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STARTING WHERE THEY ARE: RETHINKING ABORIGINAL EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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Bilingual education programs are being developed in some remote Aboriginal communities that have retained their own languages and a high degree of traditional orientation. As bilingual education in the Northern Territory is today beginning really to mean bilingual/bicultural education, this means that Aboriginal teachers are expected to act in different ways from when they worked as Teacher "Aides" and assisted in programs that were solely based on the non-Aboriginal culture. It is also a new situation for many non-Aboriginal teachers who, particularly in the Early Childhood area, have been trained to work with small children and now find that their most significant activity is the interaction they have with adult Aboriginal teachers as they help these teachers work with children. This paper outlines an approach that assists teachers develop more meaningful early childhood programs for Aboriginal children, and in addition helps teachers function more effectively in their new roles.

1. BILINGUAL EDUCATION AND COGNITIVE GROWTH

In the past we have often thought that Aboriginal children only had to learn English to gain an education - but that is only partly true. Aboriginal people who speak a language that is spoken by only a few hundred or maybe at most a thousand people, *do* need to learn English to communicate with people outside their immediate tribal groups and to learn many of the things they will need to know to cope with life today and in the future. However, the other part of the picture is that education is more than information: it is much more concerned with 'thinking' and with what people do with what they know. For children who are speakers of minority languages who will ultimately be bilingual, the role of the mother tongue in achieving full cognitive development is now seen to be of vital importance. Cummins (1979, p.234) quotes a UNESCO report of a study of Finnish migrant children who were educated in Sweden. The researchers concluded that

the migrant children whose mother tongue stopped
developing before the abstract thinking phase was

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achieved thus usually remained on the lower level of educational capacity than they would originally have been able to achieve.

Other evidence also leads Cummins (1979, p.232) to say, "the findings of several research studies suggest that maintenance of L1 (first language) skills can lead to cognitive benefits for minority language children".

However, the enrichment and development of the mother tongue are not only important for cognitive development but have a vital role to play in the acquisition of a second language. Cumming (1979, p.232) concludes a study of available research by stating, "it is clear that in minority language situations a prerequisite for attaining a higher threshold of bilingual competence is maintenance of L1 skills." (Here "bilingual competence" implies optimum growth in English). There is also evidence cited by Toukomaa and Skutnabb-Kangas (1977, p.28) to suggest that when children find themselves in a foreign language learning situation "the development of a skill in the mother tongue will slow down or even cease, leaving the child without a basis for learning the second language well enough to attain the threshold level in it." It would seem that if we are concerned that Aboriginal children develop real competency in English when they are older, great emphasis must be placed on the mother tongue in the early years.

2. BICULTURAL EDUCATION

a) *Inseparability of Language and Culture.* In the early days of bilingual education in the Northern Territory many people thought that all that had to be done at the Pre-school level was to translate the existing English program into the vernacular, and the aims of bilingual education would be achieved. It did not take long before people began to realise that you cannot always translate words and ideas from one culture directly to another. Often the word that is suggested in the vernacular is related to a quite different conceptual view of the world and carries a different range of meanings. For example, in some communities the way the animal kingdom is classified differs markedly from that of the western world and so in some languages there are no equivalent generic terms for words like 'bird' and 'animal'. Language is related to culture and to an important extent the particular language each group of Aborigines speaks expresses the way in which they view their world. Harris, J. (1980, p.143) reminds us that as Aboriginal children begin to develop cognitively, they, like all children, are influenced by the culture in which they are developing. The concepts they are acquiring and the

language in which they express these understandings are related to the total Aboriginal system of knowledge. If education is to begin with the known, and with the *perceivable*, it must start where Aboriginal children are - not where we would like them to be.

b) *Aboriginal Knowledge and School Learning.* Bilingual education that uses just the language of the children does not go far enough. Not only the language but the learning experiences must come from the present-day Aboriginal culture if the children are to have foundations from which they will be able to go on developing intellectually. This means that the learning experience will relate to the life-way of a modern Aboriginal who drives a Toyota, exchanges goods for money and procures his food from the store. But much of this Western behaviour is only a veneer. (See Harris, S., 1977, ch.2, who notes, for example, that though an Aboriginal may use cash to gain food, he can do so with hunting and gathering attitudes. He concludes that isolated Aborigines are still more "Aboriginal" than "Western" in their attitudes, values and perceptions of reality.) So learning experiences for Aboriginal children should draw heavily on the environment, or on what is known as ethno-science to which so much Aboriginal knowledge and use of language is related. This area has provided many of the experiences related to the Aboriginal child's developing conceptual view of the world and so Harris, (1979, p.149) states:

