Interpretations of Classroom Discipline Practices by Teachers and Indigenous Students in a Western Australian Secondary School

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The aim of this study was to investigate the perceptions and interpretations of Year 8–10 Indigenous students and their teachers in relation to specific incidents of classroom management. The students and their teachers from one metropolitan secondary school were interviewed after the students were removed from the classroom for misdemeanours and referred to the next level of discipline. Indigenous students and teachers described the events that led to the action, and how they interpreted those events. Indigenous students' perceptions could be categorised into three types: they accepted that they were at fault; they denied fault and blamed other students or the teacher; or an initially minor incident escalated to a more serious one. Teachers reported events from a position of power and authority; they considered that students who disrupted were misfits but they were very concerned about incidents affecting the rest of the class. In many cases both parties worked to construct a situation which led to the student's removal.

Introduction

Many teachers believe that classroom control is their biggest challenge (Charles, 1992). Failure to control students is considered to be an indication of poor teaching ability and attracts the condescension of other teachers, students and parents who hold such teachers in low esteem. Teachers' success is closely linked to the ability to control students (Jessup, 1995;
Reid, 1989). The routines of the classroom are complex and dynamic and good discipline is not merely a matter of rules and control. Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore and Ouston (1979) established the importance of sound classroom climate, the effective use of rewards and the establishment of good relationships between teachers and students. The relationship between teachers and students is dynamic and entails continuous construction (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler, & Dowsett, 1982).

Although student conformity to school rules might be the objective of many teachers, such an achievement says little about the quality of the classroom environment or the effectiveness of instruction. In particular, when the rules are applied to students whose racial, cultural and social backgrounds differ from those of the teachers, the grounds for obedience to these rules are less compelling. Reid (1989) emphasised the contribution which teachers had to make to the construction of misbehaviour in the classroom, and in the present research the processes by which this resulted in Indigenous students being disciplined is examined.

In proportion to their numbers in schools, Indigenous students in Western Australia get into trouble more often than other students. The disruptions that are attributed to them range from minor infractions which are dealt with in the classroom to more severe problems that result in suspension from school. In Western Australia, thirty days’ suspension results in exclusion from school, and the rate of suspension and exclusion of Indigenous students is much higher than for non-Indigenous students. The extent of this imbalance is evident from the number of exclusions: in 1993, Indigenous students, who comprised less than five per cent of the student population in Western Australia, made up 47 per cent of exclusions (Gardiner, Evans, & Howell, 1995). More recent data indicates that suspension from school targets Indigenous students unequally: they form only three per cent of the Australian population but constitute 12 per cent of suspensions (Australian Law Reform Commission, 1997).

The process of suspension is built into most school discipline policies today. It is intended as a last resort for difficult cases where milder sanctions are inappropriate. Typically, the steps that lead to suspension are clearly delineated in school policies (Education Department of Western Australia, 1998). In practice, however, systems of implementation do not necessarily function according to policy and this may be the case with
Indigenous students. Given the unrepresentative proportion of Indigenous students who receive suspensions each year, it was considered worthwhile to examine the processes that operated to bring about the suspension of Indigenous students in one Western Australian school. The aim of the research was to explore teachers' and students' interpretations of the events that led up to the suspension. It was anticipated that the research would reveal inequalities in the application of behaviour management practices in relation to Indigenous students. As a consequence this might assist teachers to modify their methods of work to avoid conflict.

Explanations for these inequalities can be grounded in a range of theoretical perspectives (Partington, 1997). In particular, cultural explanations vie with explanations derived from a critical examination of the context and processes operating in the classroom. Cultural explanations for the differential experience of Indigenous students in school discipline incidents explore cultural characteristics that lead either to misunderstanding or are the basis for sound relations between the teacher and the student. Cultural conflict occurs when Indigenous students, immersed in their home culture, are confronted by the dominant culture at school which pervades the institution and is in evidence in the structures, interactions and knowledge that is transmitted in classrooms.

Even if they have been raised in urban settings, Indigenous students are likely to demonstrate values and practices that reflect those of traditional Indigenous society (Malin, 1989). These include autonomy and self-reliance, an absence of subordination to adults and respect built on relationship rather than role. Given that the school's culture of student conformity is built on a set of values that demand student subordination, subservient relationships and conformity rather than independence, there is bound to be culture conflict in the school for Indigenous students. Teachers can reduce this conflict by employing culturally appropriate strategies, i.e. interactional processes that accommodate the student's culture and result in his/her perception of acceptance and understanding in the classroom. However, this is not always feasible, given the complexity of culture and the diversity of backgrounds of Indigenous students across Australia. A range of strategies has been identified in relation to culturally appropriate instruction
More traditionally oriented students are likely to experience difficulties with the content of the curriculum because their home environments reflect little that is in the curriculum. For example, the genres of reading and writing are likely to be seriously different, with Indigenous students acquiring a 'moving and stopping' genre (Malcolm, 1994) rather than the typical genres of standard Australian English. The absence of familiar and supportive content may lead Indigenous students to reject the content of the classroom and withdraw, either physically or mentally, giving rise to further occasions in which they are subjected to the disciplinary authority of the school.

An alternative explanation is founded on power relations that operate in the classroom. Relations of power appear to pervade all educational contexts (Gore, 1995; Manke, 1997) but there are additional pressures on Indigenous students due to their location as members of a subordinated group in society. This location has been created as a consequence of historical oppression and consequent 'castelike' status (Ogbu, 1995) arising from colonial domination. Teachers' are likely to be more oppressive in relation to Indigenous students than other students. As Cummins (2001) noted, the 'cultural literacy' of the dominant group is imposed on the subordinate group who are seen to have inherently deficient culture and values. The discourses of schooling, designed for the 'generic' student (Luke, 1995), may disadvantage Indigenous students in diverse ways. The forms of communication and interaction in the school, while familiar and comfortable to many students, can be alienating for some Indigenous students.

