

Faculty of Education

**A Study of Attendance and Classroom Participation Among
Aboriginal (Nyungar) Students in a West Australian Metropolitan
Senior High School**

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“This thesis is presented as part of the requirements for
the award of the Degree of Master of Education
of the
Curtin University of Technology”

1999

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

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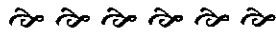
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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Joseph Indich and Jamie Ugle who were killed in the early morning of Tuesday, 20 August 1996 while being pursued by a Police vehicle in a 'high-speed car chase'.

In the early hours of 6 February 1997, in a similar incident, Michael Winmar, another of my students was fatally injured. He died four days later in a hospital without regaining consciousness.



'No man can truly be happy if he acts against his better judgement'.

Socrates

'Leaving the schoolhouse, Gemmy paused a moment, the papers safely in his pocket, and as he looked about him, felt for the first time that he could go any way he pleased; he did not have to go back down the ribbon of road...

...he still carried in his pocket the sheets of paper on which they had written down his life. He took them out now. They were sodden. Rain had begun to wash the writing from them, the names, the events; their black magic now a watery sky-colour, the sooty grains sluicing away even as he watched; the paper turning pulpy, beginning to break up in his hands, dropping like soggy crumbs from his fingers into puddles where he left them, bits all disconnected...'

David Malouf, *Remembering Babylon*

Abstract

My thesis combines an analysis of the reasons behind changing attendance and participation of Aboriginal students at a West Australian metropolitan senior high school with an appraisal¹ of the role of Aboriginal students in its school curriculum, 1993-1997. This study also incorporates an examination of teacher attitudes towards Aboriginal students and culture with an ethnographic study as well as a qualitative survey of the attitudes of Aboriginal students towards school and the curriculum process.

This thesis begins with an explanation for the choice of Aboriginal students and their experience at school as my research topic. Some autobiographical details of the author and my position on staff at school, 1994-97, then follows. A general background to Aboriginal Education and metropolitan senior high school is provided, with a specific discussion of the role of Aboriginal students and the place of Aboriginal Studies in the life of the school. A concise analysis of the secondary literature is then undertaken which provides, *inter alia*, a knowledge base for the 'ethnographic' interviews. The various strategies introduced in an attempt to improve the attendance and participation at school of Aboriginal students are then analysed, including an assessment of the success of the Aboriginal Studies programme.

The next section focuses on the attitudes and actions of Aboriginal students and their teachers, giving a detailed account and appraisal of a series of interviews. My thesis then concludes by outlining some of the major factors influencing Aboriginal attendance and participation at school, as well as examining some of the key areas where Aboriginal education may be improved. My thesis does not purport to provide definitive answers to these issues, but rather points to an embryonic strategy for improvement, based upon the necessarily limited focus provided by this research.

A series of appendices follow my written conclusions. No manuscript collections were consulted in the course of undertaking this research. However, many interviews and questionnaires have been extensively used with a voluminous selection of secondary source material, a selection of which is detailed in the bibliography.

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In 1994 a then Year 11 student, Belinda Hughes completed an assignment on Aboriginal Education as part of her course work for the unit 'Current Events'. The following year as part of her Senior English Year 12 assessment she undertook further research into Aboriginal Education. I am grateful to Belinda and her English teacher Paul Billing for giving me permission to peruse, and in some instances, to use Belinda's findings. Belinda wrote, photocopied and collated many of the questions used in student and teacher surveys.

Many librarians greatly assisted me both in the Eastern States and here in Western Australia. Of particular help were the staffs at the Curtin University of Technology Library and Edith Cowan University Library, most especially the inter-library loans departments.

To my father-in-law, Emeritus Professor John de Laeter a big 'thank you' is in order. Not least for providing me with: a copy of Ralph Folds *Whitefella School*; periodic loans of a financial nature; and for the use of the house at Preston Beach where I first thought of writing about the students at Kwinana Senior High School (hereafter KSHS).

Other people to whom I am grateful include a past principal of KSHS, Ms Halina Szunejko, who first enabled me to work with Aboriginal students. The present principal of that school, Mr Ed Harken² also deserves my thanks, not least for allowing himself to be persuaded to bring Aboriginal students into mainstream classes. Other members of staff at KSHS who helped immensely were: Miss Jan Challenger who was willing to take on all students at any time in her Art classes; Keith

¹. See Appendix One.

². At the time of writing my thesis. Ed is currently District Director Fremantle Education District and has continued to support me in matters both professional and personal.

Svendsen who as Programme and Managing Student Behaviour (MSB) co-ordinator has always treated students with dignity and respect. My friend and colleague Abraham Kassab whose basketballing prowess and willingness to be flexible during homework classes helped to make school a more positive environment for many students. Tanya Hunter for all her hard work in helping me prepare this thesis for examination; and last, my friends and erstwhile colleagues at the Education Department, Western Australia, Dean Wynne and Matthew Moody, both of whom harassed and harangued me all the way to the finishing line.

I wish to express my profound gratitude to the students of KSHS, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, with whom I have worked and learned, laughed and larked and who have given my life added meaning and purpose in the last five years. When I left teaching at Murdoch University to begin high school teaching many thought me either mad or a martyr. However, in contrast to such gloomy predictions my high school teaching experience has proved to be both merry and marvellous. I make special mention of David Wally and Clive Ryder whom, one morning in the Cottage (Aboriginal Learning Centre), had the idea that *we* – students and teacher – should try to put some of our story together. I am also appreciative of the support of parents, guardians and so many people in the local community for their constant encouragement and support, not merely in respect to this project but, more importantly, in my work at KSHS.

Finally, my wife Catherine and my son Simon Peter deserve particular thanks, for their love and inspiration, which sustained far more than this study.

Introduction

The metropolitan senior high school, which is the main focus of this study, is Kwinana Senior High School, located south of the Swan River, Perth, Western Australia. The Kwinana/Medina suburbs have been described as 'low socio-economic' areas. Five main criteria have been used to determine this status: high unemployment (42%)³; high incidence of crime; high proportion of rental accommodation (mainly 'Homeswest' housing); high percentage of single parent families; and low retention rate to Year 12 and onto tertiary education. The school has been designated as a 'Priority School' by the Department of Education of Western Australia (hereafter EDWA). Moreover, KSHS has been adjudged as having within its student population a large number of students from the designated category 'Students at Risk' (STAR). Because of these problems the school receives some additional funding from both the Federal and State Governments' funding which is specifically intended to bring about a reduction in poor attendance patterns. Funding is for the

³. This statistic was provided by the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) Kwinana (now Centrelink) in March 1996.

whole school population – both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. The Kwinan/Medina area has had an Aboriginal (Nyungar) population living within its locality for a period of time exceeding 45,000 years. The number of students whose parents, parent or guardian acknowledge their ‘Aboriginality’ currently enrolled at the school is 76 out of a school population of ~~c~~860. KSHS is a State, or Government dual sex school. There are ~~c~~75 staff of which 60 are teachers, most of whom are full-time.

In late 1992, with attendance among Aboriginal students at a significantly low level, a new strategy was introduced to encourage attendance and enhance learning. The focus of this strategy was the Aboriginal Learning Centre, housed in a building separate from the main school. This had been set up with Federal and State funding under the auspices of the STAR project and was designated as solely for Aboriginal use. Only one month after completing my Graduate Diploma in Education (Secondary) at Curtin University in November 1993 the Education Department of Western Australia (hereafter EDWA) appointed me as a Social Studies and History teacher to KSHS. My specific remit was to teach Social Studies and to write and implement Aboriginal Studies programmes to lower school students. I was not appointed with specific responsibility for Aboriginal students.

On my first visit to the school it was immediately obvious that my head of department believed she was being sent an expert in Aboriginal Studies. Her conviction was that I was someone who had been sent to this ‘priority school’ to implement a series of Aboriginal Studies programmes for all years and pitched at all academic levels. Moreover, it was tacitly ‘understood’ that I was familiar with Aboriginal culture and had taught and worked with Aboriginal people for a number of years.

The Aboriginal population at the school was almost invisible prior to 1993. This was in marked contrast to my observations down at the local shopping centre where young Aboriginal people could be seen everywhere. The situation was indeed bizarre. I was a first year out high school teacher brought in to teach Aboriginal Studies to the whole school population – but specifically for the edification of Aboriginal students – yet I knew nothing about Aboriginal people, culture or studies. Furthermore, there was a marked absence of Aboriginal people at the school. I began to question why this should be, and why, as a group, Aboriginal children would not want to come to school. I wondered whether their families felt alienated from the education process and by the education process. The very few Aboriginal students who did come to school were mostly (if not exclusively)

closeted in a small demountable building located slightly off the school premises. This 'classroom', the afore-mentioned Aboriginal Learning Centre was known as 'the Cottage'.⁴

During my first year at Kwinana – in addition to my normal teaching duties – I was given the task of writing and implementing Aboriginal Studies programmes and began to teach these to years 8-11. As I knew nothing of Aboriginal Studies or culture, and after five years in Australia I had spoken to no more than half a dozen Aboriginal people, it was clearly time to redress the balance. I found myself spending more and more time across the road from the school at the Medina Aboriginal Cultural Centre, meeting and speaking with the Nyungar people who either worked there or called in during the day. The main shopping Centre at Kwinana is only three minutes walk from the school and at lunchtime I would take a walk down there where I would meet people I had seen at the centre *and their children*. Sometimes my teaching duties would take me to the Kwinana Arts Centre or the Kwinana Recreation Centre – two minutes walk from the school. There I would meet the same young people *and their friends*.

In this manner I undertook a process of discovery and education, much of which is reported below. During the period June-December 1992 the Aboriginal Learning Centre (hereafter ALC) had been in contact with fifteen children, seven of who were fairly regular attendees. Three of the 'regulars' intermittently attended some 'option'/non-academic lessons in mainstream classes. However, as I initiated dialogue with the Aboriginal community and became increasingly involved with the students, changes in attendance began to occur. In early 1995, after I had taken charge of the ALC, this change was clearly increasing in significance. Dramatically increased attendance became the pattern, as did the substantial incorporation of the Aboriginal students into mainstream classes.

**Outline Pattern of Increased Attendance of Aboriginal students at the ALC and Mainstream
Classes 1993-97**

1994	4 'visitors' and 3 regular attendees at ALC	15 enrolled in mainstream classes
1995	30 regular attendees at ALC	15 enrolled in mainstream classes rising to 55 in Terms 3 and 4

⁴. I believe that this term was first used by the students.

1996	75 enrolled in mainstream classes
1997	75 enrolled regular attendees- decreasing over the year to 32
1998	17 enrolled regular attendees – decreasing over the year to 12

It is clear that some form of ‘success’ was being achieved, and as I considered events the idea of writing up my experiences began to germinate. However, the final decision to research and write this thesis was in response to a ‘challenge’ issued by one Year 8 and one Year 10 student. One day during form period some of my students were talking with me and they made me laugh. As we continued to chat and joke I said ‘I could write a book about you guys’. Two students immediately responded ‘why don’t you sir?’ Many of the other students chorused ‘Yeah, why not sir? Write about us’. The Aboriginal Education Worker (hereafter AEW) looked at me, smiled and said ‘Why don’t you?’ I looked at them all and in a *very* rare moment the classroom was completely quiet and I replied ‘OK, but only if you help me. We will have to write it together’. And we did.

Chapter One

Methodology

Upon taking up my appointment at KSHS I had no intention of engaging in 'research'. I knew very little about Aboriginal education, as the following short account amply demonstrates. I had visited the school in the week immediately prior to the commencement of the school year and had been given my class lists and told which units I would be teaching during the year. There were Aboriginal students in all my classes. I knew this was the case because against each Aboriginal student's name were the letters 'AB'. Also the school had drawn up a separate list of all the Aboriginal students who were expected to attend on the first day of term, and it was possible to cross-check the names. My curiosity, if not suspicion was aroused. I am from two European Jewish families and I was brought up to be wary of lists. We had good reason to balk at such bureaucratic practices. I was told that there might be one or two 'extra' Aboriginal students because often they failed to enrol at the end of the previous year. Moreover, I was lead to expect Aboriginal students would come and go throughout the year. I was scheduled to begin teaching Aboriginal Studies to my four lower school classes and advised that it was expected that I include Aboriginal issues in the Year 11 'Current Events' unit. I had been lucky. My head of department was 'user friendly' – helpful, professional and welcoming.⁵ It was also clear that she was not anti-Aboriginal. Nevertheless, unbeknown to her, she had filled me with anxiety.

It was clear that my HOLA believed I was an experienced high school teacher with a sound knowledge of Aboriginal culture. Indeed, I was supposed to be generating new source material in order that Aboriginal Studies would become an integral part of the Social Studies learning area.⁶ Aboriginal Studies had been introduced to the Society and Environment programme in two pilot Year 8 classes in the previous years. I had three days, allowing for the weekend, to prepare.

It should be pointed out that during my Dip.Ed. year at Curtin University, February to November 1993, I had received no formal training in the teaching of Aboriginal Studies, or indeed, Aboriginal students.⁷ Moreover, my knowledge of Aboriginal heritage and Aboriginal people was limited to playing 'footie' with the children of an Aboriginal family in the park at the end of our road, and to

⁵ . From the beginning of 1996 EDWA advised that heads of department would be known as 'heads of learning areas' (hereafter HOLAs).

⁶ . From 1995 EDWA advised that Social Studies were to be called 'Studies of Society and the Environment'. This has subsequently been amended to 'Society and Environment'.

⁷ . Instruction is now given to tertiary students enrolled in the graduate diploma at Curtin University.

the derogatory remarks uttered by some Australians I had met since emigrating to Perth from London in December 1988.

In the afternoon of the day of my visit to KSHS three significant events took place. Still in panic following my discussion with my new HOLA I drove from the school to Curtin University where I immediately went to the Education Resource Centre, within the Education faculty, with the intention of securing resources with which to prepare my Aboriginal Studies lessons. The librarian was sympathetic but was unable to offer me any real assistance. She said that there were no resources applicable to secondary high school students for there were no 'official' Aboriginal Studies courses in the K-12 curriculum. The senior librarian suggested that I visit the Aboriginal Studies Unit situated close to the Education faculty. I had seen the demountable building every day during my Dip.Ed. year as I drove in and out of the car park. But it had never occurred to me to pay a visit. I had been in training to teach secondary high school students, and because of my family situation had always assumed that I would be teaching in a metropolitan school setting. This would not, I assumed, include the teaching of Aboriginal Studies, or the teaching of Aboriginal students. It should be reiterated that in 1993 Curtin University did not offer Aboriginal Studies education to its Graduate Diploma of Education students. It seems ludicrous now but I genuinely believed, albeit unconsciously, that Aboriginal people lived in country towns, in the bush, in the outback, anywhere, but not in Perth. Looking back, I honestly believe that I had never really consciously thought of the children in my road, with whom I spoke nearly every day, as 'Aboriginal'. They were just people who I liked and who, I believed, liked me.

I entered the Aboriginal Studies Unit (hereafter ASU) and explained my predicament to one of the people there. He was surprised at my request. But initially I misunderstood why. He told me that I was the first non-Aboriginal person who had ever come to him for help to prepare programmes for students in Years 8-12 –as opposed to primary students and Curtin students studying Aboriginal culture. Regrettably, he could not assist because all the resources were packed up because the ASU was shortly changing its location. However, after I had pointed out that neither of the two schools I had been to on teaching practice would be of any use because they did not teach Aboriginal Studies. He suggested that I contact the Aboriginal Education Unit, (hereafter AEU) at EDWA. He let me use the telephone and it was my good fortune that I was connected with Mr Bernie Ryder.

Bernie was busy. I was desperate. Bernie was very busy. I was in an increasingly agitated state. He would send me some material. It would not reach me in time for Monday morning's lessons. I asked him if he knew any Aboriginal people. He replied that he was Aboriginal. And then I said it:

‘Please, you’ve got to help me. I don’t know anything about Aboriginal people. I don’t even know what ‘Aboriginal culture’ means and I’m supposed to be teaching ‘it’ next week. It’s important to me that I try to do a good job. There are Aboriginal kids in the class. Can I come and see you?’ He agreed and I spent the afternoon with him. And he told me I was going to be OK. Then I reminded him that I knew *nothing* and he said that that was why I would be just fine. He and his wife Lynda were very gracious to me that afternoon and as I was leaving he called me back and handed to me copies of the three Aboriginal Studies programmes, still in draft format, that he and his team had been working on for nearly three years. Aboriginal Studies units, Years 8-10.

