



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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ATTITUDES TO SCHOOL EXPERIENCE:
A REPORT FROM A SEMINAR OF ABORIGINAL STUDENTS

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On 25th September, a day long seminar was held at Maitland in South Australia as part of the Action Research Project for Secondary Education of Aboriginal Students. This project is being carried out within the Research & Planning Branch of the Education Department of South Australia.

The participants in the seminar were 27 past and present Aboriginal high school students, and the 10 current students were all senior students. Questionnaires were administered and answered individually by all students. Later in the day a discussion of some of the information collated from the questionnaires took place. After the meeting, the questionnaires were more thoroughly analysed, and the following report was written.

The questionnaires are reproduced in the Appendix following the report.

There were two main reasons for calling the meeting: firstly so that Aboriginals could give their views about school, and secondly so that the school and the Action Research Project could use the information given by the Aboriginals to effect changes. Three questionnaires were administered during the day. Part I was put on the overhead projector, and the students filled in answer sheets. Part II and Part III were on sheets which were filled in by individuals.

I. ABORIGINAL STUDENTS' OPINIONS ABOUT SCHOOL

1. DISCIPLINE AND TEACHERS (Part 1 - Questions 1,2,16.)

Three questions were directly concerned with discipline. Fourteen of the Aborigines said that discipline in schools should have been more strict, and the other fourteen said that it should not have been more strict. Slightly more of the present students thought discipline should not have been more strict, though they predominantly (10 out of 13) admitted that students did not learn much from "weak teachers" (16). Past students (also 10 out of 13) concurred. The majority of students (20 out of 28) thought that students got more work done when teachers were strict.

Although 12 out of 26 said students should "have been allowed more freedom to do as they liked", only three of those were past students. The remaining 9 were students still at school.

2. SCHOOLWORK AND CURRICULA (Part 1, Questions 3,4,5,6,8,9.)

a) Schoolwork

There were three questions relating to how hard students should work (3,8,9). Equal numbers of past and present students, totalling 16, thought that students should have been made to work harder. Five past and 5 present students disagreed. Despite this though, all of the past students thought that students got things "too easy", and did not learn how to work. Ten out of the 14 present students agreed with them. However, the answers to the question "most students are overworked and shouldn't have to work so hard" had 14 agreements and 11 disagreements.

There was general agreement that lessons should be easier and plainer (4). All the present students, and 10 out of 13 of the past students agreed. Further evidence of this was the agreement of 26 out of 28 that "Teachers should do more explaining of difficult problems" (6). In view of this it is surprising that 9 out of 27 still considered that teachers "do too much talking and explaining" (5). This may imply that the talking and explaining that actually occurs is ineffective.

b) Teachers Help (Part I - Questions 14,15)

Eighteen of the Aborigines thought that teachers should "only help students when they ask for it". The remaining eight then meant that teachers should not help students if the students didn't ask for help. However, when the opposite question was asked, 22 out of 28 said they thought that teachers should help even when students did not want help!

c) Curricula (Part I Questions 7,11,17,18)

(i) and (ii). Equal numbers of students (14 and 14) thought that they should only study subjects that they liked. There were no significant differences between past and present students' "likes" and "dislikes" of subjects, so they are not separated in the following table.

Subjects	Numbers of students who would have liked to drop the subject.	Numbers of students who would have liked to spend twice as much time on the subject.
Maths	10	4
Social Studies (including Geography, History)	8	1
English	3	1
Science	3	2
Woodwork	-	4
Metal work	-	4
Art	-	3
Home Science	-	3
Ag. Science	-	1
Commercial Studies	1	3

(iii) Twenty-two of the students thought that students should do about an hours homework each night. The 6 that

disagreed may therefore have thought an hour was either insufficient or too much.

