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HOW DO TEACHERS TRANSMIT THEIR ATTITUDES AND EXPECTATIONS?

Part 3

Jennifer

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In earlier articles (*The Aboriginal Child at School*, Vol.7, No.3 and Vol.8, No.3) I have described a tentative model which teachers could use to examine how their language behaviour may transmit their attitudes and expectations to their pupils. The strength and potential value of the interpersonal accommodation model lie in the fact that it is a teacher *self*-monitoring instrument. Ultimately, only the participants in a situation can provide an adequate understanding of 'what is really going on.' As outsiders looking at transcripts we miss the full richness of the talk. We are unaware of the private and personal meanings embodied in the subcultural experience of the group.

Keeping this caveat in mind, I would like to attempt to illustrate the operation and effects of interpersonal accommodation by focusing on a relatively brief classroom incident and relating interpretations of it to comments made by the teacher involved. The interaction explored is primarily that between the teacher and the class as a whole, although this broad focus reveals a relationship between the teacher and one child, which is then further explored by observing the interaction of these two on different occasions, and also by noting the reactions and comments of other children in the class. It must be stressed that what follows is not intended to be evaluative of this teacher and his pupils. These comments are made about very brief segments within the working of a class in which the teacher and children share a warm, supportive, and productive relationship; a relationship in which reciprocated bantering and joking are as much enjoyed as they are frequent. Mr A would be an asset to the staff of any school.

The incident occurred in a London classroom (11 to 12-year-old children). The teacher had very effectively introduced a lesson on

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(*Acknowledgment: I would like to thank the teachers and children of the Devonshire Hill School (London). The classrooms in which I worked were happy, exciting, and productive places. I consider it a privilege to have been able to work in them. J.D.*)

note-taking skills. As a practical example of the skill taught, and as a test of their grasp of the ideas presented, the teacher had read a short story, asking the children to take notes as he did so. He then asked questions about the story, telling the children that they could both use their notes and use note form in writing the answers. Explaining to them that the note form they used might not be understandable to other children, he asked them to correct their own work, pointing out that they would know if they were right or wrong. Correcting of the work had been underway for some time, when Jennifer interrupted, protesting that John was cheating.

1. Jennifer: Sir! 'e's been writing them down as you say them.
2. (Excited interchange occurs.)
3. Mr A: Yes, the answer - the answer to that one was,
'They put them to death! (Continuing interchange)
4. Mr A: They burned them, yes.
5. Mr A: Now then -
6. Jennifer: Sir! Sir!! Sir!!!
7. Mr A: Right! If you're going to say anything will you
please put your hand up!
8. (Silence)
9. Mr A: Jennifer!
10. Jennifer: Sir! John Wright - as you were sayin' the answers
'e was writin' 'em down because when I saw 'im -
11. Mr A: Then nobody -
12. Jennifer: three, four, or five, or six -
13. Paul: She shouldn' be lookin' at 'is book.
(Excited cries)
14. Mr A: Then nobody -
15. Paul: She shouldn' be lookin' at 'is book.
16. Mr A: Nobody needs to worry about that. The only loser
there, if John's cheating, is John himself.
17. Class: Yeah (Agreement followed by silence.)
18. Jennifer: Yeah! But sir!
(Excited cries)
19. Mr A: You just concentrate on what you're doing.
20. Jennifer: But say sir - - ?
(More excited cries)
21. Paul: Jennifer! - Jennifer!, Jennifer!! 'ow did you know?
(more cries)
22. Mr A: Stop! Stop! This is - This is im - This is important.
Let's clear this us before we go on. (The class is
now silent.) Just put your hands down. Just put
your hands down. This is important, Paul. Jennifer
is worried about John getting 16 out of 16, because
Jennifer thinks John, by getting 16 out of 16 - he'd

