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EFFECTIVE TEACHING STRATEGIES IN ISOLATED ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES: SOME ISSUES TO CONSIDER

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The factors that influence the learning and processing of information in any "normal" teaching environment are many but in comparison to the environment where cultural variables are added the "normal" teaching environment appears to lack complexity. Added to cultural variables an environment where the language being used in learning experiences is, if not a totally different language to the first language learnt by the child, certainly a differing form of their first language; then you have a truly complex environment in which to guide the learning and processing of information. Such a description fits the Aboriginal Community schools in the Gulf of Carpentaria and Cape York regions of Queensland. In particular, I intend to focus on Doomadgee State School, arguably the most isolated of community schools, where in my position as Curriculum Master I have seen the conflict of culture, language and curriculum first hand. It is the intention of this paper to examine how and why this conflict affects student performance and to focus on methods by which this conflict can be minimised.

Language and cultural variables have an effect on most aspects of learning and processing information. Attention and memory, information processing capacity, cognitive development, representation of knowledge through imagery or propositions, remembering and forgetting, cognitive skill acquisition, problem solving and language learning and use are all aspects of learning and processing information that are affected by language and cultural differences. McGarvie (1984) states that:

Aboriginal and islander students are more likely to have: cultural difference, language differences, "person orientation, Life/Family/Ethnic-Group History difference and "field sensitive" and "external locus of control" characteristics. (McGarvie, 1984, p.2)

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All of these factors need consideration when deciding upon instruction method and format for Aboriginal students.

Attention is a pre-requisite for some form of memory or information storage to take place. James (1890) stated:

Everyone knows what attention is. It is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one of what seem several simultaneous possible objects or trains of thought. Focalisation, concentration and consciousness are of its essence. It implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal with others. (Bourne, et al. 1979, p.35)

or put more succinctly, attention refers to:

processes or conditions within the organism that determine how effective a particular stimulus will be. (Berlyne, 1974, p.124)

Attention is the difference between listening and hearing. To hear requires no effort as the tympanic membrane and other parts of the auditory system work regardless of any conscious effort. However, to listen requires a conscious effort or thought. The teacher cannot guarantee that the student is attending to information as this requires the student making a conscious effort. To be attentive will require the student to be motivated. Attention is an important concept in the study of learning. Its motivational aspect is concerned with alertness and the focus of attention.

Motivation may not necessarily need to be teacher induced. It could be the student has set long term goals that require high achievement levels in your particular subject so irrespective of the teacher or teaching strategies this student's attention level will be high. However, teacher traits and teaching strategies may further enhance attention. In the case of Doomadgee State School where few students set goals beyond the end of the week let alone five or ten years down the track, teacher traits and teaching strategies become of paramount importance.

For the aboriginal child attention will not, unfortunately, guarantee the quantity and quality of memory deposit

that will occur for a similarly able mainstream student. The reasons for this are language and health based. Given that I had a basic understanding of the French language would not be a guarantee that I could attend a school in France and given that all other factors were equal achieve to the same degree as a fully literate French student. This is simply because for each phrase spoken there is a silent translation being done in the mind. With each translation small amounts of information are either lost or altered in translation. Each translation takes time. While one phrase is being translated another is being spoken. Having completed the translation the student then may need to attempt to conceptualise the deeper significance of that phrase; again a time consuming activity. With unattended or unintelligible information being lost from S.R. after one second and from W.M. every fifteen seconds, it can be seen the task of the student in a foreign environment (and for the Aboriginal child school is a foreign environment) needs special consideration and understanding. The unfortunate fact is that language problems are at their peak in the early part of their (the aboriginal child's) schooling. It is here where they struggle for second language literacy. It is also often in this time that students perceive themselves to be poor academic achievers because of their struggles with a different language and culture. Classifying themselves in such a manner at this time can have long lasting effects.

As early as the first grade, high-achieving compared with low-achieving boys have higher expectations for success in school.

(Stipek and Hoffman, 1980, p.865)

With lower expectations can come a lowering of students' notions of self worth and ability, often reinforced, though unintentionally, by teacher feedback.

Teachers' feedback to children regarding their school performance seems to be related to the development of children's self concept of ability.

(Stipek, 1981, p.405)

These self-evaluations of ability seem to reflect the feedback the teachers often used.....These perceptions also seem to influence their expectations about future school performances. (Wittrock, 1986, p.298)

Thus Aboriginal children may often perceive themselves as poor learners. Consider this in relation to the findings of Willows (1974).

