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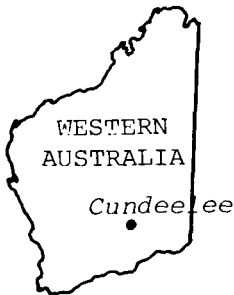
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SURVIVAL,
EXPECTATIONS,
AND UNDERACHIEVEMENT:



SOME OUTCOMES
IN A SPECIAL ABORIGINAL SCHOOL

*T. Misich

As the classification implies, Special Aboriginal Schools necessitate special skills, methodology, philosophy, curricula and above all, special personnel. Unfortunately, for a number of reasons not all of the personnel who have trained for these positions take up appointments in these schools. Quite often it is the ordinary classroom teacher or principal who must review his or her own makeup, and adjust to the new set of circumstances and special needs which they face.

Personal adjustments to the new environment and the planning of educational goals and programs require time. No two situations are exactly alike and no single formula can guarantee success. It is up to the individual to search and to determine, largely through trial and error, a recipe for success.

The degree and meaning of success is inherent in the quality of goals set, rather than the quantity of output. If the incumbents in Special Aboriginal Schools expect high levels of success, they can achieve high levels of success. If they choose only to serve their time, success will not be an outcome. It is the expectations held by the school staff, not what is expected of the school staff, which will promote success and equal educational opportunity. Expectation levels are believed to be critical for both personal survival and educational development within the school.

PERSONAL SURVIVAL

Firstly, personal survival is a very real threat facing any new appointee to a Special Aboriginal School. Surviving the first few weeks is a physical and psychological problem. The oppression of

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isolation, of belonging to a minority group and above all, the new levels of caution and wariness, quickly bring on a high degree of 'culture shock'. The variance in life styles, health standards, work demands and community pressures are difficult to cope with all at once. The new appointee will often be pressured for favours or the like. The duration of pressure largely depends on the individual. In our case at Cundeelee, it was three weeks, before it was realized that a patronizing approach would achieve little. There was no menace behind the many requests but rather it was seen as a necessary means to test the character and patience of the new teacher - "Get what you can while he's still new". If the new teacher expects this, there is no need to prolong it further than one week. However, at the same time it is good 'P.R.' and provides invaluable contact to play the game, for at least a little while. For this reason it is strongly suggested that the appointee take up residence up to two weeks prior to the commencement of school. An early introduction to 'culture shock' will allow time for acceptance and the asserting of one's own character, before being confronted with the burden and demands of work. Communities are genuinely interested and supportive of teachers and the school. To be able to have free time to interact and relate to the community is invaluable.

ESTABLISHING RAPPORT

The establishment of good rapport prior to the first day of the school year will go a long way in ensuring success in the classroom. If a positive image is presented, it will be discussed around the camp within earshot of the children, who in turn reflect it in their attitude to the teacher. It is easy to realize the benefits if the teacher is readily accepted as soon as school begins.

Other benefits of an early arrival are purely physical. It provides time to settle in and adjust to new health standards. Generally, any bodily reaction will emerge in the first two weeks. Again, without the pressures of work the body will adjust more rapidly.

Allowing time to understand and gain acceptance goes a long way in reducing isolation. The community is the source of interaction and support and this can be quickly gained prior to school. A more positive attitude to the coming year will emerge. Greater energy can be devoted to strategies and planning as the hard 'spade work' would have already been done. Without these initial pressures of 'culture shock' it will be far easier to cope with the pressures of work during those coming hectic, first two weeks of school.

The new appointees should 'come to grips' with their personal expectations and those of the community if they are to ensure their own survival within the first few weeks. What often appears harsh and threatening is often the result of what one expects, rather than reality. Support, acceptance, and well being, are what should be expected but these will only be achieved through work. Realizing this and allowing time for them to evolve is important to survival.

EDUCATIONAL EXPECTATIONS

From here, survival is related to the teacher's expectations for educational development within the school. Generally, there is little else to do in Special Aboriginal Schools outside of work. With realistic goals and a positive attitude it is easy to regard the work as a 'challenge', rather than merely as a job. If the expectation levels of the teachers are high and they are prepared to give all they have, the challenge can be rewarding for all. If not, the job may only reach levels of mediocrity and even become soul destroying, thereby setting the tone for educational underdevelopment. The chances of teacher survival and an equal educational opportunity for the children are then minimized.

This realization gradually dawned upon us at Cundeelee and necessitated some real soul searching in attempting to overcome the problem. We discovered some solutions at Cundeelee which could perhaps be applied elsewhere.

The search for direction was grossly time-wasting at first. A common complaint from Special Aboriginal Schools is the loss in time through 'finding your feet'. No amount of past records or contact will overcome the problem of finding a baseline of performance on which the learning program can be developed. It is inherent and unavoidable. However, the degree of wastage could perhaps be minimized with one basic philosophy. That is, the children are at school for educational development and that the teacher should expect the highest possible level of development.

