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WHY IS LIFE SO HARD FOR ABORIGINAL STUDENTS IN URBAN CLASSROOMS? [1]

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This paper is a report on a recent study of urban Aboriginal children at home and at school, in Adelaide.[2] It will mostly describe the situation for just three of the students in one reception / Year one classroom, as they are representative of many Aboriginal students in the other classroom which was closely studied, and in classrooms whose teachers I interviewed, or who were observed by me. In other words, the situation that I am describing for Naomi, Jason and Terry# is, I believe, similar to the situation for many young Aboriginal students in urban classrooms in South Australia[3]. Naomi, Jason and Terry were three physically attractive, energetic, bright and curious five year olds. Outside the classroom they were articulate and confident but inside the classroom, by the end of the year, they were in the lowest academic group for their age, considered troublesome by their teacher, and were largely ostracised by their non-Aboriginal peers.

The study found that skills and characteristics of many Aboriginal students which were so valued at home became irrelevant in school because of the way that the classroom was organised. As well, there was a clash in terms of the values and ways of communicating between the teacher and these students. These clashes, together with the teacher's unconscious low expectations about the students' academic and social potential created serious lack of rapport between the students and teacher. This lack of rapport gradually developed into a vicious cycle where the students became marginalised both socially and academically. The non-Aboriginal students tended to follow the teacher's lead in attitudes expressed towards Naomi, Jason and Terry. The successes of these three students were largely invisible, that is, they were not acknowledged and reinforced by the teacher. Mostly, all that was noticed and responded to by her was what she saw to be their 'problem behaviour'. She was unable to recognise or respond to their zest for learning, their resourcefulness and ingenuity,

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All the personal names used in this paper are fictitious.

and their awareness of and concern for the needs of the other students. The conclusion is that it is not surprising in the light of what was observed, that Aboriginal children tend to do poorly academically and drop out of school early; also, however, much of this could be avoided by more responsive teacher behaviour.

The discussion to follow will show, firstly, how certain culturally based differences led the teacher to misinterpret the motivations and responses of the Aboriginal students. And, secondly, how this eventually resulted in a situation which seriously disadvantaged the Aboriginal students both academically and in terms of status within the student hierarchy.

DIFFERENCES IN HOME SOCIALISATION

The two most prominent differences in cultural orientation in the Aboriginal and Anglo families studied were that the Aboriginal families valued and worked to develop in their children an autonomous or independent, self-sufficient bearing on life. In contrast, the Anglo families invested considerable time and energy to developing in their children particular correctness concerning dress, manners, bearing, health and hygiene in keeping with a set of clearly stated expectations. In the Aboriginal families, the major restriction on the child's individual autonomy was the adults' expectation that children modify their independent drive with a nurturing and socially considerate orientation. In other words, it was hoped the child would become self-reliant and self-regulating while also being always aware of others' needs, and be able to help out when needed. In the Anglo families, the young children sought their parents' attention a great deal. However, the Aboriginal children, for much of the time that their parents were present, oriented to adults no more than to peers. While the Anglo children were often asking questions and seeking assistance from their parents, the Aboriginal children's self-sufficiency meant that they relied on their own observations to learn new things. If they needed assistance in doing something, the Aboriginal children would be more likely to seek this from their older brothers and sisters than from the adults. In addition, they were encouraged not to dwell on their own minor injuries or upsets, to be able to resolve their own disputes, and not to take themselves too seriously. Several Aboriginal parents stated that such characteristics as these were necessary if their children were to survive in a world which was largely hostile to their Aboriginality. Hence the Aboriginal children of this study were skilled observers, and possessed a great deal of practical competence at a relatively early age as compared with

their Anglo counterparts. As well, they were used either to helping those younger than themselves or to relying on the help of children older than themselves. Those people who were admired tended to be emotionally stoic, to be assertive in conflict with their peers, and be well able to laugh at themselves. The autonomous bearing of the Aboriginal children of this study meant that, given an unfamiliar situation, they would expect that they would be allowed the time and space to sit back and examine the whole situation from afar before having to plunge into it and try to be competent. If that time and space were not given, the child may experience great shame or embarrassment. This is consistent with Coombs, Brandl and Snowdon's (1983) statement that the Aboriginal people of their focus felt that making a mistake while performing a deed in the public eye was a more serious failing than admitting ignorance and not attempting to do the deed in the first place.

The importance of autonomy for both the Aboriginal children and adults of this study meant that direct, obvious control of children by adults towards their particular desired goals was considerably less than that exerted in the Anglo families. In fact, the number of directives, reprimands, rationalisations[4], monitoring questions, and punishments were more than twice as common in the Anglo families. Table 1 presents the relative frequencies of these acts.

