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ABORIGINAL CHILDREN WANT TO LEARN 'GOOD SCHOOL WORK':

A SURVEY OF WHAT URBAN ABORIGINAL CHILDREN SAY ABOUT SCHOOL AND TEACHERS.

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INTRODUCTION

The study sets out to find out urban Aboriginal children's views of schools and teachers, particularly the things they enjoy and find valuable in their schooling experience and their ideas on what changes they would like to see. Literature indicates that whilst, on the one hand, Aboriginal parents and communities increasingly "want to help my children do better at school" (de Lacy, 1985, p.282), on the other hand very few succeed, especially once they have entered high school. A study by Goodnow and Burns (1985) has shown that primary school children are very discriminating judges of what helps them learn. Thus finding out what Aboriginal children actually say about their school experience may help educators to interpret their behaviour in the school setting more accurately and consequently to communicate with them more effectively. In the fairly extensive literature on Aboriginal children's education a number of relevant themes recur. One is the importance of personal relationships in Aboriginal children's learning. Affiliation is the basis of traditional Aboriginal relationships with individuality of the person secondary to the close knit family group. This is expressed as concern with affectionate relations in Aboriginal children's interactions with teachers and peers. It relates to what Honeyman (1986) calls traditional Aboriginal society's "humane teaching", where education was through guidance rather than direct instruction. Another theme is the unpredictability of educational outcomes for Aboriginal students, particularly the nature of the acquisition of English literacy. "It is the most puzzling yet most debilitating characteristic of Aboriginal education to be recognised in recent times." (Willmot, 1989, p.10) There are contradictory findings on Aboriginal adolescents' attitudes to school. Jordan (1984) in her South Australian study found that Aboriginal students had a "positive view of schooling and school personnel" (p.289).

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Dawson's (1970) earlier study of students living on an Aboriginal reserve in a rural area found that all except one teenager, in answer to the question "what do you want to do most in life?", replied "leave school and go to work". It is apparent that one needs to be cautious in generalising about Aboriginal students without taking note of different contexts and lifestyles. The author is not aware of a study of urban Aboriginal primary school children's attitudes to schooling. It should also be noted that there are contrasting views on the extent to which rural/urban Aborigines still exhibit features of traditional Aboriginal culture and values.

Harris (1976, p.1) insists on the importance of a "continuum between the tribal community and the later part Aboriginal community" and the need to appreciate that "the values and attitudes of Aboriginal people today owe more to the old tribal ways of life than to the middle class white community". In contrast Eckerman (1988) warns that transporting simplistic views of traditional values into rural/urban settings will do a great deal of harm to the integrity of their culture.

OBJECTIVES

The aim of the study is to find out what are Aboriginal primary school children's views on different aspects of their schooling and the changes they advocate to make school a better place for them

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were 71 Aboriginal pupils at three State primary schools in New South Wales. Fifty-one children came from two schools, A and B in a metropolitan city setting (15 from school A, an inner city school and 36 from school B, a suburban school) and 20 from School C in a country town. Forty four percent of the children, drawn from grades 2 to 4, were between 7 and 9 years old, and 56%, in grades 5 and 6 were aged 12 to 14.

Procedure

A number of questions, taken from Goodnow and Burns' (1985, pp.62-63) *Home and School: A Child's-Eye View*, were asked of each child in a one to one interview:

1. What do you like about school?
2. What don't you like about school?
3. Is there anything you would like to learn more about at school?
4. What makes a good teacher?

Common elements in children's responses were grouped into categories on the basis of similarities, for example in response to "What do you like about school?", responses such as "maths", "reading" and "writing" were grouped as 'school work', but also tabulated separately according to key elements; responses such as "playing with friends", "playing sharks with friends" were grouped under 'playing with friends'. Grouping presented little difficulty. To reduce bias in categorisation and to preserve the "flavour" of what the children said, there was no attempt made to join similar categories, such as "Playing with friends" and "games". When children gave a number of responses to a question, only the one mentioned first was noted. In most cases the names given to the different groups of responses echo the words used by the children themselves. For example, when commenting about what they did not like about school, many children used the word "hard": "hard work", "hard maths", etc, so the category 'Hard Work' was adopted. Others referred to "bad kids" in a variety of ways, so this was chosen as the appropriate heading for the relevant category. For various categories, four examples of the children's verbatim responses are given. Because of the large number of categories it was not possible to obtain statistical relationships between children's responses and the independent variables of age, sex and school.