At the risk of laboring my point, or even of being regarded as unprofessional, I must emphasise the importance to my procedure and methodology of the simple statement that ‘*I knew nothing*’. This was why the one person to whom I was looking for help felt I would be ‘just fine’.

The third significant event that afternoon occurred when I returned home. As I embarked on a frantic quest for background information to Aboriginal culture I reached for the Australian history texts on the bookshelves in my study. These proved to be of little use. However, in Manning Clark’s *History of Australia* I read

Civilization did not begin in Australia until the last quarter of the eighteenth century... When Captain Cook and Joseph Banks sailed into Botany Bay in April 1770, the officers and crew of the strange vessel had been greeted by the horrifying howls of the Aboriginal women who lived in that place. That howl contained in it a prophecy of doom – that terrible sense of doom and disaster which pervaded the air whenever the European occupied the land of the primitive[sic] people.⁸

Before coming to Australia in 1988 I had spent over 16 of the 33 years of my life ‘overseas’, in the Middle East, the Indian sub-continent and South East Asia. Clark’s language was not that with which I agreed. Furthermore, at the risk of appearing self-righteous, I had thought myself privileged to have spent so much time in other people’s lands. The historical account which I read made me resolve to try to act as a guest, especially when I began to work in my new ‘home’ at KSHS.

In due course, when I began teaching Aboriginal Studies, I would say the same thing at the beginning of each of my five classes: ‘You are going to have to help me here. Many of you will probably know more about this subject than I do’. The students probably thought that this was a

⁸ . Manning Clark, *History of Australia*, (abridged by Michael Cathcart), (Melbourne University Press, 1993), pp.3-11. It is important to note that Manning Clark has, in some of his other writings, shown profound respect for Aboriginal people.

strange thing for the teacher to say. But I meant it. I subsequently found that this was a truth not confined to me, the non-Aboriginal teacher. In December 1995 I heard an interview with the Aboriginal author Ruby Langford in which she stated

We have the right to tell our story our way. For too long, so-called professional people, invariably white people, have sought to appropriate, exploit and often mis-represent Aboriginal culture, either deliberately or inadvertently.⁹

During my time teaching, learning and working with Aboriginal students and their-families, and during the research and writing of my study, I have been mindful of Ruby Langford's words. I am aware that I may be regarded, at least by some Aboriginal people, as just one more 'so-called professional...white', guilty of misunderstanding. Throughout work on my thesis this non-Aboriginal student has been fearful of misrepresenting Aboriginal people. Certainly I have often-misunderstood Aboriginal people and their cultures – most evidently Aboriginal Nyungar culture. In light of this it needs to be understood that both at the time, and retrospectively, I was necessarily reluctant to be definitive in my conclusions. My role was, firstly, to learn. I soon discovered that there was little literature, which could educate me with regard to urban Aboriginal life; I was going to have to find out myself. A good deal of my practice would focus on this; it would turn out that my most valuable source of information would be interviews, formal and informal, both with Aboriginal students and their teachers at school, as well as Aboriginal people from the local community and Aboriginal people with whom I met socially.

What were the problems I would need to overcome and what strategies could suitably be employed? What of the role of Aboriginal Studies? I did not have pre-conceived answers to these questions. I did know that I had to listen carefully to others. In reporting events I am, therefore, substantially taken up with an ethnographic procedure, and for this reason, included below (chapters 7 & 8) are records of the interviews with both teaching staff and students. When changes in attendance and participation of Aboriginal students had reached a level worthy of report, I had to consider what potential complications might arise. For example, could one really say much more than that under certain conditions, attendance and participation had dramatically increased? I did not know to what extent this increase was permanent. I knew that personal kindness was the key to success, but to what extent were the procedures that I followed valid? My belief is that the conclusions to this question are speculative. For example, we introduced Aboriginal Studies into the curriculum, and

⁹. 'Interview with Ruby Langford – Ginibi' on a video produced by the Academic Services Unit of Murdoch University, Western Australia, for the E420 Course *Aborigines and Education*. I am appreciative of the kindness shown me by Mrs Jean Thomas for the loan of the video. See too, Ruby Langford, *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (Penguin, Australia, 1995).

this seemed to have some value, but precisely what, at least in the longer term, is hard to say. For this reason my thesis limits itself to specifying particular practices, analysing them where possible, and only when conclusions seem clear will recommendations be made.

It will become clear to the reader, as it did to me, to my surprise, the high value which others placed on my role. This outcome was not easy to respond to. A proper analysis of our story at Kwinana needs to provide an understanding of what I, as a researcher, brought to this study. Indeed, one of my advisers defined this study as 'auto-ethnographic'. A sketch then is made of some factors in my thinking and of my processes of familiarization with the specifics of Aboriginal Education and the relevant literature.

I also include an account of some background material, which may initially appear incongruous in a study of classroom attendance and participation.¹⁰ At one level my thesis is a plea for changes to attitudes on race. Every effort was made to focus on classroom attendance and participation, but it was increasingly apparent in the course of researching this thesis that factors from the historical background of Aboriginal Education, and from the present state of race relations in Australia were impacting on day to day teaching practice. All the literature consulted recognised, to a greater or lesser extent, the veracity of this argument.¹¹ After I had submitted my thesis for examination (in May 1998) I obtained a copy of *Perspectives on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education*¹² in late September 1998 after my thesis had been examined. Some of the sections of this text confirm my views expressed in this thesis

My thesis also made use of the 1985 *Australian National Opinion Polls Survey of Attitudes toward Aboriginal People*. An analysis of this poll helped provide me with a knowledge base for the ethnographic approach adopted in this study, and proved particularly helpful with the interviews which I conducted. The rationale behind the interviews was complex. However, essentially they corresponded to the following. The interviews reported herein were designed to elicit responses to questions such as: 'what is the point of attending school?' The ethnographic interview process was

¹⁰ . See my Chapter Three, pp.40-43.

¹¹ . See, for example: *Aboriginal Attendance: Some Practical Strategies*, (Ministry of Education, Western Australia, 1993); *National Principles and Guidelines for Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies, K-12*, (Curriculum Corporation, Carlton, Victoria, 1995); *Western Australian Aboriginal Education Strategic Plan*, (Ministry of Education, Western Australia, 1992); Neville Green, *Desert School*, (Fremantle, 1983); Ralph Folds, *Whitefella, School: Education and Aboriginal Resistance*, (North Sydney, 1987); Kevin Keefe, *From the Centre to the City: Aboriginal Education, Culture and Power*, (Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1992); *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, (formerly *The Aboriginal Child at School*), (Queensland University Press, 1974).

concerned with gleaning some understanding of each cultural/professional group involved in Aboriginal Education.

The following interview subjects were included:

- i) All Aboriginal students at KSHS.
- ii) Some non-Aboriginal students at KSHS.
- iii) All teaching staff at KSHS.
- iv) Many parents and guardians of students.
- v) Many community persons from the Kwinana/Medina area.

My understanding of the distinctive features of the ethnographic interviewing approach, and how it might be distinguished from non-ethnographic interviewing, have been gained from discussions with my principal supervisor, Dr John Hall and forays into the extensive reading list which he gave me. I wish to make it clear that my thesis does not focus on the responses made by parents, guardians and other members of the local community. My thesis is principally concerned with students and their teachers¹³.

The most important texts examining theoretical and methodological issues in qualitative educational research almost wholly mirror those on the reading list for the educational unit 'Ed.621: Naturalistic Research Methods'. The Faculty of Education within the Division of Humanities offers this unit at Curtin University of Technology. I am mindful of my word limit and I will not, at this point, replicate my bibliography. However, an initial understanding of qualitative educational research was gained from Graham Hitchcock and David Hughes *Research and the Teacher: A Qualitative Introduction to School –Based Research*, (London, 1989), especially pp.79-107, 144-147.¹⁴ The most insightful texts were N. Brogdan and S. Biklen's *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods*, (London, 1992); M. Ely, *Doing Qualitative Research*, (London, 1991). Perhaps the quintessential element is whether the 'interview' is *in vivo* or *in vitro*. Often written questionnaires requiring written answers were presented to the teachers and their Aboriginal students, the respondents remaining anonymous. However, in addition to the structured interview with formal or 'set' questions, conversational material was gained in casual or incidental situations, either in class or in the school yard, on excursions, away at camp, or in the staffroom.

¹² Gary Partington, ed., *Perspectives on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education*, (Social Science Press, 1998). Chapters 1, 2 and 9 I have found to be particularly pertinent to my study

¹³ My understanding of Aboriginal issues has certainly been enhanced by adult insights. However, I have been unable to replicate these findings due to the word limit imposed on my thesis.

¹⁴ . N.B. This text is not on the Ed.621 book list.

Summary

Attendance of Aboriginal students at KSHS during the years 1993-1996 increased dramatically. In attempting to describe and analyse the practices involved in promoting this outcome, a methodology was utilised which may be best described as 'auto-ethnographic'. The events and subjects are, as far as possible allowed to speak for themselves. Analyses of the author's own role and evaluations are also of great importance. Possible implications are noted and investigated, but are not to be regarded as the primary object of this thesis. Wherever possible, however, recommendations are made.



Importantly, the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and their parents, and a significant number of teaching staff, as well as many people in the local community, expressed a strong desire to have 'our story' told. The telling of 'our story' is the core of this study. Unfortunately it will become clear that in 1997 the story ceased to be 'our story'. We ceased to be those creating the narrative. Attendance fell again. This too is reported, since it serves to illustrate further the points I wish to make.

Chapter Two

Approaching Aboriginal Education – A Literary Review

Before I begin a review of some of the material written on Aboriginal Education, I think that there is a need to restate the necessity for such an activity. The main purpose of this is to provide a framework of important background knowledge in Aboriginal education – the framework, in fact, in which I operated. More specifically, for the purposes of a formal thesis, a review serves an overall purpose, comprised of four main elements. First, to demonstrate that important background reading was undertaken. Second, to acknowledge useful ideas, both substantive and methodological. Third, to justify the research approach; and finally, to demonstrate what is lacking in the literature on Aboriginal Education, as well as critiquing certain authors for errors or omissions.

A Philosophy of Aboriginal Education

In 1995 an important paper was presented at the Research Council of Education in the Northern Territory by Sister Anne Gardiner, Principal, Murrupurtyanuwu Catholic school, entitled 'Aboriginal Education – A Reality in the 1990s'.¹⁵ It is important to acknowledge that in Sister Anne's paper she admitted that 'to be more specific, I should say Tiwi education is a reality in the 1990s'. However, in the Tiwi context she believes that education 'has taken a giant step forward'. This is because the staff are 'working together to Aboriginalise the school – or rather to localise the school'. Secondly, the Assistant Director of Catholic Education challenged the Principal and staff to move away from their dominant roles as non-Aboriginal, non-Tiwi teachers.¹⁶

In his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Paulo Freire speaks of education as 'an act of depositing in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor'. This, he argues, is 'the banking concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing and storing the deposits'.¹⁷ In this concept of education, knowledge is a gift

¹⁵ . Sister Anne Gardiner, "Aboriginal Education – A Reality in the 1990s", *The Journal of Indigenous Education*, 24:2 (1996), 20-24.

¹⁶ . In my experience those involved in Catholic education often talk about sharing power with Aboriginal people but rarely do it. In the Government system they rarely even talk about it! Although Sister Anne is writing mainly of a strictly non urban setting I believe that parallels may be drawn with my metropolitan school.

¹⁷ . Quoted in Gardiner, *op. cit.*, 20.

bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know little or nothing.

Against this banking concept of education, Freire pleads with educators to abandon the educational goal of deposit making and replace it with problem-posing/problem-solving by people in their relationship with the world. He calls such education 'problem-posing' education. He advocates education as the practice of freedom, as opposed to education as the practice of domination. Freire has helped the oppressed to see the world not as a static 'reality', but rather as a 'reality in process', in transformation.

Freire's has two basic philosophical assumptions upon which he based his approach to education. First, that humanisation is axiomatic for humanity; people are capable of changing their world. Second, that education, as an act of knowing, is never neutral, it always has a political consequence. Sister Anne essentially concurs with Freire's arguments; we are capable of coming to a critical consciousness of our reality, to the point where we can act to change it.¹⁸ She asserts that this is 'the reality of Aboriginal education in the 1990s'.¹⁹ My own belief corresponds to Sister Anne's. If this is the case and there is the political will to alter our reality the learning process can be revolutionised.

Martin Buber in *Education Between Man and Man* observed that across the whole extent of the planet new human beings are born who are characterised already and yet have still to be characterised. '[T]his is a myriad of realities, but also one reality. The child, not just the individual child, individual children, but the child is certainly a reality. Therefore, as the child is a reality, then education must become a reality'.²⁰ Aboriginal Education must also become a reality. This assertion implies that this is not yet happening. Buber believed that 'education is ultimately shaped out of inclusiveness, reverence, grace of being, friendship and humility'.²¹ In Kwinana I have found that this attitude has been the key to change. Indeed, to put it quite simply, kindness has been the key to change.

¹⁸ . *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁹ . *Ibid.*

²⁰ . *Ibid.*

²¹ . *Ibid.*

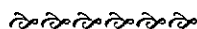
Hedley Beare,²² claims something similar:

I have tried to suggest that perhaps there is too much curricular 'theology' around at the moment. We are too rationalistic, too earnest in our planning, too mechanistic, too deadly serious. We would enable our younger generation and ensure their future more adequately, I think, if we reinstated compassion, responsibility, and respect for the incredible oneness of the cosmos, if we valued gaiety[sic], playfulness and an organic connectedness in our education.²³

This is a view with which I concur. Gardiner states that:

We have offered many "new" packages... some were good, others mean nothing to the children we strove to educate, because we imposed rather than questioned and listened. I agree that what we need in Aboriginal education is a new spirit. Yet if we are the educators we claim to be, we only have to look at what is uppermost in the lives of Aboriginal people, viz. the spirit.²⁴

Working with this sort of approach, how are we to orientate ourselves towards the present situation in Aboriginal Education? For Aboriginal people 'spirit equates with life, spirit, breath, pulse, or as Sister Anne puts it, 'the line of life'. 'Perhaps' she states, 'we have bypassed the very core of Aboriginal education...the right to be the people God created them to be'. Many educational philosophers have pleaded with teachers to allow education to be owned by Aboriginal people. Sister Anne contends that it is 'only now that this reality has begun to take its rightful place in our educational world'.²⁵ I have no real formal evidence which I can reproduce for the reader of my thesis to prove that many of the Aboriginal students and their families with whom I worked at KSHS were people of the spirit. Nevertheless, my five years spent among Aboriginal people. I believe that anyone who was present in any one of our Art classes would concur with this belief at least to some degree.



²² . Hedley Beare is currently Professor of Education at Melbourne University, and formerly First Secretary of the Northern Territory Education Department.

²³ . Hedley Beare, 'The Curriculum for the 1990s - a New Package or a New Spirit', quoted in Gardiner, 'Aboriginal Education', 21. I am aware that many educators - and certainly a majority of whom I worked amongst at KSHS - disagree that urban Aboriginal people living in the late twentieth century and people of the spirit.

²⁴ . Gardiner, 'Aboriginal Education', 21.

²⁵ . *Ibid.*, 21 - 22

Aboriginal/Non-Aboriginal Relations in Australia Today – The 1985 Australian National Opinion Poll

In the school staff-room there was the usual buzz of activity. Teachers were coming and going, organising rosters and duties. One small group was talking about an article from the daily newspaper on remote Aboriginal education, focusing on bilingual programs, community-based schooling and self-determination. A teacher remarked:

“It’s a tricky business isn’t it? Thank God we don’t have to worry about it here where there aren’t any real Aboriginès. One boy in my class is supposed to be Aboriginal but he doesn’t look like it to me. Maybe he’s one sixteenth Aboriginal...so I don’t know what sort of difference his Aboriginality is supposed to make”.²⁶

Similar words to those used by this teacher can probably be heard in staff-room conversations in every town and city across Australia. Certainly I have been privy to such comments in the staffroom at KSHS. Teachers hold such attitudes not because they are teachers, but because they are Australian. In 1985 the Australian National Opinion Poll (hereafter ANOP) surveyed attitudes towards Aboriginal people by polling 2,000 adults across Australia, interviewing 28 ‘opinion leaders’, and conducted 17 group discussions around particular themes. Despite the poll being commissioned by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, the results were so negative that the report was suppressed until a newspaper ‘leaked’ the results.²⁷ According to ANOP findings, ‘middle Australia’ is permeated with what they labelled as ‘soft racism’ towards Aboriginal people. While one-quarter of their sample was supportive of Aboriginal aspirations on issues such as land-rights, one-quarter were implacably opposed. Meanwhile, the other half of the population, ‘middle Australia’ itself, leaned towards ‘opposition and prejudice through fear, ignorance, misinformation, and soft racism...[a] prejudice which has a greater propensity to harden than to turn to sympathy’.²⁸ It is worth pointing out that these views were expressed during the heyday of ‘political correctness’ (i.e. the mid-1980s). Such views are probably more widely held in today’s political climate (i.e. the late-1990s) where Independent members of Parliament who expound racist sentiments have been

²⁶ . Quoted in K. Keffe, *From the Centre to the City: Aboriginal education, Culture and Power*, (Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1992), p.65.

