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ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER VIEWS

ABORIGINAL CHILDREN AND SCHOOL



L. Crawford,
Aboriginal Teaching
Assistant,
Walgett High School.

Aboriginal children are confronted with numerous problems coping with the school system. An Aboriginal child is torn between the extremes of two cultures; the dominant white culture and Aboriginal culture.

The dominant white culture perceives the Aboriginal culture to be different and at worst, very inferior. The Aboriginal culture is resigned to the white culture's perception of it, because this perception is reinforced in the reality of the dominant white situation.

The Aboriginal race is seen by many whites as lazy, irresponsible, uneducated, and a burden to society. The white Australian perception of Aboriginals as an ethnic group is still, in many ways, one of inferiors. Aboriginals have encountered white superiority since white settlement. Aboriginals were hunted and destroyed as vermin, and at a later stage, those that survived were placed on missions or reserves. At the time this seemed an effective solution, but it did in fact take Aboriginals away from their tribal lands, which were an important part of their culture. The Aboriginals were degraded and culturally ruined. Although there has been a small effort by white authorities to help Aboriginals, Aboriginals still have a strong feeling for white hostility and dominance.

The Aboriginal child is a product of these two widely different cultures, but he is forced into a white school system, which still, in many ways, merely tolerates his Aboriginal heritage.

In 1880, when New South Wales provided free, compulsory and secular education for all children, people of Aboriginal descent were not included. The same year, the Aboriginal Protection Board was formed, with part of its responsibilities being the education of Aboriginal children who lived on the various reserves and missions throughout the state. The education of Aboriginal children on the various reserves and missions was one of the minor duties of the managers or supervisors

of the reserves and missions. Few if any of the managers or supervisors had any teaching qualifications themselves.

Aboriginal children only reached third grade primary standard by the time they were ready to leave school. As late as 1939, the Department of Education introduced a new syllabus for teachers in Aboriginal schools. This permitted "bright" Aboriginal children to advance as far as fourth grade primary level.

For many years Departmental regulations discouraged Aboriginal children from enrolling in Public Schools. Most Aboriginal children were forced to attend segregated schools, where standards were uniformly low. It was not until the late 1940's and early 1950's that Aboriginal schools were staffed by trained teachers and even later before public schools in many rural areas were desegregated.

Since many parents of Aboriginal children now enrolled in public schools were denied normal educational opportunities themselves, it is not surprising that they are wary of the education system in which their children are now compelled to participate.

At present, in general, Aboriginal parents accept the education that is offered and the manner of its offering, not because they are content, but because they are not in a position to see any alternatives. With greater knowledge and understanding they would be in a better position to shape education to their own needs, to have an influence in bringing about changes they desire. Until progress is made towards these goals, I believe many Aboriginal students will continue to find it very difficult to meet the demands of school.

School, since it is not an issue of explicit importance in the home (where the people of real significance to the youth live), will continue to be of little relevance to the young Aboriginal. He will drop out in the face of discouragement, or pressure from a peer group, or the attractiveness of life outside the school, much more readily than he would be likely to do if he were backed by informed parental support. He will continue to be dependent on others for periodic stimulation of his aspirations and periodic information on possible futures, rather than receive continuing informed and ongoing stimulation within the home.

It is accepted by Aboriginal communities that there is a need for education, but we need a balance between European and Aboriginal education. The Aboriginal child may have two unrelated worlds; the world of the home which is an Aboriginal world and the middle class world of the school. This hampers learning in school as well as

hampering successful relations in the home. The Aboriginal child may be unable to identify with either the home or the school and may be forced into a cultural vacuum. Unable to find relevance in every day experiences, he may totally accept one culture while completely rejecting the other. If he adopts the Aboriginal culture and rejects white culture, and in particular the school, the child may become an outcast. If, on the other hand, the Aboriginal child totally rejects the Aboriginal culture and adopts the white culture, he may be disliked by the Aboriginals because of his rejection of their culture, and yet may still run into problems in a white society which may still refuse to accept him.

Confronted with these problems, it is not surprising that the Aboriginal child's performance in the classroom is poor. This is generally attributed to his lack of cultural background and poor material circumstances. However, this explanation is far too narrow, in that, while it focuses attention on what is lacking in the child, it fails to explain inadequacies which exist in the school system.

Communication will also hinder the Aboriginal child's performance in the classroom. He will have his verbal communications, yet his use of language may be such that he is perceived by the teacher as being backward. However, the greatest barrier to communication could be in the use of non-verbal communications. Non-verbal communication includes all body movement and actions which are actually part of every day speech. The Aboriginal child will strongly doubt his ability at verbal and non-verbal communications in the school because the school environment is so different to his home environment. Because white culture particularly regards eye contact as so important, if the child hangs his head or fails to use eye contact during a conversation, the teacher in many cases may regard this avoidance of eye contact as lack of attention or insolence. However, this avoidance of eye contact in many cultures is regarded as proper for the child as a sign of respect, or the result of embarrassed lack of confidence. The inability of the Aboriginal child to communicate effectively in the classroom will surely affect his performance in the classroom.

White babies have their hands smacked together while someone sings "clap hands", and have their toes tickled while doting relatives chant "This Little Piggy". They are learning to co-ordinate and to count. Such a child grows up in the verbal matrix of his family, an integral interacting member of the society. School will be put before him as a step on the road to advancement. What such a child has experienced and achieved by the time he goes to school, is totally unknown to Aboriginal children. Aboriginal children have had totally different experiences, and have consequently become vastly different. Having had

different experiences, they consequently think and react differently.

For a white child, early home experiences and perceptions will be continued, extended, deepened by school. For the Aboriginal child, early home experiences and continued perceptions will be abruptly discontinued or interrupted, unless the teacher understands Aboriginal values. These values are all too often, not just not understood, but denigrated.

