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## THE PROBLEMS OF TEACHING IN A TRIBALLY-ORIENTED

### SPECIAL ABORIGINAL SCHOOL



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S.A.

*The following article is an extract from Mr. Lines' dissertation for his Advanced Diploma Course at Torrens College of Advanced Education, Adelaide.*

### BICULTURAL INTERACTION

In considering the difficulties which arise in a bicultural situation, it is important to realize that although it can often act as a catalyst, the bicultural situation is not always the origin of the conflict but merely serves to amplify any personal tensions or problems which may already exist.

The stresses and problems of life in a bicultural situation arise largely from the teacher's past experiences. In each case the teachers at Ernabella came from a monocultural, middle-class background. Their families were relatively affluent and able to keep their children at a tertiary institution for periods ranging from two to four years. Similarly they were all brought up to accept (and hold as desirable) certain traits and modes of behaviour which conform to the general Euro-Australian pattern. While these permeate

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1. Barker, F.H.: Black and white photography in a black and white school. *The Aboriginal Child at School*, Vol.2 No.3, June 1974.

their total culture, and influence all personal interaction, several are outstanding in their differences from the standards held by the traditionally oriented Aboriginal. Because of this they greatly influence the new teacher's expectations and the success of his initial contacts with the people. In the same way, the teacher's western European cultural heritage can act as a major obstacle in accepting the Pitjantjatjara people as they are now and not as he would like to see them in some idealized future.

A brief summary of the standards and values that we expect to be held by Euro-Australians - and tend to transfer to other ethnic minorities - would include emphasis upon :-

1. The elevation of individual achievements as opposed to the welfare of the total group; affecting such things as identity, status and role.
2. A belief in the values and benefits of competition as opposed to the co-operative approach.
3. The acceptance of Euro-Australian moral standards, codes of behaviour and etiquette.
4. Belief in the Puritan work ethic - that a good man is one who aims to continually improve his life and to support his nuclear family by working.
5. The importance of material possessions and individual ownership.
6. Rigorous standards of hygiene.

Such an ethnocentric outlook on life creates a situation which requires a major reorientation in the thinking and evaluation of people who are to work in a bicultural situation. This is an adjustment which many teachers find extremely difficult to make at first.

Comments by teachers, such as the following :-

"The living conditions of the Aboriginal people shocked me when I first arrived, because I hadn't realized that they still live in wiltjas. I expected to see houses of a European-type design and found the actual living conditions strange." (1)

"I felt uncomfortable in the first few weeks".

"It was terrible to begin with".

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1. Dawson, M.: The experiences of a first-year teacher in an Aboriginal school. *The Aboriginal Child at School*, Vol.2, No.4, Sept.1974.

show that, in each case, the teachers felt a loss of orientation in their first months. Since the teacher's effectiveness is conditioned by the extent to which he is able to adjust to the ways of living and working in the new situation, it is vital that equilibrium is restored as quickly as possible.

CULTURE SHOCK

All teachers stated that they suffered from some form of culture shock in the early stages of their appointment but were unable to give specific details of its effect. Nevertheless, they agreed that it is a problem which needs to be faced - although it is one which can receive too much emphasis.

Kalvero Oberg, the anthropologist (who first popularized the expression) describes culture shock as a malady, an occupational disease of people who have been transplanted into a different cultural situation.<sup>(1)</sup> He states that it is an illness of the mind in which the victim rarely knows he is afflicted. Symptoms are said to be irritation with others, depression and annoyance. It is caused as a result of communication problems and partly by growing feelings of inadequacy as the teacher realizes that his efforts are not likely to achieve as much as he had hoped.

