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RESEARCH REPORT

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE SELF-CONCEPTS OF
URBAN AND RURAL RESERVE-DWELLING ABORIGINAL CHILDREN
AND
NON-ABORIGINAL URBAN CHILDREN

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Do Aboriginal children feel competent and confident in the school setting? Where do these feelings, positive or negative, originate?

Do teachers believe these children are competent and worthy? Does it matter what the teachers think?

Does a child's concept of himself influence his success in the school setting?

Can schools help Aboriginal children feel more positively about themselves?

The following research report is not directly addressed to all of the above questions, but is an interesting study which compares the self-concepts of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children.

INTRODUCTION

Although there has been little research into Aboriginal self-concepts, one might reasonably conjecture that the effect, over many generations, of cultural debasement, social ostracism, economic exploitation and discrimination would militate against the development of a healthy self-identity. In fact, it has been suggested that these pressures have resulted in many Aboriginals identifying negatively with their race - "black is bad". Recently however, there has been increasing evidence of the development of a search for positive identity, particularly among some of the more articulate members of the Aboriginal community - an apparent consciousness of the positive values implicit in the concept of Aboriginality. Perhaps this, if not wholly an internal development, is an echo of the American Black Power Movement's "black is beautiful".

What emerges from the research literature in the United States is a considerable difference of opinion regarding self-concept development and the black revolt. In a recent summary, Arnez (1972) concluded that Negro students did not have poor self-concepts and, in fact, *where students had been provided with curricula including black studies*, they scored higher than white children on self-concept measures. She was concerned, however, with the reliance social scientists still put on the research findings of the pre-revolt era which did show negative self-concepts among Negro children. In an opposing view, Banks and Grambs (1972) concluded that the impact of the black revolt was exaggerated and that Negro children still held negative attitudes towards themselves. They believed that these children, still living in a world where being black produced feelings of shame, despair and anger, found it difficult to believe that they were beautiful when so many of the conditions within their homes, schools and communities did not support this belief.

These environmental conditions and their influence on self-concept development are crucial. The concept of self is not an inherited characteristic but learned from interactions with the environment, particularly the socio-cultural environment. If social interaction within that environment assists in the development of feelings of adequacy, a positive self-evaluation is likely to develop.

A particular concern, within the school environment, is the effect of self-concept on scholastic achievement and academic progress. Brookover et al. (1964) concluded that there were specific self-concepts of ability related to specific areas of role performance within the school setting. They found that even when I.Q. was controlled, there was a significant positive correlation between self-concept of ability and performance in the academic role. These findings are supported by those of Coleman (1962) and Aspy (1971).

When reviewing self-concept research, it is important to recognize the distinction between uni- and multi-dimensional measures - the former measuring a "global" self-concept, the latter measuring specific self-concept components, levels or factors. There may be a distinction between a general self-concept or self perception in which disadvantaged children fare reasonably well at least in segregated schools, and a self-concept of achievement, that is, self measured against the standards and expectations of the school as a middle class institution.

Concerning teacher attitudes, Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) and Leacock (1969) found substantial evidence of low aspirations and expectations of teachers for their low socio-economic status black pupils.

Watts (1970), as part of a wider research into the academic progress of Aboriginal adolescent girls, found that there was no significant difference between the Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginal girls in her sample in their actual self-concepts, although the non-Aboriginal girls showed higher aspirations for their ideal selves than did the Aboriginal girls. In a study of achievement motivation and educational retardation of Aboriginal children in New South Wales, Duncan (1969) concluded that there was an urgent need to build up Aboriginal pride in their heritage in order to strengthen the Aboriginal child's feelings of individual identity and his self-esteem. Watts (1971) noted that the personal experiences of the members of the National Workshop on Aboriginal Education suggested that many Aboriginals held themselves in relatively low esteem and that the Workshop perceived the need for a precise determination of the existing self-concepts of Aboriginal children.

This present study was partly in response to the Workshop recommendation and was an exploratory investigation into the self-concepts of two groups of Aboriginal and one group of non-Aboriginal Grade Seven children. The investigation:

- (a) focussed on the inter-relatedness of the various factors of the self-concept;
- (b) endeavoured to find information about the relationship between self-concept factors and scholastic achievement among Aboriginal children, compared with the relationship for non-Aboriginal children.
- (c) measured teacher perceptions of the self-concepts of the children.
- (d) determined those attributes of self perceived by the children as personally important.

THE STUDY

The subjects in this study were grouped according to ethnicity, location and sex as follows:

- Aboriginal rural reserve-dwelling - 8 boys; 11 girls

- Aboriginal urban-dwelling - 6 boys; 7 girls.
- Non-Aboriginal urban-dwelling - 28 boys; 36 girls.

