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ACROSS AUSTRALIA.....

FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER

DEVELOPING ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATION

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Most Aboriginal communities in Australia have been provided with government schools, built, staffed and organized by government departments. As with mission schools, the motivation for schooling has largely come from outside the community itself, though often with tacit community support. Although formal 'Western' schooling fits uncomfortably with the values of a hunter-gatherer society, in most cases schools have adapted very little to the special environment of an Aboriginal community. Not surprisingly, both achievement and attendance are often poor. Attempts to vary programs, as in bilingual education, and to augment the staff of these schools with Aboriginal teacher aides (teaching assistants), have not altered this situation greatly, though this does not negate the worth of these initiatives.

One of the many possible reasons for this predicament is the lack of community control over what happens in its school. In many cases this is almost absolute, duplicating the lack of control over land, law, health services and many other aspects of life. For this reason, schools have been seen by some authors as one of the more direct agents of cultural change, acting to assimilate Aboriginal people into white society with a community that functions as a 'total' institution. The natural resistance of Aboriginal people to this process is likely to have profound implications for Aboriginal community schools.

What, then, can be done to provide communities with the opportunity to exert some control over the type of education their children will receive in the government school? At Aurukun in North Queensland there exists a School Advisory Committee which is taking worthwhile initiatives and demonstrating that informed community participation in educational decision-making can occur within a Government education system. This year, for example, the Committee

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has appointed a school counsellor who would act as a 'mediator' (the term used by the person who raised the idea) within and between the school and the community. As such, the counsellor is responsible for acting as a liaison officer to find out why some students are not attending, as an advisor to white staff in the school should they unwittingly create problems through ignorance of Aboriginal cultural values, and as a member of the administration team in resolving conflicts between students, and assisting with discipline, particularly in the Secondary Department. As no immediate source of funding for the position was known, voluntary fund raising activities were commenced by the Committee which was able to raise sufficient money from discos and food selling to pay the counsellor for some months, pending a submission for government funds. Suitable candidates for the position were approached by the Committee, and those interested were interviewed before a selection was made. The school counsellor is now an important part of the school, playing an active role in school administration.

It may be worth considering the background to a development such as this. For a start, these things take time. An Advisory Committee has existed in Aurukun for several years, with Departmental encouragement. Lacking legal powers (such as are found in, for example, Boards of Governors in Britain or Papua New Guinea), a great deal depends upon the attitude of the Principal, who can easily manipulate such a body to become a rubber stamp for his initiatives, or alternatively, can work for genuine sharing of decision-making. As Principal, on arrival at Aurukun 3½ years ago, I made my first professional duty a meeting with the community council, inviting the members to continue to participate in the Advisory Committee. While the Committee met regularly every few months, it was more than two years before a meeting was called by the Chairman rather than by me, and over three years before significant initiatives were taken by the Committee. A feature of meetings now is the active involvement of a number of members who feel confident enough to request reports on aspects of the school of interest to them or ask to visit classes. Such confidence must be worked for. An important early decision by the Committee was to turn down an almost unanimous request by staff for an earlier start to the school day. Whether the rejection of this request was justified or not, the school abided by it, and the Committee saw that its decisions carried weight.

Another important task for the Principal is the education of Committee members as to the alternatives available to the school within the broad policy guidelines of the Department of Education. No committee can be expected to make good policy decisions in education without some knowledge of the options available. Initially,

it is desirable to avoid issues that may lead to a decision being overruled by the Education Department. While a mature group may be able to handle this situation, it could be very destructive in the early stages of its development. The Principal's role here is to explain likely Departmental reactions to initiatives and to do his homework with the Department before throwing in suggestions for consideration by the Committee. The Principal must also undertake the sensitive task of educating Committee members and the community generally to any deficiencies in the schooling of their children. Poor academic performance due to poor attendance is a typical problem area. It is important that parents realize how well their children perform in school, but great care is needed to avoid either of two fairly natural reactions; the first being to blame the teachers for not doing their job, and the second is to see this as yet another failure of Aboriginal people to cope with a white man's world.

An early problem for a principal new to a school, and particularly if he is unfamiliar with Aboriginal culture, is to decide whether the Committee is telling him what the members think he wants to hear. Again time is needed to develop confidence and increase one's sensitivity to what is being expressed by the Committee, possibly in ways that are difficult for an outsider to grasp. A related problem can be mistrust of the motives of Committee members. For example, will nepotism be a problem in appointing someone to a position in the school? My experience has been that, when the qualities that are required for a certain job are fully discussed, it is not likely that an inappropriate person will be chosen, whatever family relationships operate. Developing trust in the judgement of the Committee can be a slow process, but it is essential if the Committee is to function effectively.

To summarize, I believe genuine and valuable community involvement in educational decision-making is possible in Aboriginal schools operating within a State Education Department. An advisory committee, with the support of the principal, is able to make a constructive contribution to school policy. However, time is needed to build relationships and establish trust between committee members and the school administration. As well, judgement must be exercised as to which matters should be brought to the attention of the committee, particularly in its early development, and careful explanation of alternatives available to the school must precede decision-making. As a committee gains experience, it should take increasing responsibility for the development of school policy, to the long-term benefit of community and school.

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