RESULTS

"What do you like about school?"

Children's responses were grouped into six categories. The one "games" answer was put under Sports category. Miscellaneous category included three "nothing" responses. Table 1 shows the activities/facilities that Aboriginal children liked about school.

**Table 1 - Aspects of School Liked by
Aboriginal Children (in rank order)**

	No.	%
School Work (Standard Subjects)	27	38.0
Play with Friends	14	19.7
Sport	12	16.9
Outdoor Activities	7	9.9
Extra Subjects (Art, Music)	7	9.9
Miscellaneous	4	5.6
Total	71	100.00

Close to 40% of these Aboriginal children said school work was what they like most about school. If art and music are added to the standard subjects, the percentage of children naming school work as what they liked about school rises to 47.5%, nearly half the sample. Table 2 shows what aspects of school work they liked.

**Table 2 - School Subjects Liked by
Aboriginal Children**

Subject	No.
Maths	12
Art/Craft	7
Story Writing	6
Spelling	5
Reading	3
Science	1
Total	34

Mathematics was the subject most liked by the children. After school work, playing with friends and sport were the most frequently mentioned activities that made school an appealing place for these Aboriginal children. Children's responses were compared to those of the much larger (2000) representative sample of non-Aboriginal primary children in Goodnow and Burns' study (Goodnow & Burns, 1985, p.96.). Though one needs to be cautious in not over-interpreting a comparison between two such disparate groups it is interesting to look at responses of the children in each sample, grouped according to age, juniors (7-9) and seniors (10-12).

Table 3 - Comparison of Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Children's Comments on What They Liked about School
(Expressed in percentage)

	Juniors (7-9 years)		Seniors (9-12 years)	
	Aboriginal	Non Aboriginal	Aboriginal	Non Aboriginal
School Work (Standard Subjects)	35.5	43.0	40.0	30.0
Playing with Friends (Peers)	19.4	3.0	20.0	7.0
Sports, Games Playing	19.3	32.0	15.0	33.0
Outdoor Facilities	9.7	0.0	10.0	0.0
Extra Subjects (Arts, Crafts, Music)	9.7	15.0	10.0	20.0
Teachers	0.0	2.0	0.0	3.0
Miscellaneous (Including "Nothing")	6.5	5.0	5.0	7.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

About 30% to 40% of the total sample in each group nominated standard subjects as aspects of school they liked. It is worth noting that non-academic subjects of Art and Craft were mentioned by twice as many non-Aboriginal children as Aboriginal, particularly among the older pupils. Sports, games and playing with friends were favoured by non-Aboriginal children, whereas playing with friends was mentioned more frequently by the Aboriginal children. Teachers in the co-operating schools expressed surprise when presented with these results as they ran counter to the prevailing belief that Aboriginal children mainly came to school for sport.

"What don't you like about school"

Children did not hesitate to say what they did not like about school, though nearly a fifth could not think of anything they disliked. Their responses are shown in Table 4.

Table 4 Aspect of School Disliked by Aboriginal Children
(in rank order)

	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>
Hard Work	32	45.1
Nothing	13	18.3
Bad Kids	11	15.5
Getting into		
Trouble	7	9.9
Homework	4	5.6
Miscellaneous	4	5.6
Total	71	100.0

Nearly half of the Aboriginal children referred to "hard" school work as an aspect of school they disliked. As one eight-year-old girl put it: "If you can't do hard work and the teacher does not help you". An encouraging 18% found nothing wrong with school.

Bad Kids worried 15 percent of the children. Six of the eleven references to Bad Kids came from the inner-city School A. It was apparent that "kids who bash you up and run away from school", "who are show offs and tartish", who "push", "punch and tease you" loomed large in the minds of these Aboriginal children. Examples of miscellaneous and Bad Kids are found in Appendix A.

The specific school subject Aboriginal pupils mentioned as being the "hard work" they disliked are shown in Table 5.

