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ACROSS AUSTRALIA

FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER

SCHOOLING AT SMALL SETTLEMENT*

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INTRODUCTION

I was a teacher at the Small settlement school in 1977. It was not a good year for the school by any reckoning and I thought I would leave it at that when I left in December of that year - the day after school finished. Put it down to experience, let all the sordid little details dissolve in time. But they didn't and I never got Small settlement out of my mind. In 1978, I visited the school anew and this paper is a result of my observations and interviews.

It was written with teachers in mind, particularly young teachers going into Aboriginal schools for the first time. However, it may have more general interest: many features of the school's history are characteristic of the history of Northern Territory administration. A cursory acquaintance with some of the things that have gone on before may help to provide a basis for the courage and awareness needed for working effectively in an oppressive environment. A historical perspective may assist teachers and others in approaching their clients with the humility appropriate for making their work interesting and their influences positive.

THE SETTLEMENT

Compared to other Northern Territory Aboriginal settlements, Small settlement is middle-aged. It was established in 1940. Initially the settlement was run officially as a Government ration station, a rehabilitation centre for opium addicts and a home for 'incurable' women. Soon, however, people began to camp around

* The name of the settlement and the names of the people have been changed to ensure anonymity.

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the new government buildings. At first, these were mainly older people who had had relatively little contact with nearby missions. Some of the older residents at Small settlement claim these people couldn't abide mission life and so ran away to Small settlement. The other view is that the priests couldn't tolerate these particular people and so expelled them from the missions. Whatever the case, there were, by 1945, about 75 Aborigines more or less permanently resident at Small settlement.

In 1954 the first teacher was posted to Small settlement and in 1961 the local council was constituted. The population of the settlement was estimated at 189 in 1961 and at 269 in 1965. The current population is approximately 225 and the combined school and pre-school enrolment has been in the area of 70 to 80 children over the past few years.

With the splitting up of the Welfare Branch into different departments in 1973 and the amalgamation of Territory schools under the authority of the Commonwealth Teaching Service (C.T.S.), the administration of the settlements was, theoretically, modernised and democratised. In practice, as is noted later in this paper, the effects of the administrative reforms of 1973 have been less than spectacular. At Small settlement as elsewhere, one white boss, the superintendent, has been replaced by half a dozen or so 'Heads of Departments': the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (D.A.A.) administration officer; the community adviser; the forestry officer; the health officer; the housing manager; the church leader; the school principal, and so on. Conflict between these small power bases has become a central fact of existence, an ongoing theme of the institutionalised lifestyle of Small settlement. The situation has arisen where the number of white residents has increased steadily through the decade of the seventies; where such employees continue to be encouraged by the way their administrative roles have come to be framed, to talk more and listen less; to seek out departmental kudos rather than local needs; where the policy of self-management has become little more than an irritating footnote to the internecine red-tape bickering of daily life.

In this paper I make some suggestions about how such a predicament has come to be and how it has influenced schooling. I have described Small settlement as middle-aged. In a sense, however, the school is 'old', in that it has always been a government school on a non-mission or semi-mission settlement. Only a few schools in the Territory have had such a long *direct* relationship with education policy-makers in Darwin and Canberra. Furthermore, the school was for many years held up as an example to others. It was officially

regarded as a successful product of the implementation of government thinking on Aborigines and education, something of a showpiece. In that which follows, an attempt is made to describe the foundations upon which this reputation was built and to suggest some of the reasons for its collapse.

THE SCHOOL IN THE FIFTIES

The relatively early establishment of a government school at this small community was largely the result of the actions of the local parents. It is not clear why some parents decided they wanted their children to attend school. Perhaps the desire stemmed from the wartime 'egalitarian' experience or perhaps it was a matter of observing other people's children going to school. Some parents were adamant that they wanted the children in their care in school: they enrolled these children in a 'white' Darwin school.

From our perspective in time, it is difficult to appreciate the courage it must have taken to do this. A section of the Darwin community was horrified by the audacity of these bush people. However, despite all the noise and the pressure, the letters to the editor and the petition to the Commonwealth Office of Education, these ambitious parents stuck to their guns.

Discussing the school with the middle generation at Small settlement - those who are now parents of the school children - is to discuss its first teacher, John Smith. "He was the best teacher I ever saw." "I wish that man was alive today." These are the inevitable comments. The standards set by John are those by which his ex-students judge subsequent events at the school. And these standards are unusual in some respects.

