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TEACHER TRAINING FOR TEACHERS OF ABORIGINES

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Some determinants of educability for Aborigines are discussed and such problems as integration and involvement in decision-making by Aborigines reviewed. The role of the teacher in effective communication with Aboriginal children and Aboriginal communities and related aspects such as teacher expectation are considered. Research findings in behavioural science which relate to belief systems and attitudes are considered for inclusion in teacher education programs for the teachers of Aboriginal children. In conclusion, some proposals are made concerning teacher education programs.

SCHOOLS COMMISSION FINDINGS

Aborigines have not fared well in Australian education systems. The Schools Commission Report for the Triennium 1976-78 (1975, p.97) shows that only 59.64% of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders aged 15 years attended school, compared with 81.5% of all Australian fifteen year olds. The percentage drops off rapidly to age 19.

The Commission has the following to say about the educability of Aborigines:

As it studied the situation, however, the Commission came to the conclusion that one element, the voice of Aborigines themselves, was still muffled. (p.96)

Among Aborigines there is a strong feeling of alienation from the mainstream of Australian society, even after participation in the educational system. (p.99)

Prejudice and discrimination arise in schools from the tension between two differing value systems as well as from the more obvious differences in skin colour. (p.99)

Three important aspects have been brought out here: decision

making by Aborigines; alienation of the Aborigines; and prejudice leading to discrimination against the Aborigines. Each are vital when discussing the educability of Aboriginal children.

EDUCABILITY OF ABORIGINES

Both internal and external factors have to do with the educability of Aborigines. Among the internal factors are self-esteem, mental abilities, physical health, emotional well-being and language development. External factors include the school, teacher attitudes, decision making, societal goals, family attitudes and teacher training.

The only variable which seems central to most aspects of educability is teacher attitude. The teacher is the person who spends the most time with the child; he is the catalyst in the educational environment of the school. He acts upon the child and bears the brunt of the responsibility for education once the child is in the school environment. The educability of the child may be determined by the factors mentioned and many others, but it is the teacher who has the capacity to build or reduce that educability: the things which prepare or reduce the child's potential for success at school. The teacher is also the person in the best position for combating alienation and prejudice. It is harder for him to 'tap the voice' of the Aborigines in a decision-making context, but he can involve the parent in the sorts of decisions which white parents make at the classroom or school level. Why do Aboriginal children reject school? Why is there such a high drop-out rate? Tatz (1971) poses the following questions which might be considered in reducing the drop-out rate:

Should a purely western education for Aborigines be provided, or should Aboriginal cultural values be fostered or retained?...Why has there been a limited number of Aborigines graduating from secondary schools into tertiary and technical schools? (p.232)

The teacher is central to help answer these questions, firstly by working towards better acceptance of Aborigines in a white system by involving parents in decision-making; and by looking at the possibility of introducing more relevant curriculum material to help overcome negative attitudes towards Aboriginal society by white peers.

Aboriginal communities are searching for identity, for a past and hence future, and therefore the teacher has a unique position to help consolidate that identity and foster the self-esteem which may trigger the motivation to succeed at school. Aboriginal people have become more aware of the concept of integration and indeed it might

well be argued that the earlier policies of assimilation which Australian governments held, were the root of much alienation.

INTEGRATION OR ASSIMILATION

Aborigines are a distinct group. They are identifiable. Integration would therefore seem a totally more acceptable approach because it allows for this difference. The concept allows for Aborigines to remain identifiable and yet contribute to and be part of the Australian whole. Assimilation means loss of identity and total acceptance of 'western' Australian society - it leaves little room for decision-making by Aborigines. Integration in the classroom is therefore a valuable approach to increasing the educability of the Aboriginal child: it offers identity and hence choice; the choice to stay close to a 'traditional' identity, or move towards a more 'western' identity.

The concepts of integration and identity are important because they allow the teacher to overthrow the assumptions behind IQ tests and other similar tests - that they measure a universal capacity and not a capacity unique to a culture. The Aborigines' lower IQ scores are not, then, a reflection of intellectual ability, but perhaps of difference, not deficit; a reflection of their non-'westernism'. As de Lacey (1974), states:

One important principle which seems to apply universally to mankind has recently emerged from the work of Berry in Canada. As a result of his studies of children in Scotland, Australia, Central Africa and North America, Berry has put forward his 'ecological functionalism' hypothesis - the idea that in different cultures, skills are developed in response to the particular environmental demands upon each culture. (p. 101)

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Tolerance of difference would then become an aim for the teacher. 'Difference' allows for acceptance once attitudes are overcome; it also allows for choice and decision-making by Aborigines. 'Deficit' allows for only manipulation and the infusion of a hypothetical 'missing something' which allows for little decision-making for the Aborigines themselves, but for acceptance of an outside authority - in actual fact, in most cases, non-acceptance leading to alienation.

