

2001

Perceptions of Their Teachers by Aboriginal Students

John Godfrey

Edith Cowan University

Gary Partington

Edith Cowan University

Kaye Richer

Edith Cowan University

Mort Harslett

Edith Cowan University

This article was originally published as: Godfrey, J. R., Partington, G. P., Richer, K., & Harslett (ext), M. (2001). Perceptions of their teachers by aboriginal students. *Issues in Educational Research*, 11(1), 1-13.

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.

<http://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks/4371>

Perceptions of their teachers by aboriginal students

John Godfrey, Gary Partington, Kaye Richer & Mort Harslett
Edith Cowan University

Students from both upper primary and lower secondary years responded to a questionnaire covering various aspects of their schooling experience. The questionnaire contains seventy three items the majority of which are constructed with a four point Likert scale. An analysis of the questionnaire indicated that the four point Likert scale questions are highly reliable when all these questions are considered and within its sub-sections. The paper reports these Aboriginal students responded highly positively on a number of significant features in regard to their schooling with the exception of their teachers attitudes toward them. The analyses indicated the need for teachers to form strong relationships with Aboriginal students to ensure their educational success.

Introduction

This paper examines the perceptions of Aboriginal middle school children (Year 5 to 10) to the treatment and care they receive at school, the manner in which the school welcomes them, their attitude to school attendance and school management and their concerns regarding the attitudes of teachers towards them. It highlights, in particular, the attitudes of Aboriginal students to their teachers.

Four hundred and seventy one Aboriginal students from rural and urban areas in Western Australia responded to a questionnaire survey which identified their attitudes to number of educational factors. The questionnaire of 73 items consisted primarily of Likert scale items. The students were in classes which ranged from Year 5 to Year 10. The ages of the students ranged from 10 years to 17 years.

Literature review

Aboriginal students' attitudes to and concerns regarding their teachers and schooling have received significant attention throughout the past two decades in journals and manuscripts that feature Aboriginal education. A study by Fanshawe (1976), based on overseas research of teacher effectiveness, has influenced studies that discuss characteristics of effective teachers of Aboriginal

children. Fanshawe (1976, 1984, 1989) argues that the personal characteristics of effective teachers of adolescent Aboriginals should include;

being warm and friendly,
making realistic demands of students,
acting in a responsible, businesslike and systematic manner, and
being stimulating, imaginative and original.

The relevance of these teacher characteristics is acknowledged by Green (1982), Murray (1982), Eckermann (1987) and O'Keefe (1989). For example, O'Keefe (1989) reviewed and revisited the Fanshawe (1976) teacher characteristics re-emphasising that teachers in Indigenous classrooms must gain the respect and trust of the children and the community. Partington and McCudden (1992) list the Fanshawe (1976) characteristics claiming that they;

reflect an awareness of the importance of expectations on children's schooling, and imply an understanding and acceptance of the children's cultural differences . . . among Aboriginal students personal relationships are more important for successful education . . . It is important that teachers do not hold low expectations for Aboriginal students' performance . . . If they fail to take into account the different cultural characteristics of Aboriginal interpersonal interactions, teachers will continually fail to attract their participation in learning (pp. 215-216).

They argue that anecdotal evidence suggests that teachers treat Aboriginal students unequally and so there is a definite need to "ensure that low expectations for such students do not result in reduced performance or negative attitudes towards school" (p. 215).

Other writers while not referring specifically to the Fanshawe (1976) teacher characteristics have discussed other factors crucial to the education of Indigenous children, particularly the role of the classroom teacher: for example Collins (1993) discusses the major factors affecting the academic potential of Aboriginal children and the impediments to their participation within the regular classroom.

To the Aboriginal child . . . transmission of knowledge is viewed as part of a human relationship and without teacher/pupil rapport, learning will not take place. This personal approach to teaching can perhaps be equated to traditional forms of instruction, from highly respected elders of their tribe." (p. 12)

Collins also warned that it is vital that teachers not have negative preconceived notions about the abilities of Aboriginal children.

