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TEACHING ASSISTANTS IN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES



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The following article is based on a paper given in 1976 in Alice Springs at an induction course for teachers newly appointed to work in Aboriginal Schools in the Northern Territory. Mr Brennan is Principal Education Adviser to the Northern Territory Division of Education. In his talk he was concerned to give practical advice to this group of teachers and we believe that his comments will be helpful to teachers who work with Aboriginal children in a variety of settings around Australia.

In discussing any aspect of teaching in an Aboriginal community you cannot dissociate one from any other. Curriculum, community involvement, community decision making powers, school philosophy, school policy, and attitudes to teaching assistants are all inextricably interwoven.

One of the most exciting, rewarding and challenging prospects of teaching in an Aboriginal community is the chance to work with an Aboriginal teaching assistant. In teaching tribal Aboriginal children in an Aboriginal community you must realize you are entering a world which is entirely different from teaching children in Brisbane, Sydney or Adelaide, or any predominantly non-Aboriginal community. You will be teaching children and becoming involved with people holding social and cultural values many of which are diametrically opposed to our Western social and cultural backgrounds.

You may say the social and cultural influences in different schools in predominantly non-Aboriginal communities also differ markedly (lower socio-economic class versus upper middle-class youngsters in Sydney, for example). This is true to a certain extent, but at least in say, Sydney, the odds are that the teacher is a mainstream person with a knowledge of Western social and cultural influences, teaching, in the majority, children from the dominant society and culture. Even if a child in your class in Sydney lives in a difficult social environment you can at least begin to understand the problems he faces, and therefore you can attempt to help him. And more important than your understanding of his background,

the parents, older relatives, peers and the child himself can at least begin to understand and respect you and perhaps, to a degree, identify with and emulate you. But in most Aboriginal communities we have a group of non-Aboriginal teachers who constitute very much a minority in the community - teachers who have Western social and cultural values and are teaching Aboriginal children with Aboriginal social and cultural values. It is indeed unlikely that the Aboriginal children, and especially the Aboriginal adults, will strongly identify with non-Aboriginal teachers.

It has already been said that Western and Aboriginal values, on the whole, differ markedly. Most of us, for instance, are competitive. This results in our looking after ourselves. Most of us are probably not totally self-centred but our main concern is the welfare of our immediate family. We do our job to the best of our ability at least partially to ensure we keep our job. Tribal Aboriginal people share, and are non-competitive. They are bound to look after the extended family. This means that a distant cousin (a person many in our culture would not consider a relation) can expect to be given money, food and clothes by a relative holding a job. Many in our society would consider it naive to help such a man. It is totally improper for a tribal Aboriginal man, woman or child not to help his cousin. Repeatedly I have seen an Aboriginal child coming to school with tatty clothes. Perhaps a teacher, teaching assistant or school councillor mentions to the parent it would be better for the youngster to come to school in better clothes. The mother buys new clothes for her child. The next day that child comes to school in the same old tatty clothes and another child arrives in the new clothes. This occurs because a relation asks for the clothes and the child more often than not will hand them over. Often teachers make the mistake of growling at the child for giving his clothes away when, in fact, he is doing the right thing in his society.

Most of us are future oriented. We plan for our holidays, maybe save money (unfortunately I don't), keep a set of clothes clean for tomorrow. I may be wrong, but I do not believe tribal Aboriginal people are as vitally concerned with the future as we are. It is important to us that a teaching assistant arrives in clean clothes. It frustrates us that he did not wash a set of clothes yesterday. But it may not be important to him, and in all probability it does not frustrate him. I think Aboriginal culture and society is oriented towards the past. I think that, in the main, it is more spiritual than ours and more religious. In so many ways it is far superior to ours. But Aboriginal adults and children do not plan for tomorrow as we do.

Another way our societies differ is in attitudes to material goods. Tribal Aborigines and members of the mainstream society value material goods but their reasons for valuing them differ markedly. Most of us take care of a vehicle we buy. An Aboriginal generally uses a vehicle until it stops. In most cases he does not worry about servicing it. A man gets his holiday pay - he shares and spends it until it is gone - there is practically no budgeting.