**Table 5 - School Subjects mentioned by
Aboriginal Children as Hard Work**

<u>Subjects</u>	<u>No. of Children</u>
Hard Maths	16
Spelling	6
English	6
Science	4
Total	32

Though Maths was the most favoured subject, at the same time half the Hard Work category referred to "hard maths" as the most disliked activity at school. Teachers at the co-operating schools, when presented with the above apparent discrepancy, pointed out that both made sense. Whereas Aboriginal children enjoyed learning maths during the early "hands on" experience phase, some found the transition to verbal description of the problem to be solved difficult. What exactly children found hard in the various subjects needs to be further investigated and addressed. It is worth noting, however, that the Aboriginal children's mention of standard subjects, as aspects of school that they disliked, is in line with Goodnow and Burns' study that found 45% of junior and 48% of senior primary children mentioned standard subjects as negative aspects of school. In that sense Aboriginal children are no different from mainstream primary pupils. They like school but not when it gets "hard", which often means that children don't know how to do it or are not clear on what is expected of them. As Goodnow and Burns put it: "Subjects that are too 'hard' represent one form of disappointment, one way in which children find that school does not meet their need for work they will like and cope with". (1984, p.104).

"Is there anything you would like to learn more about at school?"

The question was asked to find out what modifications children would like to make to school curriculum, as an indication of which of their perceived needs were not being met. Their responses are shown in Table 6.

**Table 6 - Subjects and Skills about which
Aboriginal Children would like to Learn More**

Subject/Skills	No.	%
Maths	19	26.8
Nothing	19	26.8
Other School work	20	28.1
Reading	7	9.9
Art	3	4.2
Sport	3	4.2
Total	71	100.0

Over a quarter of the sample couldn't think of anything about which they wanted to learn more, with the same number mentioning Maths. Frequently the children who mentioned Maths as the subject they liked most at school then surprisingly wanted to learn more about it. In noting the interviewer's puzzlement, children explained they wanted to learn more about Maths so it would be "less hard", so they could "learn it better".

Other school work mentioned by 28.1% of the sample included a variety of sensible demands including "about answering teacher's questions", "finding things in a dictionary", "about Australia, how it looks", and "how to print on a computer". (The latter mentioned by School C Children.) This category also included comments that showed some children's curiosity about their heritage, as expressed by an eleven-year-old girl: "more about Aborigines.... more about my history and family". Other examples of the type of answers that were grouped in Other School Work category can be found in B.

"What makes a good teacher?"

As Goodnow and Burns found, children come to school with expectations of what teachers should be like already in mind. The qualities of a 'good teacher' mentioned by children are shown in Table 7. Examples of the different categories of answers are found in Appendix C.

**Table 7 - Main Qualities of a Good Teacher
Mentioned by Aboriginal Children**

	No.	%
Personal Qualities	15	21.1
Gives You Free Time	14	19.7
Gives You Good School Work	9	12.7
Classroom Activities	9	12.7
Outside Activities	8	11.3
Helps With Hard Work	8	11.3
Gives Easy Work	5	7.0
Don't Know	2	2.8
Attractive Appearance	1	1.4
Total	71	100.0

One fifth of the Aboriginal Children referred to two sets of personal qualities they appreciated in a teacher. One was termed fair management, including teachers acknowledging and rewarding good work in some way such as "giving stickers, lollies or points", "if you do good work you should be allowed to play games" as well as "don't make you write lines" and "have a fair go attitude". The other quality associated with a good teacher was kindness and courtesy towards children. A kind teacher was one who "helps you when you are in a fight", "makes you feel comfortable when you're in trouble" and also helps with "hard work". Children particularly appreciated courtesy from teachers who "ask you things nicely like "please don't do that", who "does not growl at us, but talks to us", who "don't yell at you", "don't rouse at you as much". These repeated comments seem to suggest that children have had a fair amount of exposure to teachers yelling, rousing, growling and "bossing you around".

A teacher who gave you free time to do things like draw and play on computers was also favoured. Some children expected their teachers "to make learning possible " (Goodnow and Burns, p.65). The category Gives You Good School Work clearly showed this expectation. Children wanted teachers who "teach well", who "teaches, have good things for you to learn about" and as one seven-year-old boy summed it up: "If I ask can I have some more homework or tables they give it to you". Only five children appreciated a teacher who gives you

"easy work". Children also referred to games and activities in the classroom and activities outside the classroom. Only one child thought that an attractive appearance made a good teacher.