- only get that if he was cheating. I don't give a monkey's whether John gets 2 out of 16 or 16 out of 16. John will know, whatever score he gets, he will know himself how many he got right - and that's the important thing. If John thinks it's better - it looks better to get 16 out of 16 then, fair enough, if you all want to put 16 out of 16 you can do - but you might just as well have stayed in bed this morning because you're wasting your time and my time -
23. Mr A: Is there anybody that disagrees with that?
24. (Silence)
25. Mr A: Isn't it absolutely pointless if you do a test, or spelling test, or an exam and cheat - there's absolutely nothing gained by it at all.
26. Girl: (At intervals throughout (25)) Yes. Yes. Yes.
27. Mr A: So - don't get your knickers in a twist, Jennifer.
- Right?
(Laughter)
28. Mr A: There's no -
29. Mr A: You do what you want to do and John does what he wants to do.
30. Mr A: Right! That's cleared up.
31. Mr A: (Child's name) Yes?
32. Child: (Child queries answer to previous question. See (3))
33. Mr A: Yes. As long as - as long as *you* think that's - it's - it's the right answer. It obviously is. It's written - you know! - They certainly didn't send them to be made hamburgers out of did they? - or send them, send them on holiday to Paris for the weekend.
(Laughter)
34. Mr A: OK - Next answer!
35. Child: Number 6.
36. Mr A: What did a witch make when she wanted to hurt somebody?
37. Mr A: Caroline?
38. Caroline: A doll.
39. Mr A: A doll. What did she do with this doll?
40. Child: Stuck pins in it.
41. Mr A: Stuck pins in it.
42. Child: She *pushed* pins in -
43. Mr A: Next one. What do they call a man who does magic in Africa?
44. Mr A: Sandra?
45. Children: (Indistinguishable - Laughter.) Sir! Sir! - Witch doctor.
46. Mr A: Which doctor? I don't know.

47. Children: (Laughter) - a *witch* doctor. No, a *witch* doctor.
No, a *witch* doctor.
48. Mr A: Yes, sometimes called, Dr Who.
(Laughter)
49. Mr A: Yes a *witch* doctor.
(Amused talk.)
50. Mr A: I spent - I stayed up all last night learning all
these jokes so I'd be ready for you this morning.
51. Jennifer: (Aside)
52. Mr A: Did you hear that?
53. Children: No! (Laughter)
54. What?
55. (Silence)
56. Mr A: You know we were talking about revolutionaries
yesterday! (Yeah! Nods of agreement.)
57. Mr A: People that didn't like the country they lived in
and tried to change it -
58. Mr A: Here! - Class 15's own revolutionary. When I said
I'd stayed up all night learning my jokes, she
turned round to me - complete straight face - and
said, 'What a waste of time!' (Laughter)
59. Mr A: At least she hasn't got a machine gun in her hand,
Paul.
60. Child: Now, number 9.
61. Mr A: Number 9!...

Jennifer opens the sequence with an attack on John (1) which gets no reaction from the teacher (3). At this stage he has not become involved in the incident. However, Jennifer insists (6) and in (7) the teacher enters with a divergent move, by invoking a rule addressed to all the group (you). This move is accepted and there is immediate silence. Jennifer has the floor in (10) but the teacher, now fully aware of her position begins to diverge from her in (11) with a comment designed to terminate her complaint by imputing to a rule which has been previously established and which he finally states in full in (16) and (19). Paul realizes this, and, in verbalizing the rule in his own way (13), uses it to attack Jennifer. The teacher again interrupts (14) but this time his divergent move applies to the wider group. However, he is still attempting to let the rule assert itself, although by (16) he is forced to state the rule and also to diverge further by implying a second rule (which he will elaborate in (22)). In (16) he clearly addresses the whole group - his 'nobody' involves them all. There is acceptance of his position (17) but in (18) Jennifer decides to ignore the first rule, thus diverging from the teacher's position, and returns to the attack. The teacher, in (19), is forced to restate his first rule but he shifts his 'persons'

