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INCORPORATING TRADITIONAL CULTURAL MATERIAL INTO THE CURRICULUM OF ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

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SETTING THE SCENE

Queensland has isolated Aboriginal communities whose contact with the dominant society is restricted by the tyranny of distance, if nothing else. Several additional communities experience greater contact because of proximity.

In 1972, a majority of these schools were still mission controlled. Transition to State responsibility has occurred at various negotiated rates, but by 1978 all were the responsibility of the Queensland Education Department except for Islander schools in the Torres Straits. These remained the concern of the Department of Aboriginal and Islanders Advancement until 1985.

Problems concerning the education of ethnic minorities were enumerated in the early 1970s. Examples are:-

- The almost total failure of ethnic members to achieve in school.
- The incongruency between classroom expectations and those manifested by students.
- The relevance or irrelevance of curriculum content.
- The appropriateness of teaching strategies.
- The effects of language difference.
- The alienation between school and community.

These issues continue to exercise the minds of educators.

Reference is made through the body of this paper to three alternative programs - ethnic studies, bilingual teaching and the teaching of aspects of traditional culture within the school. Resourcing innovative programs was a real issue for anyone contemplating them in the early seventies. Any adopted program had to be alive and functional for both school and community.

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IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM

Demographics contributed to the changes in Government policies that took place during the late 1960s.

There was a rapid decline in the numbers until 1890, then a slow regression in the rate of decline until it ceased about 1930, with the numbers stabilising about 1933.

(*Australian*, 1976, p.46)

Stevens (1970, p.372) has shown that the total estimated Aboriginal population has increased from 75,385 in 1927 to 139,050 in 1969, to 254,000 in 1981. This indicates that the Aboriginal population is both significant and increasing. Aborigines were not going to vanish as had been anticipated during the first half of the twentieth century. Changing public attitude

culminated in the overwhelming approval for alteration to the Commonwealth constitution which was given to the Federal government in 1967 to enable it to take over responsibility for Aboriginal affairs through the nation.

(Stevens, 1970, p.378)

The earliest visible result of Commonwealth intervention was the closure of the old dormitory system. More funds were now available. This meant a program of material improvement to educational facilities - buildings and more trained teachers. Education was to extend beyond the existing Year Four level of the 1960s.

Most communities in the early seventies had their anthropologist. These people challenged the practices of the European establishment in these communities. The school, its educational practices and teachers were not sacrosanct in this regard. Questions such as the following were posed to teachers -

- Could the community be more involved in the school?
- What concessions to or account of the culture is the school taking?
- To what extent does the curriculum take account of the culture?
- What is the purpose of the school education - Westernization or coping?

A philosophy which espoused the need for greater community involvement with schools and education in general, was also coming to the fore.

Aboriginal parents perceived the school as an institution representing a plot by the dominant Europeans to continue to take

their children from them. This alienation of minority groups from the dominant group in society is well documented -

...it is a common feeling within the group that their group does not belong with the dominant group in society.

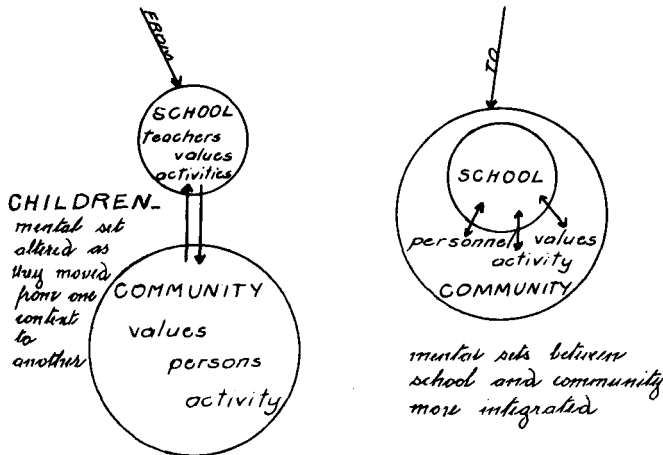
(Barry, 1980, p.43)

Consideration of such questions gravitated thought towards how to take account of the cultural difference that existed between the school and its clientele? Any innovation should be aimed at reducing the existing alienation of the school from the community; making the school a more meaningful part of the community life.

The Aboriginal children oscillate, both physically and mentally, between the school context and the community context. Knowledge and values are cognitively compartmentalized, and are reserved for each specific environment. The aim ought to be towards integration of the school into the community. For example, Aboriginal adults would participate more in school life and gain understanding; similarly, teachers could be more visible as participants in community activities and gain, in turn, an understanding of Aboriginal values.