EDUCATIONAL UNDERACHIEVEMENT

Unfortunately, Special Aboriginal Schools all too often imply a special set of preconceived expectations which immediately preclude the school from educational equality. The children are often classified as remedial or retarded and strategies supporting slow development and low achievement are adopted accordingly. Consequently, this can be proliferated from staff to staff over the years, without the realization that the children are not, in fact, remedial or retarded.

Our view of the problem was not one of remediation or retardation, but rather of educational underdevelopment. Educational underdevelopment, then, being the gap between potential development and the stage at which the children are as a result of past expectation levels. It became clear that, as far as humanly possible, we should utilize our time to bridge this gap.

I stress that any staff has only a limited duration of influence which, in Special Aboriginal Schools, is further eroded by the pressures of a totally alien environment. It is the teachers' and principal's responsibility to ensure full maximization of this time to ensure the greatest economy of effective teaching. Our problem in this context was to find a strategy which could fulfil this goal and thus reduce student underachievement.

Tests and assessments of individual performance established areas of low achievement in aspects such as word attack skills and numeracy skills. These, in conjunction with levels of community expectation and a knowledge of the minimal performance levels which are required to ensure progress in secondary education, provided a basis for a dynamic school-based curriculum. We realized our own expectations were low, as were those of people outside the school. This assumption was derived from our own analysis. Pre-set expectations had set the climate for a fairly low-key rate of educational development. Basic skills development handicapped further extension. Consequently, our own expectation levels were reviewed and of necessity increased, so that we could bridge the ever-widening gap.

STRATEGIES

To ensure the greatest maximization of time in fulfilling our goal it became increasingly clear that direct instruction would be the method to adopt. As a result, all aspects of the school evolved into a high degree of formalization. The children were directed through areas of deficiency and into extension programs, as time was of the essence. Pupils were expected to achieve and produce standards not previously set down. This proved very successful but there is still room for improvement.

With a formal timetable and program it was possible to cover all aspects of the curricula in conjunction with our aim of overall educational development. The children's response was positive, providing the direction was interesting. By adapting to the local environment wherever possible and meeting individual needs, the children willingly met our expectations. A formal approach enabled us to be precise in setting our goals and for the children to comprehend and achieve them

in as direct a manner as possible. The rate and quality of development has been most rewarding, with individuals progressing up to three years in some areas with only one and a half years of effective teaching.

Language Development

Our strategy was given a great boost by sheer chance. Cundeelee is a pilot school for the introduction of the Van Leer Language Development Program. This provided an in-built program of direct instruction prior to our arrival at Cundeelee. Van Leer is a comprehensive language program which is highly reliant upon the teacher and extremely prescriptive in its stages of progress and method of presentation. It is highly repetitive in consolidating language patterns involving all aspects of the curriculum. The program's methods and strategies require a regular teacher-dominated routine in lessons. Whilst being direct and prescriptive, it was nevertheless interesting and highly popular with the children. It was an excellent example of how direct instruction may incorporate high interest activities and maximize student participation. This was our aim throughout the school and generally it was achieved. However, as with the Van Leer Program, this approach necessitated a lot of work for the teacher in terms of preparation, presentation and providing direction for the achievement of set goals.

Perhaps the greatest fault with Van Leer was too much repetition and a lack of challenge for the fast achievers. Consequently, units tended to 'drag on' and contradicted our efforts for time economy. As a result basal readers were introduced as, too, was the new W.A. maths syllabus.

Whilst the basal reading and Van Leer schemes vary, it was possible to structure the experiences of language in Van Leer to accommodate those found in basal readers. The results were most rewarding. The quality and quantity of success was such that the gap in underachievement was reduced to only one or two reading units for children in the junior class. This success was reflected in all language skills. Similarly, a great deal of success was achieved through the injection of the recent maths syllabus into a rather stale area of Van Leer, combined with the Van Leer support language program.

The overall success of direct instruction in the junior school was far beyond our expectations. Student achievement and standards were highly rewarding for the teacher, the parents and, more importantly, the students themselves. What is more they were, and continue to be, extremely proud of their results.

The degree of success in the junior school possibly far outweighed that in the middle and upper school. Only the juniors were generally exposed to a 'formal day' and a high set of expectations arising from the adapted program. Even the pre-primary students were introduced to the program in the final term of 1980. This provided an opportunity for an equal start in their first formal year of schooling. Progress achieved in 1981 underlined the importance of such an early start, as these students in Year One displayed remarkable development. Unfortunately, due to circumstances, it has been far more difficult to effectively repeat the program in 1981. However, this by no means alters any expectation levels. The 1982 Year One intake would be expected to succeed as did their predecessors.

In other areas of the school the gap in educational underdevelopment was far greater, as the children had been exposed to various levels of expectation throughout their school history. It was this ambiguity of expectations which at first coloured our own. We realized this, and also that if we did not appraise our own goals, the gap would increase further.