Table 1
Frequencies of overt and direct social controlling acts by parent over child : cross-group comparisons*

	Aboriginal	Anglo
Directives	236	359
Reprimands	124	350
Monitoring questions	90	270
Rationalisations	89	335
Teasing & scaring**	22	0
Punishments	4	9
TOTAL	565	1323

* Counted across four families for six recorded hours of daily activity for each group.
** For controlling purposes.

(Malin, 1989:169)

In sum then, the important aspects of the child rearing in the Aboriginal families of this study included:

Encouraging *autonomy* through the child's

- Self reliance
- Ability to regulate his or her own behaviour
- Ability to observe well
- Enormous practical competence
- Seeking help and attention from peers as much as from adults
- Approaching new tasks cautiously to avoid making mistakes
- Being emotionally and physically resilient

Encouraging *affiliation* through the child's

- Being affectionate and nurturant with those who are younger
- Keeping an eye on those around and know where everyone is
- Helping others
- Trusting that his or her peers can be relied upon to help if need be.

These behaviours as they occur in the classroom will be described below under the major headings of autonomy and affiliation.

AUTONOMY IN THE CLASSROOM

The Anglo children were much more dependent upon and accustomed to parental guidance and obvious monitoring than the Aboriginal children and hence in the classroom they expected and in fact, depended upon constant teacher supervision and direction as they grappled with the new tasks of classroom life. They continually adjusted their actions in accordance with what they thought the teacher's expectations were, from moment to moment. If they were being attentive when they knew they should be attentive, they would closely watch the teacher's line of vision in order not to be caught at not attending. Many of the Aboriginal students appeared to be oblivious of this need to continually monitor the teacher and adjust their behaviour according to her expectations, even when she appeared to be attending to something else. They tended to monitor their entire social, physical and academic environment and regulate themselves accordingly, apparently having the expectation that they needed to be self-sufficient and attentive to everyone in the room, not only the teacher.

Of the eight Aboriginal students in this particular classroom, Naomi, Jason and Terry were the most culturally and physically distinguishable as they alone had both parents who were Aboriginal. The other five Aboriginal students were from more obviously bicultural homes, each having an Aboriginal and an Anglo parent. These five students demonstrated that they were aware of the need to monitor adult whereabouts and obey adult directives with relative swiftness. In many regards these five students displayed the same tendencies for self-regulation and for self-reliance as Naomi but they adjusted them to some extent to fit with the teacher's expectations. Hence, they less often 'infringed' the classroom norms in the ways that Naomi did. Observations in and interviews with teachers of other classrooms at all the primary school year levels found similar tendencies to Naomi among many Aboriginal students although not all.

The following anecdote (Malin, 1989, 408-411) from one videotaped classroom encapsulates many of these principles.

> *The Tracing Lesson* (1.1a 30:26-34:01)
>
> Fifteen minutes into the lesson, when all the students but Naomi[5], an Aboriginal student, and Tran who is Vietnamese, have begun colouring in their traced balloons. Naomi is still in the process of tracing the outline. She has spent a great deal of time talking to Ronald and Gaye who are sitting opposite her, and also much time watching those around her. Her teacher, Mrs Eyers sees her, sitting rolling three coloured pencils back and forth on her desk top while watching the children around her. Mrs Eyers reprimands her, telling her to hurry on as they have plasticine work and a story still to do before recess. Naomi colours for several seconds, then begins to survey the class again watching Bruce who has finished and is on the carpet playing with plasticine. She then watches Mrs Eyers come over and write Gaye's name for her on the back of her sheet.

Although Mrs Eyers had told her to hurry, Naomi does not see the necessity to immediately obey even when Mrs Eyers is standing less than a metre from her.

> (35:10-36:00)
> Naomi receives another reprimand four minutes later, after she has leaned over to show Gay where she made

a "mistake". She obeys the directive to work by colouring for a few more seconds but then she fixes her gaze on Gaye who has walked over to the teacher on the other side of the room to seek final evaluation of her finished work. When Gaye indicates to Mrs Eyers that she doesn't know what to do with her finished worksheet, Naomi calls out across the room for her to "Put it on the chair?"

So, although Naomi appears "to be in a dream" (a common quote of Mrs Eyers') she is in fact monitoring very closely her friend's activity. Even the 'top' student of this class did not know that finished worksheets go on the chair, so Naomi's knowledge of such a routine is not common knowledge at this stage.