²⁷ . For a comprehensive and critical analysis of the poll, its procedures, interpretations and consequences see T. Rowse, ‘Middle Australia and the Noble Savage: A Political Romance’ in J.R. Beckett (ed.), *Past and Present: The Construction of Aboriginality*, (Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1988), pp.161-177.

²⁸ . Australian National Opinion Polls Market Research, *Land Rights: Winning Middle Australia, An Attitudes and Communications Research Study*, (ANOP, Sydney, 1985), p.5.

returned to the Lower House with substantial majorities. Moreover, the Prime Minister has seen fit to largely ignore their racist expressions.

According to the ANOP, typical of this attitude set is the use of such criteria as 'blood content' or darkness of skin pigmentation to judge degrees of Aboriginality or levels of Aboriginal culture. The commonly held belief in the public mind is that the 'real' or 'proper' Aborigines are considered to be 'full bloods' living a 'tribal' lifestyle in 'outback' Australia.²⁹ These Aboriginal people are perceived to be different in kind to, and more deserving of special assistance than, the so-called urban 'half castes' who 'do little or nothing' except 'cause all the trouble'. Only 3 per cent of all respondents believed that Aboriginal people were the socially disadvantaged group most deserving of Government assistance, while 42 per cent believed Aboriginal people were receiving too much assistance, especially in the form of what they called 'handouts'. Some of the key areas included education (which was listed as the highest in order of priority), land, housing and welfare payments. The denial of Aboriginality and the denial of legitimacy in relation to social justice programmes go hand in hand.³⁰

I believe teachers can be thought of as life-long members of 'middle Australia'. The majority of them, in my own informal 'polls', tend to share many of the views described by the ANOP, so I concur with its observations, based on the prevalence of attitudes in general discussions both in the school context and in social gatherings. Keffe has referred to research undertaken in 1985 about curriculum location and content of Australian Studies in schools in the Australian Capital Territory. Thirty-eight teachers from various schools were surveyed and all indicated that learning about Australia generally included learning about Aboriginal Australia, but that this learning was narrowly defined to studying about pre-contact, 'traditional' society and culture. Only one teacher included anything in their curriculum that could be regarded as contemporary content, or taught anything about Aboriginal urban culture. At KSHS teachers of Aboriginal Studies much prefer to teach 'traditional' Aboriginal culture if they are asked to offer units on Aboriginal culture. In the same survey 135 students from the same schools identified 'Aborigines' as one of the major areas of current learning about Australia, and traditional Aboriginal culture as the main form of this content. Each of these students voluntarily engaged in follow-up informal interviews. At this time, what Keffe has termed a 'disturbing number of students', when asked what they knew about urban Aboriginal Australia, volunteered remarks that were similar to the ANOP's findings. Some common (although not quantified) responses were that Aboriginal people in the city received handouts in the

²⁹ . *Ibid.*, p.46.

³⁰ . *Ibid.*, p.17.

form of free houses and free cars, were paid to go to school, and that most were simply pretending to be Aboriginal in order to get these benefits. The belief that nearly all handouts were wasted on alcohol abuse was ubiquitous.³¹

I believe there are direct connections between public attitudes, teacher attitudes, curriculum content, the restricted form of learning about Aboriginal Australia and student perceptions of Aboriginality. The convergence of these areas are 'too striking to be coincidental'.³² One of the common consequences of these attitudes is the denial of any social or economic disadvantage in urban Aboriginal Australia. Attitudes and perceptions denying social need for urban Aboriginal Australians may be founded on ignorance in the general population about, for example, Aboriginal educational and employment opportunities in Australian cities. One of the findings of the 1986 Census was that the Aboriginal population of all States and Territories, except the Northern Territory, was predominantly urbanized. At the time of the Census, 66.5 per cent of the Aboriginal population of Australia was to be found in urban areas.

In 1986 there was a total of 227,645 Aboriginal people in Australia. By 1991 this figure had risen to 265,458; in 1996 there were ^{c.} 340,000. In Western Australia the Aboriginal population was 41,778 in 1991 and is now ^{c.} 45,000. Over one third of these people live in Perth.³³ For all Australian students, retention rates have increased significantly in recent years (35 per cent in 1983 to 58 per cent in 1988 and 78 per cent in 1995). In 1995 in Western Australia the retention rate (defined by the number of students completing Year 12) of Aboriginal students was a mere 13 per cent. There is, therefore, a case for intervention to ensure a more equitable spread of participation rates and educational outcomes. In Western Australia Aboriginal youth unemployment is currently 47 per cent compared with the non-Aboriginal rate of 21 per cent. Aboriginal teenagers in Perth in 1995 were five times more likely than their non-Aboriginal peers to leave school before completing Year 12, and were over two and a half times as likely to be out of work and either looking or not looking for a job when they did so.

There is widespread ignorance about the contemporary social reality of Aboriginal Australia. Confirmation of this ignorance is manifest in the fact that over 30 per cent of the ANOP respondents could not name one Aboriginal achievement of any sort, or name an Aboriginal

³¹ . Keeffe, *From the Centre to the City*, p.66.

³² . *Ibid.*

³³ . Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1991 Census figures. Quoted in *The Little Red, Yellow and Black (and Green and Blue and White Book) – A Short Guide to Indigenous Australia*, (Lane Brothers Printing, Adelaide, 1995), p.11. See also, *Western Australia's Other History*, (Australians for Reconciliation, W.A.,1997), p.57.

individual who had ‘impressed’ them. There was also an enduring set of romantic myths about the existence ‘out there’ of genuinely deserving traditional Aborigines.³⁴ It is reasonable to suppose that even this degree of goodwill has been somewhat eroded in the current political climate, particularly with the persistent, if erroneous assertion that Native Title legislation entitles Aboriginal people to claim the traditional quarter-acre block so prized by much of ‘white Australia’.

There are important repercussions for educational practice in an understanding of Aboriginality, especially when the attitudes expressed in the curriculum are recognizable as being based on stereotypes. The ANOP poll suggests that teachers, as an influential segment of middle Australia, do not understand Aboriginality, do not accept the validity of urban Aboriginal culture, and do not support programmes of Government intervention in relation to Aboriginal education for the majority of the student group. Indeed, my own interviewing of teachers which has been partially reproduced as my chapter 7 demonstrates that teachers at KSHS largely mirror the attitudes represented in the ANOP poll. At an in-service training session a teacher remarked that she had been teaching Aboriginal Studies for 12 years. On examining the ANOP survey she remarked to a group of teachers:

I don’t know about the rest of you but I suddenly feel a little queasy. What else have I been teaching in my Course but how to think about Aborigines in a negative, stereotyped, really a bit racist way? What’s that old line [which states] that to educate others we must first educate ourselves? I just never realised what I’d been doing.³⁵

Ignorance, soft racism and a denial of the legitimacy of urban Aboriginal Australia are attitudinal obstacles to ambitious programmes of educational change. Given this, Keefe’s question is a cogent one: ‘How can programs in schools for Aboriginal students and Aboriginal Studies curriculum development be made to work?’³⁶

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<sup>34</sup> . Keefe, *From the Centre to the City*, p.69

<sup>35</sup> . Quoted in Keefe, *ibid.*, p.69.

<sup>36</sup> . Keefe, *From the Centre to the City*, p. 68.

## Aboriginal Studies

Exacerbating the difficulties I personally faced in the climate outlined above is the fact that in 1993 little published work existed which solely deals with urban Aboriginal students and their education at school.<sup>37</sup> However, there is a voluminous literature on remote or community schooling or traditional Aboriginal Education, though Aboriginal people write little of this. Most work is of an academic nature written by professional, tertiary educators, usually from a European, 'white' and/or non-Aboriginal standpoint. The more detailed texts on Aboriginal Education are almost wholly in the domain of traditional Aboriginal community schools. Many of these schools are either independent or under the jurisdiction of the Catholic Education Office. In Western Australia most of these are in the Kimberley region. The majority of other such schools are found in the Northern Territory and far Northwest Queensland. It is also revealing that the literature on Aboriginal Education that has been generated by Catholic Education in Western Australia outweighs that which has been produced by EDWA. Although much of the curriculum material published by Catholic Education has been intended to be of assistance in primary school teaching, it can, nevertheless, be adapted for secondary schools. Most, if not all the teaching resources, unit programmes, and extra curricular activities suggested by the AEU, Curriculum Branch, within EDWA, whether for use in the primary or secondary school sector, have been about Aboriginal culture in the pre-contact phase. Little or no classroom material appears relevant to urban Aboriginal culture. For many teachers, *People of the Spinifex* is still a key text.<sup>38</sup>

Such a trend is reflected in the publication *The Aboriginal Child at School*. It is perhaps paradoxical that this journal is subtitled *A National Journal for Teachers of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders*, as the majority of school teachers to whom the University of Queensland Press caters are teachers from cities and towns, i.e. teachers of urban or suburban Aboriginal students. Furthermore, the journal has a high percentage of articles that address the issue of bilingual or multilingual classrooms. Many (c.52%) West Australian Aboriginal school children live in Perth, the overwhelming majority of whom are Nyungar Aboriginal people. These Aboriginal students almost exclusively speak only Australian English, although not necessarily standard Australian English and who are only able to read the English language. It is perhaps instructive that The University of Queensland Press has recently renamed the publication *The Australian Journal of Indigenous*

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<sup>37</sup> . Since writing this thesis a series of studies edited by one of my examiners has been published. This volume features several articles, which deal with urban Aboriginal issues. *Perspectives on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education*. In my first week of teaching Aboriginal Studies in 1994 one of my colleagues from Society and Environment lent me his copy of his thirty-something year old Curriculum Branch EDWA social history book.

*Education*. Significantly, the word 'indigenous' is often associated with 'outback' or 'traditional' Aboriginal people.<sup>39</sup>

In the preparation for my research into Aboriginal education for my thesis I consulted a variety of sources. Of these, such Federal Government and EDWA funded publications, as the following are perhaps the best known: *The Aboriginal Voice in Education; Rebutting the Myths; Going Forward. Social Justice for the First Australians; Western Australian Aboriginal Education Strategic Plan; National Principles and Guidelines for Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies, K-12; Aboriginal Attendance: Some Practical Strategies; Working Together, Walking Together; Learning to Live Together: Units in Aboriginal Studies; Nyungar Past and Present. A Study of Change in Aboriginal Society*; and, *In the Beginning: A Perspective on Traditional Aboriginal Societies*. Such publications represent a considerable change from the ethos of the 1950s and 1960s. At that time, in attempting to isolate factors responsible for the educational under-achievement of

culturally different children, researchers set up literally hundreds of projects which, as Anne Eckermann argues in her important study,<sup>40</sup> tended to cluster around the following eight major hypotheses.

1. Minority group children are deprived of early sensory/experiential stimulation.<sup>41</sup>
2. Minority group children are exposed to poor mothering, which fails to encourage appropriate problem-solving skills in early socialisation.<sup>42</sup>
3. Minority group children's development is inhibited by father's absence, which creates identity problems, particularly in boys.<sup>43</sup>
4. Minority group children tend to exhibit primitive/pathological thought processes.<sup>44</sup>
5. Minority group children suffer language deficits.<sup>45</sup>
6. Minority group children are exposed to the culture of poverty.<sup>46</sup>
7. Minority group children are likely to suffer from socio-genic brain damage.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> . EDWA resource from the early 1970's utilizing information from the 1930's!

<sup>39</sup> . Of course, the term 'indigenous' also includes Islander people, the majority of whom live in Queensland.

<sup>40</sup> . A-K Eckermann, 'Learning Styles, Classroom Management, Teacher Characteristics and Rural-Urban Aboriginal People: Some Thoughts', *The Aboriginal Child at School*, 16:1 (Feb/Mar 1988), 3-19.

<sup>41</sup> . J.Hunt, *The Challenge of Incompetence and Poverty*, (Urban: University of Illinois Press, 1969)

<sup>42</sup> . R.D. Hess and V.C. Shipman, 'Early Experience and the Socialization of Cognitive Modes in Children', in N.S. Endler, L.R. Boutler and H. Osser (eds.), *Contemporary Issues in Developmental Psychology*, (Holt, Rinehart and Winton, New York, 1968).

<sup>43</sup> . M. Deutsch, *The Disadvantaged Child*, (Basic Books, New York, 1967).

<sup>44</sup> . F. Riesman, *The Culturally Deprived Child*, (Harper and Row, New York, 1962).

<sup>45</sup> . C. Bereiter and S. Englemann, 'Teaching Disadvantaged Children the Language of Instruction', *Canadian Education and research Digest*, 8 (1967), 126-136.

<sup>46</sup> . O. Lewis, 'The Culture of Poverty', *Scientific American*, 215:4 (1965), 19-25.

<sup>47</sup> . C.A. and B. Valentine, 'Brain Damage and the Intellectual Defence of Inequality', *Current Anthropology*, 16 (1975), 117.

## 8. Minority children may be genetically inferior.<sup>48</sup>

In each case, researchers 'measured' the minority group child, parent or community against factors considered educationally relevant and important in the middle-class, white, English speaking child, parent or community. In each case the minority group child<sup>49</sup> was found to be deficient, deprived or disadvantaged in terms of socialisation, values, environment, communication or even genetics. This was the essence of the 'deficit' model in education, that is, in this context, the arbitrary privileging of white middle class values, in comparison with, and to the detriment of, Aboriginals. It was this culturally imperialistic world view which precipitated various forms of compensatory programmes, designed to bring non-middle class, non-white etc. children 'up to scratch', or, to use more current jargon, 'up to speed'.<sup>50</sup>

Clearly more recent literature represents some change and marks an improvement from this. Reference is made below to the *Beazley Report*, a set of practical recommendations on Aboriginal issues that reflect a greatly modified outlook. Indeed, the existence of the Aboriginal Learning Centre at KSHS and the implementation of Aboriginal Studies represent a response to the concern for social justice in a number of recent reports. Of even greater significance for the future direction of Aboriginal Education are the *Daube Report*, the 1991 report by the *Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission* into racist violence in Australia, the *National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* (1997) and the findings of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in custody (1991) all of which clearly demonstrate the correlation between current educational practices and the incarceration of Aboriginal people in Australian prisons.<sup>51</sup>

In the next chapter I cite repeatedly Beresford and Omaji who refer to *The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* and *Bringing Them Home*, works which relate offending to truancy, making suggestions about schooling. Similarly, in keeping with the *Beazley Report*, is *Aboriginal*

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<sup>48</sup> . A.R. Jensen, 'How much can we boost I.Q. and Scholastic Achievement?', *Harvard Educational Review*, No.2 (1969), (I regret that the page numbers were not included in my copies of the photocopied sheets)

<sup>49</sup> . Interestingly I recall a classroom situation in February 1995. With a class of Aboriginal boys and girls I was working on population density: the possible numbers of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginals was being discussed. A Year 10 girl turned to me and said 'But there's more of us than them'. Evidently she did not consider herself to be in a minority.

<sup>50</sup> Students who may be categorised as intellectually disadvantaged are often referred to as 'slows' by other students.

<sup>51</sup> Partington has rightly asserted that the "ill-treatment" of Indigenous people, even in the recent past, has been so common that few families have escaped it's effects, and these effects have consequences for education: *Perspectives on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education* "No Simple Solutions exist: Perspectives on Education as the key to change, pp.2-26, p.3.

*Studies Across the Curriculum*<sup>52</sup> which can be seen as a practical kit or all-purpose manual in keeping with the National Aboriginal Policy, formulated in 1989, and from which goal number 21 speaks of providing:

all Australian students with an understanding of and respect for Aboriginal traditional and **contemporary**<sup>53</sup> culture.<sup>54</sup>

Perhaps most significant of all is that this curriculum package is imbued with the ethos of 'across the curriculum'. Aboriginality is, therefore, not merely to be acknowledged within the context of Aboriginal Studies units but is seen as welcome and ever present in the school community.<sup>55</sup> This thinking is welcome. However, in much of the literature there is a discouraging trend that I now examine.