Munns (1998) explored the nature of the relationships between Aboriginal students and their teachers in an inner urban school with a majority of Koori students, arguing that teachers must reject deficit explanations for student dissatisfaction. He quoted the research of Hatton, Munns and Nicklin Dent (1996) to claim that when classroom practices were underpinned with deficit logic, almost certainly the results would be lower teacher expectations, a compromised curriculum and restricted academic demands on the most needy students. He considered that positive school relationships were critical to success in educating Aboriginal students but that positive school relationships "depend on the quality of the personal relationship with their teachers" (p. 183).

Later, Fanshawe (2000) simplified the four characteristics according to Kleinfeld's (1972, 1975) "warmth and demandingness" model of teacher effectiveness.

In summary, the literature includes reports on a number of studies of Aboriginal students perceptions of their teachers and schooling. The Fanshawe (1976, 2000) teacher characteristics are still considered to be highly relevant to the teaching of Indigenous children. The bulk of studies emphasise the role of positive teacher attitudes in the education of Aboriginal children. Few studies use large samples of Aboriginal students from metropolitan and non-metropolitan schools. This study attempts to give an overview of the responses of a large sample of Aboriginal students to a questionnaire survey containing a number of variables relating to their education in general and their teachers in particular.

Methodology

Sample of schools

A range of students and schools were surveyed from the Perth metropolitan area and non-metropolitan areas of Western Australia in 1998 (Table 1). Twenty two schools were surveyed. Ten of these schools were primary schools; three metropolitan primary schools and seven non-metropolitan primary schools. Twelve of the schools were secondary schools; six metropolitan secondary schools and six non-metropolitan secondary schools. The schools were chosen for the survey on the basis of the number of Aboriginal children enrolled in the school and the willingness of the school to allow the students to participate in the research. A mix of metropolitan and non-metropolitan schools were chosen to ensure a wide spectrum of views from Aboriginal children.

An Indigenous Research Assistant administrated the questionnaires and Aboriginal Education Workers were in attendance at all sessions to assist students with any difficulties they encountered with the instrument.

Sample of students

A total of four hundred and seventy three students were surveyed within the period of a calendar month (Table 2). Two hundred and nineteen are males (47 percent) and two hundred and fifty two are females (53 percent). The subjects are Year 5 to Year 10 students. The age range of the students surveyed is between ten years and seventeen years with the average age thirteen years and five months. The majority of the respondents were between the ages of twelve to fifteen years. The standard deviation of the ages is 1.7 years.

Table 1: Schools surveyed

	Metropolitan	Non-metropolitan	Total
Primary	3	7	10
Secondary	6	6	12
Grand Total			22

Table 2: Students surveyed

Male	Females	Total
219 (47 %)	252 (53 %)	471
Age (in years)		
Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
13.4	1.7	10 to 17

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consists of seventy three items, sixty two (85 percent) closed items with fifty nine (81 percent) of these being four point Likert scale items consisting of responses strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree. The items form six variables; 'Attitude to Absenteeism', 'Attitude to the Educational and Social Aspects' of school life, 'Educational Aspirations', 'Attitude to School Behaviour Management', perceptions of the 'School Atmosphere' and 'Attitude to Teachers'. The absenteeism variable consisted of seven Likert scale items, the 'Educational and Social Aspects' of schooling consisted of thirteen questions, the 'Attitude to School Behavior Management' variable contained seven items, the 'Attitude to School Atmosphere' variable is formed with eleven items and the attitude to teachers consists of nine items. Thus the total number of items analysed in this paper is 56 Likert scale items,

that is 78 percent of the total. The variation in the number of questions chosen for each variable is an attempt to ensure that the diverse aspects of each of the variables are covered by the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was administered by an Aboriginal Research Assistant. Any difficulties the respondents encountered with the questionnaire items were overcome with the assistance of the school Aboriginal Education Workers.

