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ABORIGINAL TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAM : A REALISTIC PERSPECTIVE OF 'DROPOUTS'

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The Aboriginal Teacher Education Program (A.T.E.P) was established in 1978 within the then Torrens C.A.E. (now Adelaide College of the Arts and Education) for the primary purpose of affording a supportive opportunity for people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent to undertake teacher education courses. The need for Aboriginal people within the teaching profession is obvious, and the demand for relevant courses is well-documented with the NAEC and NITE being the most recent proponents. Aboriginal people and organisations concerned with Aboriginal education see the need as a priority : it is assumed that this fact is accepted and requires no further discussion or substantiation at this point.

One of the most common enquiries centres upon an obsession with the 'drop-out' rate. There is an almost morbid tendency for outsiders to dwell on 'failures' in statistical terms as a peculiar method of measuring success. Perhaps the most frightening aspect of such an approach is the lack of insight and perception about the very positive and meaningful processes which can occur inside an enclave support program, and which can result in a student 'dropping out'. Unless outsiders (all too often the evaluators) have a sensitive knowledge of the background to the Aboriginal situation in Australia, and unless they can appreciate the processes which most entrants undergo, they will almost inevitably be locked into an erroneous and negative perspective of those who do not continue being failures - as typified in the negative term 'drop-outs'.

Pool Realities

Coyne and Willmot¹ used the terminology of "a pool" to describe the people eligible in the Aboriginal community for courses, further training, employment, etc. The pool towards which ATEP directs its

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¹ Coyne, G. and Willmot, E., 1976: *A Portrayal of the Aboriginal Community College, Adelaide*. Aboriginal Community College, Adelaide.

recruitment has certain constraints, some imposed by the nature of the program and the institution within which it operates and some implicit in the nature of the pool. The program, for example, cannot recruit students under the age of 17-18 years or over the age of 60 years. The nature of the pool does not usually facilitate applications from persons over the age of 40 as they are usually living a set pattern of life or feel that they are too old to undertake such a new and challenging venture. People who are already employed with some degree of satisfaction can rarely afford the luxury of applying for ATEP entry at the risk of losing their employment. The tenuous nature of the current job market encourages people to cling to whatever security and stability they have; it does not encourage mobility or risk. People with heavy family commitments are unable to take advantage of ATEP entry unless long-term, reliable alternatives to these family commitments can be satisfactorily arranged. In short, it is usually younger single persons, married people with no excessive family commitments or married people without a reliable source of income who are in the most convenient and amenable position to apply for ATEP entry.

The educational backgrounds and experiences of such people are, of course, varied. However, it can be stated without too much fear of contradiction, that these potential students have far less education experience and qualifications than most other students undertaking tertiary study. For most, Year 11 or 12 internal will be the highest level attempted : for many there will have been a break of several years from education during which time they may well have experienced underemployment and unemployment. Although most people will have gained invaluable life skills in this period they will have lost contact with the demands and procedures of formal education. Hardly any will have gained the skills required for a 'comfortable' passage through tertiary education. Even fewer will have had any experience of tertiary level courses although several will have undertaken some post-secondary training.

Those people who have experienced or gained high academic skills and qualifications will probably not be interested in teacher education courses. Chances are that they will have gained reasonably secure, well-paid jobs with a certain amount of prestige. They would be ill-advised to abandon such positions for three or four years on a student allowance with the risk of not succeeding in the course and the very realistic possibility of not gaining employment even on successful completion of the course!

Many Aboriginal people feel a total alienation from, suspicion of or animosity towards the education system. By and large the

demands it makes cause more trouble than the dubious benefits it offers. The Aboriginal experience of education has not been particularly encouraging yet, with paradoxical accuracy, they see education as one of the few opportunities for personal and group survival and advancement, one of the areas into which there must be an urgent Aboriginal input to ensure that Aboriginal people and their cultural values are accepted and respected. Yet to survive in the education system calls for people who can operate in a value-hostile environment but still retain their essential identity and be recognized and accepted by the Aboriginal community for whose children they are creating spaces and pathways. For many, the stresses and tensions of such a situation are intolerable. Others who could very well succeed in terms of raw ability find the prospect too daunting to even contemplate.

In short, then, the students who even apply for ATEP are very special people : they are very much the minority of a minority, people who, for whatever motive, are prepared to take on the demands and buffetting of a tertiary education course in an alien and often value-dislocated, culturally-remote setting. The program acts as a base, a harbour, a lifeline from which people can gradually come to terms with the requirements demanded of them and from which they can gain confidence, security and a positive sense of acceptance of Aboriginality with all the inherent social, cultural and educational implications.

Implications

There are several major implications for the operation of a special program such as ATEP.

