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Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in Urban Classrooms

How two teachers of Aboriginal students cater for cultural differences^o and minimize conflict

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ABSTRACT

Much of the literature on Aboriginal education tends, and rightfully so, to emphasise the disadvantages Aboriginal children face when they enter into Western schooling. Cultural discontinuity theory proposes that cultural mismatch between the home and school cultures is an important factor in the alienation and school failure for minority (e.g. Aboriginal) children. Research certainly supports the view that Aboriginal students differ from their Western counterparts in terms of world view, learning styles and sociolinguistic etiquette. Current cultural ecology theory proposes that some minority group students (i.e. from 'involuntary' or 'colonized' minorities) rectify these differences in opposition and in resistance to the majority culture and thus play an active role in perpetuating school failure (Ogbu, 1987). In some urban schools, it appears that the inability of teachers to understand and cater for the cultural differences of their Aboriginal students is compounded by an active resistance to the school culture by those students. This paper investigates the teaching styles and practices of two teachers in urban schools who not only recognise and cater for the unique differences and abilities of their Aboriginal students but who have actively created learning environments in which student resistance is either directed towards group enhancing goals or rendered inappropriate. Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The writer became aware of the work and reputations of Ms. Banks and Mr. Wells through communication with officials of the N.T. Education Department (e.g. advisory staff, principals, teaching colleagues) and members of the two school communities (e.g. parents). These teachers were seen to have developed philosophies and pedagogies that were child centred, equitable and affirmative of Aboriginal cultural orientations. The two class groupings were originally set up as school responses to the large numbers of students (predominantly Aboriginal) who evidenced moderate to severe behavioural and/or learning problems. Three important indications of the success of these classes were the subsequent decrease in student behavioural difficulties and truancy; the increase in student academic competence and the consistent support of Aboriginal parents and their communities.

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^o Cazden, C. Coined this term in, *A Culturally Responsive Education*.

THE TEACHERS AND THEIR CLASSROOMS

Ms. Banks and Mr. Wells had at least four years experience in teaching Aboriginal children or adults. Ms. Banks had a class of fifteen Aboriginal students from grades 4 to 7. Of Mr. Wells' sixteen students, fourteen were Aboriginal from grades 5 to 7. In both classes there were children who exhibited a wide range of academic and social needs. In previous years, many of these students had been truants, had been suspended from school and had evidenced a wide range of non-compliant behaviours. Since the formulation of these classes (Mr. Wells' group in 1988, Ms. Banks' group in 1991), student truancy and suspension had steadily declined and student misbehaviour in their own classes was rare.

In these classrooms an observer gained the immediate sense of an established ethos characterized by affiliation, ease of interaction between group members and affirming of Aboriginal culture and individuality. It appeared that these teachers highlighted and valued commonalities in their students' backgrounds, experiences and interests and incorporated these into a meaningful curriculum. The two 'big' questions were, 'What were these teachers doing that was so effective?' and 'How were they doing it?'

THE STUDY

The writer spent at least two hours per week of the first semester in each classroom as participant observer. During this time, data was collected through extensive field notes, audio and video recordings, and informant interviewing (of teachers and students). When analysed, this data indicated commonalities between teachers in terms of five major categories. That is, both teachers appeared to:

- 1 Incorporate Aboriginal learning styles into classroom processes;
- 2 Incorporate Aboriginal sociolinguistic etiquette into teaching styles;
- 3 Value and reinforce Aboriginal experience and knowledge;
- 4 Develop positive, affective relationships with their students;
- 5 Enhance self esteem and social identity of Aboriginal students;

This paper will examine each of these five categories in terms of observed teacher behaviours and practices and the subsequent meanings generated by students. Reference will be made throughout the paper to relevant research in Aboriginal or cross cultural education.