John came to Small settlement in 1954, having taught for brief terms at Phillip Creek (since moved to Warrabri) and Delisaville. He stayed for six years and during this time became known as a 'character': as the number of visitors to the school increased, so did the stories about John, his teaching methods and his 'style'. Some of these stories paint him as a radical innovator and the others as a straight, old-fashioned disciplinarian. Certainly, he was rarely pleased about being visited. If in a particularly contrary mood, he would make a point of ignoring his V.I.P. guests, of being dressed in his rattiest clothes, or of allowing the visitors to inspect the school while he remained outside nonchalantly puffing on strong tobacco. He was able to run the school without outwardly

doing or saying much mainly because he employed a sort of monitorial system. Two of the most advanced students did much of the teaching.

In one sense this was an antiquated approach, but in another it represented an innovation in the field of Aboriginal education. It was one way John had of displaying to his students confidence in their ability to manage themselves and master the material. The students, in those days a class of twenty to thirty, responded with enthusiasm to this approach. After a few years, the standards achieved by his students in most areas of English literacy were reputed to be equal to that of their white contemporaries in Darwin.

The other side of the coin is that John's classes involved hours of tedious and repetitious drills. He maintained extremely strict discipline in the school, a clip over the ear for talking out of turn, a real hiding for uttering a swear word. Children changed into school uniform when they came to school and were in trouble if they weren't clean, tidy and punctual. It is tempting to ascribe the remarkable initial success of the school to John's old-fashioned authoritarian approach. Indeed, many of John's contemporaries in the teaching field and some of his ex-pupils do just that. His success is often attributed to the rote-teaching approach: "John knew that Aboriginal children learn best by constant repetition." Alternatively, his strong discipline is emphasised "I tell you, we *believed* that man."

However, a more complex system of relationships seems to have emerged in John's time than these sorts of explanations allow for; for example, a number of the parents were utterly opposed to his use of corporal punishment, and yet, their respect for him knew no bounds. Part of the explanation for this lies in the fact that he was the first teacher. The fact that he had reached a venerable age and that he stayed for a long time also had something to do with the respect he was accorded. But it was more than a matter of politeness or respect. His whole attitude to his work and the roles he slid into in his relations with the community differed subtly but radically from the norms being set by some of his contemporaries teaching at other settlements.

Rather than trying to *impose* a system - be it an ideology of assimilation, a Christian way of life, a 'civilizing' influence, or whatever - he was more interested in finding out what the people, particularly the old people, wanted from the school. He didn't do this by hassling people, by calling meetings and asking questions no one understood, or by putting ready-made answers into people's mouths. He gradually found out that the adults were particularly

interested in learning how to write their own names. Then he held night classes to teach this skill. He went on to teach the adults how to write certain place names, because he had been asked to do so. And he taught the Aboriginal names rather than the European ones.

John made it clear to the community that his primary allegiance was to them. He stayed home during the holidays and took people for outings; he went to town rarely and made excuses to avoid going in; he invariably shut down the school if there was a funeral or a big ceremony taking place. He didn't treat Small settlement as a personal empire or as a rung in some ladder he was climbing. He didn't really look upon teaching as a 'career', therefore he didn't appear to feel the need to impress anyone. Indeed, his distaste for the ambitious or sanctimonious, be they welfare officers or priests, was manifest in his public behaviour. One shudders to contemplate what his reactions would have been had the present self-advertising system of teacher advancement, peer assessment, been implemented in his time. I guess he would have opted for remaining a Band 1 teacher.

To his white contemporaries, then, John appeared a mixture of the authoritarian teacher and the social recluse, a complex, even contradictory sort of figure. To the Aborigines of Small settlement, however, he presented fewer problems of interpretation. True, he had his share of strange ways, idiosyncrasies, quirks, but all these aspects only added interest to the man because they didn't detract from the vital characteristic, that he was always 'straight' for the people. His loyalties were, quite clearly, not divided.

THE SIXTIES

For the settlement, the sixties were halcyon days. This was the period when many of the community developments there were taken as models for other settlements, the time when local and foreign dignitaries were specifically taken there to be shown how the policy of assimilation could and should work. The school became one of the first choices for teachers who aspired to teach Aboriginal children in a 'progressive' environment. Two of the chief monitors of John's time continued as assistant teachers in the school through most of the decade and young people were employed in teaching capacities from time to time. For much of the decade, the pre-school was under the control of local Aboriginal women, with very marginal white presence. Unfortunately this situation was neither officially encouraged, nor capitalised upon. Whenever a new white teacher arrived, the Aboriginal pre-school teachers had to move over, only to move back when the next staffing change occurred.