This was best defined by one of the Ernabella staff as a "feeling of helplessness". Such feelings of culture shock are precipitated by the anxieties that result from losing all the familiar cues used for personal orientation. These cues to behaviour (words, gestures, expressions or customs) are acquired as part of the individual's upbringing and are deeply ingrained. As Oberg says,

"All of us depend for our peace of mind and our efficiency on hundreds of cues, most of which we do not carry on a level of conscious awareness". <sup>(2)</sup>

<sup>(3)</sup>  
Oberg speaks of four stages of culture shock, and these can reasonably be applied to the teachers at Ernabella.

1. The initial stage - where the individual may have feelings of happiness and confidence. Everything is seen on the brighter side and it is clear that an enriching experience lies ahead.
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(1) Foster, G.: *Traditional Cultures: and the Impact of Technological Change*. Harper, New York, 1962. p.187

(2) Ibid. p.188.

(3) Ibid. p.189

2. The crisis stage - everything seems to go wrong and the teacher becomes frustrated and annoyed with the situation in which he finds himself.
3. The recovery stage - the teacher begins to recognize and tolerate the new cues necessary for orientation and enough of the language such that he no longer feels so isolated. The problems of living begin to be solved and his optimism returns.
4. Full or near recovery is made in the fourth stage. The teacher may still feel strain at times but he retains a confident attitude to his work and he can relax with a new sense of belonging.

Once having adjusted to the initial cultural change and having made the necessary reorientation, the teacher is not necessarily immune to further shocks. Nancy Sheppard stated that, at times, over her long stay in Ernabella, she used to get really depressed.(1) This despite the fact that she considered Ernabella almost as home. Although these could perhaps be called further attacks of culture shock, this is not the only explanation. Normal feelings of depression and frustration which arise in the normal course of events may become increased by the nature of the cultural conflict.

Such feelings may be less frequent, and the individual may take less time to recover, but they can occur time after time. Perhaps the greatest reason for such attacks is the fear of failing on the job. Since teaching in a small community can become the teacher's whole life, he becomes most concerned if he believes that he is not fulfilling the position that he occupies. A symptom of this trouble may be seen in the teacher's withdrawal into the school as, in an attempt to handle his problems, the teacher spends more time in preparation and thought. While necessary, such a move tends to isolate the teacher unduly from those people with whom he needs to communicate and also has the effect of making him more tired and less able to handle any new difficulties.

Culture shock is a problem which is more widely based than the classroom and school. There are fewer symptoms of culture shock identifiable within the school than without, because our education system demands that, to some extent, we must resocialize our Aboriginal pupils to conform to Euro-Australian values.(2) However, as .....

(1) Sheppard, N., Teacher at Ernabella, 1959-1964 - *personal interview*.

(2) Mitchell, I.: Cooking damper in an electric oven. In T.Roper (Ed), *Aboriginal Education*, 1969, Abschol. NUAUS, North Melbourne.

the question is vital to the teacher's everyday life which is reflected in his classroom behaviour, it has a strong bearing on our overall approach and must be given a great deal of consideration.

## COMMUNICATION

Perhaps the greatest barrier to be overcome is that of communication or language. Since it plays a major part in allowing the new teacher to adjust to the different culture, it cannot be overlooked. Bob Capp considers this to be the most important problem of all, (1) while Bill Edwards states that -

"staff members become involved in misunderstandings, which lead to frustrations and conflict, arising from inability to communicate in the language of the people." (2)

At Ernabella, despite efforts over thirty years at teaching English as a second language, the vernacular still remains the main vehicle of communication, and anyone without it is at a great disadvantage in interacting with the Pitjantjatjara.

Knowledge of Pitjantjatjara can give the teacher direct access to the background information essential for his success in the community and the classroom. If he is unaware of the general daily events and concerns in the community he is at a great disadvantage, if not totally ineffective, for these events bear upon the children's attention and motivation. Teachers not knowing the language can feel excluded and miss the satisfactory class teacher relationship expected in white Australian schools. Understanding the vernacular is also very important in establishing good contact and mutual respect with the rest of the community.