Alienation of Indigenous students by the school, however, is not passively accepted. Instead, they are likely to resist (Folds, 1987), thereby enhancing their status as difficult students and leading to even greater oppression to keep them in check. For many, this resistance speeds their exit from school as a result of the application of school rules that enforce suspension and exclusion of students who disrupt the system.

Even though Indigenous cultural attributes may be relevant to an understanding of classroom dynamics, they are overshadowed in the school by the attributes of the dominant culture and little—or no—value is placed on them and they become irrelevant to the operation of the school. The issue, then, becomes one that
is based on power: the power of the institution to ignore alternative ways of interpreting the world, and the powerlessness of Indigenous people to have their reality represented in the school.

Neither perspective, however, is fully adequate by itself to explain the situation of Indigenous students in relation to school discipline. For an understanding of the actions and consequences that occur, both are required. Cultural characteristics may bring into play relations of power that exacerbate social situations in classrooms and can lead to the imposition of severe consequences for Indigenous students.

The Operation of the Student Behaviour Management System

In keeping with the recommendation of the report on disruptive behaviour in schools (Education Department of Western Australia, 1995), the school had a discipline policy which stated the roles and responsibilities of staff, outlined processes for conflict management, and prescribed procedures to follow if conflict couldn't be resolved.

The discipline policy, termed the Managing Student Behaviour (MSB) Policy, was instituted in the school in the mid-1980s and reflected much of Glasser's (1969) perspective on behaviour management. The document outlined steps that teachers should take to resolve a conflict. Initial steps in the process of settlement were intended to resolve the conflict within the classroom. The steps included self-reflection so that teachers questioned their approach to discipline including how they provided positive reinforcement, the use of a questioning technique with the student—'What are you doing?'; 'Is it against the rules?'; warning the student—'This cannot continue, we have to work it out. Obey the rules or ... '; and the use of isolation within the room or outside. If all these failed, then the student was referred to another person. The severity of the incident determined the appropriate person: a buddy teacher for an infraction that could be readily resolved; the year coordinator if it wasn't resolved satisfactorily, and the deputy principal for a major infraction such as fighting or swearing at the teacher. The primary purpose of this step in management was to defuse the situation by allowing a cooling-off period before working out the problem with the teacher. A teacher, Edith Farmer, described the process of cooling off in relation to a conflict with one student:
Disruptive behaviour is not easily defined in a way that is clear and unambiguous (McManus, 1995). At the school where the present study took place, the school rules were few and specific, although they did not encompass the range of behaviours for which students were referred to other teachers. School policy allowed teachers considerable flexibility in the interpretation of the behaviours that warranted referral. Among the teachers, there did not appear to be a consistent approach to discipline. Sometimes, students were sent out of the room after committing relatively minor offences following a series of disruptions by other students whereas on other occasions they were not. The timing of the offences influenced teachers' decisions to send the students out of the room. In some cases, the teacher failed to follow the sequence of school approved strategies designed to defuse situations and went straight to eviction.

In all but two cases in the present study, there was close agreement between the teachers and the students over the events that lead to students being sent from the room. However, the perceptions of the significance and meaning of these events differed. From the student data, the events could be divided into three categories: those in which the students considered the course of action fair; those in which it was seen to be unfair but they readily accepted the teacher's authority; and those where the events escalated from a minor infraction at the start to a major misdemeanour by the time the student was sent from the room.

In the early years of the behaviour management policy in the school, students and staff were informed of the processes involved. One teacher, Ian Jamieson, pointed out that new teachers were still given staff development on the policy and practice, but students were no longer provided with information.
on the system because many students were never going to be involved in it, and 'those students who are going to be involved with this system are going to find out soon enough'.

**Method**

The school consisted of approximately 85 teachers and 700 students, of whom some 85 were Aboriginal, principally members of the Nyoongar community of south west Western Australia. These students were distributed across the many classes in the school. Data on conflicts that resulted in students being evicted from classes were gathered after the event as it was not feasible to be in attendance when events occurred. Interviews were conducted as soon as possible following the student being sent from the room. Generally, this was on the same day or soon after.

**Interviews**

The cases for interview were selected by one of the teachers who worked closely with the Indigenous students. These cases were selected according to criteria which we discussed prior to the commencement of the research. Cases had to involve an Indigenous student who was sent by the teacher from the classroom to the next level of behaviour management, and had to involve an altercation between a student and a teacher. An initial set of questions was used to direct the interviews, and additional questions were asked if the circumstances warranted it.

Twenty six interviews were conducted with Indigenous students who were sent from the room, and a total of 66 interviews were conducted with their teachers and with others associated with the operation of the school's discipline procedures. Interviews with teachers were conducted in an annexe off the staff lounge or in their offices, while students were interviewed in the office of the Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers and the teacher who chose the cases. This was a room where Indigenous students often gathered to talk with these staff members at lunchtime and other breaks during the day, and where they felt comfortable.

**The Students' View**

*I Had To Go Out and That's It*

Ten of the students who were sent out accepted that they had caused the incident. These students considered the school rules to
be legitimate, and that they deserved the consequences of their actions. In a number of cases, the students stated that the application of the rules was fair. These students were conscious of the potential for injustice in the application of the rules and were able to indicate the conditions which made their treatment fair.

Interviewer: Do you think you were trying to upset the teacher?

Colin: Yes, like she shouted at me and I like I said I just kept on talking, irritating her, making her angry and that's probably what sent me up, the way I was irritating, being disruptive.

Interviewer: Do you think that the other students were as much involved or do you think you were the main one?

Colin: All the time they're like that in that particular class, them boys and that, you know, they muck around and shout and swear and that but that particular day I know even though they was talkin I know it was me 'cos when she told me to be quiet and that I wouldn't. I just kept on going you know, forcin' her to send me out and that.