COGNITIVE SCHEMA OF THE PERCEIVED SCHOOL/COMMUNITY SITUATION

IDEALLY any project needed to promote a change



Knowledge remained specific to each context, i.e. school learning was basically useless in community life and home knowledge was devalued by the school.

Valuing by the school of contributions from the community. Community sees school participating in community life.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Three alternatives suggest themselves:

1. Ethnic Studies
2. Bilingual Program
3. Traditional Culture in Teaching Program

Each of these programs could serve common goals. For example:

- To foster pride in heritage.
- To assist school life to relate to cultural values.
- To improve liaison between school and community.
- To encourage students to be better citizens of their own and the wider society.
- To destroy stereotyping on both sides - school and community.

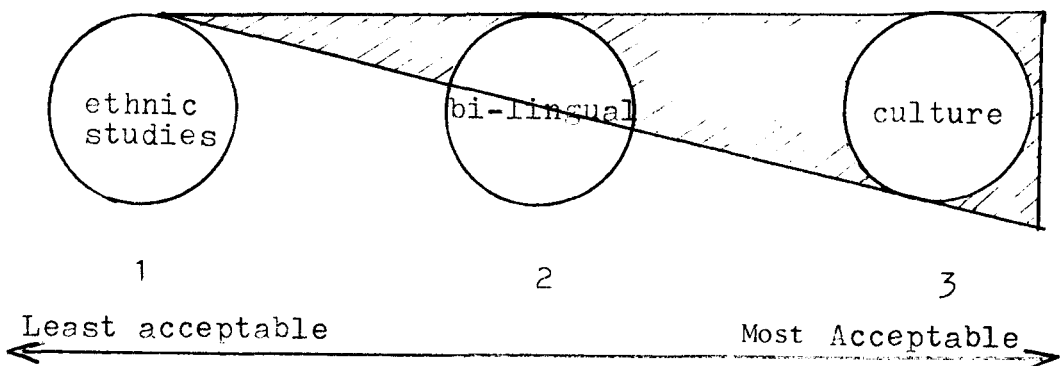
In differential ways the three alternatives take account of the belief

...that every child has a right to be brought up as a member of his own culture. This does not mean that he must be prevented from learning about (and learning from) other cultures, but simply for survival the individual must be firmly rooted in his past, and his past (perhaps more than his present) is his culture.

(Aboriginal Consultative Group 1975)

PERSPECTIVES

Aboriginal perspective of the proposals



From an Aboriginal perspective the three proposals can be placed upon a scale of remoteness from Aboriginal experience. That is, from understanding and meaningfulness. This is not to suggest they don't understand ethnicity - they are only too aware of the many differences between themselves and Europeans. As prevails in European thought, Aborigines think in terms of inferiority/superiority rather than difference.

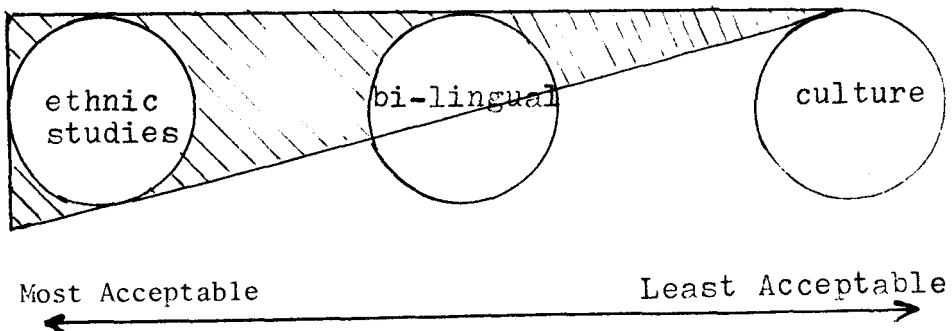
In terms of an educational curriculum, however, it is believed that the content of a traditional culture-type program would be much more meaningful than the content of an ethnic program. This term 'ethnic' would be strange to begin with, while song, dance, myth, kinship and artifacts are clear, concrete concepts. Talk of other peoples and studying them is conceptually meaningless to Aborigines in an isolated community - their experiences and their general outlook tend to be confined to their own community.

The bilingual proposal falls between the other two. Language is part of culture. It is familiar. For such a program to be considered by the school an orthography has to exist, so that there is already literature available in the language. If so, how many can actually read it? Is there, or has there been any teaching and learning of how to read in the vernacular?

