



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

In 2022 *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* transitioned to fully Open Access and this article is available for use under the license conditions below.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

WHY ARE ABORIGINAL CHILDREN LABELLED as a SPECIAL NEEDS GROUP ?

*Robyn Lee **

In a large urban centre in North Queensland, a young five year old Aboriginal boy enters the classroom, wide-eyed and silent. Behind him come his mother and grandmother, seemingly reluctant to enter the classroom. The school year commenced two weeks earlier, so the other children have developed some routine. Having not been to pre-school, Joseph takes his place at the desk assigned by the teacher and silently watches the other children talk, laugh and skilfully use the available equipment.

The school year progresses. Joseph never loud, raucous or a problem settles in gradually and begins to comprehend his new environment. By Easter, Joseph has adapted to school routines though academic progress is not evident. By first semester's end it is clear that Joseph has not acquired sufficient academic skills, and seems to have some learning problems.

Why is it that many Aboriginal children, like Joseph, are considered as children with special needs, requiring a great deal of learning support to reach their potential? This essay shall attempt to provide reasons for this label, based on the research provided by individuals who have studied Aboriginal children in depth. The issue of how to deal with these children in the classroom will be addressed. Effective strategies for teaching Aboriginal children shall be included.

The reasons for the existence of this label are categorized into several areas.

* Robyn Lee, submitted this paper as part of a Bachelor of Education degree (external studies) through the University of Central Queensland. She is currently employed as a primary school teacher in Cairns.

ATTITUDES OF THE TEACHER, COMMUNITY AND SELF

For many years it was believed that Aborigines had less innate ability or intelligence than non-Aborigines. A belief in the inferiority of Aborigines as a race of people had long been supported by imperialistic rhetoric about white racial supremacy, the failure of Aborigines to adopt European work ethics, and the numerous failed attempts to educate Aborigines (Kociumbas, 1988, p 147; McConnochie 1982, pp 19-22). As late as 1961 the annual report of the N.S.W. Aboriginal Welfare Board stated "...Aboriginal children, as a whole, do not possess an intelligence quotient (I.Q.) comparable to that of their white counterparts..." (Duncan, 1969, p.194). This claim was supported by the poor results Aboriginal students achieved in school-administered intelligence tests. I.Q. were then regarded as a major indicator of intelligence. (from Guider, 1991, pp. 42-43).

The validity of I.Q. scores are questionable as these tests are culturally biased, depend on a high degree of English competence and have no relevance to the experiences of an Aboriginal child. Still these attitudes persist. Consequently upon receiving an Aboriginal child in the classroom the teacher's expectations for that child are lowered. Malin, in her research into classroom behaviours of several Aboriginal students, concluded that the children "appeared to be invisible when they were being competent and when they were seeking affirmation from the teacher. Yet they were invariably visible in being censured when they were being afflictive or autonomous at the wrong time, performing many deeds which to them would seem normal and desirable" (1990, p 325). The expectation of low achievement works as a self-fulfilling prophecy and the Aboriginal child does not excel beyond the expected level.

Prejudice and racism exist in our society so that members of Western and Aboriginal society are alienated.

Another aspect to consider is the attitudes of the Aboriginal people themselves. Many Aborigines grew up with the feeling that being Aboriginal was "bad", due to the attitudes and stereotypes reinforced by white Australians. "As a black child grows up he can't hit out at

anyone else, only himself for being black. And he sees this continual rejection, continual animosity (that) is directly attributable to his blackness. And so he hates being black" (Bowden & Bunbury, 1990, p 51).

The confusion and negativity towards one's own culture is being overcome in the current movement towards the Aboriginals own racial identity.

The attitude of Aboriginal parents towards education plays a significant role. If parental expectations are low, or parents do not see the value in education, their children will feel likewise. However, if parents respect the school system, ensuring their child maintains regular attendance, and has the necessary equipment and if they have certain expectations for the child, the child is more likely to succeed at school.

By these comments we are placing European values on the Aboriginal attitudes whereas their attitudes are based on their cultural heritage, and significant differences exist between Aboriginal and European culture.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

"Aboriginals have an alternate way of seeing reality" Harris,(1990, p.21). Harris (1990) looks specifically at basic differences in Western and Aboriginal belief systems.

(1) *Religious V's Positivist Thinking.*

"The Aboriginal world is characterised by religious rather than scientific attitudes in the sense that what they believe is more important than what they can prove ..." (p22)

(2) *Relatedness V's Compartmentalisation.*

Aborigines are preoccupied with the relatedness of land, kin, and religious ceremony. Westerners compartmentalise their world drawing distinctions between work and play, home and school etc.

(3) *Cyclic V's Linear Concepts of Time.*

Aborigines tend to focus on events, or cycles of generations.

