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Autonomy and self responsibility versus non-compliance and socially maladjusted

As an Indigenous educator working in mainstream education, I found it disheartening when I read that in order for a child to 'succeed' in Australia today they should enter the education system with specifically defined behaviour styles. Styles such as asking questions when they don't know something, managing their own belongings and following a set routine (King & Boardman, 2006) are emphasised as important in Western society. These behaviours are different from those expected by Indigenous parents (Malin, Campbell, & Aguis, 1996). From an Indigenous perspective these styles seem to be focused on making children dependent on others rather than learning to be self sufficient.

These behaviours however are not the focus of Indigenous childrearing and this is what has me concerned. Prominent Indigenous leader Rose Kunothe-Monks recently wrote in a local paper "... if we are to accept change then it must not be at the expense of identity" (Kunothe-Monks, 2006). Researchers who have studied differences in child rearing back up Kunothe-Monks. Children should not have to sacrifice their cultural identity in order to succeed at school (Glover, 1994, Hughes, 2004).

If the education system wants all children to enter already 'pre-trained' in the culture of 'school', aren't they asking families to give up a fundamental part of their culture, their child rearing style? Childrearing is based around one's culture and for Indigenous families this culture is teaching children to be independent and to make their own decisions regarding their needs.

There was a time in Australia when children entered preschool in order to learn to slowly adjust to changes and expectations of formal education. If they didn't have this opportunity, in the Northern Territory a 'Transition' class was designed to assist children with the transition from home to school. Now education systems across Australia appear to expect children to arrive at school with these formal learning behaviours and 'skills' pre-learnt. Just how much are educators dictating and enforcing a culturally biased way of childrearing and learning?

King & Boardman, (2006) state that "learning is impeded by noncompliant and uncontrolled behaviour", but what is considered as noncompliant and

uncontrollable? How much is learning impeded not by the child's 'normal' home behaviour, but by his or her teacher's inability to understand, respect and work with it?

While I acknowledge that it is important for Indigenous children to learn to 'fit in' to the culture of the majority - 'fitting in' should not mean totally disregarding the culture of the minority. Having worked in various early childhood environments, I have found that allowing for children to be independent and self regulating is not an impossible task. Having a 'routine' that offers flexibility allows for children to make some of their own decisions while still meeting the requirements and restraints placed on an organisation. Maria Montessori's philosophy to learning is to give children "an opportunity to care for and maintain their own environment and encourage them to look after themselves and to provide them with an environment that relates to real life and challenges the mind (Lewis, 2001).

I take inspiration from Annette Hamilton (1981) a noted anthropologist who studied Indigenous child rearing in Arnhemland in the Northern Territory. In her view, "If all children were not ruined by adults 'training' them and were left to their own devices, then everything would be right in the world" (Hamilton, 1981).

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