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SYMPTOMS AND SOLUTIONS : PROBLEMS OF EXPLANATION IN ABORIGINAL EDUCATION

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The preparation of this paper has been stimulated by the table appended to the article "Parental involvement : endeavours to improve communications between Meningie Area school and the Pt. McLeay community in the period 1973-4" (A.M. Nankivell, *The Aboriginal Child at School*, Vol.3 No.1, 1975 pp. 48-55). The table, headed "Summary of Main Points Arising from Group Discussion of the Eight Major Problems at Meningie", is a report of some conclusions derived from a seminar conducted with "Aboriginal and white parents and representatives of the various administrative and ancillary bodies concerned to discuss mutual problems".

The article and table describe a number of 'facts' and make deductions, based on the unchallenged wisdom of psychologists, which purport to 'explain' problems in Aboriginal education. Indeed, the table is a succinct statement of the kind of explanatory system which has been used in Aboriginal education; an explanatory system which deserves close examination in the light of the failure of Aboriginal education over the last 130 years. The comments which follow, then, are not directed exclusively at the paper under discussion; they refer to general problems of explanation in Aboriginal education.

SYMPTOMS

Psychologists have long adopted a medical analogy as an aid to thinking about human behaviour. Central to this analogy is the use of symptoms as indices of underlying pathology. The model has the symptoms (certain behaviours) being caused by some underlying pathology (psychic states, poor motivation, etc.) with treatment being directed toward the underlying causes - not to the symptoms. This analogy is heavily emphasized in the table used by Nankivell: for example -

SYMPTOM	CAUSED BY	TREATMENT
Discipline problem	Inexperienced staff	More teaching and less theory at Colleges of Advanced Education.
or		
Friction between staff and students	Lack of communication between staff, children and parents	Increasing communication between staff and parents.

Recently this medical analogy has been rejected by many psychologists on a number of grounds. The major criticism has been the extent to which the adoption of this model is likely to introduce major distortion into description and explanation of behaviour. In a criticism of psychoanalytic theory, which has adopted a similar model, Skinner noted :

"The point is not that metaphor or construct is objectionable, but that particular metaphors and constructs have caused trouble and are continuing to do so." (1)

Skinner's criticisms are in terms of the kinds of explanations which are developed. He particularly notes the shift away from direct observation of behaviour and towards the discussion of internal, unobservable phenomena, and the difficulties associated with translating any treatment strategies produced into practice.

This criticism may be made of the medical analogy used in the table. More importantly, however, the adoption of this pathology model, when used by psychologists, leads to 'symptoms' being described largely in terms of individual behavioural characteristics and diagnosis being couched in terms of individual pathology. This tendency builds a major bias into discussion of Aboriginal performance in schools, with the behaviour of Aboriginal children constituting the symptoms, the Aboriginal child constituting 'the problem', and solutions being based on changing the child.

There are, then, objections to the use of medical analogies in analysing behaviour. The 'germ theory' approach is clearly appropriate enough if one is concerned with treating measles. It is not appropriate if one wishes to analyse problems in Aboriginal

education, unless one is concerned with "curing" Aboriginality. The analogy has led the authors of the table under discussion into statements of causality which are not able to be supported by research, and which, when used as the basis for decision-making in Aboriginal education, have led to ill-founded and inappropriate educational policies and practices. Many of the explanations of Aboriginal failure in schools have been expressed in terms of person-centred pathologies, variously described as 'cognitive deficits', 'cultural deprivation', 'language deficit', 'poor motivation', and so on. These explanations which ignore the validity of Aboriginal lifestyles and abilities, are derived from the pathology models described above, and need close scrutiny.

