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SCHOOLS DO MAKE A DIFFERENCE, BUT...!

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Professor Watts' (1980) review article of *Fifteen Thousand Hours: Secondary Schools and Their Effects on Children* was a welcome, optimistic view of the positive effect schools can have on pupils. It was particularly welcome for the optimistic view that teachers and schools can achieve something in the area of Aboriginal education. Watts reviewed this book against the background reality that many teachers of Aborigines

> come to feel that there is little the schools can do to help Aboriginal children learn; that the problems are so great that until there is a considerable improvement in the socio-cultural and socio-economic conditions of Aboriginal people, particularly in the urban and rural areas where the people do not follow a tradition-oriented life, there is little the schools can do.
>
> (Watts, 1980:3)

While accepting Watts' view, I will argue that an overly optimistic view of the possibilities of schooling for Aboriginal children can be just as debilitating as the pessimistic view that broader structural inequalities such as poverty, poor housing, poor health have to be redressed before teachers and schools can achieve anything. To this extent it will be argued that teachers need to be positive about what they and schools can achieve. Teachers need to be aware of the specific ways in which schools can make a difference. *15,000 Hours...* outlines some of these.

As well, teachers of Aboriginal children will need to be aware of the ways in which schools can make a difference, specifically for Aboriginal children. The latter may be best expressed in terms of teachers of Aborigines being aware of the ways in which schools may inhibit the achievement of positive educational outcomes for Aboriginal children. Teachers of Aboriginal children, for example, must ensure that they are not involved in 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Thus I am arguing that the teacher must be

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aware of the specific ways schools might make a difference at each of these two levels. As well, given that the school is situated in the broader society which 'allows' certain conditions of life to exist for Aborigines - poverty, poor health, poor housing, massive unemployment, rampant prejudice - and that such factors are important correlates of educational failure, any teacher committed to providing 'real education' and 'real opportunities' for Aboriginal children should surely be committed as a human being to bringing about structural changes in the living conditions of Aboriginal people.

Thus I am arguing that the individual as a teacher must be involved in classroom practices which ensure effective education for Aboriginal children, but as well, the individual as a caring human being must be involved in pressures for broader social change. More bluntly, I am saying that teachers as individuals must be involved in the politics of Aboriginal affairs. Not to do so would be an act of 'bad faith' (Sartre, 1969: Chapter 2).

Just as individual pathology models of Aboriginal educational failure deny the importance of social and situational factors (and often blind individuals to them) (McConnochie and Whitelaw, 1976: Bucknall, 1976), so 'education-bound' solutions deny the extent to which schools are socially determined institutions which reproduce and legitimate social inequality. It is well to keep in mind that 'education cannot compensate for society' (Bernstein, 1970).

Thus I am arguing that teachers should be involved at two levels to bring about change - within and without the education system. My call for the involvement of teachers of Aboriginal children at both levels follows Apple (1977), who has argued that the task of the educators committed to change is twofold. Firstly, his/her task is

> to engage in the rigorous historical, analytic and empirical scholarship necessary to show how many of the tools, categories, perspectives and ideologies of education provide unquestioned support

for the sociopolitical framework within which they operate. This is doubly important for teachers of Aboriginal children. Harris (1978:22) also supports this view. He says that:

> It is especially important that all who are in any way involved in the education of Aboriginal children gain an insight into the Aboriginal experience which has moulded present day attitudes to authority, schools and white society generally.

Secondly, Apple argues, the educator's task is to be involved in 'concrete and practical areas of action' within and without the education system. True commitment to the Aboriginal people requires commitment to transforming the reality by which they are oppressed (Freire, 1974).

Watts (1980), drawing on the *15,000 Hours...* study, has outlined some ways in which aspects of the school as a social institution relate specifically to pupil attendance, pupil behaviour, examination success and delinquency. Fitzgerald (1976) in *Poverty and Education in Australia* (The Fifth Main Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Poverty) outlines 'extrinsic' and 'intrinsic' contributors to the educational failure of Aboriginal children. Something will be said briefly at this point about the 'intrinsic' contributors ("more subtle reasons for the Aboriginal child's lack of 'success' at school", Fitzgerald, 1976:195), which the teacher within the school can act to negate.

Fitzgerald's first 'intrinsic' factor is self-esteem or lack of it. Such a lack is a significant factor in Aboriginal children's failure at school. Teachers must ensure that the Aboriginal child's feeling of alienation is overcome (Ingram and Randall, 1977). The first step here would appear to involve an increased emphasis on things affective rather than on cognitive development. Ingram and Randall (1977:15) argue that

> cross-cultural education must be concerned with developing in each person a sense of belonging with the whole community, while retaining individual identity.