Pilot study

Two schools with a sample of 19 secondary and 10 primary students were chosen to conduct a pilot study (Table 3). An analysis of the reliability with this sample indicated that the questionnaire is highly reliable ($\alpha = 0.95$). The discrimination indices of the items varied between 0.23 and 0.82 with the exception of 3 items which produce low indices in the range of 0.09 to 0.11. Some items were rewritten, and one was rejected. These pilot study statistics indicate that the questionnaire was suitable to be used with the proposed larger sample of 400 to 500 respondents.

Data analysis

Cronbach Alpha calculation

Cronbach Alpha is a measure of the internal consistency of the individual item scores. Knibb's (1996) *EdStats* is used to calculate the Cronbach alpha reliability index of the variable scores and the total scores on the questionnaire.

Discrimination indices

With the use of the *EdStats* computer program the student scores on the items are correlated with the total scores of the students on the questionnaire (less the score on the particular item) to find an indication of the discrimination of the item. Discrimination values below 0.3 indicate that there is a weak correlation between the item values and the totals of the other items.

Table 3: Pilot study results

Sample	2 schools: 19 secondary and 10 primary students
Cronbach Alpha co-efficient	0.95 (highly reliable)
Discrimination indices	0.23 to 0.82: 3 items low indices, some rewritten, one reject

Frequency counts, variable means and standard deviations

After the data was checked for reliability and discrimination it is analysed using frequency count percentages to gain an overview of the attitudes of these

Aboriginal middle school students to their teachers and educational experiences. The analysis of the frequency count of student responses on the four points of the Likert scale is over particular items and various subsets of items that make up the variables. Means and standard deviations are also examined to assist with the interpretation of the frequencies and to compare and analyse the seven variables.

Simple regression

Simple regression is used to analyse the relationship between each of the variables with the other variables. Simple regression "describes the linear relationship between two variables in terms of an equation of a straight line" (Knibb, 1996, p. 27).

Multiple regression

A multiple regression is used to predict the relationship between the dependent variable 'perceptions of Aboriginal children to teacher attitudes' and the fundamental variables 'attitude to absenteeism', 'attitude to educational and social aspects of schooling', 'educational aspirations', 'attitude to behavioural management' and 'attitude to the atmosphere of the school environment'. Knibb (1996) claims that, "the advantage of multiple regression over simple regression is that more than one independent variables can be used to predict the level of the dependent variable" (p. 29).

Results

Cronbach Alpha calculation

The Cronbach Alpha calculation produced a reliability co-efficient of 0.93 (Table 4). This statistic indicates that the questionnaire is highly internally reliable as a measure of attitude to schooling by Aboriginal children. Cronbach Alpha reliability co-efficients for the seven variables are also calculated, these range from 0.69 to 0.84 (Table 4). These co-efficients indicate that the questionnaire is also highly reliable within its sub-sections.

Discrimination indices

Items with a discrimination index below 0.3 were closely examined and considered for elimination from the analysis. After an examination of the discrimination indices and carefully re-examining the intent of the question it became apparent that a further six items together with those constructed with reverse statements needed to be reversed scored (Table 4).

Table 4: Questionnaire statistics

<i>Cronbach Alpha reliability co-efficient</i>	
Overall	0.93. (highly internally reliable)
Sub -sections	0.69 to 0.84 range (highly reliable)
<i>Item Discrimination Indices</i>	
	Below 0.3 closely examined, considered for elimination.
	Six items needed to be reversed scored

Frequency counts, variable means and standard deviations

The first variable examined was 'Student Attitudes to Absenteeism'. This variable included items such as "attend school regularly". The mean on the variable is 2.96 on the four point Likert scale with a standard deviation of 0.56 which indicates high positive responses with few extreme scores on the variable (Table 5). In the light of these positive responses it is not surprising that the Aboriginal children sampled by this survey also responded positively to the second variable of thirteen items 'Attitudes to Educational and Social Aspects of schooling'. The mean on the variable is 2.97 with a standard deviation of 0.48. These results also indicate high positive responses with few extreme scores on the variable. Aboriginal students responded very highly positively to the nine items in the 'Educational Aspirations' variable. The mean on the variable is 3.27 with a standard deviation of 0.49. The students also responded highly positively to the seven items in the 'Attitude to Behavioral Management' variable (mean: 2.96; standard deviation: 0.52). The results of the fifth variable examined consisted of eleven items of the 'Attitude to School Atmosphere' variable with a mean of 2.98 and the smallest standard deviation of 0.38. These results indicate high positive responses with very few extreme scores as with all the previous variables.

