INNOVATIONS IN EDUCATION

Training Head Start Teachers in Alaska

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I HAVE been involved in educating Head Start teachers and aides from the very beginning of the program in the summer of 1965. Most of the trainees with whom I worked were urban blacks, Mexican-Americans, and a small number of Anglo-Americans from poverty areas. I found teaching these groups most exciting and rewarding because the “orthodox methods” of instruction proved to be inappropriate and new ways of meaningful teaching had to be found.

When I was invited to participate in a Head Start Training Program held at the University of Alaska near Fairbanks during the summer 1968, I accepted with enthusiasm. My deep interest in cultural anthropology was an added challenge to the job, since all trainees were to be Eskimos and Indians from many tiny villages all over Alaska. They were teacher-directors and aides; some had worked with Head Start children during the past year, while others were new to their jobs. They had been chosen by their individual village councils to participate in the summer training program, although I do not know on what basis that choice was made.

Of the 100 participants we expected, only 94 arrived, mostly women, with not more than a dozen men among them. They ranged in age from about 19 to 40 years. In educational background there was a wide range, from those who had completed the second grade to a very small number of those who had finished high school sponsored by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, or by correspondence courses, neither comparable in levels and scope to most high schools in the United States. Trainees and most of the staff were to be housed in one of the university dormitories, so we would not only meet during the program but would share meals and leisure hours as well.

The training program was planned for a duration of six weeks. One week prior to the beginning was spent in discussing a program set up by members of the teaching staff. I had read as much as I could about Alaskan Eskimos and Indians before my arrival at the university, and continued to do so during all those weeks while I participated in the program.

A New Experience

My hopes that I could do a good job of teaching were slightly dampened by fear, since this would be my first experience with a cultural group which had only very marginally participated in the broader American culture. I also learned that many of the trainees would have a poor command of the English language. Some of the staff members who had lived in Alaska for a considerable length of time pointed out that the trainees could be expected to be very friendly and polite toward the teachers, masking any other feelings they might have. We were told
not to expect any verbal participation; the Alaskan natives were basically non-communicative, a cultural trait we were to respect, as well as shy about speaking to strangers because they were embarrassed about their poor English.

At that point I became very anxious. I do not believe that lecturing is always a good method of teaching, particularly with a group which is not accustomed to a formal approach to learning. I have never taught without expecting responses from my students and have always been able to elicit these. My part in the program was to give daily presentations in the field of Child Development to a fairly large group and to lead two discussion groups of about 15 participants each.

A few days before the program began, those of us who were new to Alaska were flown by a small bush plane to a village on the Yukon River to see the native population in their natural surroundings, visit the Head Start site, meet some of the children who had participated in the program during the previous year, and others who were to enter it this fall. Upon landing on a gravel strip somewhere near the village, we found all the houses empty. They were small, one-room log cabins with sod roofs, on top of which grass and flowers sprouted. The total population of 89 had assembled along the river where the boat, which arrives there twice a year, had docked, bringing the much needed supplies. Old and young were busy helping to unload the goods.

Later in the day when all the inhabitants of the village returned to their homes, we visited with them, talked to them, met the Chief and looked at the house where the Head Start program was administered. We found children and adults very friendly and not at all shy. And while I did not believe that I had become more than very superficially acquainted with some of the natives of that village, I felt I had captured some of the atmosphere, the spirit of the people, which might give me a better idea of how to approach the group of trainees with whom I was going to work.

On the flight back I pondered the questionable value of reading books about people and their ways of life, and the real understanding that can come only by an authentic exposure to people. One result of the trip was to put all very carefully prepared presentations at the bottom of my suitcase and to begin my task anew.

Eager Response

Those of us who have worked with Head Start trainees know that they are responsive, willing to learn, motivated, and interested in doing a good job with children. I think this is true when they are taught on "the gut level" which is meaningful to them rather than in a basically abstract fashion. I hoped I would be able to get the subject matter across to the group of native trainees, but I admit that I was most ill at ease and greatly apprehensive before our first class session. My anxiety, however, left me almost immediately when I saw those 94 expectant faces. My first topic was "The Needs of Young Children." I was not even surprised that after a few minutes when I asked my audience some questions, as is my habit when addressing a group, some of them responded. During that session, I described the feelings of a mother for her infant, her loving care, her warmth and gentleness, and then I asked the trainees
how they cared for their babies to make them feel loved.

Their responses were brief and simple, stating beautifully how an Eskimo or Indian child would develop a sense of trust. I proceeded to describe the need for assertiveness and the often resulting negative behavior of the two- to three-year-old and let my students give examples of their observations of young children. Most of them had children of that age level and understood their need for independence. Then I stressed the inquisitiveness, speed of locomotion, physical and intellectual drive of the four- and five-year-old to which they added pertinent examples, revealing their children’s need for initiative.

At the end of that first presentation I realized that I had actually discussed Erik Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development of preschool children,1 as I might have done in any college course, but without using his terminology, which would have been beyond the comprehension of my audience. During those weeks of teaching I felt more and more in accord with Jerome Bruner’s point of view that there is no reason to believe that any subject cannot be taught to any person at any age in some honest form.2 When that first session was over, a young woman came to me and said, “I have learned something new today.” Her remark certainly made my day.

Leading a discussion based on the content of the preceding presentations was, however, much more difficult. In the beginning, 60 minutes of talking twice daily with people who supposedly do not like verbal communication can become a very long period of time. How was I going to involve them? How could I make them talk? In order to make them feel more comfortable with me, I told them a good deal about myself. I was very honest in my comments. I mentioned the fact that English was not my mother tongue and that it had been very hard for me to overcome the language barrier; that cultural differences had made me feel very uncomfortable during the first few years of living in this country. These were facts shared. I told them many of my life experiences which I thought would be of interest to them. I discussed my family, what each of us did and where we lived. At that point I could tell, by their facial expressions, that we had made contact.

The following day, I hung a big map of Alaska on the wall and had each member of my discussion group put a colored pin into the location of her or his village. I learned a great deal about the geography of the state and I believed that my students learned to feel that I cared about each one of them. Later, I invited them to tell me and the rest of the group about their lives at home and about their families. From then on the 60 minutes were never long enough for our discussions. Some members did not participate, but this happens in any group: most of us became well acquainted, and enjoyed and appreciated each other. Eventually we were able to discuss the topics on the programs, but if this did not materialize, I was not overly concerned. My group had learned to enjoy discussions.

As the weeks progressed it became more and more apparent how much they had learned and how eager they had become to learn more. There came a time when many of them confided to me that they did not...

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teach the Head Start children in English but in their native tongues. And while I knew that this would not be in accordance with the program, I felt this to be of great value for the children because it would contribute to their pride in being an Eskimo or an Indian. They hopefully will not have to be helped to improve their self-concepts, as seems to be necessary among most of our other underprivileged children.

My most satisfying moment occurred when on my very last day in the program, four trainees came to tell me that they had registered to take correspondence courses to continue their high school education, and one had signed up for her first college course.

**A Friendly Place**

I had many questions in my mind during those weeks of intensive involvement with the native trainees. The white man has brought a great deal of anguish to the Eskimos and Indians of Alaska. He brought disease—tuberculosis, which killed a shockingly large number of the native population; and syphilis, which had been unknown in the far north before his arrival. He introduced the use of alcohol to a population with a very low tolerance level to intoxication and thus created a severe problem of alcoholism. He familiarized with the value of hard cash a people who had been self-supporting by the use of their land, through hunting and fishing. It was a hard life, to be sure, but the natives had survived with their pride intact, a pride which comes clearly across when one gets to know them individually.

What did they gain through the contact with the white man? Maybe an easier life, but they paid a high price. Does the introduction of the Head Start program to rural Alaska really make any sense? Can we truly tell the natives what kind of education is best for their children? True, they are all citizens of the United States today, but are they really? Will they have to give up all the values and customs of their ancient culture to fit into the "acceptable mold"? I have many questions and very few answers. But since the confrontation of the white man and his ways with the Eskimos and Indians has occurred, now we can only do our best to provide the kind of intervention that will not deprive them of their dignity and pride.

Many good things may result from the Head Start program for the native children, if it is administered with sensitivity and compassion. I do not know how well the program will prepare the children to become competent students when they enter the first grade, but they will have learned that school is a friendly place one can enjoy. They will have had a number of hopefully enjoyable experiences in arts and crafts, dancing and music, and listening to stories which might have remained unfamiliar to them until they entered the real school. Children in the program receive at least one well balanced meal a day. They all undergo a thorough physical examination for an early detection of illness and physical defects, which should result in a healthier population in the future.

One of my co-workers in the training program tried to answer some of my numerous questions by stating:

I feel that Head Start is a major program in rural Alaska because it is the first program of worth which has belonged to the people—not the white man, not the state government and not a federal agency—but the native people. The people know this and are proud of their program and their responsibility.

Head Start is a bridge. In most villages, the six-year-old leaves the one-room home filled with native family, and steps into a white, warm, room with a strange teacher.

With Head Start, the child spends a little time in a relatively familiar setting—a community hall and a native teacher—but with new types of activities, associations, and experiences.

When I returned after those weeks spent in Alaska, I felt I had received a valuable gift, a deeper understanding and an appreciation of members of an old culture who were now on the brink of becoming teachers in a new adventure in education.

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