This is the base upon which later cognitive development and learning will build irrespective of what is attempted by the school. *If it is ignored, it is doubtful whether the school will play a significant part in the cognitive development of the Aboriginal child.* If the school fails to recognise the importance of the child's previous cognitive development, the cognitive structures he has acquired and the Aboriginal systems of knowledge which provide the context in which his cognitive development has occurred, it is unlikely that the school will succeed in assisting the child to acquire Western concepts and skills. (Emphasis mine).

c) *Cultural Continuity and Self-Concept.* Such an approach is not only important for intellectual growth but also helps to provide children with a strong sense of identity, and a positive self-concept which today are considered to be essential for the development of a sound base on which later educational experiences can be built. There is a great deal of concern at the Early Childhood level about the way a child relates to others and the way he feels about himself. In recent times gaining a positive self-concept has

been seen to be of vital importance to the child, and educators are anxious to plan learning experiences for children to achieve this end. It is now understood that one of the most important factors influencing the child's view of himself is the appraisal by significant others, for "as he is appraised by significant others so he begins to see himself." (Jersild, 1952, p.83). Jersild (p.83) further concludes that "not only what is said by significant others and what they do, but the child's perception of what they think, feel or do affects the child's development of self-concept." In view of this, Reyes (1979, p.51) states:

Each individual and for that matter every learner in the school has the ontological right to be himself within the parameters of his own language, culture, race, sex, and creed. Learners who view themselves as being respected, loved and therefore accepted as they are will develop a positive self-concept. The child is motivated to learn because he feels good about himself and has confidence in his ability, language and culture.

And he concludes:

Self-concept is so crucial in the school setting that many educational psychologists and educators believe that positive self-concept is the condition 'sine qua non' for learning to take place. (Reyes, 1979, p.57)

If we are concerned that Aboriginal children are helped to develop self-identity and a view of themselves as having competence and worth, not only do we have to use the language of the children but we need to offer meaningful educational experiences from within the culture of the children. Thus we can no longer take a program developed for non-Aboriginal children and simply transpose it into an Aboriginal community. We must begin with the Aboriginal life-way and develop a program for Aboriginal children that will enable them to develop the positive self-concepts that will help them cope with the many experiences life will bring. Such an approach also enriches and develops the language the children speak and so lays a foundation for cognitive development and the future acquisition of English.

3. A NEW KIND OF TEAM-TEACHING

a) *Aboriginal Teachers and Adults as Early Childhood Educators.* For many Aboriginal teachers or assistant teachers such an approach can be rather overwhelming. Many of them have been quite happy to function as helpers; or act as a teacher after someone else has

programmed or defined the learning experiences that in the past were considered appropriate for Aboriginal children. A program which draws its learning experiences from the Aboriginal system of knowledge and which aims to enrich and develop the language the children speak, frequently conflicts with Aboriginal teachers' ideas of "proper" school and pre-school. Their concepts of "school" and "teaching" are probably related to the model of schooling that had been functioning in their community when they were children. In most cases this will probably have been a transposition from the non-Aboriginal society with little more than a passing concern for its relevance to the Aboriginal community in which it had been placed.