to an ambiguous 'you'. From the tape it would appear that the whole group could accept (19) as being directed at all of them, but certainly Jennifer could and does interpret the 'you' as referring to her (as evidenced by (20), her last weak attempt to object). Paul (21) also interprets it as directed at Jennifer and returns to the attack with yet another formulation of the rule. By (22) the teacher realizes that the previously established rules are not operating effectively and so, in a completely divergent move, he invokes his authority, calls for, and gets complete silence. This silence is, in fact, a convergent move by the class which trusts him enough to expect him to make a judgment and to re-establish the position. His opening move is to call for attention. As he begins to get this his speech rate slows, and although the content of his message is quite divergent, his tone gradually becomes more supportive. Sensing, intuitively, that he is distancing himself, he makes an unaffected converging move, "I don't give a monkey's ..." which is completely accepted - silence reigns throughout this whole segment. It is interesting to note how he defines the 'persons' in this situation. Initially, he refers to Jennifer and John, the two 'failures' in terms of the rules ('concentrate on your own work', and 'cheating hurts only the person who cheats'). However, by the end of (22) he switches to 'you all' which then includes the whole group in his re-established rules. At this stage, too, he is clearly indicating his own position as one of the group but also as interpreter to it - 'you're wasting *your* time and *my* time.' By (23) he feels safe enough to risk testing the acceptance of his rule - a converging move. On the tape this comes across as quite a genuine question. However, sensing acceptance, in (25) he risks a further divergence through the use of the distancing words 'absolutely pointless' which certainly cannot be countered. By now, he is acutely aware of the extent of his divergence and so 'moves back' to the group (27), but at Jennifer's expense. However, the tension is broken. He begins (28) to re-state the rule for the benefit of all and in a general form (cf. 16), but switches instead, in (29), to a limited form of the rule which involves divergence only from Jennifer who, in fact, had created the situation. In this case there is no ambiguity about the 'you'. It is interesting to note that John (who *had* been cheating) emerges without direct criticism. Possibly this was because, at the outset of the questioning, the teacher had established that the children could use their notes so that concern about 'correct' answers probably wasn't his primary focus. In addition, he had asked the children to monitor their own performance and so, in effect, Jennifer had breached his definition of the situation.

By (30) the teacher feels confident that the issue is 'cleared up'. In (33), in which he deals with a further response to the question already answered in (3), he takes the opportunity to re-stress the newly-established position - 'as long as *you* think it's the right answer'. Now he commences a series of almost blatantly obvious convergent moves. The pace of the lesson quickens to dispel the 'solemnity' of the previous statements. He smiles; his body movements are supportive; and he indulges in a series of jokes which the children are quick to grasp. He is now back into what is quite a familiar pattern. Embedded in this sequence, at (42), is an interesting aside which the teacher did not (and could not) hear. It grows out of two exchanges earlier in the lesson (prior to this incident) when the teacher had accepted, as correct answers, words that differed from the original story, with the comment that 'precise' answers were required. In fact, in (41) he is now breaking his own rule (the story did say 'pushed') perhaps because he doesn't want to introduce a further divergent move at this stage, or perhaps because he has simply 'forgotten'. In either case, this child is sensitive to the fact that he has broken the rule and, thus, her comment is actually a divergent one.

However, the class is now 'with him' and at (50) he converges conspiratorially (although with an obvious 'lie') by taking them into his confidence. Jennifer comments aside (51), and sensitive to the fact that she may have been hurt, the teacher converges on her (52-58), giving her a chance to 'get back' at him, although in doing this, he first 'sets her up' as a revolutionary (58) and, in (59) in effect, 'puts her down' again with his 'throw-away' line which converges on Paul who had led the early attacks on her.

Some of the teacher's reactions to this tape are of particular interest.

Mr A: "I don't know - I didn't think I said all that. I do tend to talk rather a lot don't I? - The point about the cheating - the big sort of heavy teacher bit, I don't prefer - I think actually, on that particular point - I think perhaps I put that over much better than I did the answering of the questions - I think that the rule was more established individually with the children when it cropped up - I don't think I've ever stopped the class and said it to everybody before."

It seems clear, therefore, that throughout this incident this teacher would have been sensitive to the fact that the extent of his divergence was 'out of character' for him. This helps to explain his use of the vernacular statements as a converging device. However,

their use in this way was obviously below the level of his consciousness. His reaction to hearing them on the tape confirms this.