This compliance does not equate with submissiveness or weakness. Colin, like other students, exercised judgment on the course of events. He made comparisons of the performance of other students and he was aware of the subtle distinctions between their behaviour and his. This suggests a sophisticated awareness of the conduct of classroom behaviour.

In another incident, Jarred Naylor, a Year 8 student, was sent out with Colin for deliberately baiting the teacher by echoing the teacher's statements at the beginning of the lesson. Despite several warnings, the two students persisted to the point that they were removed from class. The teacher, Grant Francis, attributed the misbehaviour to a combination of peer group pressure and image: 'To sit there and be cooperative and actually answer questions is just so contrary to their image that I think that causes them not to.' He also noted that Jarred had a reputation as a troublemaker. Grant considered that his interaction with students at the beginning of the lesson contributed to Jarred's acceptance of the discipline:
[In] the class before yesterday’s class, I had a problem with the two of them and I sent them to the coordinator’s office. So, yesterday before the class started I had a word with the two of them outside and said ‘Look, I’ve had it, this cannot go on indefinitely, now either you promise to behave in class, or I will not let you in in the first place’. And they promised and sat there, they looked serious, they looked honest and sincere and said ‘No we want to come inside, we’ll do the right thing’. And, of course, fifteen minutes later it started.

Jarred reported a very similar version of events:

**Interviewer:** How did you feel when you were sent out?

**Jarred:** I was thinking about when I went out yesterday for messing around. Mr Francis, we were talking to him before we went in and he said will we have the same problem as yesterday and we said ‘No’, if one of us mess up they send us to the office to send us outside, you know and then that’s what he done.

**Interviewer:** So he warned you before you went in.

**Jarred:** Yes.

Students who accepted the authority of the teacher believed they had offended and willingly accepted the consequences. Even so, these students were evaluating the teachers’ actions and the apparent fairness of the teachers’ resolution of behaviour in these situations led the students to accept the outcome.

‘*We Thought it was Unfair Because We Weren’t Doing Anything*’

A group of students complied with the teachers’ demands to leave the room and go to a buddy teacher or other authority figure, but considered the action was unfair. Feelings ranged from annoyance to a desire to do violence to the teacher. A common thread running through the students’ explanations of events was that they were innocent of any wrongdoing. In one incident at the beginning of a maths lesson, Evan Mourish, a Year 8 Aboriginal boy who got into trouble along with two other non-Indigenous boys, described the event:

Me and two other boys were sitting up the back and the teacher asked us to move and we didn’t want to because we didn’t think we were doing anything wrong, but she told us to move, or we’ll get sent out. So we didn’t move and she sent us out.
In the above instance, the teacher's final decision, to send the students out, was clear-cut: their refusal to obey a teacher's instruction resulted in the application of the MSB Policy. However, the path to this decision was not so clear cut.

The teacher reported that the initial decision to ask the students to shift their desks was based on a number of factors: the students were giggling at the back of the room; the desks were in disarray and she wanted them to have a better view of the lesson; Evan had a penetrating laugh and therefore was noticeable in the classroom; there was a group of girls in front of the three boys, and the teacher was afraid the boys would get up to mischief because of this. The purpose of shifting the boys was to avoid a conflict situation during the lesson, but instead it led to their eviction. As the teacher stated:

Fran: At the beginning of the lesson we do mental arithmetic and of course they organise their files and get ready and there was bit of giggling at the back of the room. The only thing is, the room is not mine, so there were desks all over the place. So there were three boys sitting right at the back and when I heard the giggling I straight away said to myself 'Are they up to some mischief?'. So, what I only asked them, if they could shift their desks to the middle of the room, all three of them. So they'd have a better view rather than sitting behind other students and they just refused.

Interviewer: Just point blank?

Fran: Yeh, they just said they're not doing anything. I said, 'I know you're not doing anything but I want you to shift your desk in the middle of the room' because the way the room was set up there was nothing in the middle, it's all blank. Desks on the side so I just wanted them to put their desks in the middle and they refused.

Interviewer: And then what happened?

Fran: And the next thing is well, when they refused I said 'Well that's deliberately disobeying teacher's instructions' and the only alternative I could do was just send them out of class through the MSB system and I sent all three of them.
Interpretation of Classroom Discipline Practices

This event differed from the preceding one because the teacher's focus on what might occur rather than what was the case was judged to be unjustified by the students. It would have been in the teacher's interest to exert a more general change in the classroom environment so that the targets of her management would not feel victimised. Rather than accepting her exercise of power without question, the boys challenged her assumption of authority in the classroom. There were clearly alternative approaches the teacher could have employed to ensure order. She noted that the room was in a state of disarray (the room was not the one she normally taught in at this time due to renovations) and it may have been more politic to have rearranged the whole class in order to engineer a more amenable arrangement of the boys at the back of the room. This would have avoided any resistance from them. More attention on the teacher's part to the dynamics of the classroom social system may have averted the conflict and ensured effective control.

Simon Newburn, the Aboriginal Education Worker, observed that many Indigenous students felt that they were picked on.

I think what it is they're not really listening to what the kid has got to say. Like I said before most of them feel they're getting picked on. Other ones are doing things, like starting it off or doing it and the other ones, the ones who are getting caught are the ones who are sort of answering and when they get caught by the teacher [she] sends them out and [is] not giving them a chance to explain themselves that another party were involved and if the other party was sent out too, they'll feel a lot better. They believe in fairness.

The dynamics of the situation, however, are more complex than just the offering and acceptance of an explanation. In some cases personal relationships between teacher and students were unsatisfactory, and Indigenous students perceived negative feelings towards them, while teachers considered some students' behaviour to be beyond the pale, and demonstrated their feelings accordingly. Helen Gaskill, a year coordinator, made the following observation:

The main thing I can differentiate with the Aboriginal students is that they think they're being picked on because they're Aboriginal.

