mounsey was formerly the Headmaster of the South Hedland Primary School at Port Hedland in Western Australia.

At the beginning of 1973 staff, students and parents were all most concerned with a general escalation of aggression, threatening behaviour, stealing and high tension between a large group of Aboriginal children who live at the 12 Mile Reserve, and the balance of the school population. Complaints were received daily of money being stolen from lunch bags, cases, desk trays, the teachers' desks. In addition whole lunch packs, articles of fruit, or biscuits were removed from children's cases and consumed. At recess and lunch times children were threatened with violence unless they yielded up tasty items from their lunch,