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DEVELOPING A POSITIVE TEACHER/CHILD RELATIONSHIP IN AN ABORIGINAL TEACHING SITUATION

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I doubt that anyone would disagree with the need to establish a positive teacher/child relationship in any classroom situation. The fact is that most young children are expectant of this happening and are conditioned by their home environment and experience to relate to the school and the teacher. There is no doubt that this attitude tempers any sense of strangeness and assists in the development of a feeling of security so necessary to a successful school experience. Many of the steps taken to foster a positive relationship between teacher and pupils occur spontaneously and as a result of mutual interaction, on the basis of a common cultural background. In the case of Aboriginal children in a class situation, this common cultural background cannot be presumed to exist. Many aspects of the Aboriginal culture are vastly different from the European one, not the least of the differences being that the very concept of the school institution does not belong to the Aboriginal culture.

Some understanding of the basic cultural differences is necessary to provide for the building up of a feeling of mutual trust and ease. Suggestions, hopefully of a practical nature, are offered to facilitate this most important aspect of a class teacher's responsibilities, for without it, I am convinced little meaningful learning will occur.

1. Make time and opportunities available for the children to study the teacher. Playground duty is one such time where they can observe in an unthreatened situation, can tag along silently or ask questions. Usually the questions relate to the teacher's home, birthplace, family, personal likes and dislikes and come at the stage after he/she has achieved initial acceptance. Questions like these are more than to satisfy natural curiosity. They are necessary to the placement of each person within the children's experience - very much a part of the Aboriginal way. When one considers the personal nature of instruction in the Aboriginal 'education' system, and the importance of the intricate interpersonal relationships with their implied responsibilities and taboos in all aspects of their traditional life, one can better understand the significance of this need to 'know' the

teacher. As a teacher, one needs to learn the value of silence in this process, to be unafraid of silence and able to use it to advantage in promoting this understanding. During the early days of my appointment to Roebourne school, I made it a practice to walk home after school with the children. At first they kept a discreet distance, and apart from a chorus of giggles, it was a silent journey. It wasn't too long before they were brave enough to walk with me, but little more conversation was carried on than "Goodbye" at the gate. In due time, the home walk (about a kilometre) wasn't long enough to complete the saying of all that was to be said. I considered it extremely valuable contact time and well worth the ten minutes exposure to the heat of the afternoon. One must be ready at all times to accept an invitation or opportunity to interact with the children, but such situations cannot be contrived or forced, as Aboriginal children are sensitive to posed behaviour and the response is likely to be negative.

2. The significance of body language in the Aboriginal communication system cannot be overlooked. A teacher can unknowingly convey negative attitudes to the children by means of gesture or facial expression. Likewise, positive messages can be communicated non-verbally, which is often a more acceptable way than verbally. Small children, particularly, respond to the (positive!) use of touch. Textures of skin, hair, clothing - especially pantihose! - seem to hold particular fascination for them, and one soon becomes accustomed to the feel of small fingers on one's legs, especially during story-telling sessions. They love to hold your hand whilst on out-door excursions, or to be cuddled while reading orally or delivering news. This seems to add to their feeling of security, or of being accepted. As they get older, it is important that one realizes the increasing influence of the male/female barriers which operate and to be careful not to offend their sense of modesty, but usually a hand on the shoulder is still acceptable and appreciated. The important thing is to let them take the lead in such matters and to respond accordingly.

3. Response in an out-of-school situation, when teacher meets child in the community, can also play a significant part in the development of positive relationships. With the usual comparatively short-term appointments of teachers in country towns, it often happens that there is little opportunity for interaction with the Aboriginal sector of the local community. They are often reluctant to visit the school or to participate actively in the usual school/parent scene. The value of even casual contact between parents and teachers to the progress of a child at school, cannot be over-estimated. Adults

usually appreciate a teacher's effort to introduce himself by name and just to mention that he/she is the child's teacher. This can happen in the local store, at the sports oval, in the street; just a few quiet words and a handshake is enough. As mentioned before, Aboriginal people don't usually practise the art of conversation as we know it, but they are more likely to be co-operative in their children's school experience if they are aware that their child's teacher is a person who has an interest in their child,as a person, and who acknowledges him/her as part of a family. With regard to the child, again there is no need to make a laboured situation out of it - a smile, a wave, a "Hi -" (with name) is sufficient to say they are accepted by you.

5. It is interesting to note the frequency with which Aboriginal people refer to the quality of respect in relationships particularly with non-Aboriginal people. It is something we take for granted, but sadly, is often too clearly lacking in many relationships. How, as a teacher, does one show respect to one's pupils? The following suggestions are offered :

a) Listen to them attentively and respond with interest or concern;

b) use an acceptable pitch and tone of voice when talking to them: the approach should be natural rather than forced: 'talking down' to them is unnecessary and off-putting;

c) refrain from talking about them, their problems and their families within their hearing;

d) observe the accepted common courtesies of conversation and interaction, and make this part of classroom training and practice generally.

6. Put the children in the position of the teacher sometimes. In the area of language for instance, it is interesting to learn even isolated words from the prevailing dialect and the children love to teach. They show surprising patience in the way they will repeat the words over for one to achieve the precisely correct pronunciation. They enjoy seeing the teacher record these words for future reference in a notebook or class chart. In matters relating to the environment also, these children are usually the experts and can be encouraged to teach or to lead the others.

7. Another valuable asset to the development of sound teacher/pupil relationships is a sense of humour. An ability to laugh with the children, who have a keen sense of the ridiculous, becomes a most useful tool when shared. Any hint of sarcasm, needless to say, should be avoided at any cost, and the children themselves often have to learn the difference between laughing with and laughing at others. As they hate to be teased this is one subject that has particular relevance.

8. With the difference in culture and language between teacher and pupils and the strangeness of the school situation, many opportunities exist for misunderstandings to occur within the classroom. It is so important that, as a teacher, one does not take for granted an understanding of even the most basic of procedures and activities in any aspect of class or school. Most of these should be taught patiently step by step, by means of example, repetition, role playing, encouragement. Such things as using school facilities (toilet, drinking fountains, lockers, play equipment) packing away materials correctly, 'ruling-up' work-pads or sheets, instructions for specific learning aids and games, carrying messages to other staff members etc. One must be sure that children understand verbal instructions. One experience of mine illustrates this point. A very conscientious little girl in my Year 2/3 class participating in a writing lesson, was writing on a single sheet of paper in contact with the 'textured' desk top. As I passed her I said, "Lean on something, Sharon." No reaction whatsoever. Next time I passed I repeated the instruction. Still no apparent reaction. Suddenly I realized her elbow was on the desk, her chin in her hand and her arm was white with the effort she was making to 'lean', elbow almost boring through the desk top. Easy to see how misunderstandings occur.

Finally, a word of warning. Being warm and positive does not include being 'soft'. Bearing in mind that this situation of adult authority, discipline and direction is usually a new one to the children, the teacher should choose strategies which relate to their experience, ensure that each task is within the child's ability, and then show them he/she expects it to be completed. During this initial training, supervision and assistance will almost certainly be necessary to achieve the desired results. Aboriginal children are most certainly capable of high standards of presentation and neatness and are likely to conform to the levels expected of them. The trap is to set these levels at a standard below their abilities. With experience, one is able to identify more easily and accurately levels of ability in individual children, and to set realistic standards of expectation for them.

In a sense, this discussion 'wheel' has turned full circle and we are back to the crucial question - the need to consistently develop positive relationships between teacher and pupils in the classroom. From this basis, the other matters will fall into place.

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