



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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THE EFFECTS OF TEACHER STYLE ON YEAR ONE ABORIGINAL CHILDREN'S READING ACHIEVEMENT

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Since the mid-1950's, educational literature has reflected a deep concern for the relatively poor academic performance of children from particular ethnic minority groups. In the United States, for example, attention has focused on the low achievements of many Negro, Spanish and Indian children, and in Australia there is an increasing concern with the educational achievements of numbers of Aborigines. The data collected to date suggest that a child's ethnic group membership makes an important contribution to his success in school. More specifically, the data raise the very broad issue of educability of children from some socio-economic and sub-cultural groups.

In most instances educability has been closely linked with teacher performance, suggesting that teachers play an important role in determining their pupil's behaviours and achievements. It is this possible link between teacher behaviour and student achievement which has provided the impetus for much of the educational research focusing on the influence of the teacher. This area of research, however, is not characterized by a large number of conclusive studies. Nevertheless, some encouraging trends can be noted to indicate a possible relationship between the teacher variable and student achievements and behaviours.

Mood (1970), for example, lists some fifty desirable teacher attributes, which he condenses to five categories -

- a) dedication to the educability of all children;
- b) ability to communicate;
- c) ability to motivate;
- d) ability to organize and manage a class;
- e) ability to create learning experiences;

and Rosenshine and Furst's (1971) review of research indicated that

the following teacher behaviours were the most important: clarity; variability; enthusiasm; task-oriented, achievement-oriented and/or business-like behaviour; and provision of opportunity for students to learn what is to be learned.

THE TEACHER AND ETHNIC MINORITY CHILDREN

During the past fifteen years some research has focused specifically on teachers of minority group children, in an effort to establish the characteristics of those likely to be successful teachers of minority group children.

Watts (1970) and Gallimore (1969) for example, emphasized the affiliative nature of many minority groups and Ausubel (1961) and Gallimore and Howard (1968) noted the stress placed on personal relationships within the Maori and Hawaiian cultures. Watts (1975) suggests the affiliatively oriented nature of some minority group children will result in a concern for affectional relationships in interactions between teachers and peers. She posits, therefore, that interpersonally oriented, warm teachers may prove effective with minority children.

Research shows that only some teachers are effective with many minority group children. Among the Sioux, for example, Wax and Dumont indicated that:

These teachers are difficult to describe because they are remarkably different in background and personality and some are 'real characters' in the sense that this word was used fifty years ago. In general, they differ from the less successful instructors in that they respect their pupils. By this, we mean that they treat them as if something of respect was already there...These teachers are strict disciplinarians and do not tolerate nonsense... all are very fair and all are extremely skilful in avoiding a situation which would embarrass a shy student before the class. They tend to place a heavy emphasis on scholastic work and often behave as if such matters as pupils' neatness in dress and eating habits, or how pupils spend their money, do not fall within their province. (Wax and Dumont, 1964:75)

Other studies with Indian and Eskimo children (Wax and Wax, 1969; Collier, 1970; Dumont, 1969; Dumont and Wax, 1969; Albert, 1956; and Briggs, 1970) provide evidence that teachers' interpersonal style

could be crucial in determining children's achievement. Kleinfeld, in reviewing such studies, concluded that:

The ethnographic literature, in sum, suggests that, for Indian and Eskimo students, the type of interpersonal relationship the teacher establishes with the student is critical to his effectiveness. Middle-class white teachers, reflecting the dominant achievement orientation of their culture, tend to focus on academic tasks and attempt to compartmentalize the task and the interpersonal aspects of the situation so that personal feelings will not interfere with the primary mission of task accomplishment.

Indians and Eskimos, in contrast, reflecting the primary emphasis placed on interpersonal harmony in their culture, tend not to separate academic work from their personal relationship to the teacher and to other students. Harmonious classroom relationships appear to be a necessary condition of learning. (Kleinfeld, 1972:5-6)

Kleinfeld's own research, attempting to describe effective and ineffective teaching styles, focused on Indian and Eskimo students in ninth grade. She found that the factor separating silent classrooms from those where students were intellectually engaged, was whether the teacher assumed a stance of personal warmth or professional distance.

