

ABORIGINES' CO-OPERATIVE NATURE CAN AFFECT SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

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The co-operative nature of Aborigines can adversely affect their ability to succeed in a competitive schooling system. This can be substantiated by an historical study of various native groups.

Essentially, the competitive learning processes involve a participant consciously persisting in attempts to achieve superiority, i.e., a better relative position with regard to the goal than an opponent can achieve (Owens, 1982, p.1), while the co-operative form of learning involves students interacting to achieve a mutually shared goal. It is not the aim of this work, however, to conclude on the merits of each of these educational instruments. Nevertheless the defence of the competitive system of learning in relation to Aborigines cannot be upheld on inherited or genetic grounds. As a result, most of the arguments that follow discuss the inadequacies of our present competitive system and its inability to cope with cultures that are dependent on co-operative means of behaviour.

It should be noted that although criticism is levelled at the competitive attitude of schools and its negative and positive components weighed up, research on the effect of the co-operative form of schooling on Aborigines is limited through an insufficiency of material written on the subject.

The nature of Aboriginal culture, however, is seen as indicative of Aborigines being unable to 'succeed' in a competitive education system. Furthermore, the Aborigines' failure in the modern schooling system stems from the fact that -

all of us are the inheritors of a tradition of
thought relating to the nature of life, which
has been handed down to us...

(Montagu, 1975, p.45)

The social and cultural distinction between Aboriginal and European societies can best be viewed in terms of their own social realities. Beckenham (1948) stated -

There is a great gulf between black and white not only in appearance but in way of life and thought.

(Beckenham, 1948, p.46)

The co-operative element is particularly evident in Aboriginal societies where the interdependence between the members and the environment is critical due to the intimate relationship of the Aborigines with their land and because their survival is dependent upon nature.

In particular, the lives of the Aborigines have been shaped by their Dreamtime which means that, to the Aborigine, culture is of prime importance. Traditionally they have stressed co-operation, group orientation, mutual and economic inter-dependence.

This contrasts, in the extreme, with the relationship that 'modern' society has developed with the environment, where it is utilized for many purposes. The value placed on material gains by modern society, school's fierce competition and a curriculum based largely on white middle class values further alienates the Aboriginal value of interdependence.

Here the climate of co-operation and competition have been used to illustrate the degree of their function and utility in the separate social realities of the Aborigine and European. Simply, the Weltanschauung of the Aborigine has the underlying principle of co-operation, whereas the dominant viewpoint of the European is based upon competition.

Yet, it is superficial to say that Aborigines are not competitive as no society is totally competitive or co-operative. Competitive and co-operative habits exist side by side within society. Ritchie (1963) in his ethnographic account of Polynesian culture (New Zealand Maoris), has evidenced that, while overt interpersonal competition is comparatively rare in Polynesian communities, intergroup competition which involves competition among groups with competition within each group is quite common, for example, during sports events and dancing competitions. He further concluded that a co-operative social orientation is evident compared with the social relationships characteristic among Europeans, which are more frequently solely competitive. The co-operative orientation of Polynesian groups is particularly

evident in the reciprocal kinship obligations which exist in these groups (Ritchie, in Thomas, 1978, p.1). The latter finding is reflected in the work of anthropologists Elkin (1964) and Berndt (1968). They have similarly emphasised the role of kinship obligations within the Aboriginal society in ensuring the co-operation of individual members.

Furthermore, Madsen (1967), Sibley, Senn and Epanchin (1968), Wasik, Senn and Epanchin (1969), concluded that different aspects of child rearing practices and child behaviour have affected the preference for co-operative and competitive behaviour styles. Those who are economically disadvantaged are more co-operative and group orientated.

Shapiro and Madsen (1969) found children of Israeli kibbutzim to be more co-operative than urban middle class Israeli children of school age and, in 1970, a dramatic difference between three ethnic groups in Los Angeles (Afro-American, Anglo-American, Mexican-American) and Mexican village children was found. The latter behaved co-operatively in a group situation and were able to obtain rewards, while the former group who behaved in a non-adaptive competitive manner were, as a result, unable to obtain rewards in a group problem solving situation.