INCORPORATION OF ABORIGINAL LEARNING STYLES

Harris (in Christie, 1985) notes that Aboriginal children learn most efficiently through activities that emphasise real-life activities in context specific situations. In both Ms. Banks' and Mr. Wells' classrooms much of the student learning appeared to be organized around these principles. Most math and language activities were generated from initial 'concentrated encounters' (Gray in Christie, 1985) in which teacher and students shared real-life experiences. These 'encounters' were characterized by teacher-pupil equity (e.g in roles, responsibilities), by teacher/pupil 'talk' and provided a 'springboard for future discussion and related activities. Two examples of such encounters will be examined here.

Mr. Wells took his group on an excursion to Fogg Dam. At the Dam, pupils who knew more about the area and its wildlife than the teacher or other pupils were deemed 'tour guides' and operated as teachers of small groups. From time to time, all groups rejoined around a centre of interest (e.g. an unusual bird nest) where an adult tour guide operator acted as information resource. This event as a central lived and shared experience provided a great deal of material for further language and maths activities back at school.

Ms. Banks took her group to the local supermarket to make a list of stores and food prices in preparation for a forthcoming camp to Oenpelli. One of the older pupils was the liaison between the shopkeeper and the group. Through previous class discussion, pupils and teacher had decided on the composition of small groups and the foodstuffs that each group would find and price in the shop. Equity in these discussions is evidenced in the final shopping list which contained, despite the teacher's attempt to 'steer pupil choices towards 'healthier' foods, items such as Camp Pie and Cocopops. In the shop, student groups operated independently of the teacher, finding, pricing and recording items. Ms. Banks later stated that it was obvious that most of the Aboriginal pupils, even the youngest, were familiar with the placement of items in particular aisles and shelves and found listed items easily and quickly. Non Aboriginal students, on the other hand, evidenced a disorientation in this activity and had to be assisted by their Aboriginal peers. This instance of superiority of Aboriginal 'detection' may be attributed to the greater autonomy permitted of Aboriginal children (i.e. they often engage in shopping activities independently of adults) and/or their characteristic 'field sensitivity' noted by Harris (1980).

The shopping activity provided material for real life maths learning back in the classroom. In small groups, the children had to estimate and total prices, estimate and subtract discount and divide totals to gain individual subscriptions. Older children provided assistance to younger ones by using concrete materials (e.g. real money or MAB blocks) and the imperative to 'get it right' resided in the group and not with the individual student.

The 'Fogg Dam' and 'Shopping' encounters shared characteristics important to effective Aboriginal learning. They provided meaningful contexts in which teacher and students negotiated learning content, methodology and processes. They were highly relevant to student past and future experiences and incorporated affiliative and autonomous aspects of Aboriginal social life (noted by Malin, 1989).

INCORPORATION OF ABORIGINAL SOCIOLINGUISTIC ETIQUETTE

Research into cross cultural education indicates that cultural differences in patterns of interaction between white middle class teachers and their minority students may be an important factor in school failure (Au and

Mason 1981; Erickson and Mohatt 1982;). Erickson (in Wittrock 1986:136) argues that 'the culturally congruent social organization of instruction can reduce the situations of interactional interference that occur in the classroom... the reduction of these interactional difficulties increases student opportunity to learn and decreases misunderstanding between teacher and student! Australian researchers (Malcolm, 1980; Harris, 1985; Eades, 1988) propose that Aboriginal culture predisposes actors to particular ways of interacting in terms of questioning responding techniques and the use of silence.

A characteristic of classroom activity in both Mr. Wells and Ms. Banks groups was what may be termed group talk'. These talk sessions may be planned (e.g. discussion of a forthcoming group project) or impromptu (e.g. to settle a dispute between group members). During the talk, teachers sat with the group on the mat or around a student desk, participating in but rarely appearing to direct the discussion overtly. Overlapping talk was permitted and interestingly, it was students who most often sanctioned loud or overlapping talk when it became excessive or prohibited others from listening to an individual speaker (e.g. the teacher). Ms. Banks stated that such talk was 'almost always on the topic' and 'very rarely was there an irrelevant or inappropriate suggestion put forward'. Teachers addressed questions 'out' into the group rather than to individuals, though individuals may be asked when they had a greater knowledge of the topic than other group members. During these talks, the right of students to remain silent was respected, though students usually displayed an enthusiasm for verbal participation, rather than the reverse.