The basic instrument used was the *Primary Self-Concept Test* (Andrews, 1970), a fifty item adjective check and a twenty-five item phrase check. The instrument was developed using Brisbane Grade Five, Six and Seven subjects and was subjected to reliability and validity checks. The factor analysis of Andrews' data resulted in the current model of the test providing measures on six factors or sub-scales of the self-concept. They are:

1. Self as striving for success, sufficient, confident.
2. Self as tense, apprehensive.
3. Self as socially adequate.
4. Self as hostile, aggressive.
5. Physical and psychological self-worth.
6. Self as conforming, conscientious, dependent.

Other measures used were:

- (a) School-rated reports of each subject's scholastic achievement, based on reading and general academic achievement, graded according to a five-point scale.
- (b) Teachers' perceptions of each of their pupil's self-concepts using a positive-negative rating.
- (c) A selection by each subject from the adjective check-list of ten descriptions perceived by each as those attributes of himself most centrally important.

FINDINGS

The following are findings concerned with the specific hypotheses tested in this investigation:

Hypothesis 1. Reserve-dwelling Aboriginal children will tend to display greater striving for success, sufficiency and confidence than urban-dwelling Aboriginal children.

This hypothesis was not supported as no significant difference was found between the two groups (reserve and urban Aboriginal) for Factor 1. Further analysis showed that Aboriginal children generally, and rural Aboriginal girls in particular,

(.001 level) achieved significantly lower scores on this subscale than their urban non-Aboriginal peers.

Hypothesis 2. Grade Seven rural reserve-dwelling Aboriginal children and Grade Seven urban-dwelling non-Aboriginal children will tend to have similarly developed concepts of self as socially adequate, but this concept will be less well developed among urban-dwelling Grade Seven Aboriginal children attending integrated schools.

No significant difference was shown to exist between each pair of the three groups, thus giving support to the first part, but not the second part of the hypothesis. Within their own environments, subjects considered themselves equally socially adequate.

Hypothesis 3. Aboriginal children attending an integrated urban school will tend to have a more highly developed negative factors (2 and 4) of self-concept than Aboriginal children attending a rural reserve school.

Significant difference between means at the 0.1 level gave support for this hypothesis.

Hypothesis 4. High achieving Aboriginal children, irrespective of location, will have a more positive self-concept than low achieving Aboriginal children.

The correlation between the summation of the positive self-concept factors, (1, 3, 5 and 6), and scholastic achievement for rural Aboriginal children was .623, significant at the .01 level, thus giving partial support to the hypothesis. However, an interesting difference was found for urban Aboriginal children. Though not significant, positive self-concept factors correlated negatively with scholastic achievement (-.122), while the negative factors correlated positively (.391).

Hypothesis 5. Teachers will tend to perceive high achieving children as having a more positive self-concept than low achieving children.

A positive correlation between teachers' perceptions and scholastic achievement of .53 (significant at the .001 level),

gave support to this hypothesis.

Hypothesis 6. Attributes of the self perceived by children themselves to be centrally important will tend to reflect those self-attributes most closely related to their different psycho-social environments.

Attributes chosen by more than 50% of each group were:

- reserve Aborigines - dependable, obedient, reliable;
- urban Aborigines - friendly, helpful, generous;
- urban non-Aborigines - keen, friendly, helpful.

While it is impossible to quantify the above data, it is suggested that reserve Aboriginal children, within the setting of an Aboriginal settlement and its restrictions, see conformity as important. Urban Aboriginal children, confronted by an indifferent if not hostile environment, and reared within a sub-culture which emphasizes primacy of group relations, see social adequacy and collaterality as important. Urban non-Aboriginal children appear to perceive the need for a balance between achievement and affiliation.

SUMMARY

While the findings of this exploratory investigation are to be treated cautiously because of the small numbers of Aboriginal children involved, the following tentative conclusions are drawn:

- (a) Little difference in the overall picture of self-concept was found between the two groups of Aboriginal children. However, urban Aborigines showed greater development of the negative factors of self-concept than those children on the reserve, and the reserve Aboriginal girls were found to have the least positive self-concepts of all groups.
- (b) Aboriginal children in both groups, urban and reserve, were more homogenous than non-Aboriginal children, in relation to the variables tested in this study.
- (c) The factors of the self-concept accounting for the greatest discrimination between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children were the self as *striving for success, sufficient, confident*, and the self as

conforming, conscientious and dependent. The group showing the least development in these factors was the group of reserve Aboriginal girls.

- (d) For urban Aboriginal children, self-evaluation appears to be negatively correlated with scholastic achievement.
- (e) Environmental influences on Aboriginal children condition those attributes of the self that individual children perceive to be of greatest importance, in a manner which does not appear to be greatly associated with scholastic achievement.

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