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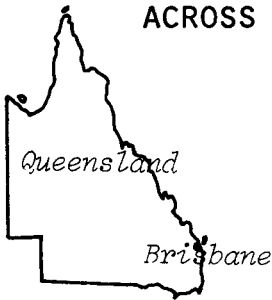
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ACROSS AUSTRALIA.....

FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER

KEEPING THE TEACHER HAPPY



* M. Christie
Brisbane

In his book *How Children Fail*, John Holt talks about the strategies children have for coping with school. The strategies of most children, says Holt,

have been consistently self-centred, protective and aimed above all else at avoiding trouble, embarrassment, punishment, disapproval or loss of status. This is particularly true of the ones who have had a tough time in school. When they get a problem, I can read the thoughts on their faces. I can almost hear them, 'Am I going to get this right? Probably not. What'll happen to me when I get it wrong? Will the teacher get mad? Will the other kids laugh at me?'

I didn't really get to thinking much about children's strategies until I had stopped teaching and gone into a few classes to observe as a fly on the wall. Most of what went on in the classroom went completely unnoticed by the teacher. And what the teacher did notice, she seemed often to misunderstand. The children had an amazing variety of strategies which really had the teacher fooled. Some of them had fooled me too, for the years I had been teaching. I thought that if I were to point out some of the strategies which I saw, teachers may begin to look more carefully at their own and their children's behaviour.

Keep Guessing: If you don't know the answer, it's better to keep guessing than to stop and think. The teacher wants the lesson to keep moving. If you stop for a moment, he may think you're not concentrating. Anyway, teachers don't seem to mind you guessing - they think it means that you're active and interested - and when you come up with a right answer they're pleased because they can move on to the next part of the lesson.

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Stay on a Winning Number: If you happen to give a right answer, stick with it. If it's been right before, it will be right again. This is a good strategy if you don't know what the teacher is talking about. Don't confess that you don't understand. This will make the teacher frustrated and draw out the lesson. It will make the whole thing unnecessarily complex and time-consuming, and you run the risk of making the teacher cross. If you've got a winner, stay with it. It'll win again sooner or later.

Mumble: If you think you know the answer, mumble it. When the teacher asks a question, his brain is tuned to receive the right answer, so by mumbling you're covering yourself quite well. If you're right, good. If you're wrong, the teacher might think that you're right. He really wants you to be right because it will mean that he's teaching well and he can move on.

Take a Stab: This is a good one, because if you're good at it, it will save you and the teacher a lot of trouble. If you're given a problem, say the first answer that comes into your head. If it's a maths problem, try adding first. Add all the numbers together and the chances are you'll be right. If you're reading a difficult word, use the initial letter as a cue, take an educated guess and carry on. You will know that you're wrong if the teacher stops you. Don't stop to think about it or the teacher will get jumpy.

Split-second Timing: This is an easy one to master and very useful. If you are reading with a group, listen carefully to a good reader and echo what she is saying almost exactly as she says it. If you are good at this you'll be able to fool almost anyone and never have to read a word. If you don't know an answer, put your hand up a split second after the teacher has chosen someone.

Hedge Your Bets: Learn to cover yourself when called upon to answer a question. Say, "I think it might be 24 or maybe 30," or "I think it might be a triangle...or maybe a square or oblong." If you're not quite sure, present your teacher with a small selection of possible answers. You'll be surprised how often he'll choose the correct one and then tell you you're right.

Look Interested: Remember to put your hand up often. The teacher likes it. There's no need to worry about being called upon. Usually she doesn't call on quiet children with their hands up. She calls on the noisy ones who are half out of their seats waving their arms, or she chooses those who are looking inside their desks or chatting and don't have their hands up at all. If you do get called upon, smile sweetly and say "I've forgotten." It won't matter.

Wait for an Easier Question: If the teacher asks you a difficult question, don't think about it too hard. She knows that if she wants to be a good teacher, she must break the problems up into small manageable pieces. So just sit quietly and wait until she feeds you something which is dead easy.

I suppose it's to be expected that children should develop strategies for dealing with teachers. Teachers have strategies for dealing with principals and I suppose principals have their strategies and so on. The worrying thing is that children resort to the use of their strategies so much, and that the teachers notice so little. And every time that happens, communication breaks down.

