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DO ABORIGINAL PUPILS HAVE NEGATIVE SELF-CONCEPTS?

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In this article I would like to question one of the explanations offered to help account for the relatively low academic achievement of Aboriginal pupils, namely that they are handicapped by negative self-concepts. The connection between self-concept and school success itself seems plausible enough. For instance, students with negative self-concepts may tend to adopt low occupational horizons which, in turn, can undermine one type of motivation for academic achievement. Similarly, if pupils perceive schooling as a race then lack of self-confidence could lead them to take the attitude, "Why bother, I'm not good enough to win a place to university anyway." Moreover, as Jackson (1960) points out, classrooms are very judgmental places where the behaviour and work of children is constantly evaluated by teachers and peers. As a result in many learning situations the student "is risking error, judgment, disapproval, censure, rejection and, in extreme cases, even punishment" (Canfield and Wells, 1976:7). If insecure and defensive, pupils may find such an atmosphere very threatening and consequently be inhibited by a fear of failure. Also, it may be suggested, unless children are *self*-sufficient they may experience difficulty coping with cold, distant, formal teacher-pupil relationships.

What is more open to dispute, however, is whether or not Aboriginal children have negative self-concepts. Fanshawe (1976) observes that there is insufficient experimental data to enable this issue to be resolved conclusively on empirical grounds. And within the literature on the education of socially disadvantaged children there are opposing views that can be related to differences in ideology. For example, on the one hand, writers such as Johnson state quite clearly that:

Growing up in a family that has inherited poverty, living in an environment that induces failure, being rejected by society, and being confronted with his own inadequacies in the school, the disadvantaged child learns to look upon himself with contempt. Furthermore,

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his negative attitude towards himself is continually reinforced. When he fails to change his negative self-concept to a positive one, he in turn produces children who develop a poor self-concept. Poor self-concept is still another cycle of poverty for the disadvantaged.

(Johnson, 1970:26)

According to this school of thought, the alleged negative self-concept of the Aboriginal child should be regarded as learned, culturally determined, a personality deficiency, and part of the culture of poverty.

On the other hand, there are writers who regard the negative self-concept thesis as yet another way of blaming educational disadvantage on the 'victim' rather than on the 'system'. An example of this is provided by Arnez, who says:

Now that black people have rejected the theories of cultural deprivation and cultural disadvantage, white-oriented social scientists are endeavouring to prove that black people's lack of success...is due to their negative self-concept rather than to the racist nature of society.

(Arnez, 1972:104-5).

By engaging in 'person blame', suggests Arnez, 'deficit theorists' are able to distract attention away from the real cause of educational disadvantage, namely prejudice and discrimination generated by structured inequality and institutionalized racism.

Briefly, the case for Aboriginal children having negative self-concepts can be argued as follows. The self is a social product, formed from our perceptions of what others think of us; that is, from the image we see when we look into the mirror of us that others hold up (the 'looking glass self'). Compared with their white counterparts, Aboriginal pupils are confronted with a more negative mirror image because they get more negative feedback from 'significant' and 'generalised others' (as a result of low achievement at school and damaging ethnic stereotypes in our society). Therefore logically, other things being equal, they must develop lower self-esteem than do white students. Furthermore, it can be argued, anyone doubting the validity of this reasoning need only look at the negative self-reports made by Aboriginal children and the self-denigrating nature of much of their personal demeanour.

However, whilst these arguments may appear to be logical, they do not take into account the possibility of the following distinctions being made by or about Aboriginal children.

The first distinction involves the difference between being aware of negative evaluation by others and accepting that evaluation. Aboriginal children may be aware that members of their race are regarded, by 'society', as 'failures in life', as having not 'got on' and as having not 'made a go of things'. They may be aware that they are regarded, by 'society', as being not only different from white people, but also as being inferior to them. They may be aware that they are sometimes treated in a patronising and condescending way by members of other ethnic groups. But, even though they may be constantly presented with this negative evaluation, Aboriginal children may not accept it as valid judgment of their true social and individual worth. Instead, they may react along the lines of: "We are just as good as other people"; "Who do white people think they are?"; "It's not our fault that we're poor." Furthermore, whilst Aboriginal children may be aware, in effect, that 'society' blames poverty and education failure on the 'victim', they themselves may hold the 'system' to be responsible.

