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## ATTITUDES OF ABORIGINAL STUDENTS TO SCHOOLING

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### ABSTRACT

*In this paper the attitudes of Aboriginal students to schooling are examined. Aboriginal children from upper primary and lower secondary years responded to a questionnaire related to various aspects of their schooling experience, their intentions about remaining at school and their future education. The questionnaire contained 73 items constructed primarily with a four-point Likert scale. An analysis indicated that the questionnaire was highly reliable as a whole and in its components. The paper reports that these Aboriginal students responded highly positively on a number of significant issues in regard to their attitudes to schooling. They generally had positive attitudes to school, intended to remain at school to the end of year 12 and wished to succeed in further education.*

### INTRODUCTION

This paper highlights the attitudes of Aboriginal students to schooling. It examines the perceptions of four hundred and seventy three Aboriginal students, aged 10 to 17 years, from rural and urban areas of Western Australia to number of educational factors. The children in years 5 to 10 responded to a questionnaire which sought their attitudes of the way they are treated and cared for at school, the manner in which the school welcomes them, their attitude to school attendance and behavioural management of their school.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Aboriginal students' attitudes to and concerns about their schooling and teachers have received significant attention over the past two decades in journals focusing on Aboriginal education. Hill (1989), in an

analysis of a major comparative study of children attending Central Schools in New South Wales, discussed the perceptions of 161 Aboriginal students (12 percent of the sample) who had responded to a questionnaire on school morale. The results were compared with those of non-Aboriginal students. The attrition rates of Aboriginal students was of concern: 61 percent of Aboriginal students terminated their study in Year 10 compared to 44.8 percent of non-Aboriginal students while 70 percent of Aboriginal students in Year 11 terminated their study compared to 28.2 percent of non-Aboriginal students. Hill (1989, p.14) claims that "by national standards these attrition rates of non-Aboriginal students are very high, so the even worse Aboriginal figures constitute a serious concern for education authorities." On the basis of these figures, Hill anticipated a high rate of alienation among Aboriginal students. However, the opposite seemed to be the case, Aboriginal students did not differ significantly from non-Aboriginal students in their enjoyment of school and were even keener to stay at school than earlier attrition rates and teachers' perceptions suggested. Hill suggested that teachers' perceptions of low career aspirations of Aboriginal students could represent a barrier to motivation but "the research indicates that Aboriginal students . . . are as satisfied with their schools as are non-Aboriginal students, if not more so." (p. 19)

Hill's analysis of the Central Schools data indicates an area of critical importance for the education of Aboriginal children: the role of school morale and the teachers. Numerous articles feature these factors as central to the issue of the education of Indigenous children; for example Murray (1982), O'Keefe (1989) and Partington (1998).

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

Later Fanshawe (2000) simplified the four points on the basis of Kleinfeld's (1972, 1975) "warmth and demandingness" model of teacher effectiveness.

Unfortunately unintentional discrimination by administrators and teachers and the lack of a feeling of acceptance at school can begin early in the educational experience of children. Malin (1994), for example, carefully analysed an educational situation and the experience of three young Aboriginal children in an urban classroom. She reported that an experienced teacher who enjoyed teaching and was considered by Education Department officials to be a good teacher unfortunately allowed a situation to develop in which three year 1 Aboriginal students were seriously disadvantaged "both academically and in terms of status within the student hierarchy" (p. 141). Possibly the advice of Goves-Jacka (1994) could have been applied in this case; "if you really wish to provide equal opportunity for all, why not try positive discrimination for children from minority groups in your classroom?" (p. 114)

Hudspith (1994), Day (1994) and Harris and Malin (1994) also discussed how Aboriginal students could be assisted to enjoy and succeed in the urban classroom. Hudspith emphasised the importance of teacher-student humour while Day argued for the importance of empowering Aboriginal students to succeed

academically. Harris and Malin claimed that positive attitudes were vital to the success of Aboriginal children in schools.

Herbert (1995) highlighted the critical issue of the dual struggle faced by Aboriginal girls in schools. She argued that teachers seem to be unaware that "on the one hand they are trying to deal with their femininity in the context of intra-cultural values and beliefs while, at the same time, trying to position themselves within a cross-cultural situation" (p. 11).

Other researchers suggest that teacher training programs need modification. Andrews (1993, p. 30) asks the provocative question;

how do teachers, (whose explicit objective is to teach children to succeed in the education system) and how do the children (whose attendance often indicates their own, their parents' or community's desire for them to succeed in the education system), become involved in a process which results in failure?

The literature includes reports of a number of studies of Aboriginal students' attitudes to and perceptions of schooling. The majority emphasise the role of positive teacher and other school personnel attitudes in the education of Aboriginal children. However, few studies use large samples of Aboriginal students from a range of schools. The present study attempts to give an overview of the responses of Aboriginal students to a questionnaire survey containing a number of variables relating to their schooling.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Sample of Schools**

Twenty two schools in the Perth metropolitan area and non-metropolitan areas of Western Australia administered a questionnaire designed to elicit the views and attitudes of Aboriginal students to various aspects of their education. The schools were chosen on the basis of the

number of Aboriginal children enrolled and their willingness to allow students to participate in the research. A mixture of metropolitan and non-metropolitan schools was chosen to ensure a wide spectrum of views from respondents: ten primary (of which three were metropolitan) and twelve secondary (six metropolitan).