These results are evident in Sommerlad and Bellingham's (1972) study of Aborigines. They found that Aborigines are significantly more co-operative than Europeans of the same socio-economic stratification. Differences also occurred within the Aboriginal sample, "with individuals in the stream preparing for secondary education showing more competitive behaviour than those continuing post primary courses emphasising manual training and domestic science" (Sommerlad & Bellingham, 1972, p.149). Secondary schooling was found to be far more competitive than primary schooling.

Furthermore, the findings of Sommerlad and Bellingham (1972) differ from those of Elkin (1964) and Berndt (1968) regarding kinship ties. Sommerlad and Bellingham found that kinship roles did not necessarily ensure co-operative behaviour. They tested the hypothesis that, "if co-operative behaviour among Aborigines is, in fact, a direct function of kinship structure then such behaviour may not occur in situations where partners in a co-operative game belong to totally unrelated tribes with no recognised kinship ties". (Sommerlad and Bellingham, 1972). Their findings differ from those of Elkin and Berndt as Sommerlad and Bellingham could not sustain their hypothesis. All studies suggest, however, that there are cultural differences in interaction preferences.

Moreover, the findings of Sommerlad and Bellingham are supported by the studies of Miller and Thomas (1972) on Blackfoot Indians and non-Indian Canadian children from non-integrated schools as well as Nelson and Kagan's work of the same year. Nelson and Kagan (1972) concluded: "American students so seldom co-operate spontaneously on the experimental tasks that it appears that the environment provided for these children is barren of experiences that would sensitize them to the possibility of co-operation."

Miller (1973) also tested Blackfoot Indian and non-Indian children in an integrated school, and compared the results with his previous findings. He found that while children in the integrated school were more co-operative overall, the Indian children were more competitive than those in separate schools. From this finding it could be concluded that, even though the schools may encourage competition, the interaction between groups with different values serves to break down cultural expectations.

Despite this, Aboriginal children find it difficult to cope with both co-operative and competitive demands of different cultures and endeavour to live in 'two worlds'. The Aboriginal student faces problems which are not shared by the majority of his or her age group and more often performs poorly at school. In 1971 -

only 9.27% of Aboriginal children enrolled at secondary school continued their education as far as form IV and less than 2% were attempting the higher school certificate.

(Duncan, 1974, p.124)

In a field study, Graves and Graves (1975) carried out on Cook Islanders, it was found -

mutual interdependence creates habits of interpersonal behaviour which cannot easily be thrust aside even when non-reciprocation produces resentment.

(Graves and Graves, 1975, p.2)

This reinforces the notion that cultural change is difficult for Aborigines.

Graves & Graves also found that a non-Western group of rural children was substantially more co-operative than Europeans in New Zealand, and a strong identification with traditional values was apparent. The Cook Islanders, however, were taking on Western personality characteristics, including rivalrous personality

predispositions which they concluded inhibit successful co-operation in an effort to become 'modern'.

This is reflected in the findings of Sommerlad and Bellingham. As previously mentioned, they found that the Aborigines who prepare to attend high school show more competitive behaviour than those continuing other post primary courses, and the increase in competitive behaviour stems from secondary education being far more competitive than the primary system. Unlike Graves and Graves, Sommerlad and Bellingham make no reference to rivalrous personality predispositions and their repercussions. Nevertheless, all works substantiate the view that one's surroundings invariably influence one's behaviour.

Given such cross cultural data, one could hardly dispute that the culture in which one is reared is a major instrument in determining one's preference for co-operation or competition. Yet, in contrast to this belief, one may suggest that there is some evidence of racial genetic inferiority of Aborigines which has contributed to the fact that they do not do well at school. Even if the argument held any truth to it in terms of genetic make-up that is common to all Aborigines, the statement can only be seen as a gross generalisation. Firstly, no reference is made to specific genetic disorders that might account for the inability to learn. Secondly, such terms as inferiority are racial prejudice, particularly without qualification. Lastly, the context of the learning process in question which shows up this possible inferiority might be at fault, as it does not take into account the special circumstances of cultural background. This sort of insinuation may be likened to giving intelligence tests to Aborigines, who are unlikely to score well due to a different cultural background.

