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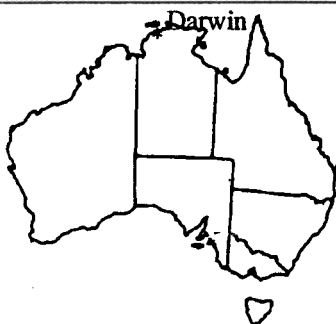
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BOOK REVIEW

ABORIGINAL KIDS IN URBAN CLASSROOMS

EDITED BY STEPHEN HARRIS & MERRIDY MALIN*

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I am a 3rd year, Diploma of Teaching student at the Northern Territory University. I can say, this book has been well worth the expenditure of \$19.95. The cover design incorporates colours which are often associated with Aboriginal people. It was designed by Murranjii - Heather Alley, mother of Terry Ngarritjan-Kessariss, who is one of the contributors. The cover depicts an Aboriginal story concerning education and survival, which is very appropriate regarding the content of this book.

The book contains eleven chapters, each written by Master of Education students at the NTU, all experienced teachers, and the book's editors. A brief biography is included on each contributor. Each chapter focuses on urban Aboriginal children and, as Stephen and Merridy state in their foreword, these papers seek to dispel any misconceptions of urban Aboriginals having lost their Aboriginal culture. As well, each of the papers included in this volume contains relevant and practical information regarding the teaching of Aboriginal children in urban primary schools.

Terry Ngarritjan-Kessariss contributes two of the eleven chapters. Her first chapter draws on her memories and experiences of being a "Millner Kid" and growing up in the Darwin suburb of Millner. She reflects on her own life as an Aboriginal child with the main focus being "it is okay to be Aboriginal"(p1). Ngarritjan-Kessariss' second chapter looks at "Talking Properly with Aboriginal Parents". This chapter also includes some parent's perceptions of their children's schooling experiences. Kessariss states that Aboriginal parents often come into the school with negative school experiences of their own and that teachers need to be aware of both this fact and Aboriginal communication styles. By taking the time to get to know each parent individually Kessariss says it "will greatly enhance the chances of a successful teacher-parent discussion"(p122).

Len West also has two chapters dealing with Aboriginal behavioural expectations and how these "natural" behaviours can cause conflict and misunderstanding in an urban school. During both papers West clearly contrasts the differences between the Aboriginal child's behaviour at home and at school and he believes the "cultural behaviours of Aboriginal people should be seen as a positive resource to be used in school, rather than a hurdle to overcome"(p19).

In his second chapter West writes about his involvement with the "Mean Machine". The "Mean Machine" was a class with a majority of urban Aboriginal students at Millner Primary School in Darwin. In this chapter West gives

a detailed history regarding the inception of the program, its progress and his involvement.

Both of West's papers explain how educationally, Aboriginal behaviour and learning styles affect the participation and involvement of Aboriginal students in the Western school system. By discussing the "mainstream" school subculture West states, "if students in the Mean Machine are to succeed academically they will need these important basic building blocks of the Western educational system. These are not part of the formal school curriculum but are an essential component of the Mean Machine's program"(p95). By this statement West implies that it is the individual teacher who can make a difference within the system because formal school curriculum often does not include accessible 'basic building blocks' as far as the Aboriginal students are concerned and that these become part of the individual teacher's program.

The Mean Machine appears to have been demonstrably successful. It is clear from this paper that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal parents gave the program their full support and they also requested "to be involved in the Aboriginal Studies program"(p95). Comments from the Mean Machine students and West's closing comment of it not being unusual "to gain two grade levels of performance in one year once the emotional context is made conducive to learning," (p100) makes one wonder why this class has since been closed.

Another of the contributors is Sandi Hudspith and her paper investigates classroom humour and its function. Hudspith's research reveals that classroom humour has certain rules that are largely determined by the teacher, and depending on whether the humour is "hostile" or "amicable" determines the function it performs within the class.

