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DETERMINANTS OF SCHOOL SUCCESS

#Part 2

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In the first issue of *The Aboriginal Child at School* last year, we described the theoretical framework for considering factors contributing to the school success of Aboriginal children as presented in *Aboriginal Futures : Review of Research and Developments and Related Policies in the Education of Aborigines* (Watts, 1981).

The philosophical basis for this consideration is well worth stating again:

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;
- the achievement of the ability to communicate effectively with the diversity of people with whom there is interaction;

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- 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. (Watts, 1981, p.156)

Watts (1981) develops three groupings of factors determining school success:

1. Child characteristics
2. The school and classroom as a learning setting
3. Environments beyond the school.

In Part 1 of this article,¹ characteristics of the children themselves were discussed. In Part 2, the remaining groups of factors as identified by Watts (1981), will be considered.

Whether and what the child will learn at school is a function of the interaction between the child and

- the school - its orientation to cultural pluralism, its policies, goals, organization and practices, its curriculum both overt and hidden, its ethnic composition and its relationship with the home community;
- the teacher - his ethnic membership, his pedagogical competence, his personal characteristics, his attitudes to and expectations of the pupils and, in the case of minority group children, his knowledge of the children and their culture;
- other pupils and their orientations.

(Watts, 1981, p.165)

These characteristics affect the learning of all children. Their effects are not, except in very few cases, inevitable since environmental influences are mediated by the children's perceptions and by conditions outside the school, for example, parental perceptions, expectations and aspirations. Watts describes the effects of the school, the teacher and the other pupils.

THE SCHOOL

Schools receiving Aboriginal pupils may have a positive orientation to cultural pluralism. Where they do, staff will seek to plan programs which acknowledge and respect the children's cultural membership; they will try to ensure that the school is as receptive to the Aboriginal as to the other children; they will seek constantly to

expand their understanding of the culture from which the children come and the ways in which the children have been socialized; they will attempt to find and use learning resources which are culturally appropriate and methods which facilitate the children's learning.

Where schools do not have such an orientation, none of these things will happen, except fortuitously. The school and its personnel will ignore the Aboriginality of their pupils or, in some cases regret or denigrate their cultural membership and seek to use the schooling experience to make the Aboriginal children more like those of the majority group; where this occurs, the price for acceptance and success is likely to be denial of identity and all it means.

In the absence of a positive valuing of minority groups the school, too, is likely to hold a deficit orientation to these children, emphasizing their lacks in comparison with the majority group children, and thus to plan in terms of remediation rather than to search for ways of capitalizing on their distinctive strengths.

The organization of the school, particularly where there are large numbers of Aboriginal children, may seek to be responsive to the children or it may impose structures which owe their origin to consideration of the majority group. In some respects the structures may be appropriate to both groups, but in other respects there may be differences; for example, the Aboriginal children may be better advantaged by a vertical-group type organization rather than an age-grade system. (Many non-Aboriginal children may also profit from the former). The school which serves both majority and minority communities is constrained, but where numbers are reasonably even or where either group constitutes a significant proportion of the enrolment the school has a responsibility to devise structures which will disadvantage neither group.

School practices in regard to the establishment of remedial classes, special classes, or alternative courses need to be sensitive to the possibility that Aboriginal children, because of their Aboriginality and their developed characteristics, may be inappropriately located in these classes and viewed as "difficult to teach".

The curriculum of the school must offer a genuine learning opportunity to all pupils. Where the school is an Aboriginal school, the need for a curriculum that is geared to the pupil body is obvious. Where the school is attended by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal pupils, the aims (as outlined

at the beginning of this [article] will be appropriate to both groups, but specific materials and teaching strategies may be necessary to offer the Aboriginal children a chance to learn and to succeed; these materials and strategies should take account of the children's salient motives and their culturally developed ways of learning and of relating to adults.

The hidden curriculum of the school which shapes its orientation to the pupils is revealed through its organization and practices.

The ethnic composition of the school, a characteristic over which it has no control, will of itself affect the learning environment of the children. Outcomes for the Aboriginal pupils may well differ according to whether

- . the total pupil body is Aboriginal;
- . the Aboriginal children form a substantial proportion
 - a) in towns of high prejudice or
 - b) in towns of low prejudice;
- . the Aboriginal children constitute a minority, but where numbers are such as to afford them mutual support (which may be directed towards or away from school goals); again Aboriginal non-Aboriginal relationships in the town and in the school will have a major influence;
- . the Aboriginal children form a very small minority.

While the school does not determine its ethnic composition, it does control the extent to which it considers the implication of this composition for individual children and groups of children and it does control the extent to which it seeks to be responsive to the Aboriginal children in the particular setting in which they find themselves. A further aspect of ethnic composition over which the school has little control is the staff. Schools with Aboriginal pupils cannot ensure they have some Aboriginal teachers on staff; obviously the children are likely to be advantaged if they have role models on staff and if there are included on the staff some who have an intuitive understanding of them, an understanding arising from common cultural membership. Schools do, however, often have a choice in the appointment of ancillary staff; where the school is conscious of the transcultural difficulties of the Aboriginal children it can include among the ancillary staff some members of the children's community. Having appointed such people it needs to ensure that they are given the opportunity (with training) of offering the children support and at the same time extending the understanding of the teachers.

