

*SCHOOL/CLASSROOM STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

The following is an extract from an address on "Strategies for Teaching Aboriginal Children" at a seminar of the Liverpool and Metropolitan West Regions, held at Patrician Brothers, Fairfield, on April 21st and 22nd, 1982.

5. SCHOOL/CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

Many of the obstacles faced by Aborigines in education can be overcome through the development of appropriate school and classroom programs. Following are some suggestions for teachers and administrators:

a) Teaching Language

It should be appropriate to *all* children being taught, e.g., consider a child being asked to collect "soil" for an experiment and not knowing that "soil" is a synonym for "dirt".

b) Student Language

The use of Aboriginal English should not be denigrated, for to do so is to lower the child's feelings of self-esteem and self-worth and to encourage him/her to avoid speech as much as possible. Aboriginal English should be seen as a positive and viable means of communication within the child's known environment prior to coming to school. In time, the child will come to appreciate the differences between "home talk" and the language of instruction, and hopefully be able to use either on appropriate occasions.

Often words that non-Aborigines accept as swear words are not used as such by the Aboriginal child. The teacher should be aware of this in forming discipline rules in the school, so that Aboriginal children are not unduly penalised or ridiculed.

c) Discipline

This should be discussed at length between the Aboriginal community and the school. The following advice on discipline may be

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helpful to teachers:-

- i) Develop strategies to avoid confrontation, e.g. sending children with "messages" to other teachers.
- ii) Allow for student "cooling-off" periods.
- iii) Develop open and honest student/teacher relationships.
- iv) Show warmth, concern and interest in children's activities outside the school.
- v) Be aware of the different concept of touching and bodily contact that Aboriginal children possess.
- vi) Explain clearly the need for, and boundaries of, discipline.
- vii) Deal with disciplinary problems, where possible, on a personal basis.
- viii) Develop a teacher/student "buddy" system, e.g., particular teachers setting up a good relationship with "problem" children.
- ix) Do not allow disciplinary methods to affect the child's involvement in extra-curricular activities, e.g. sport. (Sport can be used to develop self-esteem).
- x) Get to know the parents of the children in your group and seek their advice on how to manage the child in a given difficult situation.

d) Evaluation/Testing Procedures

These should be relevant to the child's culture, language and experiences. As intelligence testing may be culturally biased, such tests should not be used solely as a grading process for Aboriginal children.

e) Self-esteem

Often unwittingly the child's self-esteem is undermined in school, simply because of the alien situation that the child finds himself/herself in. Positive self-esteem strategies for Aboriginal children include the following:

- i) Aboriginal guest speakers, e.g. community leaders/members, poets and story tellers;
- ii) employment of Aboriginal staff in ancillary positions;
- iii) material written by Aboriginal people included in the curriculum;
- iv) Aboriginal Studies in curriculum areas, e.g. music, art, cooking, maths;
- v) Aboriginal displays, e.g. Aboriginal flag, posters;
- vi) appropriate recognition of National Aborigines' Week and its importance to Aboriginal people;
- vii) success orientated tasks;
- viii) audio-visual materials about Aborigines;

- ix) opportunities for leadership and responsibility given to Aboriginal students;
- x) involvement of parents in school activities;
- xi) a study on famous Aboriginal people, e.g. Evonne Cawley, Charles Perkins;
- xii) opportunities for Aboriginal children to present items to the school, e.g., plays, poems and concerts.

f) Resources

Teachers should be aware that many books and audio-visuals have been based on an ethnocentric viewpoint, which can to another culture be seen as racist material. For further information, teachers could refer to *Let's End the Slander*, published by the Office of the Commissioner for Community Relations, Canberra, 1980.

g) Use of Environment

Wherever possible, utilise the school and community environment to reinforce the curriculum.

h) Relevant Curriculum

Make sure that the curriculum planned makes use of the background of the children being taught.

i) Homework

Aboriginal children often cannot do homework due to adverse study facilities, e.g. overcrowding in the home. Homework centres may be established to alleviate the problem. Perhaps school timetables can be organized to accommodate a "homework period".

j) Attendance

At times Aboriginal students may not be able to attend school for the following reasons: illness of members of the extended family; child's feeling of alienation and lack of success in the school environment; death in extended family (an Aboriginal family would consider travelling several hundred miles for a funeral); observance of National Aborigines Day; lack of adequate lunch or clothing.

NOTE: It should be noted that Aboriginal families do not travel from place to place at random. Usually they travel to a very set pattern and the school could easily identify this pattern. Contact between the schools involved in this pattern could be made so that children receive a continuous program. This would alleviate the problem of children falling behind in their work.

k) Teacher Morale

This may be enhanced through -

- i) discussion and sharing by teachers of successful strategies and programs;
- ii) discussing/sharing problems;
- iii) having whole school staff meetings;
- iv) having an across-the-school approach to discipline and the development of self-esteem;
- v) sharing problems and solutions with outside agencies e.g. Aboriginal Legal Service and Aboriginal Medical Service;
- vi) liaison between infants, primary and high schools;
- vii) having staff socials and get togethers;
- viii) involving parents in problems being faced;
- ix) close liaison with and involvement of the teacher's aide (Aboriginal) in the classroom;
- x) use of outside personnel e.g. regional consultants or members of the Aboriginal Education Unit;
- xi) being seen to mix with the community;
- xii) professional reading and participation at inservice courses.

l) Use the Consultative Process

Be aware of the value of consultation which may be undertaken with:

- other teachers and staff of the school;
- students in the school;
- the community;
- organisations such as New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group;
- Aboriginal organisations;
- school counsellor;
- regional consultants particularly those with duties in Aboriginal education/Aboriginal Studies;
- inspectors of schools and other regional officers;
- members of the Aboriginal Education Unit, Department of Education.

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