Personal warmth, however, was found to be not a sufficient condition for eliciting a high level of intellectual performance. The extent to which the teachers demanded a high level of academic work differentiated effective and ineffective teachers. The effective teachers, according to Kleinfeld, displayed an instructional style which created an extremely warm personal relationship and, at the same time, actively demanded a level of academic work which the student did not suspect he could attain. (Kleinfeld, 1972:34)

READING AND EHTNIC MINORITY GROUP CHILDREN

Few studies focus specifically on reading, teachers and ethnic minorities.

St. John (1971) compared the reading achievements of black and white students taught by teachers with different styles. Her findings, that black students' reading achievement gains were higher with interpersonally oriented teachers, partially support Kleinfeld's findings. She found that the strongest relationship for black pupils

was that between teacher orientation to the child and growth in reading, and concluded:

For blacks, child-orientation or interpersonal competence in teachers contributes significantly to reading growth and seems to lead to improved conduct and attendance and belief in teacher's approval. (St. John, 1971:646)

Piestrup (1973) provides further evidence of the extent to which teaching styles and approaches influence reading achievement. She studied the interactions between 14 teachers and first graders in 14 predominantly black classrooms. The teachers were classified into six teaching style groups along two dimensions: mutuality of communication, and task orientation. The comparisons of the reading achievement scores of children taught by teachers with differing styles indicated that the teacher group highest on the two dimensions was the most effective teaching group.

TEACHING STYLE AND YEAR ONE ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

The purpose of the present study was to explore further the effects of teacher style on Aboriginal children's achievements in beginning reading. To minimise the effects of experience with different teachers, only Year One children were selected for the study. Data were compiled on thirty children and thirteen teachers from six Brisbane metropolitan schools.

A Verbal Interaction System was used to analyse pupil-teacher interaction. This system contains five major categories for analysing classroom verbal behaviour; the category which refers to teachers' acceptance and rejection responses was selected for the purpose of the study.

Teacher behaviours were tabled and tables entered on a matrix which then represented summary information providing type and amount of interaction together with an objective picture of the pattern of verbal interaction in the classroom. These patterns of interaction provided the primary basis for classifying teachers into three different teaching style groups:

Group 1

Teachers characterized by an even distribution of scores on acceptance and rejection of children's ideas, behaviours and feelings, with neither set of scores being high.