The Aboriginal children's learning will also be affected by how well the school understands (and how well it operationalizes that understanding):

- the likelihood that there will be discontinuities between the home and school experiences of some of the children;
- the feelings of the parents towards the school, feelings often of shyness, of reluctance to make an approach even when they are concerned about their children.
- the reasons why Aboriginal parents do not join school committees and the need for the school to initiate approaches in a way that is courteous to the parents and likely to attract their support;
- the dependence of the school on the home for insights into the children's abilities and interests;
- the goals the parents desire for their children.

Unless schools achieve appropriate links between themselves and the community, the progress of many Aboriginal children will be diminished.

(Watts 1981, pp. 165-8)

Professor Watts stresses the desirability of establishing appropriate links between school and community, the development within school personnel of an awareness and understanding of possible discontinuities between home and school assumptions and expectations of children's behaviour and learning, and between the home and school experiences of some of the children. As well, the curriculum of the school, the teaching materials and strategies used must be capable of offering Aboriginal children the chance to succeed in their school learning.

Many individual school initiatives have successfully met these requirements and *The Aboriginal Child at School* is pleased to be able to publish descriptions of such initiatives.

THE TEACHER

The pedagogical competence of the teacher affects the progress of most children; a few, probably because of the resources and learning climates of their homes and because of their own abilities, are less dependent on the teacher. Not many Aboriginal children are likely to be members of this latter group, at least in respect to goals of Western education.

Pedagogical competence is not an absolute, existing independently of the learners. Rather it is the ability of teachers successfully to engage their pupils in learning. In the case of many Aboriginal children, distinctive styles of learning and profiles of strengths and weaknesses, characteristic personality patterns and culturally learned ways of relating to others, especially adults, require of the teacher the use of teaching strategies and a pattern of interpersonal relationships different from those which may be appropriate to many children of the majority society; sometimes it is a wider range of strategies which is required. Personal characteristics have a special importance in the teacher of Aboriginal children; he needs to value and respect cultural diversity and there is strong presumptive evidence that he will be a more successful teacher of Aborigines if he is warm and accepting but at the same time realistically demanding; he needs to understand his pupils' backgrounds but he needs also to use this understanding in the service of a strong conviction that the children can learn provided he respects them and arranges appropriate learning environments.

It is difficult for teachers to foster the learning of children whom they do not understand; when the teacher and the child have different cultural backgrounds there are frequent occasions when misunderstandings by the one of the other's intentions or responses occur. Guiding the learning process involves highly personal transactions between the teacher and the pupil. There must be accurate appreciation by the teacher of the child's perception of a situation, of the cues in that situation which are significant to him; the teacher must be able to sense what the child is extracting from a particular experience if he is to guide his learning. The ability to cue-in in this way requires knowledge of the child as an individual (and not merely as a member of a particular group exhibiting the characteristics imputed to that group) and knowledge of his distinctive styles and orientations. The teacher must know, too, the culturally sanctioned rewards and punishments to which the Aboriginal child has learned to respond; otherwise the sanctions employed by the teacher (both positive and negative) may be inappropriate and/or misinterpreted and thus fail to achieve their purpose. Teacher knowledge of the Aboriginal pupil and his situation will also help the avoidance of those behaviours which the child is likely to attribute, because of cultural norms, to a negative valuation of himself.

An important area of understanding and acceptance relates to the child's language, especially where this is a non-standard form of English. Where teachers see the children's language

as inferior to rather than different from standard English, they are likely also to exhibit negative attitudes to the child and his language and, moreover, to impute to the speakers of that language form a range of negative stereotypes, including limited cognitive functioning. These attitudes create a climate of expectations and interpersonal relationships prejudicial to the child's progress in all aspects of his school career. Understanding of the validity and efficiency of the language in their own socio-cultural context needs to accompany the teacher's acceptance of his role in helping the children to acquire standard English so that they may function effectively and confidently in standard English settings when this is required, and so that they might master this major tool of learning. This latter goal is easier of achievement if the teacher has the understandings discussed above.

Where the Aboriginal students speak an Aboriginal language, the teacher needs support from Aboriginal personnel in the classroom. Whether the school program is conducted in English or in English and an Aboriginal language (a bilingual education program) the teacher needs at least an understanding of the essential differences in phonology and in syntax between the two languages if he is to provide maximum assistance to the children as they seek to acquire the new language.