Secondly, there is the possibility that Aboriginal pupils' perceptions of their actual performance at school may differ from their perceptions of their potential level of competence. It may be difficult for them to deny that their developed academic ability is lower than that of most white children; but they can always take the view that, "If I had the same opportunities as white kids then I'd perform just as well as they do"; or, "Whilst at the moment the majority of white kids are more successful at school than me, if given half a chance I'd soon catch them up". In short, Aboriginal children can have negative views of their present ability, but positive views of their potential ability.

But even if an Aboriginal child accepts that he does not have the same potential ability as white children, even if he accepts that with all the opportunities in the world he would still perform badly at school, he may nevertheless not accept that this constitutes grounds for regarding himself negatively or for "looking upon himself with contempt." That is, a child can have a negative view of himself as a pupil but a positive concept of himself as a person. Teachers, on the other hand, may not make this distinction; instead they may add a moral dimension to their 'objective' assessment of students' work. For example, if a pupil's academic performance is poor, then teachers may make and transmit the judgment that the pupil is not only bad scholastically but also is necessarily lazy, stupid,

unimportant, not worthy of respect, and deplorably lacking in the Puritan virtues of enterprise, drive and the will to succeed. However, although some teachers may not distinguish academic competence from moral and social worth, the Aboriginal child has a vested interest in doing so and in rejecting the value-judgment component of the teachers' assessment.

A fourth distinction is that between lack of self-confidence and lack of confidence in others and the system. In mixed social company, an Aboriginal child may be placed in a threateningly evaluative relationship with white people. In such a situation, the Aboriginal child might show signs of shyness, embarrassment and self-consciousness. One interpretation of this behaviour is that the Aboriginal child lacks self-confidence. Another interpretation, however, is that the Aboriginal child lacks confidence in the white people to take him seriously, treat him as a social equal and generally give him a 'fair go'. For example, in a job interview, an Aboriginal person may give the impression that he has no faith in himself. The truth of the matter might be that he considers himself far more capable of doing the job than all of the other applicants but that he has no confidence in the selection panel to give him an honest hearing; and it is his uncertainty about the panel members, and not any uncertainty about himself, that makes him appear tentative. To take another example, the reluctance of an Aboriginal child to stay on at school and undergo a matriculation course might be taken to mean (by outside observers) that he lacks confidence in himself. However, this particular pupil's perception might be, "I'm confident that I would be able to improve and get to University if only my parents could help me with my homework, my friends would not reject me if I became serious about academic achievement, and if my teachers would be more patient and not give up on me."

It could be the case then that many Aboriginal children, in effect, say to themselves: "The only difference between me and white kids is that they get the breaks and the sponsorship whereas my opportunities are blocked by obstacles beyond my control. But I can't say this publicly because people would think I'm conceited or that I'm just making excuses or that I've got a chip on my shoulder. So to prevent people thinking this way, the easiest thing to do is to make out that I blame myself." It is important then to distinguish between the impression that the behaviour of Aboriginal children seems to give about their self-concepts and what in fact their words and personal demeanour really mean.

Insofar as these four distinctions are valid, they suggest that the results of research, purporting to demonstrate that Aboriginal children have negative self-concepts, should be approached with caution. They also suggest that the negative self-concept thesis may be based on an 'over-socialised conception of the nature of man'. When it comes to attitudes about one's self, perhaps too much stress is placed upon the influence of social learning and not enough upon the possibility of man having a natural disposition to develop high self-esteem and protect it against persistent attack. Finally, these distinctions suggest that, instead of focusing only on the 'victim' and devising ways to build up the self-esteem of Aboriginal children, the spotlight should be turned also on the 'system' to see that changes can be made to inspire the children's confidence in their teachers, school and society.

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