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DETERMINANTS OF SCHOOL SUCCESS

#Part 1

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This article is written with the aim of providing one theoretical framework for considering the factors that contribute to the school success of Aboriginal, and indeed all, children. A second aim is to offer the opportunity to practising teachers to consider their day-to-day classroom practices against this framework and to describe and comment on teaching practices that meet individual learners' needs in each area and to take theoretical ideas and express their practical implications.

Professor Watts' major work *Aboriginal Futures: Review of Research and Developments and Related Policies in the Education of Aborigines* (1981) discusses, within a chapter, the determinants of school success. The philosophical basis for this discussion is outlined in the following extract:

Throughout this exploration of the education of Aborigines the view is taken that school success means success in achieving the full range of goals envisaged in the establishment of schools and the determination of their programs:

- the achievement of basic intellectual and academic skills and the development of advanced cognitive abilities such as problem-solving through the application of both convergent and divergent thinking skills;
- the acquisition of the ability to guide and the willingness to undertake responsibility for one's own learning;
- the extension of knowledge, understanding and appreciation of one's world in all its aspects;
- the growth of a secure understanding, acceptance and valuing of oneself and the achievement of a well-based sense of confidence and competence, and of a pride in one's cultural group;
- the discovery and development of talents and of creativity;

This covers only the first of the major groups of factors contributing to school success. In later issues we will explore the remaining factors as described in *Aboriginal Futures*...

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- . the achievement of the ability to communicate effectively with the diversity of people with whom there is interaction;
- . the development of the ability to interact sensitively, harmoniously and productively with others and to value others, both those who resemble and those who are different from oneself.¹

(¹ I [Watts] noted in Chapter 5 that Aboriginal people are concerned that their children acquire basic skills, that their education provide access to jobs and the skills for living in the modern world and that many want their children to learn about their own culture so that they might be proud of their heritage and confident as Aboriginal people. The secure achievement of these goals requires success in all the elements listed above. The development in children of culturally distinctive values and associated behaviours prized by Aboriginal communities, will, as with other groups, be the responsibility of the community. The school, in order to play its proper part in helping the community to realize its aspirations for its children, will need in its pursuit of its goals to exhibit active awareness of and respect for the Aboriginal community.)

The view is also taken that, in large part, these learnings are interdependent, e.g. the mastery of basic skills is dependent on the social and emotional well-being of the child and of his view of himself as a learner and as a person; a sense of confidence and competence requires success in achieving the range of goals valued by the individual; knowledge and its utility are circumscribed unless the child develops higher cognitive abilities; the child cannot value others unless he values himself.

The child functions in the classroom as a total person, bringing with him all the results of his previous learnings and experiences which have shaped his emotional, physical and intellectual being: his self-identification and his influential friends, his concept of himself and his level of adjustment, his motives, values and aspirations, his attitudes to and perceptions of school, learning and the world about him, his health and nutritional status and his sensory functioning, his level of cognitive functioning, his preferred ways of knowing and learning and his competence in language usage.

This complex human being then interacts with teacher, with fellow pupils and with the learning resources provided for him and out of these interactions comes success or failure

in progress towards the achievement of school goals. In a sense, he cannot but respond in terms of the characteristics he has already developed; these characteristics guide his selective response to what is offered and his capacity to profit from those offerings. Thus success requires that there be a match established between the child and the school so that his past learnings are recognized, valued and utilized and made the springboard for further learnings. Initial success is a prerequisite for later success providing the pupil not only with a base for more complex learnings and the motivation to attempt these learnings but also affirming, in his own and the teacher's eyes, his ability to succeed.
(p.156-157)

The children's attainment of success at school is seen as the outcome of a complex set of interdependent variables ranging from the characteristics of the children themselves, through characteristics of the school and classroom to the influence of environments beyond the school.

1. Self Identification and Reference Group

Self identification is the identification of an individual's self with a particular cultural group. This is of considerable significance in the case of Aboriginal children and their perception of their Aboriginality will affect their school learning in two ways -

Firstly, it will shape their values and orientations and learning styles and hence make the schooling that is offered seem more or less relevant, more or less meaningful, more or less attractive and available. Secondly, the response of the school to their Aboriginality will either

- a) make them feel welcome and accepted members of the school community, students whose Aboriginality is an important, recognized and respected characteristic, or
- b) lead them to feel diminished in stature where schools afford no recognition, much less affirmation, of their Aboriginality, or
- c) lead them to feel alienated and hostile in encountering an explicit or implicit devaluing of the cultural group to which they belong. (p.157-160)

In what ways can the teacher and the school recognize, foster and respect children's particular views of themselves as Aborigines? This may be through formal avenues such as the curriculum and planned learning experiences and through informal ones such as day-to-day teacher/child interaction.