- (4) *Being V's Doing .*
Emphasising maintaining existing circumstances rather than developing or changing them."
- (5) *Closed V's Open Society .*
"In Aboriginal society there is room for creativity and individual differences (for example, in art, songs and dances) but all creative activities are variations on an accepted theme" (p. 32).
- (6) *Contrasting Views of Work and Economics.*
"Many remote Aboriginal people appear to view the government very much as a creator, being in the sense that it can cause goods and cash to materialize. The connection between land use and individual effort as a source of government's resources is not perceived." (p. 34).
- (7) *Contrasting Views of Authority.*
Authority is perceived as "looking after" or "nurturing" the community.

The Aboriginal Education Section of the South Australian Education Departments has correlated other cultural information of significance to note including the deep sense of affiliation (Malin, 1990) and family obligations in the extended family. Many Aboriginal people do not attach any importance to the future. Therefore they are not concerned with long term goals. Traditionally there is little emphasis on time keeping so many students do not have training in punctuality. Aborigines value group membership. Therefore they are offended by being singled out, either for praise or blame. Shame is a most powerful personal emotion involving embarrassment, disgrace and humiliation. The concept of sharing which Aboriginals adhere to may result in conflict in school.

LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

This is the one area the average teacher, especially in an urban classroom, does not consider sufficiently. Many Aboriginal people use an Aboriginal language or a version of English in the home that does not match "standard" English taught at school. Teachers must become aware of the variances in home language used by children in their classroom.

Specific language patterns e.g. the transference of "h" when saying "E's got a sore (h) ear," differ from standard English patterns.

The linguistic system employed in reading texts differs significantly from that to which many Aboriginal children are accustomed.

Body language is a significant means of communication for Aboriginal people with gestures such as dropping the head, shuffling and smiling as signs of embarrassment, lowering the eyes as a show of respect, body contact e.g. touching to initiate conversation.

LEARNING STYLES

Many educators are aware that Western children learn in schools much of the knowledge that they need for living, and that Australian Aboriginal children learn outside of schools in more informal settings much of the knowledge and many of the skills that they need for living. What many teachers are not aware of, however is that this contrast between formal and informal learning runs deeper a contrast in terms of the content of learning, or the type of discipline or degree of organization involved the processes, or methodologies (as opposed to content) of teaching and learning are fundamentally different (Harris, 1980, p. 19).

The major features of informal Aboriginal learning according to Harris (1984, p.42) are -

Much Aboriginal learning is

- *by observation and imitation rather than through verbal instruction.*
- *through personal trial and error.*
- *through real-life performance rather than contrived settings.*
- *through successive approximations to the end product, and little focus of sequencing skills i.e. more learning of whole than parts.*
- *Problem-solving techniques rely on persistence and repetition.*
- *Teachers must take these points into consideration when planning learning experiences for the children.*

DISCONTINUITY BETWEEN HOME AND SCHOOL

"Aboriginal children often begin pre-school or school with no background experience of reading or of listening to books being read to them" (Richards, 1990, p 14). As these early literacy skills are missing, Aboriginal children come to school without the pre-requisite skills of the other children.

The structure of school, with potentially the first non- Aboriginal adult the child has ever met; along with being a minority in a mainly European group of children; the unknown learning materials; different furniture; being taken out of her/his extended family support group; and language differences all cause a great deal of trauma for the Aboriginal child, as there is no continuity between the home and school environment. Many Aboriginal children face this trauma on entering Year 1 as many do not attend pre-school or attend irregularly. Therefore, many of the readiness skills developed by other children are missing. The Queensland Education Department is encouraging Aboriginal parents to send their children to pre-school in preparing the video "Our Children, Our Future".

HEALTH PROBLEMS

The general level of health of Aborigines is well below the average standard in Australia ... Most of the disease patterns are that of the type of "Third World Countries" (Vimlati, 1989, p24). Ebbeck (1991) believes their ill health is related to poor, carbohydrate-excessive nutrition, effects of alcoholism, overcrowding, inadequate housing and sanitation and low immunity to introduced diseases. Hearing problems caused by severe ear infections are prevalent in North Queensland.

WELFARE PROBLEMS

High levels of unemployment; poverty; sub-standard housing; social problems related to alcoholism; location as urban fringe dwellers or geographic isolation in rural areas all result in a poor home environment, with related consequences for the classroom.

SCHOOL CURRICULUM

In mainstream classrooms the school curriculum studied is based on the needs of the majority of the population i.e. usually the European children. Therefore the content of the program would not be relevant or meaningful to the Aboriginal child. As the school program relies on a high level of literacy, Aboriginal children are disadvantaged. However in many Aboriginal community, schools or where the percentage of Aboriginal children is high, specific programs have been established to enhance Aboriginal learning e.g. the Van Leer Language Development Program (1979).

This leads to the question of what effective strategies teachers in the classroom can employ to develop Aboriginal children to their full potential.

