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TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE TEACHERS OF ABORIGINAL MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

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effective teaching of secondary school Aboriginal students.

ABSTRACT

This paper reports a component of research that involved interviewing teachers identified as effective with Aboriginal students in selected primary and secondary schools in urban and regional Western Australia. The research shows that characteristics of effective teachers include understanding Aboriginal culture, history, and students' home backgrounds; an ability to develop good relationships with Aboriginal students and their families, a sense of humour, and preparedness to invest time to interact with Aboriginal students out of the classroom in order to strengthen relationships. The research also indicates that effective teachers understand that Aboriginal students are often more independent than others, do not chastise or embarrass them in front of others, set challenging and achievable objectives, and include cultural relevance and recognition in the curriculum and classroom environment.

This research provides directions for teacher pre-service training, teacher induction, and teacher in-service professional development. It is suggested that schools consider middle schooling pedagogy and curriculum principles as a means of better providing for adolescent Aboriginal students.

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this paper is on characteristics of effective teachers of Aboriginal students in years 6 to 10, as revealed in the Quality Schools for Aboriginal Students Project. This is a joint Edith Cowan University and Education Department of Western Australia Project in which data were gathered through questionnaire, interviews, and ethnographic studies with Aboriginal students, Aboriginal and Islander Education Workers (AIEWs), Aboriginal parents, and teachers. Findings are discussed in the light of studies on

When recalling their own schooling, people tend to remember the best and worst of their teachers and the impact these teachers had on their lives. Teachers whose ability to motivate, encourage, be understanding, and careing inspired students and provided a positive school experience which in turn contributed to students' success in their later lives. Other teachers who were unable to do these things made school a negative and unproductive experience for their students. There is little doubt that teachers are a critical variable in students' school experiences and learning. It can be the case that a negative experience with just one teacher is enough for a student to get into a conflict cycle and commence truanting from school. This was evident in an interview with a teacher of a youth support centre, when the teacher related:

Jason (an Aboriginal boy) is in year 9 and he is a good kid. He had a run in with his science teacher who just wouldn't let things lie. Instead of treating the incident as just an incident and forgetting about it, he kept on throwing it back at the kid. Jason reacted. To make matters worse he was his form teacher. Now he has commenced truanting and he is here at the centre.

Such incidents might tempt teachers and schools to harden, rather than review their attitudes towards Aboriginal students. However, the Quality Schools for Aboriginal Students Study showed that 94.4 % of middle school Aboriginal students in selected urban and regional schools in Western Australia want to get as much education as possible, 82.3 % hope to stay on at school until year 12, 98.2 % said their families want them to get as much education as they can, and 89.2 % consider they have the ability to stay at school (Harslett, Harrison, Godfrey, Partington, & Richer, 1998).

While it is evident that Aboriginal students and their families want education, it is also clear,

(Table 1) that they do not have positive experiences with school and with teachers. This is particularly true of secondary students.

Table 1

Combined strongly agree and agree responses by Aboriginal secondary students in selected schools Western Australia

Questionnaire item	Primary	Secondary
I look forward to school	76.5	64.6
I am treated fairly at school	76.5	76.9
School makes me feel important	69.3	45.3
My teachers encourage me to stay at school	77.8	57.3
My teachers care what happens to me at school	67.8	55.7
My teacher/s always help me	66.3	67.1
Most teachers at this school care about me	67.8	55.7
Most of my teachers understand me	85.8	63.2
The teacher/s pick on me at school	18.2	30.3
I respect my teachers	90.0	79.1

Student perceptions of treatment and affiliation by teachers shown in this Table, are disturbing, with high proportions of students considering teachers do not care about them, that they are treated unfairly, are not made to feel important, are not encouraged, and are not understood by their teachers. It is also disturbing that a high proportion of students do not respect their teachers. While it is of concern that so many Aboriginal secondary students have these negative attitudes, it is also true that most do not. An important inference here is that Aboriginal students' attitudes overall are pro-school, pro-teachers, and pro-education – as long as teachers and schools manage to “get it right” in what they provide and how they relate to these students.

