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TEACHER-PARENT COMMUNICATION

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An Action Research Project into Secondary Education for Aborigines in South Australia was initiated in 1972, and the appointment of five research teachers (project teachers) was approved by the Minister of Education at the end of 1972. In February 1973 the five project teachers took up their positions at Ceduna, Maitland and Meningie Area Schools and Glossop and Port Augusta High Schools. (In South Australia, "Area" schools cater for both primary and secondary students and "High" schools cater for secondary students only.) Those five schools were chosen because they had the highest percentage of Aboriginal students enrolled when the project began. Project teachers were appointed for a period of two years and their main task was to develop suitable strategies for increasing the achievement and motivation of Aboriginal students in secondary school.

The importance of teacher-parent communication was recognized by the project teachers, who set about initiating communication with their local Aboriginal parents. "Communication", when used in this context, refers to the non-verbal processes (such as manner and gesture) and verbal processes, which teachers use to build up understanding, trust, confidence and rapport with other human beings.

A large number of research studies in U.S.A. and Great Britain have shown that the fostering of communication between teachers and parents, particularly when parents belong to ethnic minority groups, can lead to an improvement in children's school achievement.(1). Similar observations have been made by Australian teachers and researchers involved in the education of Aboriginal and migrant children.(2) This article pre-supposes that readers already appreciate that teacher-parent communication is essential, so it does not set out to present evidence to convince readers about the value of teacher-parent communication. Consequently, the article will consider the following:

- I. Degree of teacher-parent communication in South Australian secondary schools.
- II. Teacher-parent communication in the five project schools.
- III. How to initiate communication between teachers and parents.
- IV. Goals and guidelines for teacher-parent communication programs.

I. DEGREE OF TEACHER-PARENT COMMUNICATION IN SOUTH AUSTRALIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

In 1974 a lengthy questionnaire which included questions to determine the type and extent of communication between teachers and Aboriginal parents was sent to teachers in all non-tribal South Australian schools which had 10 or more Aboriginal secondary students enrolled. Questionnaires were sent to twenty-two schools. A total of 86 questionnaires was returned from the five project schools, and 73 questionnaires were returned from 15 other schools. Of these, 156 questionnaires were able to be analysed and responses from teachers in project schools were compared with responses from teachers in other schools.

Fifty percent of teachers in non-project schools and 29% of teachers in project schools had never spoken to any Aboriginal parents. The table below indicates the places where the other teachers saw and spoke to Aboriginal parents:

Percentage of Project School and Other Teachers who spoke to Aboriginal Parents

Place where teachers met parents	Teachers at Project Schools	Teachers at other schools
In the street	35.0%	17.1%
At the reserve	20.2%	8.6%
At school	31.3%	24.2%
Socially	23.2%	10.0%
At sport	19.8%	8.6%

Whether or not teachers communicated with Aboriginal parents was correlated with both their attitudes towards and their opinions about Aboriginal students. The teachers were asked to rate certain teacher attributes in terms of effectiveness in teaching Aboriginal students. The attributes were -

understanding, sympathy, firmness, air of authority, adaptability, knowledge of culture, fairness, patience.

The four ratings were -

essential, valuable, useful, unimportant.

From analysis of questionnaires it appeared that teachers who communicated with Aboriginal parents had different attitudes and opinions from those teachers who had limited, or no communication with them. Teachers who communicated with Aboriginal parents thought that :-

- * understanding was essential
- * firmness was essential
- * fairness was essential
- * sympathy was valuable not essential
- * adaptability was essential
- * knowledge of Aboriginal culture was valuable or useful
- * an air of authority was unimportant.

It may be that communication with Aboriginals caused teachers to alter their opinions, but it may be that teachers with those opinions were the ones who sought contact with Aboriginals. However, by their own admission, many teachers who were teaching in project schools and who became involved with Aboriginal people had modified or changed their attitudes favourably.

At the same time as questionnaires were sent to teachers of schools, a separate questionnaire was sent to principals of the schools. Eighteen of the questionnaires were returned, four from project schools and fourteen from other schools. This questionnaire showed that 67% of schools informed Aboriginal parents about their children's progress only once per term, and that the usual means of communication was the report form or a circular. Parents were informed about school activities via a news sheet, and 7 out of 11 principals thought the Aboriginal parents' usual response to the news sheet was indifference.

II. TEACHER-PARENT COMMUNICATION IN THE FIVE PROJECT SCHOOLS⁽³⁾

When the Action Research Project began, communication between teachers and Aboriginal parents was virtually non-existent in four of the project schools. At Maitland, contact between the school and Point Pearce reserve had been initiated about five years previously, though only one teacher had been involved with the Aboriginal parents. Each project teacher set about initiating communication with the respective Aboriginal communities when the Action Research began. During the two years of the project, three project teachers made great progress and they successfully involved other staff members in the communication process. The activities of each school varied greatly, according to the needs of the school and the needs of the Aboriginal community.