Mr A: "One thing here I'm absolutely appalled at, is the amount of vernacular English I use - I've always thought and always been told that the patterns of speech or patterns of writing or any patterns you present to the child should be a positive pattern - a perfect pattern. I mean, OK, the vernacular's there to be used and it's good on occasions - perhaps that 'Knickers in a twist' bit took a bit of the tension out of the situation, but there earlier where I said, "I don't give a monkey's' well (laughing) the actual saying you know is - perhaps not suitable for children's ears."

Further discussion about how these statements had been completely accepted by the children, reassured him that in this particular incident their use had been effective. But his comments here do illustrate the interdependence of elements within the model. At the outset he is clearly expressing a view of knowledge and of teaching. However, his (language) actions, arising out of his attitudes to the children, coupled with his desire (intention) to ease tensions, belie his beliefs. (This mismatch between a teacher's views as 'educationist' and his actions as 'teacher' is actually quite common.)

Asked if he had intended (23), 'Is there anybody that disagrees with that?' as a genuine question, he replied,

Mr A: "Well, you know, these are a top year in the junior school and I don't really like making rules - class rules - without them fully understanding and without, really, their consent - not that, if I thought a rule or a condition was important - if they did disagree with it - and I had tried to put it over as clearly as possible but they still disagreed with it at the end - if I thought that actually that rule was important - it would stick - but I think - with most of the children in this class - you can reason with them without losing any - without sort of appearing to be weak - or - needing their consent to get on."

Again we have evidence of a sensitive, child-oriented teacher who imposes rules only as a last resort, but who, nevertheless, is particularly able at establishing the 'persons' involved in the situation. Clearly rules in this classroom involve all, including the teacher (the child's reaction at (42) is 'negative' evidence of this). But just as clearly, this teacher is able to maintain a

position both as part of, and apart from, the group and is thus able to act as the interpreter of its rules, and is clearly expected, by the children, to do so.

His being one of the group is also clearly illustrated in his comment when asked if he had intentionally given Jennifer the chance to have a joke at his expense (52-58).

Mr A: "I don't know - I think it's important - when I very often have banter and take the mickey out of quite a few of the children in the class - I think it's invalid unless there are times when you become the target."

However, it is his interaction with Jennifer that is of particular interest in this incident. What are his perceptions of her?

Mr A: "...the girl who started this - Jennifer. Jennifer's a very odd girl in that she's probably the most intellectually capable child in the class and yet on things like this she becomes really a lot more immature than the rest of the children. If you noticed that the background noise - whilst Jennifer was complaining - were children that really wanted to get on with marking the test - were a bit fed up with yet another one of Jennifer's interruptions."

And it is true that Jennifer does interrupt. When I was working with groups in this class, I found I often had to ask her to wait, to be quiet, or to give someone else a turn. It is also true that the other children have these expectations of her. During a discussion I had with a group of boys from this class, the following exchange suddenly occurred, despite the fact that Jennifer had not previously been mentioned by anyone.

Deva: Yeah I know - 'e really makes you laugh - our teacher.

Paul: When - when 'e's telling a story and Jennifer F. - or when she's doing maths -

Deva: Oh yeah!

Paul: an' Jennifer F. goes - '*That's* not right!'

Deva: an' 'e goes -

Paul: Mr A goes (exclamatory gestures)

J.D.: With his hands. Yes. Mmm.

Deva: or 'eiver' 'e goes - 'Tch! Nuvver one of 'er sleepy jokes comin' out.

These children certainly expect Jennifer to be disruptive. But they also expect her to be 'put down'. Earlier in this note-taking

lesson Jennifer had twice called out, 'You read too fast', the first time being silenced by a wave of the hand, and the second by being ignored. Later, when all the children had been silently writing answers to questions, she again interjected.

Mr A: What do you call a man magician of the same sort?

Jennifer: Sir, can you put two words?

Mr A: Yes. Yes you can.

(The interjection led to a buzz of conversation, followed by someone calling out quite loudly, 'What?')

Mr A: Old Clever Dick over there's got *two* words. We'd expect that!

The 'putting down' continued when the questions were being answered and, keeping in mind her teacher's comment about her intellectual capability, it is interesting to note how this is done partly by disvaluing her answers.

Mr A: What could Houdini get rid of from round his wrists?
Jennifer has made a special request to answer this question.

