

NUTRITION EDUCATION: A POINT OF VIEW

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Summary

The first step in any nutrition education programme with Aborigines is for the educator to learn the Aboriginal point of view.

However this is not easy because we take so much of the world for granted we sometimes don't realize other people see things in a different way. Furthermore learning to see another point of view may be very threatening. To the extent we take things for granted we are certain of the world. To the extent we learn to see another point of view we must throw our certainties into doubt.

A group of Aboriginal people took me with them to collect bush food. We travelled from Alice Springs down a bush track known as the old south road till we came to the second dry creek bed. This was a very good place for finding some particular birds which were part of the traditional Aboriginal diet. As we collected these and prepared to eat them a group of white men could be seen further up the creek bed. They, too, were collecting the birds and carefully putting them in cages. One of the Aboriginal women shook her head. "Just look at those White-fellows", he said, "selling our good food." I could almost hear the White-fellows saying, "Look at those Aborigines eating our profit."

People look at the world in different ways.

All people have an understanding of the world which has evolved from earliest childhood. Throughout life each new experience has been interpreted by associating it with other familiar experiences. For each person the different experiences of life become increasingly manageable as more and more of them can be put into familiar categories. These different categories become consolidated and taken for granted. (Marris 1974). They form the basis of each person's understanding of life. The Aborigines and the Europeans understand life in different ways.

When I began working as a Nutrition Educator with Pitjantjatjara Aborigines I knew that parents tended not to introduce solid food until their children were about 12 months old, and after this the child's diet consisted mainly of damper and tea. Many of the children were suffering from undernutrition. I recognized a need to teach about adequate, balanced diets for children.

I learnt that the Pitjantjatjara people had one word for meat, kuka, and one word for everything else, mai, and traditionally they eat both kuka and mai. From my point of view I felt the information I wanted to impart about the different food values would be more easily understood if I used these two food groups which were already recognized by the Aborigines, rather than introducing three or more food groups.

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Furthermore, the fact that they had traditionally eaten both kuka and mai was a starting point for talking about the need for a balanced diet. I asked each group to tell me about their traditional foods and I used this as a basis for discussion. The importance of giving an adequate, balanced diet to the children was stressed. However, from the Aboriginal point of view, the understanding of what was going on was probably more like this:

We went with our relatives to her place to stay with her and she came and stayed with us in our country. She wanted to know about the food we ate in the old times and we told her stories about the men hunting kangaroos and emus and the women collecting lizards, goannas, witchety grubs, tomatoes, yams, seeds, and figs. We explained how we gathered this food with our relatives and how we distributed it amongst them. We told her which relatives we had to give food to, and which ones we had to receive food from.

She was very interested to learn we called some things kuka and some things mai. She told us we should eat both kuka and mai. She didn't understand that when we found food it was distributed amongst those relatives to whom we had obligations.

So we explained it to her again. We told her about the importance of our relationships and that sharing food in the way our ancestors taught us was a way of expressing those relationships. She still didn't understand. She said we should get kuka and mai to give to the children.

We explained again that the children do not have the obligations the adults have. If the children are there and ask for food we give it to them. But they might ask for other things and we give them those too. Poor thing, she just didn't understand how we use our food.

From my point of view, no matter how the subject of food was introduced, be it traditional or European food, sooner or later, and usually sooner, the Aboriginals would turn the subject around to their relatives. It was very frustrating for me; and in retrospect I realize it must have been equally frustrating for them. It appeared that because of the way I understood the world I was seeing food in terms of nutrients. Because of the way the Aboriginals understood the world, they were seeing food in terms of relationships. We were looking at the same thing from different points of view.†

Nutrition education amongst Aboriginal people is not new. For many years attempts have been made to teach Aboriginals about the relationship between food and health, the nutritional needs of infants, the differing nutrient values of European food, plus practical aspects of

† The idea of looking at things from different points of view involves more than just putting things in different categories. It is a different way of looking at the world. The various aspects of this were summed up by Luckman (1967) who suggested that the way we looked at the world involved "an encompassing system of meaning in which socially relevant categories of time, space, casualty and purpose are super-ordinated to more specific interpretive schemes in which reality is segmented and the segments related to one another."

budgeting, and food storage and preparation. However, the continuing undernutrition suggests that past programmes have not been successful (Kirke 1974). It is thought that one of the reasons for this lack of success is that white health workers have tried to impose western ideas on Aboriginal people in a didactic way. The teaching has not been accepted by the Aboriginals and consequently there has been no significant change in their health behaviour.

Increasingly nutrition educators are being encouraged to use the socratic or two-way method of teaching. This method assumes that people already possess information, feelings, interests and beliefs which profoundly influence the learning process and which must be taken into account before they can be modified. Two or more people work together on the information, integrating it with existing ideas and with possible action. (W.H.O. 1954). The knowledge Aboriginals have is now being taken into account and educators are being encouraged to learn from them.

But what should they learn?

It would seem that if the present two-way teaching programmes are to differ significantly from the past didactic ones the educators must learn more than just isolated facts such as the names and nutritional content of traditional food. They must learn to see the Aboriginal's point of view. This is a necessary first step.

However, learning to look at the world from another point of view is not easy.

Something which became clear during the nutrition education programme in which I was involved is that during the process of learning about another's way of looking at the world, the educator's own way of thinking may be threatened.

As educators we are aware that those we hope to teach are likely to resist ideas that are threatening. But this does not only apply to those we hope to teach. The educator, too, will experience anxieties if his taken-for-granted outlook on life and the world is threatened: and seeking to understand the Aboriginal point of view may be very threatening. In practice, I believe many of us resist this threat by clinging to what we know to be right.

For example, educators know that sickness in Aboriginal children is related to nutrition. We know there is an optimal weight-for-age for children that will not be reached if they are undernourished. We know that after the first few months of life breast milk alone does not provide sufficient nutrition for normal growth. We know what type of food infants need. We know that an undernourished child is more prone to infection, and we know that infective diseases are far more likely to prove fatal in the presence of undernutrition. We know sickness in Aboriginal children is related to nutrition.

Aboriginal people have told me they know sickness is caused by spirits. Sometimes spirits enter people and make them sick, and sometimes their own spirit leaves them. This may happen when someone has done something wrong, or they may just be unlucky and go into a place that contains a spirit that will make them sick. Sometimes a spirit is blown by the wind and a lot of people get sick at the same time. These

people know that the medicine man is the person who knows how to deal with the spirits that cause sickness. They told me that when he has done this they know the person will get better, and added that sometimes the white doctor or sister could give medicines that might help the person to recover more quickly. They said that white people had told them to give the children special food to stop them getting sick. But they didn't believe the white people. They knew sickness was caused by spirits (Stacy 1977).

Here is a situation where the nutrition educator knows that sickness in Aboriginal children is related to nutrition. These Aboriginals know it is not.

The educator's knowledge is part of the way he understands the world. The Aboriginal's knowledge is part of the way the Aboriginals understand the world.

Those who see the world the same way as the educator will know they are right because they are making judgements using the standards which exist as part of their understanding. Those who share this Aboriginal point of view will know they are right because they are making judgements from within their understanding.

Who is right?
Can this dilemma be resolved?
Can it be ignored?

If these matters are seriously considered by the educators they are likely to create anxiety because they will cause them to reconsider what they had previously taken for granted. They may tend to resist this threat by not considering them. To the extent that we take our understanding for granted we are certain of the world.

To the extent that we are prepared to hear and feel another point of view, we must throw our certainties into doubt.

Understanding the Aboriginal point of view is a necessary first step in any nutrition education programme.

And what is the next step?

That question cannot be answered until the point of view of those Aboriginals who are to be educated is known. It is possible the educators may decide not to take another step.

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