Eckermann comments that 'a good deal has been stated and hypothesised about the essence of Aboriginal learning styles and their implications for teaching'. She cites *The Guidelines to Teachers* accompanying the New South Wales Aboriginal Education Policy as the prime example of explicit hypothesising. In my own reading I found some educational commentators discussing an observed and stark contrast between the learning styles of the Western and traditional Aboriginal education systems, though it should be noted that there have been distinct regional differences noted in the latter. For example, Stephen Harris has found that:

1. Most Aboriginal learning is through observation and imitation rather than through verbal instruction, oral or written, as is the case in European schools and society.
2. The other important learning strategy for Aboriginals is learning through personal trial and error as opposed to verbal instruction accompanied by demonstration.
3. Most learning is achieved through real-life performance rather than through practice in continued settings, as is often the case in schools.
4. Focus in Aboriginal learning is on mastering context specific skills. Mastery of context specific skills is in contrast to a school education system which seeks to teach abstract context free principles which can be applied in new previously inexperienced situations.
5. Aboriginal learners are more person-orientated than information-orientated, and there is no institutionalised office of 'teacher' in Aboriginal society. This means that Aboriginal children

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<sup>52</sup> . *Aboriginal Studies Across the Curriculum*, (Catholic Education Office of Western Australia, Perth, 1994)

<sup>53</sup> . My **emphasis**

<sup>54</sup> . *Aboriginal Studies Across the Curriculum*, p.1.

<sup>55</sup> . The policy statement by the Catholic Education Office is instructive and is replicated in Appendix Two.

and adults will assess, respect, or ignore non-Aboriginal teachers more on the basis of how they relate as persons, than according to how they perform as teachers.<sup>56</sup>

This last 'finding' may well be important to my own situation at KSHS.

With such a contrast in philosophy and learning styles, the purpose of both systems would, predictably, be different. One system aims 'to prepare people for participation in the workforce and in the wider economy and community generally'.<sup>57</sup> The other 'aims at preparing a person to function effectively in a society which does not emphasise material values, but those community values of responsibility and obligations which are an important part of an extended family group and spirituality'.<sup>58</sup> The Select Committee on Aboriginal Education was clearly influenced by the work of researchers such as Harris. Indeed, those who give advice to would-be teachers of Aboriginal students at tertiary institutions are also greatly influenced by such studies in the belief that academic or 'official' findings are likely to be accurate.

It would be invidious not to acknowledge the value of some of the observations in this direction, as I discovered in the summer holidays before beginning at KSHS, when I read Neville Green's *Desert School*. Green published in 1983 this account of his experiences with Aboriginal students of the Warburton Ranges. In 1966 he had found himself, for the first time, in the central desert area of Western Australia and in front of a class of Aboriginal children. *Desert School* reveals that the Warburton community had few expectations of the teachers, for the white man's formal education system had little relevance to their children. School was not seen as a preparation for adult life, rather that it was regarded as an unhappy interruption to the acquisition of tribal knowledge. Some little time after his arrival at the school Green

. . . began to take stock of the vast cultural differences – what values could I as a white teacher give to Ngaanyatjarra children – what could I teach that would assist a man through stages of the tribal law or a woman in the refinement of survival strategies – questions forever present and forever unanswered.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> . Stephen Harris, *Culture and Learning: Tradition and Education in North East Arnhem Land*, (Western Australian College of Advanced Education, Perth, 1984) , quoted in *House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education, 1985*, (Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1985), p.25.

<sup>57</sup> . *Ibid.*, quoted in Q. Beresford and P. Omaji, *Rites of Passage: Aboriginal Youth, Crime and Justice*, (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1996), p.63.

<sup>58</sup> . *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> . Neville Green, *Desert School*, (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1990), pp.42-3. Although *Desert School* is not about urban Aboriginal students Green's observations and experiences are pertinent.

Green began to see how ‘unrealistic and culturally destructive were the education programmes, that we endeavoured to implement’.<sup>60</sup> Consequently, his first weeks in the classroom were ‘soul destroying’ as he tried to apply the teaching strategies that had ‘proved so successful in the city’.<sup>61</sup> He continued to reflect:

What was wrong with my teaching? I was more than puzzled – I was frustrated and dismayed. Had I arrived at Warburton straight from College, the children’s failure to respond – and I saw it then as the children’s failure – would have totally crushed my confidence. An effective teacher must have both confidence and a belief in the rightness of what is being taught. I was losing. I was getting nowhere and becoming culturally and psychologically disorientated. I left the classroom each day heavy with the conviction I had taught the children nothing...It was apparent that schooling was not education...Classroom was a vacuum in which living ceased for a few hours each day.<sup>62</sup>

For many teachers, (certainly for many at KSHS), Green’s dilemma is an all too familiar reality whether in the country or the city school setting. But, as Green writes, ‘I began to learn something new about myself’. He continued:

As teachers we tend to shut ourselves off from children and keep our private lives and our past histories separate from the classroom. We close the door on ourselves and in so doing we close the door on the children. We do not invite children into our own lives, and we do not encourage them to invite us into theirs. But I found the children were interested in kinship and family affairs, and I encouraged their interest and they began to ask questions and talk to me. These were delightful, intimate times and in the weeks ahead they would gradually tell me, a little at a time, about themselves and their families.<sup>63</sup>

Also, early in my teaching at KSHS I read Patrick Dodson’s comment that ‘an Aboriginal world view is essentially interactional, while that of the Western world is transactional’.<sup>64</sup> The philosophy of Western education is premised upon the concern to change the world and to value technology and ‘progress’. In contrast, Aboriginal culture is more concerned with relating to the world and

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<sup>60</sup> . *Ibid.*, p.40.

<sup>61</sup> . *Ibid.*, p.41.

<sup>62</sup> . *Ibid.*, p.42.

<sup>63</sup> . *Ibid.*, p.44..



valuing harmony within human relationships. I determined to keep this in mind when teaching Aboriginal Studies to both Aboriginal and no-Aboriginal students, and I took Green's words to heart. Although I am not naturally a person who shares overmuch about himself I found that as I did open up my life to my students that they began to do the same.

Green went on to state that he learned 'that many of the things Anglo-Australian children regarded as important were not valued here'.<sup>65</sup> While I found this to be broadly true, for my purposes, and in many particulars, it was not so. Perhaps because the students at KSHS are urbanites I have found that in many regards there is little or no difference between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in respect to their interests, hobbies, likes and dislikes. Moreover, an interest in family matters is almost universal.

Ethnographic interviewing of students served to reinforce any emerging views about Aboriginal 'learning styles'. Indeed, confirmation was gained from talking with and interviewing – I believe that there is a valid distinction between the two – the parents and guardians of Aboriginal children. It seems that well-meaning primary school teachers either consciously or unwittingly isolated or marginalized Aboriginal children from the learning process by excluding them from standard cognitive classroom exercises, in the belief that their Aboriginal students were either incapable or uninterested in accepting classroom teaching practices.

Eckermann warns that any set of propositions about Aboriginal learning-styles should be critically examined before 'we develop and encapsulate a whole new range of over-generalizations that will serve to lock Aboriginal people into yet another cycle of disadvantage'.<sup>66</sup> It may also be noted that Eckermann was writing before most, although not all, of the current, well-meaning remedies to 'cultural deficit' or 'cultural deprivation'. My own experience of teaching Aboriginal students in the secondary high school environment, as well, incidentally, as tutoring Aboriginal people at university level, leads me to support Eckermann's admonitions.

Significantly also, Eckermann acknowledges that we 'continue to know little about the richness and complexity of rural/urban Aboriginal cultures', partly because there has been little emphasis in research except on 'the influence of poverty on rural/urban Aboriginal communities'.<sup>67</sup> She points

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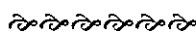
<sup>64</sup> . Patrick Dodson, *Regional Report of Inquiry into Underlying Issues in Western Australia*, (Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1991), p.56.

<sup>65</sup> . Green, *Desert School*, p.44.

<sup>66</sup> . Eckermann, 'Learning Styles', p.17

<sup>67</sup> . *Ibid.*

out that B.H. Watts has warned of the dangers of such a trend.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, transporting simplistic views of traditional values into rural/urban settings is a doubtful pursuit and can 'do a good deal of harm to the integrity of urban/rural Aboriginal cultures'.<sup>69</sup> Research on value orientations among Aboriginal people certainly indicates a strong first preference for their future orientations.<sup>1</sup> Past orientations appear consistently as a second preference while the present orientation is least favoured.<sup>70</sup> Such results, as Eckermann points out, can be interpreted in many ways, and the Kluckhohn Strodtbeck Schedule, which was used to investigate people's value orientations has many limitations.<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, the people's own interpretations of their responses is relevant. They explained that they were looking with optimism to the future, that they remembered the past with some fondness and regret, but that they did not like the present very much, given the socio-economic circumstances in which they were living. It seems reasonable to accept, therefore, that orientations change (as do culture and social organization) as people's interpretations of, and interaction with their environment, change. Consequently, 'a neat little label which places Aboriginal children – all Aboriginal children, for all time – into a box marked past/present orientation is harmful as well as incorrect'.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, Eckermann argued, it 'provides us with easy explanations as to why they do not plan for the future, why they have no ambition, why they fail to do well at school'.<sup>73</sup> In the next chapter I proceed to the specific question of Aboriginal attendance and participation in school.



### Summary

In this chapter an attempt has been made to describe the current condition of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations with particular reference to the 1985 ANOP survey, and also to describe some aspects of practice within Aboriginal Education, reviewing selectively some of the literature. The wide extent of 'soft racism' has been suggested, and underlined as a factor in Aboriginal Education. With regard to educational practice some change from the deficiency models of the 1950s and 1960s has been noted, but with some significant cautions, notably in the area of over-

<sup>68</sup> . B.H. Watts, 'Continuity/Discontinuity between Home and School'. Paper presented to the Eighth International Congress of the International Association for Child Psychiatry and Allied Professions, Philadelphia, 1974, I regret I am unable to provide page numbers.

<sup>69</sup> . Eckermann, *op. cit.*, p.17.

<sup>70</sup> . A. K. Eckermann, 'Group Organization and Identity within an Urban Aboriginal Community', in R.M. Berndt, (ed.), *Aborigines and Change: Australia in the 70s*, (AIAS, Canberra, 1977), *passim*.

<sup>71</sup> . F. Kluckhohn and F. Strodtbeck, *Variations in Value Orientations*, (Row Peterson, 1961).

<sup>72</sup> . Eckermann, 'Learning Styles', p.17.

<sup>73</sup> . I.Bid. Eckermann's thought on value orientations among urban Aboriginal people may prove to be pertinent to Kwinana. I have found that many secondary high school Aboriginal students do not relish learning about the so-called pre-contact phase in Aboriginal Studies – particularly so after Year 8. Furthermore her research into changing value orientations may shed light on changing perceptions of school by many Aboriginal students.

characterisation of Aboriginal learning styles. 'Deficiency models' may have been replaced by well-intentioned but equally stereotypical ideas. A lack of literature devoted to urban Aboriginals has been noted, as has a lack of Aboriginal sourced educational literature. If Aboriginal education is to help Aboriginal people to find their way to a better future, and if the Aboriginal people are to own their education, there must be change<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> I wish to emphasise the importance of the essay/papers in *Perspectives on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education* which amply demonstrate a need for change in education practice. It must be noted that the key to a meaningful future is a meaningful education.

### **Chapter Three**

#### **Considering school attendance and classroom participation**

In January 1994 there were <sup>c</sup> 850 students enrolled at KSHS and <sup>c</sup>27 of these were Aboriginal children<sup>75</sup> whose parents or guardian had acknowledged their child's Aboriginality on the enrolment form which must be completed before every high school student can be admitted to class. It can legitimately be stated that for some parents and guardians in the Kwinana/Medina locality, whether Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, filling out the enrolment form is a procedure that is anticipated with a degree of anxiety. Many adults resent and resist visits to school for a multiplicity of reasons. For example, many Aboriginal adults were excluded from the Australian education system until after Aboriginal students were the victims of racial vilification by the non – Aboriginal school population and made to feel generally unwelcome by many teachers. Moreover, those Aboriginal children who did attend school were often denied the same quality of education offered to non – Aboriginal or 'White' Australians. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that many adult Aboriginal people are reluctant to participate in the current education process and pass on either consciously or unconsciously their negative experiences and their understandably negative attitudes to their children, who in their turn are brought up with an animosity and sometimes a fear of going to school. I shall return to this theme in my Chapter three. . It should also be pointed out that there were many students who have Aboriginal heritage but whose parents do not, for a variety of reasons, acknowledge Aboriginality on the enrolment form. Furthermore, although enrolment guarantees admission it does not automatically mean that attendance will follow. Finally, it must be pointed out that attendance does not necessarily equate with participation. Each of these problems was evident, and attendance and participation of enrolled Aboriginal students were both low. What were the specific causes of non-attendance? Should there, indeed, be any need for concern?

In an important recent study Quentin Beresford and Paul Omaji have examined why Aboriginal children are more susceptible to offending behaviour than their non-Aboriginal counterparts, and have also considered socio-economic and cultural factors in addressing this problem.<sup>76</sup> In their survey of Aboriginal youth, Beresford and Omaji found that non-attendance at school was 'one of the most striking features' of their social experience.<sup>77</sup> Of those interviewed in detention, 84 per cent were either regularly not attending school at the time of their arrest, or were irregular attendees. The figure was little different among those interviewed in the community, where 81 per cent were

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<sup>75</sup> . Student numbers fluctuate for various reasons throughout the school year.

<sup>76</sup> . Q. Beresford and P. Omaji, *Rites of Passage: Aboriginal Youth, Crime and Justice*, (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1996).

currently non or irregular attendees at school.<sup>78</sup> Figures recently released by the Aboriginal Education Unit within EDWA stated that 21 per cent of all Aboriginal children in Western Australia between the ages of 5 and 14 had **never** attended school. Furthermore, only 11 per cent of all 14 and 15 year olds were currently enrolled at school.<sup>79</sup> Beresford and Omaji assert that there is ‘no escaping the seriousness of these figures, nor the implication that the school system is failing Aboriginal children’.<sup>80</sup> The consequence of this failure is also clear. Aboriginal children who drop out of school or who are excluded (expelled) are highly vulnerable to contact with the juvenile justice system. There is, therefore, quite obviously a need for a focus on Aboriginal Education. At this point, I believe, essential to bring to mind the various reports of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. These reports “typify the difficulties confront Indigenous people in Australia”<sup>81</sup>. I have chosen to highlight only five of the characteristics identified in the profile of the 99 people who died in custody by the Commissioners in 1991: i) they were young, ii) only two had completed secondary schooling, iii) 83 were unemployed at the date of their last detention (it is axiomatic that these three points are interrelated), iv) 74 had been charged with an offence before the age of nineteen, v) 43 had been separated as children from their birth mothers.

A general account of oppression and exclusion from the mainstream of education lies outside the scope of this chapter but is nevertheless well served by a number of studies.<sup>82</sup> However, it is significant that Aboriginal peoples experience of the education system was one of the major elements in their experience of racial conflict. For example, it is their exclusion from Government schools in Western Australia until 1946 continues to have a major bearing on the difficulties today’s generation of Aboriginal students have in the school system.<sup>83</sup> The 1987 *Report of the Western Australian Aboriginal Education Consultative Group* outlined the linkage of past and present:

Time and again the research teams were told of incidents involving negative discrimination in the education system, ranging from the recent past to the present day. Many Aboriginal people insist that this discrimination is both a present reality as well as a collective memory which continues to deeply

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<sup>77</sup> . *Ibid.*, p.52.

<sup>78</sup> . *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> . Figures announced on 26 October 1996 by Colin Barnett, Minister for Education in W.A. With the approach of summer and the end of the school year this percentage would diminish. It should be noted that this figure is lower than the 13 per cent in 1995.

<sup>80</sup> . Q. Beresford and P. Omaji, *Rites of Passage*, p.52.. Colin Barnett, the W.A. Education Minister, has said that the State Government has to take a stronger line on what he called ‘a disgraceful standard’ of Aboriginal education. Indeed, successive reports show that retention rates have dropped since 1993.

