



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

In 2022 *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* transitioned to fully Open Access and this article is available for use under the license conditions below.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

STUDENT BEHAVIOUR AND TEACHING STRATEGIES IN ABORIGINAL SCHOOLS

* R. Folds

There are at least three competing interpretations of Aboriginal classroom behaviour in tradition-oriented communities. These interpretations and the theories they support may well be familiar to experienced teachers. However, the aim here is not to expound theory but to draw out implications for classroom practice.

The first interpretation is that much of the behaviour of Aboriginal children in the classroom is explicable in terms of cultural deficits relative to the demands of school. It is a time-worn but by no means old-fashioned notion that tradition-oriented socialisation renders Aboriginal children ill-fitted to school. Certainly, Aboriginal students are often characterised as passive and given to non-participation, punctuated occasionally by one word responses at best.

My own research into classroom interaction between teachers and Aboriginal students confirms that there is little verbal interaction between them relative to that in white classrooms (Folds, 1984a). However, the ethnocentric assumptions of deficit theory that school is a given and that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children learn in exactly the same way are ill-founded and have alienated Aborigines from school rather than improved educational outcomes.

Many teachers see classroom behaviour in terms of differences rather than deficits. In particular, relative lack of verbal interaction is viewed as a cultural phenomenon modelled on Aboriginal learning style where the student makes little personal input. The Aboriginal teaching and learning style has been thoroughly documented elsewhere (Harris, 1980).

* *Ralph Folds, Aboriginal Task Force, Inst. of Technology, Adelaide.*

The interaction data equally support a third interpretation. By this Aboriginal children are seen as resisting classroom and school processes (Folds, 1984 a&b). While classroom behaviour arises from cultural differences the resistance hypothesis holds that not all of this behaviour is explicable in terms of these differences.

Thus, deficit theory would describe relative Aboriginal unresponsiveness in the classroom as inadequacy, while the same behaviour can be explained with emphasis on cultural differences. Or, again in terms of resistance theory, this behaviour might be categorised as part of a 'wall of silence'.

The pedagogical consequences are quite different for each of these interpretations. Deficit theory suggests intensive remediation to compensate for perceived inadequacies. Historically this has tended to be highly discontinuous with Aboriginal socialisation, and racist, in that it destroys Aboriginal culture and identity.

The cultural differences interpretation suggests a variety of approaches. Student behaviour is likely to be taken at face value when viewed as a straightforward expression of (equally valid) Aboriginal socio-linguistic rules, etc. Though struck by the seeming incompatibility between student unresponsiveness and subject demands, teachers may avoid 'stepping on cultural toes' and work with the behaviour rather than attempt to change it. Unfortunately, the first casualty here is often the curriculum.

Typically, subversion of the curriculum occurs through ad hoc development particularly via the introduction of 'busy work' on a large scale. In time, activities such as colouring, drawing and copying overtake almost every subject area. Busy work simulates educational activity in that it facilitates a teaching/learning situation where teachers look the part, i.e., in control, with students 'on task'. This is possible since busy work greatly reduces the demand for verbal interaction between teachers and students.

Teachers need only hand out prepared materials and give initial instructions. Ostensibly the problems that arise through teacher/student verbal interaction all but disappear. What is more, the use of busy work may even seem defensible in terms of cultural differences in that it mimics one or two aspects of the Aboriginal learning style.

Unfortunately, busy work is fairly irrelevant to academic outcomes. Worse, its notorious socialising effect is to train the very passivity in the classroom incorrectly identified as a product of Aboriginal socialisation. Thus, teachers should see the large scale use of busy work as antithetical to the goals of community education.

Not all outcomes will be like this. Most teachers will eventually find it necessary for their own survival to attempt to train student responses rather than undermine the curriculum. Also, a well packaged core curriculum tends to resist large scale intrusion of busy work, although this depends on supervision and support available to new teachers.

Some teachers resort to putting a great deal of pressure on students to respond verbally in the classroom. Aboriginal Education Workers, (AEWs) are often viewed as instrumental in generating these responses and they are encouraged in this direction. Unfortunately, when pressure on students leads to unco-operative and disruptive behaviour, AEWs are often cast in the role of classroom disciplinarians. This ultimately compromises their position as cultural brokers and thus undermines the position of the school in the eyes of the community (Folds, 1984c). Nevertheless, teacher pressure is usually successful to the extent that more responses (albeit very limited ones) are generated.

Whether this is fruitful in fostering real questioning and understanding as opposed to rote learning is another thing. I would argue that unless teachers create an environment where both cultures can operate this is unlikely to occur. Certainly, as long as

classroom behaviour is considered as straight forward expression of Aboriginal socialisation (in line with the cultural differences theory) it will be implicit that Aboriginal upbringing is an obstacle to success at school as far as teachers are concerned.

While the empirical support for the resistance hypothesis is no greater than for rival interpretations its advantages in other terms are considerable. In particular, it has better consequences for action at the level of the classroom.

The starting point for the teacher here is not the assumption that all classroom behaviour is a cultural given or that Aboriginal socialisation is necessarily an impediment to learning school knowledge. Rather, classroom behaviour is realistically seen as embodying active and passive forms of resistance to what are alien knowledge systems and instructional processes. What is foreshadowed here is an open-ended approach directed at ameliorating resistance. The result is likely to be the fostering of an environment where Aboriginal students will feel secure and able to contribute but where academic goals are not compromised. This concept of an intercultural classroom is already embodied in relatively successful Aboriginal Enclave programs and also underlies Aboriginal teacher training initiatives.

One approach here is to incorporate elements of the Aboriginal teaching style. Deslandes' (1983) study, compared Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal classroom teaching styles and found that the Aboriginal teachers transferred some aspects of the Aboriginal teaching style to the classroom. They used more of a lecturing or direct instruction style, for example, by asking fewer questions of individuals. What is more, individual students were singled out less for control purposes, and direct eye contact and silence were used less often to discipline the class. Further, the Aboriginal teachers were more tolerant of disruption in respecting students rights to not participate.

Deslandes reports that, paradoxically, the students engaged in more dialogue with the Aboriginal teachers. They actually discussed problems and offered possible solutions (p.51), even though the Aboriginal teachers solicited fewer responses directly.

If the resistance hypothesis is even partly correct, it suggests the use of culturally attuned teaching styles along the lines described will increase student participation and in turn academic performance. Further, the notion of resistance supports a non-assimilatory approach to schooling. It actively recognises that Aborigines often oppose much of what is seen as 'white-fellow business' and this can include school. As such it caters for the wider and longer term goals of community education centering on Aboriginal self-management.

REFERENCES

- Deslandes, C.S.: Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teaching styles at Milingimbi. *The Aboriginal Child at School*, 1983, Vol.11 No.5, pp.43-52.
- Folds, R.: Aborigines and School: A Resistance Hypothesis and Implications for Educational Change. In press 1984a.
- Folds, R.: Curriculum, Culture and Classroom Social Relations in South Australia's North West Aboriginal Schools. In press 1984b.
- Folds, R.: Limitations of the Role of Aboriginal Health and Education Workers as Community Developers. In press 1984c.
- Harris, S., 1980: *Culture and Learning, Tradition and Education in North-east Arnhem Land*. Education Department, Darwin, 1980.

