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WE ARE LEARNING - SLOWLY

*Peter Bailey

"The Minister directs that you take up duties at X school." Ye gods and little fishes! What does a teacher new to a school like this do?

The school concerned in this paper is in a small, isolated, North Queensland town with a population of about 200. The racial mix is about 75% Aboriginal descent. The "best" jobs are mainly confined to the European sector, with the high profile occupations being held by itinerants, (teachers, nurses, and police). The local council is the main employer in the town, but there is still a high level of unemployment. Low socio-economic and educational standards and high alcohol consumption are prevalent throughout the community.

Most of the committees and social organisations are European dominated, with the usual high level of support from the itinerants. Supportive recognition of Aboriginal needs has been observed both at the school and the kindergarten association meetings. None of the itinerant service personnel (police, nurse, teachers) have been seen to display derogatory behaviour or attitudes towards the Aboriginal population.

Some 80% of the school population is of Aboriginal descent. Although it appears that most have had only superficial contact with any vestige of traditional culture, there are some surprises for those who can take the time to look and listen. Some continue to look for bush food to supplement their diets, their language frequently utilises words of old time origins as well as the more modern Aboriginal language structures, and one child recently (in the classroom) identified "Gran's dreaming". To many parents that sort of thing "is the old people's stuff... but you might talk to [whoever]. He spends time with them." Those same parents will frequently buy for their children clothing displaying the red, black and gold colours.

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The children display a great deal of aggression towards each other. Although this had reduced this year, it is still of ongoing concern. Other concerns include a generally low academic performance, and a high incidence of health and hygiene related matters. Truancy is not a major problem. My colleague and I are new to the school, and have had no pre-service or formal induction, but have (in Term 2) received generous in-service support.

For the school to offer a more relevant and rewarding education to the children in this community, it is essential that the wider community adopts the principle of "empowerment". This concept will be introduced, nurtured, and deliberately encouraged among the adult and child population. The success of this objective will be measured by the degree of "ownership" (Danby and Upitis, 1989) behaviour displayed by the children and their parents. It is only through the development of empowerment that this school can embrace the tenets outlined in the Peninsula Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Consultative Committee (QATSICC) policy document produced in 1988. The introduction (p.4) speaks of the need for schooling to:

maintain our children's identity and our
children's continuity with the culture of
the parents.

and of the role the school can play in supporting children to get back in touch with what has been lost. The present level of empowerment and ownership evident in this school is low. Moore (in Dwyer, 1989, p.2) aptly described the need for empowerment when he stated:

When the home-based educational objectives
clash with the school-based objectives, the
student normally resolves the conflict by
rejecting the school.

The school has an obligation to bring the two sets of objectives into harmonious alignment. We, as the staff of this institution, will have to take the first steps towards establishing a meaningful educational partnership. The results of such a partnership should be easily observed. It is expected that the children's general motivation will be improved and, consequently, their scholastic confidence and ability. Empowerment will enable this school to attend to the specific needs and interests of the enrolled pupils by positively influencing both curriculum and pedagogy.

It is clear that teacher behaviours will be changed. Sungaila (1984) clearly outlined concerns facing the two teachers at this school with un-nerving accuracy. Hardly a thing in this classroom has been spared from touch and taste analysis. Anything that can be pulled apart has been. Time-on-task (for teacher set activities) has frequently been deflatingly low. By the afternoon we have often been frustrated to the point of exhaustion. It is hoped that empowerment will open up communication channels, and allow the teaching staff to adopt new ways which might harness this "devastating" curiosity drive.

Another possible effect could be that the school becomes an active centre for the transmission of traditional culture. Most of the parents have grown up without access to these matters, but there are some contacts still available. This hope is tempered by ignorance and caution on the part of the writer. As I understand the situation, certain cultural training is for specific persons according to variables such as age, gender and dreaming. Even if there is access to people who know the old ways, parents or children may reject such practices, or the public forum of the school might be a totally unsuitable location.

"Making it happen" is seen by the present staff as an essential but difficult challenge. Overnight success is not expected. The "invisible barrier" (Eckermann, 1980, p.91) is very real in this community, and it is recognised that slow, sensitive action will produce better results than any rapid initiatives. To achieve empowerment and general ownership of this school and all its activities, several courses of action have been implemented or are in hand.

The indigenous aide is respected as a full member of the school team and is not relegated to a back room to make endless cut-outs and stencils. Most of her work is with children, and she is often consulted on numerous matters such as children's needs and curriculum. Her advice has proved mature and reliable. She holds community respect and is an effective link between school and home. For these reasons, this person will play an increasing role in bridging the home-school gap.

A weekly newspaper has been initiated. It is recognised that some copies never reach home, and of those that do, not too many will be read. It is, no matter how tenuous, another link. An Aboriginal parent asked for it and this school has responded. It is produced by the children with a minimal adult content or intervention. If the children have positive ownership of this

document, then a little bit of good news from school will filter its way into the home each week.

Contact has been made with the Regional QATSIICC representative. It is presumed that this officer has a lot of experience in educating teachers and building community partnerships and considerable reliance is placed on the outcomes of his involvement.

At the start of the year, both the teachers selected book titles of an Aboriginal nature for reading to the children. This may have conveyed our interest in supporting their needs and wishes, but now both of us read what the children indicate that they want read to them, which is not always Aboriginal subject matter.

The school library has had many titles culled in an effort to remove especially antiquated and derogatory material. When funding becomes available, children and the wider community will have a voice in the selection and purchasing of new materials.

In one class, the children indicated a desire for a theme on "bush tucker". This is now being planned. Several bonuses have been identified regarding this work unit. The children will study a topic that is relevant to their interests. They will also see that their requests regarding *their* learning are valued and recognised - a shifting of the locus of control. The subject will take them out of the classroom, and will lend itself to learning styles identified by Harris (1987, p.42), Lipscombe (1981, pp.13-19) and by Cummins (1986, p.28) where he advocates "reciprocal interaction". The theme will also provide an opener to involve some of the children's parents as the experts.

In conclusion, reference is made to findings made by Heath when working with minority group children (1986). She outlines two reasons why children often achieve success beyond conventional expectations. These are a conviction that they had a considerable amount of control over their own destiny and some outsider such as a teacher was also seen to believe that they could achieve. The teachers at this school are determined to facilitate both of these factors. We further recognise Oodgeroo Noonuccal's [Kath Walker] statement (1984, p.11):

Until our culture is recognised for its richness and complexity, and is given this recognition by educational authorities, we will always have to live with the derogatory stereotype that lowers the self esteem of

our children and causes them to feel that the education system has no relevance to them whatsoever

and accept that the development of empowerment is an on-going process, that more can be done, and that more must be done to provide children with a better education.

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