Holt suggests that children resort to strategies because they are afraid - afraid of trouble, embarrassment, punishment, disapproval or loss of status. He says:

A problem is a picture with a piece missing; the answer is the missing piece. The children who take time to see and feel and grip the problem soon find that the answer is there. The ones who get into trouble are the ones who see a problem as an order to start running at top speed from a given starting point, in an unknown direction, to an unknown destination. They dash after the answer before they have considered the problem.

It may be that many children use these strategies because they are frightened. I am happy to say that in my observations of classrooms I very seldom saw children who seemed frightened. But I suspect that many Aboriginal children were using these strategies because they really didn't know what else to do. Many of them honestly think that wild guessing is the name of the game. It is hard for us white teachers to understand this. Why do these children understand so much about the everyday world outside and then become hopelessly lost as soon as they walk into a classroom?

The answer is quite simple. As white teachers we fail to realise that the home and the school are two completely different worlds. Even if an Aboriginal child can cope with the social world of the school, he is mystified by the academic world. He sees a teacher. The teacher for some reason keeps asking questions, even though she already knows the answer. Adults at home don't do this unless they are telling jokes or trying to trick us. Is that what the teacher is doing? The questions she asks are not about the real world but about an imaginary world of numbers and writing not seen at home. "If seven

boys have four oranges each, how many oranges are there altogether?" Which boys? Where are the oranges?

And as if that weren't bad enough, the teachers seem to be quite free to make up the problems, but they are not free to make up the answers. The business of getting answers is a whole different game from getting questions. The teacher's questions are imaginary, but imaginary answers are unacceptable.

With Aboriginal children the problem is made still worse because they are not used to so much language being bandied around. White people talk so much they can hardly think without talking. Aboriginal children have many different ways of thinking and finding out, but very often talking and answering questions is not one of them.

No wonder little children are driven to develop their own magical strategies for coming up with answers or for keeping the teacher happy. So far as the child is concerned his games are of the same nature as the teacher's. Every time the teacher asks one of her incomprehensible questions, the child is driven to pull one of his strategies out of the bag and try it. I could tell, while observing classes in action, that many children knew exactly what strategies they were employing and why. Some of them even looked a little guilty about it. The saddest thing was to see the children who started to work on a problem, thinking about it and working quietly, who then took a wild stab when the teacher called on them.

I said earlier that teachers didn't seem to notice what was going on. When I look back on my own teaching experience, I acknowledge with shame that I often did sense that the children were just guessing or playing games, but didn't do anything about it. Why not? Often I felt as though I had exhausted my repertoire of teaching strategies. I had tried everything to make the task meaningful and to encourage the children to think carefully about what they were doing. And still they stabbed, mumbled and hedged their bets. It was so much easier to wait for a right answer and move on when I got it. But of course this was really counterproductive. Whenever I did this the children were guaranteed not to learn. All they were learning was that school is mysterious and irrelevant. Holt says, rather strongly, that

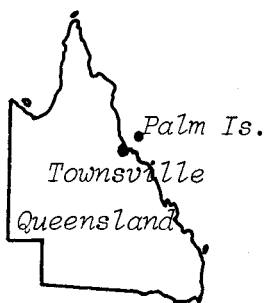
we could well afford to throw out most of what we teach in school because the children throw it out anyway.

I suspected that if I discarded the things that the children didn't see the point of, or didn't understand, everything might well be thrown out, including myself.

So I am not advocating that we throw out everything and keep only that which the children find interesting, relevant and able to be understood. We can't do that, simply because we don't know enough about what is relevant and possible for Aboriginal children. That is, or at least should be, one of the major thrusts of research into Aboriginal education. And really, it's teachers in the classroom that are doing this research. Every so often you come across a teacher who is saying to himself, "Why am I doing this?"..."Is this really what the children want or need?"..."Do they really see the connection between this and what goes on at home?" These teachers are the first to admit that their problems of content and communication are enormous, but they know that they've got problems and they are working on them. Their classrooms are alive with interest and discussion. If more teachers could look critically at what they are doing and how the children are responding, they would be able to develop ways of bringing first themselves and then their children down to earth.

Reference

Holt, J., 1969: *How Children Fail*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth.



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PALM ISLAND STUDENTS IN TOWNVILLE

*S.Baartz

I teach at three Catholic secondary schools in Townsville. My students are Aboriginal and mostly from the Palm Island community. The breakdown of the schools is:- St Margaret Mary's College, 8 girls; Ignatius Park College, 2 boys; Ryan Community School, 7 boys, 2 girls.

The students are withdrawn for English and maths, and we have introduced an extra area which we call subject help. This can cover

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