



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 CURIOSITY BEHAVIOUR OF

ABORIGINAL COUNTRY CHILDREN IN COUNTRY CLASSROOMS

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A recent study of the instructional needs of country children carried out by the author, has revealed that far too many Aboriginal country children (and, it might be added, far too many white country children too) simply do not seem to want to learn! Teachers interviewed during the course of the study viewed this situation variously:

"They are lazy you know. It is not as if they've got brain deficiencies preventing them...it is just that they seem to expect some sort of miracle without making an effort themselves."

"I think it's just a matter of forcing them out of being lazy...just starting off with basic forcing them really...sort of shoving it down their necks so that they have to do it..."

"They have such low motivation..."

"You just can't make them work..."

"I don't know a great deal, but the Aborigines to me have a lower achievement...you know...motivation - I think that in many cases that is the reason they are at the bottom of the class, not because of their ability, but because of their motivation."

But Bruner (1966) describes motivation simply as "the will to learn". He regards any child's "will to learn" as depending on at least four things:

- . the child's curiosity about what is to be learned,
- . his drive to competence,
- . the learning competence models a child has, and
- . the reciprocity he experiences in the learning process.

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If Aboriginal country children, then, often do not appear to have the "will to learn", it seems worthwhile to consider their in-school experience in terms of each of these four factors. In the study cited above, one hundred hours of video-taping of country children's in-and-out-of-school lives and one hundred and seventy five recorded discussions about country children with country children, their parents and family members, their teachers and other members of the community, were prepared. Aboriginal country children formed one of three groups whose instructional needs were investigated, and the insights presented in this brief paper, with respect to their curiosity behaviour and "will to learn", are based on the findings of this study.

Are Aboriginal country children too curious?

Interestingly enough, the study suggests that Aboriginal country children are far more curious than white children, where curiosity is defined as that fairly invariant sequence of behaviour - looking at something of interest, moving toward it, manipulating it, seeking to integrate information about it cognitively by asking questions or consulting, playing with it and eventually becoming bored with it. (Hutt, 1970; Nunnally and Lemond, 1973; Weisler and McCall, 1976). In fact, as far as many of their teachers were concerned, Aboriginal country children are simply *too curious*. Complaints were rife that Aboriginal children are :

always into things...always pulling things...like
to feel things...are hyperactive...looking for
freedom...don't fit into an enclosure...don't sit
down a lot...even like to go right out of the class-
room...are more responsive to visual experiences...
are more responsive to working with concrete material.

This is the way these children behaved on film also - continually looking, approaching and touching. It might be the papers on the teacher's desk, the carpet on the school library floor, the lock on the policeman's paddy wagon (during a school excursion to the police station), the shadow a ruler makes on the projector screen, the magpie that flies down to watch their game of football. It is noteworthy, too, that these children - mostly in middle childhood - first made sure no one was watching them. However, if the teacher did happen to be watching them, and perhaps was constantly talking *at* them, these children appeared to have no option but to twist and turn within the narrow orbit of their desk or table workspace; periodically disappear under the desk; attend half-heartedly to a fairly meaningless round of stencils, cut outs, colouring-in, worksheets, pencils, biros and books, or the busy

work of covering books, cleaning-up the school grounds, painting the school benches, digging in the school garden plot, or pruning the school's trees. No wonder their class teachers frequently reported that these children often simply "exploded to temper tantrums", and were "really stropky", "rebellious", "howling and screaming". In my view, there was evident on film enough bewilderment, confusion and frustration engendered in many Aboriginal country children by their in-school experience, to account for all the frequent attempts they made to escape that experience as quickly as they could, by whatever means.

Or is the disposition to be curious part of their cultural heritage?

That is a sad fact, I believe, particularly if it is accepted that Aboriginal country children, unlike white country children, are culturally endowed to be curious. From an ethological viewpoint, (Ainsworth and Bell, 1970; Rheingold and Eikerman, 1970), curiosity is a biological adaptive behaviour which is learned for survival. But who was better adapted to the natural ecology than the Aboriginal Australian? Who learned so well to survive? Hence, which children are most held to ransom in that country classroom where no opportunity for the visual, tactual, physical exploration of new, strange, incongruous and, more particularly, mysterious objects, in real or simulated situations, is provided? In my observation, the opportunity to look at, approach, touch and inquire about such objects, and thus to acquire information about them, in an overt rather than covert fashion, is rarely extended to Aboriginal country children, or to any of their white peers for that matter, in the country classroom.

At what stage is the development of their curiosity behaviour?

Yet, cultural endowment aside, Aboriginal country children may also need such immediate environmental stimulation and manipulation for acquiring information much more than their white peers, simply because they may not have developed the prerequisite linguistic skills to integrate information cognitively by asking questions about objects which arouse their curiosity and by reading and reflecting about them. According to Spitzer (1977), the gradual internalization of children's curiosity behaviour depends on a parallel gradual development of their linguistic ability. Teachers seem often to view Aboriginal country children as the victims of an infinite distractibility. They say they lack "self control", "discipline", are "just not able to concentrate", "their attention span...it's gone as soon as you open your mouth".

Such distractibility, however, can be interpreted differently, if curiosity behaviour is viewed from a developmental perspective over a life-span. For example, infants progress from simple attention to things or persons that interest them and are immediately within their visual field, through visual scanning of their environments and the physical manipulation of such objects, to the expression of their curiosity by asking questions and consulting others about objects that arrest their attention. Thus, it might be said that it is only by being given the opportunity to talk about the new, the strange, the incongruous and the mysterious, that Aboriginal country children will ever experience that steady force which will enable them to direct and sustain their attention, thus bringing their curiosity behaviour to a new level of sophistication, and one more appropriate to the covert information seeking style imposed in the conventional classroom.

What opportunity is being given to promote that development?

But do Aboriginal country children (and their white peers for that matter) receive the opportunity to ask questions about objects of curiosity in country classrooms? Teachers reported that Aboriginal country children, in particular, "won't answer", "won't talk", "won't ask anything". But rarely, it seems, do their white peers either. An analysis of the video tapes and scripts of twenty classroom lessons recorded during the study revealed, on the average, that only three questions were asked by children during any one lesson and that all of these questions had to do with a clarification of what the teacher expected of them. Country children, black and white, just do not seem to be asking questions about anything in school, much less about anything that evokes their curiosity, because, it seems, nothing much is presented in the classroom situation which does.

Conclusion:

Far too many country children, it seems, really want to learn. Aboriginal country children appear to be among the least well disposed to learn, at least in school. If curiosity is integral to the will to learn, and if Aboriginal country children are, as I believe, culturally endowed to be curious, though many may not have the linguistic ability to internalize that curiosity, then it is clear that such children simply must be provided with the opportunity to explore the new, the strange, the incongruous, the mysterious in the country classroom, to get *into things*, pull things, feel things, have the freedom to stand up, walk about, even go right out of the classroom, if their instructional needs are

to be met. Bruner would suggest children need a drive to competence, competence models and reciprocity in the learning situation too if they are to have the will to learn. Nevertheless perhaps some small beginning might be made with respect to the Aboriginal country child's "will to learn" by evoking that curiosity which appears to be part of their cultural heritage, which is basic to their will to learn, and in my observation is just begging for expression both in school and out of it.

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