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Last year he began a big vegetable garden in the corner of the playground, and grew tomatoes, lettuce, cabbage, capsicums, carrots, onions, chilies (which the adults love), corn and spinach. This made our lunches very cheap, and varied and nutritious. Cooking was done with the mums to show how these vegetables could be used. He also planted many banana trees and we now have three big bunches of bananas ripening. Bobby is also building a fowl-house - so soon we will be eating our own fresh eggs. (A fair sum of money was raised by selling the surplus vegetables to locals.)

The teaching aide and assistant are local women, and play a big role in helping to ensure all parents and children realize the pre-school is available for them. They are very aware of local problems. The teacher aide, Sally Mumbin, has been at the pre-school for ten years!

Our Aboriginal teacher is also a local girl, who returned to Katherine after training down south. Her local knowledge is invaluable, and because most people know her it is very easy for parents to approach her.

Attendance is now right up, with an average of 32 children attending daily.

Some days are "messy", some are very noisy, and many days flow smoothly along - but all days are happy and relaxed.

The staff, children and parents at this pre-school are Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal and all work and play together in a busy, happy and relaxed manner.

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THE NEED FOR COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN EDUCATION

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The charge is frequently made that the education provided for minority groups throughout the world is not designed to educate all of the minority group people but merely a carefully chosen few, in an attempt, not always deliberate or even conscious, to maintain the oppressive *status quo*. On any nationally applied indicator of success, such as the number of tertiary graduates or the expressed

satisfaction with the education provided, it would appear that Aboriginal education in this country could be subjected to that same charge. Yet such a charge would disguise, to a large degree, the fact that many people from the dominant culture who provide that education are genuinely concerned about its lack of success. Conversations with practising teachers in schools for Aboriginal children highlight the concern those teachers feel that children who have been reading at an appropriately fluent level in the lower primary grades can be classified as functionally illiterate by the beginning of secondary schooling; that somewhere there begins a decline in the academic achievement of many children who began their school careers with promise. Something, somewhere is drastically and basically wrong.

Enough has already been said and written about cultural and environmental 'deficit' for most critically concerned people to be aware of the gross inadequacies of such arguments in explaining school failure. More recent trends in the literature centre around a cultural 'difference' theory. Culturally different factors such as lower need achievement, present time orientation, and different language/dialect find expression in problematic terms such as lack of motivation, low educational expectations and lack of fluency with the language of instruction, and are thus seen as crucial factors handicapping the Aboriginal child in school. While such arguments may be, to varying degrees, both credible and valid, one needs to be wary of any superficial interpretation and easy acceptance. For example, failure to achieve in school cannot be simply dismissed as the result of lack of motivation or educational aspirations. A survey of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander high school students, undertaken by Watts (1976) as part of an evaluation of the Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme, found that such students have high positive attitudes to education (as distinct from attitudes to schools or to teachers) and that only 39% did not wish to continue schooling past junior secondary.

Similarly, school failure cannot be simply regarded as the result of undertaking instruction in a language/dialect different from one's own, for such an undertaking does not, *per se*, necessarily result in cognitive or academic retardation to any significant degree. The 1966-1971 St Lambert experiment in Canada took an experimental group of native-English-speaking children through a kindergarten and Grade 1 curriculum totally in French and thereafter a curriculum wherein all 'cognitive' areas were taught in French, and art, music, physical education etc. were taught in English. The children at the end of the experiment demonstrated no native language or subject matter deficit or retardation in any significant way. There are, of

course, glaring differences between the situation of those St Lambert children and the Australian Aboriginal children's situation, or even that of the French speaking children in Canada. These will be dealt with more fully later, but the point here is that instruction in a language/dialect different from one's mother tongue is not, by itself, necessarily sufficient to bring about school failure.

One of the main problems for practising teachers lies in the fact that the nature of empirical research, requiring the isolation and study of single variables, mitigates against the development of a wholistic view that is capable of seeing the interrelationship of different factors. In the area of expectations and their effect on children, for instance, the effect of teacher expectations are by now fairly well researched and documented (Fitzgerald, 1976), but often overlooked is the aspect of community expectations. As Sperry (1972) points out, the Rosenthal and Jacobsen research was disappointing in that it neither stated nor implied the role of expectations from other sources. Yet -

the administrators, the school district, and the *community* also have expectations, and possibly their expectations have more of a self-fulfilling effect on the child's achievement than the teacher's have. (p.44)

It may or may not be significant, then, that decline in the school achievement of Aboriginal children has already begun by about Grade 4, about the age when those with a Western view of child development maintain that children have become less egocentric and are transferring their concern to gang or group solidarity.

