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THE ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER STUDENT IN THE CLASSROOM [1]

Virginia Phillips

Most secondary teachers in Queensland will encounter Aboriginal and Islander students in the classroom at some time or other, and most teachers will have no experience or training to prepare them to meet the special needs of the indigenous students. Aboriginal and Islander students are, indeed, different from mainstream (or Anglo-Celtic) Australian students in their learning characteristics, their social or cultural backgrounds, existing educational disadvantagement and experience of prejudice, and their use of forms of English other than Standard Australian English (SAE). To say that all students are equal and should be treated the same way is to deny these important differences and impede the learning of Aboriginal and Islander students in the mainstream classroom.

Two features of Aboriginal and Islander learning styles about which classroom teachers need to be aware are *field sensitivity* and *external locus of control*. Students described as "field sensitive" (or field dependent) are influenced by context and develop cognitive styles related to a global, or whole, approach to thinking. The introduction to learning new material, therefore, needs to take this learning style into account, if Aboriginal and Islander students are to cope with learning in a culture which is not their own. The introduction needs to be global in its approach, to enable these students to apply it to their existing knowledge. (Tutor leaflet, n.d.) Field dependent behaviours exhibited by indigenous students, according to a leaflet issued to tutors working with Aboriginal and Islander students in Townsville, include a preference for group type, co-operative learning tasks and a sensitivity to the feelings and opinions of peers, rather than an individual, competitive learning style. There is also a tendency to relate to the teacher/ tutor at a highly personal level. The same leaflet also suggests that learning is enhanced when the following characteristics of

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[1] It should be remembered that Australia's indigenous peoples form two main groups: Australian Aborigines and the Melanesians known as Torres Strait Islanders (here referred to as 'Islanders').

curriculum are addressed:

- that the performance objectives and global aspects of curriculum are clarified;
- concepts are taught in story format (like a parable, in effect).
- concepts are made "real" to students through being linked to their own experiences and interests.

The other learning characteristic already mentioned, external locus of control, means there is a tendency to perceive external factors as controlling the students' lives. In some students there will be a failure to see causal connections between their own actions and the consequences. Teacher strategies for working successfully with students with the external locus of control characteristic involve a more structured approach to learning and developing a positive relationship with the teacher. Students are more likely to work for a sympathetic teacher than for the sake of learning.

Time spent with each student early in the course and outside the classroom during breaks can be time well spent. These students will often ask what may seem very personal questions about a teacher's private life; but these are not meant to be in any way offensive, and are asked simply out of interest in the teacher as a person. Similar questions about the students' families, and who is related to whom in the school, are usually well received by students. Showing family photographs, or having a family member call in to the school after class, helps make the teacher seem more real to students with an external locus, and their motivation will improve as their affiliation with the class teacher is established. Obviously, there is a commonsense limit to the amount of personal information and interaction a teacher should provide. It will depend on what she/he feels comfortable with, and will not go beyond the stage where the Anglo-Celtic students in the class are bored by it.

Another characteristic of Aboriginal and Islander students which the classroom teacher should be aware of, is the limited eye contact with which indigenous people feel confident. What is normal eye contact for Anglo-Celtic and other European Australians is uncomfortable for indigenous Australians, and is perceived as being stared at fixedly would be to us. Teachers need to be aware that Aboriginal and Islander students are

uncomfortable holding eye contact; they will look away, and they feel more comfortable if the teacher looks away too. One of the worst things a European teacher can do, usually in ignorance, to an indigenous student is to insist on eye contact - for example, bawling the student out on the basis of "Look at me when you're talking to me".