Willows (1974) gave good and poor readers in the sixth grade distracting words typed in red between the lines of the normal text they were asked to read. Compared with a control group not given the inserted, distracting words, the text in red distracted the poor readers more than it did the good readers. Further, the good readers focused on the meaning of the distracting text, when they did attend to it, while the poor readers focused on the surface structure, the red colour of the text. Distractability seems to be a type of attention that sometimes distinguishes good from poor learners.

(Wittrock, 1986, p.302)

A class of students who, in the main, have classified themselves as poor learners will be a class that is easily distracted or taken off the task.

Further complicating the issue in most Aboriginal communities and most certainly in this community, is the fact that many children have health problems with hearing loss being one of these problems.

Fifty percent of students at Doomadgee State School exhibit some form of hearing loss. This ranges from mild hearing loss to the profoundly deaf.

(Henderson, 1990)

Taking note of the schematic representation of the relationship between S.R., W.M., and L.T.M. (see Study Guide No. 1, p.4) hearing loss, in conjunction with higher than normal background noise caused by easily distracted self perceived poor learners, ensures that the amount of decay from the Sensory Register and Working Memory is maximised. This would occur as the student would be unlikely to receive a clear message, especially if an explanation is of some length. Unable to decipher or conceptualise the incoming

information the student would not attend to this input because of his/her inability to place it into a meaningful framework or form for placement in the Working Memory or Long Term Memory.

Attention is also affected by the manner in which the teacher is regarded by students. Education, in the traditional Aboriginal setting, was carried out by the parents or older people within the tribal group. Watch, learn, practise, perfect was the basis for much of this education. Indeed, the ability of the Aboriginal people to replicate (mimic) was quickly noted by early colonists. Tench (1789) gives example of this:

Surgeon White demonstrated his pistol to a group of Aborigines, shooting a hole in a bark shield at several places. It produced consternation, and to calm them White whistled the air of Malbrooke, which they appeared highly charmed with, and imitated him with equal pleasure and readiness. It was the first sign of the astounding powers of mimicry that the Australian Aborigines would show the whites in years to come.

(Hughes, 1988, p.86)

It seems hard to comprehend, how a people whose ability to quickly acquire information (though no comment is made as to their ability to understand) was once noted could now, as a group, be labelled poor learners by the white majority.

Whites perceive Aborigines to be primitive, less intelligent, incompetent at work because of their Aboriginality. Hence the official solutions to the "Aboriginal Problem" have tended to be program directed at changing Aborigines (e.g. giving them white education) rather than policies which might change some structural aspects of white society.

(Forster, 1981, p.116)

Research, based on the white man's educational system, appears to give validity to the beliefs of the white majority.

Aborigines lag behind their white age peers at every age. They enter school later, progress slower, quit sooner and terminate at a lower level (Browne and Megin, 1976, p.296). This data should be considered in relation to other factors, teaching staff being one of these, and should not be accepted as evidence for saying Aborigines, as a group, lack intelligence.

The majority of teachers who come to Community Schools are young. Their pedagogical training is based on the needs of the mainstream "Westernised" student. This mono-culturalist approach is not beneficial for Aboriginal students.

It is possible that a teacher, through lack of knowledge about cultural differences and by using the accepted mono-cultural approaches in teaching, actually makes it harder for the culturally different students to succeed.

(McGarvie, 1984, p.1)

Many also lack self confidence in their own teaching ability. Respect and trust do not come with the label (teacher) and Aboriginal peoples as a group believe they have much to be wary about when it comes to dealing with "whites" and the Aboriginal students display this wariness in the classroom.

In the case of the community schools, where parental action often appears to be at variance with parental rhetoric (i.e. parents speak of how important they believe school is yet often fail to ensure student attendance at school) the determinator in deciding student attendance at school is the individual student. Unlike "mainstream" schools this student self determination does not begin in the middle high school years but from the beginning of their (the Aboriginal child's) school life. Low self perceptions and expectations about their future school performances can and do affect student attendance. Why come to school if you are fully aware that in doing so your shortcomings will be reinforced and made clearly visible to your peer group? No wonder Aboriginal students in the main exhibit a negative attitude towards their schools.

There is, evidence also, of a consistent pattern in student attitudes to their schools. Most students showed a negative acceptance of school as an inescapable fact of life; a minority felt it was meeting their needs for academic achievement; a minority at the other end of the academic scale felt resentment, frustration and a need to rebel.

