



# 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*.

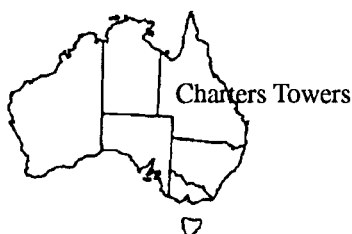
In 2022 *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* transitioned to fully Open Access and this article is available for use under the license conditions below.



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.

# STUDENT TEACHER PERSPECTIVES: TEACHER ATTITUDES TOWARDS ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

\*AMANDA EIBECK



Given the opportunity to write my views about education to this journal, I have chosen a topic that is close to me and which I have experienced first hand. I have chosen the teaching profession so that I can help my people gain the opportunity to reach their full potential. However, I feel that most non-Aboriginal teachers are not fully aware of the problems that confront Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people in schooling.

Throughout this paper I will discuss teacher views and attitudes towards Aboriginal children and Torres Strait Islander children and the way Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children react to these feelings. I will also mention some of the factors influencing the problems which are faced by Aboriginal children and Torres Strait children within the schooling system, and how we as teachers can help the development of the Aboriginal child and the Torres Strait Islander child in our classroom to reach their full potential.

Being Aboriginal is not the colour of your skin, or how broad your nose is, it is the spiritual feeling, an identity you know

in your heart. It is a unique feeling that is difficult for a non-Aboriginal to fully understand (Burney, 1982:10).

Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people are unique races of people who have different identities and cultures which are not shared by any other group or culture. Due to this, acknowledgment of their culture, background and life in general, should be noted and understood by all who teach in Australia.

I am presently in my final year of the Bachelor of Teaching degree at Central Queensland University. Throughout my time at university, Aboriginal education and Torres Strait Islander education has been spoken about in almost all subject areas from first year through to third year. During my third year I conducted an informal survey with my fellow third year Bachelor of Teaching students to see what their views were on the education of Aboriginal students and Torres Strait Islander students. This survey allowed for an anonymous response and was placed in students individual letter boxes. There were 37 responses from all the third year education students. Below are the survey results from those 37.

## SURVEY RESULTS

*Do you feel that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students need to be taught differently than non-Aboriginal Australian children?*

---

13 said yes;  
22 said no; and  
2 were not sure.

*Do you see Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students as more work on your part as a teacher?*

10 thought that they did need to be taught differently;  
25 thought that no extra time should be spent on them;  
2 thought that no extra time should be spent unless it was due to behavioural problems.

*Would you want to teach Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students? Why?*

26 said yes as they did not see any need to teach them differently;  
4 said no and that they did not want to;  
3 were unsure as to whether they wanted to or not but if they were offered a job they would take it.

The survey uncovered some very negative attitudes. A majority of 37 respondents did not see the need to teach Aboriginal students and Torres Strait Islander students any differently to their non-Aboriginal or non Torres Strait Islander peers. Therefore, it would appear that they do not acknowledge the cultural aspects, attitudes and values that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children bring with them into the classroom. These attitudes on the part of students, who are potential classroom teachers, could severely limit the opportunities for Aboriginal students and Torres Strait Islander students to reach their full potential at school. According to the Queensland Department of Education Social Justice Strategy (DRAFT 1994-1998), effective learning and teaching for socially just schooling 'takes account of the different cultural backgrounds of learners within and across social and cultural groups' (Department of Education, 1994: 4).

I completed one of my practical teaching experiences at an Aboriginal community. In my observations of this school and its teachers, I found that while some of the teachers put 110% into their teaching, others, recognising that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have special needs and that they should be taught according to these needs, did not seem to put this into practice. Teacher expectations of the students seemed low. It appeared that some of the teachers did not attempt to help the students improve, let alone reach their potential.

At this school, I taught within a grade 6/7 composite class. The work the students were doing was typically that of a year 4 or 5 level. These students were all going onto high school the following year. Maybe one or two of them would make it to Grade 10. Only one child from this Aboriginal community has ever completed year 12. So only one student out of a whole community has finished their secondary education. This is further evidence that the schooling system is failing Aboriginal children.

In regards to education in Australia, the most disadvantaged group are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. One in eight children between the ages of five to nine years old do not attend preschool or primary school. Between the ages of ten to fifteen years old onwards, participation in any form of schooling is three to five times lower than the general population (Department of Aboriginal Affairs, 1989:1).

The problem of poor schooling, is due to the way a teacher teaches and how his or her feelings are projected towards the children while teaching.