Reading

By using information which was gathered from sources outside the school and combining it with an analysis of student performance, the school staff was able to prepare formal programs which were designed to improve student achievement. Reading skills were considered to be critical. Many basic word attack skills were found to be non-existent. The use of a language experience approach together with the inappropriate level of the reading material which has been used, was found to merely consolidate existing language patterns. Consequently, a formal program of skills development and two core readers were introduced. A sequential approach to blending, digraphs, phonics etc, was employed. One core reader was appropriate to the children's English language competence. The other was well above this level and was used to develop language and provide a literacy background which could lend support in other aspects of the curricula. Where a selection of materials existed, the children were encouraged to choose.

Methodology which incorporated strategies for the introduction of new language was borrowed from Van Leer. Language experience work was then redirected to oral and written English in these formal programs. This area was too important to neglect and we aimed to expose the children to the 'wider society' as often as possible. Trips to Kalgoorlie and Perth were not only valuable sources of language experience, but also provided a concrete base for abstract elements to be developed in the classroom. Basically, all teachers are of 'wider

society' and the academic and social skills we planned to impart required this necessary base.

Extracurricular excursions were beneficial in the development of the two-core reader scheme. With greater exposure the task of introducing new topics and language was made ever so much easier. The children's own experiences were often reflected in their choice of reading materials.

In other language areas, such as spelling, normal unit core materials were used at appropriate levels. Whilst it can be argued that some of the work may be irrelevant to the children's environment, it must be remembered that our aim was towards total educational development. The children had to be given the opportunity to experience these aspects of language if we were to provide equal opportunity. Their response met our expectations.

Mathematics

A similar approach was adopted in the maths program. The focus was directed to problem areas in preference to the overall introduction of the latest maths syllabus. Where the gap was greatest, as in the senior school, the syllabus had less influence, and vice versa. Hence Number, especially Numerical Operations, took up the vast majority of the program. Development has been successful and perhaps now would be the time to change direction and swing more to the complete introduction of the standard syllabus.

General

Success in other areas of the school was not as marked, basically because our focus was in the skills areas. Without the development of these skills, development in other areas was greatly handicapped. With the success we had in the skills areas, there is no reason why our expectations in other sections of the curricula could not be duplicated.

SUMMARY

Upon reflection, our direct and formal strategies served as a tool in reducing educational underdevelopment. This by no means suggests the gap has been closed or is even anywhere near being closed. However, it does suggest that, with the right expectations and strategies, great inroads can be made and should continue to be made.

Perhaps our methodology was over-formal and too direct. I stress, however, that in the time teachers have for effective teaching whilst in Aboriginal schools, it is a strategy which provides for an optimum use of time and clarifies levels of expectation. The time is still not ripe to fully open up the program, but in a few years the 'up and coming' juniors could fulfil this goal.

If teachers have the right expectations they will achieve the right results. High expectations should persist throughout the community and not only reflect the attitude of those at school. By involving the community as far as possible into the life of the school, an understanding of the need for educational development does filter through.

People from the community at Cundeelee help in the making and laundering of uniforms, running a school lunch program, listening to reading, assisting with pre-school groups, covering books, participating in busy bees, operating a school bus contract, running recreation activities, attending open days and, above all, 'calling in' to see their children's work at any time during the day. This led to the development of an understanding that the Cundeelee School was their school, and that they should expect the best of their children.

School evolved as a communal centre for 'chit chat', adult classes and generally a 'happy place' for everyone. The school's National Aboriginal Day celebration has become an accepted event imbued with such a high degree of importance that the men take over from first light. Simple things such as this evolve when the community becomes aware that teachers have the interest of their children at heart and that they expect to provide the children with an educational opportunity which is equal to that which exists anywhere in the 'wider society'. While being quite formal in scholastic terms, it by no means precludes openness to the community.

There were 'downs and ups', but having our own direction and the support of the community, the downs did not hurt too much.

In conclusion, I would not deter anyone from the challenge and experience gained in a Special Aboriginal School. It is believed that if teachers are honest with their expectations within and without the school, success will also be honest. The direction teachers long for and seek in Aboriginal education will come largely from themselves and their schools. Once this is realized, survival and success are guaranteed.

Our experience at Cundeelee caused us to realize that the students were in a state of underdevelopment in education and that our responsibility was to bridge this gap. The strategies we used may not be universally appropriate or acceptable, but we feel they are worthy of comment. Success was achieved to a significant degree. Perhaps the overriding factor lay not in the strategies which were applied, but rather, was related to our expectations. Too often, our expectations of Aboriginal children have been too low. This merely perpetuates an acceptance of continued underdevelopment. The setting of levels which are too high is supportive of the opposite case. Low expectations condemn children to an inequality of educational opportunity. It is teacher expectation which does much to determine educational development and the achievement of student success and satisfaction.

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