This in turn means that Aboriginal teachers will need to start to think about what education really is and they will need to be helped to see the *reasons behind* the activities planned for their children. Not only will they need to become the teachers of small children, but they will also need to be their own curriculum developers - drawing on the Aboriginal system of knowledge for the school learning experiences they provide for children. Because Aboriginal people want their children to be, for example, literate, they will have to be preparing for this by reading to the children and encouraging mothers and other appropriate relatives to do this also. In addition, if the above arguments are sound, they will have to come to understand for themselves that if Aboriginal children are to become good talkers and thinkers in English they must first be not only good talkers in their own language, but good thinkers in it also. To achieve this, more Aboriginal adults (both teachers and parents) will need to be involved in the early education of their children to provide a sufficiently rich language environment in which such development can take place.

b) *Non-Aboriginal Teachers as Facilitators.* Such a change in the role of the Aboriginal teacher means that the non-Aboriginal teacher will have to change roles also. This is often difficult for people who have been trained to work with children, but programs of bilingual/bicultural education for minority groups stress the importance of mother-tongue development in the early education experiences of children. In view of this, although non-Aboriginal teachers will spend some time with the children, their major task will be to help Aboriginal teachers function effectively as Early Childhood Educators of Aboriginal children.

Many non-Aboriginal teachers who feel that they have come to Aboriginal communities to personally help Aboriginal children feel threatened by such an approach. However, to work effectively in Aboriginal programs today we may need to be reminded of the words of Abraham Lincoln who said that -

you cannot help men permanently by doing for them what they could and should do for themselves.

Others in more recent times have seen the importance of self-help in the genuine development of people. President Nyerere of Tanzania, who clearly perceives the problems of people in similar situations, states quite simply that:

...people cannot be developed; they can only develop themselves. For while it is possible for an outsider to build a man's house, an outsider cannot give the man pride and self confidence in himself as a human being. (1973)

The reality is that in Aboriginal communities it is only the Aboriginal adults who can provide the language environment and the relevant learning experiences that are essential for Aboriginal children's early education. Therefore, the non-Aboriginal teacher who wishes to work in the pre-school area of a bilingual program has to largely forsake the role of the teacher and assume the role of 'facilitator' or a person who helps others to achieve. This means they will need to be dedicated to the belief that Aboriginal people, like all other people, have within themselves the resources to achieve the desired development of their children. It is the task of the non-Aboriginal facilitator to help this happen.

4. HELPING PEOPLE TO CHANGE ROLES

a) *Cross-cultural Communication: The Importance of Working with Groups.* To help teachers meaningfully change their approach to Aboriginal Early Childhood Education means that they will have to reconsider not only what they do with the children but the philosophy that underlies their program; that is, they have to ask *why* they do what they do. To achieve this, small groups of teachers (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) and hopefully some parents in each community will need to meet together regularly to talk, think and plan so their children may have school learning experiences that are related to the Aboriginal system of knowledge. Properly planned, such programs will maintain and extend the cognitive development of the children involved. This group will become the hub around which the wheel of meaningful education for Aboriginal children will turn.

If groups of people are to communicate effectively the members need to have some common meeting ground. In the cross-cultural situation we have to work a little harder at establishing such meeting places. Hence it is a good idea to begin each session with an

experience in which everyone can share, and which is related to the goal of that particular session. Out of this experience dialogue can develop. Such experiences are easily planned. For example, if you want to talk about why we read stories to children, begin with reading some to each other. Other experiences may be related to observation of the children. These observations may occur before the session and the sharing of these reports at the beginning of a session can create a common ground or meeting place that allows for further discussion.

Many non-Aboriginal teachers wish to involve Aboriginal teachers and parents in such group dialogues but feel inadequate to cope within cross-cultural situations and are often unaware of the ways that Aboriginal people create an environment in which communication occurs. Paulo Friere (1974, p.45) maintains that when we develop a dialogue between people who meet as equals and relate horizontally (A with B), communication and inter-communication are possible. A relationship of empathy develops, and in an atmosphere of love, trust, hope and humility, people can begin to join in a critical search for something, which in this case is a more meaningful program of early education for Aboriginal children. Friere also notes that where people relate vertically (A over B) anti-dialogue results. Empathy is not established and in the loveless, arrogant, hopeless, mistrustful and a-critical atmosphere that signifies anti-dialogue, communication does not occur. Instead A issues B with 'communiques' and a critical search for anything of lasting worth becomes impossible. With the best will in the world many inexperienced non-Aboriginal teachers find that cross-cultural communication at anything but a superficial level is so difficult that they resort to vertical relationships and just tell Aboriginal teachers what to do; that is, they issue 'communiques'.