### **Sample of Students**

A total of 473 students were surveyed over one calendar month. Forty-six percent were males. The subjects were in years 5 to 10 and ranged in age from ten to seventeen years with the average age being thirteen years and five months and the majority of the respondents between the ages of twelve to fifteen years.

### **Questionnaire**

The questionnaire consisted of 73 items, 56 of which were four-point Likert scale items consisting of responses "strongly agree", "agree", "disagree" and "strongly disagree". The items formed six variables: attitude to absenteeism (7 Likert scale items), attitude to educational and social aspects of schooling (13 items), educational aspirations (9 items), attitude to school behaviour management (7 items), attitude to school atmosphere (11 items) and attitude to teachers (9 items). The variation in the number of questions chosen for each variable represented an attempt to ensure that the diverse aspects of each of the variables were covered by the questionnaire.

Two schools with a sample of ten primary and nineteen secondary students was chosen to conduct a pilot study to pre-test the questionnaire for both reliability and validity.

### **DATA ANALYSIS**

Analysis of the data using the Cronbach Alpha reliability index, which measures the internal consistency of the item scores, was performed using the Ed Stats (Knibb, 1995) computer program. Also using the Ed Stats computer program the student

scores on each of the items were 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.

After the data were checked for reliability and discrimination, they were analysed using frequency count percentages, means and standard deviations to gain an overview of the attitudes of the students to their educational experiences. The frequency count of student responses on the four points of the Likert scale was calculated over particular items and various sub-sets of items. Means and standard deviations were also examined to assist with the interpretation of the frequencies.

### **RESULTS**

The Cronbach Alpha calculation produced a reliability coefficient of 0.93, indicating that the questionnaire was highly internally reliable as a measure of attitudes to schooling by Aboriginal children. Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficients for various subsets of items were also calculated, and ranged from 0.69 to 0.84, indicating that it was highly reliable within its sub-sections of variables. The majority of the co-efficients obtained were within the limits indicated by Griffin and Nix (1991):

two types of reliability are appropriate for attitude scales . . . internal consistency and stability. Internal consistency estimates how well the items act together to elicit a consistent type of response from the respondent . . . Estimates can be well above 0.85 for scales with a few as 10 items and even higher for longer scales. (p. 58)

Items with a discrimination index below 0.3 were closely examined and considered for elimination from the analysis. It became apparent that three items needed to be rejected and an additional six items reverse scored.

After these preliminary investigations of the structure of the instrument the frequency counts, means, standard deviations and percentages on the various variables of the questionnaire were analysed.

#### **Attitude to Absenteeism Variable**

The first variable examined was "Attitude to Absenteeism", which produced highly positive reactions from the respondents, with a mean of 2.96 on the four-point Likert scale of "strongly agree", "agree", "disagree", "strongly disagree". The standard deviation of 0.56 indicates that there were not large variations in the responses on this variable. The frequencies on the items show that the students attend school regularly (85 percent); never miss school (58 percent); don't like missing school (66 percent); and they look forward to school (70 percent). In short, the seven items indicated that Aboriginal children are opposed to absenting themselves from school, are anti-absenteeism and do not regularly stay away from school.

#### **Attitude to Educational and Social Aspects of Schooling Variable**

In the light of the positive responses on the first variable, it is not surprising that the Aboriginal children also responded positively to the second variable of 13 items "Attitudes to Educational and Social Aspects of Schooling". The mean of 2.97 on the four-point Likert scale, with a standard deviation of 0.48, again indicates highly positive responses, with few extreme scores on the variable.

On average 70 percent "strongly agree" or "agree" that they like school, enjoy school activities and learning and gain a measure of success from their school experiences. Highly positive responses were evident in relation to items that indicated they did not want to miss school because of their enjoyment of the subjects studied (76 percent), the school activities (86 percent), the school learning (76 percent) and a belief that they are successful at school. However these results are not matched by

strong positive responses to being rewarded at school (56 percent). This low response rate indicates an area of concern for teachers of Aboriginal children.

#### **Educational Aspirations Variable**

Aboriginal students responded very highly positively to the nine items in the "Educational Aspirations" variable. An average of over 80 percent of the candidates responded that they strongly agreed or agreed on all nine items. The item "I hope to stay at school until end of year 12" evoked a strong positive response (84 percent). The items "I want to get as much education as I can" and "My family wants me to get a good education" gained very strong response rates of 94 percent and 98 percent respectively. Also, the item "I have the ability to stay on at school" (85 percent) gained high average positive responses. By comparison, the item "My teacher(s) encourage me to stay on at school" elicited a low response of 66 percent.

The mean on the variable is 3.27 on the four-point Likert scale, with a standard deviation of 0.49, which indicates very high positive responses with few extreme scores. This sample of Aboriginal students strongly believed in the value of present and further schooling.