The project teacher at Ceduna Area School travelled to the Koonibba reserve (26 miles west of Ceduna) once a week to speak with parents and help in the classroom at Koonibba. A system of "oral reporting", to replace the traditional practice of sending a report card home, was begun in the primary section of the Area School, and six mothers from Koonibba attended the school. Teachers, parents and students were pleased with this, and so, in the following year, it was continued and extended to the secondary students. Although many parents attended the primary reporting there was a smaller response from parents of secondary students because the students, out of embarrassment, discouraged their parents from attending.

A large scale campaign was prepared by the school for the celebration of National Aborigines' Day. The retailers of Ceduna were involved in the scheme and were asked to display the N.A.D.O.C. posters in their windows. A special assembly with an Aboriginal theme was held at school, and an Aboriginal group played guitars and sang. Twenty Aboriginal parents attended the highly successful celebrations.

Until the appointment of the project teacher to Glossop High School, the only contact between Gerard reserve and the school had been brief and occurred because of serious misbehaviour by Aboriginal students. This brief, negative contact reinforced the Aborigines' long-held ideas of the superiority, unapproachability and ferociousness of the teachers.

The project teacher had several meetings with the Chairman of the Gerard reserve Council, during which the role of teachers,

problems with children, and improving the Aboriginal image were discussed.

Oral reporting of children's progress was begun in 1974, and the principal, project teacher and several other teachers travelled to Gerard to speak personally with Aboriginal parents. The appointment of an Aboriginal teacher's aide later in the second year of the project assisted teacher-parent communication enormously, for the aide lived at Gerard and had the confidence of many parents.

During the Action Research Project, attempts were made to extend even further, the communication between teachers and Aboriginal parents at Maitland Area School. An Aboriginal fashion parade was held* and during preparations for the parade, teachers and Aboriginal students and parents met and got to know each other. The fashion parade was a huge success, and the Maitland white community made many favourable comments, so ties between the two communities moved a little closer together.

Aboriginals at Point Pearce were consulted about their interests and as a result various evening classes were held. General sessions were held during which visitors spoke about weather maps, coastlines, football, Aboriginal artefacts and fishing laws. Two residents from Point Pearce went to Maitland Area School to speak about tortoises and Mt. Tom Price.

In 1974, a seminar for past and present students was held at Maitland Area School.* The success of the seminar, indicated by the numbers of Aboriginals who attended (17 past and 10 present students) and their response to the school's enquiries was only possible because communication between Point Pearce and the school was well developed. The attendance of Aboriginal students was far better at Maitland than at the other four project schools, and this was in part due to well developed communication between the Aboriginal parents and teachers.

When the Action Research Project began, communication between Meningie Area School and Point McLeay Aboriginal reserve was virtually non-existent. The principal had occasional contact with the Point McLeay community when students misbehaved. The development of communication was inhibited by a few factors. First, Point McLeay is 50 kilometers from Meningie and visits took at least two hours. Secondly, the Point McLeay people used other towns for their service requirements, thus had no reason to visit Meningie.

* See *"The Aboriginal Child at School"*, (1) 4.

** *op cit* (2) 5.

In 1974, Meningie Area School arranged a combined staff-parent conference. Three Aboriginal parents, several white parents and the whole of the Meningie staff attended. Many of the problems which parents and staff isolated were more easily solved because of the improvement in communication between them. Teachers thereafter attended many social functions at Point McLeay, and Aboriginal parents visited Meningie Area School to see a videotape of their children at work.

At Port Augusta, few teachers encountered Aboriginal parents, although the Aboriginal population was large. The local Aboriginal Social Club became involved in the Action Research Project, and a panel of Aboriginal people associated with the Social Club raised several important issues, including the need for a better relationship between teachers and parents. The panel deplored the fact that communication between the school and parents only occurred because of problems.

III. GUIDLINES FOR INITIATING COMMUNICATION BETWEEN TEACHERS AND PARENTS

Very few people are able to communicate effectively without learning communication skills, so it is essential for trainee teachers and practising teachers to learn *how* to communicate. Workshops to foster better race relations, and communication workshops are designed so that people can learn such skills.

Initiating communication with Aboriginals requires teachers to be persistent, patient and determined, since the teachers have to break down defences which Aboriginals have had to set up in response to discrimination, paternalism, condescension, abuse and ostracism.

For successful communication to occur between Aboriginal parents and teachers, the teachers should be aware of the following:-

1. Teachers who do not really think that Aboriginal parents are worth knowing or worth respecting, should *not* try and communicate with them. Aboriginals can sense "phonies" very quickly, and this may jeopardize the efforts of teachers who genuinely want to communicate with Aboriginal parents.
2. The building up of communication with Aboriginal parents can only occur gradually. Teachers need to go to the

Aboriginal parents *first* and often after that. Many Aboriginals are very shy and it may take a long time before they feel confident with teachers.

