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"EXTENDING THE TEACHING COMPETENCE OF URBAN ABORIGINAL MOTHERS"*

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The 1972-73 program entitled *Extending the Teaching Competence of Urban Aboriginal Mothers*, described by Watts and Henry, (1977), drew both on cultural deprivation and cultural difference theory, in a way that invites consideration of the possibility of reconciliation of these two apparently opposing positions.

First, to elucidate the program and its research bases, it aimed to enhance the prospects for school success of Grade 1 and later 4-year old Aboriginal children in Brisbane, not by focusing directly on the child in a school or pre-school setting, but by working with parent and child at home.

This focus was suggested by a number of studies in the sixties (e.g. Bernstein, 1961; Hunt, 1961; Dave, 1963; Douglas, 1964; Hess and Shipman, 1965; Coleman, 1966; Wiseman, 1967), indicating that the home is a more important determinant of school success than the school itself.

In particular, Hess, (1969) saw ten family characteristics as significant for the child's optimal development: demand for high achievement, maximization of verbal interaction, engagement with attentiveness to the child, maternal teaching behaviour, diffuse intellectual stimulation, warm affective relationship with the child, feelings of high regard for child and self, pressure for independence and self-reliance, quality and severity of disciplinary rules, and use of conceptual rather than arbitrary regulatory strategies.

Watts, (1971) found maternal characteristics such as active interest in, and high aspirations for the child, to be more significant for the school achievement of Aboriginal than white adolescent girls.

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Reinforcing evidence of the importance for cognitive development of the home has come from Bronfenbrenner's (1974) analysis of the relative ineffectiveness of purely centre-based programs for disadvantaged children, and the relative effectiveness of programs which recognise and foster the parent's primacy and centrality - not merely collaboration, but primacy - in the early development of the child.

The decision to base the program in the home rather than a centre (though a group setting was also included) was founded on evidence both from Australia and overseas, (Gordon, 1971) that agency-based services tend to miss many of the most severely disadvantaged groups; and the further consideration that the mother at home is more likely to *feel* 'at home' and more able to participate in and later apply, interactions introduced there, than in the quite different setting of a centre.

A second base for the program comes from the identification (e.g. Jessor and Richardson, 1968) of a cluster of attitudes described by Nurcombe, (1976) such as low self-esteem, impulsiveness, feelings of powerlessness - attitudes engendered by long exclusion from the power bases of majority culture - which tend to inhibit parents in minority groups from feeling that they have a role to play in the education of their children, and which are reflected in child-rearing practices antithetical to Hess's variables.

However, thirdly, there is also evidence (Ausubel, 1961; Katz, 1968; Watts, 1970, 1976; Smith and Biddle, 1974) that very many disadvantaged parents have high educational aspirations for their children, and look - often fruitlessly - to the school as a means of enabling their children to lead fuller lives than they themselves have led.

A potential therefore exists in parental motivation to narrow the gap between the aspirations disadvantaged parents have for their children, and the child-rearing practices which help to prevent the realization of those aspirations.

Some opponents of deprivation theory argue, in the name of cultural pluralism, against the setting up of intervention programs which attempt such a narrowing of the gap, claiming these programs to be a middle-class corruption or seduction of the value system of a minority group. Those who advance this argument have not come to terms with the fact - borne out without exception by our experience working with Aboriginal parents in Brisbane - that what these parents, living within an urban mainstream culture, want is precisely for their children to succeed in school. A refusal to help them to do so might itself be construed as the imposition of alien values

rather than respect for the values of a culturally different group.

What respect for cultural difference does imply for educational programs has already been suggested by Nurcombe, (1976):

"...it is inappropriate and ineffective to impose objectives upon culturally different people who have had no say in their design. Educators must understand the culture of those they seek to teach...The aim should be for adults from the indigenous group to replace Europeans when enough have been trained."

How was this attempted within the Brisbane program?

