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# **STUDENT AND TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHING/LEARNING PROCESSES IN CLASSROOMS: HOW CLOSE IS THE PARTNERSHIP?**

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## **ABSTRACT**

As Hornstein observed in the beginning of the 1990s, the "enduring pattern" of instruction in social studies lessons is that which revolves around traditional "teacher-centred and text-centred" teaching strategies (Hornstein, 1990). However, other research programs which have investigated the status of social studies (Cuban, 1991; Good and Harmon, 1987; Haladyna, Shaughnessy and Redsun, 1982a) have indicated that the core subject rates well with students when teaching strategies are interactive, inductive, and

student-centred. As Hutchens (1993) found, students became "hooked" on social studies when it involved cooperative learning, and student research strategies. In 1995, Moroz, Baker and McDonald, reported the findings of a large survey of over 3000 Western Australian primary school children (Grades 4-7, ages 9-12yrs) and noted that social studies rated second last to religion out of a list of 13 school subjects. The teachers, however, had a disparate view of the subject from that of their students: they rated the subject third after maths and reading. An investigation of the teaching/

learning strategies experienced by these children revealed lessons were mainly copying from the blackboard, reading, whole-class discussion, colouring in, and looking at pictures and diagrams. This paper investigates the differing perceptions of the key members of the teaching/ learning partnership in our classrooms and explores ways to bridge this perceptual gap and improve the status of an important core subject in our schools. The paper suggests that an interactive and collaborative partnership between teachers and students in the classroom will elicit a more positive learning environment.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper addresses the question, "How close is the perceived 'partnership' between teacher and student in a school classroom?" and poses the problem of how close the student/teacher partnership can ever be while the perceptual frames of the 'partners' remain so disparate.

The question arose from an earlier paper (Moroz et al., 1995) which reported on student attitudes toward social studies and other school subjects in middle and upper primary classrooms. The lowly and declining status accorded social studies by over 3000 primary school students and their views of the teaching/ learning activities they experienced in their respective classrooms is revisited in this paper and on this occasion compared with those attitudes expressed by their 112 teachers.

The term partnership may mean any of the following: joint venture, cooperation, collaboration, association, alliance, contract, informed participation and shared understanding. In the primary school classroom it is a partnership which may be defined as a compulsory association between two parties who participate in a joint venture in the pursuit of learning. Research data suggest the partnership would

benefit by being more of a shared cooperative venture and that such an alliance would assist in attaining a more positive engagement of students (Ireland and Malone, 1995; Catlin and Kalina, 1993; Herwitz and Guerra, 1995).

Educational leaders who wish to maximise student learning outcomes in all key learning areas, such as, *Society and Environment*, may need to encourage regular on-site research and monitoring of the classroom learning environment as it pertains to the teacher/student partnership in a classroom. A recent Australian study of teacher and student attitudes toward social studies and other school subjects (Moroz, 1995) has provided an insight to this partnership problem. This study focussed largely on the status of social studies as perceived by students and teachers, and revealed a wide disparity between the perceptions of both groups. In reporting on how they think students

perceive the status of social studies and other classroom activities, teachers showed little understanding of the low and declining status of the subject as expressed by their students. On the other hand, students showed greater comprehension of the way teachers viewed the status of this subject and other classroom activities.

The low status of social studies accorded by students has been known for a number of decades in the United States, where there have been widespread status studies conducted for over 50 years. The majority of studies over this period report that students not only accord low status to social studies, such as reported in the Australian study (Moroz, 1995), but generally have negative attitudes towards the subject. However, in surveying Grades 4-7 in Western Australia, Moroz found negative attitudes occurred only in the upper primary grade level.

The literature repeatedly presents findings showing social studies to be the least-liked subject at both primary and secondary levels of schooling. Haladyna and Thomas (1979) found social studies to be the least popular subject studied at the elementary and junior high school level. They also concluded that student antipathy toward social studies was not directly correlated to their antipathy toward school in general. The research teams of Shaver, Davis and Helburn (1979) and Schug, Todd and Beery (1984) concluded that a majority of students found social studies to be uninteresting, unimportant and insignificant. In 1985, Shaughnessy and Haladyna found that most students surveyed indicated that social studies was boring and irrelevant. The problem for social studies in schools in the United States according to Shaughnessy and Haladyna (1985:2) is that "social studies is the least

stimulating and the least liked subject". Borton (1985) presented findings which showed social studies was the least liked subject of students from grade two to nine.

An associated concern with the low status of social studies is the grade-level decline in attitudes toward the subject. It seems the longer students stay at school the less they like the subject. Research by Kaoru, Thomas and Karns (1969), Haladyna and Thomas (1979), Fraser (1981) and Moroz and Washbourne (1989) have shown there exists a significant deterioration in attitude toward social studies as students progress from one year to the next. Generally, students' attitudes toward school also have been shown to decline with age but recent research, using large samples of students, suggests that the dislike for school does not translate into a dislike for all subjects: some decline slightly, others show a greater decline and

some even show a slight upward trend (Moroz 1996). Clearly, the nature of the decline requires investigation.

As literature above reveals, students consistently report they do not like social studies do not consider it to be important, and place little value on it. Student learning outcomes in such a subject will be adversely affected if the learners have negative attitudes toward that subject, and the way it is taught, and this must have significant repercussions throughout the whole community of social educators. It will be of great concern to teachers, curriculum designers and teacher educators who have a major investment in this learning area. So what can be done to address this situation in what is recognised as one of our eight key learning areas? While it is evident a major overhaul of curriculum content and processes is needed in social studies, solutions are not easily accessible or readily recognisable.

## THE WESTERN AUSTRALIAN STUDY

Our review of research literature on the status of social studies has revealed a wealth of studies conducted overseas, mainly in the United States, but the absence of much needed similar research in the Australian context. The few studies that have been conducted have produced results that generally confirm and, in some minor instances, contradict findings from other parts of the world (Moroz and Washbourne, 1989; Fraser, 1981; Print, 1990).

The respondent group in the recent study conducted in Western Australia (Moroz, 1996) consisted of over 3132 students and their 112 teachers from 21 government (K-7) primary schools in the Perth metropolitan area. There was a reasonable balance of male and female students evenly distributed across Grades 4 to 7, however, one-third of the students were in

mixed grade classes and one-third had male teachers.

