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INDIGENOUS EDUCATION IN QUEENSLAND:

ONE TEACHER'S VIEW



J. McCollow
Brisbane*

Many writings on indigenous education focus on the role of the individual teacher. This is as it should be since the individual teacher is indeed the most significant factor in the success or failure of an educational program. There are other factors, however, which are significant, and in this article I would like to deal with one, namely: the *system* within which a teacher works.

A good educational system develops, supports and encourages good teaching practice. A poor system inevitably, if unintentionally, frustrates the efforts of its teachers. I believe many of the ablest and most dedicated teachers in Queensland are frustrated. I present here my own view. Quite possibly some of the facts are wrong. The important point is that this is the impression that at least one teacher on the job has of the way things work.

I would also like to propose a few ways in which the Queensland Education Department and the Queensland Teachers Union could better promote indigenous education through more effective staffing and curriculum development procedures. I do not mean to suggest that either of these two organizations is unconcerned with the plight of indigenous students; I do mean to suggest that both bodies are committed to maintaining an administrative system which is inappropriate and harmful to the interests of these students. In order to establish a truly effective program for indigenous students, substantive changes need to be made in the bureaucracy.

The present system of assigning teachers to indigenous schools presents a clear example of bureaucratic expediency triumphing at the expense of educational effectiveness. My perception has been

* Formerly, Bamaga State High School.

that the Department makes staffing decisions based not on local needs or teacher suitability but primarily on headcount (that is, so many students warrant so many teachers). It *seems* a matter of indifference to the Department which teacher fills which school's quota. From a bureaucratic perspective, this system is efficient; from an educational viewpoint, it is haphazard in the extreme. At any indigenous school, mixed in with those who are truly there to teach indigenous children, are those who are only there for the leisurely life-style and quite a few who have no wish to be there at all.

As for those teachers who are interested in and dedicated to indigenous education: if they are placed in an indigenous school in the first place - which is by no means certain - they will find themselves having to leave it prematurely. It takes a while for a white Australian teacher to establish rapport with indigenous students; it takes a while to master the necessary teaching strategies. Nevertheless, very few teachers remain at indigenous schools for over three years - which means much of the 'teaching time' at indigenous schools is really spent breaking in new teachers (a rather hit and miss, trial and error process). As soon as a teacher becomes fairly competent, he is transferred elsewhere. Inspectors I have talked with categorically deny that this is Education Department policy. This may be true, but it is also misleading. The Education Department does very little to encourage teachers to stay in indigenous education; on the other hand its promotional structure offers compelling reasons to leave the field.

Career-oriented teachers (the very teachers most sorely needed in this field) would find it detrimental to their careers to remain at indigenous schools. In order to advance professionally, a teacher must return to a 'mainstream' school. Furthermore, the teacher must follow certain steps. At the secondary level, it is impossible to rise to the relatively modest level of subject master, let alone principal, without leaving indigenous education. There are, of course, 'mainstream' schools with a significant number of indigenous students. Even at these schools though, it would be quite difficult for a subject master to devote himself exclusively to indigenous education.

In the field of indigenous education then, the Education Department forces in a number of unsuitable people at one end and forces out a lot of the most suitable people at the other end.

In the case of low level administrators, the deleterious effects of the inflexible promotion structure are easily seen. The principals who run Queensland indigenous schools are appointed on

the basis of seniority (usually as a take-it-or-leave-it proposition). Prior experience with indigenous students, personal suitability, and a personal desire to work in an indigenous school will count for nought against an inexperienced, unsuitable and unwilling candidate who has put in more time as a deputy principal. (The Queensland Teachers Union must share the blame for this deplorable situation).

I do not believe there are any principals of indigenous schools in Queensland who plan to remain principals of indigenous schools. Perhaps there are some who intend to remain involved in indigenous education. The overwhelming majority have their sights firmly set on Class I schools in Class I cities and towns. Some of these will, in the meantime, be quite good principals of indigenous schools, but is there anybody who will seriously argue that this is the best way to motivate leadership in indigenous schools?

The job of running a school in an indigenous community is complex, demanding and frustrating. It wants a person of dedication, initiative and leadership. As things stand, there seems to be a chance of getting a person serving his time till the next appointment rewards his caution and seniority.

Another area in which leadership is missing is the area of curriculum development. It is now a generally accepted maxim that curricula need to be developed in accordance with local circumstances and needs. Needs dictate objectives, and identifying objectives is the first requirement in constructing a curriculum. Indigenous students are likely to be significantly different from white Australian children in regard to culture, language, experience, aspiration - among other important factors. Therefore, the needs of indigenous students are different. The standard course syllabi handed down from Brisbane are not suitable.