By the mid-sixties, the population of Small settlement had passed two hundred and reached its present level. The settlement must have looked impressive with the school moved into new quarters and other new buildings being occupied by the different Welfare agencies. With the garden in full operation, the settlement was virtually self-sufficient in vegetable production. The sawmill was operating; the bakery was producing bread; the Infant Health Centre was attracting a high level of community support; the Council was also generally rated in the 'shows promise' category; there was a football club, a sports committee, a parents' committee, a mothers' club and, from time to time, even a C.W.A. and a scout troop.

However, all was not milk and honey. Beneath the beehive facade, undercurrents of tension and waning confidence could already be detected. The Welfare Branch was no longer a small, cohesive band of pioneers. Potential for bureaucratic conflict was beginning to be realised within the expanding European camp at the settlement. By the end of the decade there were three positions for white teachers at the school. The status of the occupants of these positions was somewhat uncomfortable and ill-defined at times. Superintendents and other white officers occasionally complained about what they regarded as the favoured position of education.

Differences of opinion between white residents began to become visible in the sixties. With the expanding establishment, these cracks in the white edifice were bound to widen. Attempts to define and clarify roles were made but with short-lived success. The spectacle of Europeans bickering about their respective 'spheres of influence' was not an edifying one for the local residents. Although the problem was not of the magnitude it has more recently assumed, it is clear that the potential for this sort of conflict was being realised long before the administrative revolution of 1973.

In this context of relationships with the wider European community, then, the teachers came to occupy a slightly insecure position in the sixties. The same might be said about their classroom or teaching roles. The security inherent in believing that one is teaching the right thing in the right way was beginning to be shaken. Where there had been confidence and optimism in John's time, there was by the late sixties at least, increasingly persistent questioning:

- ... to teach English and mathematics, yes, but for what end purpose?
- ... what developing roles are assistant teachers to fill?

- ... does the school have roles in adult education and in post-primary vocational training?
- ... should the school introduce vocational programs such as carpentry and dressmaking at the primary level?
- ... what of the role of religious instruction in the school program?
- ... what about the 'traditional culture' - should aspects of it be taught in the school?

The qualification must be made that, although these questions were being asked at this and at other settlements by the late sixties, one also has the impression that they were being answered at the local level. Whereas the teachers of today might be tempted to reply to such questions with "I don't know" or "It's none of my business", my impression is that the teachers of the sixties were prepared to answer them with at least a modicum of confidence. Unfortunately, this residual confidence was often hollow and misplaced. To illustrate this point, I have chosen to look particularly at the subject of the introduction of traditional cultural activities into the school program.

In 1965, a physical education specialist visited the school and spoke to the teachers. He reported that he had made a study of some Arnhem Land dances and that he had found sequences of steps which he had recorded, in the 1-2-3 manner of the Fred Astaire How-to-Dance books. The recommendation was made that white teachers should 'teach' these traditional dances to Aboriginal children! On at least six occasions during the sixties, the school was visited by experts, specialist teachers or the equivalent, in the area of art. The theme was nearly always the same: the white adviser showing the white teachers how to teach Aboriginal children to paint 'Aboriginal' things.

In August, 1967 the Director of Welfare commented: "We should be endeavouring to include more traditional craft and dance activities in the school program". Yet the previous year, when the most famous of all the Melville Island carvers had agreed to instruct a group of children in his craft, the Branch refused to pay him. The then Acting Superintendent insisted he be employed on the same basis as other part-time instructors. Eventually and reluctantly, it was decided to pay him half the going European rate. "More Aboriginal Cultural Emphasis" reads a 1971 heading in the school newspaper. The article notes that a European adviser played his tapes of Tiwi music at the school. The school principal comments: "following these tapes

we hope to have some elder men to come up to the school on certain afternoons and teach the children song and dance and craft."

Statements like this may seem innocuous enough and no one would dispute the good intentions of the principal. However, if we look more carefully at what he wrote and at the other examples mentioned above, a disturbing pattern emerges. With a few exceptions, it was the white establishment which was dictating where and when these traditional programs were to take place. The teachers and the white experts were saying which people were to 'teach' these things and were selecting which children were to attend the classes. They were even, to some extent, dictating what was to be taught and what teaching methods were to be followed.

From this perspective, it is not difficult to understand why these so-called traditional programs never got off the ground. The confidence which seems to have characterised the European approach to the question of 'teaching' the Aboriginal culture was misplaced. As was the case in some other settlements, these white-imposed programs succeeded chiefly in embarrassing and offending the old people and in alienating them from the school and from their grandchildren.

