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# THE YOLNGU TEACHER

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In this short talk, I will tell you what my people at Ngukurr on the Roper River think about schools and teachers. Please remember that I speak for the Yugal people at Roper and not necessarily for Aboriginal people in other areas. I will discuss European teachers in our school but most of all I want to talk about our own Yolngu teachers.

## INTRODUCTION

The community's concept of the Yolngu teacher is changing at Ngukurr. The Yolngu teacher (this includes teaching assistants) was for many years seen as a helper and an odd jobs man. My community wants its Aboriginal teachers to be leaders, to help build an Aboriginal school sensitive to Aboriginal needs.

The community is being given a chance to determine and manage its own affairs. We can see that we must use education so that we can have the knowledge to make real choices.

## BI-CULTURAL EDUCATION

People at Ngukurr want bi-cultural education - they want children to reach a good standard in English, reading and maths, to gain knowledge to inform others and also to work for the community.

However, perhaps most important for us, we want children to be Aboriginal - to respect and understand their Aboriginal heritage. Many people now say how important it is for the young children to be taught Aboriginal ways. For education to be truly bi-cultural, it must allow for this. This feeling is the strongest one in my community. Aboriginal people must know their heritage - this is our backbone - without it we cannot be secure.

My community also understands that pride is increased through being truly Aboriginal; through moiety Aboriginal children can understand and respect the Aboriginal teacher. So too pride in our community is increased by having pride in culture and language.

With these two important aspects of bi-cultural education in mind, I would like you to consider some specific ways in which the community sees the Yolngu teachers, what they think of the Yolngu teacher and what they want of him.

## THE "IN-BETWEEN" MAN

My community can see the Yolngu teacher as an "in-between" man, for he must be able to have the knowledge and respect to assist in teaching culture and also be able to understand and work in the European ways in which he has been trained.

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As an "in-between" man, the community knows that the Aboriginal teacher must teach the European teacher more about Aboriginal culture and ways. The European teacher must also help the Aboriginal teacher to be a real teacher. (He must not be seen as half a teacher so the community wants him to be taught basic skills on-site). Some would suggest that having these skills is more important than having a formal training.

## **ABORIGINAL AND EUROPEAN CO-OPERATION**

My community knows that Aboriginal and European must work side by side, but we also know that increasing responsibilities must be given to the Aboriginal teacher. The community acknowledges that Europeans and Aboriginals must also support one another. This means more work for both teachers. For the Aboriginal, it means learning about both ways. For the European teacher, it means learning about Aboriginal culture and accepting that they do not have to always be to the fore. My community wants to see the European teacher continue working as a supporter, a resource person, and a capable trainer. My community wants European people of this type.

## **SPECIAL WORK OF YOLNGU TEACHERS**

The community would like to see the Yolngu teacher play a more positive part in discipline in the school. If the Aboriginal teacher controls and disciplines children more he can explain to parents about children's actions.

The Yolngu teacher can control and discipline children by talking, explaining to parents. We see that Aboriginal children will listen and accept advice given by Aboriginals. But to do this the Aboriginal teacher must have respect through moiety.

The community is saying more now about the value of the Yolngu teacher as one who builds pride in being Aboriginal. We have already seen increased interest in Aboriginal culture programs, involvement of Aboriginal teachers in developing an Aboriginal Studies Curriculum. These factors have made people talk about and think about teaching culture to children.

There is no doubt that this has helped the community to regard the Aboriginal teacher as a link or bridge between home and school. This is a two-way process. The people appreciate European teachers who gain understanding and who have the spirit to be involved and interested.

My community likes, on the other hand, to see the Aboriginal teachers involved in making decisions, and finding ways to develop understanding of education. It is the voice of the Aboriginal teacher which gives the community an opportunity to express feelings and to explain needs.

Because the community is secure with the Aboriginal teacher, we can see that more demands are being placed on us, the Aboriginal teachers. We may often have to explain European ways or "complicated Balanda methods" which often bewilder or frustrate the people.

The community can also feel more secure if it knows that Aboriginal people, informed and able, are making decisions for them. For my people to make choices, they need time and alternatives. Usual practice from Government Departments is to offer neither of these. My community wants educated people like Yolngu teachers to find out about these things and to assist, particularly in education, in finding out what its priorities are. Some of us must be vocal and uncompromising for our community.

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## INCREASED INVOLVEMENT OF YOLNGU TEACHERS IN SCHOOLS

My community is seeing an increased involvement of Yolngu teachers in schools. However, this will need to expand even more. Only in this way can the community really believe that we are playing a part and that Aborigines can get somewhere and have a real future.

The community is expressing its support in the way in which Aboriginal teachers are becoming more involved, through training and education programs, through developing Aboriginal Studies and through adult education. We certainly know that the Aboriginal person is the best person to express communities' wishes on things such as hours of instruction, organisation of the school year and in taking into fuller consideration the Aboriginal life style.

The community is thinking more seriously about the education of their children, but the community wants greater opportunities for the employment of Aborigines in education (at least as many Aborigines as Europeans in the school). It also wants commitment of staff to training and leading Aborigines to the fore.

In keeping with a community which has a chance to make its future, my people strongly feel that the Yolngu teacher must immediately be given the opportunities, support and training to really show the way.

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