The final variable examined consisted of nine items provoking the variable 'Attitude to Teachers'. The mean on the variable is 2.86 with a standard deviation of 0.55 which indicates positive responses with few extreme scores on the variable. However the mean is the lowest of the seven variables examined and the standard deviation one of the highest. In particular 83 percent of students strongly agree-agree that they respect their teachers but only 42 percent like their teacher and 61 percent believe that their teachers cared about them. These results indicate the necessity of further analysis of the significance of this variable on Aboriginal students attitude to schooling.

Table 5: Means standard deviations & reliabilities of variables

Variables	Questions	X	SD	Reliability
Absenteeism	7	2.96	0.56	0.71
Social aspects	13	2.97	0.48	0.78
Educational aspirations	9	3.27	0.49	0.81
Behaviour management	7	2.95	0.52	0.69
Atmosphere	11	2.98	0.38	0.79
Attitude to teachers	9	2.86	0.55	0.84

Simple regression

Simple regressions calculated with the assistance of the EdStats program compared the correlations of each of the variables against each other. The results are recorded on Table 6. 'Educational aspirations', 'Educational and Social Aspects of Schooling', 'Educational Aspirations,' 'Behavioural Management' and 'School Atmosphere' all correlate above 0.50 with the 'Attitude to Teachers' variable while the school atmosphere variable correlates as high as 0.69. These results indicate that attitude of Indigenous students to their teachers has a moderate to strong relationship with all aspects of the school experience of Indigenous students with the exception of absenteeism. These simple regression results also indicate the necessity of further analysis of the data.

Table 6: Correlations of variables

	Ed & Soc	Aspirations	Management	Atmosphere	Teachers
Absenteeism	0.53	0.51	0.42	0.37	0.40
Educational & Social Aspects		0.55	0.47	0.50	0.57
Educational aspirations			0.47	0.44	0.51
Behavioural management				0.39	0.52
Atmosphere					0.69

Multiple regression

A multiple regression model was formed with 'Perceptions of Aboriginal children to Teacher attitudes' as the dependent variable and 'Attitude to Absenteeism', 'Attitude to Educational and Social Aspects of Schooling', 'Educational Aspirations', 'Attitude to Behavioural Management', 'Attitude to the Atmosphere of the School Environment' as the fundamental variables expected to be related to the dependent variable. The EdStats program

compared the correlations of each of the variables against each other. The results are recorded on Table 7. The results indicate that 55 percent of the variance in the dependent variable is being accounted for by the independent variables. With the 'School Atmosphere', 'Management and Educational and Social Aspirations' accounting for most of the variance. The influence of the 'School Atmosphere', 'Management' and 'Educational and Social Aspects' weightings are of interest. These indicate that if the standard deviation of these independent variables are increased by one standard deviation the dependent variable 'Attitude to Teacher' variable is correspondingly increased by the respective beta weightings of the independent variables, 0.47; 0.26 and 0.20 respectively.

Limitations of the study

This study has a number of limitations. These include the following: the data is collected with a self reporting questionnaire; there is not necessarily a causal relationship between the variables, others factors than those investigated in the study may be interacting with the variables; similar aspects of attitude to schooling are being measured by each variable and the Likert scale used is at times a crude measure of attitudes and perceptions. The questionnaires were completed by subjects who regularly attended school, though some were chronic absentees.