In a follow up discussion on the Fogg Dam excursion, Mr. Wells' questioning behaviour was seen to be appropriate to Aboriginal socio linguistic etiquette (see Eades, 1982, 1988). Mr. Wells sat on the floor in a circle with his students and scribed important discussion points onto big paper. He elicited information by: tossing questions into the circle and not directing them at any one student 'What did the tour guide say about...?); permitting students to question a peer who had different or more extensive knowledge ('Ay, Andrew, you saw that jabiru, eh?'); allowing students' overlapping talk on sub-topics related to the primary conversation; asking questions of the group where he genuinely had no prior knowledge ('I was talking to the tour guide when you saw that nest. What was it made of?'). The teacher also employed questions that inferred some information and ended on a rising intonation or 'eh' (Those Magpie Geese had half-webbed feet. Must be a special reason for that, eh?')

A notable feature of these talk sessions was the physical movement permitted to the students. In one of Ms. Banks' group talks, some children changed chairs, or changed positions from chair to floor and one, the youngest, practised dance steps while he attended to and participated in the conversation. That imposed physical constraint is not always indicative

or enhancing of cognitive focus is noted in Eckermann's interaction with adult Aboriginal students. She states that 'in discussions we agreed that there was no virtue in sitting still for its own sake' (1987: 64).

Ms. Banks and Mr. Wells also accepted student vernacular and on occasions, used it themselves to make a point. For example, Ms. Banks stated to a student who had not gone to the homework class and was busily rationalizing his absence 'Jay, I think you're gamon' (pretending or fooling). You might think you can fool the homework ladies and me, but we talked to your mum and she told us where you were.

While accepting and valuing Aboriginal vernaculars and socio linguistic patterns of interaction, Ms. Banks and Mr. Wells also presented students with alternative models of standard English and trained students in the appropriate use of mainstream communicative etiquette. Mr. Wells had regular teaching sessions on standard English forms. She prefaced one of these lessons by saying 'Yesterday I heard some of you saying 'sawn'. Now that's fine to use at home for speaking but I want you to know the right way of saying this at school'. She then proceeded to teach the forms of 'see', 'saw' and 'seen'. Both teachers discussed with students the listening and speaking behaviours appropriate for other classrooms and teachers (e.g. look at the speaker, only one person speaks at a time), and some class discussions were used for modelling and practising these behaviours. Mr. Wells initiated group talks in which older students proposed archetypes of teachers they will meet in high school and the most appropriate way of interacting with each teacher type. These discussions were also relevant in assisting students to interact effectively with other mainstream teachers in the primary school.

In such sessions, Mr. Wells and Ms. Banks regularly attempted to expose the hidden or implicit aspects of school culture that generate misunderstanding and hostility between minority students and teachers. By incorporating Aboriginal social and cultural predispositions into classroom processes and at the same time presenting students with different models of majority culture imperatives, these teachers were empowering students in two ways. Students were affirmed in their Aboriginality that is the Aboriginal way and of doing things was legitimized and students were also learning ways of speaking and doing that were strategically effective and socially appropriate in mainstream contexts. These teaching practices are exemplary of those advocated by Delpit (1988) and Cummins (1986) in familiarizing minority children with the 'culture of power'.

UTILIZING ABORIGINAL EXPERIENCE AND VALUES

Writers and researchers into the autonomous and affiliative behaviours displayed by urban and traditionally oriented Aboriginal children in their relationships with peers and adults (Davies and McGlade 1982; Harris, 1982; Christie 1984,1985; Malin 1984). In Western schools the Aboriginal child's autonomy and affiliation are characteristics that may enhance teacher/pupil relationships or lead to teacher misunderstanding and reprimand. A site of potential teacher/pupil misunderstanding and conflict was noted by this writer during a maths lesson in Mr. Wells' class where groups of students worked with straws and strings to construct polyhedral mobiles. One Aboriginal boy called out across the room to Mr. Wells, 'Hey, Ted, come over here and look at what we've made' Mr. Wells responded with 'Yep. Just let me finish with this group and I'll be over in about one minute' The boy's request indicated an equity and familiarity between himself and the teacher that could be interpreted by other educators as demanding and disrespectful and therefore deserving of negative sanctions.