Although teachers tended to discount the extent of racism, Indigenous adults who were interviewed were concerned that it occurred. One noted that 'A lot of the black kids go off the deep
end because they know [that even if] the parents come to see them the teacher will always listen to another white kid before they listen to that black kid.’ There was a common perception by Indigenous students of unfair treatment towards them compared with non-Indigenous students. They reported that teachers applied more severe sanctions to them than to other students for similar offences. In both of the cases described above, the teachers could have handled the situations differently to preserve peace in their classroom and ensure all students were learning. Inappropriate actions on the part of the teachers were central events that led to the decisions to send students out. Although it was not possible for us to judge whether racism influenced these actions, Indigenous members of the school community shared this perception.

‘She Shouted at Me and That’s Why I Shouted Back’

The initial behaviour of a third group of students resulted in the situation escalating so that they were dealt with more severely than would have been warranted if the conflict had been contained. One incident in which the student and the teacher interacted to construct a more damaging situation exemplified this process. The student, Steve Wallace, had forgotten to take his calculator to a mathematics lesson. The teacher, Kay Falls, had taken four spare calculators into the class and loaned them to other students who didn’t have their own. She reported that she had no more and that Steve had failed to take his calculator to the previous lesson. Although there were diverse possibilities for ensuring Steve was in a position to do the work—for example, he could have been permitted to share a calculator with another student—the teacher chose to leave him without appropriate resources.

We were also doing a bit of work on percentages and he does need a calculator, which he has got one, but he hasn’t brought it to school recently. I have got four which I give out but I haven’t got more than four and I don’t intend to get more than four and because he was actually sent out of the class the day before we actually used the calculators and he wasn’t given one. He actually did take my calculator as well at one stage. Because another student had borrowed it and he took it from the other student so he could use it. So I took it off him and gave it back to the student that I’d given it to so that he could do his work.
This denial of access to resources meant that Steve was unable to do the maths and the teacher reported that subsequently he became disruptive.

He was making noises and he wasn’t doing his work and he was just not making any effort so I sent him out of the classroom and he stood outside for a while.

After some time Kay brought Steve back in and sat him at the front of the room. She observed that he had his hat on when he came back into the classroom:

He had his hat on again when he came back into the classroom, because he put it on when he went out. I don’t know why they have to have their hats on all the time. So, I took it off him and I put it on my desk and I said you can have it back at the end of the day.

At all times the teacher was in a position of power over Steve and his actions. She could have taken steps that would have provided Steve with the resources available to other students in the room and this could have arrested the course of events before he was sent to the office. However, she chose to demonstrate to Steve that he was subordinate to her by taking his calculator, by removing him from the room, allowing him to return to the room and by confiscating his hat. Steve complied with the teacher’s directives until the confiscation of his hat. As indicated above, this angered him, apparently because he had forgotten to remove it and he felt that the penalty, confiscation until the end of the day, was too severe. His responses to previous demonstrations of power by the teacher were relatively passive but in this instance he reacted strongly.

Steve’s explanation was straightforward:

I went out of the classroom and then she let me back in and I had my hat on and I forgot I had my hat, so she took my hat off me.

His response escalated the situation:

Interviewer: When it happened, how did it make you feel? How were you feeling?

Steve: Angry. I felt like throwing something at her, everything that was on the ground.
Interviewer: But how did, like make you feel angry towards her for taking it off you or just for sending you out?

Steve: Taking me hat off me.

Interviewer: Did you try to explain that you forgot you had it on?

Steve: Yeh, I forgot I had it on but she kept on saying you'll get it at the end of the day and I just said, 'Nu, I'm grabbing it now.' So, when I grabbed it, she sent me out to Mr Steed's office.

For Steve, the key issue was the confiscation of his hat. This personal affront to his image severely affected him. His act of bravado—grabbing the hat back—appears to have been a tactic to regain kudos in the classroom (Munns, 1998). However, it also was a direct threat to the teacher's power in the classroom and she had little recourse but to send him to the deputy principal.

During the interview with Kay, she indicated that Steve had misbehaved in her classes before. She had spoken to him at the end of the previous lesson about his lack of effort:

He's a really bright student if he wanted to be, and he said yes he knows he's badly behaved and he was going to do the right thing and he was going to be behaved and I expected him to be better when he came into class.

For his part, Steve claimed that he was not deliberately antagonising the teacher. His resistance to the teacher's inappropriate use of her authority resulted in him disobeying her instructions. It is likely that this response was a consequence of cultural influences, so that his perception of his own autonomy (Malin, 1990) and the humiliation (Christie, 1987) entailed in having his hat removed so publicly, contributed to his resistance to the teacher's instructions. For her part, the teacher suffered no consequences of her ill-considered actions. Her neglect of rather basic classroom management and instructional strategies directly contributed to Steve's penalty.

Earlier in the dispute, the teacher could have responded to Steve's actions in a number of ways that limited demonstrations of power, using instead what Manke (1997) referred to as 'politeness formulas'. These formulas, which protect the public self-respect of the listener, may be used by teachers 'because they wanted to preserve that self-esteem or because they wisely
did not want to subdue students' thinking or provoke them to the point of rebellion' (Manke, 1997). Manke also noted that Cazden (1988) suggested that teachers ‘live in fear of an outbreak of student opposition, and use politeness formulas to steer clear of confrontations that they fear they may lose’ (Manke, 1997, p.90). Kay, however, showed no such concern, choosing instead to focus on the strategies that would most likely be offensive to Steve culturally and would also be offensive to most adolescent students.

In other disciplinary situations, the school administrators acknowledged that escalation was a problem for Indigenous students who refused to accept the authority of the teachers. Swearing was a particular feature of escalation, as was shouting at the teacher, walking out, and refusing to comply with instructions. Once an MSB action had been commenced against a student, there were requirements for its completion: the student had to fill out a contract, return to the teacher and discuss the contents and then abide by the contract. At all these stages, Indigenous students were at considerable risk of non-compliance. Repetition of the behaviour after agreeing in the contract to cease lead to more severe consequences, further escalating the problems for students. Resistance to the teachers’ exercise of their authority was a common feature of such escalations.

