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THE ROLE OF GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING IN SECONDARY EDUCATION FOR URBAN ABORIGINAL STUDENTS

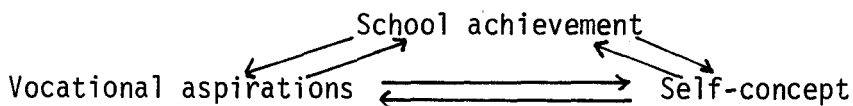
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INTRODUCTION

Despite recent developments in Aboriginal education very few Aboriginal high school students in Queensland are in academic courses that will enable them to matriculate with the possibility of entering into tertiary institutions. Instead, the majority of Aboriginal students are in lower level industrial and commercial courses and consequently leave school ill-equipped to enter into a competitive job market. Of those students who do find employment, few are in jobs commensurate with their ability.

Educationalists such as McConnochie (1973) have pointed out that the failure of Aboriginals to succeed at school is primarily a result of factors associated with our social institutions, particularly the schools, rather than with the Aboriginal child himself. McConnochie suggests that our institutions tend to debase the black child's concept of himself and the group with whom he identifies, and it is the child's consequent lack of self-esteem that contributes significantly to his low vocational aspirations and academic achievement. However, low vocational aspirations and achievement themselves interact, reinforcing the child's negative self-concept and he becomes caught up in a self-sustaining cycle of increasing school failure and worthlessness.



Any attempt to break this cycle may require a restructuring of our present educational system as McConnochie has suggested. However, this is a long-term goal and there remains a need to assist students in the present system until this can be achieved. Some

attempts have already been made to prepare Aboriginal students more adequately for suitable employment (e.g. Hall, 1974; Lett, 1971). However, the preceding analysis points to the need to focus simultaneously on self-concept, vocational aspirations and academic skills.

In Queensland, guidance officers provide educational, vocational and personal guidance and counselling for high school students, usually in the context of an interview arranged at the request of the student. Guidance officers are therefore potentially able to assist Aboriginal students with regard to their personal/social adjustment, school performance and vocational aspirations. However, Aboriginal students in particular tend not to utilize this service provided by guidance staff.

INALA PROJECT

A project was initiated in 1975 at Inala High School in the Brisbane Metropolitan area, in recognition of the potential contribution of guidance staff. The project was aimed at meeting the educational, vocational and social/personal needs of Aboriginal students so as to increase the number of Aboriginals entering into occupations commensurate with their ability and thus reduce the school drop-out rate. Inala was selected on the basis of student population; in 1975 part-Aboriginal students constituted 6 per cent of the total school enrolment of 890. The suburb of Inala is predominantly working class and Aboriginal families are considered to be well integrated with little racial tension evident.

Since the inception of the project 18 months ago the original staff of a guidance officer (part-time) and an Aboriginal assistant (full-time) has been increased to include a psychologist (part-time) an English teacher and an additional Aboriginal assistant (both full-time). The project has focused on each of the areas of self-concept, vocational development and aspirations and school achievement, however the nature of the programs designed to bring about change in each of these areas has been modified during the course of the project. Thus during 1975 normal guidance services were provided on two days for non-Aboriginal students, this being the school's staffing entitlement, while on the other days programs were initiated for Aboriginal students and their parents. This situation proved to be unacceptable to a significant proportion of school staff who considered such an approach unjustifiable. In addition some Aboriginal students all of whom have non-Aboriginal friends, experienced conflict as a result of being singled out for special attention. In

response to this situation the guidance program within the school is now completely integrated although Aboriginal students will visit the Guidance office more frequently than do other students during morning recess and lunch.

The activities developed during the first year of the program will be described for consideration in schools with a higher percentage of Aboriginal students or where school staff fully support programs for such students.

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

The program, aimed at increasing self-esteem, included group counselling with students from grades 8 and 9, following the success of Gilliland (1968) with a group-centered approach to counselling with American Negro students utilizing Rogers' theoretical framework (Rogers, 1961). Aboriginal students met for 50 minutes on each of eight weeks with the guidance officer and Aboriginal assistant. Results suggested that although this technique was useful for establishing a warm, trusting relationship with students, and for allowing students to voice some of their grievances, little positive growth occurred and the groups were discontinued. The relative inexperience of the staff with this form of counselling was probably significant, however, the reliance of a Rogerian approach on the ability of students to clearly articulate and discuss feelings, attitudes, and behaviour probably renders it inappropriate for Aboriginal adolescents, who prefer alternative modes of interacting with their peers. Group counselling techniques that are more action-oriented and which utilize role playing would possibly be more effective with Aboriginal students. The potential for change may also have been greater had there been non-Aboriginal students in the groups.