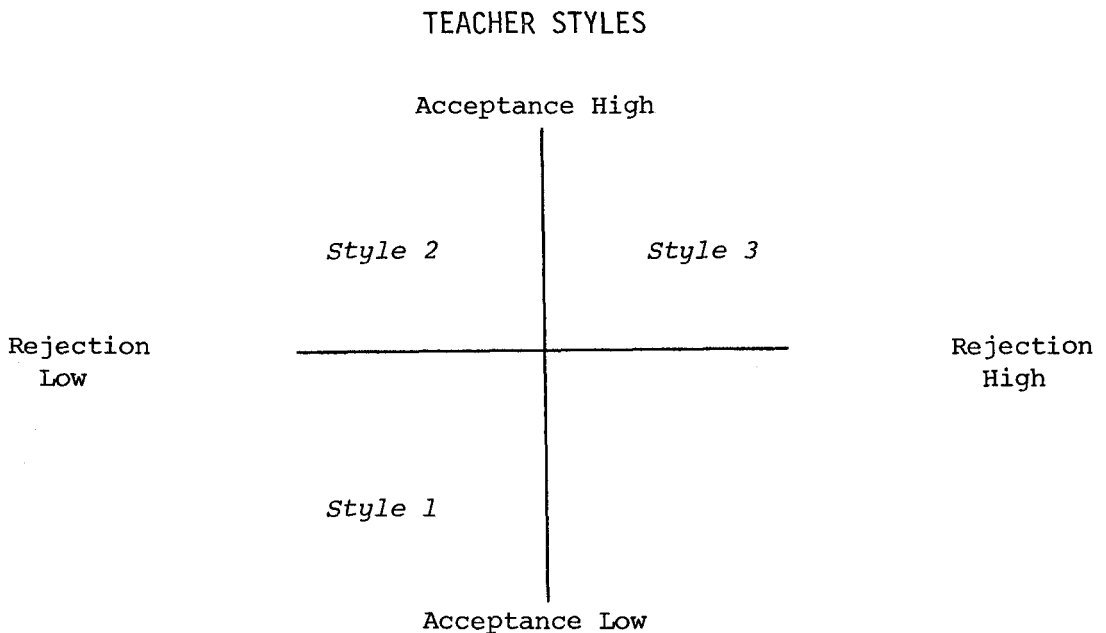
Group 2

Teachers characterized by a high score on acceptance of children's ideas, behaviours and feelings. Only a small number of rejection scores was noted.

Group 3

Teachers characterized by an even distribution of scores on acceptance and rejection of children's ideas, behaviours and feelings with both sets of scores being quite high.

Thus:



The results show that only the relationship between Teaching Style 3 and reading achievement (as measured by word recognition scores) was significant. The relationship between Teaching Style 3 and comprehension scores, although not significant, provided an interesting result, indicating that only a small minority of children taught by teachers exhibiting Style 3 recorded low scores on tests of comprehension ability.

Because Teaching Style 3 was more successful than the other styles studied, the major differences between this and the other styles should be noted.

Teaching Styles 1 and 3 were differentiated primarily on the basis of quantity of interaction. It could well be that this particular factor emerges as a possible predictor of reading achievement levels. The literature reveals little to support this possibility. Maccoby (1961), however, referring to child-rearing practices, does suggest that in the parent-child relationship:

It is the amount, rather than the kind of mother-child interaction that best predicts what the child's pattern of intellectual skills will be. That is, the mothers of the highly verbal children use more praise, but also more criticism, than do the mothers of equally bright children whose area of special skill is non-verbal. Their total level of interaction with the child is greater, and this interaction includes the administration of what we could regard as aversive stimuli as well as reinforcements. ...I suspect that for any future work in which we are trying to predict such things as the child's cognitive maturity level or his achievement motivation, we may find that this variable is a better predictor than the less global variables (such as amount of praise) that we have been relying on up till now. (Maccoby, 1961:361-62)

The factor which primarily differentiated between Teaching Style 2 and Teaching Style 3 was the number of rejection scores noted in the interaction analysis, suggesting that at least a moderate level of criticism and disapproval is a desirable feature for the Aboriginal child learning to read. It needs to be stressed, however, that this moderate level of criticism in Teaching Style 3 is balanced with approximately equivalent amounts of praise, approval and acceptance. This evidence would appear to indicate the oversimplified explanations linking pupil achievement with maximum levels of praise and minimum levels of criticism are unsatisfactory. Perhaps there are optimal levels of praise and criticism but these should not be seen to require maximum or minimum quantities of either type of interaction.

Soar (1966 and 1968), examining reading achievement, suggests that approval and criticism contribute to stress levels in the learning to read situation. His studies indicate a need for an intermediate level of stress for optimum growth in reading. It is possible, therefore, that excessive praise without criticism induces too little stress, and that a high degree of criticism without balancing levels of approval induces too much stress for the development of reading abilities.

Other explanations for the necessary presence of a moderate level of disapproval and criticism are possible. Perhaps the disapproval and criticism represent a form of demandingness which, in combination with a supportive approach, becomes an important factor positively influencing reading progress. Kleinfeld, referring to the question of demandingness, acknowledges the pervasive nature of this problem associated with determining appropriate levels of acceptance and demand. Teachers experience tension between being kind and sympathetic to particular ethnic minority children:

Especially in urban, integrated classrooms, teachers constantly ask themselves, "Should I be understanding or demanding?" If a student refuses to answer a question, even when the teacher believes he knows the answer, how long should the teacher press him? Should the teacher adjust his requirements, tests, and grading systems for the village student?

