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## THE TEACHER WON'T TEACH ME!

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Throughout 1974 and 1975 I worked among Aboriginal people in Rural Town, S.W. Queensland.<sup>1</sup> With one exception, all Aboriginal people in this country town have attained at least a primary education. Further, almost 30 per cent of men and women in the 16-30 age group have attended some secondary school; although only two completed grade 10 in 1974, a further three attended tenth grade in 1975.

These figures reflect the pattern of Queensland Aboriginal education as presented in Roper (1970:55). On the basis of these trends it should be possible to hypothesize that younger Aboriginals are attaining higher educational standards than their parents. *But the figures lie* - simply because more children are staying at school for longer periods this does not mean that they either learn more at school or are experiencing more satisfaction in the school situation.

Obviously the proportion of individuals who attend at least some secondary school is increasing; Aboriginal parents generally support the principle that education is essential if the child is to acquire reasonable employment. Such schemes as the Aboriginal Secondary Grant Scheme are recognised by the Aboriginal community as worthwhile endeavours, not only because they enable parents to support their children for longer periods at school, but because they make the whole educational issue topical. Discussions about the grant lead to discussions about children's problems at school. Ambitions for "good jobs" are intrinsically linked with educational achievement. Education officers associated with the Aboriginal Secondary Grant are sought out, asked for help to "have the kids sent to boarding school", as the Rural Town high school does not teach classes beyond Grade 10, and their expertise enlisted to find employment. This concern is not restricted to high school students either. Mothers generally recognise that :

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1. Dr Eckermann wishes to thank the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies who supported her research from January 1974 to December 1976.

"Kids need the first year at school or they get bugged up for the rest. If they miss too much in that first year, they never catch up...."

Further, parents express concern for children who have moved too frequently from one school to another and the necessity for stability is clearly recognised by their endeavours to "find a steady place" once the children are ready for school. Nor is this practice a recent development. The parents and grandparents of today's parents have always moved away from the stations and closer to town because they recognised their children's needs for education. Nevertheless, I would argue that in Rural Town, Aboriginal children are not gaining more satisfaction from school than their parents. Rather they are staying at school longer because today they are all enrolled by the time they are six, and because they have to remain there until the legal leaving age of fifteen. Since *all* children now attend high school in eighth grade, the number of Aboriginal children in secondary schools has risen. However, after prolonged discussions with Aboriginal children attending both primary and high schools in Rural Town, I have come to the conclusion that they do not enjoy the learning situation, see no real evidence that they may benefit from it in the future, and frequently do not learn even basic skills such as reading and writing while they attend. I do not maintain that such a situation is typical of Queensland Aboriginal education, but I do argue strongly that it is characteristic of Rural Town for the following reasons.

#### a) Aboriginals' Perceptions of Teachers' Attitudes

With two exceptions children have expressed dissatisfaction with school, because, in their opinion, the teacher doesn't like them, and doesn't "teach them".

Consider the following comments:

"The teachers never take any trouble to explain things."

"I don't like school 'cause the teachers don't like us dark kids, that might be only my idea, but I reckon they pick on the dark ones and make them feel small..."

"When I first started grade ten I was doing O.K. and the headmaster that was there he sort of took an interest in the dark kids and he'd sit down and explain things to you no matter how long it took. But then we moved to -----"

and things were all different, the things they were learning and books and all. There the teacher couldn't care. I went and asked one to explain some maths because they were ahead from the school down here and the teacher just told me to do it like she'd shown in class. Well that was bloody useless 'cause I couldn't understand that, so I never bother then..."

"I don't like that tech. drawing, the teacher won't teach me, if you get behind, well, that's just too bad for you, tough luck!"

Mothers, too, frequently comment that teachers have a negative attitude towards Aboriginal children: for example:

"I reckon 'X' left school because that headmaster was down on dark kids. She got into strife but according to the other kids the teachers never worried too much about her playing up, then Mr 'Z' heard about it and told her to leave school. He told 'Y' the same things they reckon, told her that now she was fifteen she could leave anytime as far as he was concerned..."

"That teacher has a habit of pulling the kids' hair, so my 'X' reckons she's too frightened to move in his lesson..."

"This school must be the worst for a long way. The last two headmasters made a point of making sure the dark kids didn't get picked on by the white kids. But this headmaster, he doesn't like dark kids and when the white kids see the teachers picking on the dark ones, they reckon they can try it on too. That Mr----- he's the worst of the lot, always punching and pulling their hair..."

## b) Teachers' Perceptions of the Aboriginal Child at School

In order to investigate the situation, I interviewed the then headmaster of the school. According to him, the Aboriginal parents are citizens of the town and the children "have no problems of assimilation". Neither teacher, nor schoolmaster nor townspeople differentiate between European and Aboriginal children; in his opinion Aboriginal students are no different from European students;

further, the Aboriginal students are the right age for their class, with one or two exceptions. While the school has a remedial teacher, her class is composed of six white children as well as one dark child, consequently the headmaster argues that Aboriginal children do not exhibit disproportionately more learning problems than European children. Further, he maintains that he has no truancy problem with the dark children, although some stay away fairly often because of illness for which they always bring a note from their parents. He does not believe that the Aboriginal children behave less well than European children. In his estimation neither the school nor the town has a "black/white problem" and in his opinion this is amply demonstrated by the two Aboriginal men involved in the football team. He maintains that the "coloured kids" are happy at school and very keen on sports where they frequently excel because they "seem to have a natural talent." Further, he feels confident that he fully understands the situation and is capable of coping with it because he taught on Palm Island twenty years ago.