3. The contact between teachers and Aboriginal parents should be as informal as possible (i.e. an informal chat) and initially on the Aboriginals' home ground. Contact between teachers and parents should not occur *only* because there has been trouble at school.
4. Conversation between parents and teachers should be child-centred at first, because that is what teachers and parents have in common.
5. Conversation needs to be "light", easy to understand, but mature enough to convey respect for the parents' intelligence. Teachers may need to use the Aboriginal parents' vernacular if they are to communicate effectively.
6. Teachers should avoid conversation or comment which implies that Aboriginals should aspire to white middle-class values.
7. Conversation or mannerisms which could be construed as condescending or paternalistic should be avoided by teachers.
8. Details of school activities should be relayed to parents personally by teachers. Invitations for parents to attend the school or school functions need to be made personally and reminders given, (so that the parents know that their presence is really wanted) and transportation etc. needs to be arranged by the school.
9. The teachers should make it clear that Aboriginal parents are welcome at the school at all times. When Aboriginal parents have overcome their fears of teachers and schools, teachers are urged to invite the parents to the school to see their children at work.
10. Teachers need to offer to assist Aboriginal people with their own projects and activities, for example money raising, social evenings, sports matches.
11. If their efforts to communicate with parents fail, teachers should not give up, but should change their attitude or

behaviour, rather than assume that the Aboriginal people do not want to communicate.

IV. GOALS AND GUIDELINES FOR TEACHER-PARENT COMMUNICATION PROGRAMS.

After communication between teachers and Aboriginal parents has begun, schools can contemplate arranging formal teacher-parent communication programs. Such programs consist of a series of activities ultimately designed to help teachers and parents to help the Aboriginal students become motivated and to achieve more at school. Organized teacher-parent communication programs require a full time, *specially trained* Aboriginal adult to arrange and direct the activities of the program.

Wherever teacher-parent communication programs have been set up overseas, the organizers have had one or more of the following kinds of goals for their programs. (4) An example of activities which can be undertaken to achieve the goals are listed with each goal.

1. To Help Aboriginal Parents to Guide Their Children's Learning Development More Effectively.
 - a) Through involvement with teachers, the parents come to know and understand the aims and objectives of teaching and teaching methods.
 - b) The parents can be told of specific ways in which they can assist their children, for example, by encouraging them to read or to do homework
 - c) Parents can engage in aspects of child study.
 - d) Parents can take part in basic education studies, engage in cultural enrichment experiences and personal development courses.
2. To Help Teachers Gain a Better Understanding of Aboriginal Family Life, Beliefs, Customs and Values.
 - a) Teachers can visit Aboriginal parents at their homes in towns or on reserves.
 - b) Teachers can attend in-service training workshops to learn communication skills.

- c) Teachers can attend in-service training workshops which foster better race relations.
3. To Adapt School Programs to Meet the Needs of the Aboriginal Students.
- a) Aboriginal parents and teachers need to discuss school courses and curriculum and *together*, should decide what needs to be taught.
 - b) With parents and teachers co-operating, completely new school courses which are consistent with students' interests, values, beliefs, needs and ambitions can be designed.
4. To Provide Aboriginal People with a Wide Range of Educational Programs According to Their Requirements.
- a) When Aboriginal people want to learn skills or do courses specially trained instructors (i.e. adults who have been trained to communicate and who have experience in Aboriginal education) should be made available.
5. To Assist Aboriginals to Improve the Condition of Their Home and Environment.
- a) According to Aboriginals' needs and requests, the school can arrange for people to talk about housekeeping management, budgeting, buying, consumer protection, cooking etc.
 - b) The school can also organize for experts to hold short courses in human relationships and development of leadership.
 - c) Teachers can help Aboriginal parents with Aboriginal projects such as money raising, sporting activities etc.

Successful communication between teachers and Aboriginal parents allows each to understand the points of view of the other, especially views about the education of Aboriginal children. Teachers who initiate communication with Aboriginal parents must realize the extent of the contribution the Aboriginal parents can make towards the education of their children, and the teachers must be

prepared to be patient and persistent when seeking the co-operation of parents. It has been shown though, that the motivation and achievement of Aboriginal children improves when their parents and their teachers work together as allies.

References

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3. Binnion, J., *Education for Aborigines*, in press at the South Australian Government Printers.
4. Dentler, R.A., Mackler, B. & Warschauer, M.E., (Eds): *The Urban R's : Race Relations as the Problem in Urban Education*, Praegar, New York (1968), 133-140.

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COVER PHOTOGRAPHS

We think readers will agree that our cover photograph for this issue is a particularly appealing one and technically excellent.

We would like to build up a bank of photographs suitable for covers of future issues, and feel sure that many readers could assist.

Photographs should be clear, sharp, black and white prints, preferably (but not essentially) taken on the horizontal plane. The subject should, of course, include children.

We look forward to receiving your contributions.

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