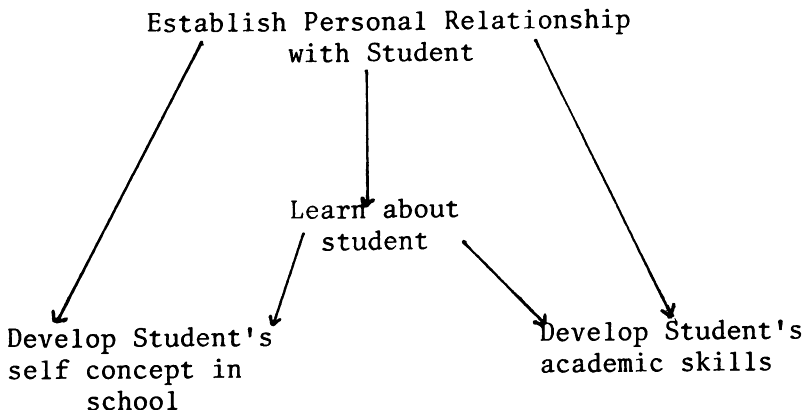
Aboriginal and Islander students will also be different from mainstream students in the educational disadvantagement they bring to the high school classroom. This disadvantagement is linked to home related factors, and also to outside social factors. Home factors include the low educational levels of most Aboriginal and Islander parents of the present generation of high school students, a factor which results in less exposure to books and other literacy materials in the home and the parents' inability to help with homework to the extent that many parents from middle-class Anglo-Celtic backgrounds do as a matter of course. Parents often lack the confidence to approach teachers about their children's work, because of their own lack of education and (in many cases) no experience themselves of high school education. For a number of complex social reasons there may be overcrowding (or what the mainstream community perceives as overcrowding) at home, making for difficulties in concentrating on homework or study. The home factors are connected with outside community factors, such as prejudice against Aboriginal people and low expectations of them (as will be discussed later), in that indigenous Australians were not encouraged to remain at school until the Commonwealth Department of Education (now the Department of Employment, Education and Training, or DEET) established an affirmative action policy in the last decade. This policy aims to improve the retention rate of Aboriginal and Islander students in high schools, to encourage tertiary entry, including on special entry, and to "train 1000 Aboriginal teachers by the year 1990".

DEET has for several years funded facilities for indigenous students, to attempt to make up for educational disadvantagement. One form of intervention, direct payments to Aboriginal and Islander students for school attendance, has been a mixed blessing, however, as it has been misunderstood by the non-indigenous population in North Queensland, with periodic outbreaks of hostile Letters to the Editor as a kind of "white backlash". More positive has been the tutorial assistance funded by DEET for secondary (and also tertiary) students, under the Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme, enabling them to have help similar to that which middle-class mainstream students have long taken for

granted: homework assistance and access to reference and other books. Outside tutors, usually with tertiary qualifications but not necessarily teaching qualifications, and some high school staff members interested in tutoring indigenous students after school hours, provide assistance with essay skills, library research, remedial English or Mathematics, and other subject input where necessary, either in the student's home or in the school library in a group tutorial. Some element of the "white backlash" mentality already mentioned is evident to a small degree in some schools, where the occasional principal will accept the program only if white students are unofficially admitted.

The self-evaluation sheet handed out to DEET (then Commonwealth Department of Education) tutors at a tutor workshop in 1985-86 summarizes the qualities needed in an effective tutor. They may very well be applied to an effective classroom teacher in a class with a whole or partial Aboriginal or Islander population. The tutor (or teacher) should be a "warm demander", that is, she/he should be warm and empathetic but expect effort from the students, and should use structured material, going from the global to the particular. The gratification of finishing a task, or other relevant rewards, should not be delayed. Material, the handout stressed, should hinge on "social contact and relevance and be contextualised". The student's use of English should be respected, never denigrated for being non-standard, and care should be taken to "avoid ambiguity, obscurity and complexity" in instructions, which may need to be repeated.

McDonald, in a paper produced within the James Cook University Department of Education, has provided the following diagrammatical representation of the role of tutor:



(McDonald, 1984)

In filling this role, the tutor can assist the indigenous student in improving her/his ability to cope in class, taking some of the load off the classroom teacher's time. Tutors fill an ancillary role, and it is in the interests of all three parties, student, teacher and tutor, for the teacher and tutor to liaise and develop a working relationship. From the teacher's point of view, liaising with the tutor is time well spent, as she/he can give the tutor the students' assignment topics and dates and discuss student progress. Tutors, in practice, often do not take the initiative of contacting class teachers until they (the tutors) have been associated with the program for some time, as they arrive as classes are finishing, are often unfamiliar with which staff room a particular teacher uses, and are conscious of being visitors in the school.

Teachers and tutors may have to compete with the sports master for Aboriginal and Islander students' after-school time. Even in the 1980s there is still a tendency for Black students to be perceived as potential athletes (if they have sporting ability), rather than as persons with educational prospects, as the author observed repeatedly on the DEET-funded Heatley High homework program in Townsville, 1985-87. Unfortunately, the sports master usually wins.

For the classroom teacher in a school with a significant Aboriginal and Islander population, and some urban schools fit this description, such tutorial programs should be of interest for two reasons. Firstly, they enable students, or at least those who attend regularly, to keep up or catch up with work and to improve skills. (Regularity of attendance is, however, frequently a problem with some students, until assignments are overdue.) The classroom teacher is thus, to some extent, freed from the extra load of attending to remedial work with indigenous students in class time. The second reason why the classroom teacher should be interested in the tutorial programs, where they exist, is because teachers who volunteer for tutoring work, even if only one afternoon or evening a week, are able to create better rapport with Aboriginal and Islander students in the informal setting, as well as assisting students to improve performance. The tutoring work is also well paid.