CONCLUSION

The picture that emerges from children's comments on their schools and teachers is that primary school for this sample of urban Aboriginal children primarily means stimulation, a place where you learn "hard work" and "learn a lot of things". Some children specifically mentioned that not going to school would be boring. School is also a place where you play with your friends and play sport. What children say they want to learn are the standard school subjects more than sports and crafts. School C staff commented that weakness in the Language Arts was a concern and that they had instituted a new program to promote children's development in this area. This reflects Willmot's (1981) observations on the unpredictable outcome in the acquisition of English literacy among Aboriginal children.

It is worth noting that this survey does not support the prevailing stereotype that Aboriginal children mainly come to school for its sporting activities. In fact sports and games were mentioned more frequently by the non-Aboriginal children in Goodnow and Burns' study than by the Aboriginal children in this sample. It seems important to challenge the stereotype as it's likely to lower teachers' expectations of Aboriginal pupils in the academic arena.

Children's comment on what they do not like about school and what they do like to learn more about point to the need for more effective strategies to identify their needs precisely and monitor their learning so that they do continue to experience successful learning and do not get to the discouraged stage where work is "too hard". The frequent references to the good teacher as the one who rewards good work suggests that Aboriginal children, like most other children, enjoy achieving in the academic arena and want their achievements recognised.

Aboriginal children's emphasis on courtesy in the way they are spoken to by teachers, and obvious discomfort in being shouted or "growled" at, is consistent with comments made to the author by her Aboriginal college students that they consider courtesy a key characteristic of the way Aboriginal people communicate with each other. Aboriginal children coming to a middle class school from their close-knit family network have rarely if ever met a 'friend' outside their family. They are likely to experience school as a more alien place than their non-Aboriginal

peers. So, though teachers' friendly, courteous manner is appreciated by all the children, it may be even more important when communicating with Aboriginal children. Aboriginal educators emphasise the significance of a personal relationship with the teacher as a key factor affecting Aboriginal children's learning.

The urban Aboriginal children in this study like coming to school and learning 'hard' subjects such as mathematics. They still need to develop a more favourable attitude to language arts. They expect teachers to help them to learn "better" when work gets more demanding, to acknowledge specifically their efforts and achievements. The result suggests that teachers who have lower expectations of what Aboriginal children can achieve academically are doing them a disservice. And finally, a friendly manner conveying respect and courtesy for the child does "make a good teacher".

Hopefully, educators will take note of these Aboriginal children's voices and some of the wise things they said about their experience of schooling.

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APPENDIX A

EXAMPLES OF CHILDREN'S RESPONSES TO:

"What Don't You Like About School?"

Miscellaneous

- painting, doing dances
- picking up papers
- running around the oval
- detention

"Bad Kids"

- they go to class when they are not supposed to and steal stickers and lollies, draw on tables, hurt people, interrupt games
- fighting because it hurts people
- bad people (bash you up and run away from school)
- the kids in my class are show off and tartish
- when people punch me
- when people tease me
- some of the kids are pushy and tease you

APPENDIX B.

EXAMPLES OF CHILDREN'S RESPONSES TO:

" Learn more about school"

"Other School Work"

- about answering teachers questions
- learn more
- more about crocodiles
- about Australia, how it looks
- sciences and social studies
- finding things in dictionary
- how to print on the computer
- more about how Aborigines used to live
- more about Aborigines and how white man came to settle us, more about my history and family
- Aboriginal culture

APPENDIX C.

EXAMPLES OF CHILDREN'S RESPONSES

"What Makes a Good Teacher?"

Fair Management

- gives you early marks, stamps
- don't make you write lines
- gives stickers, lollies, points*
- if you do good work you should be allowed to play games
- have a 'fair go' attitude
- lets us have house points

Kind

- has no pets
- does not growl at us, but talks to us
- they ask you things nicely like 'please don't do that'
- don't yell at you*
- always happy, joyful
- makes you feel comfortable when you are in trouble
- not really strict
- she is kind
- helps when you are in a fight
- she doesn't boss you around
- doesn't rouse at you as much*

Free Time

- free time
- lets you draw, colour in
- lets us play on computer

Good School Work

- gives you good school work
- makes you work hard
- if I learn a lot of things
- someone who gives us a lot of work and lets us do all different things
- if I ask can I have more homework or tables they give it to you
- gives you good work, more education
- teaches well
- doing well
- they teach well
- lots of maths and reading.

* Mentioned by a number of children