Jennifer: Handcuffs.

Mr A: No.

Children: Sir! Sir!

Maria: Chains.

Mr A: No it's lovely gold bracelets which (indistinct).

Children: (Protesting) Handcuffs! Chains!

Mr A: Handcuffs, yes. Chains, yes.

I hadn't noticed Jennifer make any such request and I can't hear anything on the tape, either here or when the question was originally asked. I assume that this has reference to some past incident concerning the bracelet that Jennifer wears. However, in order to make this joke (?), the teacher actually denies Jennifer's correct response.

In the next segment her ability is again used against her. It occurs when the question about the 'male magician', to which Jennifer had interjected, is being answered.

Mr A: What do we call a man?

Children: (Calling out) A wizard! A wizard!

Mr A: A wizard. (Goes on in slightly patronizing tone)

Listen, listen, listen to this! Jennifer - what was the other word for a wizard?

Jennifer: A warlock.

Mr A: (With exaggerated emphasis) A warlock! - How many others of you knew that word - warlock? (Some calling out but only a few put up their hands indicating that they knew the word.)

Mr A: Right, next question.

Thus, the teacher moves straight on leaving Jennifer feeling foolish about, rather than given credit for, her extra knowledge.

On another day Jennifer was one of a small discussion group, talking with the teacher about sight and optical illusions. On at least three occasions her very quick, perceptive comments are not taken up by the teacher. Probably this is because he wants the others in the group to think the issue through, but his actions may not be perceived in this light by Jennifer, particularly as, during this session, the following two exchanges occur. Although Jennifer perhaps 'asks for it' in the second episode, the first comes near the end of quite a long teacher comment to which Jennifer had been listening quietly.

(The teacher and the children had discovered that if they looked through a cardboard cylinder with one eye while keeping the other eye open a 'hole' appeared in the perceived image.)

Mr A: Each eye is picking up its own picture. It's like having two cameras - Right? Two television cameras. Camera one is picking up something. Camera two is picking up something else. Now, if the engineer was to take both those television pictures and put it on the same screen - right? then he could do the same thing. He could make it appear that there was a hole in your hand - or in Jennifer's case, a hole in her head.

The second exchange occurs a few minutes later. The teacher had been referring to the colour of the children's eyes.

Mr A: (To Mark) You've got brown; and (to Jennifer) you've got hazel.

Jennifer: Hazel!!!!

Mr A: mm.

Jennifer: Oh you're kidding!

Mr A: Yeah, Hazel nut, yes.

(The ensuing laughter indicates that the others have seen the pun.)

It would seem that in his interactions with Jennifer, Mr A constantly has his prophecies fulfilled, as do the other children in the class, who seem to see her as 'fair game' and 'safe' to joke at. However, these reactions have also led Jennifer to make and fulfil prophecies of her own. One afternoon the children had been designing 'Book Award' cards. As they planned their work they came voluntarily to the teacher's table for his comments and suggestions. Usually a small group was gathered round the table, talking to each other and to the teacher. During this sort of 'lesson' Jennifer rarely came to the table as she usually required little help. The fact that she chose to come on this afternoon obviously surprised her teacher.

Mr A: (Surprised) Ah!!

Jennifer: (Anticipating teacher's comment - Her 'prophecy')
Yours is bad.

(Comments from other children at table - mainly mildly supportive.)

Jennifer: What's wrong - Is the writing too small?

Mr A: (With a grin) No - um - first of all - you want to list them in order? - the things that are wrong with -

Jennifer: (Speaking quickly) The lines are not straight. The writing's not straight. I know. The blacksmith's wrong.

Children: (More comments, some critical) ...and that's not big enough.

Mr A: (Smiling) And those are only the *small* mistakes.

Jennifer: What's the biggest mistake then?

Chris: It's terrible.

Mr A: (Warmly and gently) No. Well first of all - ah - Jennifer. There's supposed to be -

Jennifer: (Protesting) Well you didn't tell us!

Chris: Yes he did.

Mr A: (Softly and gently) I did - ah - Jennifer.

Children: Everyone's done it right. Sir says that's good.

Jennifer: Right then. I'll do it again then.