Naomi does no colouring now for four minutes until she is reprimanded yet again, this time for being out of her chair watching in fascination the automatic focusing mechanism on the videocamera. She obeys Mrs Eyers for a second with a brief colour-in and then resumes her surveying of the room and the students.

Two minutes later when Mrs Eyers walks over towards Naomi's desk, Naomi resumes her colouring but stops after about thirty seconds being distracted by Mrs Eyers telling Bruce to play with his plasticine "nicely". At this stage, Jane, Ronald, and Tran have also not finished. Mrs Eyers walks over to Ronald who is at Naomi's group of tables and urges him to hurry. She then sits down in Gaye's chair, directly opposite Naomi, and supervises Ronald closely. Naomi sits motionless and gazes at the children on the carpet and only resumes colouring when Bruce is punished for "being silly" by having to sit on his own at the art table.

So all this while, Naomi has not felt impelled to hurry on with completing her work even when under the watchful eye of the teacher, and even after receiving several directives from the teacher. Instead, a greater requirement for her is to survey what is going on: to sit back and watch the whole situation, this first lesson for such a large tracing worksheet. This characteristic of not wanting to plunge into a relatively unfamiliar situation reflects both the autonomy Naomi would be granted at home and the importance for her of not risking being shamed for doing her assignment incorrectly in front of her peers. It is also

evident that Naomi's strategy is most effective from the point of view of learning classroom routines. She knows more than even the 'top' student in this regard. It is not useful, though, from the point of view of pleasing the teacher. It is possibly contributing to the teacher's belief which she expressed some weeks later, that this child does not accept her authority.

What is also apparent in this situation is how the Anglo children have plunged into the activities making blunders, colouring over the lines, scribbling, leaving blank spaces, not colouring all the balloons, not tracing all the strings, not knowing where to put their pencils and worksheet when they'd finished, etc., implicitly trusting that the teacher would guide them as to the correct procedures when they made a mistake. This is not the case for Naomi, who seemed more to orient to her peers for guidance than to the adult, in this case the teacher. To return to the lesson:

> (42:20-52-00)
> Naomi has been sitting and observing for most of the time that Mrs Eyers was sitting opposite her helping Ronald. Now Ronald has finished, Mrs Eyers stands and looks directly at Naomi and says to her in an exasperated tone "C'mon Naomi! (pause) You're so slow! (pause) And I've got to do something with the plasticine!" Naomi glances up at her and then looks down towards her lap unsmiling, her hands motionless. Mrs Eyers continues, "Hurry UP!" Her tone of voice now sounds impatient and she is looking down at Naomi very intensely. Naomi sits frozen with her chin against her chest, fiddling with her pencil in her lap. It is not until Mrs Eyers moves back to the carpet and begins talking to the rest of the class that Naomi resumes her colouring, which she does with some urgency. Almost a minute later Mrs Eyers directs another reprimand to Naomi and also Tran who is sitting at his desk refusing to colour. Mrs Eyers says to them both most emphatically, "Come on you two. Hurry UP!" Naomi sits back in her chair and stares into space. Tran starts to pack away his coloured pencils into their box. Naomi colours some more, watches Bruce some more and then, leaving two balloons uncoloured, begins to pack away her coloured pencils one by one, into their box. Shortly after this Tran is exonerated of his obligation to finish his colouring and Mrs Eyers fetches him a plasticine mat and he begins to make a snake on the carpet.

Thus we see Naomi still taking her time, not immediately complying with the directives to hurry. Mrs Eyers describes this behaviour of Naomi's as being "typically Aboriginal", of "going walkabout in the head." She explains to me that Tran is just plain immature, possibly being only four years old. She is therefore more tolerant of his refusal to finish than of Naomi's slowness at complying with her directives.

Naomi's behaviour is consistent with that of a child accustomed to self-regulation, having been encouraged to act independently and to make her own decisions as to when and whether she obeys another's commands. She finishes off the lesson in the following way:

> (54:30-56:60)
> As Naomi is putting her pencils carefully into their box, Mrs Eyers calls over to her, "Come on Naomi!" Forty seconds later Naomi walks over to her drawer and puts her coloured pencils away. She then shows her sheet to Mrs Eyers. Mrs Eyers says that she must colour in *all* the balloons. "QUICKLY!" she says. So Naomi returns to her table with her pencils and after some colouring, some watching of the children, two more reprimands and seven minutes, she finishes and takes it to Mrs Eyers for evaluation. Clearly Mrs Eyers is pleased with its quality, "Beautiful colouring-in but why did you take so long?"