Hence the community is likely to relate more positively to the second and third proposals than to the first proposal.

From an educational perspective, the first proposal could be seen to be more acceptable than the second or third. This does seem a little more arbitrary than the previous discussion of the Aboriginal perspective. Teachers, however, would readily commence to relate ethnic studies to social studies. Bilingual education would fall between the other two alternatives with the culture program tending to be viewed as add-in or add-on material.

Teachers' perspective of the proposals



Based upon these two perceptions the implications for making a decision are obvious. Alternatives one and three have low acceptance ratings by one group or the other, while alternative two enjoys a degree of acceptability by each. Thus, a decision in favour of the bilingual program seems indicated; there are educational advantages in such a program as well as boosting community input to the school.

RESOURCES

Resource material is available in all three curricula. In support of an Ethnic Studies approach, a multi-cultural/pluralistic societal climate of thought is abroad among the public as well as in educational circles. Among the school staff it is reasonable to expect at least one person to have pursued some form of study in the teaching of the culturally different, possibly Aborigines in particular. Material resources and teacher talent have been considerably enhanced in recent years.

Sources for the content of a Traditional Culture program are anthropological material and the community itself. A problem with the content of any literature is that specific cultural detail varies from Aboriginal group to Aboriginal group. This need not be considered a hindrance to the problem to be solved, viz., reducing discontinuity and alienation between school and community. In fact, one might consider the situation ideal - the feeder community would be the source of the content. Using the traditional culture program would also be more directly related to a need which parents perceive; namely, to increase knowledge about and the skills of the children in their own heritage. For the school it would mean direct interaction with community adults.

With a bilingual program some of this interaction would occur only indirectly. That is, Aboriginal translators working with literacy personnel, unless, of course, more deliberate efforts were made to foster involvement. A bilingual program would provide opportunities for parent participation.

ORGANIZING CONTENT

Ethnic studies would require either experienced advisers helping teachers to frame a curriculum, or very sound resource material.

Content organization, viz. sequencing, repetition, activities, etc., is going to be very structured for the bilingual program. The program is not just a subject, but a philosophy of education directed towards improving educational outcomes for ethnically different and

minority groups. So, out of this, the materials, procedures and methods would grow and develop. The influence of such a program is going to extend vertically and horizontally through the school curricula and methods. Hence there is a need for people skilled in curriculum development. Literacy in the vernacular is only one strand.

Because of the infancy of traditional culture as curriculum in schools, the content would be drawn directly from the community. Aboriginal distrust of European motives could hinder organization of materials. If a perception developed that the school was trying to impose too much 'white man' organization, systematization and influence on procedures, withdrawal actions and communication breakdown could become very evident.

One possible excellent source of cultural information and liaison with community members would be the anthropologist, or a similar person, referred to earlier. The extent of this person's assistance would depend upon -

- a) Rapport. (In 1972, for example, a poor relationship may have already developed between the school and the anthropologist);
- b) That person's educational knowledge. (This, of course, is the teacher's own area of expertise.)
- c) How broad his knowledge and community interaction is. (e.g. he may be working with one family only, and specializing in some particular aspect of the culture. In fact, intra-community jealousies may exist.)
- d) How frequently and when is the anthropologist in the community? A visitor's time is usually committed.

Of course, someone with permanency and with the cultural knowledge would be of substantial advantage. (Such persons are virtually non-existent, except for the Aborigines themselves.)

STAFFING

In the community situation under consideration here, ideally each of these alternatives requires a co-ordinator with expertise and experience, if for no other reason than that of constantly changing teaching staff. Ethnic studies might have the least necessity for a co-ordinator, bilingual studies the greater demand because of the use of the vernacular and the esoteric educational knowledge involved, while experience has shown that a co-ordinator

to the culture program is administratively desirable. To proceed, bilingual education would have to have a source of funds to employ a suitable person in a co-ordinating/advisory role. For the traditional culture program and the ethnic studies, a co-ordinator is an ideal, not a necessity.

A significant feature of the Traditional Culture teaching program will be the need for Aborigines direct from the community to act as 'teachers' on a regular basis. This implies a need for funding of wages. As mentioned earlier, funds could be accessed from the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs - even in 1972/3.