As Butts (1955) noted, the concept of an element of community control, otherwise known as structural decentralization, has never come easily to Australian school systems or teachers. It apparently never occurred to anyone that the way these programs were being organized was essentially sacrilegious. The notion of consulting traditional authorities in the first place about these basic how, when, where, who and what questions was against the mode of administrative behaviour of the time. Unfortunately, as is noted in a later section of this paper, the message still hasn't penetrated.

Although I have concentrated on only one small area, the approach I have outlined was common to many school programs in the sixties. Take, for example, the question of what was to happen to the secondary school-age children: the files are replete with comments such as, "So-and-so should go to Kormilda College, but we can't get her mother's consent"; "So-and-so is having problems from a promised husband and would be better off at Kormilda". We have the same situation of misplaced confidence in white-imposed solutions in the area of the teaching assistants. As late as 1972, an official directive to principals reads: "We are very anxious that Head Teachers should actively seek out and nominate Aborigines for teaching assistant courses." Not a 'by their leave'; not a 'should consult with the community about...'; not a 'find out if anyone is interested': just "seek out"!

My impression is that by the early seventies community attitudes towards the school were changing. On the basis of the above comments, it is not surprising that the local people were taking a close second look at the school. There were pleasing aspects about it: the levels achieved in English literacy and numeracy were high by Territory standards: the people were generally happy with the calibre of teachers sent; most of them had been industrious and many had put in two or three years; the school produced an excellent newspaper, copies of which seemed to float about the Territory and are now collectors' items; the school children were known across the country for their dancing prowess, and the school was still high on the list of places visited by V.I.Ps

But enthusiasm was waning. Although no one disputed the motives, for example, behind sending adolescents away for secondary education, the unilateral character of the methods employed were often resented. And what roles were they to fill in the community when they returned? Where were the promised bank managers and members of Parliament? What about the teaching assistants, what about the nursing aides? The importance of attending various courses had been emphasised to them. Some of them had been away to so many, their heads were spinning. Yet the teaching assistants of 1960 were still teaching assistants in 1970, just as the nursing aides of the early sixties were, by and large, the aides of the early seventies.

Perhaps this was what it was all about: being a permanent exhibition of transitional man in the Welfare museum. The contradiction between this image and the standard Welfare Branch rhetoric concerning the light at the end of the tunnel, was becoming all too pronounced. By the early seventies, community enthusiasm for education at Small settlement had become tempered with an element of cynicism.

THE SEVENTIES

Despite occasional high points, the period of the seventies has been marked by a decline in community involvement in the school. No really systematic attempts have been made to answer the sorts of questions outlined above, which were beginning to be asked in the sixties. It is not surprising that people, once enthusiastic about school affairs, now tend to keep their distance.

Among the most significant trends of the seventies has been the loosening of the purse strings. This resulted in an increase

from three teachers and two assistants in 1970 to six full time teachers, including one specialist teacher, and four teaching assistants, by 1978. Beyond this, there are others in the community with educational functions, including a part-time adult educator, a Y.M.C.A. recreation officer, and a priest who spends about three days a week at the settlement.

Increased funding has resulted in an improved supply of books and materials. This has been accompanied by a trend away from reliance on prescriptive syllabuses: do your own thing; the discovery approach; teacher assessment by peers; join the career service; professional freedom; fostering Aboriginality. These are some of the phrases to enter the Territory education vocabulary in the seventies, phrases which purported to reflect new thinking, new approaches and new solutions.

The administrative changes of 1973, in part an attempt to implement this new 'ideology', brought an old problem into focus: accountability. In the sixties, inspectors visited the school perhaps twice a year. A typical formal inspection would take two full school days during which time all the teachers would be viewed teaching, their records would be inspected, the school files would be viewed and most of the children would be tested in aspects of English or mathematics. From 1974, the inspectors took on the lightweight mantle of education advisers. Teachers are no longer directly accountable to their employer. In theory, they are accountable to their colleagues through the system of peer assessment. In practice, they are chiefly accountable to their school principal.

As in other Australian education bureaucracies, the inspectorial system with all its conformist and ritualistic aspects, was overhauled. In its place, however, we have a system in the Northern Territory wherein the school principal, the Department's man-on-the-spot, is virtually accountable to no one. This situation stems largely from the principals' powers to function as *de facto* arbiters of policy and interpreters to the bureaucracy of teacher and school performance.

