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TEACHING IN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES:

THE WARRABRI EXAMPLE



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I would like to discuss certain aspects of teaching in a predominantly Aboriginal community. I want to stress three major areas which I believe we must think about carefully if we are to educate children successfully, and actually be content in our job.

1. The manner in which we teach the children in our class.
2. Community involvement.
3. The decision-making role of the Aboriginal Community.

Each of us is an educator. By our teacher training we have certain skills in educating. Now, whether we teach in a totally European community, a part European - part Aboriginal community, or an Aboriginal community, as it is at Warrabri, it goes without saying that we use these skills to their maximum advantage.

I assume any teachers, before worrying about their function, or the policy they follow, will teach the children in their control to the best of their ability; this means of course, thorough and thoughtful preparation, and energetic and dedicated teaching while the children are in their charge. I emphasize, we cannot underestimate the importance of our actual teaching time, but *IS THIS ENOUGH?*

A Headmaster I taught under a number of years ago, told me I was paid to teach the children in my charge, and I was not paid to become involved with the adults of the community. Certainly, if we prepare well and teach conscientiously, we cannot be officially criticized, but I maintain, in an Aboriginal situation, we can teach conscientiously from 8.30 to 3.30 and yet be completely wasting our time.

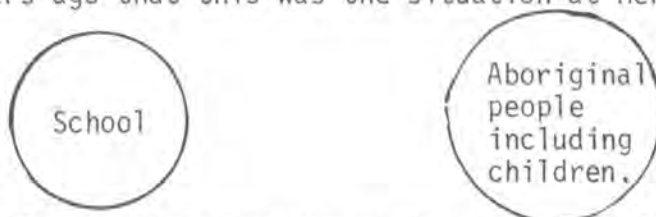
Under the Liberal government prior to 1973, we were employed to promote and inculcate a policy of social change in Aboriginal communities.

Since 1973 we are supposed to promote the principle of self-determination at the pace of the people. In my opinion, if we don't get carried away with theory, these two policies are basically the same. But I say we are not earning our salary, or promoting the principle of self-determination, or playing a meaningful part in educating these children by merely teaching twenty children from 8.30 until 3.30.

Much more is required, and this introduces the second aspect of teaching in an Aboriginal community - we as teachers must be involved in the community, and the Aboriginal community must be involved in the school. I believe that in Aboriginal communities a teacher's greatest challenge is to make education truly meaningful. It does not matter how well organized a school is, the educative process cannot be really effective unless the adult community, especially the child's relatives, *really and sincerely* want their children to come to school and learn. Therefore, we have to attempt to make the school, which is a European concept, and organized along European lines, valuable and meaningful to Aboriginal people.

In my opinion, the time I have spent working with and communicating with Aboriginal adults is of far greater importance in the meaningful education of the children at Warrabri, than the lessons I have taught to these children. (I hope this is not a sad reflection on the lessons I've taught!).

To explain this, I have a couple of diagrams. The first I've borrowed from Rex Ziersch, the Headmaster at Hermannsburg. He said several years ago that this was the situation at Hermannsburg :



This certainly was the situation at Warrabri in 1968. The children were part of the Aboriginal community. For a few hours each day they attended an institution which was not accepted by the Aboriginal people. This resulted in the child experiencing force from two, unfortunately opposite, directions, as shown below :



It is unnecessary to state to which pressure group the children succumbed. Without a doubt, in this situation the school would be endeavouring to instil in the children skills they would need to cope with their futures, and not destroying the Aboriginal culture or Aboriginality of the child. But the fact remains that the school was not accepted; it was looked on as "white man's business." I would fight with all the energy I have to prevent this situation from developing, because it means the school is impotent and our energies and efforts are wasted.

The child's peer group and the adults he admires and emulates will always have more significant influence than the European teacher. Therefore, we have to work at getting the adults to support and indeed identify completely with the school. This diagram is what we have achieved to a certain degree in the last three years at Warrabri:



If the school is truly accepted by the adult group we get this situation, which results in a real education for the children :



I can give you examples of fields of community involvement at Warrabri. For instance, in 1968 the teachers could not teach due to indifference, or passive and active opposition from the Aboriginal adults. Regularly groups of upset men came to school to "kill that f..... teacher". In 1969, the Principal of the school had every tooth knocked from his mouth by an Aboriginal man. In 1970, a riot at the pictures occurred when European men and women and children were attacked. Lack of communication, and the fact that the total community felt no identification with the school caused this situation.

Hence the responsibility fell on the shoulders of three interested and frightened teachers to show the initiative to improve the situation. We began football with the men. Scratch matches were organized, at first with non-Aboriginals doing the organizing. This gradually grew

until in 1972 Warrabri won the Centralian Country Football Association Premiership and the Aboriginal men were running the Football Club by themselves.

