

IVORY TOWERS TO BLACK REALITIES: WHAT TO EXPECT FROM YOUR IN-SERVICE COURSE

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There are a variety of ways by which teachers can be specially prepared to teach in Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander schools. For example, the Queensland Department of Education for many years has run a one-week in-service training program called Jumbunna. Some schools also run in-service classes for newly appointed teachers. At a more formal level there are courses like the Graduate Diploma in Aboriginal Education at Townsville College of Advanced Education. All these programs seek to prepare teachers for new roles and all run the risk of misinterpretation by teachers taking part. On the basis of informal feedback from participants in these various courses the authors try to clarify the major criticism of "ivory towers" solutions which seem to be inappropriate to the hurly-burly of classroom, school and community life.

Leaders who run in-service courses are well aware of these strains from personal experience. Many of them freely admit, however, that an opportunity to stand back from the day-to-day pressures has given them time to clarify their own thinking about the problems they faced. While the leaders were still teachers at the workplace it was virtually impossible to do this. As a result of this lack of opportunity to think carefully about their approaches together with, at best, shallow training for the new demands of their roles in Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander communities, and inadequate understanding of the cultures in which they were teaching, they had frequently reverted to exceptionalistic solutions to the educational problems they faced. Ryan (1976, p.17) defines these exceptionalistic solutions as those which are curative rather than preventative and aimed at deviant individuals rather than the whole set of culturally different individuals they teach. An example may clarify this definition. A teacher may be confronted with an absenteeism rate as high as forty percent. He could, using an exceptionalistic approach borne out of trying to cope with a demanding situation, organise a teaching assistant or even the local police to "round up"

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offenders and bring them to school. This solution seeks to cure the symptom rather than attack the cause. It is therefore exceptionalistic.

This approach sees individuals as deviant, rather than examining the total situation to see whether there are other causes of the problem. Ryan (1976, p.19) refers to this as "blaming the victim". As an alternative he advocates universalistic approaches to problems. By universalistic he means solutions that aim to prevent, rather than cure, and that are applied to all rather than to some who fail to measure up in some way.

At the workplace it is difficult to examine all aspects of a particular problem and then design universalistic solutions. During in-service courses like Jumbunna and the Graduate Diploma in Aboriginal Education there is opportunity to do so. Accordingly, leaders and lecturers tend to present universalistic approaches to the task of educating in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. To return to the absenteeism rates, they might advocate a series of preventative measures like seeking parental opinions about schooling so as to obtain some commitment to that schooling, explaining the need for regular school attendance to these committed parents, modifying curriculum so that it relates to the life and experiences of the Aboriginals or Torres Strait Islanders, and moving classes into the environment where the pupils have skills, knowledge, and real expertise. This set of measures may result in improved attendance. However, it is obvious that it contains important implications for school-community relations (particularly with regard to the time a principal and/or his staff will remain in that one community and the way the school works with the community), for curriculum design, for time-tabling, and planning within the school.

From this specific starting point we can now look at the broader perspective of universalistic and exceptionalistic approaches to providing education for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander pupils. Few would disagree with Fitzgerald (1976, pp. 192-200) that, in the past, there was a massive mismatch between schooling and meeting the educational needs of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander pupils. A few pupils in each school have achieved success, the vast majority have not. This mismatch situation can be shown diagrammatically (see Diagram 1).

In order to overcome this unsatisfactory state of affairs, pressure is applied to the pupils. This pressure is designed to increase the numbers of "successful" pupils and to reduce the number of deviants as shown in Diagram 2.