The desk people in Darwin have accepted these changes with relative equanimity. They have accepted the fact that information they receive about what is happening at schools like Small settlement is basically the information the principals, in their wisdom, choose to report, or else whatever can be gleaned 'off the record'. The principals have assumed potentially dictatorial roles because they now have the power of self-evaluation, a power so open to abuse.

To rephrase these observations, the situation has come about where the Darwin and Canberra bureaucracies cannot answer, indeed don't appear to maintain particularly an obligation to answer, questions the inspectors of the mid-sixties would have been able, or at least willing, to answer. What reading schemes are currently in use? Have the standards of, say, the upper primary students in mathematics improved or declined over the past two, four or six years? I doubt if an individual could be found within the Darwin educational establishment who could answer definitively either of these questions without resorting to sending off a telegram to the principal. Knowledge of this sort of information is not viewed as apposite to anyone's administrative role: "it's not my business" appears to be the sanctioned attitude. There are many aspects to this 'accountability gap'. I will mention only one, concerning post-primary education, an example which is referred to again in the final section of this paper.

In January 1977 a scheme was begun whereby certain Small settlement students were given the opportunity to continue their education at boarding schools in Queensland. In 1978, there were six adolescents in Grade 7 and Grade 8 situations in Queensland. The education of these children is, apparently, no longer the responsibility of the Northern Territory except in regard to certain payments, made by the Commonwealth, such as airfares. Yet none of the people I spoke to in the Darwin educational bureaucracy in 1978 knew of this scheme. These included people who have long-standing ties with the community and whom I would have expected to be in the know about such a development. They weren't. There had been no consultation between the school and the department and only cursory discussion with the local council. The whole scheme had been put into effect by the school principal with the assistance of the local priest. Wherefore accountability?

To conclude this section, it is necessary to discuss the most visible problem of the seventies: the effects of alcohol. It has been suggested that Small settlement has become a drunks' paradise, taking unto itself a 'beer culture', and that alcohol is the underlying cause of the lowering of interest in the school and in all community activities. Although the connection between alcohol and decline is obvious, it is not a primary equation. There are good reasons, some of which have already been intimated, for viewing mass alcoholism as a *symptom* in the first place, of a state of alienation, rather than the reverse: that is, to view alcoholism in this case as resulting from the largely unconscious realisation that one is no longer a free man; rather, one has become a member or an inmate of

a total institution, a sort of Government 'cuckoo-nest'; and that one's relationship to the means of production has been destroyed, so subtly yet so quickly and devastatingly, that one no longer exercises effective control over the destinies of one's children and grandchildren.

Abuses related to alcohol are among the hardest things new teachers coming into many settlement schools have to face - to face and deal with and, ultimately, evaluate in their own minds. Comparisons between the mid-seventies and the mid-sixties are stark and unkind: the bakery no longer operates; there is little in the way of agriculture; the large community garden is no more; the sawmill has been abandoned and left to rot; most of the voluntary associations are defunct or operating in name only.

White residents typically ascribe these deteriorations to alcohol. The simplistic equating of the two things, alcohol and decline, gives no credence to the historical complexities of the situation and such superficial explanations have led Europeans to take inappropriate actions in the community. Such thinking provides the ideal excuse for copping out: "I tried, but you can't teach drunks anything." Alternatively, it provides the more crusading or inquisitive European with the rationale for prying ever deeper into the private lives of the people: "Did you hear that so-and-so got extra beer last night? Won't take *him* out fishing again."

These two typical reactions, to cop out and to interfere, are inappropriate to the situation. As a recent community adviser to Small settlement put it:

The situation at the settlement is close to a colonial one. Government policy, as I understand it, is that white Australians working here should be engaged in decolonising the institutions to which they are connected. That is, they should be engaged in handing over authority and in giving advice in the areas where their advice is sought.

Not in copping out or interfering.

I regret that I can find little of a positive nature to write about Small settlement and its school in the seventies. There have been good teachers, good ideas and programs, but no direction. The road back from alcohol and alienation can only be taken if the people are permitted to exercise executive power. To stop people from drinking by regulation, particularly when initiated and enforced by Europeans, is no solution. Rather, the crux of the matter is

assisting people in what is a desperate search for a reason for living. The school's role in the community should be viewed from this perspective. I hope that the conclusions to this paper will help to indicate some of the ways by which the school could come to grips with this existential problem. At the same time, I have tried to place some of the themes which have been left floating in this discussion, into wider contexts.

