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TEACHER TRAINING FOR TEACHERS OF ABORIGINES

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In Vol. 4 No. 1, Ms Binnion discussed teacher-parent communication with particular reference to the Action Research Project into Secondary Education for Aborigines which was initiated in S.A. in 1972. During the course of the Action Research Project teachers in many other schools with Aboriginal secondary students were asked, via a questionnaire, for their opinions about a large number of factors relating to Aboriginal education. Consequently, this article reports the opinions of teachers in both the project schools and other schools with numbers of Aboriginal secondary students.*

Teachers in schools which have numbers of Aboriginal students enrolled, require certain personal qualities as well as special skills and abilities to enable them to successfully provide the type of education which students in those schools need. It is the responsibility of teacher training centres to prepare student teachers for this type of school situation, but evidence gathered from teachers during the South Australian Action Research Project into Secondary Education for Aborigines suggests that teachers have *not* been prepared adequately for this type of school situation.

Gerald Williams and David Morton, in a recent book called *Compensatory Education*, edited by Maurice Chazan, state:

"It seems to be accepted that there is a generic training appropriate for all teachers. ... that assumption is challenged by claiming that there is evidence for believing that a special attitude and outlook must be adopted for work with disadvantaged children and also that methods used in teaching of the curriculum itself must be revised when working in what we call educational priority areas."¹

* The final report of the Action Research Project into Secondary Education for Aborigines is available from: Superintendent of Aboriginal Education, Education Dept., of S.A., G.P.O. Box 1152, Adelaide.

The comments of the project school teachers and teachers from other schools indicate that they agree with Williams and Morton.

Aboriginal students in South Australian schools are "disadvantaged" in the sense that they are "at a disadvantage" because the culture which moulded them, and the culture which moulded their teachers and the schools, is different. Thus, when teachers and students meet at school there is a "culture-clash", usually resulting in conflict, because everything about the school is oriented towards the teachers' culture. This immediately places Aboriginal students or others from a different culture, at a disadvantage. If educational disadvantage of this type is to be eradicated, at least two things have to occur. First, teachers who wish to teach in schools with numbers of Aboriginal students (or indeed numbers of students from any ethnic minority) require special knowledge about the culture, values, life styles, learning patterns, etc., of their students. Secondly, teachers need additional skills and abilities which will help them adapt, design or innovate courses so that the students' education is suitable to student needs and so that students' disadvantages are not perpetuated.

Project teachers, school principals and student liaison seniors considered that the quality and competency of school staff could be partly attributed to the nature and scope of their training courses. A wide variety of courses were available in five colleges of advanced education in South Australia, but few, if any, of the courses could be considered as adequately preparing trainee teachers for teaching Aboriginal students, or indeed many of the poorer white students who attended project schools. At present schools use staff induction and inservice training programmes in an attempt to compensate for the inadequate preparation of teachers by teacher training centres.

A questionnaire to teachers, administered during the South Australian Action Research Project into Secondary Education for Aborigines provided some valuable feedback for teacher training centres. It is assumed that practising teachers must have clear ideas about the usefulness of their college studies, and ideas about things they should have learnt at college. From the questionnaire answered by teachers it was found that 20% of project school staff, and 13% of staff in other schools had done some type of training course oriented towards the teaching of Aboriginal students. Twenty-five out of 159 teachers (15.7%) who returned questionnaires had done some kind of course in Aboriginal studies and 18 of them considered that it had been relevant. Of the remaining 7, 6 thought their courses had been a waste of time, while the other was uncertain.

The 7 teachers who were dissatisfied about their training gave the following reasons for their opinions:

- .. 4 said that courses were oriented towards the tribal situation rather than towards the urban and fringe-dwelling Aborigines.
- .. 1 said that the lecturer was paternalistic.
- .. 1 said that teaching practice was not varied enough.
- .. 1 said that the assumption behind the course was that the present Aboriginal situation was entirely the white man's fault.

Nineteen interpretable comments were made in answer to the question, "List features of the training course which you did consider relevant."