Although Aboriginal society, Aboriginal culture, Aboriginal values are different from ours, they are certainly not inferior, but the fact remains, Australians from Aboriginal and Western backgrounds must co-exist. We must have a mutual respect for each other. (This does not mean you must like and respect every Aboriginal you meet). But I find it difficult to understand how so many non-Aboriginal teachers can live for years in Aboriginal communities without becoming friends with any Aboriginal adult. I do, however, know the reason. It is due to a complete lack of real communication between such a teacher and any Aboriginal adult. What you must realize before you go to an Aboriginal community is that -

- a) you come from a different background from the children you will be teaching, and from the Aboriginal adults you will be involved with;
- b) your background is not necessarily better than the Aboriginal background;
- c) Aboriginal children have to live in a different world from that of their parents, and you as teachers must do your bit in ensuring the children gain the necessary skills to lead happy, full and valuable lives;
- d) your influence on the child can rarely match that of the Aboriginal uncle, parents, and - very important - the older brothers and sisters. Nor should it. Who are teachers to say what will happen to any child if it opposes what the parents and relatives want for that child? And we won't win. We come and go. We are representatives of an alien social and cultural system. Just because we say children should come to school, learn maths, shower daily, blow noses, selfishly refuse to share money, all can mean absolutely nothing.

The influence of the Aboriginal adults is far more powerful than any teacher's. Therefore, to help the children you must work

through the Aboriginal adults. You may say to a 14-year-old Aboriginal student that it is unwise to drink. If his 25-year-old brother, who perhaps has been in jail (holiday camp) repeatedly for drunkenness and fighting, says to the younger brother, "Have a drink", you have no chance. But if you develop communication and some sort of mutual respect with the older brother and he comes to agree with you that it is bad for a 14-year-old to drink, it becomes a different situation. Now it is you and the older brother, whom the younger bloke identifies with and emulates, advising him not to drink.

I believe we, as teachers, have often failed in helping the children because we, in so many cases, have ignored the adults. Many of our teachers in Aboriginal communities are still doing this now. One reason why fewer problems are occurring on pastoral properties is because often the teacher and the Aboriginal adults come to know each other better than in large Aboriginal communities. The Aboriginal adults are your key to use your particular skills and expertise and training to benefit all the students in your particular community. If the Aboriginal adults are positively against, or even indifferent to, anything you are doing with the children, you have no chance of really benefiting the children. Absenteeism and vandalism against the school are often the results. If the Aboriginal adults are convinced that what you are doing with the children is important, meaningful and good for them, you have a great chance of succeeding. The challenge is yours. It is up to you to make the first move.

You are lucky if you have Aboriginal adults working in the school to which you are appointed. Do not forget that the school belongs, or should belong, more to the Aboriginal parents and children than it does to you. You are at the school to provide a service - to teach, in the main, literacy, oral English and numeracy, and to help the children obtain the best education possible. Through the Aboriginal teaching assistants you have a ready-made means of communication with the Aboriginal adult community. You as a teacher, and the teaching assistant, have something of mutual interest and importance to communicate about - the children. It is up to you to make full use of this important method of ensuring what you are doing with the children is in fact benefiting them, and is not wasting your time and theirs.

At present¹ there are approximately 320 Aboriginal teaching assistants in schools in the Northern Territory. In addition there are about 25 temporary and 9 permanent C.T.S Aboriginal teachers.

¹ 1976 statistics.

The teaching profession is an excellent means for an Aboriginal man or woman to find satisfaction in his job, become part of a career service, receive good salary and improve his non-Aboriginal qualifications and education. An Aboriginal man or woman who enjoys and can handle this type of work successfully can do a great deal to benefit his own people and Australian society in general. An Aboriginal man or woman who attains the status of a permanent C.T.S. teacher through this means, has had to overcome many obstacles and hardships, and has worked with determination. An Aboriginal over sixteen years of age can be employed as a teaching assistant Grade 1. He needs no academic qualifications and no pre-service training, but as teaching assistants are employed on the principal's and/or the Aboriginal community's recommendation, it can be assumed that teaching assistants Grade 1 would have the qualities and abilities to be assets to the school programs.