Knowledge and understanding are likely to foster co-operative relationships; such relationships serve to allow concentration on the tasks in hand and thus for maximum time to be spent on pursuing the school's goals; time on task has been shown to be a vital determinant of achievement. Where relationships are strained or hostile, attention becomes diverted from school goals as management problems absorb time and energy, and even when resumption of teaching/learning occurs, neither teacher nor pupil is fully receptive to the other.

(Watts 1981, pp 168-70)

As the above passage shows, the role of teachers is critical in the achievement of their Aboriginal pupils. Teachers play not only a direct role in their Aboriginal children's learning through the selection and development of learning experiences and appropriate teaching strategies but a subtle, mediating and indirect role as one contact point between the home and school cultures - cultures that may be characterized by differing perceptions, value-belief systems and socio-cultural contexts..

THE OTHER PUPILS

School and classroom climates are in part created by the teachers but in part also by the pupils; the climate, the characteristic tone of the school, evolves as teachers and pupils interact, each reacting in some degree to the initiatives of the other, often in cyclic fashion.

The student body can be a powerful influence on an individual child's adjustment at school and his learning. Where there is consensus between the student body (or its most powerful leaders) and the staff, the prevailing norms reinforce educational goals and individual students are likely to conform with the existing work tone. Where the student body has priorities and goals different from those of the school its powerful influence leads many students away from the pursuit of school goals.

For Aboriginal students, particularly from pre-adolescence, the school student body takes on a special significance contingent upon the relative sizes of the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups and the group which the individual student chooses as his reference group. Where numbers of Aboriginal students are high there are likely to exist one or more Aboriginal communities in the town/district. The relationships that prevail between the Aboriginal community and the other townspeople will be reflected in the inter-group relationships in the school. Moreover, the students are likely to have a strong sense of group identity which will exert a pervasive influence on the individual members of the group. Where numbers are small the children's homes are more likely to be distributed throughout the town and the children are less likely to constitute a separate self-identified group. In their case, as in the former situation, intergroup attitudes will still be a significant force. While many Aboriginal children might be expected to adopt as their reference group their Aboriginal peers, some will seek to identify rather with the goals and the norms of the non-Aboriginal group. If there is a marked disparity between the two groups, such individuals will occupy a vulnerable position, particularly if there is strong disapproval from their Aboriginal peers and only reluctant and limited acceptance by the non-Aboriginal group.

Thus the degree of success the child achieves is in part due to his characteristics in interaction with the characteristics of his school, teacher and classmates.

While much of the interpupil interaction is conducted outside the realm of school and teacher influence, the teacher may still be offered an important and possibly influential indirect role as an authority figure, and as an empathetic and understanding person who might be able to reduce conflict when it arises.

The remaining group of factors considers the influences of environments beyond the school. The preface to this section shows the interrelatedness of the factors contributing to school success:

I have suggested that school success is dependent on the interactions between child and school. These are, however, not the only determinants. The child's home, peer group, community and the wider society exert an influence both directly and indirectly, upon him. In addition, I believe, to varying degrees each individual exercises a choice; he is not the puppet of external influences but, rather, determines in part those aspects he will select and or ignore or reject from the environment which surrounds him. While schools and teachers also exercise some autonomy, they are not totally independent of the society in which they are set or the wider school system of which they constitute an element. Additionally, teachers have been moulded by their life experiences; they have been socialized within their culture and are likely to some extent at least to subscribe to its values and share its orientations. They have been affected too, again to a greater or lesser extent, by their professional preparation as teachers and their socialization into the teaching force.

To understand how children develop the characteristics which help determine their school learning and to understand the wider forces that play upon them we turn to an examination of environments beyond the school. We then identify the wider environments of the school to understand how it comes to operate in the way it does. These external environments of the child and the school are not unrelated; there is interplay between them and, in addition each of these wider settings affects both child and school. It should be noted that the history of both the Aboriginal and the dominant societies and of the contact between the two is seen to be a potential influence on operations of all the systems.

(Watts 1981, p.171)

As the ways in which the teacher can participate directly in these environments-beyond-the-school are limited, the final section of the chapter will be reproduced in full to offer background information on the nature and influence of these environments.

1. THE ENVIRONMENTS OF THE ABORIGINAL CHILD

THE HOME

The characteristics of the Aboriginal child, like those of any child, are primarily an outcome of his socialization within the home and community. To understand him we need to understand his family.

The language the child masters is clearly the language of the home. His personality characteristics also owe their origin to the home; they are developed out of the child-rearing practices of the parents which in turn derive from their values and attitudes, their aspirations, their own past experiences and their present socio-cultural setting. Thus, for example:

Ethnic Identification

Children initially share their parents' orientation to their Aboriginality. While they remain within the ambit of the home in their pre-school years there may well be no explicit reference to their ethnic identity. In the tribal setting, and to a lesser but still marked extent in Aboriginal and non-tradition oriented communities which exist as separate townships, this is the situation which will continue throughout the years of their childhood and early adolescence. For other Aborigines, however, school entry brings with it exposure to a world which contains non-Aboriginal people, who will express varying attitudes to the child's Aboriginality. Where these attitudes exhibit respect for his culture he will probably retain that image of himself as Aborigine that marks his parents' view of themselves; as he grows he may well extend this concept embracing new dimensions as his knowledge of Aboriginal peoples extends. Where the attitudes he encounters are negative, he may continue secure in his definition of himself and indeed, further consolidate the personal meaning to himself of his ethnic identity. He may, however, depending on the security of his home, the value he comes to attach to new acquaintances and his vulnerability in the face of negative reception, amend considerably his view of himself as Aborigine.