The majority of the teachers, were female and were aged between 40 and 49. Most had between 11 and 15 years teaching experience, had class sizes of between 31 and 35 students, and had as their highest qualification, a Diploma of Teaching. just over half the teachers had not completed either a major or a minor in social studies curriculum

as part of their undergraduate studies. Overall, the teachers' background in any of the social sciences was very limited. The greatest proportion of respondents had studied sociology (44%) and social psychology (32%), while a few teachers had completed Asian studies (7%) and political science (10%). Only 10% of the respondent group had undertaken post graduate studies in social studies.

Table One: Comparison of Student and Teacher Attitudes Toward Social Studies

The Status of Social Studies and Other School Subjects							
Students (n=3132)				Teachers (n=112)			
Rank	Item	Mean	SD	Rank	Item	Mean	SD
1	Sport	4.65	0.83	1	Maths	4.48	0.69
2	Computing	4.45	0.87	2	Reading	4.39	0.68
3	Creative Writing	3.98	1.23	3	Social Studies	4.26	0.61
4	Music	3.90	1.35	4	Creative Writing	4.26	0.73
5	Reading	3.88	1.24	5	Spelling	4.12	0.81
6	Science	3.82	1.25	6	Health	3.99	0.92
7	Library	3.75	1.31	7	Library	3.86	0.82

8	Maths	3.68	1.4 1	8	Writing	3.85	1.0 9
9	Spelling	3.59	1.2 9	9	Sport	3.81	1.2 6
10	Writing	3.59	1.2 7	10	Science	3.79	1.2 2
11	Health	3.49	1.2 9	11	Computing	3.39	1.0 8
12	Social Studies	3.38	1.3 7	12	Music	3.02	1.3 6
13	Religion	3.08	1.4 2	13	Religion	2.51	1.2 0

Note: Scale: 5 = positive, 1 = negative

Of 13 subjects investigated for their status across the primary schools, according to students and based on mean scores (see Table One), social studies ranked twelfth, ahead only of religion. The "most-liked" subjects were sport, computing and creative writing. Overall, students rated social studies as 'OK', that is, just above the midpoint on the five-point scale, however, by Grade 7 the rating was below the midpoint and in the negative category. The most significant differences in attitudes toward the subjects being investigated were found by

comparing responses on the basis of grade level, sex and whether the respondent was a teacher or a student.

While social studies was not rated highly and was ranked lowest of the 'core subjects', students generally perceived it to be a useful and important subject: they felt they learned a lot, that it was important and it would help them with an understanding of the world around them. They also believed that social studies would help them gain employment if they did well in it and expected to make use of what they learned.



Students had a strong positive attitude toward school (see Figure One), were happy to go to school, found most subjects interesting, and were moderately positive about school rules and liking school. However, although they tried to do well in social studies, overall their attitude toward the subject was only marginally positive. With respect to their enjoyment of activities and topics and liking for social studies, students ratings were barely above the neutral mid-point of the 5 point scale (see Figure Two). Even though middle and upper primary students like school and think social studies is an important school subject, they clearly do not like social studies in its present form.

In contrast to their students, the 112 teacher respondents had a very positive attitude toward social studies. Over 92% of teachers liked the subject, 95% indicated that they liked teaching it and 84% regarded social studies as important. Teachers

ranked the subject third from a list of 13 school subjects with a highly positive mean of 4.26 on a five point scale (see Table One).

Figure One: Grade level decline (%)  
Student attitude to school and social studies

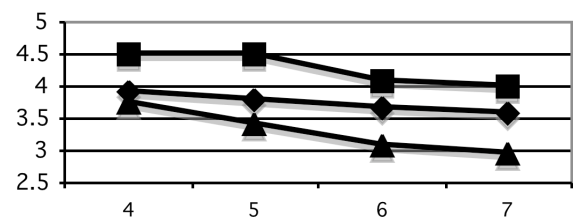


Table Two: Student perceptions of teacher attitudes to students

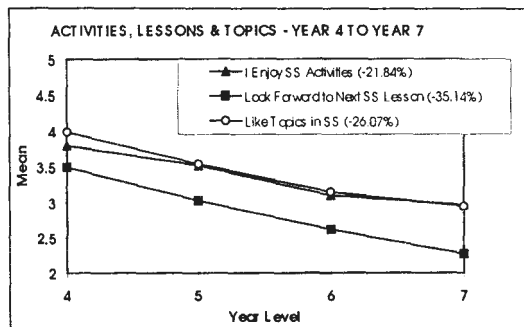
Item no.	Item	5	4	3	2	1	Item mean	SD
13	In social studies lessons the teacher is interested in my opinion*	32.1	24.4	27.2	8.6	7.7	3.65	1.23
22	In social studies the teacher tells me whne my work is good	40.5	38.8	12.5	4.8	3.4	4.08	1.01
31	In social studies the teacher likes most of the students	27.2	32.3	28.8	6.3	5.4	3.70	1.10
40	In social studies the teacher is fair*	35.1	34.6	18.3	6.1	5.8	3.87	1.14
49	In social studies lessons the teacher encourages me to do well encourages me to do well	36.2	36.5	17.1	6.7	3.5	3.95	1.06

Standardised alpha coefficient = 0.661; Scale 5= strongly agree, 3=unsure, 1 = Strongly agree

\* Negatively phrased survey items and scoring has been reversed; Due to rounding, row totals may not sum to 100%. SD=standard deviation



Figure Two: Grade level decline (%): Student attitude to social studies lessons



The subjects teachers liked teaching the most were: maths, reading, social studies and creative writing. Their least preferred subjects to teach were religion, music, sport and computing. It is interesting to note that, apart from religion, the latter list of subjects generally require active student learning approaches.

The data showed that teacher attitude toward some aspects of social studies was more positive in Grades 6 and 7 than in Grades 4 and 5. The upper school teachers were more positive about their preference for teaching values,

their belief in their own excellence as a social studies teacher, the adequacy of training to teach social studies values and in their training in assessment techniques in social studies. In spite of this, the upper school Grade 6 and 7 students liked social studies significantly less than their counterparts in Grade 4 and 5. The grade level analysis confirmed that the middle grade teachers were more accurate about their students' perceptions of social studies than their colleagues who taught the upper primary Grade 6 and 7 classes.

Teachers appear not to have obtained from their students objective feedback about the social studies learning environment in their classrooms. For example, high percentages of the respondent teachers were unsure about whether the students thought social studies was boring (32%), homework was interesting (45%)

and social studies was enjoyable (32%).