Many Aboriginal students will appear European to the teacher inexperienced with Aboriginal society. Nevertheless, anyone who identifies as an Aboriginal person, and who is accepted as such by the Aboriginal community, is as validly an Aboriginal person as someone with a darker skin. The fact of

racial intermixing (sometimes as the result of one or more generations of rape) does not remove Aboriginality, any more than having red hair and a snub nose lessens the *yiddishkeit* of Ashkenazi, or Eastern European, Jews. The definition of Aboriginality -- that an Aboriginal is someone who identifies as an Aboriginal person and is accepted as such by the Aboriginal community -- is a realistic one, since it is based on a shared history and culture, a shared experience, where the Aboriginal community has accepted mixed-race children as its own, when the Anglo-Celtic community did not. The teacher is doing a disservice to the student by not accepting that student's Aboriginality, and attempts to persuade a student that she/he is "more white than black" may reveal unconscious racism in the teacher.

A further social factor which may affect the lives of Aboriginal and Islander students is the higher incidence of death of a parent than is experienced in the rest of the Australian community, as Aboriginal and Islander Australians have a significantly lower life expectancy. Teachers need to be aware of recent bereavements, of grieving patterns in adolescents, and of burial and "tombstone opening" (unveiling) customs practised in the Torres Strait Islander community. The student who is *suddenly* becoming a problem in class may prove to have a major problem at home, which could involve bereavement, or the absence of a parent in hospital. It is worth checking.

Historically, the education offered to indigenous children reflected the Social Darwinism ideology rampant in the late nineteenth century, in which prejudice was masked behind pseudo-scientific theories of the alleged physical and mental inferiority of Aboriginal Australians (McConnochie, n.d.). Attempts at education subsequently were based on *elimination* (of language and culture), *assimilation* (into Christian ideology as presented by Anglo-Celtic society), or *integration*, with acquisition of enough literacy skills for menial work (Introduction to *Bala Bala*, cited in Biggs & Telfer, 1987, p.345). It is only during the last decade that efforts have been systematically made, on Federal funding, to redress this wrong for the present generation. This is why many Aboriginal and Islander students currently completing their secondary schooling have parents who are unable to assist them with their homework.

Aboriginal and Islander Australians, even the majority who do not speak an indigenous language at home, use some form of non-standard English which may range from a version not greatly

different from SAE[1], to one which differs considerably. Even though Aboriginal English sounds like English, the vocabulary may differ in meaning, which may lead to comprehension problems in the classroom. Also, from personal observation, it would seem that many Islander students do not hear the "-ed" after the "k" sound, as in "backed", "banked" or "locked", and so do not write it.

The usual approach to English teaching of students from non-English-speaking (or non-SAE-speaking) backgrounds in Australia was for many years the *deficit* model, that is, that the use of a language other than SAE was considered a deficiency which needed to be filled by having SAE replace the first language (L1) to create the desired homogeneous Australian. This has been applied to indigenous Australians, as well as to immigrants. In the deficit model, euphemized as "assimilation", L1 is overtly or covertly denigrated, and acquisition of English (L2), often by immersion or submersion in the classroom, is enforced. The later model of second language teaching, the *difference* model (or multiculturalism), involves respect for L1 and its use while L2 is being acquired; this has, however, been much less applied to Aboriginal and Islander students (except in the Northern Territory) than to immigrants, as will be discussed under bilingual education.

Biggs and Telfer (1987, pp.295-298) stress that L1 needs to be well established before L2 is added and that, without adequate development in L1, the learner's competence in L2 (SAE) will be inadequate to carry the burden of learning in the content areas. As a consequence, they assert, "both L1 and L2 suffer". This has been true of Aboriginal and Islander students who enter school with one or other of the more divergent forms of Aboriginal English, with an Aboriginal language as the vernacular, or a creole. (A creole is a pidgin which has become the L1 of the speakers.) Even where the non-standard version of English is not greatly divergent, many Aboriginal and Islander students have comprehension problems when taught in a linguistic code which differs from their own, as already mentioned. Because some forms of Aboriginal English sound fairly close to SAE, the differences may not be appreciated by the classroom teacher. It is easy to dismiss the student as "dumb", when actually the problem is one of decoding language.

Cronbach (1977, p.501) cites Bartlett's view that non-standard English is a "sound vehicle for accurate thought". The

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[1] Standard Australian English.

ability to think is not dependent on the acquisition of SAE, non-standard dialects having sufficient flexibility for effective thinking. While learning to communicate in SAE for assessment purposes, students can still function as learners in their own dialect if this is respected.