<sup>81</sup> Partington, *Perspectives on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education*, p.3.

<sup>82</sup> . See especially A. Haebich, *For Their Own Good: Aborigines and Government in the South-West of Western Australia*, (University of Western Australia Press, 1992).

<sup>83</sup> . For a clear and succinct historical overview of the often pernicious relationship between Aboriginal people and the education system in the S.W. of W.A. see Beresford and Omaji, *op.cit.*, pp.53-55.

affect their attitudes towards education. They insist on the importance of coming to grips with the history of Aboriginal education as the basis for understanding and dealing with present day issues.<sup>84</sup>

The collective memory of exclusion, together with the ongoing experience of discrimination, forms a significant part of the explanation of Aboriginal alienation from school; the low rate of retention into Years 11 and 12, and the associated discipline problem. Haebich has argued that Aboriginal people harbour a lasting legacy of resentment and bitterness over the issue of schooling. She states that less than 1 per cent of Aboriginal students were catered for in the State education system during the 1930s.<sup>85</sup> Those who did receive an education before the late 1940s generally did so at missions, where children were 'slotted into the assimilationists' ideal of a future Aboriginal work force'<sup>86</sup> in which boys would be farm labourers and the girls domestic servants.<sup>87</sup>

In such a manner generations of Aboriginal parents were left ill-equipped to deal with the education of their own children, in spite of changes in official policy. Not surprisingly, 'a cross-generational pattern of alienation from schools as "white" institutions resulted from the policies of exclusion and assimilation'.<sup>88</sup> Certainly the policies of exclusion and education for menial or labouring-type jobs have exerted an impact beyond their official termination in the 1960s. Adults directly affected by these policies had no experience of 'normal schooling', its expectations and organisation with which to assist their children. Such a gap in basic experience has put successive generations of students at a disadvantage unequal to any other social group. More profoundly, many adults told the research team attached to the Western Australian Aboriginal Education Consultative Group that their own experiences at school – i.e. 'outright exclusion [and/or] extreme stress and tension'<sup>89</sup> – caused them to be unwilling to become involved in 'school business' and unsure of their rights. In other words:

Aboriginal people's dispiriting experience in formal education not only disadvantages adults but severely narrows the educational opportunities of their children by circumscribing educational aspirations and reducing the scope for parental help and encouragement.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> . *Report of the Western Australian Aboriginal Education Consultative Group*, (1987), p.8, quoted in Beresford and Omaji, *op.cit.*, p.54.

<sup>85</sup> . Haebich, *For Their Own Good*, p.308.

<sup>86</sup> . Beresford and Omaji, *op.cit.*, p.54..

<sup>87</sup> . Haebich, *For Their Own Good*, p.308.

<sup>88</sup> . Beresford and Omaji, *op.cit.*, p.54..

<sup>89</sup> . *Ibid.*, p.55.

<sup>90</sup> . House of Representatives Select Committee, *Aboriginal Education*, (Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1985), p.40.

Beresford and Omaji quote from *The Aboriginal Voice* to substantiate their view that there is a strongly felt sense among Aboriginal students that ‘they do not belong in schools...consequently the potential of Aboriginal students to succeed academically and to develop self-esteem and secure identity is severely reduced’.<sup>91</sup> A separate study recorded in *Reaching the Vision*, concluded that ‘Aboriginal students seem alienated from and disinterested in schools and education. Many perceive themselves as of little value and feel they have no place in the schooling system’.<sup>92</sup> This was a recurring theme ‘in interviews conducted with Aboriginal youth for this book’.<sup>93</sup> Moreover, there are some Aboriginal, and non-Aboriginal students for that matter, who consider themselves at war with the education system – resistance is their goal not inclusion. Inclusion for them is a form of acquiescence, or in other words, capitulation or surrender. Certainly my own observation while working with Aboriginal youth at KSHS was that many students rightly believed that teachers in general were hostile towards them in that they expected them to be guilty of misdemeanors.

Ralph Folds in his study *Whitefella School: Education and Aboriginal Resistance* has explored the theme of student sedition. Although Folds’ study centred on Pitjantjatjara schooling on the north-west of South Australia, his observations in regard to the Anangu are nonetheless germane to the experience of many Nyungar students in the Perth metropolitan area, and indeed to the south-west of Western Australia. In what he terms ‘the resistance perspective’<sup>94</sup> Folds argues that

There is nothing new about Aboriginal resistance; it is part of the real story of the settlement of Australia, although for a long time its role in our history was suppressed. However, the past decade or so has witnessed the timely rewriting of Australian history (Reynolds, 1982<sup>95</sup>; Arlaltyewele, 1983<sup>96</sup>; Pepper and de Araugo, 1985<sup>97</sup>) to correct the notion that Aborigines have been passive recipients of white culture or that they willingly forsook their land for the material [i.e. in the school context, Ab. Study money, ASSPA funds, STAR funding] and other benefits of civilisation.<sup>98</sup>

Aboriginal resistance has now gained credibility as part of the story of Australian settlement (white colonisation) and race relations; but ‘continuing resistance to the institutions of the majority society,

<sup>91</sup> . *The Aboriginal Voice in Education. The Final Report of the WAAECG Research Teams, July 1987*, (The Aboriginal Education Resource Unit, Perth, 1987), quoted in Beresford and Omaji, *op.cit.*, p.55.

<sup>92</sup> . *Reaching the Vision*, quoted in *ibid.*, p.55.

<sup>93</sup> . Beresford and Omaji, *op.cit.*, p.55.

<sup>94</sup> . R. Folds, *Whitefella School: Education and Aboriginal Resistance* (North Sydney, 1987), pp.1-4, 38-45.

<sup>95</sup> . H. Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier: Aboriginal Resistance to the European Invasion*, (Penguin, Australia, 1982).

<sup>96</sup> . P. Arlaltyewele, *Settle Down Country*, (Maimsbury, Ribble Books, 1983).

<sup>97</sup> . P. Pepper and T. de Araugo, *The Kurnai of Gippsland*, (Melbourne, 1985).

and particularly school, has been all but ignored'.<sup>99</sup> While I am prepared to admit that I have met a few Aboriginal students (I can think of four during my five years at KSHS) who were unwilling to participate in school activities, I am mindful of several who were unable to be part of normal school life due to their alienation from mainstream Australian society<sup>100</sup>.

Until Folds' study it was explanations arising out of an anthropological framework which figured largely in theories accounting for the failure of Aboriginal students in school. These explain failure in terms of differences between Aboriginal culture and society and the world of school. For example, as we saw earlier, it has been argued that the ways that Aboriginal students learn are not those stressed in school.<sup>101</sup> The classroom behaviour of Aboriginal children, continues Folds, which produces 'failure' is accounted for in the same way, i.e. 'in differences between Aboriginal culture and the demands of the school'.<sup>102</sup> Therefore, any lack of enthusiasm for school on the part of Aboriginal students is explained in terms of 'Aboriginal socialisation'.<sup>103</sup> According to Folds, the theory is that Aboriginal children 'see school as a kind of ritual or elaborate ceremony in which everyone plays a set role and where every personal effort and individual achievement are unimportant'.<sup>104</sup> According to this theory passive participation is what the Aboriginal child knows best when he/she arrives at school. *Ergo*, this is what leads to 'failure'.

Along similar lines Stephen Harris noted that Aboriginal children are brought up to be relatively independent of their parents and extended families. The children spend much of their time with their peers. The independence of Aboriginal students is an important factor in their failure at the type of assessment used in school. Simply because an adult (teacher) tells the student to do something it does not mean that the student will necessarily carry out the request. Or, from the Aboriginal students' point of view, they are only carrying out classroom assignments because an adult has

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<sup>98</sup> . R. Folds, *Whitefella School*, p.1.

<sup>99</sup> . *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> An unpublished Ph.D. thesis by M.Malin, "Invisibility insuccess, visibility in transgression for the Aboriginal child in the urban classroom: Case studies at home and at school in Adelaide", (University of Minnesota, 1989) demonstrate the alertness to and indeed the expectation of teachers for possible classroom infringements by Aboriginal students. See too M.Malin, "Why is life so hard for Aboriginal students in urban classrooms? *The Aboriginal Child at School*, 18, (1990), pp.9-30.

<sup>101</sup> . S. Harris, 'Aboriginal Learning Styles and Formal Schooling', *The Aboriginal Child at School*, 12:4, (1984), 3-23.

<sup>102</sup> . See Folds, introduction.

<sup>103</sup> . R. Folds, *Whitefella School*, p.1.

<sup>104</sup> . *Ibid.* Folds cites M.J.Christie, 'Locus of Control: A Classroom Example', unpublished paper, Underdale College of Advanced Education, Adelaide, 1980; 'Teaching Purposeful Reading to Aboriginal Children', *The Aboriginal Child at School*, 10:2 (1982), 11-26; 'The Ritual Reader: Guiding Principals for Teaching Meaningful Reading to Aboriginal Children', in J. Anderson and K. Lovett (eds.), *Teaching Reading to Any Child*, (Adelaide, Australian Reading Association, 1983).



directed that they do so. Therefore, from their perspective ‘it is acceptable if they go about this task with a degree of casualness and indifference – or in short, don’t work too fast and don’t try too hard’. ‘This is the result of independence training’.<sup>105</sup> But this is not the whole story. As Folds concludes

...the classroom behaviour of Aboriginal children and their ultimate failure in school cannot be explained simply in terms of these cultural differences. Aborigines have not been passive in the face of an educational system they are in conflict with...but have little influence over. Rather, they have resisted the world of school and this resistance has an important bearing on school results. Many Aboriginal students have an active complicity in their own failure as they chose to reject school, their failure amounting to an act of political resistance.<sup>106</sup>

This points to a far more complex relationship between student behaviour and culture within Aboriginal classrooms, or within classrooms where Aboriginal students are in a minority than anthropological explanations for Aboriginal student failure – i.e. truancy, non-participation or poor results – allows for, e.g. Harris. This argument mirrors the similar cautions in the previous chapter about over-characterization of Aboriginal learning styles, some of which seem to be contradicted by experience. To understand the failure of Aboriginal Education, or conversely, to comprehend some of the successes within Aboriginal Education, it is necessary to go beyond, indeed challenge many of these explanations.

An incident while on camp with my Year 10 Aboriginal students in October 1996 is illustrative of this discussion. I deliberated much over whether to share the following passage with the students in my care, and also whether to include it here, but it and the students’ unexpected response do make my point graphically. I read the following extract from Bryce Courtenay’s *The Potato Factory*:

Strutt would tell with alacrity one of his numerous stories of the hunting trips undertaken to kill the blacks. The men in Ikey’s road gang thought these stories a great entertainment. Two favourites were the tale of Paddy Hexagon, a stock-keeper who lived near Deloraine, who shot and killed nineteen Aboriginals with a swivel gun filled with nails, and another which the prisoners on the road gang called “Stuffing Leaves”...

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<sup>105</sup> .Harris, *Cultured Learning*, quoted in *House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education, 1985*, p.25

<sup>106</sup> . Folds, *Whitefella School*, pp. 1-2.

...”Oh aye, the woman with leaves, that be a most pleasin’ ‘hunt’”, Strutt chuckled in reply. “The women be the worst. They’ll scratch your eyes out as soon as look at you”. Strutt stroked his beard as though reviewing all the details of the tail before he began. “There be three of us, Paddy Hexagon, Sam O’Leary and yours truly, and we’s huntin’ kangaroo in the Coal River area when we see this gin who were pregnant like. ‘Oi!’ we shouts, thinkin’ her too fat to make a run for it, and five pound in the bounty bag if you please and very nice too! And if the child be near to born, another two for what’s inside her belly”. He paused and the men laughed and one of them, a wit named Cristin Puding, known of course as ‘Christmas Pudding’, made a customary crack.

“That I needs to see! A Government bounty man what pays two pounds for what’s no yet come outside to be properly skinned and cured!”

“Well we shouts again”, Strutt continued, casting a look of annoyance at Puding, for he did not wish him to steal even the smallest rumble of his thunder, or tiny scrap of the laughter yet to come. “And she sets off, waddlin’ like a duck and makin’ for the shelter o’ some trees not twenty yards away. She’s movin’ too, movin’ fast for the fat black duck she’s become”. This brought a laugh, for the gang had heard it often enough and were properly cued to respond.

“We sets off to get her, but the grass ‘tween her and us be high and she be into the trees. By the time we gets there she ain’t nowhere to be seen. High ‘n low we searches and we’s about to give it away when we hears a cry up above. We looks up and there she be, up fifty feet or more in the branches of a gum tree, well disguised behind the leaves and all. How she gone and got up in her state I’m bugged if I knows, it were no easy climb”.

The road gang grew silent and even Billygonequeer ceased making his frog sounds.

“There she be, high up in the fork o’ the tree and, by Jaysus, the child inside her is beginnin’ to be borned! She’s gruntin somethin’ awful, snuffin’ and snoofin’ like a fat sow and then it’s a screamin’ and a caterwaulin’ as the head and shoulders come to sniff the world outside! ‘Here’s sport for all!’ Sam O’Leary, me mate, shouts. ‘We’ll wait this one out!’”

“Wait this one out!” Cristin Puding shouted, turning to the others. “Get it? Wait this one out!” But the other prisoners hushed him fast, anxious for the story to continue.

“Well, you’ll not believe it”, Strutt continued, once again ignoring Puding, “Though I swear on mother’s grave it be true. Out come the bloody mess. The child’s got the birth cord twisted round its neck and stranglin’ him, only later it turns out to be a her, a little girl, and it’s hangin’ itself in the air, and the black gin’s tryin’ to hold onto the cord, but it’s slippin’ through her hands. ‘Five shilling to him what shoots it down first!’ Padd Hexagon shouts”.

Strutt stopped suddenly and rocked back on the log he’d sat on and then began to chuckle softly.

“Well you never seen such a loadin’ an firin’ and missin’ and, all the time, the cord stretchin’ longer and longer with the black woman holdin’ on to it at her end and screamin’ blue murder! Then Paddy takes a bead and fires and the little black bastard explodes like a ripe pumpkin! There be blood rainin’ down on us! Jaysus! I can tell you, we was all a mess to behold. ‘Bastard! Bitch! Black Whore!’ O’Leary shouts at the gin screamin’ and sobbin’ up in the tree”. The foreman laughed again. “His wife just made him a new shirt and now it be spoiled, soaked in Abo’s blood! Paddy and me damn near carked we laughed so much!”

He paused, enjoying the eyes of all the men fixed upon him. “‘You’ll pay for this ya black bitch!’ O’Leary shouts upwards at her, shakin’ his fist. Then he takes a careful shot. Bullseye! He hits the gin in the stomach. But she didn’t come tumblin’ down, instead she starts to pick leaves from the tree and stuff them in her gut, in the hole what O’Leary’s musket’s made. We all shoot, but she stays up, and each time a shot strikes home she spits at us and stuffs more leaves where the new holes be. There we all be. Us shootin’ and her stuffin’ gum leaves and screamin’ and spittin’, the baby lyin’ broke on the ground. It were grand sport, but then I take a shot and hits her in the head, dead between the eyes, and she comes tumblin’ down and falls plop, lifeless to the ground”.

The men around the overseer clapped and whistled. Only Ikey and Billygonequeer remained silent.<sup>107</sup>

After I had concluded the reading to the students there was a silence which I mistook for shock. But one of the boys, Steven, turned to me and said ‘we know all that’. I looked into their faces and found a uniform confirmation. It seemed my students’ views and attitudes were informed by a powerful knowledge that I had little suspected.

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<sup>107</sup> . B. Courtenay, *The Potato Factory*, (Mandarin, Australia, 1996), pp.450 -453.

In seeking to understand current Aboriginal concerns in, for example, education, fiction such as the above, based as it is on historical occurrences, is of great value<sup>108</sup>. In a similar vein, a recent television adaptation of Dame Mary Durack's *Kings in Grass Castles* has portrayed the pernicious treatment of Aboriginal people by European settlers in the Kimberley. Literature of an academic nature is often neglectful of the experiences of Aboriginal people because they are seen to be 'in the past'. In my experience many Aboriginal people do not regard such incidents as being merely historical fact, but rather they are seen as present day truths which impact upon their day to day living. It would not be reasonable to attribute low class attendance merely to 'passivity'.