*Retaliation as a Form of Escalation*

Some students reciprocated the actions of teachers. When Colin Bradley failed to return to his seat as quickly as the teacher would have liked at the beginning of a lesson, she shouted at him. Colin reported as follows:

Colin: I was doing what the teacher said—go back to my seat and then she shouted at me for nothing and that's when I got wild.

Interviewer: So what she said made you angry?

Colin: Well, cause the way she said it cause she first told me to go back to my seat and so I did what she said and then she shouted at me and that's why I shouted back.

As a consequence of his shouting back, he was immediately sent out of the room, but he had made his point: he did not regard the teacher as someone with a natural right to shout at him ‘for
Lots of kids here, the normal way that they behave is fine for a classroom. They're reasonably under control. It's not necessarily that, it's more that they're aware of what's expected in the classroom and they can fit in with that easily. But I think with Bill and a few others around that that's a harder task for them than most kids.

Teachers gave a variety of reasons for this perceived deviance. A couple of students were suspected of being on drugs; others were thought to be deliberately playing up so that they could be sent outside and so avoid work; and, as indicated above, some were considered to lack an awareness of normal standards of behaviour. Not all teachers had these perceptions, however: some regarded the offending behaviour as an aberration for the student, who was normally regarded as typically conformist and by definition a good student. Even so, the establishment of reputations was accompanied by a perception that the students were no longer capable of being redeemed. Teachers were aware of the path to dropout that many students followed and misbehaviour was a common step on this path (Munns, 1998). None of the teachers gave explanations grounded in cultural differences or racial discrimination: a matter which is discussed below.

Extensive resources were available to redeem students who misbehaved, including a school psychologist, year and subject coordinators, an MSB coordinator, the Deputy Principals and a teacher responsible for the Indigenous students. In most schools students in trouble were also counselled by the Aboriginal teaching assistants who sought to negotiate satisfactory resolutions of their situations. In this school, however, the teaching assistants were excluded from participation in staff discussions regarding disciplinary acts. Simon Newburn claimed that the strong advocacy of the Indigenous assistants for the students had been an embarrassment to the school authorities.

Now that they've [the Indigenous students] got an AEW, or someone to listen to them, a spokesperson for them, they're [the school administration] more or less blocking us out a bit, you know. They don't want us to get too much involved with it because they know what we're going to say. But we know exactly what the kids are going through. We sensed all those things when we were going to school with the teachers. And the same things happen now. And now that they've got someone to talk for them they have to see him but that's why when I say to a kid 'Well let's go to the office or we'll go and see so and so', they'll say 'No, because they won't listen to anyone' is the main
thing you hear about. About the kids' excuses to not going to see him. That's why you find that a lot of Nyoongar kids will hit back instead of walking away or going telling someone.

According to Simon, the alternative knowledge that the teaching assistants represented to the school was unacceptable. It appears that the assistants were excluded from discussions so that the dominant group's explanations of disciplinary events were not contradicted. If this was true, the students' principal source of advocacy was cut off from the decision-making process.

'Once John starts then they immediately start shouting'
The students only considered the effects on themselves of conflict with the teacher but the teachers had to adopt a broader perspective. In particular, they had to consider the likely effect of any event on the rest of the class. Fran Lewis was concerned with this form of escalation:

'It (disobedience) has a sort of impact on the rest of the kids and they say, 'Oh, he got away with it, I can get away with it as well'. Sort of carries on and you probably end up with six, seven or eight kids out of the room.

This concern was uppermost in the minds of the teachers when they were confronted with classroom management issues. A consequence was the demand for a quick resolution of problems which may have resulted in injustice for some students. This need for a broader view of the operation of the classroom was a significant element that distinguished the perceptions of the students from those of the teacher. Those students who considered that they were being treated unfairly appeared to see events from their own point of view and were unaware of the teacher's concerns. One of the year coordinators, Helen Gaskill, noted that all students, not just Indigenous students, were at risk of getting into trouble if they responded to incitement from another student. In the conflict between Fran Lewis and Evan Mourish, the lack of awareness of the teacher's perspective on the part of the students constituted a communication breakdown. When the students returned to the room after filling out their contracts in the buddy teacher's room, Fran explained the reason they had been moved, and 'they understood that'. But as the teacher stated, 'Having other kids [in
the classroom while you are doing this] you can’t explain in
detail'.

The differential power of the teacher relative to the students
was central to determining whose concerns were ignored in
the classroom. In most of the incidents examined, the students
considered that they had valid reasons for their behaviours, yet
the teacher’s power, backed by the authority of the school,
resulted in these concerns being neglected.

One context in which justice did not appear to be given to
students’ rights was in situations where considerable disruption
existed. Sequential infractions by different students were not
differentiated according to the offender, so if a particular student
offended for the first time, his or her offence was treated as if
it had been preceded by multiple infractions and the penalties
that were applied were far harsher than was warranted for a first
offence. Also, the teacher did not always distinguish between
initiators and responders. A student who initiated an offence may
have been missed by the teacher, but the student who responded
may have been noticed, and so received disciplinary action, as
Helen Gaskill reported:

It’s always the person who responds that is the person who is sent
from the class or is growled at by the teacher and that, you know, is
when the unfairness comes in. Because they responded they get
sent out and it’s unfair because the person who antagonised wasn’t
caught and unfortunately that’s just a fact of life.

