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WHY NOT TRY POSITIVE DISCRIMINATION?

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Education systems are devised by the members of a society to perpetuate the values, customs and beliefs of that culture. Therefore, in a multicultural society, any child from a minority cultural group who is educated in the educational system of the majority cultural group as, for example, most Aboriginal students, *must* be at a disadvantage.

Despite the fact that unless they work in traditional or semi-traditional areas, large numbers of teachers will not perceive any cultural differences, Aboriginal students *do feel different*. They *do* perceive differing value patterns between their own and the wider 'white' society and at times they feel alienated and alone, swamped by a sea of white faces and white ideals.

Traditionally, teachers have felt that it was important to treat all students exactly the same: that any variation from this ideal would savour of injustice and that anathema to all good teachers - favouritism! Surely, the aim to provide equal opportunity for all implies equal treatment for all - or does it? What of the child who is disadvantaged before entering the classroom, simply because he belongs to a minority culture? How is it possible to erase the inequalities engendered by this situation so that in fact *all* students *are given equal opportunities*? Why not try "Positive discrimination"?

"Positive discrimination" implies treating a student differently in order to assist that student in the acquisition of positive reinforcement regarding his sense of self worth, aims and achievements. This is a sensitive issue so teachers who are unsure of methods of approach or who feel uncomfortable with the idea should not attempt to use it. However, for the caring sensitive teacher who also has plenty of experience, the good news is that positive discrimination works! In order to make it work there are some salient points worth noting:

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1. Positive discrimination should be applied gently and subtly e.g. during the first lesson of the school year in a secondary school it is almost impossible for a teacher to speak personally with every child in the class.

If there were only a few Aboriginal children in a class of thirty students, positive discrimination would ensure that of the ten to fifteen children with whom the teacher spoke on a one-to-one basis, the Aboriginal children would be deliberately included in that number, rather than accidentally excluded as is too often the case. For Aboriginal people the depth of their relationships with others is of fundamental value, so these, of all students should be among the first to be drawn into the teacher's circle of warmth, and nurtured. In the situation just described the students at this early stage, are receiving it, yet the white majority is unaware of the discrimination.

2. For teachers who are sure of their ground, it is possible, quite early in the year, to meet with a group of children from the minority group and openly discuss the problems, including racism, facing them.

At this point it is important for the teacher to:

- a) show that she is aware of several of the problems the students' may be having, by enumerating those which have been mentioned by other students;
- b) show that she 'refuses' to believe that their abilities are limited; that this tactic has been used as a 'cop-out'; and that with her instruction and help the students *will* succeed;
- c) indicate that the students success is essential not just for themselves but for *their people*;
- d) indicate to these students that she is prepared to act on their behalf, to help with school problems, to listen and in lesser areas to counsel even if the extent of the counselling is only to go with the student to someone better qualified in that area.

During this meeting the teacher is, in effect, running a "man overboard" drill. She is providing the students with information that lifelines exist and showing them where they can be found so that if or when crises arise the student knows where to seek support, without resorting to the usual anti-social/aggressive/anti-school tactics.

3. Like verbal language, non-verbal language is culture oriented. Because most teachers of Aboriginal students have a different cultural background and because they often tend to be inhibited in their contact with these students, many Aboriginal children are unaware that their teachers genuinely care about them and their problems. There is a communication gap. The third stage of the approach therefore must be a carefully considered and conducted campaign to close the gap. By talking to and touching students the teacher must now indicate to the child in a hundred different ways that he or she, his opinions and his class participation are noticed and valued.
4. Finally, positive discrimination does not imply the total exclusion of teacher interest in the rest of the class. That would be ridiculous - rather it suggests a change in focus so that the teacher is making a deliberate effort to include in the classroom dynamics in a positive way, those who otherwise may be out on the edge -
 - the truants
 - the quiet children - those who "won't say boo to a goose" but more or less do most of the work,
 - the rampant extroverts whose underachievement is paramount and whose behaviour is said by other teachers to be impossible.

These three extremes do seem to be the symptoms of the child who is insecure, unsupported and adrift in the alien culture of the classroom. If you really wish to provide equal opportunity for all, why not try positive discrimination for the children from minority groups in your classroom?

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