- .. 6 teachers considered that cultural geography, Aboriginal culture courses, a study of ethnic background and language studies were relevant.
- .. 6 teachers considered that study of the social-value differences of Aborigines and working-class people were relevant.
- .. 4 teachers thought that extensive fieldwork done in cooperation with Aborigines (at reserves or in the community) was relevant.
- .. 2 teachers said that they found aspects of psychology courses valuable.
- .. 1 teacher said that the course for handicapped children was valuable.

Suggestions from teachers about what training courses *should* contain included the following:-

- .. 13 teachers wanted courses which emphasised the Aboriginal situation as it is at *present* in the localities to which teachers are likely to be sent. A component of this was the need to meet and speak with both "successful" and "unsuccessful" Aborigines.
- .. 9 teachers thought that Aboriginal culture courses should be available.

- .. 6 teachers thought that practical teaching of Aboriginal students should be included in training courses.
- .. 6 teachers thought that special skills to increase motivation, and skills to allow teachers to cope with wide ability ranges, should be taught at college.

In this article it is not intended to design actual courses for teacher trainees, but to point out what skills and knowledge teachers need to enable them to teach Aboriginal students or students from other ethnic groups.

Probably the most important and most difficult thing which trainee teachers have to learn, is respect for the culture and values of students from minority groups. Trainee teachers must come to realise that the students' and students' parents' values are valid, and that one culture is not better, or superior to any other. When student teachers realise this, they can then appreciate the fact that teachers have no right to try and impose their own values upon students; instead teachers have a responsibility to develop learning experiences which are consistent with, and NOT in conflict with, their students' values. Therefore trainee teachers who desire to teach disadvantaged children must undertake training which will develop their perception so that they can identify students' beliefs, culture, values, ambitions, needs, wants, strengths and weaknesses. Courses which student teachers undertake should:

- 1) provide knowledge about the social environment and subcultures of children from various ethnic groups;
 - 2) train them to appreciate that all cultures have equal worth and that none is inferior or superior;
 - 3) provide experiences so that they can examine their own attitudes, prejudices and expectations;
 - 4) train them to observe, so that they can recognise students' values, ambitions, interests, needs, strengths and weaknesses;
 - 5) train them in basic communication skills so that they learn to listen to, and have empathy with, students;
 - 6) train them in basic social work skills so that they have knowledge about how to meet, listen to, and have empathy with students' parents;
 - 7) include a study of psychology and sociology so that
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they can recognise disturbed children and can make a referral if necessary;

- 8) give them an understanding of voluntary and statutory welfare organisations which can assist students in times of trouble.

In addition to this, to enable teacher trainees to be able to provide education which is consistent with their students' culture, values, beliefs and ambitions, etc., training courses should provide student teachers with knowledge about:

- a) the way in which children from different social classes learn. For example, learning through observation and discovery will place Aboriginal students at a disadvantage because the things which they are expected to "discover" are middle-class things;
- b) techniques of "innovating" and designing courses;
- c) various teaching methods which can be used in schools; including how to work with students in small groups;
- d) how to design "success-oriented" tasks which build upon students' strengths;
- e) how to design tasks which have short-term goals;
- f) how to evaluate and assess students' work.

Teacher training centres overseas have developed courses which train their student teachers to work successfully with children from different ethnic groups, and Armidale Teachers College in N.S.W. has also devised a course which has proved highly successful in preparing trainee teachers to teach Aboriginal students.²

The time has certainly come for teacher training centres in Australia to examine their methods of selecting trainee teachers and to review their curriculum and courses. If education is to become meaningful and relevant to Aborigines, teachers need to be specifically and carefully trained so that they can provide Aboriginal students with the best possible educational experiences.

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References

1. Williams, G., & Morton, D., in M. Chazan, (Ed.), *Compensatory Education*, Butterworths, London (1973).
2. Tatz, C., & Chambers, B., in D.E. Edgar, (Ed.), *Sociology of Australian Education*, McGraw-Hill, Sydney (1975).