The most critical implication is that ATEP must be acknowledged as being, to some extent, very much an experimental and trial experience for many of the students. They have the real desire and strong vocational drive to become teachers, but they very often do not have the academic background and moulding in terms of degree or continuity to be able to fully anticipate what are the demands and nature of a tertiary education course. No amount of prior discussion, testing or experience can comprehensively prepare students for the actual course. It must be seen very much as a matter of discovering by doing. Obviously, on the law of averages alone, there will be some students who decide, through experiencing 'the real thing', that they do not wish to pursue the course any further. An orientation period of one term attempts to overcome this possible problem by giving students a pre-course simulated experience : some students do decide not to continue but there will always be others who wish to 'have a go at the real thing' rather than choose solely on the basis

of orientation experience. Thus, although students enter ATEP with the very clearest intention and goal-commitment, the very experience becomes an opportunity for them to assess and re-assess their own vocational direction. In this way ATEP provides the students with an otherwise unobtainable opportunity to operate a very healthy and experience-related vocational decision-making process. It would be erroneous to regard ATEP withdrawals as 'drop-outs' or 'failures'. The vast majority of those who do not continue see ATEP positively, as it allowed them the chance to clarify their own life goals in a realistic environment by, at the base level, clarifying what they did *not* want to be.

Of course, ATEP does not consciously suggest that this should be the prime function of the program. Students apply and are accepted in the best faith. Our pre-testing is reliable and selectively predictive *to some extent*; the orientation period provides further time and opportunities for vocational change; but there will always be the probability of some people changing vocational aims after some experience in the program. It must be emphasised that, assuming vocational counselling is undertaken, students withdrawals from ATEP should generally be looked at from the positive view of Aboriginal people being given the opportunity to fully operate decision-making processes regarding their own futures, processes which they are often otherwise denied.

It should be clear that while we accept the reality of the preceding unintentional aspect of ATEP occurring, we try to avoid student withdrawals by structuring appropriate and reliable pre-testing experiences and by selecting only those people whom we feel certain have a reasonably high chance of success. There are three major problems inherent in this approach.

Firstly, the number of Aboriginal students with the educational background and success which is normally taken as predictive of success in tertiary education is very limited, not only in South Australia, but throughout the nation. Quite simply, there are very few people surviving the school system, and of those few only a small proportion will select teaching as a career.

Secondly, it is becoming increasingly evident that success in the school system does not automatically lead to success in tertiary education. Very often those pupils who excelled in passive receptive educational situations find themselves at a loss to come to terms with a situation where, as well as having to adjust to totally new language and concepts, they are expected to be capable of satisfying the demands of tertiary courses by developing rigorous self-discipline

and self-motivation. They are expected to make an extremely rapid change to accept total responsibility for their own learning. Within ATEP this year it is noticeable that those students who undertook the orientation period are more confident and capable of handling the first term units than those students who transferred from schools or other institutions with, ostensibly, a higher level of education. Adjustment to the different learning environment and format is crucial.

Thirdly, the major selection procedure, pre-testing, has been shown to be only generally reliable. It clearly identifies those people at the extremes of measurement i.e. those who would have no chance of being able to cope with the academic loading and those who have the academic ability to cope (assuming other factors and determinants are constant). However, in the middle area where the largest number of students are found, objective and structured testing of academic skills becomes less important than a device which somehow indicates the affective domain of the student's character.

Determination, maturity, commitment and perseverance can be the vital elements which can make or break a student's chances. Appropriate measures of such attitudinal states are not available, and even if they could be constructed they would only record those attitudes at the time of measurement. It would be very unrealistic to expect no change in such human areas. Interviews and on-going dialogue thus assume great importance, but it must be realised that people and their attitudes do change. This is not anyone's 'fault', it is a fact of life, and ATEP cannot be expected to be able to predict what changes a person will undergo in the three or four years following initial selection. Not only could we not predict these things but as far as possible we *should* not, for the dangers of generalising or stereotyping from specific experiences or developing self-fulfilling expectations must be avoided at all costs.

A final major factor which must be given deep consideration is the socio-cultural situation of the 'pool'. It could not be reasonably expected that because students enter ATEP they immediately become isolated from their socio-cultural background or become immune to the many social pressures and negative circumstances which are common to most Aboriginal people as an oppressed group. The ATEP students will, indeed must, retain contact and maintain their social obligations and affiliation, albeit to a reduced extent : there will be occasions when it is impossible for some people to continue in ATEP.

ATEP students are, as we stated earlier, special people. They are very much pioneers in alien territory. They will rarely share the advantages of the non-Aboriginal students : they will be subjected to

greater pressures from within and without : they will be expected to carry an enormous load in terms of academic, personal, social and cultural responsibility. They will compete with students, most of whom have had every advantage available and who will find a large degree of congruence with previous experiences inside the College. Those other students will be familiar with support mechanisms and techniques, they will be confident in most of their daily operations : they will be 'hand-picked' students to a large extent. Yet, in the first year 13-15% of them will withdraw, and in subsequent years 6-9% and 4-6%. It would be reasonable to expect ATEP withdrawals to be much in excess of these figures especially when the relative sample sizes are compared, and yet, when all the foregoing factors are considered, it becomes clear that ATEP's 'success' ratio is extremely high in terms of students coping with the course and those who use ATEP positively to re-assess vocational goals and progress to personally more appropriate and meaningful activities.

There exists a very real danger if sight is lost of the 'special' nature of all the components that make up ATEP in total. There are many components that are to varying degrees common to ATEP and normal college programs. However, an attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of ATEP against other criteria only is a very common incongruence which must be avoided.

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