3. REASONS FOR LEAVING SCHOOL (Part I - Question 22)

Only 9 of the past students gave reasons for leaving school. The most frequent reason given, by 4 out of 9, was dislike of school or teachers. Teachers "bossed" them or "were too hard" on them. Another said that no one gave her/him any reason for staying, and no encouragement to do so. Another went to leaving standard which was as high as possible, and another left because he/she could not cope. One student left because he/she had got a job. An interesting but ambiguous comment from the remaining student was "I had to - to continue on".

4. CHANGES DESIRABLE IN SCHOOLS (Part II - Question 7)

Comments to this question fell into several easily definable categories, as below :

- a) teachers
- b) rules
- c) lessons and curricula
- d) miscellaneous

a) Teachers

Teachers should be more understanding, should not "pick" on students, and should allow "feedback" about their actions etc. Strict teachers were "out". Strict in this case could mean unreasonable, or unfair, rather than just and firm.

b) Rules

Students wanted to go to the street whenever they wished, without permission, and they wanted longer breaks, both at recess and at lunchtimes. The cane was "Out", rules were to be reasonable, and Aborigines were to be treated the same as white students.

c) Lessons and Curricula

Aborigines wanted work and lessons that they could understand, that were interesting and enjoyable. Some

wanted more sport, re-introduction of clubs, and more outside activities. It was also desirable that the curricula should include something that would give Aborigines an identity.

d) Miscellaneous

Two interesting comments were made. Firstly it was suggested that an Aboriginal student council be formed, with its function to liaise between students and teachers, to interpret policy etc. Secondly it was thought desirable to spend time pointing out the importance of education and encouraging Aboriginal students to remain at school.

5. GOOD THINGS ABOUT THE SCHOOL (Part III - Question 7)

Aborigines were asked to indicate three things that were "good about school" and that "should be continued", it was mostly interpreted as "things I liked and wanted more of"

In view of the comments that resulted from "If I were Headmaster, I would change", it is interesting to see the same trends. The comments were categorized and ranked in order of frequency that they were stated.

"Good Things"	Number of Mentions
1. Having more sport and Physical Education	12
2. Art and craft lessons	12
3. Educational trips including Tasmania and camping trips, excursions and Aboriginal culture trips.	9
4. Staff involvement and interest in Aborigines and their problems.	5
5. Working out in the Community for a week.	4
6. Being allowed to remain inside when it was cold.	4
7. Career advisers.	1
8. Visitors from overseas countries.	1

* Paragraph omitted. Refer to Page 49.

II. ABORIGINAL STUDENTS' OPINIONS ABOUT THEMSELVES AT SCHOOL

1. (Part III - Questions 1,2,3)

There were three questions asked in this section, and they will be considered together. A total of 25 students (14 past and 11 present) filled in this part of the questionnaire. Each characteristic mentioned, is in order of frequency that it was indicated.

Eighteen of the 25 students said that they wanted teachers to think they were *friendly*, but only 11 of them described themselves as friendly. Only 8 of the 18 believed the teachers thought they were friendly. In answer to the opposite question, that is, about being unfriendly, only 2 students said they wanted teachers to think they were unfriendly, and one of them was actually unfriendly.

Sixteen students wanted teachers to think that they were *polite*, but only 6 actually thought the teachers saw them like that. Only 7 of the 16 thought they actually were polite.

In answer to the opposite question, 2 students said that they were not polite, and one of these wanted the teachers to think he/she was not polite. Four of the present students believed that the teachers thought they were not polite.

Sixteen students wanted teachers to think they were *good at sport*. Ten of the 16 thought teachers saw them as being good at it. Ten students said they wanted to be good at sport, they wanted the teachers to think they were, and that teachers actually *did* think that they were.

One present student was bad at sport and said the teachers knew it! One other present student said the teachers thought he/she was bad at sport.

Fourteen students wanted teachers to think that they were *interested*. Only 3 out of the 14 thought that teachers considered them to be interested, and 2 said they actually were. Half of the 14 said they were interested, but only 2 said that the teachers would have agreed with them. It is encouraging that *no* student wanted teachers to think he/she

was uninterested, but in fact eight of them said the teachers thought they were uninterested.