Table 7: Multiple regression results
Dependent Variable: Perceptions of teacher attitudes

Regression co-efficient weightings	Beta weightings
Constant	-6.7840
Attitude to absenteeism	-0.0063
Attitude to educational & social aspects	0.2027
Educational aspirations	0.0889
Attitude to behavioural management	0.2640
Attitude to school atmosphere	0.4677
Multiple correlation coefficient	0.7461

Discussion of results and implications

Aboriginal children report positive attitudes to their schooling

The major aim of this paper is to analyse the attitudes of Aboriginal students their teachers and their educational experiences. An overview analysis of the responses on the 56 Likert scale items of a questionnaire by 471 Aboriginal

children presents implications for Aboriginal education. Overall, the results of the frequencies, means and standard deviation analyses indicate that Aboriginal children have a positive attitude to their schools and their education as indicated by their responses on a number of variables. In fact they enjoy their schooling, they do not wish to absent themselves from school and believe that they are welcome, cared for and respected at school. Further Aboriginal children are anti-absenteeism; they do not regularly stay away from school.

Aboriginal children report low positive attitudes to their teachers

However on those items that relate to their teachers they are less positive. The 'Attitude to Teachers' questions are interspersed throughout the questionnaire. The mean of the 'attitude to teacher' variable is the lowest of the variables and is considered of concern for such an important variable. Usually teacher constructed instruments that analyse similar questions report means over 3.0 on a four point Likert scale for items relating to teachers. The 'Teacher Attitude' questions on this questionnaire reveal a pattern of responses not as positive as the other areas of student attitude to schools and their education.

Seventy three percent of students believe that their 'teacher/s always help/s me' and report the same result for 'most of my teachers understand me'. This is clearly a positive results but other results are of deep concern. Alarming, 42 percent of students report that they do not like their teacher, 37 percent strongly disagree-disagree that 'my teacher cares what happens to me', and 39 percent strongly disagree-disagree that 'most teachers at this school care about me'. Twenty per cent of the respondents strongly agree-agree that 'teacher(s) pick on me at school' and 12 percent believe that 'the teachers gang up on me'.

In contrast to these negative response rates a high response rate on the student attitude to the question "I respect my teachers" (82 percent) was obtained. Aboriginal children appear not to respond in kind to the less than fair treatment they believe they sometimes receive from their teachers.

Teachers influence the attitudes of Aboriginal children to educational aspirations, educational and social aspects of schooling and the behavioural management

The results of the simple regressions indicate that teachers influence the attitudes of Aboriginal children to educational aspirations, educational and social aspects of schooling and to behavioural management. The results of the simple regressions indicate moderate (educational and social aspects; educational aspirations, behavioural management) to strong (atmosphere)

correlations between each of the schooling variables, except absenteeism, with the 'Attitude to Teacher' variable (Table 6).

Teachers are the benchmark setting the 'tone' of the school for Aboriginal children

The simple regression analysis findings, with one exception, support the results of the multiple regression. The independent variables 'attitude to school atmosphere', 'attitude to behaviour management' and 'attitude to educational and social aspects' (Beta weightings of 0.47; 0.26 and 0.20 respectively; Table 7) account for most of the 74 percent of the common variance between the independent and dependent variable 'attitude to teachers' ($R=0.75$; Table 7). These results support the view that teachers set the 'tone' of the school for Aboriginal children. Teachers appear to be failing Aboriginal students in this regard for while 82 percent of the respondents did not feel lonely at school and 88 percent gained assistance from other Aboriginal students only 57 percent strongly agreed-agreed that the school made them feel important.

However the multiple regression analysis indicates that a students' attitude to their teacher does not significantly influence their educational aspirations. Teachers also do not influence the attitude of Aboriginal children to absenteeism (Beta weightings of 0.088 and -0.006 respectively; Table 7).

Conclusion

The attitude of teachers is crucial to the 'well-being' of Aboriginal children in schools. While the majority of students surveyed have a positive relationship with their teachers and respect their teachers the percentage of students who experience relationship problems with their teachers is high. These results should disturb educators. The literature review reveals that researchers for two decades have emphasised the Fanshawe (1976) teacher characteristics as critical to the education of Aboriginal children. Some teachers of Aboriginal students appear to be unfamiliar with Fanshawe's (1976, 1984, 1989, 2000) personal characteristics of an effective teacher of Aboriginal children or chose to ignore them.