Another approach used with grade 8 students involved strengthening ethnic pride and identity by the provision of one period per week to work individually or in groups on self-selected topics related to the traditional or present-day life of Aboriginals. These projects were combined with several one or two day excursions to places of cultural significance or interest. Students became very involved in these activities. However, lack of appropriate resource people and materials does create problems for this kind of program in the urban setting.

In 1976 Aboriginal students were no longer withdrawn for group activities. However, excursions of the cultural awareness

program continued, with non-Aboriginal students joining in. For example a two-day camping trip to Stradbroke Island with grade 8 students included traditional preparation of food, poetry-reading by the Aboriginal poetess Kath Walker, dancing by the Torres Strait Island dance group and an introduction to Aboriginal relics by an archaeologist. Students from Cherbourg settlement also came to Inala and stayed with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families in return for hospitality extended to Inala students who visited Cherbourg the previous year. The guidance staff have not attempted to provide students with the opportunity of learning more about their culture as the English department at the school is offering a unit in Aboriginal culture in their grade 8 course later in the year. The provision of a course or elective such as "Aboriginal Studies" or its equivalent, open to all students, is considered to be the most effective means of increasing ethnic pride and also modifying white stereotypes about Aboriginals. Teachers wishing to develop such a course should refer to an annotated bibliography of fiction and non-fiction work by and on Aboriginals which is produced and available from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.

DEVELOPMENT OF LANGUAGE SKILLS

Although the growth of ethnic pride is vitally important for the development of a positive self-concept, academic success in the classroom is equally important. Assistance has been provided for students in the area of study skills and, where necessary, individual tutoring has been arranged through the Commonwealth Department of Education. However, many students experience difficulty in subjects such as Science, Geography and Citizenship Education through an inability to adequately cope with the language used in textbooks, rather than a lack of conceptual understanding. The need for assistance in the area of language development was confirmed by the discrepancy between verbal and non-verbal tests of ability administered to Aboriginal students. Thus results of the Inter-D, an ability test containing items with a verbal, middle class, cultural bias, indicated that all students were below average intelligence. However, the results of Raven's Progressive Matrices, a less culturally biased non-verbal test of reasoning, indicated a normal distribution of IQ scores for Aboriginal students. Similar data is currently being collected for a more comprehensive study of the performance of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students on verbal and non-verbal tests of cognitive ability. There is sufficient evidence at present, however, to indicate the need for caution in using the results of tests such as the Inter-D for educational and vocational guidance with these students whose formal language skills are not well developed.

A teacher was recently appointed to the project in order to provide students with the additional language skills necessary for success in an academically oriented high school program. An important feature of the language program is that it seeks to indirectly increase self-esteem by recognising the adequacy of students' language in the home context, yet at the same time provide successful learning experiences with language that will enable them to cope more adequately at high school and engender a more positive attitude towards school and learning. This program, which is provided on an after school voluntary basis, has been well received by both students and parents and is currently being expanded to include non-Aboriginal students, many of whom have similar language difficulties. The criteria for selection of non-Aboriginal students have included the ability to relate well to Aboriginal students already in the program, and also under-achievement at school resulting from an inappropriate language style. While some slow-learning students and students with specific learning difficulties will be included in the program, most will be referred to more appropriate agencies for specialist assistance.

CAREER GUIDANCE

A third aspect of the project at Inala has been in the area of career guidance. Prior to the initiation of the project, such guidance for Aboriginal students would have consisted of one or two interviews with a guidance officer or officer from the Commonwealth Employment Service in their final year at school. The materials that are used to provide vocational information are also inappropriate in that they are almost all in a written form that renders the information inaccessible for the majority of Aboriginal students. Where audio-visual materials are available they depict only non-Aboriginals with the result that Aboriginal students are not exposed to successful Aboriginal models, and their low vocational aspirations are reinforced.

