



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

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OBSERVATIONS OF THE ABORIGINAL CHILD
IN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT:
THE NEED FOR PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT.



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Mr. Cook has been following a plan of parental involvement this year with his sixth class primary school students, and he feels that the principle is most applicable for teachers wishing to develop better attitudes towards school with their Aboriginal students.

As the observer scans the playground, certain differences between groups enter his awareness; not outstanding differences such as colour or ethnic background, but differences in more subtle behaviour and activities. The Aboriginal child, with others of minority ethnic groups, exhibits the behaviour which demonstrates that he is in an environment of alien attitudes. Sometimes it is in the inhibited, downcast response to a teacher's command or question, or the lack of initiative to institute activity in response to a command in lines, or simply in the response of being with other members of their ethnic group for solidarity. Occasionally it is aggression against school authorities, or against pupils associated with this authority in the eyes of the Aboriginal child. What is this 'alien' attitude? Does it in fact exist, or is it merely a cliché which blankets a 'problem'?

It is generally obvious to the teacher of Aboriginal children that there is a lack of consonance between the Aboriginal child and his school environment. It is also obvious to the perceptive teacher that we still have a rather authoritarian system compared to the home life of the Aboriginal child, and that he occasionally reacts to this in overt fashion, although it would appear that there is usually a covert 'simmering'.

What evidence is there to support this notion of a lack of consonance? One manifestation is the bi-modal distribution

that appears when Aboriginal and white Australian children are compared for I.Q. It has long worried teachers that Aboriginal children perform badly on our I.Q. tests. These tests are basically testing skills related to performance in our Western society, in which success is measured by the ability to produce 'the goods'.

Are Aboriginal children innately inferior in intelligence, or are their 'goods' simply of a different nature? Certainly few teachers would support a case of innate inferiority. Also certainly, few white children would pass an Aboriginal I.Q. test, if I.Q. tests *do* simply measure the attainment of skills necessary for the production of the 'goods' essential to a way of life. Few white Australian children would show similar I.Q. to a Central Australian Aboriginal child, if they were placed in a tribal area, lost, on a hot January day. Obviously, the Central Australian Aboriginal child would be in possession of the 'goods' to survive in such an environment. The assumption here, of course, is that intelligence is a measure of one's ability to get along in one's environment.

If innate differences do not exist, then I.Q. (whether the measuring instrument is Aboriginal in orientation, white Australian, or more generally Western) is simply a cultural artifact. We are talking, then, in terms of the mastering of the skills of a culture, and a basic requirement for this, given physical well-being, is acceptance of the *values* of the culture.

The values of society must of necessity be based on what is seen as essential for survival in that society, and these values are manifested in the attitudes of the members of the society in question. Obviously the values of the original Aboriginal societies of Australia were very different from those of our Western European society. As a result, the attitudes held by the members of both are different. The vast majority of Aboriginals are simply not in possession of the 'goods' of our society, both mentally as in attitudes, or physically as in control of resources.

However, it can be claimed that we are not effectively talking of original Aboriginal society; we are talking of fringe-dwellers, of 'squatters', a racially mixed group which has rejected its culture and adopted our values and attitudes. But have they? Certainly they have made the attempt, as Professor Stanner states:

"To go near is always a sort of offer: the Aborigines, from Phillip's time on, came voluntarily as near to us as they could. Usually they ended up in a fringe-camp or an institution, but just being there was a continual appeal. The trouble was that they made their appeal when no one saw or heard very clearly." (1)

However, they have not been able to cast off, even in a racially mixed social form, the attitudes and values of thousands of years of cultural evolution; as they have not been able to cast off the physical features of millions of years of physical evolution. As Professor Stanner states, they have made the attempt, but it was a physical attempt; the attempt in attitude must mean not an attempt at assimilation of Aboriginal attitudes - which means unconditional change - but an integration of Aboriginal attitudes by white Australians. If the two are to mould, to become consonant, it must be a mutual acceptance, not an abdication by one party.

There is a need for attitude change by both parties. Also the need must be brought into awareness before an adequate response can develop. Basically, the Aboriginal child in our school system is suffering from a lack of awareness of his needs by the people who most affect his life: his parents and his teachers and school peers.

How is attitude change brought about? More importantly, how is it brought about in the school environment? Two ways of bringing attitudes into consonance are to lower the barriers which bring opposing attitudes into conflict, and to raise the bonds that exist in common, if they can be identified.

What are the barriers? Ignorance, discrimination, prejudice - to name a few - are barriers to consonance of attitudes. What bonds exist in attitudes? Perhaps a desire, as Professor Stanner stated, to approach or approximate white Australian way of life. Certainly by utilising this knowledge we can commence a program of attitude change for all parties involved - Aboriginal children and parents, teachers, white Australian children, the community as a whole.

The focal point is the school. The mechanism is the development of attitude change by a process of interaction between Aboriginal parent and school, via an atmosphere of integrity and mutual respect. Obviously if the Aboriginal child is to change

his attitude to school, and we as teachers our attitude to his way of life, a communication link must be forged between parent and school. Parental involvement is certainly an ideal solution, but again, the teacher is well aware that the school is as 'alien' to the Aboriginal parent as it is to his child. No one likes to be in a situation where one's integrity is challenged, or not accepted.

A situation must be created that is conducive to all parties. The parent must be contacted, his approach and attitudes accepted and a feeling of respectful rapport established. Can this be done? There seems little reason why not. However, certain prerequisites present themselves: the Aboriginal person must feel welcome; the Aboriginal person must feel worthy; and the Aboriginal person must feel confident that his integrity will not be down-graded.

An Aboriginal teacher-aide is, of course, a valuable link between the parent and the school. This approach could be extended to Aboriginal parental involvement in the classroom, perhaps exclusively with Aboriginal children to begin with, so that confidence in the situation can develop. Naturally, parental attitude change will help the child to change his attitude. The co-operation of the parents, and the increased understanding of the Aboriginal parent-child relationship will hopefully accelerate attitude change in the teacher as well, if this has not already occurred. It would be essential, of course, that the *teacher's* attitude be conducive.

This type of program would only be a start, but we seem far from that start in most cases. Be it good or bad, the Aboriginal has only one education system open to him; and having made the step towards our culture, it would appear he will not retrace it - indeed cannot. It is essential therefore, that he be able to learn the 'goods' of our culture. It is therefore up to us to accept the first step as an initial response to attitude change, and to build on the gesture. We can do this by accepting the Aboriginal child and parent into our schools as integral entities who not only deserve, but have our regard. The hand has been given - even if tentatively - and later withdrawn; it is up to us to accept it, indeed to search for it.

Reference

1. Stanner, W.E.H., *After the Dreaming*, The Boyer Lectures 1968. Sydney, The Australian Broadcasting Commission 1968.