From the perspective of the individual students, such penalties
as those above were seen as unfair because the offence might
have been their first, as in the case of Harry Evans: ‘Everyone
else was talking and I only said something once and then I got
sent out of the classroom for it while everyone else stayed in
there.’ Harry considered that his offence did not warrant sending
out. He was only put in the corridor, but subsequently was
brought back in to finish his work during the lunch hour. The
combination of a sense of injustice at having been sent out
unfairly and a desire not to give up his lunchtime resulted in his
refusal to remain in class, and so the incident escalated.

‘You Speak Softly’
Some teachers who experienced difficulties with Indigenous
students used management strategies which, while possibly
effective with non-Indigenous students, resulted in retaliation
Student retaliation to teachers' actions was one of the ways in which students ended up in more serious trouble. Several students reported that the teachers' behaviour offended them in some way and so they retaliated.

Me and my friend were up the front of the room and talking. Everyone talks and that in our class, we always do our own thing you know, we are all doing different things. And then the teacher just come up and he used this tone of voice and I didn't really like it and he asked where I was born and that. Mainly picking on me really, or I thought he was, and he said 'what are you up to?' and I was being smart and that and just didn't really answer him properly and he didn't like how I was talking and then he said 'Oh, if you keep that up I will send you up'. I said 'fine by me'. Then he sent me up.

One teacher, Drew James, experienced in teaching Indigenous students in remote communities, attempted to adopt culturally appropriate strategies that were preferred by Indigenous students. However, in a conflict in the gymnasium with Les Tanner, a Year 8 student, he found that this did not work. Early in the lesson, Les and the group he was in completed the basketball exercises they had been set and, according to Drew, were 'messing about but interfering with other students'. Drew utilised standard MSB procedures to control the group and this eventually resulted in the removal of Les to a less competent group. As a consequence, Les refused to participate. Drew attempted to resolve the situation without penalty. Being aware of appropriate communication strategies to use with Indigenous students from his time in the north of the State, Drew explained the situation clearly, spoke softly, tried to establish a compromise and attempted not to incite bad behaviour. Even so, Les still walked out of the class and this earned him a visit to the deputy principal.

Drew's employment of culturally appropriate strategies for interaction and communication, however, would have worked only if Les had been willing to participate in the interaction and if rapport had existed. Because Les was still smarting from the earlier actions of the teacher to control the group, the anger he felt nullified the later appropriate communication strategies of the teacher, which were applied too late to influence the course of events. The teacher's action possibly brought to the forefront of Les's attention the submissive role he was expected to play, a role he rejected.
Teachers' Expectations

A diversity of acts led to students being sent out. Failure to comply with teachers' directives was the foundation of most of these evictions. Often, teachers sent students out if they didn't comply quickly enough. The range of acceptable behaviours which students were expected to display extended to the way that they were expected to talk to the teacher. Some teachers expected the students to communicate in certain ways in order to gain their consent. Failure to do so resulted in withholding permission for activities. Kay Falls, who was involved in the earlier altercation described above, refused permission for Harry Evans, a Year 10 student, to go to the toilet. She explained her reason in terms of the way in which Harry asked:

I'd had a little bit of a problem with another student and a textbook but suddenly Harry got up, well, no he didn't get up, he put his hand up and he said 'I want to go to the toilet'. The way he said it was, you know, I'd listened all the way but I said 'no I'm sorry, it's near the end of the lesson now, you can't go to the toilet'.

When Harry asked to go to the toilet, he was aware that the teacher was experiencing difficulties with another student in the class.

The teacher was having an argument with this student and then I needed to go to the toilet, so I asked if I could go to the toilet and she wouldn't let me go so I waited for ten minutes until she settled down from the argument with the other students and I asked if I could go again but she wouldn't let me go, so I just told her that if she doesn't let me go I will end up running out of the classroom because I was really bursting to go and she wouldn't let me go so I got up to walk out of the classroom and then she just stood in the doorway and wouldn't let me go and then I just, I threatened her a bit with my height because she is shorter than me and looked down at her and asked her to please move out of the way but she wouldn't move so I just walked around her and just moved her out of the way and ran down to the toilet and then went back and I got sent to Mr Clarke.

Kay Falls's description of events paralleled Harry's account. Leaving the room without permission ensured a harsh penalty for Harry but the whole incident could have been avoided by the teacher. Her perception of the extent of her power in the classroom was misguided. She failed to read the situation accurately and made assumptions about the student's motives,
claiming in the interview that he only wanted to get out of work. The confrontational nature of her interactions with Harry mirrored the earlier problems she experienced with Steve. Her lack of understanding of the students, the effects of her actions and possible alternative strategies were major contributing factors to both incidents.

However, among several students, there was support for teachers' claims that the desire to avoid work was a major factor in disruptive behaviour. According to the students' reports, in many of the classes where disruptions occurred, lessons were boring, with worksheets commonly being used as the basis for instruction. Some students considered that escape from boring or difficult classes outweighed the sanctions of the MSB system. However, although they were not in a position to force students to work, teachers did have a responsibility to ensure they were motivated to learn.

**Discussion**

Being sent out of the room was not intended to be a punishment but a means for defusing the conflict situation and giving the student and the teacher time to cool off before negotiating a settlement of the dispute. The use made by some teachers of this strategy, however, suggests that it is being used as a punishment, especially when the student is sent directly to higher levels of management, such as the Deputy Principal. The operation of the system strongly favours the teacher. Despite a statement in the school rules that discussion of conflict resolution with the classroom teacher should follow a return to the classroom, in most interviews the students made it clear that they are obliged to apologise to the teacher, rather than develop a mutually acceptable settlement.

Fairness of treatment is important if students are to accept disciplinary action. For several students, a significant element in accepting the disciplinary action was the perception that all those responsible were treated in the same way. The students saw events as a simple linear relationship between the individual act of transgression and the eviction and were unable to accept the complex judgments teachers had to make. However, almost half the students considered they were at fault, and some of these admitted that they deliberately played up to be removed from the class. Among students who accepted that they were at fault there was no questioning of the appropriateness of their treatment or
the timing of the disciplinary action. Teachers who set the scene early were able to construct a shared awareness of the consequences of disruption and students remembered this when they later got into trouble. This attention to the social side of teaching rather than only to the academic side pays dividends (Tattum, 1984).