Harris (1990) describes "two-way schooling models" e.g. Yirrkala in Arnhem Land where bi-cultural education is available as an effective method of schooling as the traditional culture is still strong. This concept differs from bilingual education which involves only the role of language in learning, whereas bicultural education involves the planning teaching and assessment of both an Aboriginal and Western curriculum. Harris (1990, pp 144-145) lists some "key ingredients" of an effective teaching methodology. Make use of teaching triangle - share an experience; talk about it; then record it in some way. Know the strengths and weaknesses of Aboriginal learning styles. Adopt a sound theory and practice of second language learning, which in this case is English. Control the hidden curriculum for learning attitudes.

Ebbeck (1991, p 202) suggests teachers be accepting of Aborigines and learn as much as possible about their values, needs and issues; be aware of resources (people and literature) which will improve your teaching of Aboriginal children; use more encouragement to dispel the barriers between school and home; be supportive and accepting of the child's language, appearance and behaviour to build the Aboriginal self-esteem; use the child's background experiences and build on those; work closely in liaison with health and welfare support workers.

McGarvie (1984, p.5) lists several "Do's and Don'ts" of classroom strategies. Don't be a depersonalised teacher, try to relate to children personally e.g. using your own family as an example. Don't stress what can't be done. Watch your instructions that they are not too complex or jargonised. Move from the known to the unknown and whole to parts. Try to build the students self-esteem and pride in their group identity.

Do not ignore students outside of school interests. Use co-operative learning strategies. Testing should be structured so that it does not depend on interpretation of printed English in all subject areas.

To summarise the many ideas suggested in the literature the general trends for effective classroom strategies can be categorised into four areas.

Firstly, building self-esteem and being proud of their identity. This may be achieved by involving parents and families in the classroom; using language and traditions positively in the classroom; and developing a multicultural program which will give the other children a greater understanding of the Aboriginal culture.

Secondly, to improve the outcomes for Aboriginal children the teacher must assess the programs being taught to ensure they are meaningful and relevant to the child and are based on the child's background knowledge; and that they involve some Aboriginal resource material or literature for the child to identify with.

Thirdly, the teacher must be aware of the different learning styles of the children, their home backgrounds, and gain whatever information they can that will help them deal with the child and the family.

Finally, the Aboriginal child's experiences at school will ultimately depend on the relationship with the teacher. A warm and positive attitude will develop an atmosphere of trust and security. Once the Aboriginal child is secure in his new environment learning will take place.

REFERENCES

- Aboriginal Education Section, (1987). Teaching Aboriginal Children (Revised Edition). Adelaide : Education Department of South
- Bowden, R. & Bunbury, B. (1990). Being Aboriginal: Comments, Observations and Stories from Aboriginal Australians. Crows Nest N.S.W. : Australian Broadcasting Corporation.
- Ebbeck, F. (1991). Needs of Aboriginal Families and Children. In M. A. Ebbeck, Early Childhood Education. Melbourne : Longman Cheshire.
- Guider, J. (1991). Why Are So Many Aboriginal Children Not Achieving At School. The Aboriginal Child at School, 19 (2), pp. 42-51.
- Harris, S. (1980). Culture and Learning. Tradition and Education in North-East Arnhem Land. Darwin : Northern Territory Department of Education.

- Harris, S. (1984). Aboriginal learning styles and formal schooling. In M. Christie, S. Harris & D. McClay (Eds). (1987). Teaching Aboriginal Children: Milingimbi and Beyond. Mount Lawley W.A.: Institute of Applied Aboriginal Studies, W.A.C.A.E.
- Harris, S. (1990). Two-way Aboriginal Schooling Education and Cultural Survival. Canberra : Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Malin, M. (1990). The Visibility and Invisibility of Aboriginal Students in an Urban Classroom. Australian Journal of Education, 34 (3). pp 312-329.
- McGarvie, N. (1984). Strategies For Teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students in Queensland Schools. Brisbane : Department of Education.
- Vimlati, I. J. (1989). Aboriginal Families, In E. Stevens (ed), Early Childhood Services in Multicultural Australia. Meeting the Needs. Sydney: Multicultural Centre S.C.A.E.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aboriginal Education Services Equal Opportunities Branch, (1984). A Guide for Teachers of Aboriginal Children in Victorian Primary Schools. Melbourne: Education Department of Victoria.
- Broom, I. J. (1976). Educational Status of Aborigines. In R. K. Browne & D. J. Magin's Sociology of Education. Melbourne: Macmillan.
- Department of Education. (1979). Overview For Language Development Program : Year 1 - 3. Van Leer Project. Brisbane: Department of Education.
- Eagleson, R. D, Kaldor, S. & Malcolm, I. G. (1982). English and the Aboriginal Child. Dickson A.C.T.: Curriculum Development Centre.
- Hansen, C. (1989). The Development of Aboriginal Education: Using the Past to Plan Brighter Futures. The Aboriginal Child At School, 17 (1), pp.41-51.
- Harvey, B. & McGinty, S. (1988). Learning My Way. Papers from the National Conference on Adult Learning. Perth : Institute of Applied Aboriginal Studies. W.A.C.A.E.
- Higgins, R. (1991). Effective Teaching Strategies in Isolated Aboriginal Communities : Some Issues to Consider. The Aboriginal Child At School. 19 (4), pp. 3-13.
- Maclaine, A.G. (circa 1974). Australian Education. Sydney : Novak. (publication date not printed in text)
- Malin, M. (1990). Why Is Life So Hard For Aboriginal Students in Urban Classrooms? The Aboriginal Child At School, 18 (1), pp. 9-29.
- Munns, L. (1990) A Handbook for Teaching Professionals Becoming More Aware of Aboriginal & Islander Students in the Classroom. Mt. Isa : Healy State School.
- O'Keefe, E. A. (1989). Effective Teachers. The Aboriginal Child at School. 17 (2), pp 23-31.
- Richards, I. (1990). Aboriginal Children and Literacy. Australian Journal of Early Childhood, 15 (2), pp. 14-18.