(Blakers, 1978, p.58)

Language and health related problems cause much of people's failure to achieve but further to this is the problem the students have in seeing the relevance of much that they are taught. If you were doing a unit on the "History of the Red Sox Baseball team", the teacher spoke only pidgeon English, you only formal English and to complicate matters you had no interest at all in baseball, how do you think you would fare? Attention, and therefore, achievement will always be maximised if the information being presented has relevance. Despite efforts to make the curricula offerings in the Community Schools as relevant as possible, there is still a wide gap between what is required to be taught in schools generally and what would be of relevance to these Aboriginal students.

Thus far I have placed much emphasis on attention and its place in the learning and processing of information regime and this for the simple fact that without attention there will be no processing of information. Now to examine some of the other facets of the regime in relation to students of this school.

Little difference should be observed in the student's capacity to process information. Miller's magical number seven, plus or minus two; would no doubt hold true. Short term memory loss is affected by the presence or absence of rehearsal. Where input lacks apparent relevance the student would see little point or lack the desired motivation to rehearse. Without rehearsal Peterson and Peterson (1959) noted that:

forgetting from short term memory occurs within fifteen seconds.

(Bourne, et al., 1979, p.45)

The importance of information relevance goes across the total spectrum of information learning and processing. Relevance highlights needs. If information is relevant the student's self perception may be "I need to know/understand that." This leads to student motivation, which sharpens attention and maximises results.

Once the information has been dealt with by the W.M. it is passed to the L.T.M. where it can be of two basic forms: either knowing how or knowing that, type information. The distinct between these two types of information has been of major concern to teachers over the past five years. Greater importance is now being placed on understanding how and why, rather than what and when. These are cognitive skills of which problem solving is a facet. The importance of these skills cannot be overrated. Williams and Hollan (1980) explain why.

The primary mission of educational institutions, from elementary to graduate and professional schools, are to impart knowledge and to teach cognitive skills. One of the more important cognitive skills is no doubt problem solving ability. Problem solving is of course predominately involved in basic courses such as mathematics and science and in professional areas such as mathematics and science and in professional areas such as medicine, engineering and architecture. But problem solving pervades almost all areas of instruction: reading and writing have important problem solving components. Even such a rudimentary process as retrieving information stored in long-term memory can be viewed as a problem-solving activity.

(Frederiksen, 1984, p.363)

For the Aboriginal student this is of the utmost importance as their cultural heritage has been predominated by the "lower" order processes of what and when as opposed to the more demanding skills of knowing why and how. It is due to this fact that their skills of metacognition appear to be poor. They are still at odds with the world of numbers and words and appear unable to monitor their own

thinking to realise "I'm not doing this correctly." As educators we need to address this deficiency as it can have implications to their future lives.

*The social and educational deficiencies
do not stop with occupational effects.
Because Aborigines are less able to deal
with the world of numbers and words they are
less efficient consumers.*

(Browne & Megin, 1976, p.299-300)

To allow the students of Doomadgee State School the opportunity to become viable participants in a mainstream community requires that their education should be such that their ability to learn and process information is maximised. At present only 15% of students attempt to go on to Year 11 and 12. It may be that the school itself, as an institution, is at fault. Knight (1978) comments:

*the situational or structural features of
schools are the cause of failure rather
than attributes of individual students.
Such feature as rules, expectations and
rituals ensure that a certain percentage
of students will be alienated from school.*

(Blakers, 1978, p.128-129)

Irrespective of this, we have a responsibility to provide the best possible education for Aboriginal students, being mindful of their cultural uniqueness and needs for survival in any mainstream society. Doomadgee is no exception. There are numerous factors that need to be addressed; language, health issues and curricular relevance included. Browne and Megin (1976) state that,

*strong cases can be made for literacy
programs and adult education, for pre-
primary schooling, for special vernacular
schools, for concentration on the late
primary years where a drop in motivation
and performance often occurs, for an
emphasis on integrated schooling or the
identification and fostering of highly
talented tertiary school prospects.*

Some of the above suggestions have already been put into practise (i.e. A.I.T.A.P. - Aboriginal and Islander Tertiary Aspirations Program). However, my concern as a practising teacher, is the classroom and in particular teaching strategies and teacher characteristics that produce the best results for Aboriginal students. Now, with a Ministerial audit recently being ordered by Paul Braddy, would appear to be a good time to highlight the unique learning problems of isolated Aboriginal children and to highlight the need for teachers coming to these schools to have specialised pre-service training.

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