Emotional Health and Self-concept

The adjustment of the child and his mental health are shaped initially by his experiences in the home. Where he feels loved and secure he develops as a confident individual well-adjusted to his environment. The mental health of the parents will determine the emotional climate of the home and hence the adjustments of the developing child. Their mental health is itself a function of their past experiences and the degree to which they feel they can cope with life's circumstances. Where their personal history is one of rejection and of difficulties, some have been able to retain a sense of purpose and control over their own lives; they cope and cope well with whatever confronts them. Others, however, have abandoned the struggle, seeking refuge in maladjustive ways, frequently seeking the solace of alcohol and withdrawing from active participation in a wide range of life activities. The past has undermined their feelings of control. Such parents cannot create an environment for the growing child conducive to his emotional well-being; nevertheless some children prove to be less vulnerable than others and maintain, in spite of all the circumstances, a functioning level of healthy adjustment.

The child who ventures forth from the home secure and adjusted will encounter in the wider environment new challenges and new experiences. Some will meet these challenges well. Others will find that they cannot maintain the sense of security deriving from the love at home in, for example, schools. Their attributes may not be valued, the learnings they have achieved may not be utilized by the school. Consequently, they are set upon a path of failure which may well undermine their feelings of confidence in themselves; symptoms of maladjustment develop. The only other avenue available to the child is to discount the significance of school success and to seek elsewhere affirmation of his worth as an individual; if he succeeds he may function, in those areas of life to which he attaches value, as a well-adjusted individual.

Motives

Parent-child interactions which are characterized by parental demands for achievement, with an emphasis on competition with standards of excellence, accompanied by positive emotional responses by parents to success and negative responses to lack of success will promote the development in the child of strong achievement motives. By contrast homes where there is a high frequency of body contact associated with pleasurable

emotions and where parental approval of the child is not contingent upon his success are likely to foster the development of children who have strong needs for affiliation, for establishing and maintaining positive affective relationships with others. These parent behaviours are a product of their own basic motivational structure, their values and the child-rearing goals they have in mind. Their interactions with their children are affected, too, by the structure of the family; the number and age-spacing of children (especially young children) will determine whether the parents place an emphasis on the development of striving and excellence; such an emphasis requires considerable time in interaction with the one child. Socio-economic forces exert their influence, too; in deprived circumstances child rearing goals are likely to reflect the priorities that must be placed on survival rather than on emphasis on individual development. And thus the child develops, in response to the socialization practices of his parents, his characteristic motives. These tend, once established, to be relatively immune to outside forces.

Values, Attitudes and Aspirations

Children who are loved and/or who wish to retain parental approval internalize their parents' values and attitudes. The children imitate and identify with their parents and are rewarded as they express these values and attitudes in behaviours approved by the family. The primacy of the family to the young child ensures that he will strive to become like them and so be loved.

As he grows older, however, he becomes exposed to other people who become significant in his universe. Some will hold values and attitudes at variance with those of the home. Whether he adopts their values and orientations will be a function of the relative attractiveness of these new figures and the rewards they can confer and, as he grows in maturity, a function of the sort of person he wishes to become.

His aspirations will, at least initially, reflect those of his parents, theirs being the result of their past experiences and the values which they hold. Often urban/urbanizing parents aspire to a better life for their children than that which they have had; sometimes they seek to arouse in their children a striving towards such a goal but unless they engage in behaviours which nurture the development of characteristics essential for the realization of this goal, these aspirations are unlikely to be internalized by the children. Much depends, too, on whether they can find support beyond the home. For

some Aboriginal parents these aspirations may be that the child rediscover his Aboriginal heritage; whether these aspirations will be realized is dependent on whether the parents have the knowledge to act as teachers - where they have this knowledge they can initiate appropriate action. Where they lack this knowledge (a source of regret to them) they are dependent on the availability of programs instituted by Aboriginal organizations or by schools. Whether the child comes to share this particular aspiration depends on the values of the peer group which becomes increasingly important as the child moves towards adolescence and on the perception the child has of his Aboriginality. This in turn may be affected by his perception of the value judgments placed on his heritage by the other social institutions. Where tribal people aspire for their children to hold fast to the Law, their wishes may be sabotaged by the life circumstances that surround the child, and by the satisfaction he finds in behaviours based on alternative values. Thus we might expect, initially, the child's aspirations to mirror those of his home. As his social world expands and as he comes to define himself in the light of his experiences he formulates his own aspirations which may or may not differ from those of his parents.