In the first year of the project, group discussions on career planning were held with grade 9 students, after the group counselling program was discontinued. For grade 10 students regular individual guidance was supplemented by an eight week course, which was provided for all students as part of their Citizenship Education course. During the eight weeks students practised the skills needed for obtaining employment such as filling in application forms, interview techniques and letter writing. Students also used booklets, tapes and films to complete an "Educational and Occupational Facts Chart" on each of a number of jobs for which they were suited and

wanted to know more about. A series of guest speakers was arranged covering such topics as unionism, insurance, credit and budgeting so as to provide students with information needed for their transition from school to work. An expanded course is operating for grade 9 and 10 students in 1976 and the content of the course has been based on students' educational and vocational planning needs as assessed by students, teachers and guidance officers. The introduction of a Career Education course starting in grade 8, that forms part of the school syllabus, is regarded as the only effective means of systematically conveying vocational information, teaching decision-making skills and self-awareness, and preparing students for the world of work. The move to career education as opposed to career selection is well established overseas (Bailey and Stadt, 1973; Evans, Mackin and Mangum, 1974; McCure and Buan, 1973) and suggests that the role of the high school guidance officer in Queensland requires reassessment if the needs of students are to be adequately met.

In response to the lack of audio-visual career information, a career library has been developed incorporating audio and video copies of tapes and films held by the Career Reference Centre of the Department of Labour and Industrial Relations. In order to expose students to successful Aboriginal models a slide/tape presentation has been produced on Apprenticeship. This presentation explains the nature of the apprenticeship system and depicts Aboriginal boys in a variety of trades. (Successful Aboriginal models have also been provided by a policeman and public servant who talked with students about their careers.) An album of photographs has also been produced in an attempt to modify existing racial and sexual stereotypes. Thus the album contains five colour photographs providing a visual concept of each of 20 different trades. At least one Aboriginal person is shown in each of the trades and women are included wherever possible e.g. radio mechanics, printing, dental technology. Ten copies have been made of each of these productions and will be distributed to schools and Commonwealth Employment offices in areas with a significant Aboriginal and Island population.

The role of the Aboriginal assistants in the school program includes clerical duties, organization excursions, liaison with teachers to bring about greater understanding of the cultural and family background of the students, and student interviews either alone or with the guidance officers. In-service training in counselling techniques has been provided for the assistants by a social worker and the guidance officers on staff. The assistants

are presently attending a course for voluntary welfare workers conducted by an Inala community welfare agency and will be presenting a lecture themselves to this group on resources for Aborigines.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT

An important goal of the project was also to make contact with, and subsequently involve parents, in recognition of the major role that they play in determining student behaviour, attitudes and vocational aspirations. Recent research which suggests that parent counselling may be more effective than counselling the student also points to the need to work closely with parents. The specific aims of the project with regard to parents were:-

1. to increase awareness of the relationship between education and occupations, in particular the consequences of taking particular high school courses.
2. to increase knowledge of the wide variety of occupations available to their children.
3. to increase understanding of the structure, functioning and role of the high school, in particular the meaning of school reports, content of subjects, importance of homework and the methods of student evaluation.
4. to increase awareness of the educational progress of their children at school and of the contribution that they can and do make to their children's progress.
5. to increase contact with the school so as to improve relationships between parents, school administration and teachers.

These aims are considered appropriate for the parents of any minority group who have received little formal education and/or who are alienated from the present school system.

Traditionally guidance officers work exclusively with the school, and parent contact is restricted to interviews at the school arranged at parents' request. Since such initiatives are almost never taken by Aboriginal parents it was necessary to develop alternative strategies for working with parents to achieve the aims listed above.

Our experience in establishing contact with parents confirmed that of other projects seeking to involve parents, namely, that initial contact is best made individually at the parents' home in the company of an Aboriginal person. The female assistant who was known to most families proved invaluable at this stage, being able to readily allay suspicions and anxiety. In the absence of an Aboriginal person on staff a local well known Aboriginal person could be approached to assist with initial introductions.