The action-research program was based on the positive response of two groups of ten Aboriginal mothers in Brisbane to the invitation to join a program looking at new ways in which mothers at home could help their children with their school learning, since mothers, it was now known, were very important - even more important than teachers - in determining how children would get on at school. Program procedures were thoroughly discussed beforehand with the mothers, who entered the scheme voluntarily and could withdraw at any time.

These procedures included a regular home visit in which a parent educator worked with the mother and her child (often children), suggesting to and eliciting from her, practical and enjoyable activities whereby she could help him with his learning at home. Other facets of the program included the fortnightly borrowing by each family of developmental games, toys and books; a regular mothers' meeting to share experiences, view films, hear visiting speakers (including the children's teachers) and work together on further learning activities to use at home with the children; and individual visits by the mothers to their children's classrooms.

In Year 11, two developments took place, both again discussed with the mothers: first, the focus changed to the mother and her pre-school child, now 4 years old, the content of activities being adjusted accordingly. Second, I was joined on the parent educator team by three of the Aboriginal mothers who had been in the home-teaching program in Year 1.

Though results are not always easy to interpret, they were modestly encouraging in terms of the acceptability and viability of the program, even in highly stressful family situations; in terms of the language and IQ gains of some of the children, and the development of verbal interactional patterns between mothers and children; in terms of the heightening of maternal morale and competence reported by each

of the parent educators whose work with the mothers appeared equally effective whether she was white and qualified or Aboriginal community member; and in terms of the development of the parent educators themselves, all of whom have gone on to satisfying jobs.

I began by suggesting that in some ways this program represents a resolution of the cultural deficit/difference controversy. Such a resolution is at least possible because there are, in fact, some goals and values which a minority group may *share* with a majority group but which it has been deprived of the possibility of implementing. Here, areas of deprivation need to be identified and measures taken to permit more effective realisation of goals. There are goals and values on which majority and minority groups *differ*; here respect and an appreciation of difference is the proper course. The delineation of the two spheres - those that overlap and those that differ - will continue to be a proper source of debate and investigation.

Among the contributions of cultural deprivation theory to the Brisbane program are the recognition on the part both of the project staff and the participating parents of an area of overlap between mainstream parental goals and those of the parents - namely, the desirability of school success; the recognition also of a disparity between those goals and some present means of achieving them; and the possibility of stimulating, by way of new information and ongoing support, new behaviours in the service of those goals.

The contribution to the Brisbane program of cultural difference theory lies in the respect of the program personnel for the values held by the parents, whether overlapping or different from their own; in the encouragement of parents to develop their own methods; in the wish of program personnel to listen to and learn from the mothers; in the ongoing modification of program procedures in the light of consultation and feedback from all its participants; in the increasing responsibility taken for the project by its Aboriginal staff members.

The possibility of a resolution between deprivation and difference theory is perhaps nowhere better exemplified than in the program's focus on verbal interaction.

While Labov, (1970) and others have drawn attention to the validity of non-middle-class speech forms, evidence continues to accumulate from researchers such as Tough, (1973), Wootton, (1974) and Wells, (1974) that while *all* social groups have access to the full range of complex language patterns and structures, groups do differ in the uses to which those structures are put. To argue that

using language to plan, to recall, to imagine, to explain, to hypothesize develops thinking processes, and that language is more often put to these uses in middle-class speech, is not necessarily ethnocentric patronization. *All* parents have the capacity to use language in these ways, and if it is brought to their notice that helping children extend their remarks backwards and forwards in space, or time, or imagination will help them learn to extend their thinking patterns, a motivational force may come into play which may be an initial step towards greater parental competence in even wider fields.

Certainly many of the mothers in the Brisbane program appeared to find stimulating and morale-boosting, the notion that talking to their children was useful to them - about why those pyjama tops went with those pyjama bottoms, about what the fire hydrant on the way to the shops was for, about the animals they mutually found fascinating on "Wild Kingdom" on tellie. One mother laughed as she recalled an incident at the table when her six-year-old daughter had knocked over a glass of milk. "I was just going to give her a clip over the ear when I thought, now I'm in the project I've got to explain why she should have been watching what she was doing!" If a conversion from arbitrary to conceptual regulatory strategies could always be thus accomplished!