Students perceived that their teachers enjoyed social studies, were interested in it, and thought it was an important subject. They felt their teachers were seen to be fair, to praise good work and to encourage students to do well. However, about 40% of all students disagreed that teachers were interested in the opinion of students or even liked most of their students. Fewer than

40% of students looked forward to their next social studies lesson but agreed that in social studies classes they generally worked well together, tried to get higher marks than their friends and found lessons not too noisy. Students thought their teachers' explanations were clear and that the teachers had control over the students in their classrooms. Students had a moderately positive perception of their ability to do well in social studies.

Table Three: Teachers' Perceptions of Students' Attitudes to social studies

Item no.	Item	5	4	3	2	1	Item mean	SD
60	My students do not think social studies is boring*	7	44	32	16	1	3.40	0.88
65	My students find their social studies homework interesting	3	40	45	10	2	3.32	0.77

68	My students enjoy project work in social studies	24	61	14	1	1	4.06	0.77
74	My students enjoy their social studies	4	56	32	9	-	3.54	0.71
76	My students find social studies easy	2	23	29	43	3	2.79	0.90

Standardised alpha coefficient = 0.661; Scale 5= strongly agree, 3=unsure, 1 = Strongly agree

\* Negatively phrased survey items and scoring has been reversed; Due to rounding, row totals may not sum to 100%. SD=standard deviation

Table Three reveals that teachers' perceptions about the learning environment in their social studies classrooms differ markedly from that of their students, as shown in Table Two (see also Figures One and Two). These data illustrate that teachers are not accurately aware of what their students think about social studies and how it is taught in their classrooms and that this inaccuracy is greater in upper primary than in middle primary levels. This finding will be of major concern to educators who support the notion that student and teacher

negotiation and agreement about the classroom environment is conducive to student learning.

Teachers are not fully aware of what students like or dislike about social studies. Of the "likes" for social studies expressed by the students, instructional practices accounted for 46%, skills items 17% and content 18%. Most "dislikes" related to instructional practices (48%) while only 4% of the items mentioned as "dislikes" were associated with content. The most commonly recorded response from students for an open ended question about

'dislikes' in social studies was that "social studies was boring".

Female students were happier about coming to school than male students, found school subjects more interesting, liked school, liked the teachers and thought the school rules were good. They had a more positive attitude towards school and social studies in every respect except with the perception of their own ability. Males were more positive about this matter. Male students were more positive towards science, computing, sport and mathematics, while females were more positive about other subjects eg., social studies, English, reading, spelling and writing.

In almost every case, the younger the student, the more positive his or her attitude to social studies. There was a significant decline in student attitudes towards social studies from Grade 4 to Grade 7 (see Figure Three). Overall, the attitudes of Grade 7 students were significantly

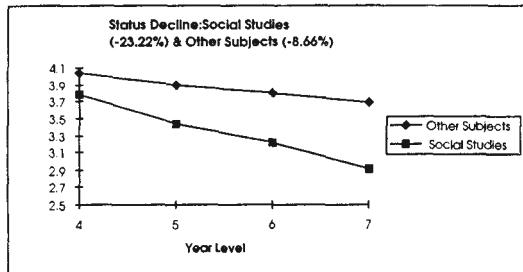
less positive than those of Grade 4 student's - even in cases where Grade 7 student attitudes were very positive (sport and computing). While there was a deterioration in mean attitude ratings toward all school subjects to the order of 8.66% over four years, the decline toward social studies (23.22%) was almost three times as great as the average rate of decline for all subjects.

The low status of social studies and the magnitude of grade-level decline, as perceived by students, is of major concern to social studies educators. Students generally consider social studies to be important and useful but by Grade 7 their attitudes toward it have become firmly negative. In order to arrest or reverse this decline, it appears educators need to move away from the teacher-centred instructional practices disliked by students who have clearly indicated

their preference for more active, participatory learning activities.

Figure Three: Grade level decline (%): social studies and other subjects

**Figure Three: Grade level decline (%): social studies and other subjects**



The most-frequently undertaken activities in social studies were copying from the blackboard, reading, whole class discussion, colouring-in, and drawing pictures and diagrams. Least-frequent were role-plays (acting), newspaper activities, projects, films, guest speakers and excursions. Students agreed there should be more computer activities, that they had learned how to use maps and they liked working in small groups. They disagreed that there were too

many tests, too much colouring in and too many excursions in social studies.

Teachers scheduled very little time for social studies: 75% of the teachers had one or two social studies lessons per week but approximately half taught less than the State Education Department's suggested minimum of 100 minutes per week. This may explain why teachers avoided the time consuming, student-centred activities in social studies lessons. In spite of the fact that 60% of the teachers found it difficult to cover all the social studies skills for their class and while 84% of teachers regarded social studies as an important subject, there was no strong agreement among the teachers as to whether or not more time needed to be devoted to social studies. Perhaps there is some inconsistency here between what teachers say and what they do. If the subject really was important to



them one can assume their actions, in terms of time allocated, would reflect that belief.

The content or topics being taught also contribute to the poor status of social studies in Western Australian government primary schools, particularly at the upper grade levels. Researchers need to establish what it is about the existing syllabus content that the students dislike and then embark on producing a curriculum framework designed to meet the needs of both students and society for the 21st century e.g., citizenship skills.

In terms of the topics and content of social studies lessons, students were in strongest agreement that they learned about Australia and Western Australia, how to use maps, how people used to live in the past and facts about the world. They felt that they learned least about note-taking, how to use different kinds of books, how to solve problems and things that

would help them to get on with people.

## **DISCUSSION**

One of the major causes of poor student attitudes toward a school subject lies with the intricate and dynamic relationship among student, teacher and learning environment variables (Haladyna et al., 1982a). Currently, as revealed by the findings of the Western Australian study (Moroz, 1996), this relationship in social studies, appears static, or if it is moving it is slow, uni-directional and out of balance. Teacher-centred practices dominate and the gap between teacher and student understandings is widening. Researchers have concluded that teacher variables hold the key to students' attitudes toward school subjects because teachers, to a large extent, influence what happens in lessons, determine the content and teaching/ learning processes and are responsible for the duration and placement of

lessons in the daily timetable (Superka, 1982; Eslinger and Superka, 1982; Schug, Todd and Beery, 1983; Haladyna, et al, 1982a; 1982b). Fancett and Hawke (1982) and Weible and Evans (1984) found that general instructional practices used in social studies classrooms were strongly correlated to student attitudes

A major and long-standing concern for social studies educators, recognised in the literature, is the limited range of teacher-centred instructional practices that have persisted over the years (Haladyna, et al, 1982a, 1982b). The findings repeatedly suggest that most teachers conduct social studies lessons in a similar way and that little has changed over decades, that is, they continue to use teacher-centred delivery rather than student-centred inquiry strategies. It seems that this adherence to traditional teaching practices in social studies, more than the

content, is what dissatisfies the students most about the subject. Teachers tend to repeatedly use recitation, textbooks, note-taking, whole-group instructional practices and, occasionally, audiovisual materials. Small group work, interactive cooperative learning activities, and inductive inquiry approaches to student learning are used infrequently.