Below is a student's view of his education:

Most teachers wanted us (Aborigines) to be the same as the white kids. To be like them we had to "bring ourselves up". In other words, we were below them. This was especially obvious when we reached high school; I guess because we had many different teachers, most of whom

---

---

considered us to be inferior, dumber than their white students. They made me feel stupid by embarrassing me in front of the class. I couldn't understand that high language and became bored. The more I was picked on, the more I withdrew inside myself and refused to work. I know the teacher thought that we were not interested in working or even coming to school because we were lazy and didn't think school was important. Because of this, they considered it a waste of time to help black students. It wasn't true though. When I felt a teacher was really interested in me, I wanted to work. (Department of Education, 1993:3)

Non-verbal communication is a significant part of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander's life and your body language as a teacher, is noted by the Aboriginal students and Torres Strait Islander students in the classroom. Your attitude as a teacher is also important, as all children are quick to sense how you really feel about them, your tone of voice, vocabulary, manner, expectations, comments, all convey either a positive or negative message to the students.

Many Aboriginal children have a different outlook on life primarily due to their different way of life, to their rich cultural heritage and to the way they look at themselves. Due to the fact that Aboriginal children in rural and urban settings bring with them values and perspectives quite different from non-Aboriginal children, curriculum and management practices must allow for this.

Watts (1983) states that

The child functions in the classroom as a total person, bringing with him all the results of his previous learning and experiences which have shaped his emotional, physical and intellectual being: his self-identification and his influential friends, his concepts of himself and his level of adjustment, his motives, values

and aspirations, his attitudes to and perceptions of school, learning and the world about him, his health and nutritional status and his sensory functioning, his preferred ways of learning and his competence in language usage.  
(Guider 1991: 48)

A learning style is the way a person absorbs and retains information and skills. Aborigines do have different learning styles to non-Aborigines. 'It is also widely recognised that "children with different needs (such as Aboriginals) need to be taught differently."' (Kalantiz & Cope, 1988:56; Dunn, 1986:12, cited In Lasorsa, 1990:37) So why aren't the teaching strategies being tailored to suit these learning styles?

A summary of these learning styles include:

- informal setting,
- co-operative group work,
- motivation-person to person,
- observing, modelling and imitation rather than through verbal instruction,
- personal trial and error - mastery before (learning by doing) performance,
- through real-life performance,
- high degree of perceptual curiosity,
- strong interest in the familiar,
- holistic approach to learning. More learning of whole than parts,
- repetition.  
(Harris, 1984:40)

Keep in mind that these are not the only learning styles, we must still allow for individual differences.

As teachers, we must teach our students in the way they learn best. Build up their confidence and pride in their identity. Assess your teaching in terms of its relevance to the children. Be aware and use the different learning styles so these students can learn. Most of all, be involved with your students and ultimately, gain the child's trust and respect, because without it the child will not learn from you.

---

## REFERENCES

Burney,L.,Lester,T.&Riley,L

1982 *Strategies for Teaching Aboriginal children.*

Sydney: directorate of Special Programs,  
NSW Department of Education.

Department of Aboriginal Affairs

1989 *Current issues: Aboriginal Australia.*

Canberra: Australian Government  
Publishing Service.

Department of Education

1994 *Social Justice Strategy,(DRAFT) 1994-1998.*

Brisbane.

Department of Education

1983 *Source Book - Teaching Aborigines and Islanders in Urban/Rural Areas, Queensland.*

Brisbane.

Guider,J.

1991 Why are so many Aboriginal children not achieving at School? *The Aboriginal Child at School.* Vol 19 April/May:42-53.

Harris,S.

1984 *Culture and Learning, Tradition and Education in North-East Arnhem Land.*  
Darwin. NT: Department of Education.

Lasorsa, T.

1990 An analysis of the Aboriginal Education Policy Documents of Queensland.  
*The Aboriginal Child at School.* Vol. 18 June/July pp36-45.

\*

Amanda Eibeck is currently in the final year of the Bachelor of Teaching course at the Central Queensland University in Rockhampton.

## CALL FOR PAPERS:

THE EDITORS WISH TO INVITE TEACHERS, ACADEMICS AND STUDENTS TO SUBMIT PAPERS THEY BELIEVE RELEVANT, FOR POSSIBLE INCLUSION IN FORTHCOMING EDITIONS OF *THE ABORIGINAL CHILD AT SCHOOL*. ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER PEOPLE IN ANY OF THE ABOVE CATEGORIES ARE PARTICULARLY ENCOURAGED TO CONTRIBUTE:

PLEASE SEND PAPERS TO:  
THE SUB-EDITOR  
*THE ABORIGINAL CHILD AT SCHOOL*  
LEVEL 6  
GORDON GREENWOOD BUILDING  
THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND  
4072