What was happening here was that a need - a deficit if you will - was being identified and worked on to bring the mother's own practice more in line with her wishes; at the same time the responsibility for doing so - and within her own context and life style - remained with the mother, who would in any case internalise new behaviour only if it meshed in with existing behavioural and cognitive structures. Thus a mother to whom a suggestion was made that encouragement may be a more effective spur to a child's effort than discouragement, was able to relate this new information to her own experience and come up with the insight: "Yes, I guess if people rubbish you all the time you do give up after a bit."

Turning to the structure of the program, the marriage of deficit and difference theory, involving the dynamic interplay of shared and differing goals, leads most naturally, I would suggest, to the semi-structured type of program outlined by Nurcombe, (1976). This is because shared goals and a need to work towards more effective ways of realising them create a responsibility for the teacher - or in our program the parent educator - to introduce information, activities and support to that end. At the same time the differences between the teacher and the taught - or the parent educator and the mothers - mean that the mothers will have distinctive contributions

of their own to make, and that the program will be open to modification, and indeed will become more interesting as the parent educator learns as much from the mothers as she gives to them, and the roles of the initiator and respondent are often interchanged.

This process of reciprocal initiation and response occurred in the Brisbane program mainly by way of an activity-based method, support for whose rationale has come from Bronfenbrenner's (1974) analysis of optimal child development (including cognitive development) as best enhanced by "an enduring emotional relationship between parent and infant involving frequent reciprocal interaction around activities which are challenging to the child."

In line with the aim, just enunciated, of sharing responsibility for initiation and response, the Brisbane program did not adopt the approach of programs such as those of Levenstein, (1970) and Karnes, (1969) in which all the tightly pre-structured activities were introduced by the program staff - an approach capable of producing dramatic and even longlasting results, but perhaps at the cost of violating the participants' life-style, so that activities might well become crutches rather than springboards to the mothers' own creative functioning. While in the Brisbane program materials and activities *were* introduced by the parent educators, and indeed pre-planned at weekly planning meetings, these activities were always designed with a potential for modification as seemed appropriate to the children, the mothers or the occasion. And some activities were mother initiated.

A final word is appropriate on the role of the parent educators in the Brisbane program whose philosophy of meeting deficits while prizing differences, taking turns in initiating and response, involves, like any sensitive teaching program, a delicate touch and skill in personal relationships.

This is in some ways even more difficult to bring off in the home visiting type of program than in the classroom situation, because three-way relationships are concerned. Not only is the parent educator hoping to foster the *child's* cognitive development by stimulating "an enduring emotional relationship between parent and infant involving frequent reciprocal interaction around activities which are challenging to the child". (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). As well, *maternal* cognitive development, through the mechanism of affiliative motivation, may be stimulated in the same way when a long-term relationship between parent educator and mother allows for *their* enduring and reciprocal interaction around challenging activities.

How to ensure this reciprocity? Experience from the Brisbane program is that it takes time and experience for the parent educator to meet the challenge of her complex, almost contradictory role, in which she "must serve as a teaching model for the mother, yet - virtually simultaneously - stand aside from the teaching role and encourage the mother to assume it." (Watts and Henry, 1977).

Not surprisingly, the three Aboriginal parent educators tended for some time to find it much easier to interact with the children than with the mothers. Thus opportunities were sometimes missed to alert the mother to the teaching potential of some activities, and the mother's primacy as educator of her own child was sometimes diminished. This was the result of early diffidence. On the other hand, Gordon (1975) describes a reverse hazard which his Florida Parent Education Program encountered in the early days. This was what he calls the "major problem of convincing parent educators to be more open and flexible and less ordering and autocratic." In a phrase that sums up much of this whole discussion about the need, in cognitive development programs, to meet needs while prizing differences, taking turns in initiation and response, Gordon says that what is needed is that parent educators should "play ping pong with the mother".

The Brisbane program lasted for two years; not long enough perhaps for its full interactional potential to have been realized. As it ended, the unanimous feeling among the parent educators was that they were just getting into their stride, playing ping pong.

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