



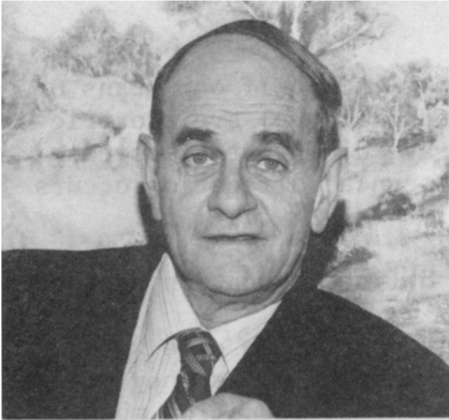
# The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

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ABORIGINAL CHILDREN  
AND EDUCATION -  
THE DEVELOPING PARTNERSHIP

\*W.D. Rose

My early years as a teacher were concerned with children labelled as slow learners. In the light of what many of them have achieved over the years - ranging from skilled trades to self-employment - I sometimes wonder whether we limit our educational horizons on occasion to expectations based on faulty or imprecise data, or to a process of conditioning; what to expect in given localities or among certain groups of children.

Fortunately, my professional reading at that time led me to Kirk and Johnson: "Educating the Retarded Child", and to their concept of "belongingness". They argued that the teacher accepts the child as he is, with all his imperfections and educational blemishes, his deprivations, disadvantages and differences. It is all too easy for us to hang the child's lack of motivation and interest on the peg of social, housing or health services deficiency, and to avoid the personal and professional involvement that is a prerequisite of the committed teacher.

Unfortunately, our educational practice is such that we continue to identify minority-group children on western-oriented tests of general ability. No allowance is made for the fact that the child is unfamiliar with the language of the test administrator or indeed, of the items of the test; and yet it is well known in psychological circles that test results are only valid if the children being tested are as familiar with the test items as was the group on whom the test was normed.

The language of the teacher is also crucial to the child's understanding. The child's receptive language - the processing of incoming signals which are mainly verbal in the classroom - suffers

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if every second or third word is not known by him. If our means of communicating with children (exposition and dialogue) are esoteric (for the ear of the select few), we encourage disinterest, boredom and anti-social behaviour. In this circumstance, alienation occurs because the child feels he doesn't belong.

John Ingram and Bob Randall (1976) defined education as the

complex process by which a person is enabled to cope with and gain satisfaction from life and the world, as they are now and as they will be presented to him...Education must therefore seek to liberate him by enabling and training him to think for himself, to solve problems for himself, to initiate action and to carry it through.

They spoke about the alienation felt by minority groups - a feeling of not belonging with the dominant group in society:

It is hard for those of us who belong to the majority group in Australia to accept that people feel alienated, particularly if we are operating the processes of education that are ostensibly aimed at giving everyone a 'fair go', and yet which are accused of largely causing the alienation.....alienation is not something to be argued about: it is a fact of life - a dominating, frustrating, destructive fact of life for many members of minority groups...that education has to take account of.

Ingram and Randall listed eight feelings that commonly accompany a sense of alienation:

1. a feeling of not being wanted; of not being able to communicate;
2. a feeling that one would not be listened to if one did try to communicate;
3. a feeling of not being good enough; of not being able to do anything; of being ashamed - often expressed as shame of one's skin or of one's people;
4. a feeling of being pushed around, told what to do, of being controlled by others;
5. a feeling that one can't do anything so why try;
6. a feeling of indecisiveness, of being unable to make decisions;

7. a feeling of not being part of the general community and consequently of not really knowing or being able to use what the community has to offer the individual;
8. a feeling of wanting to get away, to escape from being unwanted - without knowing what can be escaped to, to create satisfaction and completeness.

In brief, there is a dominating feeling of powerlessness that inhibits all activity outside of one's own group. To most of us it is hard to appreciate the effect of this sense of alienation, this sense of powerlessness. Leo Hannet says:

To be a coloured person in a white world, defined and controlled by whites, is a unique experience that only coloured people can relate.

In recent years, a great deal has been done by the Education Department to encourage community development and community involvement in education. School-based decision sharing and school-based curriculum development are alive and well in quite a number of schools where sincere attempts are being made to develop syllabuses that are meaningful and relevant to student needs.

The National Aboriginal Education Committee, established in March, 1977 has, in its short life, become a powerful advocate for dialogue and involvement between schools and Aboriginal communities. Bearing in mind what Ingram, Randall and Hannet had to say about alienation, schools would be well advised to consider carefully how to develop and nurture trust, goodwill and respect in the partnership role which is seen as inevitable and much to be desired if children - all children - are to "cope with and gain satisfaction from life and the world."

#### References :

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