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Chapter 2

Aboriginal children and schooling

2.1 Education and culture

Australian children are generally taught in schools steeped in the culture of the predominantly white, middle class teachers who work in them. Aboriginal children bring to these schools a cultural orientation that is not well understood and is often perceived as deficient. Consequently, many non-Aboriginal teachers are not appreciative of the fact that many Aboriginal children must learn to meet two different sets of adult expectations.

Harris (1988) contends that there are marked differences between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal Australians in terms of their values, lifestyle, and world-view. He cites the following as examples of characteristics of Aboriginal cultures:

- knowledge is owned or looked after by particular people (i.e., not publicly available);
- the quality of relationships between individuals is more important than the quantity of things;
- humans belong to and should “fit into” the environment;
- a non-secular, “religious” view of the world; and
- a more “closed” and “complete” society.

The National Aboriginal Education Committee (1986) claims that Aboriginal society:

- is structured around the community;
- tends not to be materialistic or competitive; and
- tries to gain a group consensus in decision-making. (p. 11)

These cultural characteristics greatly impact on the education of Aboriginal children who embrace the Western world-view in schools. Non-Aboriginal children who have been reared by non-Aboriginal parents generally have similar values, lifestyle and beliefs as their teachers. Aboriginal children reared by Aboriginal parents however, may have different views of what is acceptable and appropriate behaviour; and each may view the behaviour of the other party as “wrong”. Sometimes even the best attempts by the teacher to be inclusive fail, due to a lack of knowledge and/or a failure to understand the cultural background and “ways of knowing” of Aboriginal children.

In her study on child-rearing practices in Australia, Kearens (1984) identifies some of the following differences between non-Aboriginal cultures and Australian Aboriginal cultures: Non-Aboriginal Australians tend to treat babies as helpless creatures needing all decisions to be made for them. They consider their main task as being one of training their infants in various ways (e.g., toilet, obedience) teaching their children to first understand the word “no”, and then using various forms of punishment and approval to shape behaviours. Children are taught to listen to and tend to simple instructions, help with small tasks and

Chapter 5

A model for teaching Aboriginal children mathematics

5.1 What makes the difference; and the model

Previous chapters have focussed on the fundamental elements present in a learning and teaching environment where mathematics is taught to children, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal:

- what the Aboriginal child brings to the learning environment, both culturally and mathematically, and
- what the teacher of mathematics brings to that same environment in terms of expectations, knowledge and skills.

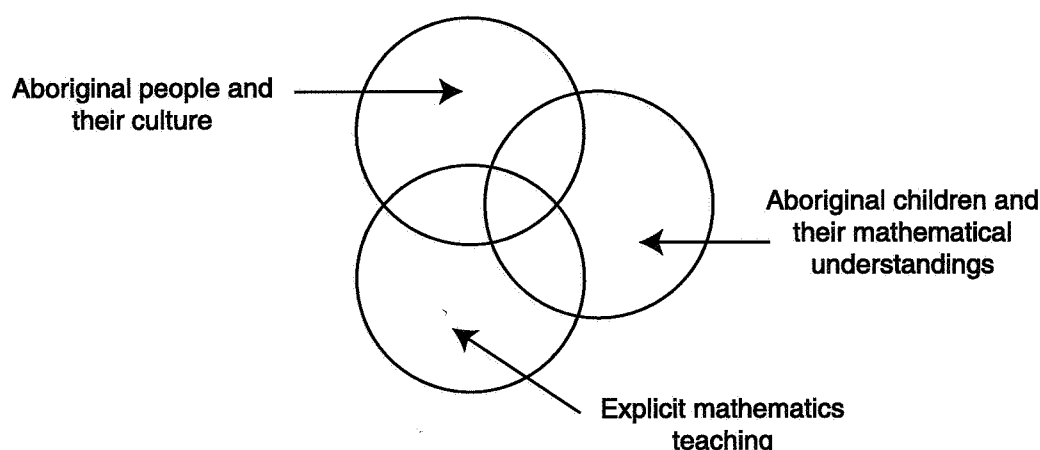


Figure 2. Model of layered focus areas for teaching mathematics to Aboriginal children.

There are three focus areas that overlap to form a “layered” response in the teaching of mathematics as shown in Figure 2. Clearly we are concerned with the intersection of these three circles, it is here that the learning and teaching begins, with all aspects being considered simultaneously. It is the teacher of mathematics who controls this learning environment. He/she must:

1. be aware of and have an appreciation for the Aboriginal people; their culture and how it impacts on Aboriginal children in a school environment of the dominant culture;