In the process, a few teachers had real communication with the Aboriginal people. You too, would probably have some ability (or gimmick) which can be used for communication: sporting abilities, musical abilities, the capacity to show genuine interest in the culture - these are all means of communication. Thus, to make education meaningful and the system work meaningfully, a teacher must discover a wavelength of communication and learn how to communicate meaningfully with the people; this is a major accomplishment and is one of great difficulty.

However, even with the ultimate in teaching, and with the teachers and the school involved immensely in the community as a whole, we are still unsuccessful without the peoples' involvement and identification with the school. From my experience it is totally a waste of time to attempt to involve the child in any program if it is without the support of the people. Indeed, if what is occurring at the school is against the desires of the Aboriginal adults, our efforts, no matter how well intended, are doomed to failure.

One important and effective measure which evolved at Warrabri to foster community involvement in the school, was the School Council. The Council, chosen by the old men, was given a meaningful role in the total school philosophy, in order to convey to the people that the school was most definitely there for the Aboriginal people's benefit. This was achieved by asking the teachers at Warrabri to be committed to a policy of passing over decision making relative to the children, to the Aboriginal adults. Hence the Warrabri School Council had the mandate of the community to make decisions concerning the school children. This policy was based on two premises in which I firmly believe :

1. The Aboriginal people are vitally concerned for their children.
2. If a problem is meaningful to the Aboriginal community, their decision on the solution of the problem will be responsible.

Therefore I have little fear in encouraging the people to make decisions concerning the children. Although this concept has worked well at Warrabri, I do not say it would work in all schools, as the differences in problems and in internal policy between even Warrabri and Yuendumu

are astounding. What I do say, is that the Aboriginal people have the moral right to make the decisions concerning their children, and we must all be ready to take a backward step from the role of decision-maker at all times.

I would think that, at many communities, the School Council or Parents and Friends Association is a purely advisory body. I certainly am not knocking this concept. But at Warrabri the School Council has developed a stage further and has accepted more authority over the school and the children. I have told the whole community that if the community, through the School Council, feels strongly about something directly concerning the children, it will be incorporated into school policy. I would like to add here, that the only decisions they are willing to make are on problems they are vitally concerned in. This gives the Aboriginal people power and authority, and I know it worried several teachers that the School Council might interfere with their professional rights. But I know almost conclusively that this will not occur. The methods a teacher uses to teach maths or music are not relevant to the people, but whether the children should be taught Aboriginal traditional culture in the school *is* relevant to them, and whether the children should travel by bus to attend a function or sporting event is also relevant and should be their decision.

These men and women on the School Council are mature, responsible adults who are vitally concerned with the school and the children.

The experience of the European teachers at Warrabri at the beginning of 1973 was as follows :

2 European teachers had been at Warrabri for 7 years; 1 for 5 years; 1 for 3 years; 2 for 2 years; 2 for 1 year; 2 for 4 months; 2 for 2 months; 2 for 1 month - almost half for less than 6 months.

Thus it is obvious that true stability of school philosophy must, to a large measure, come from the Aboriginal adults.

This is not to say a teacher does not influence what happens at the school and does not forcefully present his point of view to the School Council if there happens to be a conflict of ideas. But at Warrabri we have over 90% attendance, kids play in school grounds with no vandalism occurring, practically no disciplinary problems occur; we have, in fact, a situation where teachers *can* use their

particular skills to advantage. Thus, teachers and community are working together for the same thing, that is, the benefit of the children at Warrabri.

I do not think the School Council as representatives of the people will demand anything that is irresponsible. They never have to this point. But I do know, if a Principal, or a school, follows a policy which has the real opposition of the community (represented at Warrabri by the School Council), or even if the community is indifferent to the school, the school cannot function effectively.

To summarize, I consider that teachers in Aboriginal communities must think seriously about the following :

1. We must teach to the absolute best of our ability.
2. We must involve ourselves in the total community, and work at being involved with the Aboriginal adults, as only in this way will they gain confidence in us, and we gain confidence in them. Without the support of the adults we cannot achieve anything, so we must conscientiously work to have the community involved in the school.
3. We must recognize the moral right of the people to make decisions concerning their children, and actively promote this, even when their decision opposes what we feel.

STANDARD ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN IN MIDDLE AND UPPER
PRIMARY GRADES

*John Dwyer, Inspector of Schools (Education of Indigenous Children) Department of Education, Queensland, would very much like to hear from any teachers who have had success with programs aimed at developing standard English with children in the middle and upper primary grades. His aim is to produce a hand book which outlines strategies and techniques that have been proved successful in this area. He can be contacted at - Department of Education,
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