The Australian Journal of
INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

In 2022 *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* transitioned to fully Open Access and this article is available for use under the license conditions below.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/ or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

SOMEBODY'S CHILDREN

*Joan Hunt

Several months ago I was asked by a neighbour-friend, 'Mrs James', to help her get her eleven year-old son, 'Stephen' and eight year-old daughter, 'Katherine', back to school. Mrs James was in hospital in Sydney at the time, recovering from a serious operation, while Mr James, an invalid pensioner, was trying to look after the two remaining children at home. (An older son is with foster parents).

Stephen had missed more than 100 days of school in 1988 and had not returned to school in 1989. Katherine had a somewhat better attendance record but had stopped going to school when her mother went off to Sydney. Stephen's and Katherine's absences had been drawn to the attention of the home-school liaison officers.

My purpose in writing this is to describe my experience in encountering the school system, to try to explain my understandings of a series of incidents, and to suggest approaches which might have been more helpful and effective. First, I want to relate three background anecdotes, drawn from my own experience, which have prompted the discussion which follows:

i) In 1973 I spent several months in the U.K., where I visited a number of schools where special attempts had been made over the previous three years to build better home-school - community relationships. In the staff room during morning tea one day a class teacher and the school's teacher-librarian were exchanging experiences about a dreadful child who was terrorising each of them. I listened to them expressing their fears, outrages and threats, and finally asked the age of this seemingly dangerous girl. 'Six!...' came the reply. She was just six years old and, for whatever reasons, already alienated and angry.

ii) In the early 80s I worked as a support tutor to twenty or so Aboriginal students enrolled in a co-educational non-state country high school. At one staff meeting I remember the principal suggesting to staff members that if they felt threatened by the behaviour of any of the school's students, they

---

* *Retired primary teacher, NSW.*

NB To ensure anonymity, all names are fictitious.

would be wise to look at their own behaviour in the first instance. He was suggesting the need for anyone feeling threatened to assess their own contribution - that is, examine their own sense of security and self-worth and their need for power and control.

On another occasion, when end-of-year pupil reports were about to be written and sent, the same principal advised and warned teachers not to write any negative comments on a report unless they had already taken some positive action. The practice in this school, when a student presented a behaviour problem, was to invite the parents in immediately for discussion. The principal's warning, then, was on no account should parents first learn of a child's misbehaviour or schoolwork problems through the final written report.

Another observation I made a number of times in this school was that frequently a student, girl or boy, would be enrolled who had been expelled or otherwise rejected from a state high school. This student would then 'act up' for a few days..a week..a few weeks..without gaining notoriety from other students or a punitive response from teachers. Ultimately, he or she came to the understanding that punishment-as-payoff was not forthcoming in this school. The 'problem student' would then just 'blend into the landscape' - to mix my metaphors.

iii) My third story is of an incident recorded in one of those little 'radical' books[1] of the early seventies. The teacher of a 'problem' class in a New York ghetto school innocently asked the children 'How many legs has a grasshopper?' One child's terse reply was, 'Sir, I sure wish I had your problems!'.

I will return to these anecdotes later. Next I will outline a series of incidents relating to *getting Stephen back to school*.

While Mrs James was still hospitalised in Sydney I went, at her request to talk with the principal of the school. After a polite and cordial discussion I came away having concluded that there would be no point in Stephen returning to this school.

---

[1] Since the education clock seems to be being turned backwards at present, I wonder if John Holt, Herbert Kohl, George Dennison, Paul Goodman, Postman & Weingartner, Ivan Illich and Carl Rogers might now be worth re-reading.

The principal declared that this problem family were in the 'too hard basket' and that he believed the only hope for Stephen and Katherine was for them to be removed and placed in foster care. Meantime all he felt able to do was to report Stephen's non-attendnace to the Home-School Liaison Office every Monday. I was reminded of an ancient judge who washed his hands.

Next, my husband came up with the idea that correspondence schooling be sought for Stephen for the rest of this year, to prepare him for a fresh start in high school next year - a good idea, but impracticable. It would have required a much greater time commitment from me than I felt able to make. However, I was clear that an intensive counselling effort would probably be needed to get Stephen settled back happily in a school.

As soon as she returned from hospital in Sydney and still far from fit, Mrs James decided that Katherine would return to the same school but that she would transfer Stephen to another school in the town. Because she cannot read or write, she asked me to accompany her and Stephen for him to be enrolled. I filled out the enrolment form which Mrs James signed, and my phone number was recorded as a contact.