A corollary of the above maxim must be that the most appropriate place to develop a suitable curriculum is within the community it will be designed to serve. It is all too often forgotten that, as well as being significantly different from white Australian children, indigenous children of one locality are significantly different from other indigenous children of different localities. I am not just talking of the difference between Islander and Aboriginal students, or between urban and rural Aborigines, but of the difference between say, Aurukun students who still live in their traditional area, and Woorabinda students who do not.

Now, administrators in the Education Department will claim that they constantly encourage individual teachers to be innovative

and responsive to local needs. However, for all this encouragement, the fact is that the vast majority of courses offered to indigenous students are traditional courses of study. Furthermore, a lot of what passes for curriculum development is merely curriculum simplification: the standard syllabus made more basic and/or covered at a slower rate. To be fair, there is excellent work being done in the research and curriculum branches towards making the curriculum more suitable for indigenous students. A sterling example is the Van Leer program. Even here though, there are problems. I know personally of teachers and principals who have refused to adopt the Van Leer course.

One reason for this situation is the already mentioned staffing procedure. A school is fortunate indeed to collect a staff trained and dedicated enough to innovate. High turnover rates reduce the probability of sustaining any innovation. Most teachers in indigenous schools are new to teaching and/or to the local community so it is unlikely that they would be able to develop an adequate curriculum. Time-serving principals are equally unlikely to push for arrangements which require substantive, perhaps radical alterations to their well-loved, well-worn and widely accepted routine.

Thus, individual teachers who do try to be innovative can encounter some unexpected problems. They may find themselves out of step with the rest of the staff and school administration - perhaps even resented. In many cases a truly worthwhile innovative program is necessarily interdisciplinary in nature and require co-ordination and co-operation among a number of staff. There is likely to be at least one teacher in a pivotal position for the implementation and success of such a program who will demur, mumble something about covering his syllabus and ultimately defeat it through lukewarm acquiescence - "A good idea but I've got to cover X amount of work by the end of term." What chance does the young curriculum developer have when his fellow teachers invoke the department's hallowed syllabus requirements as a defence? The fact is then, that while the system's top administrators pay lip service to progressive teachers, the system itself favours the regressive teachers.

I said at the beginning of this article that I would propose some changes and that these changes would be substantive ones. They are indeed, for they would involve a restructuring of the Education Department's assignment and promotion procedures and the creation of an "Aboriginal and Islander Section" of the Department which would function autonomously in a number of ways.

The main aims of these proposals are three:

- A. To develop a corps of teachers trained in and dedicated to indigenous education.
- B. To provide means for these teachers to advance professionally within the field.
- C. To allow these trained specialists to develop curricula more suited to indigenous students.

I believe that there already exist teachers who are not only dedicated, but specifically interested in indigenous education, and I believe that the Education Department can take concrete steps towards developing many more. These teachers should form the staffing pool for indigenous schools. The Department can work with the training institutions to develop Aboriginal education courses which are less pedantic and more practical and which plug into a comprehensive program of recruitment, placement and advancement. The people taking these courses would be looking at indigenous education as a career. Many experienced teachers with current or previous service in indigenous schools would also be attracted by the idea of building a career in this area. Given the present oversupply of teachers and the fact that the field offers unique and consistently challenging conditions, there should be no trouble in attracting first-rate people - if they are given the opportunity to develop professionally (that is, a chance to become better teachers and a chance to be promoted).

The creation of subject-master positions in indigenous schools (which are considered too small to warrant these positions now) would solve two major problems. It would provide an opportunity for advancement and it would assure that an experienced teacher was co-ordinating curriculum development. (These positions should be created in primary as well as secondary schools). School-level administrators would also be appointed from within this branch. Since these administrators would be men and women who have specialized in indigenous education, they would be well equipped to formulate and elucidate appropriate educational goals. They would be better able to communicate with the local people and to lead their teaching staffs.

Of course, it would be difficult to make such an "Aboriginal and Islander Section" a viable proposition if it included only schools in indigenous communities. I suggest that the scheme include schools with significant proportions of indigenous students. For

example, a number of teachers specializing in indigenous education (including some subject masters) could be assigned to Cairns High School or Murgon High School. This would mean teachers in indigenous education would not be permanently restricted to isolated reserves but could also move to larger centres.

The proposal has one additional advantage. The creation of a separate "Aboriginal and Islander Section" with its own assignment and promotion structure would make it easier to introduce Aboriginal and Islander teachers into the schools. The courses which Aboriginal and Islander teacher trainees are currently taking could be plugged into this program quite effectively.

I have no illusions about the difficulties involved in implementing these recommendations. It has become increasingly obvious, however, that the present system of education for Aborigines and Islanders is in need of overhaul. Ultimately, there will have to be a substantive change.

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