Obviously greater self-esteem amongst Aboriginal children cannot be achieved by teacher attitudes and practices alone; even if it could, broader social changes would be required to ensure that Aboriginal children had equal opportunities outside of the school and to ensure tolerance of cultural difference. Thus another 'education-bound' solution here is the attempt to develop more positive attitudes towards Aborigines and Aboriginal culture amongst non-Aboriginal students. The latter point touches on Fitzgerald's second 'intrinsic' factor - white attitudes.

Fitzgerald's third intrinsic factor is the strengthening of a separate identity and cohesion amongst Aborigines. This positive sense of identity increases the view of schools

> as one more white institution, controlled and dominated by whites, fitting children only for a life in white society which is not in fact, open. (Fitzgerald, 1976:196)

Thus teachers must work to involve parents in the educational process to ensure relevance. Teachers must work with parents, not for them (Freire, 1972). Any opening of the school to Aboriginal culture will require broader social change in terms of the perceived functions of schooling and in terms of cultural tolerance. As well, equal opportunities for schooling are meaningless if Aborigines do not have equal opportunities for employment.

Fitzgerald then speaks of the way textbooks and children's literature have compounded the "feeling of distance between Aboriginals and whites." (1976:196). Teachers must be aware of such stereotyping and ensure that such material is not used.

Teacher expectations is another 'intrinsic' contributor to the failure of Aboriginal children at school. The ethnocentric and harmful notions of 'cultural deprivation' and 'language deprivation' contribute to the development of negative teacher expectations. Such expectations can become self-fulfilling prophecies (Rosenthal and Jacobsen, 1968). Such 'blame the victim' notions increase the impotent feeling of teachers with regard to the possibilities of schooling for Aboriginal children.

Fitzgerald mentions cultural differences as another 'intrinsic' factor in Aboriginal educational failure. The bureaucratic school, under the guise of fairness, has only to treat all pupils as the same to do an immediate disservice to those who are not of Anglo-Saxon or middle class background. The school then often treats this 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1974:110), which it does not supply, as an innate gift rather than a social byproduct of economic capital. Classification of cultural differences as deficiencies is dysfunctional for the educational success of Aboriginal children (Keddie, 1973).

Similarly, teacher attitudes towards different language forms can be a factor in Aboriginal educational success or lack of it. The fact that teachers are upwardly mobile, lower middle class (Bassett, 1971) and that this class is the most linguistically insecure (Labov, 1972:283-308) are important here. Linguistically, there is no such thing as deficient language (Labov, 1969). The problem is one of attitudes. Non-standard language forms are often overtly stigmatised in the classroom. This can occur covertly as well through the very fact that those with authority within the school structure use a language form different from that used by Aboriginal children. Language development programs such as Van Leer in Queensland attempt to help Aboriginal children who use non-standard English to

> become proficient in standard English without denigrating their own form of language, and thus be competent in both 'school talk' and 'home talk'.
> (Fitzgerald, 1976:198)

Such programs are obviously a step ahead of programs which denigrate Aboriginal English, but the need for such programs is indicative of attitudes within the broader society; at the present, to have any chance of equal job opportunities, Aboriginal children must be able to use standard English. In a truly tolerant and pluralist society this would not be necessary, given that the differences are only ones of style. If, on educational grounds, it can be argued that all children should have access to what Bernstein has called an 'elaborated code', then Berstein's latest work (1974) would suggest that more open, person-oriented classroom practices are required so that children who do not come to school with such 'linguistic capital' can acquire it at school.

Fitzgerald's final 'intrinsic' factor is 'school procedures'. After visiting many Aboriginal schools Fitzgerald states (1976:199)

> We looked in vain in many Aboriginal classrooms for manifestations of Aboriginality: photographs and posters were of white people, whom Aboriginal children are presumably expected to adopt as role models; art was exclusively of the European kind.

Fitzgerald notes that many teachers claimed they treated all children alike. If this is true, treating those who are culturally different as culturally similar is doing the culturally different a disservice. Class size may be a factor here as well. Reduction in class sizes can only be achieved through political pressures.

Appropriate school curriculum and real school/community relationships are school-based reforms which are required. However, they will only become a reality in the context of broader social change. It is the argument of this paper that the teacher as a caring human being needs to be involved in pressures for change at this broader level.

The sort of problem-posing education as outlined by Paulo Friere in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* would seem to be extremely appropriate for Aboriginal education. It cannot be denied that Aborigines are an oppressed group and that many live in a 'culture of silence'. Working with the oppressed poor in South America

Freire came to the realization that

> their ignorance and lethargy were the direct product of the whole situation of economic, social and political domination - and of the paternalism - of which they were victims. (Shaull, 1972:10)

Freire argued that the world acted upon the poor and submerged them, and as well that the education system helped perpetuate this submersion. His solution was education for critical consciousness, education which would make individuals aware of their existential situation and by such awareness allow them to operate on and in the world so as to change it. Such a form of education would seem to be appropriate for Aborigines who are the most oppressed group within Australian society. However, in line with the argument of this paper, it would seem that no state-controlled education system will support a type of education which may very well challenge the status quo. Thus education for liberation for Aborigines can only be achieved in conjunction with broader social changes.