Of much significance is the child's reference group - "those from among the peer group who are significant to him and whose approval and acceptance he desires" (p.160). The school and teachers' knowledge and understanding of children's reference groups are important in helping to maintain children's positive orientations to schooling and school achievement. In what ways are the school and teacher able to maximize the contribution of reference groups to individual children's learning?

2. Emotional Health and Self Concept

The child's view of himself and his role in his immediate social setting, the characteristics which compose his picture of his actual self and the ideal self towards which he would aspire will determine, in large measure, his strivings and his achievements. When he has a favourable view of himself he is likely to expect success and to mobilize his efforts to achieve that success, to desire to meet and overcome challenges, to have a sense of competence that allows him to bear occasional failures without feeling defeated or engulfed by them, to have an expectation that others will like him and be responsive to him. Other things being equal, he will, as a result, experience success which will further reinforce his favourable self-evaluations and self-judgments and confirm the validity of his view of himself as one who can learn. Students with this positive view of self are likely to be confident in their interactions with teachers and through their manner and their achievements to evoke in teachers a positive response, characterized by feelings of warmth towards the child and of expectations of his achievement. (p.160)

Children must feel emotionally secure within present learning situations if they are to cope with new experiences confidently and with expectations of success. In what way can the school community and the teaching personnel foster positive self regard and acceptance for individual children?

3. Motives

The stimulus to children's learning comes from a wide variety of motives but these will only serve school learning if they are in fact aroused. This means that the teacher must know the child's salient motives and, knowing them, effectively harness them, through her methodology and her personal relationships with the child, in the service of school learning. Unless a child's motives are aroused his intelligence lies fallow; the full utilization of his abilities demands that he sees a purpose in their use. In turn, intelligence grows as it is used. The unmotivated pupil learns poorly, leading often to a false judgment by the teacher that he lacks ability. (p.161)

Some children learn to gain parental, peer group or teacher approval; others learn because the learning setting has excited their curiosity; still others learn because they have a high need for school achievement whether independently or in terms of comparison with their school peers. How do teachers determine the salient motives for particular children and, having determined these needs, plan and implement learning experiences that will result in motivated learning?

4. Values, Attitudes and Aspirations

A student's values and attitudes determine the goals towards which he will strive. Only if classroom goals seem valid and attractive to him will he strive to achieve success. Values help determine aspirations, so that for a child to set high aspirations for academic success he must first value such success; it must be a goal to which he accords priority and which, moreover, seems attainable with effort. Goals which are too easily achieved or too difficult of attainment are not likely to be highly valued. Values and aspirations determine the attractiveness and the salience of each of the goals of schooling; some will inevitably make better sense, that is, have a greater validity, than others in the eyes of the child. (p.161)

In what ways can teachers help children to establish achievable and attractive short term and long term goals? How can a set of school goals be established that reflect the goals of the Aboriginal community?

5. Health and Nutritional Status and Sensory Functioning

These characteristics of the child affect school learning in at least four ways, Firstly, during his pre-school years, good health and nutritional status permit the child to engage in a vigorous and active exploration of his physical and social world, an exploration vital to his cognitive and social development. Secondly, the active healthy child evokes responses from his family and peers quite different from those evoked by the listless or ailing child, the responses helping to shape the demands made upon him and thus the opportunities for further learning and also the child's emerging definition of himself. Thirdly, participation in the day-to-day learning tasks of the school and active engagement in playground activities require a level of mental energy and concentration which in turn is dependent on health and nutritional status. Fourthly, ill health leads to school absence which removes the child from the learning opportunities, and which may, if frequent, lead to negative reactions by the teacher, reactions which impair her subsequent interactions with the child and which may reduce her expectancies of him.

Adequate sensory functioning (particularly visual and auditory) is also required for optimal learning. A particular comment on auditory impairment is warranted by the high incidence of otitis media among Aboriginal populations. The hearing impairment which accompanies the high incidence at the age of two or three years may restrict the child's early language learning; the further peak at age of school entry poses particular threats to effective utilization of learning opportunities which depend on listening. Moreover, the fluctuating nature of the hearing impairment which is characteristically associated with otitis media poses particular difficulties, since the teacher may well be unaware that, at some times, but not at others, the child receives a diminished auditory input; lack of teacher understanding may lead to erroneous assumptions about the child's ability or willingness to learn, assumptions which prejudice favourable interactions. (p.161-162)

It is particularly in this area that teachers must call upon resources outside the school, e.g. health workers, family support, to obtain and maintain accurate descriptions of children's health and nutritional status and levels of sensory functioning, and to contribute where indicated to remedial action.

6. Level of Cognitive Functioning

In general, the brighter the child, the more easily will he master classroom tasks, especially those involving more complex mental operations. Furthermore, bright children will, in their pre-school years and in their out-of-school lives, gain more from their learning environments and have a richer store of concepts and understandings to bring to any new learning situation. Positive teacher response to the brighter child further advantages him in his learning and in his development.