There is some evidence to suggest that a shared cooperative venture in the form of action research involving the classroom members could assist in the development of a more positive student/teacher partnership and lead to improved participation, achievement and attitudes toward school subjects, fellow students and teachers. Ireland and Malone (1995) recently reported that action research, conducted in a lower secondary mathematics classroom in Western Australia, was able to achieve positive improvement in the development of

a cooperative partnership. "The students became more active participants in their own mathematics learning and culture than they had been at the beginning of the year.". The authors' report that this was achieved by quickly and frequently surveying the students for their assessment of the classroom environment.

Observations from this study illustrate the positive social outcomes that developed in the students, such as listening, caring for the progress of others, providing help and guidance, negotiating explanations and solutions into a group consensus and peer teaching. Findings also demonstrate that the teacher had progressed towards "a more socio-cultural constructivist approach in his teaching" (Ireland and Malone, 1995).

Recent Best Practice Awards in higher education (Higher Education Supplement, Australian, 23/10/96) reveal the success of a 'Reciprocal

Feedback System' in teaching, that is, a 'collaborative process' and a frequent 'data collection system' that provides a better two-way 'communication strategy' similar to that reported by Ireland and Malone. Every few weeks students fill out a triplicate form that encourages reflection on the teaching/ learning process in the classroom, assessment of its effectiveness and suggestions for improvement. To safeguard the lesser partner (student), an independent party collates the answers and discusses criticisms with the teacher. Based on results of the survey, a classroom discussion between the partners in teaching and learning concludes the reciprocal feedback process.

The teaching/ learning partners in the classroom need to be more aware of each others differing perspectives of the teaching/ learning environment they experience. The findings above demonstrate how improvements in

the student/teacher partnership can result in a shift in focus from one of curriculum delivery to that of a dynamic interactive teaching/learning process more suited to the individual needs of the students. Catlin and Kalina (1993) also wrote about the impact on teaching practices of quick, anonymous written feedback from students about their understanding of course content and their reactions to the instruction they received. The feedback allowed tl-te teachers to adjust instruction to meet the needs of the learners and thus to improve the classroom environment. They obtained the feedback by using the Cross/Angelo Classroom Assessment Model. More recently, Herwitz and Guerra (1995) have demonstrated that 'effective collaboration' (partnership) is brought about when boundaries are negotiated by participants as they learn how to team through each others' values.

Newell (1994) suggests investing largely in cooperative learning techniques to help develop positive student attitudes toward a core aspect of the social studies curriculum, that is, responsible citizenship. She found that students engaged in cooperative learning processes in social studies lessons developed positive self acceptance and self esteem, improved learning skills, a greater liking for school, and greater motivation to participate in classroom activities. Newell based her definition of cooperative learning strategies on that developed by Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec (1990), that is, *cooperative learning is instructionally using small groups so that students work together to support their own and each others' learning.*

Similarly, Hutchens (1993) advocates "Hooking Primary Children on Social Studies", by using cooperative learning, student research strategies, and integrating

social studies with the language arts and educational technology. McKinney and Jones (1993) report students find social studies more interesting when children's books are used rather than a formal social studies text. Not only does the student attitude toward social studies improve with the use of children's books report the authors, but there is also more knowledge gained by students.

Similar to that advocated by Ireland and Malone (1995) and the Reciprocal Feedback System reported recently in the HES, Downs (1993) advocates using student surveys and interviews with parents to maintain a positive learning environment in social studies classrooms.

Clifford (1993) believes the social studies teacher can improve the situation by "bringing history alive in the classroom". To do this the teacher needs to "include active learning, integrate it with the

language arts, and appeal to multiple intelligences". McGowan and others (1990), in a study of sixth graders, linked the solution directly with teaching style, while Fouts (1987) felt the negative attitude was partly due to classroom environment "which the teachers can manipulate". Joyce (1986) found a link between positive student attitudes and teachers who made the subject more personally meaningful for their students. Brophy and Van Sledright (1993), at the Institute for Research on Teaching, found exemplary social studies teachers used more experiential learning, varied their content resources, and made constant comparisons between contemporary culture and the classroom topics being studied.

## **CONCLUSION**

Student perceptions of teachers' attitude toward social studies proved to be astute in this study. However, the teachers' perceptions of student attitude toward social studies clearly

indicated that teachers had little idea about what students thought about social studies. The teachers perceived that their students enjoyed social studies and did not think it was a boring subject but rather felt it was a difficult subject to master. Student perceptions of the subject were significantly different from those expressed by their other 'partners', the teachers, in the teaching/learning environment.

If the environment of the social studies classroom is to enable the compulsory association of teacher and student to become a partnership or joint venture in the pursuit of learning then one of the first steps to achieving that is a greater awareness of the attitudes and perceptions of the partners. The students appear to be on track but the teachers have a way to travel.

Our research shows that the teaching/ learning needs of the students in social studies classrooms are not being taken into account by

the teachers who, in spite of the strong, student-centred, action-oriented policies in social studies curricula, continue to utilise teacher-centred, text-based instructional practices the students find uninteresting and boring. The students are being turned off the subject in large numbers. While Australian students generally seem to still recognise its importance and usefulness, in other places it is seen as irrelevant, unimportant and the least liked subject in school. However, in contrast, studies conducted where the teaching practices are interactive, inductive and student-centred reveal the development of positive student attitudes toward this important social subject.

The message is clear. For social studies to improve its status in Australian schools, profound changes are required, particularly in the area of teacher development. Most middle and upper primary

teachers in Australian schools appear not to have the requisite teacher education foundations to even begin to redress the situation. A major program of professional development and support for these teachers is necessary if the problem is to begin to be addressed in our schools. Bain (1993) also finds the problem rests squarely with the professional development of teachers and believes better quality teachers would emerge if, during teacher education programs, more stress was placed on learning theory supported by more clinical practice. The recent and continuing work of Baker and Scott (1995) on the transfer of teaching skills and strategies from preservice to professional practice would also support this point of view, although, they would suggest more of the same professional preparation programs may not be the answer. Teacher preparation programs would need to be better articulated,

involve more systematic and reflective peer practice with greater opportunities for modelling and continuing in-field support or reciprocal peer coaching. The work of Joyce and Showers (1995) with inservice teacher education programs finds the structure of these professional development (PD) programs for teachers generally lacking any form of systematic process for overcoming transfer problems. They believe few PD programs (5-10%) ever achieve an outcome that leads to transfer of workshop knowledge and skills into ongoing professional practice.