#### **Attitude to School Behaviour Management Variable**

Aboriginal students responded highly positively to the seven items in the "Attitude to Behavioural Management" variable with an average of 70 percent responding "strongly agree" or "agree". Seventy-nine percent responded "strongly agree" or "agree" to the item specifically worded "I am treated fairly at school". The item "I get into trouble at school" was responded to negatively by 81 percent of the respondents and the question "I have been sent to the timeout room" evoked a similar negative response. However students less convinced that they were "blamed for things they didn't do at school" (64 percent) and only 49 percent

believed that they were "listened to when they get into trouble".

Overall, the results relating to conflicts over behaviour management at school are highly positive, but the suspension/exclusion figures appear too high, particularly in the light of the other positive results noted above. Twenty-one percent had been sent to a timeout room and 15 percent had been suspended from school. These results should cause disquiet among administrators and teachers in schools with Aboriginal children.

#### **Attitude to School Atmosphere Variable**

The fifth variable examined was "Attitude to School Atmosphere" it produced highly positive reactions from the respondents with the "strongly agree" and "agree" points of the Likert scale evoking a response from an average of 84 percent of the subjects. The item "I feel welcome at school" evoked a 89 percent "strongly agree" or "agree" response. The students believe that the school assisted Aboriginal children (80 percent) and welcomed their parents (88 percent). Possibly the influence of close mates/friends at the school ensured these respondents felt welcome at school (96 percent).

However, these positive results veil other results that are of concern; for example, while 82 percent of the respondents did not feel lonely at school and 88 percent gained assistance from other Aboriginal students at school, only 57 percent "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that the school made them feel important. Notwithstanding this low positive response rate on an individual item, overall the results on the variable indicate that the majority believe they are welcomed, treated fairly and respected at school.

#### **Attitude to Teachers Variable**

The "Attitude to Teachers" questions are interspersed throughout the questionnaire. They revealed a pattern of responses that was less positive than the other areas of students' attitude to schools and their

education. For example, on the sub-set of nine questions regarding their attitude to their teachers, the average "strongly agree" or "agree" response is 70 percent. Forty-two percent of students do not like their teachers, 37 percent "strongly disagreed" or "disagreed" that "my teacher cares what happens to me", and 39 percent "strongly disagreed" or "disagreed" that "most teachers at this school care about me". A number of the respondents "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that "teacher(s) pick on me at school" (20 percent ) and that "the teachers gang up on me" (12 percent). Thirty-four percent indicated that they "strongly disagree" or "disagree" that their teachers encouraged them to continue their education and 27 percent report that they "strongly disagreed" or "disagreed" that teachers always help them and understand them. In contrast to these negative response rates, a high response to the statement "I respect my teachers" (82 percent) was obtained.

#### **IMPLICATIONS**

The major aim of this paper is to analyse the attitudes of Aboriginal students to school and their perceptions of their educational experiences. The majority of students had positive attitudes to school. They felt welcome at school, believed they were treated fairly at school and they received care and respect at school. In short, these results indicate that Aboriginal children and their parents are not unhappy with the schools their children attend. These results confirm the view of Hill (1989) that Aboriginal students did not differ significantly from non-Aboriginal pupils in their enjoyment of school and were keen to stay at school. Their desire for schooling matched non-Aboriginal students if not exceeded their commitment.

The findings on attitudes to absenteeism support the view of Wilkinson (1987) that while Aboriginal parents have the right to withdraw their children from school for reasons that are legitimate their children are usually not absent from school without

their parents' knowledge. Aboriginal parents and children are opposed to absenting themselves from school, are anti-absenteeism and Aboriginal children do not regularly stay away from school. Educators should endeavour to discourage the myth that the majority of Aboriginal children are chronic absentees.

However the number of Aboriginal students who were in trouble at school and the number of students who were suspended from school and excluded from the classroom are cause for disquiet. Gardiner, Evans and Howell (1995) also highlighted the inflated suspension and exclusion rate for Aboriginal students in Western Australian government schools. Educators need to implement suspension and expulsion procedures in schools to ensure that Indigenous children are not over-represented in suspensions and expulsions.

The percentage of children who specified that their teacher encouraged them to continue their education indicates that classroom teachers appear to have low expectations of the educational aspirations of Aboriginal students. Aboriginal students are aware of these teacher attributes. Hill (1989) believes that teachers' perceptions of low career aspirations of Aboriginal students could represent a barrier to motivation. Munns (1998) warns that;

it was found that the development of close personal relationships that were founded on shared cultural empathy would not necessarily translate to enhanced educational outcomes . . . relationships had to be formed at both a personal and a pedagogical level in order to make an educational difference. Teachers of Aboriginal students need to accept the development of both relationships as a critical aspect of their own work. (p. 184)

While the majority of students surveyed had positive relationships with their teachers and respected them the percentage who experienced relationship problems

was high. These results should disturb educators. For over two decades researchers have emphasised the importance of the teacher characteristics in the education of Aboriginal children. Some teachers appear to be unfamiliar with the personal characteristics of an effective teacher of Aboriginal children. It is clear that Fanshawe's (1976, 1984, 1989, 2000) 'warmth and demandingness' model of teacher characteristics is still critical to the education of Aboriginal children.

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