We were received in a kind and friendly way by the deputy principal who also took the opportunity to explain to Stephen that this was a friendly school where he would have the chance to make a fresh start. The outcome was up to him.

Two attempts on consecutive days were then made to get Stephen into a classroom but on both occasions he 'took off'. Unnoticed by him I had observed his trembling hands on the first of these attempts. He and I discussed that returning to a new class was scary but had to be faced.

With Stephen clearly unable to cope, I went with Mrs James to a meeting with the senior home-school liasion officer the following week and proposed an alternative. This was that for the remaining two weeks of Term 1 I would take Stephen for 'lessons' in our home each morning, with the aim of reorienting him to formal school work. Some urgent work on a tooth abscess would be done during this time and he would return to school at the start of Term 2. This plan was readily agreed to by Mrs James and the home-school liaison officers. It worked with moderate success because Stephen was doing formal work at his own level.

On the first day of Term 2 I took Stephen to school. The deputy principal who had earlier enrolled Stephen had by now retired and been replaced by the deputy principal of Stephen's former school. This was the latter's first day in her new appointment.

Following the suggestion made by the previous deputy principal, I took Stephen to the principal's office. We were promptly redirected to the new deputy...'Mrs Frith handles enrolments!...' and my request to meet the principal was ignored by him.

The deputy principal immediately informed Stephen and me that Years 6 and 4 were full and closed. Fortunately I knew that although Stephen had not actually entered a classroom, he had been formally enrolled last term and his name entered in the school's register. I thus needed to reassure the deputy principal of this, after checking with the clerical assistant, before being allowed to take Stephen to the class teacher with whom he had been placed.

Our reception was daunting enough for me that morning, and I am sure that Stephen would not have failed to pick up the rejection - perhaps even a deliberate plan to exclude him - from this school. I came away feeling quite shaken and wondering how Stephen's mother or father would have coped had they taken him to the school that day.

Stephen found the first two days quite satisfactory, however, and on Tuesday afternoon he suggested that it would be a good idea if his cousin, Kevin, went to school with him. Kevin, his mother and small brothers had been staying in Stephen's household for several weeks in the process of moving from Brisbane to another town. I offered to take Kevin and his mother next morning so that he could be enrolled. Kevin was in Year 5.

When 'Mrs Morton' replied to the deputy principal's question about how long Kevin would be at this school, she was told that it was too much paper work to enrol him for one-and-a-half weeks and that, for legal reasons, he could not be at the school without being enrolled...another rejection about which I felt very badly.

Having worked hard to get Stephen back to school, I realised that here he was being told that he MUST go to school EVERY DAY, whereas cousin Kevin was being turned away to drift

around the streets because this school would not take him. I explained to Mrs Morton how badly I felt about the reason that had been given for rejecting Kevin, and went on to speculate privately what the response might have been had she and Kevin been NON-Aboriginal. I have since learned that there *are* procedures for short-term enrolment.

As I was leaving the deputy principal's office, the principal joined us to ask how Stephen's attendance was so far. During the brief conversation he said something like, 'This is his last chance. If he takes off from here, he's blown it.' It seemed that a threat was being issued to *me*; and I had now experienced something of the intimidation that Aboriginal and other families presumably feel when approaching school authorities. By contrast with this expression of power, Stephen's class teacher had been welcoming, helpful, firm yet non-punitive.

For the next four weeks or so Stephen seemed to be attending school regularly so my involvement decreased. Apparently, however, his behaviour at school had been unsatisfactory, to the point where he was suspended on a Thursday for three school days.

This news from Stephen came as a surprise and a shock to me, although I had learned from him that he had been placed on detention for two days the previous week. I certainly do not condone misbehaviour and readily accept that the safety of other children must be protected. However, I was surprised at a superficial level at the administrative decision to suspend Stephen, since he might well view this as a back-to-front reward and be tempted to stage a repeat performance in the future. At a more serious level I wondered privately whether this was another instance of staff trying to exclude him from the school altogther.

Stephen returned to school after missing a week and a day. A week later I went with him to explain a new, more serious dental problem to his class teacher, who was quick to convey his regrets about the handling of Stephen's suspension. When I expressed disappointment that I had not been phoned, the teacher explained that the suspension occurred during his absence from the school for a week and that when he asked the principal why I had not been contacted, the principal stated that he will only deal with parents. Had I been phoned I could have asked Mr and Mrs James, who do not have a phone, to go to the school. I am left wondering whether there was any real desire by the principal to confer with Stephen's parents.