These issues and the ramifications of across the grades decline in status for social studies are profound. This important subject is in need of a major overhaul and doing more of the same is not the solution. Kennedy (1994:8), in discussing the complexities and the significance of the task of developing citizenship education in Australia and the

central role for social studies, recognised the limitations of existing social studies programs: "There will clearly be a special role for social studies education but this will require considerable 'gearing up' if new demands are to be met". Social studies needs to be reconsidered in terms of the professional development needs of the teachers and appropriate content, resources, and instructional practice, particularly for the benefit of upper primary students who have quite negative attitudes toward social studies.

While students appear to be accurately aware of teachers' attitudes toward school subjects, the same cannot be said of the teachers. Our research data suggest the partnership would benefit by becoming being more of an informed and shared cooperative venture. Such an alliance between the students and teacher could lead to improved participation and a

more positive engagement in social studies. This alliance, in turn, should enhance achievement and attitudes toward social studies.

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**Practice Teaching in Remote  
Aboriginal Communities:  
The Need for Adaptation to  
the Social and Cultural  
Context**

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**ABSTRACT**

As part of the teacher education program at Edith Cowan University, a small group of student teachers experience teaching practice in remote Aboriginal communities. In this paper, student teacher perceptions of their experiences on such a practice are presented to illustrate the influence of the practice on their views about teaching Aboriginal children. Through an investigation of journals written during the practice, it is apparent that students had considerable difficulty adapting their teaching to the context in which they were working,

particularly in relation to the different cultural and social demands of the situation.

**INTRODUCTION**

Graduates from teacher education institutions are Education District, the prepared for teaching in a range of situations, but it is difficult to provide practical experience in all situations. One of the problems facing institutions in Perth has been the provision of experience in schools in remote areas of the State. A number of alternative approaches have been utilised over the years, including conducting instruction in regional centres and distance education. Neither of these alternatives solves the problem of experience for metropolitan students, many of whom, upon graduation, will gain employment in remote or rural schools with significant enrolments of Aboriginal children. The majority of these schools are well over 1000 km from Perth and practice in schools closer

to the city does not provide the kinds of experiences appropriate to these schools. Because of this lack of similar schools in the metropolitan area (where the majority of teacher education students attend university), the Faculty of Education at Edith Cowan University conducts three programs to provide appropriate practicum experiences for students. One of these, the Remote Teaching Practice, gives two weeks' experience in nine remote Aboriginal community schools during the second year practicum. In 1996, the practice took place in September in a number of schools in the most remote region of the State in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands. Nineteen students and five supervisory staff participated in the practice. As part of it, students were asked to keep a journal of their experiences and perceptions. This article reports some of the outcomes of the practice, viewed through the

journal entries and considers implications for teacher education in the future.

## **ORGANISATION OF THE PRACTICE**

Nine schools participated in the teaching practice. There is one other school in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands, but it was too remote to take part. The communities in which the schools are located are small, some with community populations of less than 100 and school populations varied from a handful of students up to approximately seventy students. All the schools in the Lands are operated by the Education Department and are a part of the Kalgoorlie district office being situated over 1500km to the south east. To minimise costs, student teachers and staff travelled by Toyota Coaster buses to the schools. Although uncomfortable, this has proved to be a cheap and reliable form of transport in the nine years the practices have operated. We

departed early on a Saturday, camped overnight - the first school, Cosmo Newbery - and reached the remotest school on the following Monday morning. The distances are daunting. It is over 1000 km from Perth to the first school, and a further 1000 km to the furthest visited, with over half the distance being travelled on unsurfaced roads.

The populations of the communities, apart from a small number of non-Aboriginal professionals, service and support people, were all Aboriginal. The contrast between the lifestyles of the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people was quite marked, with the non-Aborigines living in houses typical of urban housing in Perth (and the newer houses being quite spacious), while the Aboriginal people lived in a variety of accommodation ranging from makeshift dwellings to housing of a similar nature to the non-Aborigines. In general, most Aboriginal housing was much more

basic than the non-Aboriginal accommodation

There is a marked boundary - culturally linguistically, economically and socially - between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the community. The number of student teachers who can take part in the practicum is limited by the accommodation available in the houses occupied by the teachers. There is no consideration that they might be accommodated with Aboriginal people. Although it places greater pressure on the student teachers in relation to their classroom performance when they are living with the teachers, it also gives them a clear view of the daily lives of teachers in the communities, which is an intention of the practice.

Student teachers observed for the first day or so, then commenced teaching, one lesson a day at first, building up to half a day by the end of the practice. This can be a demanding schedule, given the

cultural differences in the communities, the different behavioural expectations of the children, and the active social life of the schools while the student teachers are visiting. Prior to departure, a series of familiarisation seminars was held at the university, during which videos were shown, readings discussed and information disseminated on culture, community curriculum demands and appropriate teaching methods. Even so, these vicarious experiences could only mitigate some of the shocks awaiting the student teachers, who had to cope with cultural and linguistic differences, ill-health among the children, absenteeism and life in a very different environment.

The context of the practice for the student teachers was one of performance in another teacher's class, under the supervision of the teacher, the university supervisor and, possibly, the principal of the

school. In many respects, it mirrored the experiences reported by Martinez (1994) of a beginning teacher in an Aboriginal community school in Queensland. The restrictive nature of teaching practice, in another teacher's class, under the gaze of various supervisory personnel and with a performance mark as the outcome, was more daunting than the situation of the teacher studied by Martinez. The difference was in the much more temporary nature of this experience and the greater degree of control exercised over the student teachers. They were not free to experiment with methods and practices and inevitably felt constrained by the degree of supervision and the nature of the classroom context.

In compiling their journals, student teachers were requested to comment on cultural differences that they observed, critical events during the practice (including problems they



experienced in both their teaching and after-hours lives), and their thoughts on the situation and their adjustment to it. A list of possible topics for consideration was distributed and the kinds of reports discussed with the group. Variety was encouraged and the issues to be covered was left very open ended.

