

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN THE EDUCATIVE PROCESS*

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The involvement of Aboriginal communities in the educative process is perhaps the most vital aspect in developing meaningful programs. It is also the most difficult. I would like to point out that it is a double-edged sword. Communities will not become involved unless they see it is relevant to do so and also see that their ideas are listened to and respected. In terms of Aboriginal education, this means that the school may be requested to perform functions which the educators do not consider to be sound or desirable. If the community opinions are only implemented when they correspond with the teachers' opinions then I suggest a real risk exists of the community opting out of the school situation. Involvement is a two-way process.

We use the vernacular as the language of instruction in the early years of formal schooling because of the belief that it gives security and allows the child to gain confidence in his/her own language. Do we do the same with value systems? Do we use the value systems of the communities in framing our educational programs or do we rather shape our educational programs according to our own value systems? This question applies equally to the tribally and non-tribally oriented situation. To illustrate this I will use an example which you may or may not feel to be relevant.

In terms of the Euro-Australian culture and education one of the capital 'sins' that a child can commit is absenteeism without cause. Our values are such that our education system ceases to exist meaningfully when a child is continually absent without a legitimate excuse. We, as teachers, have developed a method of dealing with this situation ranging from entreating through to prosecution and a fine. In reality, the community

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*This is an extract from a paper presented at a Conference for Teachers of Aboriginal Children held at Christies' Beach, South Australia in September, 1973. The paper was entitled "Aboriginal Education - The Second Phase".

at large agrees with this approach as they also see wilful absenteeism as acting against their accepted value systems. Does the same situation apply in Aboriginal communities?

My personal opinion is that it doesn't - absenteeism from school is not regarded in the same light by the majority of Aboriginal families as it is by Euro-Australian families.

In terms of an educative program then, the non-Aboriginal Australian response to absenteeism allows us as teachers to implement a program which is lock-step and continuous, for we can assume that in the majority of cases the student will attend continuously. I believe Aboriginal communities view absenteeism differently - e.g. they have a different value orientation towards this aspect of schooling. This can be seen in many ways - travelling, staying home to mind brothers and sisters and even just not going to school because they do not feel like it. As educators I believe we can react in two basic ways:

1. We can become policeman-like figures and put pressure on the families and children to attend at all costs while at the same time we implement a programme which is lock-step continuous.
2. We can accept the differing values of the community towards attendance at school as a fact and implement a program which takes absenteeism into account and at the same time hope that the program so presented will be seen as relevant by both the student and the community and so the value system itself will change. This, of course, will be a very slow process.

I have spent some time on a particular example. However, I believe it essential that the value systems which the communities hold be respected and that the educative programs are so adapted to allow for these differing views. Once this is done of course, the teacher's task is more complex, difficult and requires a great deal of professional expertise due to the fact that the teacher must now be aware of two value systems (his/her own and the community's).

The Coleman Report stresses the fact that two major groups of factors act on a child with regard to his/her ability to learn: in-school factors and out-of-school factors. Of the two, the out-of-school factors are by far the most powerful influence with regard to what and how much a child learns. Our programs must take this into account. They must be adapted to provide a

relevant framework within which the children can operate. The way in which they are adapted should depend largely on the value systems that the community in general holds.

Just recently I came across a statement made by an educationalist with regard to parental attitudes at a particular school (it was not a Special Aboriginal School). This person stated:

"A large number of parents are not concerned with either the general welfare or education of their children."

I disagree with the statement as it stands for I believe the great majority of parents are extremely concerned with the education their children receive, but very often their value systems are such that they see no reason for becoming involved in the educational system as it is presented. My plea then is to be aware of the value system that the community holds, respect it (although you do not have to agree with it) and use it as the basic denominator in the formation of your program.

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