Naomi made the same procedural mistake that many of the children had done, in seeking evaluation before her work was completed; but in other regards she did not make the same blunders such as colouring over the edges of her tracing, leaving white spaces, or of not knowing where to put her completed sheet. She avoided these mistakes probably as a result of her intensive surveying of what everybody else was doing. Naomi's biggest mistake was a result of her lack of awareness of the tendency socialised into Anglo children of deferring without delay to the authority of an adult. Such a deferral on Naomi's part would mean abandoning a considerable degree of her autonomy.

In summary, Naomi's 'mistakes' during this forty five minute 'tracing' and 'making with plasticine' lesson included her being slow to obey a teacher directive; not understanding the importance of keeping to the teacher's pre-set time schedule; orienting to her peers more than the task; and not understanding

that the teacher's mere presence was a cue to 'get on with' the task. Her achievements in terms of adapting to classroom life included, being one of the first to understand where completed worksheets were to be put; that 'colouring in' had to keep within the line boundary, and that no 'white spaces' were to be left; a knowledge of where the plasticine mats and writing pencils were to be kept; and that one had to wash one's hands and push one's chair into the table before one was allowed to move on to the next activity.

It would seem that Naomi, through her astute observation skills, has picked up the observable, explicit expectations and routines of classroom life while the subtle ones which go against her early socialisation, and which constitute her 'mistakes', have not been picked up by her at this early stage of school life. She continues to operate under the assumption from home, that she has the right to thoroughly size up this new and unfamiliar situation before being expected to plunge in and risk failure.

The following table presents a comparison of the Aboriginal and Anglo students displays of practical ability, often being offered in assistance to others.

Table 2
Voluntary demonstrations of practical competence*

	Aboriginal	Anglo
(Proportion of student population:	21%	79%)
Tying up others' shoe laces	5	3
Miscellaneous offers of assistance	15	0
Organising classroom materials	10	5
Opening pyramid carton on own	3	1
TOTAL	33 = 79%	9 = 21%

*Counted across 21 videotaped hours of classroom life.

(Malin , 472)

A summary of the components of the Aboriginal students' autonomy is presented in Table 3, including those for which there is no time to discuss in this paper.

TABLE 3
The components of Aboriginal student autonomy

SELF-REGULATION

Doing things in one's own time
Not always obeying directives first time round
Sometimes delaying compliance indefinitely
Wanting to size up a situation before plunging in
Not having to demonstrate contrition at being disobedient
Using questioning in an indirect, unobtrusive manner.

SELF RELIANCE

Being assertive verbally:
  Expressing one's needs, wants as declaratives and directives
Being physically assertive:
  In obtaining what one desires, or is entitled to
Possessing particular competencies including:
  Acute observation skills
  The ability and tendency to orient within a wide geographic area
  Practical dexterity and experience
  Ingenuity, astuteness and initiative.

(Malin: 472)

AFFILIATION IN THE CLASSROOM

The Aboriginal students also differed from the Anglo students in the degree to which they paid attention to their peers. In their initial weeks at school they took fellow students into consideration as much as they did both their teacher and the academic task at hand. There were many expressions of this affiliative orientation. For example, as compared with the Anglo students in the class, the Aboriginal students were more likely to know the whereabouts and activities of students not present. They expressed knowledge of the well-being, academic activity, personal appearance, friends, relatives and interests of other students more often than the Anglo students. They were more likely to assist other students, both Aboriginal and Anglo, who were in difficulty whether academically or practically. They were more likely to act as interpreters to the teacher on behalf of a student who had been misunderstood by the teacher, and to other students who had misinterpreted the teacher.

A typical example of such an offer of assistance is presented following:

> On Anglo student Adrian's first day at school, when Mrs Eyers reached his name on the roll and said, "Good morning Adrian" he just sat staring at her. Naomi, who was sitting next to him, leaned over so her face was close to his and she directed him, smiling, "Say it. Good morning, Mrs Eyers." Adrian remaining mute, sat looking at Mrs Eyers.
>
> (Malin, 508)

The Aboriginal students were also more likely to send positive messages to other students during the course of the day, either through silent smiles, stroking of the hair or face, or leaning on a neighbour in an unobtrusive way. They tended to express spontaneous joy at another student's achievement such as when Naomi exclaimed with amazement, "He beated us!" when Anglo student Bruce finished his academic assignment before herself and the people at her table. This was after she had echoed Anglo student Gaye's declaration, "I'm beating you!" earlier in the lesson. For many of the Aboriginal students in the class, despite declaring they were entering into competition with their neighbours over finishing a task, they tended not to follow through with the resolve, and they displayed no envy at another's successes[6]. In fact, often they would express pleasure. See the following table for a comparison of the relative frequencies of such affiliative acts for Aboriginal and Anglo students.