The student teachers' success in the practice depended very much on their specific situation and on their willingness to adapt. Nearly all the schools were staffed by inexperienced teachers, many of whom were in their first or second year of teaching, a common feature of remote government schools in the State, (although one which the Education Department is challenging at present with a package of benefits for teachers in these schools in an effort to attract more experienced teachers to them). While the principals were experienced teachers, few had backgrounds in Aboriginal schools

and like their staff, were mostly unfamiliar with the demands of the situation. There were exceptions. In one school, a teacher had been teaching in remote Aboriginal schools for several years and in another the principal was Aboriginal. Each school adapted differently to its community, with some making better adjustments than others. This was reflected in the experiences of the student teachers.

### **FIRST IMPRESSIONS**

The remarks by student teachers about their perceptions of the schools and their communities were influenced by their own backgrounds. Expectations for the appearance of the communities, the pace of life and the nature and health of the children were grounded in their own culture and prior experiences. This was clearly a cross-cultural event for all the student teachers, and some were able to cope better than others. The more mature and more travelled

made comparative judgments about the communities and their schools, relating them to other communities they had experienced in Australia, and, sometimes, with communities in third world countries:

*The school and community is a pleasant surprise - clean and relatively orderly, compared that is to some I have witnessed in other parts of Australia*

*Absolutely gob stopped at all the rubbish lying around. It's as bad as 3rd world countries I have visited.*

The student teachers focused on their of the children in the classroom, another reported impressions of the children, who on our arrival were very welcoming and friendly, in marked contrast to their expectations derived from their coursework and readings, which indicated that the children might be shy and withdrawn at first. In only one community was this the case,

and that lasted less than half an hour until a barbecue.

Student teachers commented on the "big white smiles", the children's affectionate nature and their willingness to "climb all over" the student teachers. This was rather beguiling because it was very different from the more reticent nature of non-Aboriginal children when making first contact with strangers:

*I enjoy the fact the children like to be held, and like the attention. It makes it feel like its special; I'm special and that I have something to offer.*

Another related matter which boded ill for education of the children was the early impression gained by a couple of student teachers (and subsequently noted by others) that the schools operated at a much slower pace than other schools in their experience.

In this initial contact, concern at the evident signs of ill-health among the children in some of the communities was a window on the student teacher's general attitudes to the communities and their members. Some couched their views at the state of health of the children in language which expressed concern and sympathy:

*There were three children in the class today – I felt very sad that I have 2 healthy, clean children waiting for me at home and there were kids here with scabies, lice, sores and very dirty. I have to remember that I am imposing on their community so I suppose all I can do is grin and bear it and make them feel as though I am here to help and not to dictate to them.*

Others - a minority - expressed disgust at the condition of the children, describing their feelings at the sight of running noses, sores and

unwashed hair. The concern with health reflects a similar concern in the literature (Coombs, Brandl and Snowdon, 1983; Menzies School of Health Research, 1990; O'Riley, 1980; Task Force on Aboriginal Social Justice, 1994). Little appears to have changed in the 16 years since the first of these reports. Throughout their journals, student teachers made observations which give clues to the effects of poor health on the children's educational performance. One noted the lethargy of the children in the classroom, another reported the slow response to directions to get up off the floor and commence activities and several stated that children tended to wind down markedly towards the end of the day. Associated with this may be hearing loss, which could affect the response of children in the classroom (Collins, 1993).

All these behaviours may be symptoms of ill the student health, the solutions to which are beyond

the teachers. control of the school, although some schools provided treatment for the children, sometimes in conjunction with the nursing clinics in the communities but sometimes in a misguided revival of colonialism. Paternalistic approaches which impose the values of Western people on Aboriginal families without regard for their own priorities are bound to fail, yet one student teacher reported her actions to impose her the standards on the family of a child who was in the early need of regular treatment. The tone of the writing implied that the family showed little care for the child because the treatment was overdue, yet the reason for this lateness was the teachers' tardiness returning from a bush trip. It is possible that the existence of stereotyped views of Aboriginal people resulted in an inability to place the of ill-health incident in a more balanced perspective, the communities outcome of which

would have been a less teachers' judgmental stance on the parents' response.

## **TEACHING**

The slowness of the response of children may have been due to both ill health and their efforts to influence the behaviour of the student teachers to minimize the amount of work they imposed (Folds, 1987). There was certainly a lack of adherence to the expectations of the student teachers in the early lessons. The children reinforced this pace by refusing to work faster and confounding the student teachers' efforts for greater achievement.

Behaviour was reported to be a problem by most student teachers. Those who reported satisfactory outcomes with regard to behaviour on. The use of appealing approaches to instruction worked well with younger children, as the following extract shows:

*I was introduced to the children and then left to it. This gave me the opportunity to establish myself with the children. I am pleased with the way the children responded - a special surprise in my pocket worked wonders for gaining and maintaining attention.*

In her subsequent lessons the same student teacher quickly changed tactics when attention appeared to be slipping and ensured lessons were shorter so that children were under control the whole time. She indicated a marked measure of authority as an early childhood specialist by recommending changes in classroom procedures to the regular teacher who was not an early childhood specialist:

*Have discussed with Gina the situation as I see it (from the early childhood perspective and as a well-experienced child carer) the learning*

*outcomes she has requested are too complex for pre-primary children - let alone these children who are experiencing things for the first time in their lives.*

The older children were more difficult to control. This was made more difficult by trying to establish routines and behaviours which were expected in schools in Perth. Even the regular teachers experienced difficulty at times, often with particular children. Misbehaviour ranged from talking out of turn, refusing to sit up and stay on task to throwing things around the room, walking around and fighting among themselves.

Two explanations may be offered for the misbehaviour of the children. These two explanations have been termed "persistence" and "resistance" by Keeffe (1988). Persistence refers to the continued influence of traditional Aboriginal culture in the lives of Aboriginal

people today. The refusal to be controlled is consistent with reports by various authors of the relative independence of Aboriginal children (Harris, 1980, Hamilton, 1981; and Malin 1989) which is a continuation of traditional autonomy of the individual in traditional society. The early enthusiastic greeting of the student teachers by the children reflected the equality they perceived: rather than regarding the student teachers as of higher status and therefore to be respected, the children considered them to be of equal status. According to this explanation, to exercise authority over the children the student teachers would need to show that they had a right to do so. Given the brief contact, such authority did not exist and so the children refused to obey. In other words, they had not yet gained the children's consent to exercise authority over them, as Harris (1980) and Malin (1989) suggest is the appropriate path to

effective management of Aboriginal children.