Selection of personnel from the Aboriginal community requires consideration of these criteria:

1. Knowledge of own culture - especially Dreaming stories, dance forms, ownership of stories, dances, land areas and sacred sites; significance of sacred sites, dances and heroes of the Dreaming.
2. Ability to speak English - to promote communication with the school. Children speak a Creole at Mornington Island. Only the elderly utilize a vernacular on a regular basis.
3. Skill, patience and ability to interact effectively with school age children. The tendency to allow children beyond about age five a large degree of independence, and the exercising of very little constraint upon the children's actions by adults, would indicate that some teaching skills would be necessary.
4. Willingness of suitable individuals to work with children. Willingness could be expected to hinge very much on (3).
5. Community acceptability of possible 'teachers'.
 - belief in their (quantity and quality of) knowledge;
 - status within the Aboriginal society;
 - effect upon kinship behaviours across groups (in other words, the more traditional an Aboriginal community, the more difficult it is to locate an Aboriginal who would be acceptable as a common teacher of cultural matters.)
4. Information from European administrative staff concerning suitability of possible Aboriginal individuals as to employability, responsibility and dependability.

Implementation of a bilingual program would also be required to employ aides or teachers direct from the community. The ethnic program would not need to, hence one of its major disadvantages, in this case.

IN-SERVICE

A degree of in-service would be necessary, if only to induct new teachers into the particular program year by year. Relative to practice in any one of the three alternatives, teacher goodwill may be readily available or created, but inadequate background produces a concern for doing the right thing (Budby, 1982, p.43).

ADMINISTRATION

Fitting the new curricula into the school routine has to be considered. Ethnic studies could be treated as a specific subject, in which case time has to be found. Time would probably be allocated from Social Studies. Such an event, however, would herald that the program was narrow in its approach and no real solution to the problem posed by this paper. An integration across other curricular areas is to be preferred.

An effective multi-ethnic educational process must move beyond the compartmentalization and isolation of the study of ethnic groups to the incorporation of the study of ethnicity throughout the entire school curriculum.

(Cortes, 1976, p.8)

In such a situation the chief administrative concern would be to provide adequate library resource materials.

The bilingual program produces no cause for concern. Its influence will be pervasive, but as far as specific times allocated, it will use the language allocation. No additional teaching space is required. Suitable storage space for developed material is desirable but is no more than a regular school storage problem.

The Traditional Culture program could be anticipated to locate itself outside classrooms, 'under the trees'. Time tabling would be a real issue. Which other curricula would have to be truncated to balance the time/subject budgets? Flexibility would need to be a ruling principle, as rigid time slots for a given activity were not likely to be the rule. Tools (saws, hammers, rasps, knives, axes, etc.) would have to be acquired, stored and maintained. Strategies for the timely, adequate collection and storage of raw materials (timber for boomerangs, spear handles,

digging sticks, etc., bark for paintings; grass for string making; roots for the extraction of dye) would also have to be developed. Hence, to implement the culture proposal involves more extraneous change to a school routine than does either of the other alternatives.

WHICH ALTERNATIVE?

Motivated by the active interest and concern of a section of the Mornington Island Aboriginal Community, the Mornington Island School introduced cultural activities for school children during 1972. This small community body was so self-motivated that initial costs of the school program were met from funds set aside for the purpose by touring traditional dance teams. So, at Mornington, alternative Three had strong community support, an important consideration when introducing innovatory or school-based curriculum.

Faced with the alternatives presented here and located on Mornington Island the author would, today, still select the proposal to teach traditional culture as part of school curricula. The same decision would not necessarily be taken in another and different isolated Aboriginal community. For example, the author was involved with the decision to introduce a bilingual program to the Aurukun School in 1973.

The teacher must understand the influences of both the family and the peer groups, indeed the influences of the whole background of the child, and take account of them in curriculum planning, using positive influences to advantage and trying to overcome the negative influences.

(Nichols, 1972, p.28)

JUSTIFICATION

A teacher, to be effective in human relations, must know, understand, come to terms with, and alter, if needed and possible, his own feelings and prejudices towards the student people he is dealing with. His function as a teacher is constructive, supportive, positive and sometimes corrective. If his feelings are largely negative and unsympathetic towards his students he will find teaching a misery and his effect miserable. This does not mean that he must learn to love them all, but at the very least, he must feel a measure of empathetic personal self-satisfaction in their company and seek to inspire similar feelings in them towards each other.

(Schueler, 1971, p.140)

The existence of the traditional Aboriginal Culture curricula creates a point of direct and interactive contact between the community and the school. At the school's induction program at the commencement of the school year, new teachers may meet their first adult fullblood Aborigines face to face. These will be Culture teachers always willing to explain aspects of their culture, beliefs and behaviour to those who express interest. Anxieties of new teachers can be allayed while coming to know their first Aboriginal persons. This can be the first step to "alter, if needed and possible, his own feelings and prejudices", and to "understanding" a culture very different from his/her own in the majority of instances.