Consideration of this last possibility, combined with an awareness of the interrelationship of language, culture and ethnicity in the development of self-concept and in the development of cognitive and coping skills, leads to the hypothesis that the decline in achievement is the result of the child's deliberate rejection of learning, whether it be at a conscious or subconscious level. If excellence in academic learning is perceived as acceptance of the dominant culture and a simultaneous rejection or 'selling-out' of one's own culture, then there will be a heavy peer group pressure and strong community expectation, either real or felt, to fail out or to drop out.

Marta Sotomayor (n.d.), in considering language, culture and ethnicity as they concern minority groups in the United States, comments:

...language has played a most significant social and survival function...[as]...it is a common language that often co-ordinates the activities of the in-group...thus promoting a sense of belonging. (p.6)

If one accepts her broad definition of culture as:

...a sifting process of arranging and rearranging experiences, selecting appropriate behaviours that provide congruence to the individual...

and of ethnicity as referring to the "cultural ethos" or the "underlying sentiment" shared by members of a particular group because of the uniqueness of that group, then one can agree with her argument that, for members of minority groups:

...ethnic, cultural and linguistic identification and affirmation have acted to ease internal stress felt as a result of outside political, economic, and social degradation. (p.9)

The interrelationship of these factors is also acknowledged by Lambert and Gardener in their 1972 study of minority French Americans in New England and Louisiana. Among the responses that the young people made in trying to cope with their dual cultural situation, Lambert and Gardener found three types, also found earlier in Child's 1943 study of Italian-Americans, which they said were evidence of a subtractive form of biculturalism. Some people were "trying to be one thing or the other, while others were trying to be neither one thing nor the other" (Lambert, 1977). There was a fourth group, however, whose French identity was given strong parental and environmental support, who were able to demonstrate success at being *both* things, French and American. This they called additive biculturalism. As a result of this, and other studies he made, Lambert concluded that:

...ethnolinguistic minorities need a strong educational experience in their *own* languages and traditions before they can cope in an "all-American" society or before they will *want* to cope in such a society. (p.26)

Similar conclusions were reached by Taylor (1977) after various studies with the French Canadians. If the risk of subtractive biculturalism, when the acquisition of one culture threatens to replace or dominate the other culture, is relatively high amongst the French Canadians who have recently demonstrated that they are politically

articulate and strong enough to have their wish for cultural separatism brought to a national referendum, then how much greater must that risk be amongst the Aborigines with their feelings of powerlessness?

It would seem, then, that Aborigines are placed in something of a dilemma. They are aware of the need for education to gain upward social and economic mobility, and, as highlighted by Watts (1976) and Shimpo (1978), they want that education (expressed in Shimpo's report as a desire for literacy and numeracy skills). Yet to participate in the very schooling system that can provide that education and those skills constitutes a threat to their cultural identity and self-concept. Small wonder, then, that for some Aboriginal children in school the maintenance of cultural identity and of one's sense of belonging to the social group becomes far more important, far more crucial, than the praise of European teachers or the possibility of long-distant rewards for success in the wider Australian society, with the resultant 'opting-out' physically and/or emotionally and intellectually from that schooling.

There would appear to be two ways that adults involved in any way in the educational process can respond to this situation, apart from ignoring it, which is valid if one is not concerned by the children's academic failure or if one has a vested interest in maintaining the *status quo* (hopefully not the case).

The first is by way of some direct change in the curriculum, somewhat along the lines of Lambert's (1977) suggestion, so that there is an effective removal of the threat to cultural identity. Such change might be in terms of introducing a bilingual program, a bicultural program, "Black Studies", or in terms of a change in the psycho-instructional dimension of the program so as to bring about greater harmony between the style of instruction and the children's learning styles and motivational and social needs. Provided the introduction of such change is preceded or accompanied by consultation and discussion with the Aboriginal parents and community so as to ensure its accuracy and validity, and improve its acceptability, it should make some considerable contribution to lessening the cultural threat of the school. Individual schools have already brought about some such changes either singly or in combination, whether it has been at the original instigation of the Education Department, the particular community, or school staff members.

However, any such change, to be fully effective, must have two co-requisite concerns: for stability in staffing, and for careful evaluation. Australian educationists comment on the need for continuity and stability of teaching staff so as to establish the

necessary rapport between the school and community (Bajzik, 1974). Houghton and Tregear (1969), although commenting on the same need at an international level, state that teachers need to stay in a community long enough to establish not only that rapport but to be able to do something constructive with it rather than being transferred out for "promotional" reasons. Increased rewards for successful work should be granted without the complete removal of the teacher from the area where success has been gained.