Health and Nutritional Status and Sensory Functioning

These characteristics of the child arise from constitutional factors in interaction with his home environment. Where sub-optimal conditions prevail within the family one can trace their source to conditions of poverty, especially overcrowding, and sometimes to parental lack of knowledge and/or parental values. Parents in tribal and non-tribal remote communities have frequently not understood the nutritional values of introduced Western food, so different from the food values of bush food with which they and their grandmothers were so familiar; also the preparation of some foods, for example, infant food formulas assumes a knowledge of measuring and associated knowledge of the need for precision in measuring that are not always present. Thus nutritional planning has not been characteristic of many families' care of their children. Parental values are sometimes implicated, too, as activities other than planned meal preparation assume a higher priority. Some parents, too, are accustomed to the presence of childhood infections, running ear, gastro-enteritis, upper respiratory tract infection, worm infestations, and so unclear on their cause,¹

¹ The action of germs is not everywhere understood or accepted.

that they take these as the norm. Frequently a further factor is implicated: seeking attention for an ailing child means long waits in outpatients clinics at general hospitals, (often involving the need to take along a number of other young children) where a friendly and respectful reception cannot be assumed; thus late presentation for medical help of an ill child results. Other health and hygiene factors are, as we shall later see, characteristic of the Aboriginal community, rather than just the individual home.

Cognitive Abilities, Learning Style and Linguistic Competence

Intelligence receives a cultural definition; the problems which are seen as valid and important, and the approaches to their solution which are seen as appropriate, vary from culture to culture. The tradition-oriented Aboriginal people develop their concepts of intelligence in the light of their value systems and their relationships with their environment. Other Aborigines also shape their children's intellectual development in terms of their own values. Thus cultural forces select those aspects of the child's cognition which will be fostered.

The ultimate ceiling a child's intelligence can reach is set by the genes. The level of functioning intelligence he achieves is, however, dependent on his environment. Intelligence, as defined by modern technological societies and by schools in such societies, grows and develops as the child actively explores his environment seeking to understand it. The nature and quality of parent-child interactions, especially verbal interactions, are important determinants of the extent to which his potential is actualized. The child requires stimulation from his parents. He needs them to talk to him, to explain the events he is encountering, to help him label the elements of his world and the interrelationships between them, to encourage him to look for similarities and differences in the objects and events around him and, once discovered to use words to express these generalizations in precise language. He needs them, too, to listen to him as he seeks to use language to explore and express his experiences. He needs their encouragement to apply his developing powers to solving problems of gradually increasing complexity. These are the conditions which foster the development of intelligence as Western culture defines it. Where homes value curiosity and exploration and prize intellectual achievement they provide a spur to the child's development; where other values prevail, the family's interactions

with the child will be directed towards other goals and his full intellectual powers, in mainstream Western terms, may not develop.

The child needs not only stimulation and encouragement but also emotional support and security and a feeling of being valued if he is to be free to develop his intellectual potential.

Learning styles, too, are developed in accord with cultural and sub-cultural values and the parental guidance of the child's early learning is in accord with these values. The parents mediate the environment for a young child in terms of their own cognitive styles and preferred ways of knowing; their explanations and the aspects of environment to which they direct their children's attention are conceived within their own orientation to the world; thus the reflective parent presents this mode of operation as a model and encourages the child to approximate her model, while the mother who solves her problems in an impulsive style presents to her child a quite different model. In neither parents nor children is cognitive style independent of other personality characteristics.

The home begins the task. From school entry onwards, the school has a role in fostering the child's application of his intelligence to his increasingly complex world, in extending his experience, in cultivating his powers of analysis and synthesis and problem-solving. Another of its assigned tasks is assistance to the child in extending his language competence and in increasing his skills in verbal communication. Furthermore, the school should help the child to gain increased power over those learning styles to which he has become accustomed and, where appropriate to develop new styles more efficient than his present styles in the pursuit of academic and personal goals.

Perception of Others

It is within the home that the child learns initially to relate to others. Under the influence of the models presented by his family and the rewards bestowed in the light of parental values, he assumes characteristic and approved ways of interacting with adults. Thus he learns that children may/should, for example, be compliant and deferring when with adults; accept, unquestioningly, the rules generated by adults; be consulted in the formulation of household rules; adopt a questioning and exploring orientation to the world; exercise independence in thought and action. The rules of

courtesy vary from home to home and from culture to culture. So, too, does the system of rewards and punishments. The child internalises these. For some, reward is signalled by verbal praise, for others by material goods, for others by physical expressions of love and for yet others there is no direct signalling of approval. Similarly with punishments: some learn to associate parental withdrawal of love or verbal reprimand with disapproval while others learn that the characteristic display of disapproval is physical punishment or withdrawal of privileges.