The value of being able to speak and understand Pitjantjatjara cannot be underestimated. All of the present staff at Ernabella have made an effort to learn but unfortunately this cannot be achieved in a short time and requires a great deal of interaction, practice and study. Nancy Sheppard regarded the ability to speak Pitjantjatjara as her most valued possession, but commented upon the amount of time required to achieve the standards necessary. She stated that, after two years of continued application, she could tell a very simple story and just communicate. (3)

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(1) Capp, R.: Former Principal at Ernabella. *Interview*.

(2) Edwards, W.: *Reflections on an Expo Aborigine*. p.2.

(3) Sheppard, N., Teacher at Ernabella - *interview*.

Because the usual length of teacher appointment is a maximum of three years, it is highly unlikely that any will learn the language to the degree that they are articulate. More often the teachers showed that they had learned a few words and phrases necessary for elementary communication, that is, giving directions and establishing control. One teacher had reached the level of interest and ability to consider a position as a linguist after three years, but has transferred to an area where it will be seldom used, if at all.

Just as the white staff do not achieve proficiency in the language, the Aboriginal aides are not trained to teach it thoroughly and well. From what the writer has seen, although it has become a written language, there are still many inconsistencies of spelling and mispronunciation that make it difficult to learn. Nancy Sheppard comments that the level of literacy reached by the majority of the Pitjantjatjara people is not as high as the level we achieve with white Australian children, and that only a few Pitjantjatjara are sufficiently articulate even in their own language. As a result, she suspects that an inferior form of vernacular is being learned by pupils and staff which, in turn, will tend to limit the degree of communication necessary for bicultural understanding. (1)

Although most of the teachers had undergone the elementary Pitjantjatjara language course provided at Torrens College of Advanced Education in Adelaide, and some had experienced the conversational Pitjantjatjara course in Alice Springs, none had completed the Intermediate Course or had any further curriculum or linguistic experience to foster their language development. Unless the teacher is prepared to make a consistent, long-term effort, and give much time and energy, the communication in Pitjantjatjara can only be less developed and meaningful than is desirable.

The difficulties of effective communication are also increased because of the Aboriginals' confused attitude to Europeans. As a result of the folk-lore and early history of culture contact, all Europeans are expected to conform to a basic set of stereotypes until such time as the individual demonstrates that they do not apply. Bob Capp describes this picture as being that, -

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(1) Sheppard, N.: Pitjantjatjara translator. *Interview.*

"All Europeans drink, have wine in their houses, all are superior, shout, are bossy, treat Aboriginal adults like children, insist on hard work and long hours on low pay and then sit down and wait for the Aboriginal to produce; all under pay and over charge; they are capable of assault, rape and murder of Aborigines, and are neither interested in nor show respect for Aboriginal customs, ceremonies or laws".(1)

Jim Downing\* would also add to this the comment made by an Aboriginal in Alice Springs that, generally, Euro-Australians are not sincere in their attitudes towards the welfare of Aboriginals. On the other hand, the Aboriginal teacher-aides at Ernabella emphasized their difficulty in understanding Europeans as being that "they are all different - you don't know what they will do".

These and other stereotypes have to be lived down by each individual teacher in the area before the value system associated with his personality can positively affect community attitudes.

As a member of a minority group within a minority group, the white staff are able to opt out of conflict by leaving the settlement. However, the Aboriginals cannot do this, and so it is that the white staff must bear the main force of any anti-white reaction. This takes the form of passive resistance to various activities, rejection or avoidance of individuals, or voiced threats. These can be very upsetting to a new member of the white staff and even the experienced worker finds it hard not to be affected. Even if they managed to overcome the strangeness of being part of a minority; have regained some form of security and equilibrium, existing under-currents of distrust and non-acceptance may help to create a situation which is unbearable.

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(1) Capp, R.: *Pitjantjatjara & European Identification Problems*. p.3

\* Downing, J.H. : Social Worker, Alice Springs