

Culture affects the way we learn

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Rugby league player Johnathan Thurston. Credit: University of Queensland

In the wake of winning the first match of this year's State of Origin series, Queensland rugby league maestro Johnathan Thurston advised students from Cape York to prioritise their education.

But how do Aboriginal and westernised [children](#) differ when it comes to collaboration, imitation and learning?

The University of Queensland School of Psychology's Associate Professor Mark Nielsen has been researching just that.

"There is a structured, guided approach to westernised learning," Dr

Nielsen said.

"When placed in a situation featuring a teaching act by an adult, westernised students expect to be told what to do, including the roles and responsibilities they need to take on.

"This is less common in many Indigenous upbringings, where collaboration among peers is more normative in regards to learning.

"Observation and trial-and-error are more commonly found in those environments, as compared to formal, institutionalised teaching and demonstrating,"

The study was undertaken in partnership with UQ School of Languages and Cultures' Associate Professor Ilana Mushin, and researchers from South Africa and Scotland.

Two groups of children aged between three and five – one in a remote part of the Northern Territory and another in Brisbane – were observed as they attempted to unlock two different boxes and retrieve a toy.

One [box](#) was opaque, obscuring the internal machinations, while the other was transparent.

An adult instructor first showed how the box could be unlocked, but incorporated a number of meaningless actions to see whether the children would imitate these movements.

"When the box was transparent, and the mechanisms needed to open the box were obvious, both groups of children behaved similarly, copying all of the actions shown to them, but did not collaborate much," Dr Nielsen said.

"But when confronted with the opaque box, suddenly there was a big difference in the groups.

"The Westernised children continued to collaborate at low levels, tending to allow an individual to explore outcomes alone.

"Typically one child would act on the apparatus from start to finish and receive little suggestion from other children about what should be done.

"In contrast, those from the Northern Territory collaborated, acted on different parts of the box at the same time, pointed at different parts of the box, and offered directions about what to do."

Dr Nielsen said that collaborating to explore solutions could provide new insights and successful methods that were unconventional.

When applied to the sporting arena, Dr Nielsen said such an upbringing could "result in a tactical edge and the expression of astonishing skills often associated with Indigenous athletes."

The study has been published in the journal *Child Development*.

More information: Mark Nielsen et al. Imitation, Collaboration, and Their Interaction Among Western and Indigenous Australian Preschool Children, *Child Development* (2016). [DOI: 10.1111/cdev.12504](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12504)

Provided by University of Queensland

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