For classroom teachers who may eventually work in Aboriginal communities, some idea of the problems faced by indigenous students whose L1 is other than English can be given by an examination of bilingual education in Aboriginal communities. Attempts at implementing bilingual education into schools at the primary level have been successful and ongoing in the Northern Territory, but have failed in the Peninsula area of far north Queensland, for reasons to be discussed. Bilingual education today means education in two languages within the school setting, to achieve oracy and literacy in both, in these cases an Aboriginal vernacular and English. The programs developed in bilingual schools in the Northern Territory involve the *transfer model* in three stages:

- literacy in the vernacular, with lesson content in the vernacular, while English oracy is being established,
- literacy in English, with content in both languages, once English is spoken well,
- content mainly in English.

(Sommer, 1980)

In most instances, English is used as the principal language of school instruction by the end of the primary years. This pattern was also followed in two schools in Queensland which, until recently, had bilingual programs.

(Phillips, 1986)

Although there is no longer any bilingual education program for Aboriginal or Islander children in Queensland, during the 1970s bilingual education was quietly introduced into the schools at Aurukun and Pormpuraaw (Edward River). At Aurukun, the Wik-Munkan language was chosen for instruction, as it is the most widely understood of the local languages. Indeed, Dixon (1980) considers it the *lingua franca* for an area on the western side of Cape York Peninsula.

Aboriginal teacher aides began, as in the Northern Territory, to carry the teaching load in the Aboriginal language in the classroom. Literacy materials in the Aboriginal language were

written and printed within the community at low cost, using the desktop publication methods now widely available. As an orthography of the Wik-Munkan language already existed, this was not a cost to the program (Adams and Ngakyunkwokka, 1984).

What proved the undoing of the bilingual programs at Aurukun and Edward River was a lack of Departmental support, with teacher transfers that were unsupportive of the special situation. Teachers committed to the program and willing to stay received routine transfers out, while other teachers inexperienced in the program, or otherwise unsuited to the situation, were transferred into these schools (Phillips, 1986).

Although it is the vernacular of children entering school in the Kowanyama (Mitchell River) school, no attempt has been made at bilingual education involving Cape York Creole. Nor has any attempt been made to investigate implementing a bilingual program in the Torres Strait Creole, Western Islands language, or Miriam (Eastern Islands language); instead, a submersion program in SAE is currently in operation (Kale, 1986).

The rationale for bilingual education is that it should enhance the acquisition of literacy in children whose first language is not SAE. Harris (1980) asserts that children can learn to read only what they can already speak, and that a person learns to read *once only*, literacy being better acquired in a language in which the learner is confident, before a move is made into reading L2. McGill (1980) suggests that the child's cognitive development may be impaired if rich exposure to the L1 is not encouraged in the first 8 to 10 years. Furthermore, he suggests, bilingual education equalizes educational opportunities by lessening the disadvantagement of those children with little or no English on school entry. Bridging to English enables these students to participate in the opportunities offered in the wider Australian community, if they so desire, opening up career or technical opportunities. As language is part of identity, retention of the indigenous L1 in a program where it is treated with respect, and not denigrated and discouraged as in the past, should contribute towards a better sense of worth among individuals in Aboriginal communities.

The National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC), instituted by the Federal Government as an advisory body on education in 1977, includes a policy on bilingual education in its policy statement, recommending that bilingual education should extend to Year 10, rather than stop at the end of primary

schooling. Extending bilingual education to Year 10 is not yet relevant in communities with no secondary "top". Even if secondary tops were added to schools in remote communities in Queensland, extension of bilingual education to Year 10 could only be implemented if the programs were resumed in Years 1 to 7. At the present time this seems unlikely.

Teachers working in Queensland may now never encounter a bilingual program for Aboriginal or Islander students, but the issue has been raised here because of its relevance as part of the historical experience of education in the past decade. The whole issue of second language learning is a wide one, and space does not permit a treatment of the controversies in the United States over its value.

In conclusion, Aboriginal and Islander students are different, even in urban environments such as Townsville, Cairns and Brisbane, and classroom teachers will best assist these students if they take these differences into account in their teaching. The effective teacher will have an awareness of differences in learning styles and the possibility of language-related problems, as well as a willingness to take time to relate to Aboriginal and Islander students on an individual, personal basis. Any group of students will take advantage of a teacher who is too wishy-washy and easily manipulated, and Aboriginal and Islander teenagers are no exception; so the teacher needs to be a "warm demander", capable of the necessary interpersonal warmth, but capable also of raising expectations of ability. The teacher who is prepared to be open to the experience of teaching Aboriginal and Islander students will find the experience rewarding, and will in turn learn much from the interaction.

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