Attempts to achieve our aims with parents have included regular meetings with small groups of mothers in their homes. This technique was found to be most successful with mothers already interested in educational issues and when groups were based on friendship or kinship ties and members lived in close proximity to one another. These monthly meetings have provided a forum for the discussion of school courses, study techniques, careers and other related issues. Those mothers unable or unwilling to participate in group discussions, have been visited regularly by the Aboriginal assistants, in order to establish a relationship of trust, and/or to inform them of the activities of the project and the progress of their children at school. The assistants also act as resource people, if a family requires help in the areas of health, housing or legal and financial assistance. Meetings have also been held at night this year in order to reach working parents. These meetings have been rather more formal and have consisted of talks by guest speakers, selected by parents, and have included representatives from the departments of Health, Education, and Labour and Industrial Relations.

In order to encourage parent contact with the school, a parent-teacher night was arranged exclusively for Aboriginal parents. For many parents this meeting was their first contact with high school teachers, most having lacked the self-confidence to attend such meetings in the past. Subsequent meetings, open to all parents, were well attended by Aboriginal parents, thereby demonstrating to teachers the real interest of Aboriginal parents in the progress of their children at school.

The interest of Aboriginal parents in their children's progress has also been fostered by the provision of a report from teachers every six weeks. This report rates the student's level of achievement in each subject and also provides information regarding social adjustment, motivation, homework and general classroom behaviour, in a way that is readily understandable by parents. These reports are discussed with both students and parents, and if necessary strategies for change initiated. This addition to twice yearly school reports, which do not provide a very explicit or

comprehensive picture of a student's performance, enables parents to take a more active role in determining the progress of their children and also helps to demystify the schooling process.

INALA FAMILY EDUCATION CENTRE

Although parent contact has been greatest with the Aboriginal community, non-Aboriginal parents are becoming increasingly involved in the project following the purchasing of a house centrally located within the community. Funds were made available in late 1975 for the provision of additional facilities and a committee representing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents was formed. The aim of the committee was to advise the Education Department of community opinion regarding the location, opening times and services that should be provided by a Guidance Centre. Members of the Aboriginal community specifically requested that the Centre should cater for the needs of all members of the community. The committee subsequently designed and administered a survey to 50 Aboriginal and 50 non-Aboriginal families, with project staff acting in an advisory capacity. The results of this survey have been described in detail elsewhere (McIntyre and Clark, 1976). The house was purchased in recognition of community opinion, and a public meeting resulted in the adoption of the name "Inala Family Education Centre" for the house and the election of a management committee of three Aboriginal and three non-Aboriginal parents, whose children were attending high school. It is anticipated that two student representatives will be added to this committee.

At the present time the Centre is open from 9.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. and from 6.30 p.m. to 8.30 p.m. Day-time staffing consists of an Aboriginal assistant and a guidance officer, while the teacher works on the language achievement program during the afternoon and evening. A guidance officer is also available one night a week. The services currently available include individual vocational, educational and personal guidance for students, parents and unemployed school leavers. A career information room holds duplicates of the films, slides, tapes and pamphlets held at the school. Other rooms in the house have been equipped for testing, counselling and small group teaching. Parents have also rostered themselves to provide supervised study facilities for those students who experience difficulties working at home. Monthly meetings, previously attended only by Aboriginal parents, will be held at the Centre for any Inala residents interested in educational issues. Other community groups and government agencies have also shown an interest in using the Centre - for example, a parent effectiveness program is being conducted by Community House.

Additional activities planned by guidance staff include discussion groups for parents whose children are at significant stages in their high school education i.e., initial year, final year prior to seeking employment and final year prior to entry into a tertiary institution. A specific program is being planned to meet the needs of parents in each group. Assistance will be offered in conjunction with the Commonwealth Employment Service to young people aged between 15 and 20 who are currently unemployed. A program for this group will focus on self-awareness of abilities, interests and values, job seeking skills, adjustment to the work situation and increasing self-esteem. Cultural and social activities are also planned to attract students to the centre and an extension to the house has been requested in order to provide additional room for such activities. Finally day trips and barbecues are planned to facilitate rewarding family interaction and generally improve parent-child communication.

EVALUATION

Evaluation of the effectiveness of a project of this nature poses particular problems. Tests of social adjustment and self-concept were administered at the beginning of 1975 to identify problem areas and consideration was given to the use of a pre- and post-test design. However, the use of psychometric tests in a pre-test/post-test experimental design are considered inappropriate for evaluating a project of this kind. Firstly, the validity of tests of non-cognitive functioning tends to be lower than that of tests of cognitive functioning; the former are also likely to be invalidated by cultural bias resulting from their high verbal content. In addition it has been suggested that situational and emotional factors tend to invalidate the results of tests administered to minority group children (Labov, 1970; Sattler, 1974). With regard to design, pre- and post-test results can only be interpreted unambiguously in a controlled experimental setting; however students in this project were exposed to a number of different variables both simultaneously and successively throughout the year, any one of which could be responsible for changes in test performance.