Most teachers veer toward the kind, undemanding end of the continuum. Teachers tend to be sympathetic to village students in view of their limited academic backgrounds, and such sympathy is easy to maintain since the village students rarely present discipline problems. Moreover, teachers are reluctant to demand because of school folklore about the disastrous results of pushing village students too far. (Kleinfeld, 1972:13)

In addition, some ethnic minority children, fearful of the school situation, frequently evade stressful learning situations by "playing quiet native". As Kleinfeld points out:

Many students have learned over the years that white teachers expect Native students to stare mutely at the floor when confronted with an academic demand and learn to use this behaviour to avoid difficult tasks.

Teachers who elicited a high level of intellectual participation from Indian and Eskimo students were aware of students' use of this role playing evasion strategy and also pointed out that village students' low self-images made them underestimate what they could actually do.

(Kleinfeld, 1972:20)

Further, it should be noted that criticisms and disapproval need to be viewed within the context of the total relationship. Maccoby (1961) suggests the effect of discipline depends on the history of the relationship that has developed between the child

and the adult interacting with him. The large number of acceptance scores on the matrices, together with other indicators of concern, suggest that children would not be overly resentful of critical comments. Perhaps they perceive the criticism as evidence of the teacher's desire for her pupils to achieve high standards.

In the context of the current study, perhaps the teachers exhibiting Style 3 also were very much aware of a need to request and insist on high levels of achievement to counter the Aboriginal children's evasive tactics. Given the accompanying high levels of supportiveness and the teachers' apparent awareness of the different abilities of the children in their classes, it would appear reasonable to assume that the demands were interpreted as an indication of concern and that, as Kleinfeld notes, "the student's performance became a reciprocal obligation in the personal relationship." (Kleinfeld, 1972:30)

CONCLUSIONS

These results, then, together with other data collected during the study, have confirmed trends established in the literature, and highlight the need for teachers who show a firm belief in the Aboriginal child's capacity to learn and who exhibit positive, demanding teaching styles.

In this study, particular attention was devoted to the effects of praise and demandingness. Within the complex teacher-child interaction it cannot be assumed, however, that achievement levels will improve simply through the giving of praise or the requesting of high academic standards. The effectiveness of praise will depend upon the previously established relationship between the socializing agent and the child, such that the approval of the particular adult is something the child wants. It could also be assumed that the child will respond to requests for higher academic performances when that demand is made by a teacher who is perceived by the child as a significant adult. In other words, the overall effectiveness of praise or demandingness should be viewed against the background of the total relationship that has been established between the child and the teacher over a period of time. Further study should not be content with the isolated emphasis on praise and demandingness. Rather, the interaction between teacher and child to determine the means by which these special relationships are established should become the focus of attention. This in turn suggests that researchers will need to employ microethnographic techniques to record detailed observations of pupil-teacher interactions in an attempt to study children and their teachers.

In addition, further research is required to study teachers' and children's behaviours at the Year Two and Year Three levels. In this study, many Aboriginal children had learned to read by the end of their first formal year of instruction. Other Aboriginal children, whilst achieving relatively low reading scores at the time of testing, gave every indication of being comfortable in the classroom situation and appeared to derive pleasure from reading and listening to stories being read to them. Given a further year with suitable teachers, there was every indication to suggest that these children would succeed with the task of learning to read. Some of the disappointing achievement data for Aboriginal children at later levels of schooling is difficult to explain in terms of the encouraging situation at this beginning level. For this reason a more detailed examination of the teaching-learning settings at higher levels of schooling is warranted.

Finally, the existence of differences within the group should be acknowledged. Whilst the literature and this study have confirmed the importance of supportive, demanding type teachers, it should not be assumed that teachers exhibiting these characteristics will always prove suitable for Aboriginal children. In the complex reading environment, Chall (1976) emphasizes the need to place more stress on maneuverability and flexibility of the teachers, clinicians and teachers. Teachers should be, as Goldberg (1967) notes, flexible and capable of devising new ways of deviating from accepted procedures and courses of study. In this context, these findings should be seen to represent a small contribution to the total set of information from which teachers are able to select appropriate strategies and approaches in an effort to design instructional programs in their classrooms.

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