Table 4
Nurturant and collaborative acts between students*

	Aboriginal	Anglo
(Proportion of students by ethnicity	21%	79%
Affirmation from one student to another		
Physical expression:	30+	22
Verbal expression:	6	4
Explanations offered by a student on behalf of another student	19	10
Explanations from student to student	29	16
TOTAL	84 =62%	52 =38%

* Counted over 21 videotaped hours of classroom life

(Malin, 510)

The world of the Aboriginal children and students of this study was a very social one. At home, they were encouraged to play with other children rather than with things. This contrasts with the materialism of the middle class Anglo world where children are encouraged to amuse themselves on their own, or with peers, with toys, books, television, drawing and construction activities, and the like. It was therefore not surprising to find that the Aboriginal students often indicated that they perceived themselves as collaborating with others and of achieving collectively, even when the class task had not been organised in that way. This was evident liguistically in subtle ways, such as expressed in the following two vignettes:

> Tuyen a five year old Vietnamese boy from the classroom next door came into the room during the morning carpet session with a message for Mrs Eyers. The class was seated on the carpet, with Tran directly in front of Mrs Eyers and Naomi next to Jane also in the front row, to the side of Mrs Eyers. As Tuyen was standing beside Mrs Eyers waiting for her response, he noticed the paper flowers pinned to the back wall, and the following conversation ensued:
>
> Tuyen: Who done them? (pointing to the back wall)
> Mrs Eyers: My children. Aren't they clever!
> Tran (Vietnamese): I done two!
> Naomi: /Me and Jane done it.
> (Naomi was stroking Jane's hair while saying this)
>
> (Malin: 511)

In fact Jane, who was also Aboriginal, and Naomi had made a flower each, independently of one another. On another occasion, the children were individually making Chinese lanterns:

> Each person in the class had been folding his or her paper, then cutting it in the process of making paper lanterns. Mrs Harry was directing them. The class was seated in a circle with Cindy, an Aboriginal student, seated between Naomi and Rebecca who was Anglo. Cindy and Rebecca had both finished the next step and Rebecca called out to Mrs Harry who was moving around the circle monitoring their work, "I done it Mrs Harry!" Cindy then called out immediately after this, "Me and Rebecca done it!"
>
> (Malin: 511)

COMMUNICATION DIFFICULTIES

Certain culturally based differences in language use also increased the teacher's misunderstanding of many of the Aboriginal students. For example, differences in the forms of questions and answers led either to the teacher's often not recognising correct answers which the Aboriginal students gave to academic questions or to her asking them in a social context which embarrassed the students. Specifically, on several occasions when the teacher asked a question, then compulsorily selected an Aboriginal student (including some of the confidently bi-cultural students) to answer, the student either did not answer and the teacher answered for them, or else the student's answer came several seconds later, after the teacher had addressed the question to somebody else. In this way, many correct answers from the Aboriginal students were never recognised. I believe that, apart from dialect differences which meant that some answers were not comprehended, there were two other tendencies involved here. Firstly, for many Aboriginal people in Adelaide, there is a longer pause time between questions and answers than in Anglo Australian talk (See also Harris, 1980/1984 and Eades, 1982). In addition, for many urban Aboriginal students, being spotlighted in front of the whole class to answer a question where they have not volunteered the answer, and particularly if they are not one hundred per cent comfortable in the class, can cause considerable shame or embarrassment. For many of them, making a mistake or being seen to be vulnerable in public, is potentially far more demoralising than it is for the majority of middle-class Anglo Australians. Mrs Eyers, as most teachers, often used public questions to informally evaluate what a student knew and her missing many correct answers in these ways led to her under-estimation of the knowledge the Aboriginal students possessed.

Another difference in communication style which worsened the situation between Mrs Eyers and many of the Aboriginal students was in their non-verbal response to reprimand. They would respond to the teacher with expressionless faces, head erect, looking directly at her or glancing periodically between her and to the side of her. This reaction differed from how the Anglo children characteristically responded, with their blushing, their often slight deferential, self-conscious smiles, or in serious situations their downward looking, often pouting expression. Mrs Eyers had said of Naomi and Terry in particular that they were not vulnerable to reprimand. She stated of Naomi, "When I get angry with Naomi it doesn't affect her emotionally"

and that "she (isn't) sorry for being naughty" (Malin: 431). The emotional stoicism valued at home probably underlay the Aboriginal students' response.

