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KOORIES IN THE CLASSROOM*

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Despite growing initiatives in Aboriginal-designed educational facilities, most Aboriginal children still undertake their schooling in mainstream classrooms where methodology and organisation have evolved according to a white Australian tradition.

The school system is an institution relentlessly perpetuating the stereotypes and social order that have been Australia's since the British occupation. Aboriginal children are seen to 'under-achieve' in terms of a system designed to meet the needs of the dominant society. While 'underachievement' may be slightly diminished by adjustments in teaching styles, these changes should be part of an overall classroom strategy that is based on an understanding of Aboriginal characteristics and cultural traditions, and a realisation that Aboriginal children's behaviour reflects their experience of a largely racist society.

In the Aboriginal sense, within both traditional and contemporary societies, the teacher is not that person out in the front of the class, but is someone within the family who has the qualifications to prepare an Aboriginal child for life. Some classroom conventions have probably developed to keep the child at a distance from the teacher, an outcome quite foreign to the Aboriginal child's expectations. It is inevitable, too, that teachers' attitudes and values will contribute to Aboriginal students' manipulation of the classroom environment.

In some instances throughout Australia, Aboriginal parents are seeking to educate their children in schools they conduct themselves, as an alternative to a system which has continually failed them. However, the majority of Aboriginal students remain within mainstream schools, and it is to teachers within these schools that the following comments are offered. These ideas are developed further in a handbook prepared by Victorian Aboriginal educators for primary school teachers**

*Koories - South-eastern term for Aborigines.

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**So you want to teach Aboriginal kids....A Guide for Teachers of Aboriginal Children in Victorian Primary Schools. Aboriginal Education Services, Special Programs Branch, Education Dept of Victoria, 1984.

The first necessity is for the non-Aboriginal to be sensitive to the characteristics of Aboriginal children -

- Recognising that they are all different from each other and that Aborigines from different parts of Australia have different cultures. Despite these variations, Aboriginal children are usually very much aware of their Aboriginal identity within the family context though they may have low self-esteem outside of it. Most are influenced by traditional concepts despite the fact that many Aborigines today have only limited access to their traditional culture. One must acknowledge also that Aboriginal attitudes, and often Aboriginal living conditions have been determined by two hundred years of white cultural and economic dominance of Aboriginal cultural values, which are alien to non-Aboriginal society.

Where relationships are concerned, it is essential to understand that Aboriginal children's first loyalty will be to their extended family.

- They will want to seek out family members in the classroom and in the schoolground.
- Shared ownership of school equipment seems natural to them.
- They have been brought up to respect Aboriginal adults without question but may not obey an order from a non-Aboriginal adult where they see no sense in it.
- They are likely to be motivated more by affection for a teacher than by respect for authority or interest in classroom tasks.

Aboriginal families' constraints on and tolerance levels of behaviour differ from those of the school.

- The children will generally accept friendly ridicule from their families but would not see it as an appropriate style of control from an authority figure at school.
- They may avoid eye contact with an adult as a mark of respect or because of shyness.
- They do not expect to initiate conversation with adults.
- Aboriginal children are inclined to communicate as much through touching as through words.

The teacher who is sensitive to the characteristics and culture of Aboriginal children will try to find classroom strategies which accommodate these qualities.

To enhance Aboriginal children's self-esteem -

- Use stories or films about Aboriginal or black people.
- Bring in Aboriginal pictures and artefacts.
- Involve members of the Aboriginal community in the school program.
- Promote interracial understanding by offering studies which show the complexity and meaning of Aboriginal traditional and contemporary cultures and the consequences of the last two hundred years.
- Try to hold realistic expectations of achievement.

Plan for a flexible daily time-slot for the whole class when the Aboriginal children can -

- Interact informally with the teacher and the other children.
- Can learn the reasons for classroom constraints and begin to adapt to classroom language.
- Aboriginal language styles can be gradually enlarged by exposure to other language forms and by the use of a 'language experience' approach to reading and writing.
- Verbal interaction in the classroom must be developed gradually and will be enhanced by the mixing of older and younger Aboriginal children in a structured learning group situation, and by a deliberate initiation of incidental conversation between teacher and child.

Aboriginal teacher aides are employed in schools with significant Aboriginal enrolments, to provide the children with a contact from their own community within the school walls. *In schools where an Aboriginal teacher aide is available -*

- Make use of that person's ability to communicate with the children, and to act as a home-school link, thus breaking down some of the cultural barriers that may be experienced.

To foster understanding between teacher and child it is important for the teachers to -

- Form friendship links with Aboriginal parents. These may be slow to develop but the response can be deeply satisfying because of the Aboriginal emphasis on personal relationships. From this may follow the involvement of Aboriginal parents in the planning and conduct of their children's formal education.

These are just some of the issues that come to mind when we consider the needs of Aboriginal children and their non-Aboriginal teachers in mainstream classes and some of the strategies that may help to foster that "drive to competence" which educators desire.



Be sensitive to the characteristics of Aboriginal children



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