It remains however, that for many Aboriginal students, the relationship with teachers is mainly negative (Partington, Harrison, Godfrey and Wyatt, 1997). This relationship is compounded by teachers' lack of training and knowledge of ways in which Aboriginal students are different from other students, by low and negative teacher expectations, stereotyping of Aboriginal students, and teaching of all students in the same way without recognition of individual differences (Day, 1992; Groom & Hamilton, 1995; Partington et al., 1997). In the Quality Schools for Aboriginal Students Project (Harslett et al., 1998), 202 secondary Aboriginal students

in large regional and metropolitan senior high schools in Western Australia ranked classroom boredom and negative relationships with teachers second to family-related reasons for staying away from school. When asked what the school can do to help them attend more regularly, the same group ranked teacher-related factors second to curriculum and structural factors as changes that could be made. Typical of their comments in respect of successful teachers were: “teachers

who encourage us more”, “teachers who help us”, “teachers who are nice”, “teachers who are fair”, and “teachers who brighten up their lessons”. While there are a number of factors that affect the quality of Aboriginal students' school experiences and influence their attendance and decisions to stay on at school (Partington et al., 1997; Partington, 1998; Harslett et al., 1998), a central factor is the ability of teachers to engage Aboriginal students effectively in learning and for students to have positive attitudes to them and to school. Given the importance of teachers

in the lives of students, it is important to know the characteristics of effective teachers so changes can be made to improve the quality of experience Aboriginal students have at school. The literature

A pedagogy based upon relationships rather than authority and teachers having an understanding of Aboriginal culture and student home backgrounds are well represented in research as the basis for the effective teaching of Aboriginal students. Malin (1990) observed the damaging consequences of a culturally-insensitive and unaware teacher on Aboriginal students and highlighted the need for teachers to be aware that Aboriginal children's socialisation means they bring different perceptions and behaviours to their relationship with teachers compared with those of non-Aboriginal students. According to Malin (1998, p. 240), teachers must appreciate that “Aboriginal children are less dependent on parent and adult guidance and more accustomed to self-regulation”. The importance of teachers taking time to build relationships is reinforced by Malin (1998, p. 242): “before teachers can be effective they must get to know each student as an individual, as a cultural being, and as a learner”. Munns (1998, p. 173) agrees: “teachers need to recognise that trust and respect are not automatically given” and good teachers “build positive personal and productive pedagogical relationships with students”.

The importance of relevance, expectations, and enjoyment in Aboriginal education is evident in research. Malin (1998, p. 244) indicates that good teachers “contextualise in a way that relates to past and present experiences and knowledge”. Partington (1998, p. 24) reports that good teachers “modify the curriculum so that it more accurately reflects the reality of the lives of Indigenous students” and are “alert to the skills Indigenous students possess rather than focussing on those they do not have”. The importance of high expectations and not stereotyping Aboriginal students as troublesome and unable to learn is a consistent theme in the literature (e.g., Malin, 1990; Munns, 1998; Partington et al., 1997). This point was highlighted by Gutman (1992, p. 22) who, in the context of research involving students in years 7 to 9 in two urban Brisbane schools, found that “teachers who have low expectations of what Aboriginal students can achieve academically are doing them a disservice”. That good teachers give students good things to learn about (Gutman, 1992), are stimulating, interesting, and original (Fanshaw, 1989), and teach interesting lessons (Partington et al., 1997) underscores the fact that good teachers are also motivational.

Consistent with the importance given to humour, the ability of teachers to be flexible, and the need for subtlety and sensitivity shown by this study are the views of Munns (1998, p. 175), who concluded that good teachers understand that “more favourable responses are more likely to be found through humour, resilience, and understanding”. In the same study, Munns (p. 175) suggested that good teachers:

Prepare and encourage students to take risks and at the same time are sensitive of Aboriginal students not wanting to betray the group by being successful nor to be shamed by failing.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE TEACHERS OF ABORIGINAL STUDENTS

In the Quality Schools for Aboriginal Students Study, fifty teachers were interviewed to ascertain what they believed to be the characteristics of effective teachers of Aboriginal students. These teachers were nominated by Aboriginal students as being “good teachers”. After responding to a questionnaire and after

having some discussion as to what constituted a “good” teacher as against a “popular” teacher, students were asked to write the names of good teachers on the back of their questionnaire paper. Based on the frequency of nominations, identified teachers were then interviewed. The interview questions that focussed on the characteristics of effective teachers sought information on the way they taught, their perceptions of the knowledge and skills effective teachers have, and their observations of the practices of other teachers whom they considered to be effective with Aboriginal students. An analysis of the interviews identified 438 separate references, which in turn were designated to categories suggested by the data. The categories and proportion of responses are indicated in Table 2.

Table 2

Characteristics of effective teachers of Aboriginal students by major categories and by frequency of responses and percentage.