In sum then, many of the actions resulting from both the Aboriginal students' autonomous orientation and their social awareness and skill contributed to the smooth running of classroom life. Some of the Anglo students were aware of the valuable resource in the Aboriginal students' inclinations to help, and their considerable practical competence and sense of responsibility. Unfortunately, however, the only acts which the teacher seemed to notice were the Aboriginal students' often slowness or occasional failure to respond to teacher directives, their emotional stoicism in response to reprimand, and their tendencies to orient less to the teacher than the non-Aborigial students. These latter acts she interpreted as their lack of respect for her authority, their not needing her and their poorness as students. This set into motion the micropolitical situation to be described below.

MICRO-POLITICAL PROCESSES IN THE CLASSROOM

In one of the classrooms studied in particular, a lack of rapport developed between the three most culturally different Aboriginal students, Naomi, Jason and Terry and their teacher[7]. Simultaneously, a state of 'co-membership' (Erickson and Shultz, 1982) or special rapport developed between the teacher and particular other students. This co-membership involved the granting of special favours, some of which were very subtle and others which were quite blatant, by the teacher to these few students. The nature of these favours included: the teacher joking with them; and entering into personal conversations with them about her out-of-school experiences. For these favoured students she clothed reprimands with humour such as when she said to Ronald who was seven minutes late to come in after lunch, "If you were much later, it would be tomorrow!" She let pass infringements of theirs which when performed by other students would be censured. She chose them to go on errands more often than other students; and she greeted their quality work with statements reflecting the sentiment, 'good as always'. The students with whom the teacher felt co-membership were those she found to be especially appealing because of a combination of particular physical and personality characteristics (e.g., cuteness, sense of humour), mannerisms (e.g.,"macho" posturing) and grooming (e.g., "wearing their clothes well"). In addition,

it appears that they were students whom she expected to 'do well' of if they did not, she perceived there to be special reasons underlying this which were out of their control, such as their coming from a 'difficult home background'. For example, of her "favourite boy" who was one "who did not get many cuddles at home", and who was often 'in trouble' for vandalistic type acts in the school, she said, "I just know I relate to Ronald and him to me." (Malin: 1989: 570)

The fact that Naomi, Jason and Terry did not share co-membership with the teacher was evident in her private use to me or other teachers, of such expressions as "sod", "dead-shit", "pain", "aggravating", "off this planet" when referring to them. Over the entire year, she did not make one unambiguously positive statement about Naomi or Jason. I believe that this indicated not only lack of rapport but negative feelings verging on dislike. Once she stated that Terry was attractive with his "coffee coloured skin", and she expressed regret that he did not seem to need her; so her relationship with him was more one of puzzlement and dismay than dislike. The negative relationship which developed between her and these three students had repercussions for the students in both the quality of instruction that they received and also regarding their relationships with their non-Aboriginal peers. These repercussions underlie the use of the term 'micro-politics' used here, to represent such situations in classrooms. 'Politics' here, refers to the alloction of precious resources by a person in authority with power and influence, among the members of a community who possess less influence and power (Kuper and Kuper, 1985). The classroom is a micro-culture and the teacher the authority. The precious resources which the teacher has to allocate among the students will become apparent as the discussion continues.

REPERCUSSIONS

Among the *social repercussions* for these three Aboriginal students, more reprimands and punishments were directed towards them than to the other students, and on many occasions for actions which when performed by others were not censured. In addition, the punishments they received were often more severe than those given to other students. The teacher rarely acknowledged their jokes or their attempts to initiate conversation with her. In addition, on many occasions she would double check the validity of statements made by these chidren. For example:

> One day Naomi read her news story to Mrs Eyers. It read, "I went to the Show (fair) with Sally". Mrs Eyers looked at Sally (Anglo) who was sitting listening on the carpet and she asked, *"Did she Sally?"* Sally nodded to Mrs Eyers, smiling.
>
> (Malin, 1989:591)

Regarding the *academic repercussions*, it seemed that Naomi, Jason and Terry lacked legitimacy as students in the eyes of their teacher. As well as testing the authenticity of their general statements about their daily life, Mrs Eyers also seemed to not quite believe that these students were capable of high quality academic work. Invariably when they handed in such work and she acknowledged it, it was with surprise. "Oh, you wrote that all by yourself, Naomi?", the rising intonation at the end of the sentence indicating that this was a question (Malin: 601). Naomi was also told that she was a "good girl" on this occasion. This was rare, being recorded six times across the year. When such praise was forthcoming, albeit with surprise, Naomi would be delighted and would sit smiling shyly or on occasion would exclaim proudly as she returned to her table such statements as, "Mrs Eyers said mine was good. She said 'Good girl' to me" (Malin, 616). As a further indication of lack of rapport or identification that Mrs Eyers had with Naomi, Mrs Eyers stated to me shortly after this latter incident that it annoyed her when five year old Naomi "bragged" in this way. This irritation that Mrs Eyers felt for Naomi, Jason and Terry led her to ignore them much of the time that she was feeling aggravated. The former two students responded to her frequent censure by pleading with her for acceptance and by often asking her if she liked their work. This irritated Mrs Eyers further and she ignored them even more. Terry responded by totally withdrawing from interactions with her, giving her the same invisibility that she gave Naomi and Jason. This led her to believe that Terry was mentally disabled and she invited a psychologist to test his intelligence. She also felt hurt by his detached demeanour, stating, "It was a real blow to the ego him not wanting or needing to get close to me." (Malin: 592).