Fitzgerald (1976:192-194) speaks of 'extrinsic' factors which inhibit the achievement of educational aims for Aboriginal children. These are poverty, poor health, inadequate housing and lack of school facilities. These are the reasons teachers often give for their feeling of impotence regarding the possibility of providing effective education for Aboriginal children. One cannot deny their existence; their existence is clear enough manifestation of the European destruction of Aboriginal society and the shameless treatment and attitudes towards Aborigines since initial European contact. However, man made the world and can thus change it. This is not to deny the difficulty of the task. Sartre's notion of 'bad faith' - man's explanation of his/her impotence in the face of socially and structurally-determined phenomena - is appropriate here. Sartre believes man's cry, that she/he is overwhelmed by the society and that as an individual cannot act to change it, is an act of 'bad faith', indeed an escape from freedom. The plea of this paper is for teachers of Aborigines as humane, caring beings to be actively involved in the broader social, political and economic contexts to push for change in the living conditions of Aboriginal people.

> Aboriginals constitute the poorest identifiable group in the community and are held in low esteem by the major society, not only because of their poverty but also because of their cultural differences and powerlessness. (Fitzgerald, 1976:192)

This is unacceptable and an indictment of affluent Australian society. Unemployment is a concomitant of poverty.

> In January 1978 half the Aboriginal workforce in Australia was unemployed. (Windschuttle, 1979:14).

Both poverty and unemployment have important implications for education. Firstly, if Connell (1974 and 1977) is correct that educational inequality is caused basically by material inequalities (Watts, 1976 found that Aboriginal parents did have high educational and vocational aspirations for their children), then no school based reform alone can achieve the desired result. Unemployment amongst Aborigines relates to questions of 'schooling for what?' Who could be motivated to achieve when there is nothing 'at the end of the line' anyway?

Poor health amongst both urban and rural Aborigines is another concomitant of poverty. Fitzgerald (1976:193) drawing upon Moodie, sums up the health situation of Aborigines so:

> ...if the Aboriginal born in traditional areas survives to school age - during middle and late childhood he will remain below optimal health due to anaemia, worm infestations, recurrent infections, and sub-optimal nutrition and risks permanent disability from deafness or severe injury.

Similarly, the health situation of urban Aboriginal children is summarised. Such children are

> ...heavily burdened with infections and parasitic diseases, growth retardation and nutritional deficiencies, anaemia, malabsorption syndromes, acute and chronic diarrhoeas and respiratory illnesses, chronic middle ear diseases and deafness. (Fitzgerald, 1976:193)

In the light of this any talk of 'cultural deprivation' is absurd. Any teacher aware of this situation must be committed to changing it.

As well, poor housing must be eradicated and new housing provided, in consultation with Aboriginal people.

All of these 'extrinsic' factors seem to stem from the poor economic situation of the Aboriginal population - from the poverty of Aborigines.

> Education cannot serve as a panacea for poverty. The provision of new or extended educational services for members of disadvantaged minorities should accompany, and not be seen as a substitute for, a redistribution of wealth in our society.
> (Fitzgerald, 1976:231)

This is the crux of the matter. It may very well be that real (meaningful) Land Rights for Aborigines could provide the base for an improvement in the economic situation of all Aboriginal people.

> If Aborigines (of the area) are given rights to (that) land and what is under it, then they can control the mining development, possibly forbid it altogether, but certainly negotiate hard for royalties.
>
> (Forsyth & Tiranti, 1980:110)

Royalties on the bauxite of Cape York Peninsula and Gove Peninsula, perhaps the uranium of the Northern Territory, and the diamonds of Oombulgurri in Western Australia, plus compensation for land already appropriated, would surely provide a massive impetus towards the improved economic standing of the Aboriginal people; improved economic circumstances would seem to be at the crux of improved educational achievement of Aboriginal children. Teachers as caring human beings should support the struggle for Aboriginal Land Rights in terms of respect for Aboriginal people, but also in terms of the possibility of improving the economic standing of Aborigines.

Throughout this paper it has been argued that teachers must be optimistic about the possibilities of schooling for Aboriginal children. They must seek specific practices which can make a difference. They must reject any school practices which inhibit the achievement of positive educational outcomes for Aboriginal children. However, school-based change alone is not enough. Optimism about the possibilities of schooling for Aboriginal children without broader social changes would be as debilitating as a totally pessimistic view about the possibilities of schooling. I believe that teachers should be involved in the broader struggle for Aboriginal rights so that they, like all Australians, can live in a state of decency and dignity. To do otherwise would be an act of 'bad faith'.

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