It would take a highly trained and perceptive teacher to work towards these goals. What does a teacher need to know? What does he need to do? Firstly, it seems, he must change from manipulator to facilitator. The Aborigine must become an actor in education, not a receiver. As H.C. Coombs (1972) says :

A study of our own efforts and those of welfare programs abroad like the 'War on Poverty' and programs for American Indians in the United States, show that apparently well-conceived programs designed by social scientists and administrators have failed because their clients, the Aborigines, the Indians or the poor, have been involved only as passive recipients - at most invited to endorse programs already approved. (p.5)

INVOLVEMENT AND DECISION MAKING

Part of being an actor in the educational process means being involved, being consulted and essentially having needs fulfilled. What are the needs of the Aboriginal people? The Aboriginal community generally feels that its needs are not attended to, that its needs are seen as being the same as the needs of European society in Australia. Gatjil Munyarryun* (1975) states this explicitly:

What is Aboriginal Education? Talk to an Aboriginal community and they will say that so far, education for them has meant *balanda* (European) education. (p.6)

...It is accepted that there is a need for education by Aboriginal communities, but we need a balance between *balanda* and Aboriginal forms of education. (p.6)

The teacher of Aborigines might well say to himself: "What can I do? It is the school or the 'department' which must initiate such a program of community involvement." Yet this need not be the case. The teacher has direct contact with the child and has access to parents. He can visit them, invite them to the school, ensure they are offered the opportunity to come to the school; to make that decision free of fear that their self-esteem, their integrity, will be affected by the attitude of the teacher.

Also he can implement content changes in the curriculum which

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* Community Leader, Yirrkala, N.T.

allow his pupils, both black and white, the opportunity to become aware of the culture of Aborigines. If this is done with the emphasis on Aboriginal children being the actors and not passive recipients, their identity is brought into the classroom; their sense of being worthwhile is developed; their self-esteem respected; their 'difference' justified.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

However, this is a hard task for the teacher. It assumes a lot. Firstly, it assumes the teacher is trained in making contact with people who may and will be culturally different to himself. Secondly, it assumes he has a good understanding of Aboriginal culture and value systems - usually neither is the case.

Aboriginal teacher aides may be a link here, but they are not yet widespread in our systems. It is well to look at the ways in which Aboriginal teacher aides are able to form a link between school and community. Hart (1974) points out the following ways in which they develop this link:

- . through their understanding of Aboriginal children and the way they learn;
- . through their knowledge of the language and the whole community way of life;
- . through their example as living models of the culture who are able to exemplify what they are teaching;
- . through their ability to develop in the children a pride in being Aborigines with such a rich heritage;
- . as 'producers' of Aboriginal drama in the traditional dances and songs of the children's corroborees;
- . as story tellers who not only entertain but through stories, reinforce the traditional community values;
- . as artists teaching the children both the techniques and the meanings of traditional art forms;
- . as bridges between home and school providing emotional security for the children;
- . as instructors and interpreters of the Aboriginal way of life to the non-Aboriginal teacher;
- . as representatives of the community to the school, bringing the desires of the parents into the school and helping to fulfil these desires of the parents in a practical way. (p.52)

This list outlines the first task in the training of teachers of Aborigines; a thorough education in the values, culture and ways of Aboriginal communities; and a thorough training in ways of communicating both with the parents and the children of minority and culturally different ethnic groups.

TEACHER EXPECTATION.

However, more is needed than an understanding of Aboriginal culture and training in facilitating community involvement. The trainee teacher has other problems which have to do with teacher-pupil relationships and teacher and pupil expectations. Do we expect as much from Aboriginal children, given a conducive attitudinal approach and a situation of integrity and empathy, as we do from white Australian children? Indeed, here we need to identify groups within the white population for whom we may have lowered expectations. Rosenthal and Jacobsen (1968) clearly make this point:

The central concept behind our investigation was that of the 'self-fulfilling prophecy'. The essence of this concept is that one person's prediction may, of course, be realised only in the perception of the predictor. It is also possible, however, that the predictor's expectation is communicated to the other person, perhaps in quite subtle and unintended ways, and so has an influence on his actual behaviour. (p.3)

Teacher expectation is closely related to teacher attitude. How can a teacher be trained so that his attitudes are less biased and minimally prejudiced? Racial attitudes have been traditionally very hard to change. Researchers such as Sarnoff and Katz (1954) suggest that search for knowledge and hence willingness to learn and believe - for example, being told black people are lazy - leads to the development of racial attitudes. This can be supplemented by a natural desire to support and conform to peer group attitudes and this too, leads to reinforcing any previous negative attitudes. Transfer of aggression is also to be considered. Frustration leads to aggression, and an 'out-group' or racial minority, offers an outlet.

BELIEF SYSTEMS

Research by Adorno et al. (1950) also shows that a proportion of people have a tendency to prejudice - the 'authoritarian personality'. This research was supported by Rokeach (1960) who suggested people may have 'open' or 'closed' belief systems.