However, Hudspith believes humour is a social activity and her research explores how

implicit and/or explicit humour can create either harmonious or discordant groups in a classroom. This chapter enlightens one to the functions of humour and how it is used by teachers to develop either positive or negative relationships with students, particularly Aboriginal students.

Sandi Hudspith co-writes another chapter with Alice Williams which identifies the teacher's role in developing urban Aboriginal children's identity and self-esteem. Alice is an Aboriginal member of the Behaviour Management Unit in Darwin and her expertise in this area is conveyed throughout the paper.

A contribution from Damien Howard focuses on the impact of conductive hearing loss on Aboriginal children. Howard emphasises that the learning experiences of Aboriginal children with conductive hearing loss will concentrate on the visual experiences of that child. Throughout his paper he states how these visual experiences impact on the teacher within the classroom and the types of teaching strategies that need to be adopted. Howard suggests ways to cope with the automatic teacher responses that occur from the behaviours arising as a result of conductive hearing loss.

Noreen Trouw's paper examines language programs used in some urban schools and critically reviews whether they cater well for urban Aboriginal children. Trouw has a different view from the usual, "English as a Second Language" approach, and views the language program of urban Aboriginal children from "English as a Second Culture" perspective. Her paper includes strategies which will assist and clearly sets out the positive findings of her study within an urban E.S.L. class.

Merridy Malin's chapter in this book summarises some of her research completed in an Adelaide metropolitan school which included a number of Aboriginal children. Malin's paper highlights some of the factors which she considers enhanced or inhibited learning for

students in reading lessons. The results of Malin's research clearly indicate that cultural differences are not the only factor affecting the process of whether children learned to read or not. Malin states the "additional factor which appeared to inhibit or enhance the opportunity of particular students to learn involved micro-political processes" (p66).

Malin describes how micro-political processes affected the children in the classroom she studied and provides tables summarising her findings. Malin also includes theoretical explanations and discusses the implications of this research for teachers. I found the inclusion of this chapter particularly relevant to the focus of this publication being urban Aboriginal children.

Alan Day's chapter entitled "Looking Toward High School: Aboriginal Students and Parents Make Choices" deals with the problematic nature of high school for many Aboriginal students and their parents. Day notes that most of the research completed in this area focuses on why many Aboriginal students are "failing" at high school and the low retention and participation rates. Day's research takes the opposite view. It looks at a small group of successful Aboriginal students at the secondary level in Darwin high schools. He details the process he utilised in selecting participants for his study and the method used in his research as mainly consisting of "ethnographic interviewing with the students themselves, their parents and school staff"(p102). I personally found Day's paper engrossing reading as his inclusion of excerpts from the conversations taken during his research disclose how these students and parents really feel about education and its impact on their lives, as a minority group.

Day's research indicates that all of the parents involved in this project held high academic expectations for their children to go on to university and then pursue a professional career. Most of these parents were involved at their child's school thus emphasising the im-

portance of parental involvement and its relation to student success. Day completes his paper with a summary of his findings and concludes with ideas on ways teachers can and should empower Aboriginal students academically.

Stephen Harris writes the last chapter and states that it is not a summary of the book. In his conclusion he says that "the whole challenge of ensuring the schooling success of a higher number of Aboriginal children", needs to be looked at from an optimistic viewpoint. Harris discusses affective factors inside and outside the classroom and some of the teacher attitudes he considers prerequisites to Aboriginal students success.

These papers provide valuable insights into issues currently on the agenda for urban Aboriginal children at school. It is clear that even though Aboriginal people have lived in urban areas sometimes for many years they have not lost their own form of Aboriginal culture. This book is valuable reading for anyone interested in the future of Aboriginal students. Just as importantly, the book will be a valuable insight and hold interest for all teachers and students from other cultures who, in towns and cities, can learn and benefit from their interactions with Aboriginal students.

* 1994, Social Science Press
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