Two principal explanations for the extent of misbehaviour among Indigenous students are current in the literature. The first refers to cultural differences in values regarding conformity, obedience, deference to adults, language, punctuality and social relationships (Christie, 1987; Groome, 1995). These differences are seen as a principal cause of conflict. The second explanation refers to structural influences in Australian society whereby Indigenous people are dominated by non-Indigenous people and they resist this domination (Folds, 1987; Munns, 1998). Associated with these power relations, racism exacerbates interactions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

The cultural explanation was relevant in some of the management problems that occurred. The demand by teachers that students treat them with respect may not be acceptable to those students who regard respect as earned rather than imposed through a teacher's official rank in the school (Christie, 1987). This may be common to students from many cultural backgrounds but it appears to have been a significant factor in the case of the Indigenous students in this study. When the teacher is talking or giving instructions, Indigenous students might engage in activities such as talking to other students, borrowing materials and so on. These activities are likely to cause the teacher to apply discipline procedures, and so Indigenous students unwittingly become embroiled in MSB procedures through a lack of adherence to the rules of the dominant culture.

For teachers, the solution to the issue of cultural differences is not simply learning some aspects of the culture of Indigenous students. As was seen in the case of Drew James and Les Tanner, speaking softly did not work because a prior relationship—a more important element of Indigenous culture—had not been established, and without this the teacher's efforts were inappropriate. Furthermore, the ways in which culture interacts with power relations contributes to the outcomes of student-teacher altercations. Culturally appropriate strategies for classroom management are not a bag of tricks that can be produced as needed. Rather, the relationships among the various
components of culture must be understood and applied in appropriate contexts so they are seen by students to be relevant and meaningful. In this respect, the needs of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students differ little, and both would benefit from such an approach.

The alternative explanation, based on perceptions of power relations and racism, has considerable currency in the present study. The feelings of injustice reported by the students have considerable support in the literature, where they are explained in terms of resistance (Munns & McFadden, 1997); autonomy (Malin, 1989), shame at their misdemeanour being made public, and the perception of racist discrimination by non-Indigenous teachers (Groome, 1995). Certainly, racism was referred to by Simon Newburn, the Aboriginal teacher assistant, while students reported being picked on and were quick to detect racism. There is also strong support in the literature for the oppressed position of Indigenous students (Keeffe, 1988; Munns, 1998; Munns & McFadden, 1997). Malin (1990) showed the extent of racism in the classroom, while the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991) noted the importance of teacher attitudes in the schooling of Indigenous students. The Indigenous students interpreted the relationships established by the teacher as a rejection of themselves and, consequently, the perception of racism was a possibility. The students' perceptions that non-Indigenous students were treated differently may be due to the unconscious establishment of greater social distance between the teacher and Indigenous students compared with non-Indigenous students. A corollary of this may be the way in which Indigenous students acquire reputations as the year proceeds: They may be constructed as troublemakers because of their experiences in a social situation that denies them influence and a voice.

An added element is the contribution of history. Past experience cannot be ignored in the way in which students respond to schooling, and the experience of Indigenous people in school has been very negative in the past (National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, 1997). There is extensive racism in the community, and many Indigenous students are sensitive to implied or overt racism. It is also likely that they are particularly aware of this issue during adolescence, as their identity as Aboriginals in a dominant non-Indigenous society
takes shape (Groome, 1995). The existence of a resistance component in the Indigenous community would further contribute to a sharp awareness of any assaults on their dignity. The different upbringing of Indigenous students (Kearins, 1984, 1988; Malin, 1989) influences their perceptions of interactions with teachers. As a consequence, some react strongly to perceived unfair treatment from the teacher.

It is possible, as Langton (1988) claims in relation to Aboriginal-police relations, that students demonstrate their rejection of the authority of the teacher by refusing to comply with directives. The historical treatment of Indigenous people has a profound effect on their response to non-Indigenous expression of authority. Many Indigenous students would have been brought up in an environment in which the authority of the dominant culture is portrayed as having doubtful validity, and these early lessons would be reflected in their behaviour in school. Adolescence is a trying time for Indigenous youth as they come to terms with the nature of Australian society and their place in it, and they would be sensitive to potentially racist and discriminatory acts.

The approach adopted by teachers to the management of their classes obviously contributes to the problems that exist. When Fran Lewis ordered Evan Mourish to shift his desk, she thought that she had only two choices: either make an immediate decision in order to avoid a potentially disruptive situation, or leave the context alone and suffer the consequences later. A third option, to engage in discussion with the students to ascertain their intentions and warn them of potential hazards in continuing with their behaviour, may have been better (McManus, 1995). However, there appears to be a mindset among some teachers that students must be dominated. Teachers exercise power in the belief that they expect obedience and, if they do not get this, they take punitive action. Students, however, do not passively accept domination by the teacher, but question, judge and criticise—even if only to themselves. A willingness on the part of teachers to negotiate could have more effectively avoided disruption, although this would mean they would need to acknowledge that power is shared in the classroom, a difficult step for many.

Teachers’ perceptions that students were deliberately causing disruptions to avoid work was supported by interviews with some students. Many of these incidents occurred during lessons in
which work sheets were used. It is possible that some students received a surfeit of work sheets during the day, and deliberately disrupted in order to avoid this form of instruction. Glasser (1990) expressed concern at the boring nature of schoolwork, and it is likely that some students make judgments regarding behaviour on the basis of such a perception. The solution for teachers is to make their lessons more interesting by using fewer worksheets—although Nicklin Dent and Hatton (1996) found that some teachers deliberately chose to present boring lessons until the students behaved themselves more satisfactorily. Worksheets, however, may be used as a control measure as much as a means of instruction. Some teachers may reason that, so long as the students are filling out work sheets, they won’t have time to get into trouble.

