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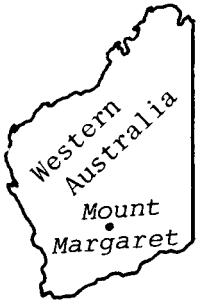
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ACROSS AUSTRALIA.....

FROM TEACHER TO TEACHER



TEACHING IN REMOTE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES: PRACTICAL STRATEGIES

*J.P. Heslop

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE TEACHER AND THE COMMUNITY

To go into an isolated Aboriginal community as the only teacher requires very careful preparation and demands a unique type of individual. However, out of the challenge of the situation can develop warm and lasting friendships and the arrival at the position where the school is a key point in the community, playing a vital role in the growth of the locality and the individuals in it. The teacher must initiate the effort to develop sound relations and the best place to start is in the classroom.

THE SCHOOL

There is a cultural difference between the Aboriginal child and his white teacher, but, if the teacher sees it for what it is - *cultural difference and not cultural deficit* - a solid start has been made towards developing friendly relations with the community, and providing the children with success. Observe the following aspects of the learning process that focus on the strengths of Aboriginal children (Sherwood, 1982, pp. 130-133) :

1. Observation and imitation.
2. Personal trial-and-error.
3. Real-life performance rather than through practise.
4. Orientation to persons (children need to like you to work at their best).
5. Mastery of context-specific skills.
6. Deal with the present time.
7. Persistence and repetition.
8. Deal with topics as wholes (language experience techniques).

Children will start to enjoy school especially if you have brought material and ideas from your home to make your lessons

* Principal, Mount Margaret School, via Laverton, W.A. 6440.

interesting. Happy children make happy parents and they will show a pleasant attitude to you.

If the journals or past programs are on hand, study them for any record of successful programs conducted during the past decade. Some excellent teachers have probably gone before you and the highlights of their service will have been recorded. Amplify these records and re-introduce the project with your own modifications. It may well be successful again.

Involve the parents and the community. Confide in them what your aims are, how you intend to achieve them, the role the children should assume and the responsibilities and duties open to members of the community. These matters could be discussed at a P & C meeting. Relate the same information at a Community Council meeting if you are permitted to attend.

Use volunteers in constructive ways. They can help you adapt your teaching to the local cultural orientation and so help make your lessons more meaningful for the children. In reading and language, for example, adults could record stories for literature and help transcribe them into reading books. They could use the local vernacular in the classroom and assist in bilingual reading programs.

Local people will be flattered if asked to help in the school, because you are telling them that their culture is important. Most parents believe that education is important (they might not know why) and for the teacher, even in small ways, to integrate the Aboriginal culture into education, means that the importance of the culture is recognised.

Once local people are helping in the school, take advantage of Adult Education funds and assistance. Your wife/husband might enjoy conducting cooking, sewing, domestic science, art/manual arts, mechanics. Mothers could be involved in preparing a cooked lunch for the school children by way of the Adult Education lessons, or make clothes in preparation for a school camp.

Involve the men as well, not in practice or contrived settings such as - 'hunting instruction from 1.00 p.m. to 2.00 p.m.' - but in practical ways. Men who work during the day can't get up to the school, so use Minor Works funds and contract the Community to develop school grounds. For example, men could build a stage and landscape a lawned area in school grounds so you can have outside film evenings during summer as a fund raising effort for the school camp or whatever. The men will be, rightly, proud of their job,

and the film evenings will see the school as a focal point for the community. Respect for the school and you as the teacher will grow.

In the classroom, you need to be realistically demanding of your students and prepare them for fitting into a European society as well as their own. Standard English (S.A.E.) needs to be mastered by every Aboriginal child as the key to future advancement (jobs, further education, social advancement) and I am satisfied that most parents want that mastery for their children as well. Parents want their children to do well in Maths, Writing, Speech, Reading and other subjects. By building on the strengths of Aboriginal children outlined earlier in this paper, the teacher has his best chance for helping each child. Success will engender respect from the community.

Finally, use the outside environment as a resource. Children feel more relaxed in their 'home territory' and you will find there are many useful educational experiences just outside the classroom door.

THE TEACHER AND THE COMMUNITY

Stay home. Don't go away every weekend to the nearest European settlement if there is one nearby. Stay home, or perhaps go camping, or 'go bush' with some of the locals. Make the community your home. Be visible - get involved in local events. For example, help in the shop on Saturday mornings, go to church, take a drive out for kangaroos, or just talk to the people.

At the same time, ensure that you maintain your privacy. Your family are important people and need your attention. Don't become a martyr in three months. Don't allow yourself to be abused by always lending tools, petrol, cassettes or food. Sometimes a 'wiya' (no) is necessary. Maybe you can make Sunday your day without visitors; a family day.

Your family. You and your family should be physically fit and your personal relationships sound before considering spending time in a small Aboriginal community. Your role as an effective teacher will be compromised if there are problems at home. Involve your wife/husband in the school, if possible, especially if s/he isn't a teacher. There are plenty of opportunities for involvement.

Ensure that the education of your children doesn't suffer. Have strategies prepared in case they get picked on because you have punished another child at school. Make sure they have plenty of activities to keep them busy during their times out of school.

For yourself, don't allow the isolation to hinder your efforts at personal professional development. Take up some study, subscribe to professional journals, seek as many visits from advisory staff as possible, and ask a senior colleague to be your 'mentor'. As a 'mentor' he should be happy to receive your letters or listen to your problems during school holidays, and respond in confidence with suggestions and encouragement. A former principal, lecturer, or colleague would be ideal. You'll be a better teacher once you can see another viewpoint to some problems.

To help you concentrate your energies on teaching, make sure before you travel to your school that :

- 1) you and your family are physically fit;
- 2) all recurring debts are going to be met automatically from your bank or credit society;
- 3) your new house is in good order. Interview the former teacher and arrange with the State Housing Authority to attend to any repair jobs in the house before school starts;
- 4) you have a supply of food in case there are any irregularities in the frequency of community food deliveries;
- 5) Your car is in good order. Carry a range of spare parts and, if you are going to buy a new vehicle specially for driving up to your new location, make sure you buy a model for which spare parts are readily available;
- 6) you understand the administration of the school. Interview the former principal and ask him to go through relevant books with you during the Christmas holidays before you take up your appointment;
- 7) you are satisfied that your family will cope with living in an isolated location.

CONCLUSION

From the discussion in this paper I have tried to highlight the personal qualities of a teacher in a small Aboriginal community. In summary they include:

1. Culturally pluralistic (tolerant).
2. Innovative and creative
3. Outgoing, while being sensitive to other people.

4. Firm, consistent and fair.
5. Professional and wise.
6. Supportive to the community.
7. A good husband/wife and father/mother.
8. Easily contented.
9. Moderate in behaviour.

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