### **Summary**

Low school attendance is an established fact and pattern amongst Aboriginal students, leading to further problems. There are historical reasons for this. To explain this phenomenon merely as a function of 'passivity' is therefore palpably fallacious. It is important to recognize Aboriginal 'resistance' when attempting to make the education process meaningful to these students. I became strongly convinced of this both from reading and from my own teaching experience, and came to regard the transcendence of 'resistance' as central to my role. I believe that it is essential for Aboriginal students to be actively welcomed in school but furthermore that it is clear to them that their teachers are on the same side. Of course this is to assume that teachers are 'for' and not 'against' their students.

## Chapter Four

### **Causes of Truancy – Attempting to Correct Low-Attendance**

In 1983, the newly elected State Labor Government of Western Australia instigated several inquiries with relevance to Aboriginal people. The Inquiry into Education was headed by Kim Beazley (Senior) and resulted in a report (known as *The Beazley Report*) which made certain recommendations in respect of Aboriginal education. These recommendations were based on the following statement:

Aborigines are probably the most disadvantaged group in our community. Aborigines suffer disadvantages arising from cultural differences, history, living conditions and illness. These difficulties, and many others, are compounded by the remoteness of many Aboriginal settlements and by a general lack of interest, understanding and sympathy on the part of many in the non-Aboriginal community. These difficulties translate into severe educational disadvantages.<sup>109</sup>

Although there have been a plethora of official findings reported subsequent to this statement. *The Beazley Report*, released in 1984, was a landmark in the history of education in Western Australia. Recommendations with particular relevance to Aboriginal education in general, and specifically of importance in the metropolitan region and other urban areas include:

#### ***Recommendation 9***

- (i) That sequential curriculum materials be developed where there is obvious need, such as computer science within Science and Technology, sex education within Vocation and Personal Awareness, Aboriginal studies and Multicultural studies.

#### ***Recommendation 96***

That training institutions make special provision through bridging courses if necessary, to facilitate the entry of suitably qualified Aborigines to teacher preparation at all levels.

#### ***Recommendation 218***

The educational systems involve Aboriginal people at senior decision-making levels.

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<sup>108</sup> Of course it must be remembered there are often many historical inaccuracies.

<sup>109</sup> . The Beazley Report of 1984, p.323, quoted in *The Aboriginal Voice in Education*, (The Aboriginal Education Resource Unit, Perth, 1987), p.10.

*Recommendation 219*

That educational systems, in consultation with the State Aboriginal Education Consultative Committee, develop and publicize policies in regard to Aboriginal education and Aboriginal studies. These policies should give due regard to:

- (i) The employment of trained Aboriginal teacher-aides and teachers...
- (ii) The encouragement of bilingual education by offering Aboriginal languages in schools, by using Aboriginal languages as a teaching medium in conjunction with English...
- (iii) The need to improve attendance and retention rates of Aboriginal students.

*Recommendation 220*

That education authorities and institutions, in association with various Aboriginal consultative bodies,

- (i) Develop Aboriginal studies materials for the Pre-primary to year 12 curriculum.
- (ii) Develop for use in schools with Aboriginal students, approved courses which are in accord with what is known of Aboriginal learning styles, language and culture.
- (iii) Conduct research in areas critical to Aboriginal education.

*Recommendation 221*

That all teacher education pre-service courses include components of Aboriginal education and Aboriginal studies.

*Recommendation 222*

That pre-service and in-service courses be made available to assist teachers of Aboriginal students to adapt curriculum materials and teaching approaches to suit the needs of Aboriginal children, and where appropriate Aboriginal people assist in these activities.

*Recommendation 224*

That Aboriginal liaison officers be available in every country education region, and in the metropolitan area, to liaise between parents and schools.

*Recommendation 226*

That procedures be established for the staffing of schools that have a significant Aboriginal enrolment. These procedures should include:

- (i) Appointment of teachers with specialist training and/or experience.
- (ii) Special promotional opportunities who specialize in Aboriginal education.

*Recommendation 231*

That the purpose of 'project' classes be reviewed fully.

*Recommendation 232*

That regular evaluation of programmes for Aboriginal students be undertaken.

*Recommendation 239*

That schools authorities and schools work to eliminate race prejudice and forms of stereotyping and to promote respect for all people.<sup>110</sup>

Many Aboriginal groups supported the Beazley recommendations of sixteen years ago, outlined above. Taken together, they amount to a moderate reform programme. However, it should be noted that many of the recommendations required long-term commitments from different education authorities if they were to be successfully implemented. Within EDWA the Beazley recommendations do not, at the present time, have the status of policy. In fact, EDWA, following the National Aboriginal Educational Policy (1989) developed its own policy (1991) but still it has not been appropriately resourced.<sup>111</sup> More recently, *The Daube Report*<sup>112</sup> of 1993 has re-emphasised the need for reform, highlighting the need for Aboriginal social justice. Obviously, the report was mindful of the reports of the Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Commission.

In 1987 *The Aboriginal Voice in Education* reproduced statistics detailing retention rates of Aboriginal students in Western Australian secondary schools, Years 8-12.<sup>113</sup> These are important figures that indicate the severe educational disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal children. Retention rates of only 6 per cent for Year 12 students indicated a crisis situation. This contrasted

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<sup>110</sup> . The Beazley Report of 1984, quoted in *The Aboriginal Voice*, pp.10-11. The reasons why these selected recommendations from the Beazley Report have been outlined and highlighted above will become clear later in this chapter.

<sup>111</sup> . It is a common complaint amongst teachers of Aboriginal Studies programmes and by teachers attempting to introduce Aboriginal culture across the curriculum that they do not possess adequate resources.

<sup>112</sup> . The Daube Report's recommendations have not been fully implemented either.

<sup>113</sup> . The retention rates for year 12 Aboriginal students, 1979-1984, and years 8-12, 1981-1986 are replicated in *The Beazley Report of 1984*, quoted in *The Aboriginal Voice*.

with non-Aboriginal national rates of over 35 per cent at that time (1986). Furthermore, the rates for Western Australian Aboriginal students were (and still are) lower than those of other States.

A number of further points need to be made which, taken together with the retention figures, clearly demonstrate that schools are failing to cater for the needs of Aboriginal students. *The Beazley Report* highlighted the following:

- Lack of Aboriginal Studies in school curriculum
- Teachers unskilled in Aboriginal Education
- Highest rates of absenteeism
- Highest rates of suspension
- Highest rates of expulsion (exclusion)
- Highest youth unemployment rates
- Highest rates of juvenile crime<sup>114</sup>

The picture revealed by *The Beazley Report* and reinforced by *The Aboriginal Voice in Education*, was not bright. When we turn to the matter of truancy, EDWA chronicles, under the title 'personal relationships', the four main causes of truancy:

- 1) Behaviour: a) does not like teacher b) difficulty relating to peers c) lack of social skills to co-operate and get on with others d) emotional disturbances due to defective family relationships.
- 2) Unassertiveness: a) pressure from peers to join them in not attending b) bullied by other students.
- 3) Adjustment to change. Difficulty adjusting to new teachers each year.
- 4) Transition to secondary school: a) difficulty in coping with the change from being seniors in primary school to being juniors in secondary school b) uncertainty about school organization and routine leads to feelings of insecurity and the perception of the school as a large, impersonal place, in which they are not valued as individuals c) students miss the cohesion of primary school groups and the security and strong relationship with one class teacher.

These outlines largely correspond to areas of concern identified at KSHS. I include below a classification of reasons for non-attendance by Aboriginal students. This taxonomy was compiled from conversations with parents and guardians, the AEW, the ALO and the Truancy Officer for

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<sup>114</sup> . A legitimate question is surely 'has anything changed?' Very few metropolitan or country senior high schools are presenting Aboriginal Studies as a part of the school curriculum. That there has been no change in the truth of the further six points goes without saying. EDWA Aboriginal Studies Unit..



Cockburn District Education Office. Within each section the reasons for non-attendance have been grouped under the headings of various 'types of influence' identified by members of the student services team at KSHS, as well as members of staff within EDWA. These were not necessarily identified by Aboriginal parents and guardians and members of the local Nyungar community, nor indeed from my own research, but were seen as useful by the compilers.

## A Taxonomy of Reasons for Non-Attendance by Aboriginal students at KSHS

| Type of Influence  | Area of Influence          | Examples of reasons for non-attendance                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|--------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| FUTURE ASPIRATIONS | Role Models                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unaware of role models in the community at large.</li> <li>• Parents/Community members appear to lead a happy life on the dole and the students see little need for an education or higher aspirations.</li> </ul>                                                     |
|                    | Local Opportunities        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceived poor outlook/likelihood of employment on leaving school.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                    | Awareness of Opportunities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No planned future.</li> <li>• No idea of how important school is or what can be achieved with a good education.</li> <li>• Unaware of the level of achievement required at each stage of schooling in order to have access to the vocation of their choice.</li> </ul> |
| PAST PERFORMANCE   | Avoidance of failure       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoidance of the negative feelings associated with continual failure.</li> <li>• Avoidance of pressure to succeed where they feel they cannot.</li> <li>• Avoidance of being told they are failures.</li> </ul>                                                        |
|                    | Boredom                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoidance of sitting and staring at work they cannot do.</li> <li>• Avoidance of trying to repeat activities they have already attempted many times.</li> </ul>                                                                                                        |

| Type of Influence                 | Area of Influence | Examples of reasons for non-attendance                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM OF THE SCHOOL | Relevance         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of relevant material in core areas.</li> <li>• Courses/Units offered are not relevant.</li> <li>• Students perceive that they are not getting marketable skills.</li> <li>• Students perceive education as worthless.</li> <li>• School program is not relevant.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|                                   | Alien Format      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers lack knowledge of how Aboriginal students think and perceive.</li> <li>• School activities are totally different to home activities.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|                                   | Interest          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Courses/Units/Activities are not interesting.</li> <li>• Home activities are more interesting.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|                                   | Consultation      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Subject matter is imposed on the students without consultation with the community.</li> <li>• The school has no formal link with the community for the interchange of ideas.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|                                   | Neglect           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aboriginal Studies is downgraded.</li> <li>• Aboriginal languages are not taught.</li> <li>• Aboriginal culture is presented in a negative way.</li> <li>• Aboriginal achievements are not mentioned in history lessons.</li> <li>• Non-indigenous values and ideals dominate the curriculum [Aboriginal culture is downgraded by not being included]</li> <li>• Lack of teaching resources which truthfully portray Aboriginal cultures and history.</li> </ul> |

| Type of Influence                          | Area of Influence | Examples of reasons for non-attendance                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------------|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| SCHOOL OR CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT/ ATMOSPHERE | Pressure          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers are impatient.</li> <li>• Style of schooling is imposed on the students.</li> <li>• Criticism for not wearing school uniform.</li> <li>• Don't attend rather than arrive late.</li> <li>• Avoidance of school punishments/sanctions.</li> <li>• Home environment obstructs the completion of homework, and the students stay away to avoid punishment for non-completion.</li> <li>• The school or parents attempt to impose aspirations and aims on the students rather than allowing the children to develop their own.</li> <li>• Students reject the high aspirations/expectations of parents and teachers for fear of not being able to attain them.</li> <li>• Compulsory sporting events e.g. weak swimmers forced to compete in a swimming carnival.</li> <li>• Late arrivals are sometimes treated as truants.</li> <li>• Comments from non-teaching staff [e.g. clerical staff] can be hurtful.</li> </ul> |

| Type of Influence | Area of Influence | Examples of reasons for non-attendance                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                   | Interest          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Able students are not provided with interesting activities because lessons cater for those who are struggling.</li> <li>• Many activities are repeated to cater for students who have been absent.</li> <li>• The school routine is repetitive without special activities to brighten it up.</li> <li>• School is boring.</li> <li>• Lack of immediate results for effort.</li> <li>• Home activities are more interesting.</li> <li>• The school doesn't have the same 'all ages' involvement in activities and social intercourse as do communities and the students feel alienated.</li> </ul> |

| Type of Influences | Area of Influence    | Examples of reasons for non-attendance                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------|----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                    | Aggression/Hostility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents/Students feel that the principal has no time for Aboriginal people.</li> <li>• Students do not perceive the school as there to help them.</li> <li>• Teachers appear uncaring.</li> <li>• Parents/Students perceive some teachers as having negative attitudes towards Aboriginal people and infer that they are not wanted in the school.</li> <li>• Parental perception that, deep down, schools don't want Aboriginal students to get an education.</li> <li>• Parents/Students perceive that Aboriginal students are punished more severely than non-Aboriginal students for the same offence.</li> <li>• Discipline is enforced in a negative way.</li> <li>• Past attempts to solve the non-attendance problem have been punitive.</li> <li>• Teachers have hit the students.</li> <li>• Racist remarks by teachers.</li> </ul> |
|                    | Personal Respect     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language used by teachers is alien and impersonal.</li> <li>• Teachers treat the students as failures.</li> <li>• Students feel neglected because teachers spend more time with others.</li> <li>• Counselling facilities in the school are inadequate.</li> <li>• The students' home life requires them to take on responsibilities beyond their years, but they are treated as immature, young children at school.</li> <li>• The students feel there is no adult in the school with the time, patience and understanding to talk to them and don't like being treated as an immature child all the time.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |



| Type of Influence | Area of Influence                 | Examples of reasons for non-attendance                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                   | Professional Competence/Knowledge | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Non-experienced staff year after year.</li> <li>• Young teachers [experienced or not].</li> <li>• Actions taken in order to solve particular problems have created others.</li> <li>• Early signs indicating a student may become a persistent non-attender are not acted on.</li> <li>• Past non-attendance correction strategies have simply placed the students back into the same situation that was the catalyst for their non-attendance in the first place [and will therefore not be successful in the long term].</li> <li>• Students don't like large group activities.</li> <li>• Lack of appropriate rewards for attending.</li> <li>• The school instruction system [i.e. a teacher standing in front of a class telling children what to do] is alien to some students.</li> <li>• Inflexible teaching/learning processes which cope inadequately with differences between dominant and minority cultures.</li> <li>• Lack of knowledge about how Aboriginal students think and perceive.</li> <li>• Many teachers are ignorant of Aboriginal culture and values. This leads to communication problems, conflicts and absenteeism.</li> <li>• Praising only the students' sporting ability directs them away from academic pursuits.</li> <li>• Lack of staff knowledge about family background.</li> </ul> |



| Type of Influence           | Area of Influence      | Examples of reasons for non-attendance                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| PERSONAL LIKES/<br>DISLIKES | Community Consultation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Style of schooling in our schools is imposed.</li> <li>• Community people are not involved by the school in the design and implementation of general curricula, teaching/ learning strategies and classroom organisation.</li> <li>• Schools don't encourage parental participation in schools. The provision of limited opportunities for participation is not necessarily the same as 'encouragement'.</li> <li>• Heavy-handed approach by the school in dealing with parents.</li> <li>• No formal community link with the community.</li> <li>• Meetings with parents are rushed or time limited.</li> <li>• Teachers don't know family backgrounds and lack awareness of problems/issues.</li> <li>• Parents are not aware their children are not attending.</li> <li>• Parents are not informed of absences.</li> <li>• Letters from the school don't get to parents.</li> <li>• Staff unaware of work carried out by parent committees.</li> </ul> |
|                             | Avoidance              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students avoid being judged because of past non-achievement.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|                             | Disinterest            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students don't care if they are not succeeding in a subject they consider valueless, but stay away to avoid pressure to try harder, or be punished for not trying.</li> <li>• Students don't like particular subjects.</li> <li>• The student has not made a personal commitment to attend on a regular basis.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |

| Type of Influence | Area of Influence | Examples of reasons for non-attendance                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| HEALTH            | Alternatives      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students would rather be elsewhere doing other things.</li> <li>• Students don't attend in order to break the law e.g. burglary during school hours.</li> <li>• Non-attendance provides the opportunity to indulge in activities which would not be allowed at home e.g. meeting boyfriends or girlfriends, smoking cannabis, sniffing petrol or glue.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|                   | Difficulty        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Too fat to travel.</li> <li>• Students go home and don't return.</li> <li>• Students are lazy and want to avoid work.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|                   | Attention         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students feign sickness to get attention from parents and family.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|                   | Embarrassment     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students sleep in and do not want to be embarrassed by arriving late.</li> <li>• No hot water to wash.</li> <li>• No lunch.</li> <li>• No clean clothing.</li> <li>• No books.</li> <li>• Learning problems associated with, or caused by health problems.</li> <li>• Physical impairments lead to ridicule from other children.</li> <li>• Embarrassment at having nits or some other disorder.</li> <li>• Community Services sometimes take a long time to help children with health problems.</li> <li>• Care for a sick parent or guardian.</li> <li>• Smoking cannabis or sniffing petrol and glue.</li> </ul> |

| Type of Influence                     | Area of Influence   | Examples of reasons for non-attendance                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| FAMILY/FRIENDS/<br>COMMUNITY [Active] | Racism              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural destruction has led to a resentment on the part of Aborigines which carries over to not attending white people's schools.</li> <li>• Racial, or anti-black feeling, in the community.</li> <li>• Racial, or anti-white feeling in the community.</li> <li>• Aboriginal students don't mix with non-Aboriginal students.</li> <li>• Aboriginal students perceive inequalities on a racial basis in the way discipline is administered in the school.</li> </ul> |
|                                       | Peer Group          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer groups coerce the students to truant.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|                                       | Older Friends       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students who have left school coerce the children to stay away.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|                                       | Parents             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents either keep their children away, or encourage them not to attend because they disapprove of the school organisation or staff, or because they feel the school is undermining the moral values of their culture.</li> <li>• Parents may feel threatened because their children are achieving a higher level of education than they did.</li> <li>• Pension days are sometimes more interesting and rewarding than school.</li> </ul>                             |
|                                       | Home Responsibility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students are kept away from school to service the family needs, possibly to care for a sick parent or guardian.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|                                       | Family Aid          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Untrue excuse notes are written by older family members other than the parents.</li> <li>• Parents cannot write, and untrue excuse notes are written by children to be signed by parents.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |

As stated above, this extensive classification was compiled principally from interviews with Aboriginal students, some of their parents and surveys of staff at school, together with District Education staff (EDWA) including, in particular, AEWs and ALOs from the Cockburn and Melville areas between the years 1995-97. These people made an invaluable contribution with their ideas on the reasons for Aboriginal student's non-attendance. It is as well to point out that many if not most of the reasons outlined can and do apply to significant numbers of non-Aboriginal students who do not attend school, either as chronic or intermittent truants. It is clear from these lists of reasons for non-attendance that the causes of truancy fall into two categories: 'in school' and 'out of school' reasons. Or, as EDWA recognises, 'some of them the school can do nothing about'. More explicitly:

It is possible that some of the causes for a student's decision not to attend school are outside the school's realm of influence. However, it is important for the school to gain an understanding of the problem. The student will consider the pros and cons of going to school, weigh them up, and if the negatives outweigh the positives, he or she will make the decision not to attend.<sup>115</sup>

To influence the would-be truant to change this decision, EDWA believes that schools have three alternatives:

Impose negative sanctions, or punishments for non-attendance; eliminate, or alleviate the negatives; and if the negatives can not be altered, make the positives more positive, or increase the number of positives by addressing other factors in the organisation of the school.<sup>116</sup>

The imposition of negative sanctions, or punishments for non-attendance would appear to be pointless. The overall aim is to bring about increased attendance and further participation. There is, therefore, seemingly little point in attempting to impose 'punishment'. Beyond stopping 'Ab. Study' money for prolonged truancy little else can be done, except for the imposition of monetary penalties on the parents/guardians of student truants<sup>117</sup>. But this is what the new school Act proposes and quite naturally the W.A. Aboriginal Legal Service vehemently opposes it. Presumably the imposition of such 'negative sanctions' would only further alienate non-attendees from the

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<sup>115</sup> . *Aboriginal Attendance: Some Practical Strategies*, p.22.

<sup>116</sup> . *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> I found that I was constantly at loggerheads with many senior staff over the issue of Aboriginal Study and ASSPA funds who kept complaining that 'my' Aboriginal students were being favoured and that this was 'unfair'.

education process and, therefore, arguably from society. The Commissioners of the Aboriginal Deaths in Custody inquiry make the consequences of such a result apparent.

The second of EDWA's 'alternatives' in respect to student non-attendance suggest an 'elimination, or alleviation of the negatives'. No school is perfect, however, there is always ample room for improvement; change only requires the political will on the part of the principal, senior staff and a percentage of teachers for it to take place. By altering or eliminating negative forces, school people can make school a more positive environment and this will inevitably mean addressing other factors in the organisation of the school. For example, it is a good idea to encourage students to turn up for school by eliminating racism from the school.

Within the EDWA report on *Aboriginal Attendance* the largest section deals with 'school or classroom management/atmosphere'.<sup>118</sup> In reading various articles about non-attendance,<sup>119</sup> its causes and the strategies to combat it, I found that the overwhelming consensus of international opinion is that changing the atmosphere or management of the school or classroom will probably be the most effective way to correct the problem.<sup>120</sup> Bearing this in mind, a number of changes were made at KSHS and these are explored below, particularly in the next chapter.

A multiplicity of possible reasons emerge for non-attendance, so it is important to appreciate that each non-attendeer is an individual, and to realise that the reasons behind his/her decision not to attend may be different from those which have influenced other students. One purpose of my thesis, but particularly in this chapter, is to suggest starting points for the investigation of students' non-attendance. To this end, I include below an account of a series of Aboriginal Education workshops which were held at the Cockburn District Office (EDWA) in Fremantle during 1994 and 1995 attended by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal education workers, comprising AEWs, ALOs, teacher aides, teacher assistants, field officers and teachers. These people discussed ways of improving the attendance and participation of Aboriginal students at primary and secondary schools in the Cockburn and Melville regional districts. They also discussed ways of implementing Aboriginal Studies courses. However, the inclusion of whether Aboriginal Studies in the school curriculum was a good idea or not was not discussed. The atmosphere was informal yet businesslike. The

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<sup>118</sup> . *Aboriginal Attendance: Some Practical Strategies*, p. 22.

<sup>119</sup> . For example, Malin's Ph.D. dissertation, *op.cit.*

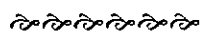
<sup>120</sup> . This is in keeping with the tuition I received from the Education Faculty at Curtin University in 1993. I wish to make particular mention of Dr Robert Wilkins whose pertinent comments and general instruction during 'Micro-skills' and 'Strategies in teaching' units stood me in good stead. Although he does not pay special attention to teaching Aboriginal students some of his strategies 'work' for teaching Aboriginal students.

school system. It is the independence of parents/carers that is referred to here; inter-dependence within the Aboriginal community is seen as high.

This type of discussion received as much prominence as that on in-school matters, where numbers of practical suggestions were made, which tended to focus on the need for teachers to be simply more caring and thoughtful. A reading of the Appendix is suggested; some of the points made are, I believe, most useful. With specific regard to the truancy issue. Whilst the majority of the attendees were education workers, they did tend to focus on the out of school factors. At this stage of my practice their views provided valuable insights for my dealings with the Aboriginal community. I learnt above all to look beyond the individual 'truant' to a communal concern about the patterns causing the truancy.

I consider these workshops to have been immensely valuable. The overwhelming majority of participants (and contributors to the "findings") were Nyungar Aboriginal education workers and liaison officers. The opinions given are spoken with an Aboriginal voice and are, therefore, clearly relevant and of importance. Alas, however, it has been my experience that despite the value of these pertinent observations they have been largely ignored by school administrations in the Cockburn and Melville education districts. Often the Aboriginal voice is perceived as non-professional and, therefore, it is dismissed.

Due to lack of funding these workshops on Aboriginal Education were discontinued at the end of 1995. However, under the Aboriginal reconciliation initiative, throughout 1996-97 KSHS continued such discussions 'in-house' with staff, students and members of the Kwinana/Medina Aboriginal Reconciliation Project. 'Good things are happening' and the commitment to ensure continued success appears on-going.



### Summary

Low attendance and truancy are concerns raised alike by the *Beazley Report* of 1984, subsequent official or government reports and EDWA. The latter attempts to describe reasons for truancy, reasons that were confirmed by a survey undertaken by the Medina Cultural Centre. Truancy is an individual problem, so there can be no hard and fast rules for dealing with it. However, there are

many possible starting points for investigation implicit in the information given in this chapter. More overtly, this chapter has suggested that the best strategies for dealing with truancy are seen to be in the field of classroom, or class-management, a theme which will be returned to in ensuing chapters. It is important to stress that the people who know why truancy is occurring are the Aboriginal people themselves; they have many of the answers, and not to go to them for answers is to simply compound the problem.

These workshops were immensely valuable. The overwhelming majority of participants (and contributors to the 'findings') were Nyungar Aboriginal education workers and liaison officers. The opinions given are spoken with an Aboriginal voice and are, therefore, clearly relevant and of importance. Alas, it has been my experience that despite the value of these pertinent observations they have been largely ignored by school administrations in the Cockburn and Melville education districts. Often the Aboriginal voice is perceived as non-professional and, therefore, it is dismissed.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Practical Initiatives at Kwinana Senior High School**

I believe that the early identification of non-attendees is critical. The likelihood of any remedial strategy being successful is diminished dramatically with the passage of time. 'Ideally, the problem should be identified and rectified before the student even becomes a non-attende[e]'<sup>123</sup>. Recognising, however, that at a practical level there will always be cases where this cannot be done, it is even more important for the school to be prepared to identify students with problems and to 'design and implement a plan of action as early as possible'<sup>124</sup>. To this end the Aboriginal Learning Centre<sup>125</sup> was introduced at KSHS in late 1992 just prior to my arrival at the school.

The 'target group' of the Centre were Aboriginal children of school age who had a history of truancy and who had shown a reluctance to involve themselves in mainstream education. Teachers had identified these children at primary school. However, school records, school and community welfare officers, the police and the local Aboriginal community also assisted the identification process. The purpose was to encourage these children to attend regularly by providing an alternative, non-threatening learning environment or situation. Once there they would have an opportunity to 'catch up' on areas of schooling that they had missed, and to improve those skills which would assist them to function as members of the school and wider community.

The school anticipated that some children would choose to return to mainstream education. I did not understand why this was so at the time. I tried to put myself in the position of these young people and doubted whether they would want to either return or begin going to mainstream classes. However, initially a more realistic aim was to provide sufficient survival skills to enable them to function as responsible, contributing members of society.

The principal objectives of the Centre are given below:

- To assist students to improve levels of literacy and numeracy.
- To develop the ability of students to communicate both orally and in written form.

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<sup>123</sup> *Aboriginal Attendance: Some Practical Strategies*, p.5.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> Initially the Centre was called the Alternative Aboriginal Learning Centre



- To develop students' self-esteem.
- To develop in students a sense of responsibility for their own life.

These objectives whilst in line with (and largely derived from) National Aboriginal Policy Goal 14<sup>126</sup>, appear sanitised. They were designed

- To enable Aboriginal students to attain skills to the same standards as other Australian students throughout the compulsory schooling years.

To achieve these objectives the following strategies, outlined in school records, were used to provide

- A positive, non-threatening learning environment.
- Established individual learning programmes so those students did not feel pressured to 'keep up'.
- Emphasis put on success but at the same time realising that failure is normal and not something to be ashamed of – we can learn from our mistakes.

In order to measure the success of the programme (and the progress of students) the following areas were considered by the principal, deputy principal male, deputy principal female and other senior staff.

- Attendance
- Behaviour
- Academic, social and personal development

For the purpose of monitoring 'progress', a checklist of desired outcomes was used.<sup>127</sup>

It was anticipated that once children began attending the Centre changes to this action plan would be necessary and modification of objectives and strategies would take place. When opening the Centre the school administration considered it faced five major challenges, at once consistent with and supplementary to the prescribed objectives:

1. To make the community aware of the Centre and its aims.
2. To make the Centre attractive so that children would be encouraged to initially attend.
3. To provide a programme that would encourage continued and regular attendance.
4. To improve the self-esteem of the students and foster socially acceptable behaviour.
5. To introduce individual learning programmes in order to facilitate students' achievement and success, with the eventual aim of joining or returning to mainstream education.

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<sup>126</sup> This was at the insistence of the AEU and EDWA.

<sup>127</sup> I had/have access to these written records on student behaviour, progress, self-esteem but I do not believe it is ethical to reproduce this data here.

The senior staff believed that the final objective could not be attempted without first achieving the previous four tasks. Nevertheless, I was to find that many of the students readily took to specific learning programmes if they were allowed to work together in pairs or in groups. I found it common place that students did not like to work individually.

After the local Nyungar community initially voiced concerns, the aim of the school administration was to avoid the Centre having a classroom atmosphere. Senior staff therefore set up the unit/classroom as a 'drop in' centre with a television set, computers, music system, games etc. The rationale behind such an approach was to encourage children to 'come and have a look'. From such a beginning it was hoped that a gradual introduction of 'academic work' could occur. Initially this would be fairly basic and with no pressure 'to succeed'. Students were assured that there would be no criticism for 'failure'; what was required was merely to 'have a go', and whilst some tasks may prove to be difficult, nothing is **too** difficult to achieve if the students stick to the task. I believe that this last is not necessarily the case. There are some tasks that many of us seem unable to achieve and sometimes we don't want to stick at a specific task – particularly if it has little relevance to us.

In December 1994, after I had been teaching in mainstream at Kwinana for a year, I was informed by the school administration that in the early stage of the project the learning programme consisted of rather basic 'survival skills' in the areas of literacy and numeracy. The reason for this was that most students entered it with reading and counting skills roughly equivalent to year 3-5 of primary schooling. Some students entering the programme had never attended school. Due to numerous gaps and omissions by the school administration at the planning stage of the project, progress was initially very slow. However, with improvements it was anticipated that the programme would open out into broader areas of education with the ultimate aim of moving students into mainstream schooling.

Formal assessment procedures such as standardised or teacher testing was kept to a minimum with any development traced from observation, anecdotal evidence or informal records, and recording of progressive achievements. More importance was given to the building of self-esteem and confidence, together with the development of social skills, particularly socially acceptable behaviour, than formal academic activities. As regular attendance was fundamental to the success of the programme this was the major thrust in the early months of the project, June-December 1992. During this initial period the Centre, staffed by one trained, non-Aboriginal teacher had contact with fifteen children, seven of whom were fairly regular attendees. Three of these 'regulars' intermittently attended some 'option'/non-academic lessons in mainstream classes.

Here below is the report written by the school administration. I should be noted that the school records for this period reveal a startling level of impersonal language. There are copious references to 'the Centre', 'the Project', and 'the Programme', but rarely any mention to the people/the students, and never their families.

### **Early Days: An Evaluation of the KSHS Aboriginal Education Alternative Programme<sup>128</sup>**

#### ***Abstract***

*The Aboriginal Alternative Education Project involved the setting up of a Centre on the school campus but removed from the main teaching area. This allowed the target group of students to experience education in an environment in which they felt 'safe'. It also allowed a more flexible approach to school attendance procedures.*

*The evaluation at this time is a little premature, as many of the indicators of success require measures to be made over an extended period of time. The Centre has been operating since the 26 May 1992.<sup>129</sup>*

*Dates available indicate increased attendance, improved behaviour, improved self-esteem and a desire amongst some of the students to participate more in the mainstream school.*

#### **THE PROGRAMME:**

##### ***Target Group***

*Aboriginal students between 12 and 15 years of age who are not attending school and/or experiencing educational difficulties. Some are also experiencing social and behavioural difficulties.*

##### ***Purpose/Outcomes***

*The programme involves the introduction of a remedial course for aboriginal[sic] students who are experiencing educational and learning difficulties.*

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<sup>128</sup> The following is an extract in its original format from an evaluation made in November 1992. It should be pointed out that in 1990-92 there was no Aboriginal student enrolled at KSHS in mainstream who had completed the academic school year in the mainstream programme. Even students from Years 8 and 9 who initially attended school on a fairly regular basis had 'dropped out' of school before the end of term 4.

*The purpose of the course is to develop independent learning skills, self-esteem and to increase the retention rates to year 12. Emphasis will be placed on language, literacy and numeracy based around cultural and physical activities.*

*The project aims to:*

- 1. Increase the participation of aboriginal[sic] students in post-compulsory schooling.*
- 2. Increase the relevance of secondary schooling to Aboriginal students.*
- 3. Increase the literacy and numeracy skills of aboriginal[sic] students.*
- 4. Improve the self-esteem of aboriginal[sic] students at KSHS.*
- 5. Increase the opportunities for aboriginal[sic] students to develop independent work skills.*
- 6. Integrate chronic school 'refusers' back into mainstream schooling.*

### **Strategies**

- 1. Provide a positive work environment that improves the student's self-esteem and develops independent work skills.*
- 2. Placing students on a self-paced programme.*
- 3. Develop interesting and relevant curriculum.*
- 4. Provide information on community resources through visits and participation in their programmes.*
- 5. Provide formal support structures to aid in the transition of students back into the mainstream high school programme.*

### **Criteria for Evaluation**

*The extent to which students:*

- 1. Remain for year 11 and 12.*
- 2. Attend school regularly.*
- 3. Improve their performance on educational assessment programmes.*
- 4. Perform well on self-esteem tests (before and after programme).*
- 5. Receive positive feedback from teachers of the mainstream programme.*
- 6. Display increased participation/commitment to the school.*
- 7. Develop independent learning and working skills.*

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<sup>129</sup> Although the unit was officially 'operating' it was little more than a 'drop in' Centre for a few young Aboriginal people until 1993.