USING TEACHING STRATEGIES AS A MEANS FOR SOCIAL CONTROL

Mrs Eyers perceived all three of these Aboriginal students to be behaviour problems, along with Anglo child, Bruce, who was officially registered with the Department of Social Welfare as an abused child. As a method for maintaining control on these

students, Mrs Eyers consistently reached them last with their work books. By keeping them sitting beside her while she handed out the books to the rest of the class, she was keeping them within her radius of control for a greater length of time. In addition, her most common form of punishment for them was 'timeout', where they were placed in 'coventry' with their face to the wall, or at the back of the room, or by being sent outside. In these ways and those to be described below, these students had less 'time on task' in each lesson for a major part of the year than the other students in the class.

Mrs Eyers forbad Naomi to take her reading book home for the final seven months of the year as punishment for her not bringing back to school her first book. Hence, the only practice Naomi received in reading aloud to someone was during the two or three occasions that she read to Mrs Eyers per week, for less than three minutes each time. (Of those reading lessons videotaped, the ratio of time that Naomi spent reading to the teacher as compared with the 'top' student Sarah was 1:6). Another punishment of Naomi for not returning her reader was to be demoted to the flashcard reading group below the one to which she had originally been assigned. Mrs Eyers stated to me:

> I'm putting her back; she's not coping enough so I said I'd demote her. She's not practising enough. I want her to realize that it's a demotion. She's just...I think they're lazy. There's no reason in the world why she can't bring her reader back.
>
> (Malin: 602)

Naomi had just that day, before her demotion, been commended by Mrs Eyers for her success in identifying the flashcard words, so Mrs Eyers' assertion above contradicts that commendation. Naomi's following comments to her peers indicated that she was most distressed at the demotion, understanding fully its implications: its lowering her status in the eyes of her peers. The pedagogic error of this move was evident in that, for several weeks Naomi was being deprived of precious instructional time as she could identify every word in her new group.

These punishments imposed on Naomi, I believe, indicate a failure on the teacher's part to reflect on the best solutions for advancing her learning. Jason and Terry received similar treatment from their teacher, but the other students did not, neither the more bi-cultural Aboriginal students, nor

'emotionally disturbed' Bruce, except in the first instance where he was one of the last to be given his workbook in lessons.

THE STUDENTS' RESPONSE TO THE LACK OF RAPPORT

For five year olds, it appears that if the teacher laughs at your jokes, if she confides in you and shares her jokes with you, that you acquire status in the eyes of your peers. Partly in this way a few privileged students came to acquire status within the student hierarchy of the class. Conversely, Naomi, Jason and Terry came to be ostracised by their peers, particularly their non-Aboriginal peers, who at times highlighted their differences in derogatory ways. On a number of occasions, immediately after one of these students or Bruce had been punished or severely reprimanded, other students nearby would make faces at them, or move away from them, or tell them that they would not play with them. On none of these occasions had the infringement that led to the censure by the teacher affected the students who performed the ostracism.

The Aboriginal students responded to their peers' ostracism with initial begging for acceptance, offerings of food or money, resorting to angry outbursts (such as described in endnote 6), and then finally social withdrawal from those doing the taunting. They sought refuge in the company of the other Aboriginal students, and with Anglo student Bruce. Bruce, who although receiving many reprimands and punishments, was rarely invisible to the teacher in the way of Naomi, Jason and Terry. In fact, he was undergoing a behaviour-modification program under the guidance of a visiting social worker, in which Mrs Eyers would give him reward tokens for 'good behaviour'. He also was the recipient of much physical affection from his teacher, which was not available to Naomi, Jason and Terry.