Fourteen students wanted teachers to think they were *good workers*, when in fact only 5 said teachers thought they were. Only 7 of the 14 thought that they were good workers, even though they wanted teachers to think they were.

It is interesting to note that 9 of the 14 who said they wanted teachers to think they were good workers, also wanted teachers to think they were interested and co-operative.

A total of 13 students wanted teachers to think them co-operative, but only 3 said the teachers would have considered them to be co-operative, and only 7 considered that they actually were co-operative.

In answer to the opposite question, only 2 students had considered themselves to be unco-operative, but 6 had said teachers thought they were. Three students actually wanted to be unco-operative.

Eleven students (5 past and 6 present students) wanted teachers to think they were *well behaved*, but none of the present students said teachers thought they were, and none said that they were! Two of the past students said that they had been well behaved. Ten Aborigines wanted teachers to think they were *willing students*, but of the 10, only 4 thought they actually were. Only 1 of the present students said teachers thought he/she was willing, but then, only 2 present students said teachers thought them *unwilling*. Three of the past students said teachers thought they were unwilling, but only 1 of those admitted to being unwilling.

Far more detailed analysis could be done in similar fashion, but for the purpose of this report, I think sufficient has been mentioned, for certain pertinent conclusions to be drawn.

2. a) STUDENTS' IDEAS ABOUT WHAT HAPPENS IN LESSONS -
(PART II - Questions 1,2,5)

"I never said much, or joined in much at school because...."

There were 46 comments made in answer to this question, and half of these stated that they were scared (12 out of 23), or that they were worried about what other students would say (11 out of 23). Nine said they thought they might be wrong and 7 said they couldn't understand the work.

When "*other Aboriginal children did well in class*", half, (15 out of 30 comments) of the Aboriginals' comments were that they did not care, and a large number (11 out of 30) said that they were proud. No one was angry about it, or frightened, and only one said that he/she made fun of anyone who did well.

There were 46 comments on children *swearing* in class. Almost half of the comments, (21) attributed the action to the student being "wild". Seven comments attributed it to a student not liking the teacher, and 6 said that the student didn't mean any harm. Only one indicated that the student wanted to shock the teacher.

b) PREFECTS (Part II - Questions 3,4)

Five of the past students had wanted to be prefects, but none of the present ones did. Nineteen (9 past and 10 present) said that they did not want to be prefects. All except one present student said that they liked other Aboriginal students becoming prefects.

3. REASONS THE PAST STUDENTS GAVE FOR NOT BEING THE WAY THEY PLANNED TO BE. (Part III - Questions 4,5,6)

This question was directed to the past students only, and answered by fourteen of them. Two students only, *had* become the kind of people they had planned to be, and they said that school had helped them become that. The remaining 12 people who had not become the kind of people they had wanted to be, gave reasons for this. Half of them attributed their difference to lack of jobs, and lack of help from career advisers. Four said they had not stayed at school long enough, and one said he/she had not had "enough will power".

4. REASONS FOR STUDENTS FAILURE (Part I - Questions 12,13)

Two questions were directed at students, asking whether

they thought students, or the school was to blame for student failure. Only 3 out of 29 students thought that the school was to blame for student failure; the remaining 26 thought the student was to blame. When asked the opposite question, 25 out of 29 said that the student was to blame for his or her failure.

5. ABORIGINALS' DISCUSSION ABOUT PROBLEM AREAS

During the afternoon the Aboriginals held a discussion among themselves, without any white people present. The main points that come from the discussion supplement the information received from questionnaires, and have extremely important implications for educators.

A summary of the main points raised follows:-

1. Better understanding was needed between Aboriginal students and teachers.
2. Aboriginal students did not feel that they were "people", they lacked identity, and were made to feel that they had nothing to offer.
3. Most interaction between parents and school was negative.
4. Aboriginal students needed more *encouragement* from both parents and teachers.
5. Aboriginal students found difficulty in individually communicating with teachers, so the formation of an Aboriginal Council to facilitate this was highly desirable. Aboriginal students would then have a "voice", and could let teachers or the Headmaster know their opinions about things.