The Aboriginal teachers, as part of the establishment, are welcoming and helping new teachers to settle into their new appointment and its strangely different environment. This exercise contributes to the self-confidence of the Aborigines, who are also information gatherers for the community at large. Initial reactions on both sides, European teachers and Aborigines, are calculated to be more favourable under the controlled and structured conditions of the in-service program than they might be elsewhere, e.g. at the canteen.

As the school academic year commences, culture teachers are noted to be in consultation with the principal and the teacher co-ordinators of the Culture Program by new staff members and parents. Aborigines are perceived to be involved with and concerned for the education of their children.

An awareness of the constraints that apply in the school environment will impinge upon the consciousness of the Aborigines as they negotiate to organize their program to fit in with the school. There is the opportunity to interact more closely with teachers as class cultural activities proceed. Their understanding of the school content will increase.

The culture lessons will provide European teachers with information about Aboriginal culture they might otherwise never learn. They may even be motivated to pursue points of interest with the culture teachers. There is the potential for cross-cultural friendships. If this ideal is realized, such teachers will perceive the need to go beyond just gathering information. They will begin to appreciate the meaning of particular aspects of the children's behaviour in class.

By understanding this behaviour, which at first is obviously strange and difficult to cope with, teachers can begin to relate

more appropriately to their clientele. They may even be able to adopt teaching styles and strategies which are more compatible with learning styles. This has a greater chance of occurring with weekly Culture contact than if no Culture classes existed within the bounds of the school environment.

Motivated teachers will be able to utilize material from the Culture lessons in the classroom. Dreamtime stories and heroes readily lend themselves to the development of experience readers at either individual or class level. Such readers developed using the class or the individual's own vocabulary are of intense interest, because the story content is so meaningful to the pupils. It is their own in several aspects:-

- i) direct from their own heritage, and
- ii) through their own participation in the production of the reader.

Taking a reverse approach, school art can move out to the Culture lessons - to bark painting, string dyeing, weaving, carving, decorating boomerangs, etc.

Integration with as many subject disciplines as possible, particularly the expressive arts, should come naturally.

(Howard, 1978, p.43)

These exercises reinforce the valuing of things Aboriginal. Culture content is extended beyond the Culture Program and integrated with other areas of the curricula. Pride in Aboriginality is supported, while the interaction between white and black has served to remove stereotypes of each other.

School displays, newsletters or magazines, can now feature culture content emanating from class activities based at school. For example, beside a map of Africa may be featured a child's version of some story from the Dreaming; or a description of an enjoyable excursion to some special food-gathering area or sacred site. Discontinuity between school and community is being bridged.

Further bridging occurs at Dance Festival time, or at a fun corroboree. Now boys are happy to paint up and join in the dancing with the adults. The alienation of the younger generation from their own heritage that concerned their parents is being reduced.

CONCLUSION

I believe that selection of the cultural program is justified in that it will achieve all the objectives of the other two which relate to reducing alienation, discontinuity and making the school a more meaningful institution.

Although difficult, with our present knowledge of the educational needs of Aboriginal people, it does not appear to be impossible both to substantially reduce alienation and to improve the effectiveness of the educational programs available...The reallocation or deployment of staff to devise programs that make the recognition of Aboriginal identity one of the main focal points of its planning, should assist in alleviating both the problems of alienation and the ineffectiveness of many of the existing educational programs.

(Barry, 1980, p.51)

In conclusion, are listed the General Aims which I believe the teaching of Traditional Culture within the school can achieve for Mornington Island, better than the other two alternatives could:

1. To avoid spiritual death.
2. To reduce loss of cultural values.
3. To restore pride in Aboriginality.
4. To support community revival initiatives.
5. To reduce the growing gap between adults and the young.
6. To demonstrate to parents, children and teachers that the school values Aboriginal culture.
7. To provide a bridge between home and school.
8. To enable Aboriginal adults to exercise influence over children as a group in the school situation.
9. To have adults of cultural standing (or informal community leaders) participating in the school.
10. To provide own ethnic model in the school.
11. To improve the emotional security of children when at school.
12. To enable Aboriginal participation in the school context.
13. To improve Aboriginal attitudes towards schooling.
14. To develop a feeling of "our school".

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