1. The Changes of 1973 in Perspective

The division of the history of the school into three periods, the fifties, sixties and seventies, is somewhat arbitrary. The year 1960 represents a clear demarcation because it is the year John Smith left the settlement. However, 1970 is harder to justify. Both proponents and detractors of the post-Welfare school system look back to 1973 as the watershed. Critics are fond of stating, for example, that high staff turnovers are a direct result of the 1973 legislation and the orientation of teachers away from the Welfare ethos of service. Yet, if we look at the records for Small settlement school, the turnover since 1973, although high, has been only marginally higher than the turnover pre-1973. In June 1970, the Superintendent felt obliged to report, "there will have been ten changes of teachers for the infants class over the fantastically short period of five months, which works out at an average of one teacher for every two weeks." As early as 1967, the Director himself noted "the thoughtless action of some teachers resigning in the middle of the year."

My point is that changes in the approach of the teaching service, from a welfare to a professional, specialist, careerist orientation, had taken place in the minds of many teachers and administrators in the years before such changes were sanctioned in legislation. This new orientation is implicit in statements made by teachers and their unions in the late sixties; the contemporaneous increase in emphasis on qualifications; high staff turnovers; and subtle diminutions of the assessment roles of the inspectors. There is no doubt that the terms of service of white people working on settlements changed radically in 1973. Consider factors such as the fragmentation of bureaucratic authority mentioned previously and the enlarged roles of school principals. However, what have these changes meant to the black clients?

Take, for another example, the question of the inclusion of aspects of traditional culture in the school program: the misconceptions which characterised the approach in the sixties continue

today. "Now come on, do the crocodile dance again, but lift your arms up higher this time." So says the white teacher rehearsing children for the next important visitor. Bear in mind that this is late seventies, not early sixties. And the visitor, seeing the smiling faces, probably interprets the show as an indication of a positive approach to Aboriginal culture. Meanwhile the dances, removed from their spiritual contexts, become secularised. Their performance, in the school yard or the graveyard, has taken on the debased function of tourist attraction. Unpalatable as it might be, the white visitor observing the smiling faces of the children, would be well advised to consider what Fanon had in mind when he wrote about black skins and white masks.

The similarity between pre-1973 and post-1973 is that under both systems the local people are not consulted. What difference is it to them if teachers are accountable to a department through inspectors and superintendents, or to a school principal and some so-called 'peers'? Many of the older teachers and administrators hearken back to the golden days before 1973: comments such as, "we let the people down" and "we lost confidence and they lost confidence in us" are ubiquitous. No doubt, there is more than an element of truth in these laments. However, as I have tried to argue, the confidence of the teachers under the Welfare system was often misplaced and therefore the residents of Small settlement had begun to lose confidence in the efficacy of the school before the modernisation. This process of loss of confidence, a facet of alienation, took place largely independently of the 1973 changes and therefore there is a case for viewing this history as a trilogy.

2. Putting Back the Clock

By contrast to the early days, new teachers coming into Aboriginal settlements from the mid-seventies have been faced with a plethora of reading schemes and other educational material. There is often too much to choose from, too many boxes of tricks churned out by the cultural deprivation industries of Europe and America, emphasising white western values and compensatory approaches. Although there is much more material there is, in a sense, less for the new teacher to fall back on, and thus continuity suffers. Many of those who maintain that 1973 marked the real beginning of a decline in standards and enthusiasm favour a return to the days of the stick and chalk and the prescriptive syllabus. John Smith's name is often mentioned in terms of a successful authoritarian rote-teaching approach. Tate's oral English course, which was something like the centrepiece of the Welfare syllabus, is also often cited:

in 1964, Miss Tate wrote that the only effective means of teaching spoken English to Aboriginal students was by "practice to the point of overlearning." Although this remark pertained to a specific area, I think it would be fair to comment that the techniques of rote-learning and repetition were regarded as having particular applicability to Aboriginal education in general. A strong lobby remains for the re-implementation of such an approach.

Stephen Harris has written about the vital importance of considering Aboriginal learning contexts. Harris notes, in reference to Milngimbi -

- i) the very limited function of verbal instruction in traditional learning situations, being the greatest single contrast with the methodology of Western education;
- ii) the relatively greater importance 'yolngu' (Aboriginal) society places on learning through observation, non-verbal imitation and trial and error;
- iii) the strictly limited extent to which rote learning is a traditional learning mode.