III. CONCLUSIONS AND ACTIONS

INTRODUCTION

Many important points emerged from the seminar with the Aboriginals, and despite the variety of information sought, several main problem areas were isolated, and will be considered below.

Not only for Aborigines, but for all students, most problems that occur exist because there have been misunderstandings among the people involved. In the area of education the people directly involved are teachers, parents and students, and because *all* have been involved in the misunderstanding *all* must be involved in *ACTION* to remedy the problems. In each of the areas concluded below, it is indicated *who* is responsible for the action.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR CHANGES MUST BE SHARED, BY TEACHERS, PARENTS AND STUDENTS.

Each must be prepared to meet the others half way, for successful solutions to eventuate.

1. COMMUNICATION

The most convincing evidence of lack of communication between students and teachers, came from the questions about what students wanted teachers to think they were like, what teachers actually thought the students were like, and what the students thought they themselves were like.

Fifteen of the 25 Aborigines said that they wanted to be 4 or more of the following: friendly, polite, good at sport, interested, good workers, willing students, and co-operative. It is significant though, that in many cases the Aborigines did not consider that they were what they wanted to be, and that teachers certainly didn't think positively of them. Assuming that answers given were indicative of honest feelings, it can be concluded that there were factors preventing Aborigines from being what they wanted to be. Teachers thought negatively of Aborigines, and so Aborigines had little hope of communicating the positive things that they really wanted to communicate.

ACTION -

TEACHERS

The responsibility for changing this situation falls mostly upon teachers, who are older, more socially mature and professionally trained. If doors of communication are to be opened, teachers must change their behaviour to assist people who are shy and unsure in the school situation, which is, after all, a white man dominated situation. It is natural that people

feel frightened and threatened when they are in a minority situation.

In 1975 teachers will be invited to attend communications conferences so that they can learn how to understand their students (both Aboriginal and white) better.

2. TEACHERS

ACTION - TEACHERS

If the communications skills learnt at conferences are applied, then teachers will become encouraging, and will stop "bossing" and "picking on" students. Aborigines were sure that they learnt more from teachers who were not "weak", so firmness and justice were two more characteristics the teacher needed.

3. CLASSROOM

ACTION - TEACHERS

In the classroom lessons should be made easier and plainer, and teachers should explain difficult work. Individual help should be given to students who have difficulties. When Aborigines join in there should be no fear of them being made to feel small. Above all, teachers should give students plenty of encouragement, and be willing to praise where praise is due.

ACTION - ABORIGINALS

When Aborigines get very angry at school, and feel like swearing, they must realize that teachers get very angry too and probably feel like saying lots of things.

4. CURRICULA (SUBJECTS)

ACTION - TEACHERS

There should be more scope for students to spend longer time on subjects that they are interested in, and enjoy. Students should be

able to choose more of what they can do at school, and with more generous staffing, schools can do this.

If a student finds difficulty with a subject and dislikes it, there seems no point in making him/her sit and bear it in the hope that "something may rub off". It won't! Excursions, educational trips, should be increased, as they widen the students' knowledge very effectively. Job experience should be extended for those wishing to take part in it.

*ACTION -
ABORIGINALS*

The majority of Aborigines wanted an hours homework each night, therefore they must be willing to *do* their homework when it is set.

5. SCHOOL RULES

ACTION-

TEACHERS Teachers must explain in detail, the reasons, including all legal implications, of the school rules.

ACTION-

ABORIGINALS

Students must be prepared to accept the rules, which are for their own benefit.

6. EMPLOYMENT

ACTION -

TEACHERS Teachers should emphasize the importance of education in finding employment. Indirectly, teachers can let employment organizations know that lack of job opportunities are making children disinterested and unambitious.