The percentage of children who specify that their teacher encourages them to continue their education indicates that classroom teachers appear to have low expectations of the educational aspirations of Aboriginal students. Aboriginal students are cognizant of these teacher attitudes, the attitudes are not unnoticed; they do not exist in a vacuum having no effect. Munns (1998) argues that teachers must reject deficit explanations for student dissatisfaction. He

claims that when classroom practices are underpinned with deficit logic, this atmosphere results in lower teacher expectations and restricted academic demands on the most needy students. If teachers are unable to form warm relationships with Indigenous students, the transmission of knowledge, which is the foundation of schooling, will not occur and teachers will waste their time.

It appears that while the majority of Aboriginal children respect their teachers they perceive that a proportion of their teachers do not respect them as individuals who have a right to all aspects of a rewarding educational experience in schools.

References

- Collins, G. (1993). Meeting the Needs of Aboriginal students. *The Aboriginal Child at school*, 21, 3-17.
- Eckerman, A. K. (1987). Learning styles, classroom management, teacher characteristics and rural-urban Aboriginal people: Some thoughts. *Discourse*, 7, 55 - 68.
- Fanshawe, J. P. (1976). Possible characteristics of an effective teacher of adolescent aboriginals, *The Aboriginal Child at school*, 4, 3-23.
- Fanshawe, J. P. (1984). Possible characteristics of an effective teacher of adolescent Aboriginals? *Wikaru*, 12, 72-98.
- Fanshawe, J. P. (1989). Personal characteristics of an effective teacher of adolescent Aboriginals, *The Aboriginal Child at school*, 17, 35-48.
- Fanshawe, J. P. (2000). *Helping Indigenous children to succeed in school: How much difference does it make when teachers care?* Paper presented at the Australian Indigenous Educators Conference, Fremantle, April 2000.
- Green, N. (1982). The classroom teacher's influence on the academic performance of Aboriginal children, in: J. Sherwood (Ed.) *Aboriginal Education: Issues and Innovations*. Perth: Creative Research.
- Hatton, E. J., Munns, G., & Nicklin Dent, J. (1996). Teaching children in poverty: Three Australian primary school responses, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 17, 39-52.
- Kleinfeld, J. (1972). *Instructional style and the Intellectual performance of Indian and Eskimo students; Final Report.* (Project No. 1-J-027). Washington, D.C.; U.S. Department of Health, Education & Welfare.
- Kleinfeld, J. (1975). Effective teachers of Indian and Eskimo students. *School Review*, 83, 301-344.
- Knibb, K. (1995). *EdStats*, (Version 1.0.5). Mount Lawley: Edith Cowan University.

-
- Knibb, K. (1996). *EdStats User's Guide*. Mount Lawley: Edith Cowan University.
- Munns, G. (1998). 'They just can't hack that': Aboriginal students, their teachers and responses to schools and classrooms, in: G. Partington (Ed.) *Perspectives on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education*. Katoomba: Social Science Press.
- Murray, B. (1982). What can you do in the classroom? *Impact*, 59, 7 - 8.
- O'Keefe, E. A. (1989). . . . across Australia . . . from teacher . . . to teacher effective teachers. *The Aboriginal Child at School*, 17, 23-10.
- Partington, G., & McCudden, V. (1992). *Ethnicity and Education*. Wentworth Falls: Social Science Press.

Correspondence: Dr. John Godfrey, Edith Cowan University, Mount Lawley, WA, 6050.

Dr John Godfrey is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Community Services, Education and Social Sciences, Edith Cowan University, Perth. He holds a PhD from the University of Newcastle. He has published in reading comprehension, academic dishonesty, religious education, the history of Australian examinations, Indigenous education and teacher receptivity to change.

Gary Partington is an Associate Professor in Kurongkurl Katitjin, the School of Indigenous Australian Studies at Edith Cowan University where he coordinates research.

Dr Mort Harslett is the Principal of Geraldton Secondary College.

Kaye Richer is a teacher at Leonora District High School.