More recently, in support of the environmental argument, Thomas (1978) in a study among Cook Islands, Samoan and Fijian children concluded that -

children from the three Pacific Island countries have similar pattern preferences on school activities, but differ markedly on preference for non-school activities.

(Thomas, 1978)

Moreover, the children tested in the Cook Islands were, overall, more competitive than those tested in Samoa and Fiji, and with increasing Westernisation of the education system the role of the school is increasing competitive behaviour.

In relation to another primitive group, O'Collins (1980) in a study of societies in Papua New Guinea concluded that the concept of sharing and exchange between individuals or groups is an essential feature of social life, but has worked against the children at modern schools. He reiterated:

The aim of Papua New Guinea's new educators is not to train the children to fit the culture, but to prepare them for another culture. To do this, children had to be isolated from the socialization process that was going on in their home communities. The average effect was children grew up, went to school and often went away from their society and were taught that the values, customs and skills of their own community were less important or were actively harmful.

(O'Collins, 1980, p.21)

It is interesting to note again the problems of conflict created by educational authorities in their desire to promote education along Western lines in an endeavour to 'catch up' economically and scientifically with the rest of the 'developed' world. Also, the inherent problems of trying to carry on traditional cultural values are in evidence.

Furthermore, Coker (1981) found that -

Aborigines as a group consistently score much lower in English reading, writing and arithmetic tests than any other identifiable group in Australia. They also leave school at an earlier age and at a lower achievement level than the national average.

(Coker, 1981, p.3)

One might assume that such commonality is due to the genetic make-up, but again it must be argued that tests which are specified for one cultural group are inadequate for another, particularly one as divergent from the modern industrial society as the Aboriginal society. For instance, let us take into account just one factor - study habits. There is no cultural tradition in Aboriginal society to foster such habits at the expense of, say, performing kinship or co-operative duties within the tribe.

In recognition of problems experienced by Aboriginal children, the New South Wales Government's Aboriginal Education Policy (1982) stated that -

it is important for the school to realise that Aboriginal children have unique needs which are influenced by the attitudes, values, and beliefs of Aboriginal society.

A further cultural difference is exemplified by the fact that the Aborigines, as a rule, place less emphasis on achievement than their European counterparts as they invariably do not confer high status on the achiever. As supported by Hughes (1984) -

differing [from] Western school values, the group to the Aboriginal is more important than the person.

Consequently, the cultural clash is not a myth.

Thus, cultural and environmental differences clearly evidence certain preferences for co-operation and competition. The more 'modern' the society, the less the preference for co-operation and the less 'modern' the society, the less the preference for competition. This fact may be attributable to cultural differences which, in turn, are created by cultural values peculiar to the culture in question.

Different interpretations of what is 'worthwhile' is pre-determined by cultural antecedents. Therefore, when different cultures meet in schools, the minority group suffers due to emphasis being placed on the prevailing dominant culture. The Aborigines place less emphasis on competition than co-operation, so it should then be expected that Aboriginal children more often will not 'succeed' in schools operating in a stringent competitive mode, as the schools function around a set of values alien to the cultural value orientation of the Aboriginal. It should not be overlooked that Aborigines compete within the terms of reference of their traditional life style.

Nevertheless, the co-operative attitude of the Aborigine reflected in empirical studies of other native groups has resulted in Aboriginal educational deprivation through inappropriate learning methods. As Aborigines place great emphasis on tradition, the cultural framework of the Aboriginal society does not lend itself easily to competition or individual achievers which is obviously

counter productive to the co-operative way of life. As summed up by Sommerlad and Bellingham -

Co-operative behaviour rather than competitive is considered to be a salient aspect of the Australian Aboriginal value system and one of the factors contributing to the failure of the Aboriginal children in the school situation.

(Sommerlad and Bellingham, 1972, p.149)

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