Some Aboriginal children come from a home with no clock, into an ordered, regimented classroom that operates by the clock; a totally new world for them; a world that they cannot understand; a world that threatens failure. They withdraw, to become enclosed in a minority world to which they belong, to which they return for support and comfort.

One of the important reasons, and there are many, for the conditions that confront Aboriginal children, lies in the silence of the Aboriginal family; a silence, relative that is, to the white families constant talk. Speech among Aboriginals is applied horizontally rather than vertically. Men of an age speak with men of an age. The younger are silent in the presence of their elders. Women are silent in the presence of men. Children are silent in the presence of all except their peers. When Aboriginal children go to school, it is comparable with being dumped in a foreign country.

Their five or six years of being silent, going to sleep early, or running outside to play while adults talk, may help to explain something of the Aboriginal child's reticent, awkward, withdrawn manner in the classroom. Perhaps all this explains the widely-known, but continuing tragedy of the Aboriginal child in Australia, that although there is nothing inferior with their intelligence, they seldom keep on at high school, and hardly ever go on to their Higher School Certificate.

The Aboriginal child's poor language skills and inexperience in logical reasoning and finely discriminating verbal differences, are significant reasons for what appears later as "slowness". Such slowness may be wrongly interpreted by verbally more facile whites as low intelligence. Slowness is at no time synonymous with stupidity.

Many years ago a group of UNESCO scientist's issued the following statement on race:-

According to present knowledge, there is no proof that the groups of mankind differ in their innate mental characteristics whether in respect of

intelligence or temperament. The scientific evidence indicates that the range of mental capacities of all ethnic groups is much the same. It is now generally recognised that intelligence tests do not in themselves enable us to differentiate safely between what is due to innate capacity and what is the result of environmental influences, training and education. Whenever it has been possible to make allowances for the differences in environmental opportunities the tests have shown essential similarity in mental characteristics among all human groups.

Since this statement has never been effectively challenged, the failure of Aborigines to achieve positions of responsibility and power in the community may be assumed to be connected with the failure of Aboriginal children to achieve educational standards comparable with those achieved by the rest of the community.

Is it really the Aboriginal child failing to cope with the education system? Or is it the education system failing to cope with the Aboriginal student?

The white middle-class nature of school is a very different experience for the Aboriginal child. The classroom is an authoritarian environment; the teacher up front and rows of students one after another; the school period and the layout of the school. Similarly, the world of text books is different, and class assignments have no relevance to whatever traditional values and experiences the Aboriginal child may have. This severely limits the Aboriginal child's chances of success in the classroom situation. Therefore the child seems doomed, with no chance of mastering the content of the teaching/learning process.

It is possible though, that success may be achieved if the teacher becomes involved in and appreciates the culture of the Aboriginal child. There may be some doubt about white teachers achieving this successfully, since the present curriculum seems to be totally centered around a white culture, and it seems to do little to develop an understanding or common ground between cultures, particularly between the white Australian culture and the Aboriginal culture. Cultural differences are taught more as a curiosity, and in some cases as a source of white superiority or national pride, rather than being taught as a basis of cultural understanding. The success of a teacher in achieving a successful degree of classroom interaction and performance may be severely handicapped by a society which refuses to accept

Aboriginals fully. Similarly in the school situation, the attitudes of fellow teachers may also have a damaging effect on the classroom interaction and performance of the Aboriginal student.

What do we expect of our Aboriginal students? Considerable recent research indicates that the expectations of the teachers do fix the academic goals of both student and teacher. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) clearly indicate and demonstrate the importance of teacher expectations on pupil performance. If we believe that Aboriginal children are lazy or that they can't be trusted, or that they can't achieve beyond a certain level, then they will live up (or down) to our expectations. Their performance suffers, and the teachers' expectations that they are slow learners, appear to be quickly confirmed.

In many country towns teacher expectations are a reflection of the community expectations and attitudes. Aboriginal children believe that they will not perform well in class, and they realize that this belief is shared by their peer groups and their teachers. By the time they complete their schooling, Aboriginal children have accepted the fact that their education attainments are well below average. They feel inadequate but not sure whether the fault lies in their own shortcomings, or whether it has something to do with their racial origins.

Aboriginal children know that their role expectations are those of the unskilled. They also know that if they do break out of the vicious circle of poverty and deprivation, they can only do so by accepting unconditionally the standards and behaviour patterns of the dominant white society. Inevitably they are forced to turn their backs on their own traditions and their people. This is not an enviable choice, but it will remain so whilst our education system is nothing more than a production line for the labour market.

Because of the difficulties in the school situation, the Aboriginal child may develop a sense of failure in himself, in his culture; he may develop a sense of frustration which could severely restrict his successful interaction in society at large. The image that he may have of himself is not one in which he can take pride, and his self concept is severely damaged.

The white middle-class nature of the Australian society, and particularly its school system, severely hampers successful performance of Aboriginal children in the classroom. The Aboriginal child is perceived in white middle-class terms, and very little attempt is made to perceive the Aboriginal child from an Aboriginal view point.

Confronted by the white middle-class school system, the Aboriginal child's performance in the classroom is usually below standard. His inability to act in the classroom successfully, could lead the teacher to perceive him as backward. He is left with a confused concept of himself in relation to society at large. Because of this, he may lack dignity, confidence and a sense of pride in his cultural differences.

There is a need for a change in the education system for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginals, to develop an Australia where the values, traditions and culture of both people thrive.

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REFERENCE

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Laurie Crawford was the first Aboriginal teacher aide to be appointed to a High School in New South Wales. His article was based on a paper he prepared for first year teachers appointed to Walgett High, many of whom, he says, "have never seen or had any dealings with Aboriginal children."

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