Mr A: (Supportively) Now hang on a minute. Can I tell you?

Jennifer: Sir. I'll *do* it *again*.

Mr A: What were you doing? What were you doing when I was telling you?

Chris: She was talking to Karen.

Mr A: Another question. What were you *not* doing?

Chris: Listening.

Jennifer: I was - um - (smiling, because she'd been caught out)
I was listening to Carol. I was not talking to Karen.

- Mr A: You were not talking to Karen! You were listening to -?
- Jennifer: I was *listening* (Chris interjects: Hm! Hm!) but with *him* rowing I couldn't hear anything. (This causes a squabble at the table. Mr A allows the children to 'squash' Jennifer's protests.)
- Mr A: (Smiling and supportive) Actually - it wasn't, it wasn't bad Jennifer - it wasn't a bad one, right? Just that the words 'Reading Award' weren't much good.

As her teacher points out, her work was actually quite good. However, her own prophecy that it would be criticized was fulfilled, partly through her own actions in inviting criticism and initiating it herself, and partly through the fact that her academic performance was tied to a moral issue, her failure to follow the rule to listen carefully to the directions. In both of these areas the other children see her as a fair target and are allowed to criticize her. The 'we' of the group includes the teacher but, on this occasion, not Jennifer, although at times the teacher steps 'out' (converges) to give her support.

But Jennifer is irrepressible. At the end of this 'design' session, the teacher asks,

- Mr A: How many of you feel pleased with what you've done this afternoon? (Hands go up.) Now, how many of you feel that you've done a good afternoon's work? (More hands.) OK. How many people are a bit disappointed? How many found it sort of difficult and they didn't really get much out of it? (Some hands go up.) Right. Hands down.
- Jennifer: Sir! How many are not sure?
- Mr A: (Who hadn't heard) Sorry?
- Jennifer: Sir - if - um - Who's not sure?
- Mr A: (Smiling - almost condescendingly) Yes Jennifer. How many of you are not sure? (Laughter)
- Mr A: (Smiling and supportive) Jennifer, you're not sure whether you've enjoyed it or not this afternoon. Right thank you. Put your hand down.

Jennifer's had been the only hand. She had made her point. Besides, she likes her teacher.

Jennifer: 'e's funny an' 'e makes me cheer up for English.

But he also makes her mad.

Jennifer: And in the sch- and in the classroom, cause Reginald got thirty - um - before me - um - 'e goes - 'Oh you always expect that from boys' - that makes me *mad*!

J.D: Does it really make you mad?

Jennifer: It makes me laugh - it makes me laugh as well.

But does he like her? She's not too sure.

J.D: Don't tell me names. Have you ever had a teacher that you think didn't like you?

Jennifer: No! Um. Um. Um. Yeah! Mr A.

J.D: No you're telling - (Laughs)

Jennifer: (Laughing) Not really.

J.D: Why do you think he doesn't like you?

Jennifer: (Amidst confused responses) I don't know?

Child: He does. He does.

Jennifer: I don't know.

Katie: He says she's a big mouth.

Jennifer: So have *you* (to Katie).

(Unintelligible laughing responses).

Child: Yeah, but he's not so bad.

J.D: But when he says that ('big mouth') - does that make you feel bad or do you know he's joking or what?

Jennifer: Don't know. Don't know. Don't know whether 'e likes
—— us - or - or - not.

The most revealing part of the statement is a silence. The long pause in Jennifer's last sentence before she finally says 'us' rather than 'me'. Perhaps she feels on safer ground suggesting that the teacher likes the group. That's less open to challenge.

Jennifer's teacher does like her, however, and he does have a high estimation of her ability. But these are not the attitudes that his language behaviour signals to her. Through monitoring this language behaviour in the terms of the interpersonal accommodation model, he has become aware of this mismatch. Such awareness could lead him to consider alternative strategies for dealing with Jennifer's contributions. Of course, this would also involve him in considering the effects of these changed strategies on the interaction patterns of the class as a whole.

With the help of the model he has been able to step back from his own experience, to view it analytically, and to talk about it articulately. In short, he has become an observant participator in his classroom.