Resistance refers to Aboriginal people's opposition to assimilation into non-Aboriginal culture (Keeffe, 1988). This resistance to the function of the school was well expressed by Folds (1987) in relation to Aboriginal children in schools not far from these communities. Keeffe (1988, p. 72) noted that a range of strategies was used by Aboriginal children to resist the influence of teachers, including "cheeky behaviour", sullen withdrawal, inattention, and absenteeism.

Classroom management was a problem for most of the student teachers and so either explanation could be valid. A mix of both is more likely, given the strong traditional orientation of the communities. There appeared to be few problems in the school with an Aboriginal principal, (which suggests that resistance may have

been a major factor), although this was the closest community to Perth, and it could be argued that elements of traditional culture were not as strong.

Given the students' perceptions of equality along and their efforts to resist work, the student teachers were at a grave disadvantage. Despite their knowledge of the implications of resistance and relevant aspects of Aboriginal culture - such as different world views, talking behaviour and ways of referring to thinking (Harris 1989), - a lack of understanding of the implications of these differences for their teaching was quite exasperating. This was clear from the statements they made, particularly as the practice neared its end:

*I shall have to be more strict in the classroom to calm the kids down. The kids weren't even good for Judith so I had buckleys getting them to*

*participate for me. Two days to go.*

Under the circumstances, two solutions were attempted: entice the children to go along with the expectations of the student teachers by offering incentives; or use unpleasant sanctions to enforce the will of the student teachers over the children. Both options were evident in the reports in the journals. The incentives worked with younger children but were less effective with older ones, while the imposition of sanctions through the use of management systems such as the Canter approach (Charles, 1992) had some success. Even so, these strategies were derailed by the children's manipulation of them. For example, in one class where points were awarded for good behaviour, the student teacher recorded the following statements by children who sought to maximise their point scores:

*'Mam, I'm writing with my pencil - points?'*

*'I'm sitting up straight Mam - points?'*

*'Yeh, I'll rub the board. Points?'*

The application of sanctions along the lines of the Canter approach was also circumvented by Aboriginal children who would walk out of school - or threaten to do so - when they were disciplined by the student teachers or the teachers. When this happened to the student teachers it was quite distressing:

*The worst thing possible happened during my lesson today, the thing that I was always scared of... One of my students walked out. I hated it, it made me feel like a failure. I know I have seen him and other do it ever since I arrived but I always thought that if they liked me enough they would not. He came back. He*

*was happy then. The reason he left was because I put his name on the board, a consequence of him mucking around. I don't like consequences but when I did not use them yesterday he walked on the desk and went riot. I think that I must find an in between.*

In the school with the Aboriginal principal, more culturally - appropriate strategies for handling behaviour problems were practised. When disruption occurred in the classroom considerable time was spent resolving the issue, particularly if it involved conflict between two or more children. All the parties to the incidents participated in working out solutions, while firm discipline was expected and obtained by the teachers. It is possible that the children conformed in this situation because of the greater credibility of the principal and the other teachers,



but the student teachers also were able to share in this authority. The school was able to affirm Aboriginality in the processes used, at the same time as reducing the need for resistance, because of this acknowledgment.

Keeffe (1988) identified absenteeism as another aspect of resistance. From personal observation in the past I am able to support the view that resistance certainly has been a significant cause of non-attendance but during the 1996 practice a major cause was the influence of cultural events.

Deaths, law business and important meetings on the future of the communities emptied some schools and resulted in brief admissions of children to others as families travelled among the communities. There is a tendency among some non-Aboriginal people to refer to such movement as "walkabout" but clearly there were strong social reasons for the families to travel.

Even so, the willingness to take children from school with little regard for the continuity of their education strongly suggests a perception of the irrelevance of schooling, which would be consistent with a resistance perspective on the process of schooling.

Whatever the explanation, the variations in attendance had a chaotic effect on the student teachers and their teaching. On some days a student teacher would be confronted with two children, on the next six and the day after another six, of whom three would be new that day. In one school there were no children present for several days because of a funeral. Continuity of lessons was disrupted and preparation of resources problematic because of the fluctuations in attendance.

*I had a great day today even though three different 6 year olds turned up from yesterday.*

*My progressive maths lesson from yesterday had to be altered because today's class didn't know what I was talking about.*

A consequence of irregular - and often small -attendance was the desire to keep children in school once they had arrived. This was often problematic as children, particularly the younger ones, would come and go as they pleased:

*It seems weird having to chase kids across the school yard to try and keep them here. This behaviour would not be tolerated in the city but it's their way of life out here.*

The need to socialise the children into the ways of schooling was much more difficult in these schools than in urban schools. The perceived irrelevance of school and the attractions of life outside contributed to irregular attendance. It could not be argued, however, that

there was no regard for education in the communities. Heslop (1996) showed that members of the community were interested in education and were willing to participate in its management. Unfortunately, few of the student teachers were in a position to confirm this interest, and there was little overt participation in most of the school.

## **CURRICULUM**

The student teachers were acutely aware of the differences in standards attained by the children compared with non-Aboriginal children of similar ages in Perth schools. Most of the children were several years below grade level. The contributory factors for the low levels of attainment were a topic of frequent comment in the student teachers' journals, sometimes inadvertently. For example, one student teacher wrote:

*We climbed up a hill just out of the townsite. They all thoroughly enjoyed this, however it was very difficult to get them speaking any English language as they were not within the school grounds. It is as though the moment they walk out through the school gate they can change back into themselves again.*

This student teacher's observation touches clearly on an important element of the relationship between the child and the school. Because of alienation from the curriculum, children are unable to "be themselves" at the same time as they fulfil appropriate roles within the school. Learning in a language which is hardly ever used by children outside the school is only one contextual factor responsible for low levels of achievement. Other contributing factors are irregular attendance, the poor health noted earlier and the resistance of the

children to a curriculum which is perceived to be irrelevant. These factors, however, may be symptoms of deeper problems. In the school where the student teachers were most impressed with the achievements of the children - the school with an Aboriginal principal - one student teacher reported:

*Very relaxed classroom climate but expectations of quality work are enforced as in any school. "White" rules are laid down, hands up, obey teacher, no walking around.*

This contradiction - the imposed dominant curriculum succeeding in one context but not another - is best explained by the credibility of the teachers in the school. The student teacher later reported:

*[The principal] has turned me willingly into a disciple. I am convinced that we have to teach Aboriginal people not that "white is right" but, to*

*beat the white man [sic] and live in the white mans world you have to learn the white mans way. This school provides a white mans learning style with structure, rules and manners, that does not forget the chns Aboriginality.*

The school and the community were allies in a joint project to empower Aboriginal people. This is consistent with the demand by Andrews (1993) for greater understanding of Aboriginal culture and language, as well as the employment of "at least one full-time permanent teacher who is of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent" (1993:28).