Many teaching assistants Grade 1 are young people with high school education, although throughout the Northern Territory, you will find middle-aged and elderly men and women in these jobs. It must be remembered that in general the older people are held in greater respect - they are of a higher status. Even if such people cannot read or write, they are usually a tremendous asset to a school and its educational program. In Central Australia it would invariably be older teaching assistants who would be involved in teaching traditional song and dance. An untrained teaching assistant can be recommended for the first year teaching assistant course at the Aboriginal Teacher Education Centre at Batchelor, outside Darwin. After successfully completing this year of training and study, the teaching assistant returns to his home community and works in the school for at least a year. He is now designated a teaching assistant Grade 2. He can then return to Batchelor and tackle a second year's full-time study. If successful and after another year's teaching, usually in his home community, the teaching assistant Grade 3 can apply for a year's course run by the Darwin Community College, also at Batchelor, in order to qualify as a permanent C.T.S. teacher. Where it benefits the Teaching Assistant, it is possible for the teaching assistant, the school, the community and the Aboriginal Teacher Education Centre to agree for the training to be undertaken in successive years. The courses undertaken by teaching assistants are divided into academic and professional studies, and special studies which include pre-school, bilingual and driver education.

Not all Aboriginal teaching assistants have the ambition, the particular skills and abilities, or perhaps the desire to do the three years training and study required for C.T.S. status. Many of

the most valuable members of the school staff (including non-Aboriginal teachers) are, what we would term, untrained teaching assistants, yet such men and women can exert a magnificent influence on the school and its program.

When you arrive at your particular community and your principal suggests you work with a teaching assistant, I hope you will do so with enthusiasm. Many teachers have said to me when I was principal of a school in an Aboriginal community, that they did not wish to have a teaching assistant in their classroom. They felt it meant more preparation, as they had not only the children but also the teaching assistant to prepare for. It is obvious that these teachers had not yet, and perhaps never will come to grips with what is required in a school in an Aboriginal community. No matter how well you teach your class, your efforts will be wasted without the real and sincere support of Aboriginal adults. And we all should do what we can to gain this support. Certainly it can mean more work for a teacher who is working with a teaching assistant, but he is a fool if he does not realize it should ensure his job will be more successful, satisfying, and in many ways easier.

Depending on what formal training a teaching assistant has undertaken, you may have to give considerable advice on how he should teach a particular Maths, English or Social Science lesson. If you ask a teaching assistant to teach a lesson on science, you may have to spend time on the method and reference material the teaching assistant will use. In some cases it may be easier to teach the lesson yourself, *but overall not so valuable*. Basically, our biggest challenge is formulating attitudes. Think of the effect it has when the children in your class see you, and then an Aboriginal adult they know and probably like and respect more than they do you, teaching a similar lesson. I can assure you, you will gain the real respect of your class and will have few disciplinary problems if it is you and an Aboriginal adult sincerely trying to achieve the same thing.

Do not forget that serious problems do not develop in schools when what the non-Aboriginal teachers are doing for the children has the sincere and active support of the Aboriginal community. As teachers, it is your job to use your expertise and skills to the benefit of the community in which you are working. I think, when it is all boiled down, you are accountable firstly to the community. Your skills in education do not end with kids. If you can help improve an Aboriginal teaching assistant's method of teaching, it is part of your job to do so.

Do not forget the teaching assistant will be teaching you more than you are teaching him. Local kinship, the correct method of communicating with parents and old people, tribal culture and social patterns, can all be explained to you by the teaching assistant. Most importantly, they will interpret problems you are experiencing with the children if the parents cannot speak English or are reluctant to approach you. If you become friends, they may arrange for you to be invited to ceremonies.

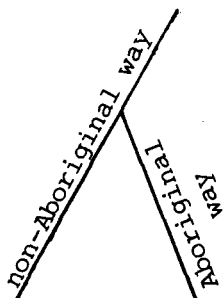
I must emphasise that the term 'assistant' is only a term of identification. It identifies what Education Departments and Teachers Unions and Federations consider the difference between qualified and unqualified teachers. It has nothing to do with the importance of the job a person does, or his status on the school staff. It has nothing to do with intelligence, integrity, or responsibility. Teaching assistants are at least as important to the school as are non-Aboriginal teachers. In the school in which I was principal, I can honestly say that some teaching assistants were always of more value than some non-Aboriginal teachers. You may wonder how a staff member who can't read or write and can speak very little English can be so valuable to a school program. I worked with one such lady. She was an important member of the Walpiri tribe, and Walpiri youngsters, when they so desire, can be pretty aggressive. If a student even looked like stepping out of line she would discipline the student in no uncertain terms. I can assure you it could, on occasions, be horrible to behold.