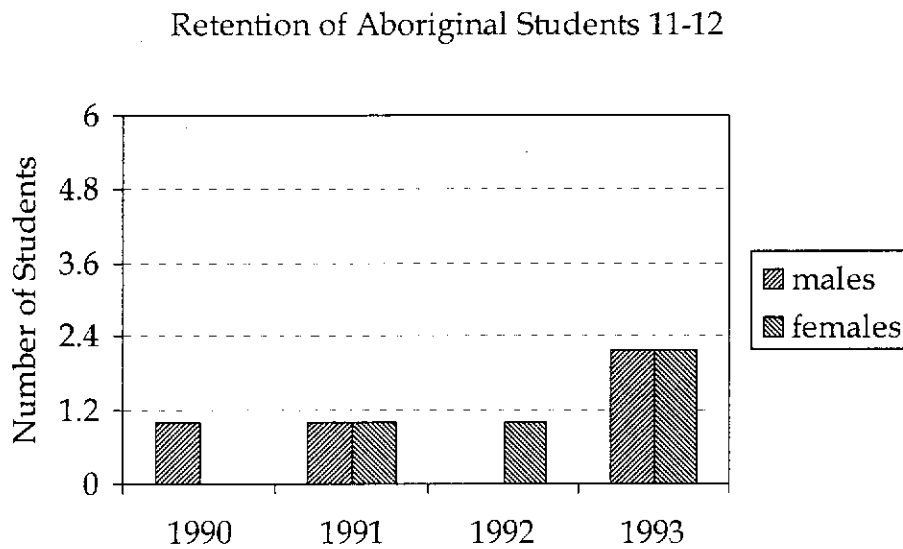
### **Methodology of Evaluation**

*Numerical data was collected from school records to establish some baselines from which any improvement in retention rates, attendance and academic achievement could be measured. These figures are based on aboriginal[sic] students who have been full-time students. It should be kept in mind that many of the target group have not attended high school at all.*

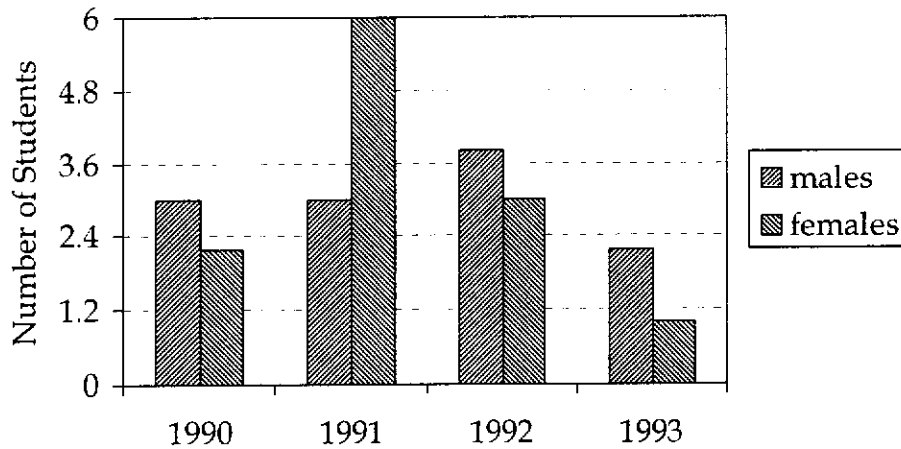
*Anecdotal evidence has also been collected from teachers and support staff actually involved with the students and from interviews with the students involved.*

### **EVALUATION-Retention Rates**

*As a baseline measure retention rates for 1989/90, 1990/91 and 1991/92 are available. These can be compared to the expected retention rates for 1992/93.*



## Retention of Aboriginal Students 10-11



*Figure 3 shows the drop out rate between years 11 and 12 expressed as a*

Drop Out Rate Year 11 to 12 Aboriginal Students  
as % of Year 11 Aboriginal Students

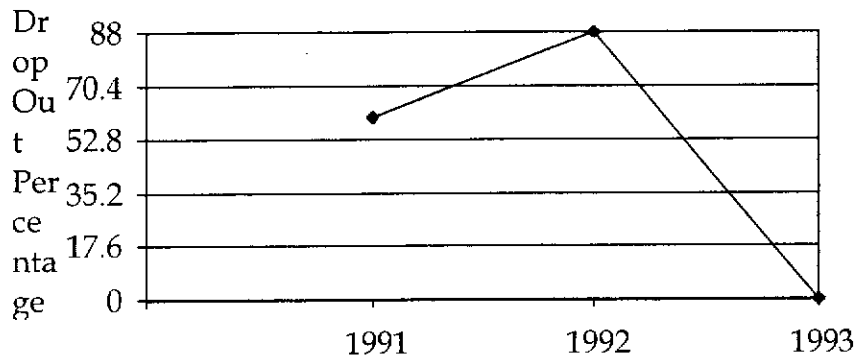
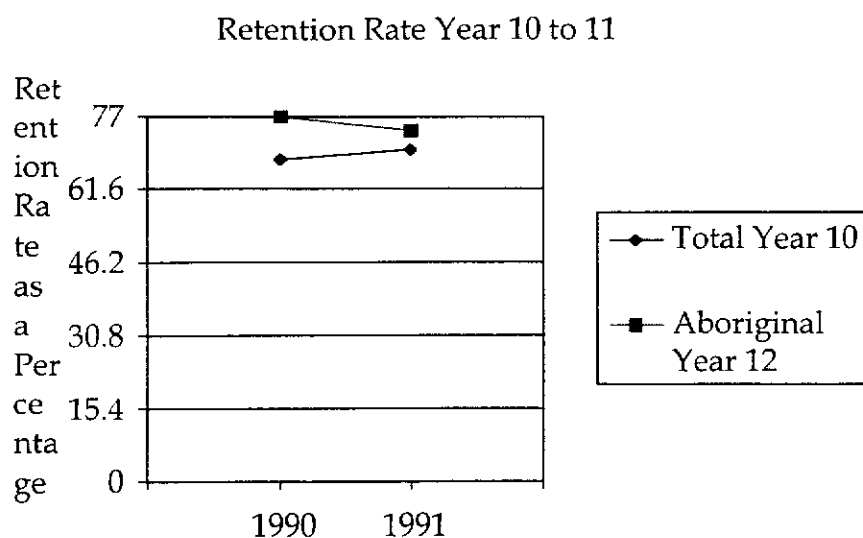


Figure 3

*percentage of the total number of Aboriginal students in year 11.*

*Retention rates for Year 10 to 11 expressed as a percentage of Year 10 Aboriginal students for 1991/92 and predicted rates for 1992/93 are shown below, together with the overall retention rate for the total year 10 population.*



*It must be recognised that none of the observable trends in this data can be attributed to the programme.*

### **Regular Attendance**

*Data collected here refers only to those students who are enrolled as students at the Kwinana Aboriginal Alternative Learning Centre.*

*Since commencement on 26 May the Centre has had contact with 15 children. Currently there are seven regular attendees. In the first six weeks the number of half-day attendance was 110; this increased to 190 for the next six weeks and continues to grow.*

*A 13 year old boy had attended school for only three days since the commencement of the year has, since enrolling at the Centre on June 15, had 30 contact days (to September 13).*

*A 13-year-old girl who had hardly attended school in the first four months has now presented herself for 32 days (to September 13).*

*In June another 13-year-old girl who had enrolled in the schools Educational Support Unit (ESU) was transferred to the Centre because of chronic truancy and behavioural problems. These problems included being an elective mute, and stealing. Since then, she has not missed a day at school, and now splits her time between the Centre and the ESU<sup>130</sup> class.*

<sup>130</sup> Education Support Unit (Ed. Support).

*At the end of July a 13-year-old boy who had not attended school since being excluded in year 5 enrolled. He now attends regularly.*

*In August a family of three children were enrolled at the Centre. These students had a long record of truancy at their previous schools. Their attendance has now improved.*

### ***Improved Performance on Educational Assessment Programmes***

*Initially the aim was to avoid a classroom atmosphere so the room was set up as a drop in Centre with TV, computers, music, games etc. to encourage students to come and have a look. Once attendance had been established there was a gradual introduction of academic work.*

*In the early stages, the learning programme consisted of rather basic 'survival skills' i literacy and numeracy as most enter with skill levels in these areas equivalent to years 3-5 of primary schooling. As improvement is noted the programme opens to wider areas of education, with the ultimate goal of the students moving into mainstream schooling.*

*Four students are already in a transition stage spending some time at the Centre and some time in mainstream classes at KSHS. At this stage it could not be claimed that this transition was fully successful as on occasions, these students go missing between the Centre and the mainstream class.*

*Formal assessment such as standardised testing is kept to a minimum. Student development is traced from anecdotal records, observation and recording progressive achievements. See below for some examples.*

### ***Perform Well on Self-Esteem Tests Before and After the Programme***

*The anecdotal records kept on each student give some indication of a student's self-esteem which is generally low on enrolment at the Centre. Formal data for year 8 Aboriginal students who were enrolled in February at KSHS is available and indicates that two students who were tested at that time were two standard deviations below the mean for year 8.*



*No further testing has been done since February. However, the observation is that attendance has increased, some students are operating on mixed mode, and all students go into the main school for art classes, and to use toilet facilities, indicates an improvement in student self-esteem.*

***Recent Positive Feedback from Teachers in the Mainstream Programme & Display Increased Commitment/Participation to the School***

*As indicated previously four students, at their request, are now working on a mixed mode that indicates increased participation in the school. The fact that two of these students use this as an opportunity to become fractional truants is of some concern. However, this truancy seems to be related to a lack of concern for the time constraints of a formal timetable, rather than a desire to escape the classes. This information comes from interviews with the students concerned.*

*Another indication of increased participation in the school is the art classes, which commenced in the Centre, but now run in the schools art classroom. The students have also been involved in a community project that required them to work as a group, painting a bus shelter in Medina.*

*The schools MSB records show that since moving into the Centre the number of referrals for infractions of school rules has decreased. For example, one student was constantly being referred for suspected theft and truancy. This student has only been referred once since moving into the Centre. A second student who enrolled at the school in June did not attend any classes for the first two weeks and in the next week was referred for abusing staff, disrupting classes, failing to follow teachers directives and vandalism. Since transferring to the Centre this student has shown a gradual improvement although he could not be described as an angel.*

***Develop Independent Learning and Working Skills***

*Students at the Centre have not developed many of the skills required to be independent learners and workers. They do not have any notion of goal setting, or any concept of sticking to a task until it is complete. As a group, regular attendance and punctuality cannot be depended on, nor can they be relied on to keep an appointment or follow simple instructions without close supervision.*

*It must be said that these same comments can be levelled at many students, not only at KSHS, but also at many other High Schools around the State and in the general community.*

***Summary***

*An evaluation at this early stage of a programme, which has such long-term goals, is inappropriate<sup>131</sup> and it must be realised that the success of the programme will only be evident if it is allowed to run for at least two years, with ongoing monitoring.*

*There is evidence from attendance and behaviour that the programme is having some success. Of the small group of students involved most would not be attending school at all if the programme was not running, and there has been an increase in Aboriginal enrolments in the mainstream classes at KSHS which could be an indirect result of the Centre's operation.*

### **Recommendations**

- 1. Provide funding to employ a teacher on contract for a two-year period.*
- 2. Facilitate the sharing of resources between similar Centres around the State.*
- 3. Co-ordinate programmes rather than having a number of schools trying to find individual solutions to common problems.*
- 4. The school expedites the necessary submissions required to employ an Aboriginal education worker to give support to the teacher at the Centre.*
- 5. The programme continues for a two-year period<sup>132</sup>.*

In December 1994 I was appointed to take over the role of Co-ordinator of Aboriginal Education and teacher of the Aboriginal students at the Kwinana Aboriginal Centre (hereafter KAC), with effect from January 1995. Prior to this I had been asked to write a report on the year. That report is reproduced below. The contrast with the earlier report will, no doubt, be apparent, i.e. my report is more informal. This is important, as my approach to the students at the Centre was to be more personal and more involved<sup>133</sup>.

### **Introduction**

1994 has seen a change to the original format of the Centre with the main aims being **early intervention** and **transition**.

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<sup>131</sup> This appears to be a paradoxical conclusion to draw given that the Report itself an evaluation

<sup>132</sup> Between 26 May 1992 and November 1994 the Kwinana Learning Centre was run by Mr Wilf Carr. The deputy principal (male) wrote two other reports for the years 1993-94 inclusive. These largely mirror the 1992 report and have been reproduced, in the original format, as Appendices Four and Five. As with the 1992 report above, they make for fairly sterile reading.

<sup>133</sup> I compiled this report with the assistance of Mr Wilf Carr in September 1994, during my third term at KSHS.

Students who are identified as being 'at risk' are now accommodated at the Centre and receive tuition until they are able to be integrated into some, or all mainstream classes. Initially these students attend one or two option<sup>134</sup> classes of their own choosing. When they feel comfortable working with mainstream students, they move into more option classes.

Currently there are six students in mainstream classes attending regularly as well as one primary aged student who has no suitable placement at any other school within the Kwinana area. This student has social, personal and academic problems.

In addition to these younger students there are three who are nominally in Year 10 and one in Year 9. One student has progressed to attending a number of mainstream classes but the other students constantly resist attempts to integrate them.

There is one Year 11 student on the roll but lately she has not been a regular attendee.

The students work well as a separate group and look at the Centre as a safe and comfortable place to be. Any academic progress is seen as a bonus to the main objectives.

During the year eighteen students have been enrolled and of these eleven still remain at the school. Alas, however, the attendance of most of these is at best irregular.

The Centre manager, Wilf Carr, has structured the student's learning programmes on student centred learning principles, with the emphasis being on literacy and numeracy skills.

Students are assessed for a 'start point' and a learning programme is put in place to help to develop and increase the skills already acquired by the students.

During term one, the AEW resigned and the Centre was left with Wilf Carr as the lone adult to supervise and teach the students. This put him under a great strain as he was totally without DOTT time.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> 'Option' classes are subjects other than the four learning area subjects of Maths, Science, English and Social Studies (now Society and Environment).

<sup>135</sup> DOTT – Duties other than teaching. This time is most commonly used by teachers for the preparation of lessons and for the marking and reporting of assignments.

Expressions of interest were called for from the Aboriginal community, through the District office and a new 'temporary' AEW was appointed late in term two.

The presence of a new AEW at the Centre has made life a lot more comfortable for Wilf, and this support in the classroom and during the recess breaks have allowed Wilf the time to spend on preparation and counselling.

### **Changes to the Centre**

At the beginning of the year, ASSPA<sup>136</sup> funding was approved for the building of a verandah on the north side of the Centre. This provides shade to the classrooms as well as a cool, protected area outside for students to play, sit, talk or work. It is also valuable for visitors to enjoy the freedom of visiting the Centre without being intrusive in the classroom area. BBQs and other social events can now take place in an informal setting.

Diane (the AEW for semester 2, 1994) spent some time at the beginning of second semester reorganising the Centre into work-related areas and recreation areas. Students earn recreation time by completing work or presenting work of a good standard.

There are forty Aboriginal students enrolled at Kwinana altogether, and many of them see the KAC as the information centre for their social and cultural events. They visit and mix with the regular Centre students and go on excursions with them or attend specially organised lectures and workshops.

Recently all of the Aboriginal students in the school were invited to attend a series of health education workshops run by Gningala Clanton and co-ordinated by Kim Crawford from Kwinana Youth Services. While many of the students attended these workshops, a number of mainstream Aboriginal students did not. This was due to three main reasons:

1. They did not want to miss their regular classes for six weeks.
2. They had, over the past two/three year period already received good information on the sex education topics offered by the workshops, in their regular health education programmes.
3. The students expressed some embarrassment about being called out of their class to have special 'sexuality programmes' presented to them. Some attended infrequently, while others truanted or

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<sup>136</sup> