



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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Sommerlad, Elizabeth and Bellingham, W.P.; *Co-operation - Competition: A Comparison of Australian European and Aboriginal School Children*. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*. Vol. 3., No. 2., June, 1972. (Pp. 149-157)

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Doubtless it is the hallmark of good research that it raises far more questions than it answers.

Certainly the work done by Dr. Elizabeth Sommerlad at Kormilda College in 1970 has been fruitful in raising many pertinent questions about the education of Aboriginal children, especially in the adolescent years.

In a recent edition of the *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, Dr. Sommerlad has described one series of experiments that she conducted into the area of cooperation among Aboriginal children.

Sample groups were chosen from both the Transitional and Post-primary streams at Kormilda (*the former group are a more sophisticated group who are being prepared for secondary schooling, the latter a group doing terminal studies of a practical-technical nature.*) In addition a group was chosen from working class pupils at a Darwin Primary School.

A simple mechanical drawing test that demanded group cooperation for success, and in which success was rewarded, was the sole measure employed.

Predictably, it was found that the levels of cooperation were highest among all the Aboriginal samples with the relatively unsophisticated Post-primary group showing the strongest levels of cooperative behaviour. The European group was, in comparison, noticeably lacking in cooperative behaviour.

There is little that can be said in criticism of the tests. They appear to have been well designed and administered. In the reporting it would have been helpful to have seen the raw scores and also the tantalizingly withheld I.Q. ratings. The sample chosen was unfortunately narrow but this was unavoidable in the test situation.

The research is timely in that it serves to remind us of the poverty of our knowledge about current Aboriginal social structures and mores. This in turn must challenge us to question the appropriateness of the education that we offer to Aboriginal children, especially in tribal and semi-tribal situations.

Traditional anthropological texts appear to have little to offer in assisting to help build up contemporary sociological pictures of Aboriginal communities. A small number of modern surveys do exist and for these we must be grateful. However, it is a matter of considerable urgency that basic sociological data essential to the construction of an adequate educational philosophy, and thence curricula, is collected.

Some of the more pressing areas that need to be covered for each community are:

- the strength of traditional values - including cooperation and kinship loyalties;
- how cooperative values relate to the noticeable drive for excellence within many family groups;
- existing real bases for authority;
- the aspirations of parents for their children.

In the absence of such data there would appear to be scope for local schools to attempt to do their own field work in conjunction with the parents and Aboriginal teaching staff. There are many hazards in such a program but the experience of those who have begun to make approaches of this nature shows that when handled with care there is a great potential for productive dialogue. There is an increasing level of concern apparent over educational matters among many groups of tribal people. In my own experience strong feelings do exist on such areas as class size, methods of grouping, type of classroom environment, and curriculum needs. I believe that it would be a comparatively simple matter to follow through a general discussion on values and aspirations into a mutual exploration of methodology and curriculum. If such a program were designed to utilize available VTR material on teaching methods and other areas of interest, some most worthwhile modifications to the school program, together with a high level of community education, would have been achieved.

Dr. Sommerlad has reminded us of the high value that Aboriginal people place on cooperative behaviour. Surely it is in the best interests of all concerned for the school and its staff to demonstrate that they are interested too in such an ethic. Discontinuity between school and society has become something of a bandwagon - however in the Aboriginal schools in Australia discontinuity is a tangible fact that we must strive to reduce as speedily as possible.

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