I have given much thought to the incidents just described in an attempt to identify the issues involved.

The first one which occurred to me is that of authoritarian power and control. Our society and most social institutions within it are structured on vertical lines with roles allocated to those on the power-full 'giving' end and those on the powerless 'receiving' end. This is a win-lose model. For schools to function in a humane and caring way, the power dimension needs to be replaced by *respect for the person*, whether this be other executives, teacher colleagues, parents or pupils. To be able to respect others, one must first respect oneself. From an executive position one *can* use 'power with' instead of 'power over' others. This is a win-win approach. The teachers in the UK school [refer i)] seemed to be expressing their powerlessness and lack of resourcefulness, certainly a 'loser' position.

The next issue I would raise is to question the usefulness, ever, of punitive rejecting approaches in schools with students who are already alienated. Difficult though it might be, I believe that hope would lie only by using strategies aimed at rehabilitation and the fostering of the personal development of the 'problem' child. The non-state secondary school I referred to [see ii)] had adopted the latter approach in both policy and practice. As far as I know, no student was ever relegated to the 'too hard basket'.

As far as detention, suspension and expulsion as *corrective* measures are concerned, they seem to me to be contradictions in terms as well as negative forms of reinforcement. My understanding of behaviourist psychology is that if any particular behaviour is to be extinguished, then reinforcement - either positive or negative - must be withheld. This may not be easy to do, since it is probably difficult to find ways of providing children like Stephen with meaningful, purposeful learning activities while also teaching a full class. Reinforcement, however, is more likely to foster unsatisfactory behaviour than to extinguish it. I am reminded of someone's Law of Flexibility: *'If it doesn't work, do something different.'*

The third issue which came to mind relates to the problem which Stephen and many, many children find with school itself. In a study which I conducted in 1971 I needed to survey the literature relating to Aboriginal education at that time. What struck me forcibly was the repeated references to Aboriginal

children as 'problems for the school system' with no one suggesting that the reverse might also apply.

If the premise is accepted that real learning occurs only as an act of personal meaning-making in the learner, then it is clear that many children experience problems of relevance and have difficulty in taking in what teachers are presenting. This problem was well stated in the recent ABC Television documentary *Nobody's Children*. In describing the alienation problem the commentator said, 'What they need to learn they're not being taught. What they're being taught they don't understand.'

In Stephen's case, he has missed so much school, over the past three years at least, that he would probably be able to connect with school work at Year 3 level, whereas Year 6 is mostly out of his reach.[1]

A final issue which seems relevant here relates 'learning as meaning-making' to the learner's needs and personal starting-point. Stephen's family spend most of their energy and resources just on day-to-day survival. They live totally on social security benefits and have no realistic prospect of improved circumstances. There is little point in making judgmetns about how resources might be better handled when there is so little to handle anyhow.

When I worked with the Aboriginal secondary students I was regularly reminded of Maslow's hierarchy of needs: basic physical needs, safety needs, belongingness and love, esteem, and self-actualization. For children such as Stephen basic food, clothing and shelter needs are regularly in deficit. Much of the school content is at the level of self-actualization - to be engaged with when all lesser needs are reasonably well satisfied. Knowing the number of legs per grasshopper [see iii)] is not much help when you are cold or hungry.

Having set down these thoughts and feelings about my recent encounters with the school system, I still retain hope: hope that teachers and administrators will be given opportunities to improve their professional and personal morale so that dealing

---

[1] I believe there is a case for more, not less, composite classes or family groups where children could work, without stigma, at an appropriate level according to attainment, instead of being placed on an age-grade basis. But that's another issue.

with 'problem' children shifts from being a battle to becoming a field of opportunity, opportunity to respect and restore the lives of those who would otherwise be destined to become 'nobody's children'.

REFERENCE

Maslow, A.H. (1970): *Motivation and Personality*, 2nd edition, New York: Harper & Row.

.....

REMOTE ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER COMMUNITY FUTURES

Conference : 11 - 14 July, Townsville, Qld

The program for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies' Biennial Conference 1990, is now available. Sessions cover -

- Community focus - informal discussion
- External influences on Communities
- Communication
- Community self management
- Community environment
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community futures - summary.

Full details, accommodation booking form and enrolment form may be obtained from -

Centre for Continuing Education
Australian National University
GPO Box 4
CANBERRA ACT 2601 (Tel(06)249 3806, 4754 or 2892)

(Bookings, together with cheques, to arrive by Friday 22nd June. 1990).

****