Similarly, Aboriginal student affiliative behaviours (e.g. helping other students with school tasks or caring for younger siblings) may be viewed by teachers as cheating or 'babying'. For example, an Aboriginal boy in a year 6 class was reprimanded by his teacher for 'always chasing after his younger brothers and sisters during recess and lunch times'. During these period, the boy was distributing food to his younger siblings and ensuring they ate it. When the boy continued to do this, despite the teacher directions to 'stay in the big area and play with friends your own age', he was forbidden to go to the younger area at all. The boy truanted school for some days but still continued to distribute food at school break times.

Such instances of Aboriginal student autonomy and affiliation are valued in Mr. Wells' and Ms Banks' classes where all children are encouraged to be self reliant and to demonstrate care and concern for others. For instance, there are no 'no go' areas for students in either room. Students are free to use any area and to utilise any available resources, including those that may be seen by other teachers as their personal items (e.g. teacher's desk, chalk erasers, texts). In Mr. Wells' room where the air-conditioning often malfunctions, the students go outside the room to work, individually or in groups. During lessons they also use the school library which is connected to their room by an adjoining door. While they tell Ms. Banks where they are going, they do not ask her permission to leave the room. It is understood that students have the responsibility to make decisions (e.g. when they feel cold or need extra reading resources) and to act on those decisions.

In both classrooms, older children are encouraged to tutor younger ones. This tutoring may include explanations of teacher instructions, motivating and praising talk and monitoring of the younger child's work and behaviour. Peer teaching appears to fit well with Aboriginal cultural orientations that emphasise sharing, personal relationships and the importance of the peer group for instruction.

DEVELOPMENT OF AFFILIATIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS

Researchers stress the importance of rapport or co-membership between teachers and their Aboriginal students (Christie, 1984; Malin, 1989). It appears that Aboriginal socialization practices orient children to affiliative and equitable relations with adults, an orientation that is distinctly at odds with institutionalized relations between children and adults in schools. As already stated, interaction between Ms. Banks/ Mr. Wells and their students was characterized by ease, equity and often humour. Both teachers took a personal interest in their students, knew their families and particular background experiences out of school. Aboriginal parents were involved in classroom life (e.g. as tutors, guest speakers) and both classes had visited their teacher's home as part of an excursion. Interestingly, in response to a survey on what the students in Mr. Wells' class enjoyed most about their class, all students prioritized their excursion to his home as the 'best thing'. The teachers not only extended the 'physical' boundaries between the 'official' dimension of school and the 'unofficial' dimension of life outside of school they extended the role boundaries within the classroom.

Both teachers not only shared responsibilities for teaching with their students (e.g. in cross-age peer tutoring activities) they also ensured that in some instances, students were able to teach them (the teacher) something new. These teachers regularly stepped out of their 'official' roles as teachers (what Goffman [1961:95] terms 'role distancing') by disclosing some personal information or by using humour. In previous research (Hudspith, 1991), this writer has proposed that humour, an essentially social and linguistic activity, performs an important function in the establishment of affiliative relationships between teachers and their Aboriginal students. In the following extract from a transcript, Mr. Wells was sitting with his class discussing this forthcoming class camp. One of the students suggested they include the making of Aboriginal artifacts in their activities:

9.0. Tr: When I was living on X Island, we had kids come over from the N.T., for the basketball and for afternoon activity all these TERAS lads made spears each they all made number one spears. C. I. is listening attentively.

