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# ABSENTEEISM AND THE ABORIGINAL CHILD

*Lyn Peacock*

Until our culture is recognized for its richness and complexity, and given this recognition by education authorities, we will always have to live with the derogatory stereotype that lowers the self-esteem of our children and causes them to feel that the education system has no relevance to them whatsoever. (Kath Walker 1984: 11)

## INTRODUCTION

This paper is written with the intention of educating those Teachers who may at some stage of their career come into contact with Aboriginal children and their unique and complex learning style, as Sherwood (1982, p.41) states, "most student teachers, as well as practising teachers have no real preparation for teaching Aboriginal pupils or for teaching about Aboriginal Australians".

Until Aboriginal Studies becomes a compulsory subject at tertiary level, particularly for those students training to become teachers, Aboriginal children will continue to fail, as the values of the dominant Western society are continually inflicted upon a culturally diverse race of people. The European values taught to Aboriginal children cause confusion for those students aspiring to further education. Aboriginal students either resist and fail school to maintain their identity or assimilate, whereby they lose their identity in order to succeed at school.

To assist Aboriginal children to remain at school and be successful, it is imperative teachers adopt classroom strategies which incorporate the Western formal learning style together with the informal learning of

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Aboriginal children. The integration of the formal and informal features of learning can then be appropriately applied within the classroom and form a functional learning style for today's Aboriginal children.

Harris (1987) says: Those Teachers who believe that all we need to know is the Aboriginal way of doing things only have half the formula; those teachers who think they need only good Western teaching methodology and do not need to make special adaptations for Aboriginal children have only the other half of the formula. (Harris 1987: 55)

Hence, to be an effective educator of Aboriginal children, the teacher must firstly recognize and accept the cultural diversity of the indigenous people. If cultural differences are recognized and accepted, Aboriginal children sense their traditional values are of some importance. This knowledge is essential and enables Aboriginal students to maintain identity and self-esteem which is crucial if indigenous children are to succeed in mainstream society.

Secondly, educators must ask themselves if the dominant, methodology of teaching is taking into account the indigenous groups cultural differences. If the answer is no, teachers then need to query western methodology and consider a pedagogy suitable for Aboriginal children. From an Aboriginal perspective and personal experience this paper will share how Aboriginal society perceives education and the relevance of schooling when applied to the intricate way of life of the Aboriginal people.

This paper will focus on absenteeism and the significance of culture as to why Aboriginal children fail to attend school.

## **ABSENTEEISM AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCE :**

During the socialisation process of the Aboriginal child it is revealed at an early age that Aboriginal society is very much family orientated. Within the Aboriginal framework emphasis is placed on the extended family and the complex kinship system. However, Aboriginal children's values taught in the home environment are incompatible with those taught within the school experience. Hence, when Aboriginal

students are continually absent because the Aboriginal child perceives the family as a priority over school attendance, it is apparent what is considered to be good reasons for indigenous childrens' non-attendance may not necessarily be the right reasons for the dominant society.

Christie (1988) states:

*When Aboriginal do not turn up for class, ...whites almost automatically interpret this as meaning that they are not interested or lazy, or whatever. We seldom realize that work and schooling for most Aborigines means daily wrestling themselves away from the meaningful responsive Aboriginal social environment which determines their identity and moving into another world of planning, purpose and control. (Christie 1988: 12)*

1. Within Aboriginal families children often take turns going to town with their parents or extended family, particularly on a pay week or pension day. This is an important and happy occasion for all the family and children play a significant role whereby Aboriginal parents allow all their children to participate.

This may be inappropriate behaviour according the values of the dominant society. However, educators should consider that Aboriginal people are the most underprivileged group in this country, as Wilkinson (1987, p. 26) so aptly states, "while there may be doubt and confusion about the reasons for absenteeism in some instances, there is no doubt at all that it is often the result of economic disadvantage". Aboriginal families from a low socio-economic background prioritize food, clothing and shelter and do not visualize the importance of education.

