



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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2. Doug & Sue Thompson, *Peppimenarti*

C.N. MacNeill points out in the June/July issue of *The Aboriginal Child at School* that empathy, teaching skills, communication skills and perseverance are important characteristics of a good teacher of Aboriginal children. It is only fair to point out that these would be considered necessary qualities in the teacher of any child, Aboriginal or otherwise. If I had to pick the qualities that are most in need in teachers of Aboriginal children, particularly in the smaller, remote and more traditionally oriented communities, these would be in order: maturity, adaptability, patience, and the desire to learn.

These qualities are not mutually exclusive. One requires maturity and patience because these are necessary qualities if a teacher is to remain in one school for a long period of time. All the empathy, teaching skill and ability to communicate are not one bit of good if the teacher only stays one or two years. Aboriginal children, and especially Aboriginal adults, take a long time to form a personal relationship and to get to know teachers. It still surprises me to find that Aboriginal people can have deep affection for the most intolerant and paternalistic people because they have known them for a long period of time.

Adaptability is certainly a necessary quality for any teacher of Aboriginals, that is, adaptability in the widest sense. One must, particularly in isolated situations, be able to cope with a lifestyle and value system radically different from that of a middle-class European. Maturity is also a necessary factor here, especially where the teacher may be the only European in the community. The teacher must have a clear sense of his/her own identity and philosophy as a teacher, both to avoid the need to submerge his/her own sense of values in order to feel accepted by the Aboriginal community while at the same time avoiding the rejection of Aboriginal values and culture because of their seemingly alien nature.

Maturity and patience are also necessary for the teacher to get to know the community as a whole: clan groups, relationships, the local environment, all the minutiae of the community that it takes years to get to know. In our opinion a teacher is only going through the motions in an Aboriginal community if he/she does not have friendships with and know a large proportion of the older people who are of central importance in that community. Empathy with and knowledge of Aboriginal children must be complemented by empathy with and knowledge of their parents and relatives.

All of the above requires a high degree of patience and adaptability. It requires that one learns the art of sitting in companionable silence, of learning conversation is not the only means of gathering information. It requires that one learns a different sense of time and a different orientation towards work (or if that is rather hard, at least to understand that other people have a different concept of work). It also requires that one learns a different orientation towards the use of language, brevity of expression - hand gestures and face gestures as a substitute for language. To some extent it requires that you, the teacher, become the learner and that your goal of helping the children become bicultural necessitates that you become partly bicultural yourself.

Patience is also a necessary prerequisite to enable a teacher to cope with what seems to be the slow pace of change and understanding of some children. One has to understand that the cultural difference is often complicated by physical disabilities, environmental limitations and cultural pressures beyond the influence of the teacher or the school. Adaptability is important here because it is the school and the teacher that has to change to come to terms with these factors. The students should not have to change to fit in with the school.

It is important that a teacher of Aboriginal children should have the desire to further his/her own learning, both in the informal and the formal sense. The sorts of situations and problems that face many teachers of Aboriginal children require a theoretical understanding and background; for example, an understanding of anthropological research methods, linguistics and a basic grounding in teaching English as a second language. It needs to be complemented by an informal curiosity: why children live with different families at different times, why children don't come to school at certain times, how the community works, which families relate to different parts of the country, what sorts of understandings an isolated community of children will gain about the outside world from a steady diet of cowboy and Kung Fu films.

Perhaps most importantly patience, adaptability, the desire to learn are all useless if a teacher does not have the maturity (in the sense of knowing him/herself, his/her faults, strengths and limitations) to cope with a very demanding, trying and at times soul-destroying job. (I am talking here about isolated, small, traditionally oriented communities but the above probably describes

most teaching situations at least some of the time.) The turnover of teachers in the Northern Territory is very high, but it is horrifically so in the more isolated areas and particularly so in Aboriginal schools.¹ The teacher in this situation must recognise little distinction between his/her personal and professional role. He/she must accept at times that the educational goals which he/she pursues contribute towards the breakdown of traditional values and authority. He/she must at times cope with a bureaucracy that seems insensitive, uncaring and oriented only to European urban situations. He/she must cope with inadequate and often substandard living and working conditions. He/she must also learn to live in a situation where there is no support structure in the shape of readily accessible friends, colleagues who understand your particular situation, or people who share the same value system. Ultimately, the teacher in an isolated Aboriginal school must learn to rely for most things on his/her own resources. Hence the need for maturity.

Finally, it is axiomatic that maturity, adaptability, patience and a desire to learn are qualities that it would be desirable for most teachers to possess regardless of the types of children that they were going to teach. However, in the ideal teacher of Aboriginal children, these qualities would need to be more highly developed because of the particular combination of societal, environmental and professional factors that teachers in Aboriginal schools have to face.

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¹ See Shimpo, M., 1978. *The Social Process of Aboriginal Education in the Northern Territory*. Department of Education, N.T. Division, Darwin.