9.1. P13: \ We could do that.

- 9.2. Tr and I remembered one of the kids said to this old bloke, this kid had this spear and he said to the old bloke, he said, 'That spear, that wouldn't kill a wallaby, that wouldn't hurt it' and Old G. didn't say anything. The kid said 'That wouldn't go into anything' and Old G. stood up and threw it at the toilet block and that toilet's make of that steel metal stuff ?
- Old G. is an Aboriginal tribal elder.
- C.I. laughed delightedly.
- 9.3 P5: Yeah, it's tough!
Tr: and that spear went straight through it! Cos it was made of mangrove root.. straight through it! and stuck into the wall inside and I'm thinkin'.
- 9.4 Ass: (laughing) was Mr. P in the toilet ? Ass is the Tr. Aide.
- 10 Tr (laughing) No, he wasn't hiding in the toilet and thought (laughs), I thought (laughs) Oh no! the Principal will kill me! He will kill me for wreckin' the toilet' so I ran and pulled it out and gave it back. So that mob make good spears!
P7: We could use 'm to catch fish.
Tr: Yeah. Who's interested in doin' more fishing' this year ?
- C. I. is laughing and attending very closely.

In this sequence Mr. Wells used humour to inform, to share a past experience and to highlight the superiority of traditional Aboriginal knowledge and skills in a particular area. He used explicit messages in story form that could be understood by all the students. In the story he not only had the laugh on himself, but indirectly on his own Western culture that assumes its own technological superiority over any other culture. Mr. Wells used humour here to affirm his student's Aboriginality, the uniqueness of their history and heritage. At the same time he disclosed personal information and allowed his students to see him outside of his official role as teacher.

ENHANCING SELF ESTEEM AND IDENTITY

Ogbu (1987) proposes that children of involuntary minorities experience academic and social failure at school because they develop 'an oppositional cultural frame of reference and oppositional identity' that precludes the valuing and acceptance of school rules and practices. These oppositional cultural frames of reference and identities were, and to some extent still are,

evident in some of the older Aboriginal students in the two classrooms studied, particularly in their interaction outside of their own classroom. However, much has been done by Ms. Banks and Mr. Wells to strengthen the Aboriginal identities of their students while reinforcing the message that students can and must succeed in school to optimize life chances.

Arguably the most potent reinforcement of student Aboriginality comes from the continuing presence of Aboriginal adult models in both classrooms. The teacher facilitate the interaction of students with a variety of Aboriginal people who are seen to operate successfully in Western roles while maintaining strong Aboriginal identities. Aboriginal parents, student teachers, school personnel provide regular links between the school and the Aboriginal school community. Through excursions (e.g. to see an Aboriginal rock band, Aboriginal dancers, Aboriginal tribal areas) and weekly guest speakers (Aboriginal personalities from media, sporting, governmental agencies) students are exposed to a diversity of Aboriginal models in which education and purposeful goals are seen to be crucial and achievable. In Mr. Wells class, the talks of Aboriginal guest speakers appear to focus on two major areas, their past experience as an Aboriginal child and student and their current experience as an Aboriginal adult interacting positively in a Western world. While the former is meaningful for students in term of their own currently lived experience, the latter may demonstrate for students that Western education is an important tool through which modern Aboriginality may be constantly redefined and constructed.

CONCLUSION

It may be seen that the education of Aboriginal children in urban schools is often problematic and may lead to on going, long term misunderstanding and frustration for students and their teachers. However, there are classrooms where Adult pupil/teacher interactions are characterized by sensitivity, respect and allegiance to common goals. In such classrooms, teaching processes and strategies are informed by Aboriginal student learning styles, sociolinguistic etiquette, experience and values and social identity. Mr. Wells and Ms. Banks may be unique teachers in that they understand and cater for Aboriginal student differences and needs while focusing student creativity and energy towards self enhancing goals. However, unique teachers in schools are optimally placed to share their skills and knowledge with other practitioners and so play a vital role in the dissemination of culturally sensitive and socially valuable pedagogy.

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