These learned modes of interacting with adults and these learned rewards/punishments condition the child's interactions with new adults such as teachers. In the first instance at least they expect the same rules of behaviour to apply at school as at home. Where the rules differ the child may become bewildered, ill-at-ease and insecure. He breaks the teacher's rules and she breaks his. Under such conditions his attentions are focused primarily upon behaviour rather than upon learning and so the latter suffers.

Homes differ, too, in the relative emphasis they place on co-operation and competition with others. The child internalizes his parents' values in this regard and arrives at school practised in the exercise of particular relationships with others. Where the school places a different emphasis he is handicapped. If he is, for example, used to solving problems through group means, he is not well attuned to a competitive atmosphere in which each must strive as an individual; under these conditions, as the co-operative behaviours valued at home are discouraged and as competitive behaviours which to him seem alien are rewarded, his inspiration to engage in classroom learning is negatively affected.

Previous Learnings

The home and the community in which he grows determine the content and range of the child's early learnings. Where these are used as the base for new learnings by the school the Aboriginal child capitalizes on his past experiences and is likely to succeed in the new learnings. Where, however, the school is ignorant of these prior learnings and proceeds from a different base - for example, the typical learnings of the middle class majority child - he commences his school career at a marked disadvantage.

THE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY

The Aboriginal community in which the child grows exerts an influence on him directly and also indirectly through his family. His parents are likely to share and reflect the orientations and values of the community of which they are members and from which they draw support and in this way they mediate the influence of the community on the child. Aboriginal communities, for reasons arising from the cultural values of their members and/or because of real or perceived exclusion from the wider society, are frequently tight-knit communities characterized by the strong bonds of kinship and of interpersonal relationships which define their essence. Thus the child has a clear place, a strong feeling of belonging and support from other family units as well as from his own. The community is a place in which its members are free to express their cultural identity and follow their culturally preferred life style. Where the Aboriginal community exists within or near a town where the people of the majority society hold it and its members in low regard, the community provides a bulwark for its members against the effects of prejudice. Thus the support it offers, the intensity of the interpersonal bonds between members and its existence as a unit distinguishable from the wider society make the norms of the community compelling and a major force in the shaping of the developing child.

Its members speak a common language; this becomes the child's language and serves not only the purposes of communication but also as a badge of identification, to the child, to the community and to the outside world. Its ways of knowing, its categorization and classification of the world also become internalized by the child through the language that is available to him. The values that are enshrined in the language and underlie its nature become his values as he seeks to maintain the community's support. Its views of the outside world become his views as the collective memories of his people retell and relive their experiences, positive and negative.

Some communities consist not of one single group but of a number of smaller groups not always in harmony; when external stresses mount and personal feelings run high the divisions and the intergroup hostilities that emerge have their effect on the child as on other members, again exerting an influence on his developing views of his universe. When the diverse groups within the community draw together in the

face of common adversity, this further defines the child's view of himself as an Aborigine.

The location of the community in relation to the majority society and the services to which it has access are also a determinant of the child's development. As we saw in Chapter 4, many communities have limited access to employment opportunities; to public health and medical services; many are most inadequately housed. These conditions constitute a threat to physical and to mental health and to a sense of material well-being. Where a significant number of the adult community respond to these life circumstances by the over-use of alcohol and/or by aggression or apathy and withdrawal, the Aboriginal child's personal environment is negatively affected. All these circumstances exert a significant effect on the child's daily life, on his learning opportunities and on the perspective he develops of Aboriginal man's place in the total society. Where his people develop their own organizations and services the better to meet their needs (such as legal and medical services) the child not only benefits directly from the services but also redefines his concept of what it means to be Aboriginal.

These issues help demonstrate the effect on the Aboriginal child of the wider society. This wider society, at the political level, proclaims equality of opportunity, equality of access to resources and to social institutions and to respect. The growing child, particularly in his adolescent years, may set high goals for his own future and may strive to achieve these goals. Whether success attends his efforts will be only partly dependent on his abilities and his actions. Other influential forces will be the support he receives from his own family and from his community but, importantly also, the attitudes and practices of those members of the majority society with whom he interacts; they may have internalized the values that underlie equality and access and respect and act in the light of these values or they may, instead, hold ethnocentric views which exclude the Aboriginal people from full participation. The stereotypes this latter group holds of Aborigines will shape their reception of the individual Aborigine. Thus some Aboriginal children will strive for access and of those who strive only some will succeed. Others will interpret the messages from the wider society in the light of the experiences of the members of their own community; where these are negative, they will not perceive access as open to them and will turn

their energies elsewhere. The adolescent's view of the future that is open to him and the attractiveness of that perceived future will direct the level of his striving and hence of his success in school.