SUMMARY

It is apparent that culturally based differences initially led Mrs Eyers to mistakenly believe that Naomi, Jason and Terry were not accepting of her. Their different dialects and ways of using language meant that she missed many of their correct academic responses to her questions. Her low expectations of their academic abilities, that she expressed early in the year, were therefore not challenged. Her irritation with their appeals for clemency caused her to ignore them when they were most in need of support as well as clouding further her perception of their academic progress. They increased their appeals

to her, and on a rare occasion vented their anger on their peers and at her. This increased her negative feelings towards them to the extent that she resorted to simplistic, racial stereotyping in her efforts to rationalise what was happening and retaliate with discriminately harsh censure. The students were hence caught in a vicious cycle which must have considerably obstructed their opportunity for learning. During that year, Jason and Terry left to attend other schools. Over the following three years, Naomi withdrew into passivity during lesson time and when she no longer had other Aboriginal students in her class, she took refuge in a friendship with an Anglo girl who was herself ostracised by her peers. When I asked Naomi's year five teacher why she associated with this girl who was 'in trouble' with school authorities, her teacher replied it is because Naomi accepts her unconditionally as her friend, whereas none of the other students will. Both students needed each other's companionship.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Thus it can be seen that the quality of life for the three most culturally different Aboriginal students in Mrs Eyers' class was considerably less than for all the other students. They received far less of the precious resources of teaching. Such resources included the teacher providing each student with equal amounts of all the following services:

- the availability for 'time on the task';
- one-to-one or small group-to-teacher instruction;
- teacher time spent reflecting on his or her relationship with each student and the academic progress of that individual student, and how to enhance both;
- teacher personableness through say, the sharing of private jokes and informal conversation;
- gestures of affection and appreciation;
- communication of high expectations for each student for both academic achievement and the ability to handle responsibility;
- simple tolerance.

It was evident from Mrs Eyers' comments that she had initially low expectations for these students; that she held negative stereotypes of their home backgrounds and that she had absolutely no knowledge of the richness of their cultural background. I, and others who are familiar with this study, believe that Mrs Eyers is no ogre. She is the victim of poor out-dated

teacher training who also has unquestioningly accepted her social conditioning so that she carries in her subconscious many of the stereotypical views of Aboriginality of the larger society. But, her attitudes and understandings are far from unique among teachers in Australian urban schools. And all this only emphasises the point that more Aboriginal teachers are needed in urban schools, not only to help defuse the racist stereotypes, but to act as interpreters and guardians for Aboriginal students like Naomi, Jason and Terry. In addition, better pre- and in-service education is needed for Anglo teachers emphasising the multitude of issues raised by this research.

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[1] I wish to acknowledge my appreciation of Stephen Harris's editorial advice on this article. Acknowledgment of the contributions of the many people who participated in this study in one way or another is presented in the foreword to the dissertation. I remain grateful to them.

[2] This paper presents some of the major findings of a study written up in my 1989 dissertation (See references). A more detailed report has been prepared for submission to the *Australian Journal of Education*. Unfortunately, in both articles much of the richness of detail from the study has had to be sacrificed for conciseness. In the study a whole year was spent in two reception (transition)/ year one classrooms (of five and six year olds) and a great deal of time, spread over several years, was spent in Aboriginal and middle-class Anglo Australian homes. The ordinary activities of daily life in the classes and families were recorded by extensive fieldnotes combined with video and audiotaping. The analysis of these materials was then double checked in interviews with both the mothers and teachers involved in the major part of the study and additional parents and teachers, both Aboriginal and Anglo. All of these people watched videotapes of the Aboriginal and Anglo families and the two classrooms and were asked to comment upon the things which stood out as interesting, problematic or whatever.

[3] The findings of this study were presented to a meeting of teachers, Aboriginal Education workers, school principals, and Department officials at the SA Education Department's Aboriginal Section in Enfield, Adelaide. It was generally felt that the situation described here was common for Aboriginal students in urban schools throughout South Australia. Teachers not attached

to the Aboriginal Section of SAED who have read parts of the thesis have also stated that they believe that the teacher referred to here as Mrs Eyers, is not unusual.

[4] A rationalisation is an act which seeks to explain or justify a particular stance in order to persuade the other person to submit to that stance.

[5] At this stage Naomi and Jane were the only Aboriginal students in the class.

[6] The only exception to this was one incident towards the end of the year when Naomi's despair which arose from her persistent invisibility to the teacher drove her to declaring to her Anglo friend, who had just received elaborate praise from the teacher, that she hated her.

[7] Mrs Eyers was an experienced teacher who enjoyed teaching and was considered by Education Department officials to be a good teacher. Several teachers, Aboriginal Education workers and Education Department officials with whom these findings have been discussed have stated that they believe that Mrs Eyers and her ways of dealing with her class is fairly typical.

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