It is tempting for teachers to assume that the reason for misbehaviour lies with the individual students concerned. While it is certain that some students possess attributes that result in their lack of compliance with the demands of the school—and this was found in the present study—this is not sufficient reason to heap all the blame on them. There is plenty of evidence that Aboriginals across Australia experience problems in fitting in with mainstream institutions (Coombs, Brandl, & Snowdon, 1983; Malin, 1990; Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, 1991; Task Force on Aboriginal Social Justice, 1994). The process of escalation that occurred in a number of incidents, for example, mirrored the experience of Indigenous people at the hands of the police, as reported in the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991).

The failure of Indigenous students to fit into the routines of the school may be the basis for teachers viewing them as problems. Through their apparent recalcitrance, Indigenous students may develop a bad reputation, and this was seen by Angus (1982) as indicative of a measure of authoritarianism in teachers.

Authoritarian teachers with narrow definitions of the classroom situation, because of their elaborate and rigid system of norms and rules, are more likely to be confronted by pupil behaviour which they regard as unacceptable than are those who negotiate the classroom situation and insist on a minimum number of rules.

(Angus, 1982, p.272)

This suggests an appropriate alternative approach to classroom management of Indigenous students, and possibly of all students.
A move away from narrow definitions of classroom roles of students towards greater student responsibility within a framework of collaboration and more egalitarian teacher-student relationships may result in improved behaviour and achievement (Glasser, 1990). This would benefit all students, as the attitudes displayed by some of the teachers in this study seem inappropriate and are marked by the absence of reflective practice. While initially more time consuming and requiring greater personal commitment by teachers, such an approach would reduce confrontation and mitigate the perception held by many of the Indigenous students that they were being picked on.

**Conclusion**

For most of the students involved in the incidents investigated, it is clear that some modification of the strategies employed by teachers would reduce their offences. The key factors which appear to influence student acceptance of teachers’ management decisions are related to the restrained use of power in the classroom. This embraces the perceptions of fairness of the decision, which relates principally to identifying and acting against the correct offenders; providing a clear prior warning that misbehaviour will result in specified action; acting against behaviour which is clearly breaking the rules, rather than marginal issues; and avoiding escalation. In the context of a conflict, it is easy for the teacher and the student to lose sight of reasonable action. In the heat of the moment it is difficult to maintain a reasonable perspective on events but if teachers were to apply a rule of reasonable action to their decision, escalation might be less frequent. Such a rule would enable teachers to ask themselves, ‘If this incident occurred in isolation from preceding incidents for which the student had already been penalised, how would I treat it?’ So, for example, rather than seeing the failure to remove a hat on entry to the room as a major offence, it retreats into insignificance and, instead of inflaming the situation, the teacher can defuse it.

It is likely that a combination of influences—personal factors, cultural factors, opposition to perceptions of oppression and racism, the demands of out-of-school responsibilities and lack of resources—all contribute to a complex interaction with teachers who are under pressure to teach a group of twenty to thirty students from two or more different cultural backgrounds while maintaining order. Added to this, the teachers also have
their concerns and preoccupations arising from out-of-school events. Misbehaviour in class is a complex phenomenon which can rarely be attributed to any one cause, and cannot be explained adequately from only one perspective. A knowledge of the specific contexts, motivations and interactions that contribute to the disruption may need to be known if teachers are to make adequate judgments.

It can be argued that all social situations convey demands for certain types of behaviour, and it is the function of the school to promote acceptance of compliant behaviours, because these are expected by adult society. In the demands made by teachers, however, the development of these behaviours is of far less interest to them than the immediacy of situational control: the teachers in this study believed that they had to act decisively and often arbitrarily to assert their authority over the students, ostensibly so that they can teach them. The notion that classroom management procedures are intended to control deviant behaviour is acceptable so long as the deviant behaviour is clearly defined and the students are aware of what is deviant. In the interaction in the classroom, however, the decision to label a behaviour as deviant, disruptive or potentially disruptive is problematic. Depending upon the context of the behaviour, the teacher may choose to ignore it, apply minor controls, or apply extreme sanctions, even for minor first offences.

While the procedures delineated in the school’s policy on discipline imply escalation in the severity of the offences, they fail to convey the dynamic nature of the interactions that accompany them, and ignore the underlying causes of the offences. Classroom control is made to appear an unproblematic process in which the teacher remorselessly administers increasing levels of sanctions to deviant students when they fail to conform to lower levels of control. While this does occur in many cases of disruption, this model of control ignores both the inconsistent nature of teacher responses, as well as the participation of the teacher in the construction of the problem. All too often, the behaviours for which students are sanctioned are not problems until they are defined as such. In other contexts, and using different interpretations, the behaviours might be regarded as positive acts by the students. The social demands of classrooms create conditions in which students must behave in ways that are often quite at odds with the ways they behave
outside the classroom, and this can develop negative attitudes towards school (Brown, 1987).

Many of the problems which occurred in this study could have been avoided through the use of effective communication, the establishment of good rapport with students and the restrained use of power. Despite the difficulties entailed in implementing such an approach to teaching, it is likely that doing so will help in classroom management. This approach will provide teachers with an awareness of the influences on students who come into the classroom and access to context-specific solutions to problems. Even though many of the problems encountered with students in class are a consequence of external factors, an awareness of the influence of these factors, combined with sound relationships, effective communication and a willingness to avoid confrontation, should reduce the level and frequency of disruptions involving Indigenous students.

NOTES

1. This research was approved by the Aboriginal Education Consultative Committee of Edith Cowan University. An Indigenous researcher was a member of the research team and interviews with students were conducted by Indigenous research assistants.

2. Pseudonyms have been substituted for all names of individuals and places in this article.

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