EVENTS and CELEBRATIONS for IYWIP

Many events and activities are being held internationally and throughout Australia to celebrate in 1993 the International Year for the World's Indigenous People. During the Year, the IYWIP Secretariat will produce the IYWIP Newsletter which will include information on activities and events to mark the Year.

The events listed here include only those advised to the Secretariat so far but, as the Secretariat is advised of events, they will be listed in later Newsletters. It would be appreciated if organisations arranging events would inform the IYWIP Secretariat of event details for inclusion in the IYWIP Newsletter.

Please note, the details provided are accurate at the time of printing and some are subject to change. As the changes are advised to the Secretariat they will be included in the Newsletter.

Should you wish to have an IYWIP activity or event for 1993 included in the IYWIP Newsletter, please provide details to the IYWIP Secretariat. Basic information required for the listing is: Event title; venue; dates; contact person's name and details.

MARCH

8 INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

11-14 ABORIGINAL WOMEN AND
HUMAN RIGHTS CONFERENCE.
Montreal Canada

21 INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR THE
ELIMINATION OF RACIAL
DISCRIMINATION

21-28 WEEK OF SOLIDARITY WITH
PEOPLES STRUGGLING WITH
RACISM and RACIAL
DISCRIMINATION IN WORK
TRAINEE-SHIP SCHEME
LAUNCH.
Contact: (06) 289 3114

WINDOWS TO THE FUTURE.
TANDANYA, ABORIGINAL
CULTURAL INSTITUTE. (exhibition)
Contact: (08) 223 2467

APRIL

3-18 INTERNATIONAL POPULAR
THEATRE EXCHANGE.
University of Western Sydney, Westmead.
Contact: (02) 2812188

7 WORLD HEALTH DAY

12-17 5th. INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM
OF THE PACIFIC ARTS ASSOCIATION
(Adelaide S.A.) Contact (08) 207 7383

HIGHLIGHT REFERENDUM.
Broome, W. A.

MAY

16 INTERNATIONAL MUSEUM'S DAY,

17 WORLD TELECOMMUNICATIONS DAY

21 WORLD DAY OF CULTURAL
DEVELOPMENT

25-31 WEEK OF SOLIDARITY WITH THE PEOPLE
OF ALL COLONIAL TERRITORIES, AS
WELL AS THOSE IN SOUTH AFRICA
FIGHTING FOR FREEDOM, INDEPENDENCE
AND HUMAN RIGHTS

31 WORLD NO TOBACCO DAY

JUNE

4 INTERNATIONAL DAY OF INNOCENT
CHILDREN VICTIMS OF AGGRESSION

5 WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY

13-17 INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON
INTELLECTUAL AND CULTURAL
PROPERTY OF THE INDIGENOUS
PEOPLES'.
Kokohinau Marae, Teko, New Zealand.
Contact: Fax 64-7-307-0762

14-25 WORLD CONFERENCE ON HUMAN RIGHTS.
Vienna. Contact: (06) 261 2310

16 INTERNATIONAL DAY OF SOLIDARITY
WITH THE STRUGGLING PEOPLE OF
SOUTH AFRICA.

22-24 POLICE, ABORIGINAL & TORRES STRAIT
ISLANDER PEOPLES' NATIONAL
CONFERENCE.
Perth W.A. Contact : (06) 347 6622

26 INTERNATIONAL DAY AGAINST DRUG
ABUSE AND ILLICIT TRAFFICKING.

EVENTS FOR THE LATTER HALF OF 1993 WILL BE PUBLISHED IN THE NEXT ISSUE