THE PEER GROUP

We have already noted, in our discussion of the child's self-identification and his influential friends and in our discussions of his relationships with fellow classmates/schoolmates, the significance of the influence exerted by the child's peer group within the Aboriginal community. If the child wants acceptance into this group, he must abide by its norms, internalize its values, share its goals and follow its life-style. Importantly, in this setting the peer group is often a mixed-age group and the influence exerted by the older members, particularly those but recently left school, upon the younger members is considerable. In many communities, the adolescent group comprises early school leavers who achieved little success at school and who have, for want of opportunities and lack of skills, entered the ranks of the unemployed. Their attitudes to school and school achievement and to the utility of striving at school are frequently highly negative and their life-styles focused on pleasures of the moment. Where such peer groups exist they exercise a negative influence likely to be countered only for those children who have in their lives significant adults who offer a strong and informed support to their school endeavours or whose schools offer experiences which are sufficiently rewarding.

2. THE WIDER ENVIRONMENTS OF THE SCHOOL

Few Aboriginal children attend independent Aboriginal schools. For most their school is part of a wider system, either state or parochial. While each school develops its own individuality it is affected by the school system of which it is a part, however imperfectly it reflects that system. Thus the school system influences the Aboriginal child's learning through its effects upon the school he attends.

The influence of the school system can be illustrated by reference to the multicultural nature of the society it serves. Where the school system values cultural diversity and seeks particularly to provide an effective education for Aborigines, it promulgates policies that uphold this value. The effectiveness of these policies is in part

dependent upon their public acceptance and their acceptance by the individual school, but in part dependent also on the administrative and resource supports provided for the implementation of the policy. The creation of an administrative unit responsible for Aboriginal education may promote the latter, but its effectiveness will be affected by the decision-making mandate it is given, by the relationships which are fostered between this unit and senior officers at the regional level, by the extent to which departmental structures foster interaction between this unit and the other divisions of the department, by the quality of its staff and by the numbers and quality of support staff attached to such a unit. The numbers can be determined as adequate only in relation to the numbers and locations of schools serving Aboriginal students, and the quality would seem to be dependent on the special training that is made available.

The effect of the system's policies on Aboriginal education is mediated by its policies and practices in other areas, for example

- its staff recruitment and placement policies determine whether Aboriginal children's schools are staffed by teachers with appropriate experience and personal qualities;
- its policies on specialist training affect the likelihood of such school staff having been specially prepared for their role;
- its promotion policies affect the quality and stability of staffing in these schools;
- its policies on curriculum responsibility determine whether curriculum guidelines and teaching resources are developed with the Aboriginal children's particular needs and characteristics in mind or whether all decisions are made at the school level and thus totally dependent on the calibre and experience of the staff;
- its policies on in-service teacher education affect the likelihood of there developing a corps of teachers highly skilled in the teaching of Aboriginal children;
- its policies on school-community relationships influence the orientations of local school staff to their own roles.

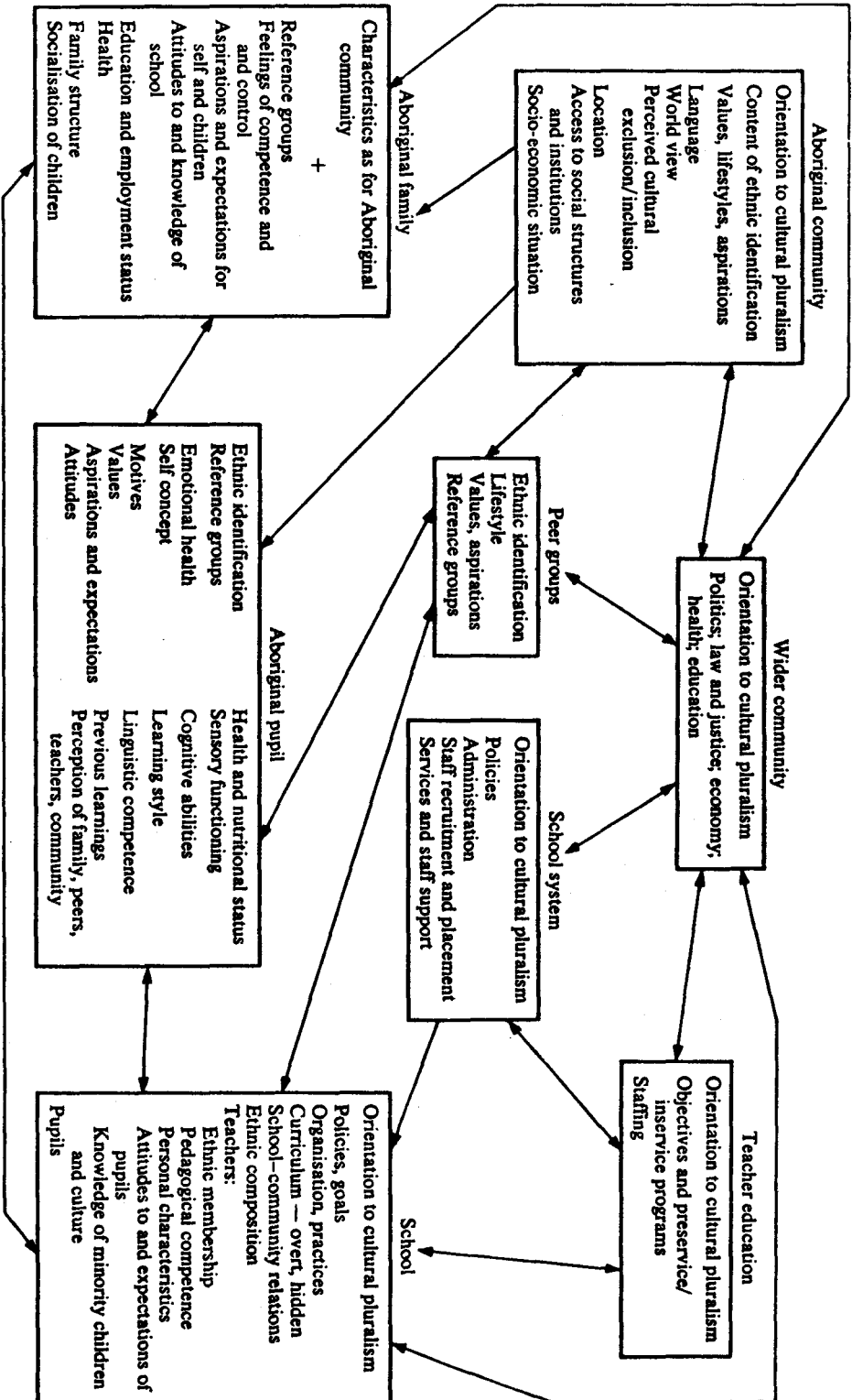
Furthermore, its views on its own need as a system to be responsive to the community at large create a climate which affects the degree to which Aboriginal communities feel their views are likely to be sought and received.