Categories
Pedagogy
Relationships
Managing student behaviour
Understandings
Total

In categorising these data, it is appreciated that effective teachers are holistic in their work as they manage, respond, and anticipate the behavioural and learning needs of students in the classroom environment. The elements identified as categories in this study interact and are interdependent, as teachers undertake the dynamic and interactive tasks of teaching and facilitating learning within the context of their pedagogy, relationship with students, understanding of students as individuals, and management of student behaviour. These elements interpreted from the data are used as the framework to develop an understanding from the perspective of teachers of the characteristics of those who work well with Aboriginal students.

PEDAGOGY

Pedagogy is often described as the art of teaching. Teaching style, relevance, student-

centredness, enthusiasm, and expectations are identified elements of effective pedagogy revealed in this study.

In their pedagogy good teachers use strategies where by they work with students in a relationship rather than in an authoritarian mode. Teachers reported that effective teachers “don’t create barriers by being dogmatic”, understand that “authoritarianism doesn’t work”, “engage students in learning rather than I present you learn,” and understand that “dogmatic teachers alienate Aboriginal students”. In planning strategies good teachers use a variety of approaches, particularly “having a good blend of verbal and written work”, “limit writing and have more discussion”, “demonstrate with visual modelling”, ensure variety - “don’t overdo the use of books,” and “involve the Aboriginal community in the classroom as much as possible”.

The second major element of pedagogy most frequently mentioned is relevance in terms of individual differences, cultural context, the present, and the future. With respect to individual difference teachers advocate curriculum planning around “student point of need” and “working from what they know”. Cultural context requires teachers to “relate to the knowledge and skills they bring with them”, “link to their world”, and “include Aboriginal elements in as much of what they teach as possible”. Finally, effective teachers understand and practise the principles that “what you teach needs to be relevant to this day and age” and that “they must see the value of the curriculum to their future”.

Student-centredness is advocated as a strong element of effective pedagogy with Aboriginal students. “Involve students in deciding what should be done” and “working collaboratively with students” are consistent lines of advice given by interviewed teachers. Conducting group work where “every one shares the problem and shares the solution”, “where they interact and help each other”, and have “collaborative learning between students” are strategies used by effective teachers. In this mode teachers “are flexible and adjust so students engage in learning” and they “adapt and set up lessons so students can achieve success”. These teachers “manage time flexibly, don’t expect things to be done immediately, and accept that the task will usually get done”.

Teacher enthusiasm and positive attitudes to students are identified as important when working with Aboriginal students. “Be positive and give kids a chance”, “show enthusiasm”, “give encouragement”, “find out what motivates them”, and “have them experience success” are competencies teachers see in themselves and colleagues who are successful with Aboriginal students. “It is important”, observed an experienced teacher, “to make sure Aboriginal children feel welcome. Including those who have been absent or have been involved in disciplinary action”.

Effective teachers set realistic individual expectations for students and give positive acknowledgment when they are achieved. The interviews revealed how effective teachers have “realistic expectations for different students”, “define expectations and give encouragement”, “expect standards of every child in the classroom”, and make sure that “what has to be done is made clear”. Effective teachers observed that those who “don’t automatically think they [Aboriginal students] will be weak”, realise that “many are gifted”, and “avoid stereotyping students”, successfully set realistic expectations.

UNDERSTANDING

Having an understanding of Indigenous history and culture and of student family and home backgrounds were consistently identified as being essential in order to build relationships based on understanding and empathy. Typical of many responses was that teachers “need to know something of the two hundred years of what has happened” and that “they’ve suffered a lot and we are teaching their children, the effects of their history are current, and aunts, uncles, mums, and dads have memories and values”.

Within a cultural context a strong theme is the need for teachers to appreciate differences in child rearing backgrounds and family responsibilities. Typical comments included, “even at year 8 Aboriginal children are independent and accept family responsibilities”, and “child discipline differs to middle-class white Australia - be open minded and accept that people are different and come from different backgrounds”.

Having an understanding of family and home backgrounds was expressed as essential so that

teachers “knew where the kids were coming from”. As one teacher said:

Just a little bit of understanding of what goes on at home without being judgemental. There is a reason for their behaviour. There might have been an all night party. Money might get spent on alcohol before food. The kids might go hungry.

The need for teachers to be understanding is reinforced by students. In the research cited earlier (Harslett et al., 1998) students were asked what more schools could do to help them attend and stay at school longer. A high proportion of responses reflected a need for teacher understanding of cultural and home backgrounds. For example, “teachers understand us more”, “ understand family circumstances - sometimes kids can’t get to school early and get into trouble”, and “understand Aboriginal kids and help them with their problems”. When the same students were asked for the main reasons they stayed away from school, a high proportion gave cultural and family-related responses, such as “when I go to funerals”, “I sometimes have to look after my sister”, “help at home when a member of the family is sick”, “no money and have nothing to eat”, and “my mum gets paid and lets me stay home”. These were typical reasons why Aboriginal students may be absent from school. Teachers need to have an appreciation of these causes when responding to student absenteeism.