Diagram 1 : School Meets the Needs of a Few Pupils

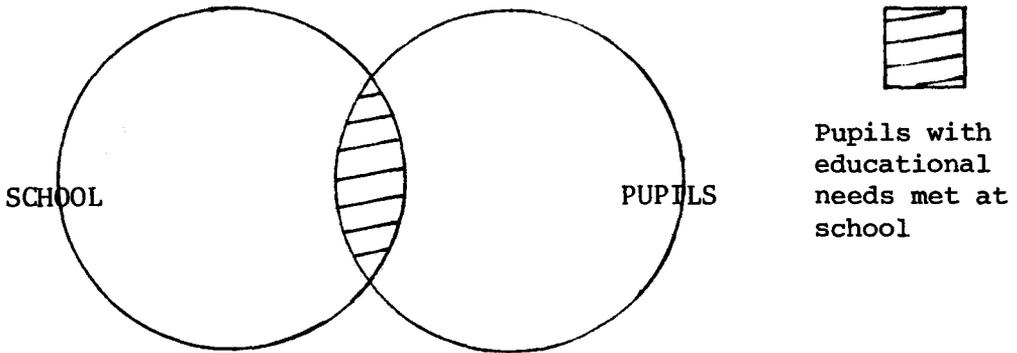
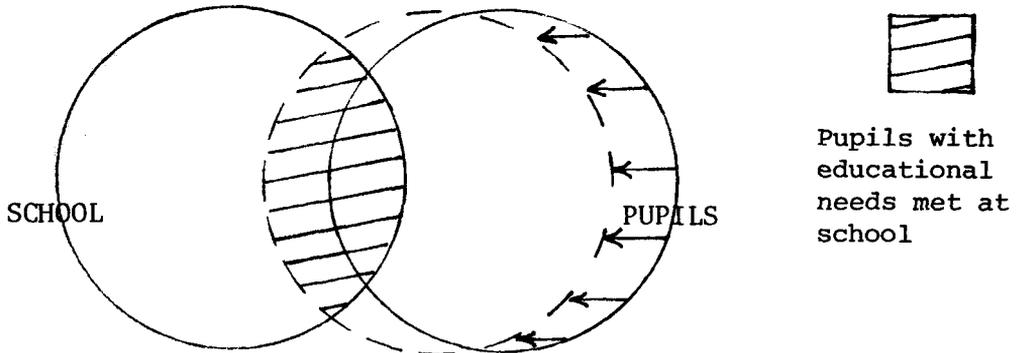


Diagram 2 : Exceptionalistic Approaches to the Mismatch between Pupils and School



Ryan would refer to such a solution as exceptionalistic, because the pupils are seen as deviant and they are then coerced to "measure up" to the norm.

On the other hand in-service courses tend to emphasise universalistic approaches which modify the school, its curriculum or its teaching strategies to more nearly fit the existing needs of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander pupils. This can be shown diagrammatically as follows:

Diagram 3: Universalistic Approaches to the Mismatch Between Pupils and School

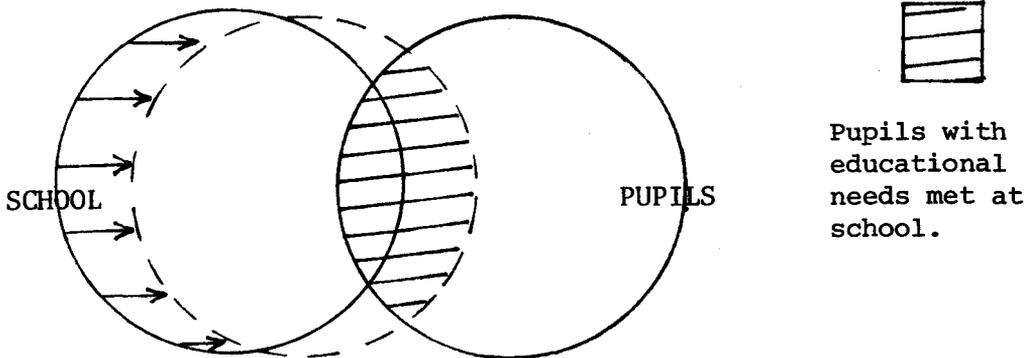


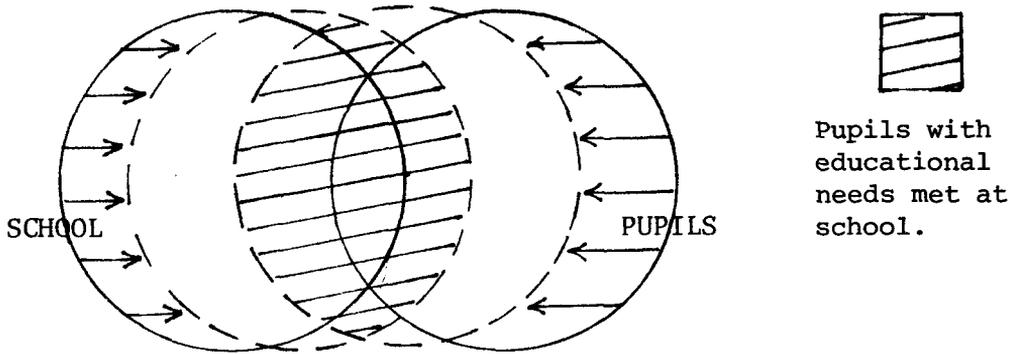
Diagram 3 shows how the school, its curriculum and teaching strategies move towards pupils needs. In so doing, more pupils have their real educational needs met. It must be stressed, however, that not all pupils will receive this optimal education. That would be far too utopian. At the same time it must be acknowledged that in an attempt to project the need for changes to the school it is common for lecturers to emphasise universalistic approaches. This emphasis is not wrong - many lecturers justifiably see it as an essential balance to the workforce solutions which are most often exceptionalistic.

Teachers frequently challenge the practicality of ivory tower approaches. The authors have seen such criticisms in a variety of in-service settings. The criticism is valid. Solutions to real-life problems are not necessarily either universalistic or exceptionalistic approaches.

Hence, even after the set of universalistic approaches to dealing with absenteeism have been employed, it could be necessary, and frequently will be necessary, to follow up with exceptionalistic strategies. This situation is shown in Diagram 4.

In this way an even greater number of pupils will have their educational needs met. It must be stressed that even after harmonising effective universalistic and exceptionalistic approaches not all pupils will receive this optimal education. The more the school adjusts (universalistically and exceptionalistically) to the characteristics of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander pupils, the greater the percentage of them who will have education which meets their needs.

Diagram 4: Optimum Match between Universalistic and Exceptionalistic Approaches



The correct balance between universalistic and exceptionalistic approaches depends on many things. These include the community context, school atmosphere, staff expertise, continuity of staff, available support mechanisms, as well as flexibility and perseverance of staff members. As individual teachers try to balance universalistic and exceptionalistic approaches they will need to use their own professional judgments about what is appropriate and possible. In making their decisions they will have to modify ivory tower approaches to suit their realities.

Furthermore, it must be stressed that perseverance is essential to the effectiveness of many universalistic approaches. In other words, considerable time and effort is required before improvements are noticed. The absenteeism problem mentioned earlier would take time to tackle effectively by universalistic approaches. For one thing, parent-teacher meetings could take months of effort to produce the type of parental commitment required. For another, it will take time and effort to plan out-of-classroom activities or to modify curriculum. Even then it may take the pupils some time to adjust to this new form of learning and to realise its benefits. A similar delay in pupil acceptance of a new curriculum is also likely. So, once a teacher has initiated a universalistic approach, modified it to meet the real needs of the local community, and augmented it with exceptionalistic approaches wherever necessary, it is imperative that the teacher persevere with the strategies to give them time to work. There are no miracle, over-night solutions. Training in ivory towers is designed to provide insights, conceptualisation skills, and an introduction to a wide variety of universalistic approaches to the effective education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pupils. It provides only the preparation for action, not the perseverance

required to make the action successful. In other words, ivory tower approaches are linked to black realities both conceptually by their own content and practically by the understanding, skills, flexibility and perseverance of the teachers who use them.

References

- Fitzgerald, R.T., 1976: Commission of Inquiry into Poverty. *Poverty and Education in Australia*. (Fifth Main Report). Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.
- Ryan, W., 1976: *Blaming the Victim*. (Revised Edition). New York: Vintage Books.

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