The school system is itself not autonomous. It is subject to the political policies of the day, to budgetary restrictions and staff ceilings which are imposed. These policies affect departments across their entire operation. In addition, departments are specifically affected by the attitudes of government to the education of Aborigines and the resources they are prepared to make available.

School systems are responsive, too, to community pressures and community aspirations. Their schools serve a diverse clientele and the allocation of their resources is affected by their perception of priority needs. Apart from the Northern Territory, only in Queensland and Western Australia does the Aboriginal school population approach as high as four per cent of the enrolment of government schools; thus Aborigines constitute a very small minority in each of the systems and until recently the people have had no mechanism for conveying to school systems their aspirations, their concerns or their guidance. Their relative power as a pressure group, in view of their size and their general position in the Australian society, is highly dependent on whether the system accepts a special responsibility for the education of their children.

There is further limitation on the school system in initiatives it might take in the education of Aborigines. It recruits its staff from the graduates of teacher education institutions who have their own policies of student selection, thus predetermining the types and diversity of teachers ultimately available to the system for employment. The teacher education programs that are followed in individual institutions shape the personal and professional qualities of future school staff, and thus influence the effectiveness of later staff development programs initiated by the system itself. The willingness of colleges and universities to develop specialist programs and their staff recruitment policies affect the extent to which systems are able to draw upon those with specialist qualifications in their staffing policies; in turn the teacher education institutions are dependent on financing from the Tertiary Education Commission and approval of courses by state boards before they can develop and offer such programs.

Figure 1 : Determinants of school success



School systems, schools, Aboriginal community members (adult and child) are affected by the wider society's valuation of its Aboriginal population. This valuation is conveyed through government policies, legislation and programs but the more vivid message is that contained in media comment. What the media choose to select for comment on Aboriginal peoples and the tone of their comment inevitably affect the knowledge of non-Aborigines about Aborigines and their attitudes towards the latter and, in addition, provide for the Aborigines a window on how they are seen and valued by the wider society. These messages are contained not only in what the media choose to emphasize but also in what they choose not to present; those aspects of Aboriginal life and culture and life-style which are omitted from the media picture remain relatively unknown and therefore unappreciated by the wider community.

(Watts 1981, pp.172-183)

Professor Watts has developed a model of these determinants of school success (Fig. 1) that shows the principal groups of variables that have been considered and the complex interrelationships of these variables in their contribution to success at school.

The chapter concludes -

To attempt to pull these diverse threads together: the Aboriginal child's success in pursuing school goals is a function of the complex interactions among a wide range of variables. Central to his success are the interactions and learning experiences of the classroom itself, but teacher, child and the other pupils function as they do because of the characteristics of the school and its members; the classroom participants and the school itself are influenced by forces beyond themselves - these forces are to be found in the Aboriginal homes and communities and in the wider school system. The ultimate influence is the Australian society within which both Aboriginal children and their families and the school and its staff have their being.

Success is likely when all forces support the child in his school endeavours in ways appropriate to his cultural and personal characteristics and when the wider society and the school personnel transmit to him and his community both directly and indirectly messages which affirm their value as Aboriginal Australians.

(Watts 1981, p. 184)