In the light of these findings which, I suggest, have considerable standing in a wider context than Milngimbi, it would be difficult to justify re-introducing syllabuses emphasising rote-learning and verbal instruction. No doubt, as Harris and numerous teachers over the years have noted, Aboriginal children have a high tolerance for repetition. But is it educationally sound to base teaching methods upon that which children are known to be able to tolerate.

Regarding John Smith, I have argued that his success was due to personal qualities and to the value his students and their parents placed on their relationship with him, rather than to his old-fashioned teaching style. John was conspicuous by the manner in which he displayed where his loyalties and interests lay, and by the way he maintained his independence of white establishments. Except in these important respects, I think it would be a mistake for teachers to try to emulate him today. Bringing back corporal punishment, for example, would be totally at variance with the wishes of the parents. Turning the clock back doesn't work. There is, however, an increasing amount of locally produced, Aboriginal-oriented, culturally relevant material being made available by the Education Department. Surely this provides the basis of a positive alternative

to the turning back the clock approach. One can only hope that some of this new material is being used.

3. The Problem of Post-primary Education

One of John Smith's students was probably the first Northern Territory-educated Aboriginal to attend a government high school. Small settlement thus has a long history of sending off adolescents to be educated for jobs that don't exist back home. The Education Department can claim, with some justification, that it has played its part in alleviating this Territory-wide problem by promoting teacher training. The Department is currently again making noises about 'vocational training' for settlement people. Unfortunately, vocational training and lack of jobs are only aspects of a larger issue, the destruction of the traditional economies and the failure to get productive, self-generating economies going in their stead. However much we may try with our compartmentalised minds, the 'solving' of the smaller problems such as vocational training, out of this context, is no solution at all.

Generally, the school has taken the line that the local economy is not its problem. The recent development of the system of sending away children to boarding schools in Queensland has already been mentioned in terms of lack of accountability. It should equally be viewed in the context of how these 'individuals' will fit into the economy (call it 'life') when they return from their studies.

The answer to that question, taking past experience into consideration, is that they are likely to fit in very badly indeed. The history of sending students away from settlements to southern boarding schools has been one of the saddest of the appendices to the Northern Territory education story. Their mentors have egged the students on vicariously with promises of wealth and power and prestige, and the students have returned, the authority of their new science unacclaimed and their so-called 'leadership qualities' unrecognised by the communities of their origin. As I understand it, they have become deeply disturbed people.

Now, these words may sound hard and there may be exceptions to the above pattern. However, the question surely arises as to whether this development can be justified on any grounds. Those who introduced it claim it is in accord with the wishes of the parents who are dissatisfied with the alternatives offered. This may be the case but such a justification begs more than it answers.

There are other facets to post-primary education. The school has recently been under some pressure to start programs in 'functional' subjects, in response to the needs of unemployed or under-employed adolescents and others. The school has generally resisted making moves in this direction. The Y.M.C.A. recreation officer is one of the people involved independently in this area. He has the advantage of being able to respond to stated community needs with immediacy without having to negotiate red tape. However, the sort of contribution he can make is constricted by other factors, particularly the janitorial status he holds in the local education establishment. He is actively discouraged from tackling anything serious like 'education' because his role has been tightly defined for him solely in terms of recreation, that is, beer and skittles.

There appears to be the scope, the demand and the manpower for the education establishment at the settlement to move into the field of secondary-cum-vocational training. To be effective, as is pointed out in the following sections, post-primary programs would have to be responsive to the requirements of a co-ordinated economic plan. Under the present administrative structure, the forces of inertia make the possibility of such developments highly remote. However, if the school fails to pursue such a direction through the authority of the local community, then post-primary education must continue to be largely an alienating force. The children currently schooling in Queensland will have little reason to return to live at Small settlement. Or is that the plan?

4. The Problem of Alienation

The concept of alienation is probably not the ideal one for viewing the situation at Small settlement. However, it could put the predicament of some settlements into a surrealist sort of framework so rarely touched upon by teachers and educational bureaucrats in their waking hours. In this context - a context of powerlessness, perceptions of impotence, feelings of being foreign in one's own land, of cynicism and institutionalised dependence - particular problems and events in the school take on new meanings. Alienation may predispose us to greater consciousness of the double edge to cynicism and oppression described by Freire: the oppressor is also oppressed, the social engineers are themselves victims. Consider the drinking patterns of Europeans working on Northern Territory settlements; consider the continual demands of these same people for the establishment of police stations at places like Small settlement: to protect whom from whom?