Education becomes irrelevant when employment prospects for Aborigines are so insecure. Statistics from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (1987, p.1) show:

*Aboriginal unemployment is six times the national average.*

*On average, Aboriginals earn only half that of other Australians.*

The daily, or week-end outings in particular, that are taken for granted by the more affluent are in stark contrast to the leisure activities confined to Aboriginal families living on or below the poverty line. The reality is that the trip to town on a pay day is a special occasion for the economically deprived Aboriginal family.

2. I believe there is a certain amount of status and prestige attached to the eldest child member of an Aboriginal family that could be, appropriately utilized within the classroom. Regrettably, the educators knowledge is limited so the teacher is unaware of the high self-esteem the Aboriginal child has acquired through this valued position within the home environment.

Older children in Aboriginal society are responsible for taking care of the family household as young as eight years old. Older children's responsibilities include taking care of younger brothers and sisters of their immediate family as well as the extended family. Aboriginal children are kept home by their parents for the specific purpose of caring for younger siblings. Other duties the Aboriginal child is responsible for comprise housework, washing, cooking, shopping and taking care of elderly grandparents. This is justified by Wilkinson (1987, p.26) who says, "such commonplace as cleaning at home, baby-sitting, would be legitimate reasons for absenteeism."

However, the responsibilities allocated to older Aboriginal children by their parents are not only in the household but extends into the school environment. At school the eldest child is accountable for:

- (a) *ensuring the younger children go to and from school safely*
- (b) *ensuring all the children have adequate lunch*
- (c) *acting as a mediator if there is a disagreement or fight within their immediate family and extended family. The role of mediate expands outside the family circle as well.*
- (d) *responding first and foremost to the needs of smaller brothers and sisters if the younger children have no friends to interact with.*

It is interesting to note the following characteristics of child rearing practices on Darnley Island as described by Anson (1988) she states, "once a boy is eight years old he accompanies his father and uncle every - where.".... Some of the thing they teach are:

- (1) when is the right time to go and hunt for turtle.
- (2) how to travel in the boat when there's no moon at night.
- (3) what to do when stranded in the boat; and
- (4) which place to go fishing or diving for clam and trochus shells.

The girls are also required to perform certain duties, Anson further states: "The girls help the mother with the cooking, washing, collecting wood, raking the yard and minding the baby".

Some other teachings include:

- (1) how to collect shells from the reef.
- (2) how to make island crafts.

(Anson 1988, pp 32,33)

When Aboriginal children enter the urban situation they bring with them a unique lifestyle, where role responsibility of the indigenous child is very much culturally distinctive compared with that of European children.

It is clear that cultural values when applied to role responsibility for Aboriginal children become an integral component of the Aboriginal child's socialisation process. However, it is incongruent with the low level of responsibility Aboriginal children undertake in the classroom. The discrepancy lies with the fact that Aboriginal children are valued highly in Aboriginal society for the amount of responsibility that is undertaken at an early age whereas, in the classroom, teachers are unaware of the important role Aboriginal children play within the day-to-day ritual of Aboriginal society. The ignorant assumptions of the educators stem from the belief that urban Aboriginals in particular, are assimilated and do not possess cultural values different from the non-Aboriginal population. However, this is a totally false assumption as Callan (1986) explains:

Academic research has failed to achieve a positive view of the adaptive capacities of urban Aborigines. Rather it merely depicts Aborigines as white in orientation and without Aboriginality. (Callan 1986, pp 60,61)

Dudgeon and Oxenham (in press p,2 ) elaborate this further, saying, "stereotyping is perpetuated by ignorance and a shallow understanding of Aboriginal people. If you were black and lived in the bush you were considered "traditional"; if you were brown and lived in a house in an urban setting you were considered a part Aboriginal, but somehow not a "real one." The stereotyping Aboriginal people are constantly subjected to stems from prejudices transmitted by Europeans across generations and continue to haunt a race of people who have overcome insurmountable odds during the past two hundred years.

McGarvie (1988, p.28) reveals an important statistic the dominant society should be made aware of "the major proportion of the Aboriginal and Islander population, over fifty five per cent (55%), live in the State's urban areas".

I believe urban Aborigines see maintenance of cultural values as being the most crucial aspect of themselves. Aboriginal people view aspiring to further education as a means for equality while still retaining cultural identity.