One practical solution is to work in larger groups than the usual team of two and where possible ensure that there are at least two people from each culture in the group; the advantages in working in such a way soon become apparent. The experienced members, who have already learned some of the skills of cross-cultural communication, now often quite unknowingly make this experience available to the total group. The following passage summarises this process:

The non-Aboriginal who has established rapport with Aborigines is able, both in and out of the group situation, to help newer teachers become aware of the subtleties of this type of communication. Often new teachers in their enthusiasm to know, ask too many questions, or the wrong ones, or are fearful

of asking any. They are often uncomfortable with silence, or talk when they should be still. Unknowingly, they may mention words or topics that are inappropriate. When thinking they are obtaining Aboriginal opinion, they are often merely putting their own words and thoughts in Aboriginal mouths. They are unaware of the non-verbal communication that is so vital to Aboriginal people and may miss the silent cues that are signifying peoples' enthusiasm or otherwise for the topic under discussion. In the group, by watching how others behave, and if necessary being rescued by their peers from a difficult situation, they have time to gain confidence and to develop sensitivity without feeling that the responsibility of maintaining communication rests on them alone, which is often the case in the one-to-one situation. (Graham, 1979, p.40)

For the Aboriginal teachers, the advantages are also considerable. It takes time for young Aboriginal teachers to realize that their contribution is vital if meaningful education for Aboriginal children is to be achieved. The group allows new behaviour patterns to be learned far more quickly and less traumatically than in the often threatening one-to-one situation and allows the frequent use of the vernacular, which is rarely possible in the one-to-one situation. As new teachers see the more experienced Aboriginal teachers (and hopefully parents) supplying information, offering opinions, reminding and if necessary correcting, they soon slip into similar patterns of group behaviour and begin to contribute to the total group output. In an Appendix some practical suggestions about communicating with groups of Aboriginal staff and parents are provided.

b) *Some Help with 'How To' : a Handbook with a New Orientation.* To assist the development of such programs *Wangkami: A Handbook for Aboriginal Teachers Involved in Early Childhood Education* is currently being trialled. The aim of this handbook is to help Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people talk and think about education of young Aboriginal children. The handbook includes these themes: (The following is not a table of contents)

- 1) *Introduction and Working with the Guide.* This gives practical information on establishing a group, and some advice for working with Aboriginal people in group situations. It also suggests ways in which ideas brought forward by Aboriginal people can be collected and later used as the material for the development of curriculum.

2. The importance of *Sensory Experience* in learning is then explored. Themes include: *How a Baby Learns, Looking, Hearing, Touching, Tasting, Smelling and Moving.*

3. Other important aspects of Early Childhood Education, such as *Experiences, Environment, Play, Concepts, Classification and Language*, both oral and written (i.e., stories) are then discussed.

4. An introduction to child development is given in a section entitled *Growing*, and the role of *Parents and Teachers* are also examined.

5. The handbook concludes with a closer look at the developmental levels within Early Childhood Education.

c) *From Theory to Practice.* The discussion program aims to help Aboriginal teachers and parents understand the simpler aspects of theory underlying Early Childhood Education and encourages them to explore their own culture for experiences that will be meaningful to their children. For example, Aboriginal parents are very conscious of the importance of the visual modality and that children learn through looking. For a hunting-gathering people 'seeing' and understanding what you see are essential for survival. The environment surrounding each community is full of things to be seen and Aboriginal people are aware of the optimal time and place for such activities. As teachers talk together of the things children learn about by looking and observing, lists can be made of the visual experiences available for inclusion in the pre-school program.

Later when these experiences are programmed for the children Aboriginal teachers can be helped to discover that learning can extend beyond the excursions, and items can be gathered and taken home to provide for further learning experiences. As in our own culture, features in the environment are often recorded in song, story and dance and these can also be included in the program. In addition, the experiences children have had in the environment can provide the raw material for story and picture books and so lay a foundation for literacy in later years. But most importantly, teachers can begin to appreciate that if Aboriginal people provide enriching language to surround these learning experiences, the children will be acquiring the verbal symbols so essential for concept development.