Teacher attributes of empathy and sensitivity can only be present if teachers have an understanding of Indigenous cultural and student home backgrounds. This is reinforced by advice that the effective teacher should “be tolerant of cultural issues and behavioural factors and not to make a big deal out of students being away”, and “empathise with student home and historical backgrounds”. “There has to be”, as one teacher responded, “ an understanding of what is happening at home and other things that might be distracting. If you are not sensitive to that you are going to get off on the wrong foot”.

RELATIONSHIPS

The ability to develop and sustain good relationships with Aboriginal students and their families is a major element in the profile of effective teachers. Such relationships require

building rapport, trust, getting to know students as individuals, and taking a personal interest in school and out of school activities. “Relationships”, recommended one teacher, “must be developed slowly - they cannot be rushed”. The importance of the development of good relationships with Aboriginal students is captured in the following interview response:

Take an interest in their personal lives and find out what goes on at home. I think forming relationships with these kids is very important. In fact with me relationships come first before teaching them anything.

Within the classroom effective teachers advise not to take non-essentials too seriously - “we middle class people get hung up on things like uniform, earrings, and haircuts”, “don’t pick on minor points - be flexible”, and “treat students as individuals”.

Good rapport needs also to be established with families. Effective teachers “nurture relationships with parents and guardians” and “interact with parents and grandparents as much as possible”. “Teachers who stay at the school”, observed a principal, “build good relationships with students and their families”.

Consistency and fairness with all students while at the same time having an understanding and appreciation of student differences are critical factors in teacher-student relationships. “Having routines and being consistent enables a lot to be done”, “everybody must be treated fairly”, “consistency at all times”, and “the kids jump on you any time they see you not being fair”, were typical responses made by teachers in affirming this characteristic. Furthermore, in being fair effective teachers “understand that all children deserve equality of outcome” and “treat an incident as just an incident and don’t hold it against individual students”.

Having a sense of humour and appreciating the importance of humour with Aboriginal students is an important attribute of effective teachers. For instance, teachers advised that “you must be able to have a joke with them and take a joke or else you will not make it” and to “make Aboriginal students feel welcome you must be able to share a joke”. “A sense of humour”, commented another teacher, “is a most powerful discipline tool. You can often diffuse a situation with a well placed humorous remark”.

The interviews further showed that effective teachers are appreciated by Aboriginal students and their parents as having patience, being persistent, and being good listeners. These teachers “take time and give attention that is needed”, “don’t expect things to be done straight away”, and “go slowly and provide a happy environment when they [Aboriginal students] attend [school]”. Effective teachers advise that “listening and not jumping to conclusions are really important”, that teachers should “listen to the kids when they have a problem”, and “listen and understand what is being said”.

MANAGING STUDENT BEHAVIOUR

The elements of good pedagogy, understanding of culture, history and the home backgrounds, and establishment of good relationships with students and their families, are fundamental to engaging Aboriginal students in learning. In addition, effective teachers have a range of strategies which they use to establish and maintain good student behaviour. The main elements of such additional strategies are identified in this study as positive reinforcement, subtlety, consistency and fairness, and an ability to be flexible and non-confrontational.

It was the view of many teachers interviewed that Aboriginal students need “lots of rewards and praise”, “more positive reinforcement than other students”, and “instant positive feedback.” Subtlety in the management of Aboriginal student behaviour was a strong theme evident in teachers interviews. “Low-key recognition”, “quietly motivate and encourage”, and “provide a quiet atmosphere - if someone is not working I go up and give them personal help”, are typical examples of advice given. This style is reiterated by a teacher who observed:

With Aboriginal students its really important to just pull them aside and talk to them quietly, not yell at them. Some times they don’t think they have done anything wrong and will stand up for that and that can lead to trouble.

Closely allied to subtlety are skills required in being non-confrontational and flexible. Effective teachers have learnt from experience “to have the ability to back off”, to “give students plenty of room to back out”, and not to shame students by

“asking difficult questions in front of others”, by “picking them out in front of the class”, or “making a spectacle of them in front of other kids”. The importance of flexibility and sensitivity is well illustrated when it is advised that teachers:

Must be flexible. This hard and fast rule that no one does this in my room no matter what - doesn’t allow for what might happen during the day.