There are also a number of objective measures that can be used as indicators of effectiveness, namely employment statistics, absenteeism and supervision rates and school achievement. However, these measures are similar to test scores in so far as the factors responsible for change cannot be identified with certainty. Of the 13 students who left school in 1975, five are employed in occupations ranging from clerical work to labouring, three are undergoing

training at Business College, two are repeating grade 10 and three are unemployed. The percentage of students unemployed is therefore almost half that of the national figure for 15 - 20 year olds, which is approximately 41 per cent at present. A comparison of the absenteeism of grade 8 students, over terms one and two, before and after the project commenced revealed a decrease from an average of 19.2 days in 1974 to 12.8 days in 1976. (Guidance staff have worked closely with Commonwealth Education officers on the issue of attendance.) Between February and September 1975, five students were either expelled or suspended; since that time only one suspension has occurred. However, no improvement is evident in the school performance of students who were in grade 9 in 1975. In the first semester of that year all nine students passed in at least one subject, and three passed in three or more subjects (a pass is equal to 50 per cent). Results for the first semester in 1976 indicated that five of the nine students failed in all subjects. (Changes in subjects from grade 8 to 9 make this comparison impossible to make).

An evaluation of the effectiveness of the total school guidance program was carried out in May 1976 when, as part of an internal evaluation of the school's programs, an independent committee of teachers surveyed all teachers and 100 randomly selected students on issues related to student welfare. In this survey guidance services were rated as one of the most effective services offered to students, the majority of staff indicating that no further improvement was needed. Students rated educational and vocational guidance as good while personal guidance was considered inadequate. A similar kind of assessment will be made at the end of this year when parents, as well as teachers and students, will be asked to rate the effectiveness of the guidance services provided to Aboriginal students and their parents. Case studies may also be used since these can indicate which strategies are most likely to prove effective with particular students, thereby enabling other researchers to estimate the applicability of particular strategies to their target populations.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Aboriginal high school students do have special guidance and counselling needs that arise from their distinct cultural background - needs which teachers are frequently reluctant to recognize. Even in urban areas the attitudes, values, beliefs and abilities that students bring to school are shaped by unique experiences associated with membership of a depressed minority group. The most appropriate way of meeting the needs of Aboriginal students is the introduction of comprehensive career education programs that focus on both

personal and vocational development. This approach avoids the problems associated with singling out Aboriginal students and does not rely on students seeking out services of their own accord. In particular, Miller and Leonard (1974) suggest that a career education program should help disadvantaged students achieve the following:

- .. Develop a positive self-concept
- .. Develop a belief in their ability to control their own lives
- .. Develop an appreciation for and a pride in their own cultural heritage
- .. Understand themselves as unique persons in terms of interests, abilities and values
- .. Maintain appropriate aspiration levels
- .. Clarify their own feelings and values related to work
- .. Broaden their perceptions and knowledge of various occupational areas
- .. Provide a variety of occupational role models
- .. Understand the steps required for entering various occupational areas
- .. Develop general work-related behaviours which are needed for success in any occupational area
- .. Develop belief in the effectiveness of planning as a way of reaching goals
- .. Be willing to devote energy to reaching their goals.

Aboriginal aides can play a valuable role in the provision of guidance programs particularly in the areas of stimulating parent interest in the school and its goals, increasing parent awareness of the career possibilities open to their children, assisting students to develop a more positive self-concept and encouraging them in their efforts to seek jobs after they leave school. Aboriginal aides in Queensland high schools have begun to receive some training in these areas. The project staff strongly recommend that principals of high schools with a significant proportion of Aboriginal students appoint at least one Aboriginal teacher-aide with ability and interest in the areas outlined above.

Finally parent education and involvement is critical in view of the influence that parents have on the development of a child's self-concept, vocational aspirations and attitudes towards learning

and school. Consequently guidance staff should seek to extend their activities beyond the confines of the school and initiate a meaningful dialogue with parents about ways they themselves can assist their children succeed in the present educational system.

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