However, Solomon (1976) reminds us that children do not only learn by looking and seeing, they also learn as they are *seen*. In

further discussions Aboriginal teachers can be encouraged to observe children playing in or near their homes and note the roles they assume in dramatic play. As they become more aware of how children are learning about life as they act out real-life situations, they can then plan to include more opportunities for children to indulge in meaningful dramatic play in the pre-school program. In this way the doll's corner and the dress-up box can be re-examined in relation to the life style of each particular community and more reality can be established. Hence, if Aboriginal people use homes for shelter from rain, use suitcases for storage of goods, and actually live, i.e. eat, sleep, and talk outside under a bough or corrugated iron shelter, the experiences that are offered to the children should reflect these understandings. Children should then be *seen* by others to be acting in ways they find meaningful, and such experiences will increase all childrens' understanding of their own life style. In this way a dialogue with a small group of adults which aims at increasing their understanding of the learning process also provides content for the learning experiences that are offered to their children. In time the total program should gradually change to reflect the deepened understanding of Aboriginal people about the process of formal school education and how their children's home experiences can contribute to that. What should emerge is not a program that has been transposed from our own society but a program that is based on sound educational theory and yet draws its content and teaching strategies from the system of knowledge inherent in Aboriginal society.

CONCLUSION

If the Early Childhood offerings in Aboriginal communities are to meet the educational needs of the Aboriginal children involved, programs will have to be developed that will not only use the language of the children but will draw the early learning experiences from the Aboriginal system of knowledge. In this way children will be assisted in gaining a positive self-concept and "optimal psycholinguistic and cognitive development will be fostered". (Watts, McGrath and Tandy, 1973, p.3). The reality is that it is only Aboriginal people who can provide this knowledge and by their presence help create a language environment in which such education can take place. The involvement of Aboriginal adults in the planning and implementation of the early education of their children must be seen as the central task if a soundly based program of Early Childhood education is to be developed for traditionally-oriented Aboriginal children.

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APPENDIX

CHECKLIST FOR COMMUNICATION.

Here is a check list of practical suggestions that may help cross-cultural communication become even more effective. Some of these have already been referred to but they are so important in

this sensitive area that they probably need repeating:

- . Have at least two Aboriginal teachers in the group, three or four is ideal. If you work with only one Aboriginal teacher, invite someone else to join the group. In time, aim to involve some parents in discussion sessions.
- . Timetable teacher development sessions or dialogues; do not leave them to chance. You will probably need about three each week.
- . Allow at least half an hour for each session; the end of the day is not always the best time.
- . Find a place where the Aboriginal teachers are comfortable. Sitting on the floor or under a shady tree may be best. A cup of tea or a cold drink can often help to create the relaxed atmosphere that you require.
- . Plan a common experience to introduce dialogue. Draw the learning of the group from this common meeting place.
- . Do not leave a topic until you have worked out how to implement the ideas you have been discussing. This will often involve making or collecting appropriate materials, making games or story books, or developing some program outlines.
- . Avoid using educational 'jargon' unless it is explained and frequently reinforced.
- . Allow time for the Aboriginal teachers to talk things over together in their own language and then tell you what they have talked about.
- . 'Hasten slowly' is the rule. Don't attempt too much, too quickly.
- . Let teachers illustrate information if listing proves to be difficult.
- . Translating educational ideas into the vernacular is a slow process. Allow time for understanding and check with others such as the local linguist or more experienced staff.

- . Let content suggestions develop from an understanding of theory. Good theory will lead to good practice.
- . Carry understandings learned at teacher training sessions into program planning times.
- . Share the leadership if at all possible, making use of more experienced Aboriginal teachers or those with some training.
- . If you have asked someone else to lead do not take over and do it for them. If you feel you are going to interfere, go away and leave them to it. They can report back later.
- . Do not be afraid of silence - learn to relax and wait for others to talk. If necessary rephrase the question but do not supply the answer. If there is still no response from the group, suggest they talk about it in their own language because maybe they have not understood the question and need to clarify it.
- . Remember that Aboriginal people use a lot of non-verbal language when they are communicating. Learn to 'hear' this also.
- . Learn to listen not just to the words people say but to the ideas they are trying to convey. (Remember that expressing ideas in a second language is difficult.)
- . Remember, people learn more from the things they think out for themselves than they do from the things they are told.

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