The concept of alienation may also predispose us to think in terms of means and ends. The confusion of ends with means is the central issue of several works on the subject of alienation. Whereas Europeans tended to view the settlement schools in the early days as means, means to the end of, say, assimilation, there is mounting evidence to suggest that Aborigines have viewed the schools and the relationships they established with teachers as 'ends' in themselves. The white establishment which endorses the sending away of secondary-age students regards this practice as a means towards certain ends, murky and questionable though they may sometimes be. My impression is that the parents and guardians who agree to have their children sent away may regard the whole business as an end in itself, something along the lines of 'free travel'. Whether or not such illustrations of ends-means confusion fit into any definition of alienation - and I would be doubtful if they do - the concept at least causes us to move off laterally into these grey areas. That may be the most enlightening thing we can do.

5. The Economy

"It can be confidently said that the fortunes of Small settlement have fluctuated with the fortunes of the sawmill." This opinion, so ironical in retrospect, comes from a Welfare Report dating from the mid-sixties. Ultimately, the sawmill was handed over to D.A.A. and left to rot. Meanwhile, the Forestry Department pats itself on the back about the valuable asset, low-grade timber, it will one day leave behind for the local people. One wonders if a replacement sawmill fits into the picture. Or is that a D.A.A. problem?

Bill Brown, the officer-in-charge of forestry in the Small settlement region for many years before his Department moved him along in 1978, realised the potential of the sawmill. He offered to remove the whole structure, on his own volition, to the main forestry centre. As I understand it, he was also able to count on considerable support from the communities. Such inputs, of course, went for nothing in the face of bureaucratic inertia and the sawmill no longer exists.

Brown's conception of forestry was a community-oriented one. A plantation was also a paddock. Low-cost, low-technology power and water production were utilised. The villages were kinship-clusters rather than one or two centralised 'institutions'. Vegetable, animal and timber produce were marketed along co-operative and traditional lines. Thus the huge hinterland becomes re-populated. People are given the opportunity to free themselves from the predicament of

institutionalised dependency they find themselves in at places such as Small settlement. An economy is established and a reason for living is provided. The two things, as Brown continually pointed out, are not divisible.

The above represents only part of Brown's vision. However, for all the support he received from the various departments, he may as well have been living in Antarctica. After eight years at Small settlement, cynicism about the white man's government caught up with him. Every time he moved, his superiors offered him another draught of hemlock. His story, although hardly unique, surely has implications for the school. The days when the teachers, and more particularly their employer, could feel justified in maintaining their job was teaching children the three R's, have gone. There are alternatives to the present system of imparting skills for which there is no home market and imparting Western values and thirsts that can be quenched locally only with the palliative of alcohol.

One of these alternatives is for the school to orient itself to the task of imparting locally relevant skills while at the same time deglamourising the crass and ephemeral middle-class consumer values which currently pass for western culture at Small settlement. This is easier said than done, but my impression is that the school is quite consciously moving in the opposite direction. A radical turn-around won't occur unless the school embraces the role of an agent in a co-ordinated attempt to establish a viable local economy. And, of course, this cannot happen either while the school and its teachers remain accountable to externally-imposed standards and criteria.

6. Accountability

The absence, on the part of the white administrative superstructure at Small settlement, of the will to attempt to deal with the resounding problems of the economy and of accountability has been the main theme of this paper. There are, no doubt, a variety of fascinating reasons for the continuing parochial and colonial characteristics of the administration of the different agencies. In this respect, what the Karmel Commission (1973) had to say about administrative decentralisation should be required reading as should what administration theorists such as Skilbeck describe as a conflict between a dominant theory of inevitably increasing role differentiation and another trend, one that hasn't reached Small settlement yet, towards holistic, strategic planning.

These considerations, however, are peripheral to our main concern. As Michel Crozier has suggested, the problems of bureaucratic phenomena are essentially problems of power. For the Aborigines of Small settlement, the problem is lack of power. As far as the administration of the school is concerned, the local community is utterly impotent. It is not their school, it doesn't belong to the people and is not accountable to them. I think it should be.

In some cross-cultural situations in other lands, teachers are employed directly by local communities. By the terms of contract, these communities are able to protect their customs and religious institutions. They maintain the power to make directives to teachers concerning, for example, what is to be taught, when, where, to whom. They exercise the power to hire and fire teachers, although teachers retain their normal legal rights.

I believe there is ample evidence to suggest that the school at Small settlement is ripe for a move in such a direction. When I consider the respect which the local community holds for the loners, the anti-establishment, non-organisation men like John Smith and Bill Brown, my belief is strengthened.

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