3. Pride is a very important characteristic of Aboriginal people. Aboriginal children feel embarrassed or 'big shame' if there is not adequate lunch, books, clothes or money to pay for school activities and excursions. Wilkinson (1987, p.26) says, "the majority of parents....if they can't dress or otherwise fit their children to perceived standards, their embarrassment and desire to protect their children cause them to withdraw them until they can be appropriately equipped." Rather than be embarrassed in front of their peers, Aboriginal children would rather stay at home than attend school.
4. Funerals or Tombstone openings are very family orientated gatherings, where Aboriginal children are allowed to take part in these particular ceremonies. Wilkinson (1987, p.30) justifies this statement saying, "the students are often absent from school in order to participate in matters such as funerals, which obviously impinge on their class time." Families often travel long distances to attend such important ceremonies.
5. Often derogatory comments such as they have gone 'walkabout' are referred to Aboriginals in schools and the wider community. Because of the family orientated society, indigenous people see taking time to visit families as a natural part of the Aboriginal lifestyle. Aboriginal people come and go as they please, time is irrelevant. However, I would argue the nomadic trait is still within the confines of Aboriginal identity and remains as a vital but mysterious link to the past.

The imposition with the values of the dominant group on why we must attend school is incompatible with the values of Aboriginal people. The reasons for non-attendance are an intricate part of Aboriginal cultural values and must be respected as such by educators, rather than seeing absenteeism as a hindrance. Most, teachers see absenteeism as a destructive force on Aboriginal childrens learning. Christie (1988) however, believes: First and foremost, Aboriginal students must be able to control the pace of their own academic learning. They can't give themselves over completely to study as white students can, without compromising their identity. (Christie 1988: 12)

The destructiveness caused when loss of Aboriginal identity occurs is explained by Ogbu (1987), "minority students who adopt the school style in communication, interaction or learning may be accused of "acting white". A bright minority student faces a difficult choice: He or she is punished by peers for behaving in a manner that enhances academic achievement; on the other hand, conforming to peer pressures not to behave that way leads to academic failure." Consequently, Shipman (1975, pp.34,35) says, "When a child is exposed to contradictory values in school and home, the resulting culture conflict often leads to his disassociating himself from the school. ... it may ultimately lead to rejecting the way of life of his parents." Because of the frustrations caused by cultural mismatch, the alternative for the Aboriginal student is either, resist school to maintain identity or assimilate, whereby Aboriginal children sacrifice their identity to succeed in mainstream society. The notion that academic failure of the minority group is attributed to lack of identity and self-esteem is a reality for the Aboriginal child. Indigenous children will continue to fail unless there are innovative changes to the school environment to enhance cultural identity. However, equality in education is marred by institutions. Aboriginal people perceive that to be successful in the dominant society, there is no place for Aboriginal culture within the school experience. It seems so hypocritical that Australia recognizes the various minority groups, but, as the dominant European society monopolises the hierarchy, minority groups are continually forced to learn the dominant culture.

Banks (1986, p.16) believes that an effective multi-cultural education will reduce institutional racism, he argues, "Strategies that are effective in reducing racism in the curriculum and the school must be

comprehensive in scope and focus on all aspects of the school environment, including the hidden curriculum, institutional norms, school policy, ... assessment and testing procedures, ... teaching methods and materials, and the attitudes and expectations of the school staff".

In conclusion, this paper has discussed Absenteeism and the relevance of Education for Aboriginal children. Aboriginal peoples' views on education are in stark contrast with those of the dominant society. It is unfortunate, however, that educators may not see cultural values as an integral factor in why the Aboriginal child fails to attend school.

It is my belief that too much emphasis is placed on the quantity rather than the quality of time the teacher and student spend together in the classroom. Quality time is just as imperative, where teachers could build a positive self-image, promote identity through culture and enhance self-esteem.

My preference in discussing absenteeism from an Aboriginal view point was intentional, as the aim of this paper is to educate those teachers who are constantly in contact with Aboriginal students and hopefully educators will gain a better understanding of the reasons why, Aboriginal children view school as irrelevant.

The next time a student in your classroom says the reason for non-attendance is "I had to stay at home and look after my brothers and sisters", maybe you will have a more empathetic approach.

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