7. FURTHER EDUCATION

ACTION-

ABORIGINALS

Numbers of past students wanted more education,

and to learn more about some things. If they really want to do more, they should contact the school or let teachers know what to arrange.

8. STUDENT COUNCIL

ACTION -

TEACHERS The Aboriginal students at school should have the opportunity of forming a council to help them communicate their ideas to teachers.

IV. APPENDIX

PART 1

These questions were put on the overhead projector and Aboriginals had answer sheets to fill in.

1. Discipline in school should have been more strict.
2. Students should have been allowed more freedom to do as they liked.
3. Students should have been made to work harder.
4. Lessons should be made easier and plainer.
5. Teachers do too much talking and explaining to the class.
6. Teachers should do more explaining of difficult problems.
7. Students should do about 1 hours homework each night.
8. Most students get things too easy and don't really learn how to work.
9. Most students are overworked and shouldn't have to work so hard.
10. Education is important for a job when you leave school.
11. Students should study only those subjects that they like.
12. When students fail, the school is to blame and not the student.
13. When students fail, they are to blame.

14. Teachers should only help students when they ask for it.
15. Teachers should help students with any problems, even when they don't want help.
16. Kids never learn much from weak teachers.
17. If I had been allowed to drop any subject, it would have been
18. If I could have spent twice as much time on a subject, it would have been
19. Students get more work done when teachers are strict.
20. I have had enough education.
21. I would like to learn more about some things.
22. I left school when I did because

PART II

1. I never said much or joined in much at school because:
 - (a) I thought I might be wrong
 - (b) I was scared
 - (c) I didn't care about the work
 - (d) I didn't like the work
 - (e) I did say a lot
 - (f) I was worried about what other kids would say
 - (g) I couldn't understand the work
 - (h)
2. When other Aboriginal children did well in class I was :
 - (a) Didn't care
 - (b) Angry
 - (c) Proud
 - (d) Frightened
 - (e) Ashamed
 - (f) Made fun of them

3. Did you ever want to be a prefect? YES / NO
4. Did you like other Aboriginal children becoming Prefects? YES / NO
5. When a child swears in class it is because:
 - (a) Does not like the teacher
 - (b) Wants to shock teacher
 - (c) Is wild
 - (d) Wants attention
 - (e) Can't help it
 - (f) Enjoys making teacher wild
 - (g) Doesn't mean any harm
 - (h) Another reason
6. The person in the school I most wanted to be like was
.....
7. If I were a Headmaster, things that I would change in the school would be:

PART III

1. What words best describe the type of person you were at school?

friendly	unfriendly	co-operative
unco-operative	smart	dumb
tidy	untidy	well-behaved
nuisance	interested	not interested
polite	not polite	willing student
unwilling	good worker	lazy
truthful	liar	good at sport
bad at sport	popular	unpopular

2. What do you think most *TEACHERS* thought you were like?

friendly	unfriendly	co-operative
unco-operative	smart	dumb
tidy	untidy	well behaved
nuisance	interested	not interested
polite	not polite	willing student
unwilling	good worker	lazy
truthful	liar	good at sport
bad at sport	popular	unpopular

3. What kind of person did you *WANT* teachers to think you were?

friendly	unfriendly	co-operative
unco-operative	smart	dumb
tidy	untidy	well-behaved
nuisance	interested	not interested
polite	not polite	willing student
unwilling	good worker	lazy
truthful	liar	good at sport
bad at sport	popular	unpopular

4. Are you the sort of person *NOW* that you planned to be when you were at school?

5. If the answer is YES, did school help you become the sort of person you had dreamed about?

6. If answer (to 4) is NO, what is the main reason you are not now the person you planned to be?

7. List three things that you really liked about school, and that you would not like to see changed.

.....

* From page 39

6. IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION IN JOB ACQUISITION (Part I - Q.10)

All but one of the Aborigines present thought that good education was necessary for getting a good job. Even so, when asked if they had enough education, seven replied that they had (5 of the 7 were still at school). All but two of each of the past and present students wanted to "learn more about some things".