While flexibility is an element in the profile of teachers, so is the ability to be consistent and fair. Many teachers advised that “students are OK with rules that are fair, clear, and consistent”, that it is essential to be “straight down the line”, and teachers should “not carry a grudge” - they should “deal with the matter and forget about it”.

DIRECTIONS

It is evident that research is broadly consistent in identifying the quality of the relationship teachers establish with their students as being a fundamental characteristic of teachers most effective with Aboriginal students and in many respects the results of the study reflect universal principles of good teaching. The difference is that effective teachers re-invent such principles within the context of students’ cultural and home backgrounds and student strengths and needs. In terms of pedagogic style, Fanshaw (1989, p. 36) described such teachers as “supportive gadflies”, who are “warm and demanding”, and Partington (1998, p. 6) proposed that the key to improving the experience of Aboriginal students “is to transfer the dominance-submission expectation of teachers into a relationship in which Aboriginal students become equal partners in education”.

Evidence from research briefly referred to during the introduction supports other research that shows that a high proportion of adolescent Aboriginal students, particularly in secondary school, feel alienated (Geraldton Community Education Centre, 1995; Task Force on Aboriginal Social Justice, 1994). Information referred to earlier from students indicated a plea for better relationships with teachers and the school. Information from teachers has shown the importance of a relationship-based pedagogy and student-centred curriculum. These findings

suggest that while quality pre-service training, regular induction, and in-service professional development of teachers is essential, it is also necessary that schools have structures that maximise opportunities for relationship-based pedagogy and student-centred curriculum. The convergence of these findings, and research on student alienation and education for adolescents (e.g., Australian Curriculum Studies Association, 1996; Eyres, Cormack, and Barrett, 1992), suggest middle schooling best practice as a reform direction schools could adopt.

The alienation of adolescent students in schools has been discussed widely in the literature in recent times (e.g., Cumming, 1995; Mau, 1992; Australian Curriculum Studies Association, 1996) and can be manifested in absenteeism, disruptive behaviour, failure, dropping out, a feeling by students of a lack of control over their situation or not having a sense of belonging, or any combination of these. A study in two secondary school in a regional centre in Western Australia found that 50 % of lower secondary students and 65 % of Aboriginal students felt alienated (Geraldton Community Education Centre, 1995).

Middle schooling reform aims to change teaching and curriculum practices to better suit young adolescents. Pedagogy is built on relationships rather than authority, is student rather than subject-centred, and teachers work collaboratively in teams rather than individually. Learning teams collectively focus on the academic and pastoral needs of students and have the capacity and flexibility to negotiate and plan curriculum around students' needs, interests, and learning styles to attain required framework outcomes. This structure better suits the needs of adolescents than does the traditional, highly-structured subject-centred approach typical of most secondary schools (Schools Council, 1993; Australian Curriculum Studies Association, 1996). Such practices clearly resonate with suggestions Aboriginal students and good teachers have made for improvement.

CONCLUSION

From this study a profile of effective teachers of Aboriginal students can be constructed. Strong elements of that profile are that effective teachers have an understanding of Aboriginal cultures and

histories and of their students' home and family backgrounds and circumstances, an ability to develop good relationships with Aboriginal students and their families, and a capacity to be empathetic and flexible and to adjust to the dynamics of student behaviour and need.

Such relationships are typically built on consistency and fairness with all students while at the same time there is an understanding and appreciation of student differences and needs. A sense of humour, being able to have a joke and deliberate investment by teachers of time to recognise and interact with Aboriginal students in the school playground and out of school are also means by which effective teachers build positive relationships with them.

The data further suggest that effective teachers are appreciated by Aboriginal students and their parents as good listeners who take time to find things out and don't jump to conclusions, understand that Aboriginal students are often more independent than other students, are non-confrontational and don't chastise or embarrass students in front of others, and negotiate classroom behaviour rules and consequences. These teachers adopt a student-centred approach to learning and program student work at appropriate levels, set challenging and achievable standards, provide support, and include cultural relevance and recognition in the curriculum and classroom environment.

While individual teachers through training can become more effective with Aboriginal students, in typical subject-centred secondary schools students will encounter numerous teachers individually teaching their subjects. One insensitive and ineffective teacher may be all it takes to alienate an Aboriginal student who then resists or exercise his or her independence and chooses to not attend or to leave school. Middle schooling best practice reduces this risk as smaller teams of teachers work with small learning groups of students. Within learning teams with the support of organisational and time flexibilities, teachers can negotiate curriculum relevance with students in terms of what will be taught, how it will be taught, and how it will be assessed.

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