This headmaster also provided me with a teachers' assessment of all Aboriginal children on the Aboriginal Secondary Grant, although it was not possible to obtain similar assessment for primary school children. Table 1 has set out this information:

Table 1

Teachers' Assessment of Aboriginal Children in Receipt  
of the Aboriginal Secondary Grant,  
Rural Town, November, 1974

Sex	Grade	Average Age for Grade	Holder's Age	Scholastic Attainments		
				Average	Above Average	Below Average
F	8	13.1/12	13.3/12	1		
F	8	13.1/12	13.3/12	1		
F	8	13.1/12	13.8/12		1	
F	10	15.2/12	16.2/12			1
F	10	15.2/12	15.6/12			1
M	8	13.1/12	14.5/12	1		
M	8	13.1/12	13.8/12			1
M	9	14.1/12	14.6/12			1

Table 1 represents results for all high school students still at school in November 1974. It is noticeable that four out of the eight students are performing at a below average level, yet only the boy in Grade 9 has been receiving remedial help. Further, one of the boys aged 14.5/12 who is considered an "average" student, has great difficulty in reading a newspaper, constructing a simple sentence, and cannot spell words of more than two syllables.

During 1975 I was able to hold extensive talks with one of the younger high school teachers at the school. He summed up the situation as follows:

He pointed out that there are a surprising number of "underprivileged" children at the school, both black and white. The Aboriginal children pose a particular problem because they "have a king size inferiority complex and tend to give up before even tackling a problem". They also "suffer from a chip on their shoulder" and become rebellious and sullen when reprimanded or faced with any authority. They are always ready to fight if they believe a white child has insulted them and are rowdy, withdrawn, cheeky, rebellious and undisciplined in the classroom. Further, the teacher maintains that with two exceptions the Aboriginal children's performance in class is often at the lowest level, although the whole standard for the school for both white and black is lower than in other schools at which he has taught. In addition, the dark children associate with low achievers, so that even in cases where they are coping adequately, this performance deteriorates rapidly when they come under the influence of their white friends. According to this teacher, the influence of the peer group, especially European members of the group, is very strong. Aboriginal parents, as well as European parents, show great reluctance to visit the school and to discuss problems with teachers. The policy of the school, according to him, discourages poor achievers from continuing at school after they reach the age of fifteen; he maintains that "fair pressure" is applied to poor achievers who are also problem students to leave school at the earliest opportunity, and this practice is applied to both Aboriginal and European children.

Both headmaster and teacher are presenting points of view which, in my experience, are fairly prevalent in the teaching profession. The headmaster perceives Aboriginal children in terms of European stereotypes: "coloured kids seem to have a natural talent for sports". Further, he is burying his head in the sand - if you pretend a situation doesn't exist, may be it will go away.

The young teacher is interpreting Aboriginal children's behaviour in school mainly from a discipline point of view : low achievers = discipline problems. In his own words: "You really have to screw these kids into the floorboards to establish you're the boss." This type of reaction appears to be much more common than we realize. In discussion with teachers in New South Wales, one first-year high school teacher recently told me: "Teaching is a matter of survival - I've got to make sure I survive out there first, then secondly I can try to teach the kids." In fact, teachers at this high school maintain that one of the principal things they have learned at training college has been to establish iron control and discipline in the classroom during the first term of school because otherwise the students would simply walk all over them. So teachers' reactions in Rural Town appear not to be unique to South West Queensland.

In Rural Town the content of Aboriginal/European interaction, generally marked by paternalism, social distance and discrimination, also appears to have influenced relations between teachers and Aboriginal students, as well as Aboriginal and European children. This is quite clear from Aboriginal peoples' perception of the school's attitude towards them and their children. Thus suspicion and antagonism associated with contact between the minority and majority generally, have spilled over into the classroom and contributed to the Aboriginal child's dissatisfaction and unhappiness in the learning situation.

The reasons why this situation will continue are not related to the Aboriginal child's "disadvantage" or "deprivation". They are rooted in the whole social situation in which the schools are:

"... places designed by middle-class English  
Australians for middle-class English Australians  
and controlled by middle-class English Australians...."

(Roper, 1970:26)

A social situation in which teachers react to students in terms of their preconceptions about "Aborigines", "slow learners", "discipline problems", will never foster the individual child's capabilities or interests. Further, a social situation in which there is no communication between the different groups in society, does not lend itself to free interaction between parents and teachers, an essential factor if school is to become relevant to the Aboriginal child's whole frame of reference.

A number of changes are essential if we are serious about equal educational opportunities in Australia:

- a) The Aboriginal child needs to be reinforced in his Aboriginality at school. This should be an aspect of the total educational system from kindergarten to tertiary level.
- b) The European child needs to be exposed to differences in society, and the concept "different" must be valued positively rather than negatively, which has been the case for so many years.
- c) Teacher education programs need to include courses which:
  - i) sensitize prospective teachers to cultural differences;
  - ii) train student teachers to communicate acceptance of cultural differences in the classroom.
- d) Our schools need to change from bureaucratic monoliths where students are categorized, stamped and parcelled out, into places of learning.

Unless these changes occur fairly rapidly, it will never be possible to ensure educational equality. As Roper (1970:9) points out:

"If we believe that all groups have a contribution to make then the education system should offer encouragement. It is not good enough to offer the best education only to the sons and daughters of the rich or the already established. To do this is to deny chances to individuals and to deny the society the development of all talents."

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#### *Reference*

Roper, T.: *The Myth of Equality*. Education Department National Union of University Students, Melbourne, 1970.