Many, but by no means all, schools in Aboriginal communities have serious disciplinary problems. Many of the adolescents and older male students are initiated young men. Many of the young girls are already married. A non-Aboriginal teacher who is not well known, trusted and respected by the community can be in big trouble if he attempts to discipline a student, particularly if the teacher is unfair, or goes about it in the wrong way. With the support of this elderly teaching assistant I never experienced such trouble. When I think of it, I was assistant to this lady and an old man who was chairman of the school council, in running the school. On top of this, she took traditional stories in the vernacular, and organized the teaching of every girl in the school traditional song and dance. At school council meetings and adult meetings, frequently involving over a hundred adults, she explained to the older women and men exactly what was going on in the school, and where our problems lay. And believe me, she did not mouth what I wanted her to say.

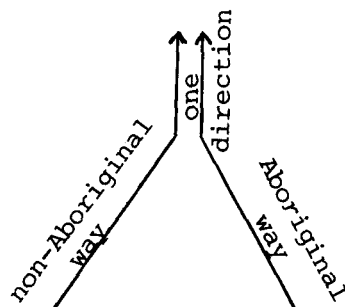
We will fail if the school degenerates into a white man's institution. It has to be black and white adults *together* working for the betterment of all the children of the community. One old

Aboriginal man helped me with my philosophy. When I was depressed and wondering where the whole thing was leading, old Johnny Johnson Jambajimba, a Warramunga man, said to me, "Kids have to know more than I had to know when I was a lad. They have to know many different things, both black fella way and white fella way. Adults have to teach the kids things because they have to live in a new world - they will have to be able to talk with white people - but it has to be black and white teachers together, going the same way."

It cannot be like this:



It must be like this:



The teaching assistant with whom you will be working can help you achieve this.

The teaching assistant establishment in many schools in the Northern Territory is adequate although in others it needs to be significantly raised. Most one-teacher schools have one teaching assistant, and some larger schools approach one teaching assistant for each class. I believe the aim should be one Aboriginal teacher or teaching assistant in every class.

If you are fortunate enough to be working with a teaching assistant, please leave behind any thoughts that you are the boss of the class and the teaching assistant is some type of menial aid. You must form a team, with neither feeling superior or inferior to the other. Certainly the children must feel you are two people whose job it is to teach them. Your expertise (and your only authority over teaching assistants or the community in general) is to work out how best to teach literacy, communication skills and numeracy, and some knowledge of science and social science over-all. Curriculum, class and school philosophy, method of handling and disciplining children must be a dual effort and responsibility. Aboriginal Studies etc. are largely the responsibility of the Aboriginal member of the team and other community members, and you are the assistant.

If the Director of Education in the Northern Territory asked any of you to prepare financial estimates for the entire Education Department in the Northern Territory, you would not know how to go about it. After you had made a hash of it, it would be unfair of the

Director to say you were irresponsible and unintelligent. Indeed it would be the Director who would be irresponsible and unintelligent if he did this. Yet non-Aboriginal teachers do just this type of thing. They ask teaching assistants to prepare and teach lessons with no advice, no discussion. Certainly, trained and some experienced, untrained teaching assistants can do this. But do not assume that all teaching assistants can do what it has taken three years of training for you to learn.

Please remember that a teaching assistant who has been working for a number of years in schools would, in all probability, have worked with a number of different non-Aboriginal teachers. This in itself is not easy. He has had to adapt to teachers who can teach and those who can't; to teachers with discipline of a military nature and those with no discipline at all; to teachers with varying philosophies, methods and levels of maturity. It is important for you to remember that the teaching assistant you are working with will have to get used to you as much as you will have to get used to him. And you have faults and weaknesses and gaps in your knowledge as does the assistant with whom you are working.

To summarize:

1. Go to your community humbly, and with the definite knowledge you do not have all the answers.
2. Accept that the Aboriginal parents and adults have the moral right to be the final authority over their children. You do not have this right.
3. Aboriginal people care very much about their children, (in some cases this is shown in a different way from our way).
4. Aboriginal people are responsible about things that are meaningful to them. If a problem is meaningful to them their solution will be responsible.
5. Work *with* Aboriginal teaching assistants accordingly.

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