This would be no bad thing anyhow, since many of the present methods of rewarding success are, to put it mildly, quite cock-eyed, involving as they do the removal of men and women from work in which they excel to new roles for which they sometimes have no gift whatever. (Houghton & Tregear, p.22)

The second concern, for careful evaluation, is essential in light of the previous discussion about the relationship between schooling and cultural identity. If such changes in curriculum do not produce the expected improvements in academic achievement then there is need to look, when searching for the cause of that failure, not only for inadequacies within the new program itself, but also for whether that change is, by itself, sufficient in both direction and quantity to remove that threat to the child's identity. If it is insufficient, then without additional changes the results for the children will probably be the same: rejection of schooling.

The other way of responding to the educational dilemma faced by Aborigines is by changing the decision-making power structure within the schools. Increasing the level of community and parental participation in the educational process can be interpreted as a move towards cultural equality and thus should lessen the threat to, and affirm the value of, the cultural identity, as well as help alleviate some of the feelings of powerlessness Aboriginal people suffer. It should be noted that the emphasis here is on "participation", "having a share in and being part of", not on community "involvement", the "implicating and entangling in" the school process through tuck-shops, working bees, volunteer aiding, parent "education" evenings and so on¹. While such activities may be eminently worthwhile, and may have beneficial effects on the child or on the school/home liaison, they may do little by way of recognizing cultural equality, and may, without any accompanying participation, sometimes breed feelings of abuse and ill-usage within the community.

¹ These definitions of participation and involvement are from Beare, H.: Lay participation in education. A paper delivered to the Aust. Council of State School Organisation Conference, Surfers Paradise, Queensland, 1974.

Participation needs to be on a decision-making level, involving some decisions about curriculum, staffing and finances. Some educators argue that such participation needs, in fact, to be complete control as is the case in the independent Black Community Schools, both in Australia and abroad (Fein, 1970). While this is obviously a valid concept for those schools in those situations, the wholesale transference of control over indigenous schools to their local communities may quite possibly bring about the educational chaos protagonists of the above idea warn about, since simply transferring control would not, of course, ensure educational expertise in the community. Such chaos would by no means be inevitable though, as the experience with many North American schools, like the Mt Currie Indian School, illustrates (Wyatt, 1977). Transference of control from the Bureau of Indian Affairs to the local community, in the Mt Currie case, resulted, after a period of time, in widespread changes to curriculum content, teaching style and staffing, but such changes have been accomplished smoothly and without chaos. Other advocates of community participation take a more moderate stance. Shimp (1978) argues that control by the community need not necessarily be complete, and that the assumption of that control should take place gradually, with such control being exercised directly at the school level, or indirectly through representation to, and subsequent action by, the Education Department.

However such increasing participation is accomplished, it should bring with it beneficial effects to the schooling process. Research (Schiff, 1963; Coleman, 1966; Jablonsky, 1968) has consistently shown that when parents participate in school affairs, then:

- a) school attendance improves,
- b) children study better, and
- c) the children acquire basic skills more quickly.

Totter (1970) also found a considerable decrease in the incidence of crime and juvenile delinquency, with such results being explained by Coleman (1966) as the effect of increased parental participation on a student's "destiny control", or locus of control, that is, on the degree to which the student sees him/herself in control of his/her own life, with the higher the sense of control, the greater the academic improvement (Beare, 1974). If such research evidence has been found in situations not necessarily dealing with minority group children, then one should reasonably expect at least similar improvements in the schooling of Aborigines, for whom the issue of locus of control is more crucial.

With that in mind, those concerned with improvements in school achievement will see some obligation on their part to work towards increasing parental and community participation, but herein lies a difficulty. Parental perceptions of the school are often moulded and set by previous treatment they have received from the school. If the school has, in the past, maintained a "fortress-cum-shop" attitude, then possibly any overtures to the parents to participate in decision-making may at first be met with hesitancy and distrust (Claydon, 1973). There is a need for those making the overtures to prove the genuine-ness of their intentions by following through on any collective decisions reached. Failure to do so would naturally be interpreted as shallowness and insincerity and would greatly damage future relations (Shimpo, 1978).

As with the implementation of curriculum changes that support the child's self-concept, it would appear that many schools are making a genuine and concerted effort to increase parental and community participation. As yet, however, such efforts are being made on an individual school basis, and, while they are worthy in themselves, there is no guarantee that such efforts would continue after the existing staff is changed. Perhaps it would be well to look to bringing about appropriate legislature that would provide such a guarantee. The potential results seem worth the effort.

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