Festinger (1957) found evidence to support his theory of cognitive dissonance. This theory suggests that once a belief or attitude such as a prejudice is held, evidence to the contrary will be rejected and supporting evidence accepted.

This evidence would suggest that traditional ways of attempting to change attitudes, such as presentation of facts which discredit a prejudice, may not be very productive, indeed they may reinforce the prejudice. Also, simply mixing groups may be counter-productive and reinforce attitudes already held. Lippman (1974) reports on both the above approaches and outlines objectives which may be useful in changing attitudes which show prejudice:

Three objectives should be borne in mind:

- a) To increase sympathy with and knowledge of ethnic and racial differences.
- b) To learn to react with interest and pleasure and not with fear and hostility to these cultural differences.
- c) To realise that to be different is not to be inferior. (p.28)

Lippman suggests these objectives may be attainable through teacher influence by attempts 'to form positive attitudes to others who are different'; by setting up a less authoritarian environment in the classroom;* by curricula supporting inter-group relations. Certainly, we should not ignore differences, or try to 'assimilate' them, but become more aware of them and understand them so that suspicions about differences do not lead to prejudices.

Before these measures can be put into effect in the classrooms, our teachers need to be aware of the research firstly, and secondly, of ways of introducing programs which utilise the results of the findings. Teacher education, therefore, becomes a primary concern.

TEACHER EDUCATION

Becoming aware of research and of the problems concerned with and arising out of prejudice are not the only ways of improving teacher education. More practical aspects, such as selection of material should be part of any teacher education program. J. Harris (1976) draws attention to the problem of the Aboriginal image in school

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*Campbell, (1968) reports Australian teachers are more authoritarian than U.S., English, or New Zealand teachers.

library books. He outlines problems associated with material found in libraries:

derogatory material; social darwinism; inferior stereotypes; emphasising the superficial; negative descriptions; biased and incorrect historical information; low expectations, and lastly, no information at all. (pp 34-35)

The teacher can be aware of the effect that materials and his attitudes and expectations can have on children. However, the teacher must first be aware of them himself, and his training must be able to equip him with the knowledge and experiences which will allow him to not only implement effective programs, but be more an emphatically vital educator; one more aware of his own values, assumptions and prejudices and also more aware of those of others.

SPECIFIC PROGRAMS

Programs for teacher education, apart from the skills, knowledge and experiences offered in traditional teacher education programs, might offer courses in the social and behavioural sciences which deal with attitude development, prejudice, group dynamics and associated fields so that an awareness of research findings is developed. Courses in social psychology and sociology could supplement and form a context for this information. Cross-cultural studies and studies in the pre-history and history of the Aborigines are also necessary to set an historical perspective.

Studies about the effects on the educability of Aborigines of the following, would appear necessary: the home; the school; curricula; the community; integration and assimilation; and teacher expectation. Also, it would seem desirable that the teacher have experiential knowledge of Aboriginal culture before coming in contact with Aboriginal children as a teacher. A period of involvement in a school with Aborigines during training would assist. This, of course, would be impossible for all teacher trainees, but would be a possibility for those wishing to specialise in Aboriginal education.

Given this knowledge and experience, the teacher may have a viable chance of developing an environment which will be conducive to the educability of both Aborigines and European children. The experience would, of course, need to be varied because of the variety of Aboriginal societies in Australia, ranging from tribal to fringe-dwellers, to inner-city dwellers.

There are already elective undergraduate courses in Aboriginal studies at many Australian colleges: Mt Lawley Teachers' College in Western Australia, Torrens and Salisbury Colleges in South Australia, Darling Downs and Kelvin Grove Colleges in Queensland and Armidale and Westmead in New South Wales, for example.(Willmott, 1975, p.14).

Since most teachers at some time come in contact with Aboriginal or other minority groups, and with groups with differing social values and prejudices, a more integrated and general course in these areas would seem desirable for *all* teachers. An attempt has been made, but whether or not it is on a scale large enough to be effective, is questionable. Specific programs and departmental policies affecting Aboriginal education are being introduced, but the basic problem is still in the classroom for the classroom teacher. He is the catalyst for change and it is to him, and his teacher training we should increasingly look.

Inevitably, however, we must refer to the needs of the people concerned. Hopefully, an increasing number of teachers of Aborigines will, in fact, be Aborigines - they are vastly under-represented. For the majority of the history of Western man in Australia, he has decided what those needs are. It is fitting therefore, to conclude with the following statement by the Schools Commission's Aboriginal Consultative Group:

We do not see education as a method of producing an anglicised Aborigine, but rather as an instrument for creating an informed community with intellectual and technological skills, in harmony with our own cultural values and identity. We wish to be Aboriginal citizens in a changing Australia. (1975, p.32)

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