In contrast to the above school, in other communities the imposed curriculum was designed to subject the children to standards of behaviour and attainment that were not perceived to be essential. Principal among these was the demand for cleanliness and

neatness, with children being showered and dressed in "school clothes" prior to entering school, then changing back into their home clothes on departure from school. Not all schools showered the children, but the purpose can be questioned: is it to ensure good health, or does it make the children acceptable to the teachers cultural preferences?

*The health routine consists of taking off their home clothes (if they are wearing any) then going to the wash room to clean their teeth. Once teeth and toileting is done they get in the shower, and the brown dirt just pours off them! Whilst in the shower they are given shampoo and soap. It is also a good time to check their bodies for sores, boils, etc. The problem with this health routine is that here at school is the only place it happens. I dread to think of how dirty the*

*children stay during their holidays. Even the bigger children have to be socialised to make sure they wash their hands after toileting or they would not ever bother.*

The imposition of the dominant culture without careful planning and consultation with the local community is a recipe for failure. The support of the family and community are essential if school is to be perceived as relevant to the children, as various writers and reports have demonstrated (Castley, 1988; Groome, 1995; Task Force on Aboriginal Social Justice, 1994; Watson and Roberts, 1996). Without such relevance children will continue to resist the efforts of the teachers by truanting, being unresponsive in class - (the "Wall of Silence") (Folds, 1987), failing to pay attention and misbehaving. The student teachers reported successful lessons as well as unsuccessful ones. Those which were successful were

invariably conducted on topics of relevance to the Aboriginal children (and these were not necessarily only culturally - relevant topics, as lessons on cooking Western food were very popular) or were conducted in relevant contexts, such as trips to the bush. Student teachers who made efforts to relate to the children socially and gain their confidence appeared to have more effective lessons. On arrival in the community one student teacher spent much of the first day playing football with the children. This established good rapport and respect for the student teacher, particularly as he played in bare feet and shorts!

Children were appreciative of student teachers who attempted to bridge the cultural gap by teaching in culturally - responsive ways. In some cases student teachers incorporated the children's language into lessons, such as teaching body parts using both English and the local language. Other student

teachers reported successes by using their own family photos as teaching aids for language development; by building on expressed interests of the children, such as teaching bubble making and colour mixing, and by establishing direct personal relationships with individuals.

Even so, the gulf between the cultures was difficult for the student teachers to comprehend. In the school where one of the teachers spoke the language of the community, a student teacher reported on the apparent failure of a child to learn a concept when communicating in English. When the teacher questioned the child in her first language, it was apparent that she did comprehend the concept:

*During maths (an ordering activity) the teacher demonstrated this child's understanding. I had thought she did not have a clue what was going on, but then he*

*asked her the same question in the language, clarifying for me that she had understood perfectly.*

Graham (1988) made the point that attention to language is vital if Aboriginal children are going to learn mathematics effectively. Teachers need to comprehend the complexities of language in relation to mathematical learning if they are to do justice to the children. The inability of the student teachers to carry out such instruction reduced their effectiveness in the classroom.

#### ABORIGINAL TEACHING ASSISTANTS

Each of the schools had at least one Aboriginal teaching assistant (Aboriginal Education Worker -AEW) on the staff. These staff members had the responsibility of liaison between the dominant culture and the culture of the children. In their journals, only one of the student teachers reported

making conscious efforts to work with the AEW in the classroom. The others may also have done so, but from observations during the practice this is unlikely. By using the AEW to negotiate with the children, explain tasks and seek feedback on problems, it is possible that the student teachers could have reduced the problems they encountered. The one student teacher who did report consistently on working with the AEW was an early childhood student teacher who is accustomed to para-professional staff in early childhood centres.

## CONCLUSION

The group of student teachers experienced considerable frustration and disappointment in teaching in the remote schools but at the same time was exhilarated at the opportunity to participate in the practice. A majority of the 19 said they would apply for remote schools on graduation, which suggests that they had positive experiences during

their visit to the schools. Even so, to be fully effective they needed to comprehend the importance of culturally - responsive education which would increase its relevance to the children and reduce the alienation and resistance which existed. They would also need to learn how to locate their teaching within the community so that it had the support of the families. This lesson was learned by some of the students but not by others. For most of them the principal method that became dominant in their repertoire was the imposition of the dominant curriculum by force or by bribery through rewards and enticements, approaches which led to resistance on the part of the children and contributed to non-attendance, misbehaviour and boredom. The student teachers were unaware of this, however, intimating that responsibility for the lack of learning rested with the children, who were claimed to be much more

difficult to teach than non-Aboriginal children. Rather than seeing the problem as the imposition of a largely irrelevant and oppressive curriculum, the student teachers in effect blamed the children for failing.

The results of the evaluation of the teaching practice through the students' journals have implications for teacher education, both at the pre-service level and when teachers are being appointed to schools in traditionally - oriented Aboriginal communities. The main requirement is for strategies to incorporate relevant content and methods into the curriculum. Communication with members of the communities to ensure acceptance of the curriculum and the active involvement of those members in the education process are significant steps. Student teachers need to be taught appropriate processes for working with Aboriginal Education Workers and members of the community.

One early childhood specialist student demonstrated that these skills can be readily acquired and contribute to improvements in the quality of education. It is essential to avoid a 'learning context in which the teacher sees it as his or her duty to enforce strict discipline while transmitting the dominant curriculum to unwilling subject children in total isolation from the community's values, understandings and practices.

An approach to teacher education that develops awareness of the processes of domination and subjectification is highly desirable for Aboriginal education. It is clear that the application of "normal" teaching methods in Aboriginal schools contributes most effectively to domination and results in alienation of the children. Teachers need to share authority in the classroom and develop strategies to integrate the children's prior learning into lessons in ways that



support the dignity and self-direction of Aboriginal children.

The evaluation also reaffirms the value of Aboriginal teachers for Aboriginal schools. The credibility of staffing schools with teachers from the communities is much greater and cultural responsiveness is assured.

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