All children in the classroom can learn. Whether they do learn and the extent of their learnings are in large part dependent upon whether their present levels of cognitive functioning are recognized by the teacher and whether the learning experiences provided are such as to tempt them forward from a secure base. Otherwise, they will flounder, their feelings of confidence will be undermined and they will not achieve the levels of mastery of which they are capable.

The teacher's judgment of a child's level of intelligence is, in some circumstances, as important a determinant of learning as the actual level itself. On the basis of his judgments, the teacher sets expectancies which in turn determine the way in which he interacts with the children and the performance he demands, the behaviours he rewards. Additionally, the teacher's judgments are conveyed, in subtle and unsubtle ways, to the child. Where the judgment is positive, he is thus doubly advantaged in the learning experiences provided and by his feelings of confidence in his abilities. Teachers do make errors, probably most frequently in lowered judgments about children who come from a cultural or social background different from their own; where this happens, the children are set upon the path of failure. Moreover, teachers ascribe to children in the light of their perceived intellectual level, a range of other characteristics, an ascription which again influences teacher-child interactions. (pp.162-163)

The research work to date on the "self fulfilling prophecy" phenomenon, while still unclear as to the mechanisms involved, does suggest that our perception of others' expectations of us influences our perceptions of ourselves and our subsequent behaviour. In what ways can the school and teachers try to ensure that the descriptions

of their Aboriginal children's levels of cognitive functioning are accurate, and are expressed in such a way that they contribute meaningfully to educational planning?

7. Preferred Ways of Learning and Knowing

Each child develops, partly as a result of the culture/sub-culture into which he is socialized, preferred ways of learning and knowing: some favour a concrete style, some an abstract conceptual style; some are oriented more to the visual aspects of their environment while others pay more heed to aural cues; some work best in a group setting, others as individuals; some are dominated by the totality of an experience, while others are adept in breaking down a problem into its constituent parts.

Teaching strategies will lead the child towards success if they capitalize on his preferred style since in doing this they activate his existing store of knowledge and thus ensure his readiness for the new learning; in addition, they proffer the new experience in such a way that he can grasp it with comfort. Both these elements assist motivation and the engagement of the child's intelligence in the task at hand. These results are more likely to eventuate if the teacher not only recognizes but regards as legitimate the various ways of knowing. Where the achievement of school goals requires the child to acquire new ways of knowing (e.g. context-free generalization instead of context-bound thinking) the prior utilization of his own style will foster his early success and continued cognitive development as well as a sense of security arising from the evidence of the teacher's respect for him and his ways of knowing; these achievements will foster his acquisition of the new ways. (p.163)

Research is taking an increased interest in the ways individuals differ in their learning and knowing strategies. We are reasonably sure that some children prefer to learn by listening, others prefer to see the material to be learnt while still others are equally happy using sight or sound. When it comes to the description of the learner differences in finer learning skills, such as those involved in the acquisition and retention of knowledge, heavy reliance must be placed on the teachers' observation and analysis of the differing learning techniques used by their students. Teachers, with a knowledge of individual learning styles, become the mediators between the material to be learnt and the learner.

8. Linguistic Competence

Children's competence in the language of the classroom determines their success in the mastery of academic tasks. Their ability to communicate their thoughts and feelings and their ability to receive with accuracy the communications of teachers and of peers - their sociolinguistic as well as their linguistic competence - are vital to learning in classrooms which are highly verbally oriented. Children vary in their verbal competence - in their mastery of the syntax and structures of their language, in the vocabulary they command, in the sophistication and precision of the concepts they have developed and in their ability to facilitate problem solving through the use of language. They vary too in their orientation to language use and the rules of communication which they have acquired. Thus they may be expected to vary in their learning progress. Their oral competence defined broadly as above also affects their likelihood of mastering the task of learning to read, a skill upon which much later learning is predicated.

These variations occur among children whose first language is the language of the classroom. Where children speak a different language or a dialect of the school language, their learning difficulties are vastly compounded. The child is in an alien only imperfectly comprehended environment; breakdowns in communication are likely to be the rule rather than the exception; since the results of his earlier learning and his categorization of his universe are codified in his own language/dialect, they may not readily be available to him for use in this new setting; the task of learning to read is insuperable to one who lacks oral command of the language of the books. Not only are there cognitive challenges but, in addition, the child finds less security in the classroom which, in turn, compounds his difficulties. Where the language/dialect he speaks is one which is held in low regard by the school, the messages directed to him devalue his language and therefore himself and the community of which he is a member. Negatively affected, also, will be a wide range of interpersonal experiences with majority group members within the confines of the school. (p.164)

How can the school prevent the learning difficulties resulting from differences between the school/classroom language and the out-of-school language?