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ACROSS AUSTRALIA...

FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER


 UNGRADED TEAM TEACHING
 IN A SMALL SCHOOL

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In country areas of Australia it is not a rare concept for multi-grade classrooms to exist under the instruction of one or two teachers. However, even within the structure of single teacher schools, there is usually a grade structure within the classroom, where the teacher divides the children into grades and the blackboard into grade areas. This works efficiently if the children in each grade section are of the same academic level and of similar chronological age. In many cases the teacher can call on the senior students, when they have completed their work, to help the juniors, and in this way the teacher surreptitiously sets recapitulatory and revisionary work for all the students. The big ones helping the little ones is an efficient concept in small school teaching, especially if the children are of European extraction and have had a fairly continuous educational exposure.

In an Aboriginal school or a school with an enrolment of predominantly Aboriginal children, the assumption that the children have had a continual exposure to education cannot be made, and if made, can be very detrimental to the educational development of the child. A teacher arriving in an Aboriginal community peruses reports and other information regarding the children and after several weeks of teaching and testing, sets up "grade areas". Here the dangers creep in.

Most Aboriginal children are lacking in the basic European competitive instinct and do not wish to be singled out as superior students. They seem to believe in the words of Eldridge Cleaver that, "Competition is the law of the jungle and co-operation is the law of civilization". Perhaps the Aboriginal people are more civilized than those of the European west.

Although an Aboriginal child is academically backward or underdeveloped, he or she may very well be fully developed in the skills of

living and survival within the Aboriginal community. The least developed child, academically, may be superior in status within the sacred, secret life of the Aboriginal community, and is therefore respected and senior in relation to a child of equal or lesser age, although that child may be academically more advanced.

Although the above is redundant since all teachers are possibly aware that this situation exists, it is well to draw attention to it, especially for those going into the situation for the first time. Any new arrival in an Aboriginal community is regarded with suspicion and an attitude of "let's wait to see how he or she shapes up".

This appraisal takes time, and during this time of appraisal, the children will concede nothing to the teacher, and without their help the teacher can find out nothing. This period of time may last for many months and at times, years. The teaching assistant is of immense value during this investigatory period, but again is bound by tradition and will refrain from giving any unsolicited help and information. Bearing in mind all the above observations and dangers, it is recommended that the small Aboriginal school functions best as an open space (not to be confused with open education) unit.

The benefits thus derived are that all the children are within one unit structure and sub-units can be set up for individual lessons. The strengths and the weaknesses of the students can be assessed continually and fluidity between sub-groups for differing subject areas can be made feasible. Thus the fourteen year old can work at a Grade 3 level in Maths, Grade 8 level in Craft and Grade 4 level in English. In this way, there is little or no "shame" attached to the continual group interaction, and no teachers are labelled as "infants", "primary", or "the teacher of the dumb class".

One of the most beautiful things about Aboriginal society is that people have no age in the European meaning of the word. They are either young, middle-aged, old or close on dead. This concept of age follows on into the school, and there is no strict peer grouping in the grade/age sense as there is in the European school. Thus children of all age groups can be seen playing together. In an open space unit this is a great asset so long as a peerage has not been created within the classroom or school by the introduction of European concepts. It is perhaps important to note that in many cases the school and the community are often very separate entities. Although there is no peerage in the community, it may well exist in the school environment, which is European in character.

After two years at an Aboriginal school, we were frustrated with the lack of regular attendance, lack of enthusiasm, and in some cases, subtle rebellion. We continually revised our approaches to the learning situations and used streaming in subject areas, graded teaching interaction programs and combined lessons. In the second year we decided to combine the pre-school area and the prep/infants areas of the school, and noted a remarkable improvement in the attendances of the children in that area. The primary section of the school remained irregular in attendance and attitude. We laid the blame on the ages of the older boys and girls. Many of the girls were getting married and moving away from the settlement. The boys were going hunting and fishing and were seemingly not interested in academic education.

Throwing caution to the wind, we decided to integrate all grades, leaving only the prep. grade and the pre-school together as a unit. All children who had spent at least four months in prep. grade were incorporated into the unit. Those with less regular attendance, that is, four months attendance in prep, and those recently promoted from pre-school formed a unit with the pre-school. All the remaining children were placed into one unit and a team teaching, open unit was introduced. This unit, under the supervision of one male and one female teacher, taking the primary and the infants section respectively, is sub-grouped and re-sub-grouped on ability and age levels. This allows the infant graders of 'mature' age to be taught by the male and the infant graders of lesser age to be taught by the female.

It is now possible to split female/male, academically advanced/academically underdeveloped, mature aged and lesser aged. With this combination it is possible to split for almost every possibility that exists. Of course, the group can also be taught as a whole for those areas where sub-grouping is not essential.

This approach allows for group and individual progression. It also allows for the school as an entity to progress as an educational unit of the whole community.

The results of this approach so far have been most successful. The school now maintains an average attendance of 95% of not only enrolment, but also of eligible enrolments. That is to say, there is an enrolment of 100% eligible children and a 95% attendance of enrolments.

Since the school has only been operating with this program for six weeks, it might be too early to assess the value of the program fully. However, it is, at this point of time, the most successful approach to teaching yet attempted in this community.