PROBLEM BIAS

The effects of handing questions of educational programming and problem definition to psychologists are only beginning to be recognized. Caplan and Nelson summarize concern being felt over these effects when they comment :

"To the social science knowledge producer... 'unbiased' is defined in terms of the canons of scientific methodology. However, there is a characteristic which distinguishes psychology from other disciplines ... the chief focus of interest for psychologists is on person centred variables, and this has a definite biasing effect on the inferential potential of the findings when used as a premise on which to base later action for 'corrective change'". (2)

That is, policy makers (or teachers) basing their decisions on psychological research are likely to instigate 'person change' programs, while the problem may demand situational changes. This person change process is clearly exemplified in compensatory education programs in which policy has been directed towards changing black children, on the dubious assumption (based on equally dubious psychological research) that these children suffer from some form of cognitive or linguistic deficit. Only recently, and in the face of the widespread failure of compensatory programs, have teachers begun to realize the extent to which a heavy reliance on psychological evidence and explanation has misled them, and have begun examining the failure of black education in terms of deficits in teachers, curricula and methods. Archibald (1970) has described

the influence of psychologists on problem definition as a clinical orientation; "if the shoe doesn't fit, there's something wrong with your foot". (3). The dangers inherent in this clinical orientation have been described elsewhere (Kelly and McConnochie, 1974) (4) and need not be discussed in detail here.

FLIGHTS FROM THEORY

One further characteristic of writings about Aboriginal education deserve comment. Under the heading "Action (CAE's)" Nankivell comments; "more teaching, less theory" and also under this heading "teachers needed, not educated people". These statements are in keeping with the kind of thinking already described. The medical model has built in to it the possibility of a rather cosy working relationship between the practical man in the field, and the researcher in the laboratory - the G.P. and the research doctor; the teacher and the psychologist. This has worked, more or less, for the medical profession, when the aims, methods and subject matter of the G.P. and the researcher have been fairly similar. In Aboriginal education, this relationship has been disastrous. The objectives, methods and theoretical constructs of psychologists have born little relationship to the needs of teachers in Aboriginal schools, nor have the psychologists descriptions of Aboriginal children shown much similarity to Aboriginal children. The failure of teachers to recognize the limitations of psychological research has led to 130 years of failure in Aboriginal education.

Psychologists do not have ready-made solutions for teachers. They do not have magical elixirs and potions which will cure Aboriginality. This is not surprising. Psychologists are still seeking adequate models to describe the development of behaviour in children from familiar western cultures. Psychologists who experience great difficulty in consistently producing efficient change-oriented programs for children who differ only slightly from their white, middle-class peers (children from low-income families, children with minor differences in learning abilities, black children in North America), are in no position to prescribe programs which will produce desired change across major cultural differences.

However, there is a more basic reason why psychologists will not solve the problems of Aboriginal education. Many of the important factors involved have not been studied by psychologists, either

because they have chosen not to study them, or because the factors involved are beyond their professional expertise. Of course, many of these factors have been researched and described by historians, anthropologists, sociologists, novelists and journalists. But not psychologists. Teachers wishing to come to terms with the failures of Aboriginal education must become familiar with this literature.

It is perhaps a comment on teacher preparation in Australia that to give a teacher "practical training" is to give him the products of psychological research and established wisdom. To continue in this manner is to ensure that educators will find themselves in the well-trodden blind alleys of psychometrics, remediation and compensation. Any kind of real changes in Aboriginal education will come about only when teacher training places less emphasis on training and more emphasis on education. The choice is not between teachers and educated people, but between educated teachers and uneducated teachers.

FOOTNOTE

At the risk of appearing trivial, it is perhaps worth mentioning the relative importance ascribed to CAE's and universities in the article being discussed. Reading the paper, and table attached, one would be led to believe that CAE's had the sole responsibility for the preparation of teachers for Aboriginal schools, and the universities are making no contributions in this field. To adopt this viewpoint is to overlook the contributions universities and university staff have made to the preparation of teachers for Aboriginal schools, the development of programs in Aboriginal schools and communities, the continuing involvement in research into problems of Aboriginal education, and the dissemination of knowledge through university-based journals and magazines. It is perhaps unfair to ask whether this oversight might be related to the fear of theory apparent in the paper.

References

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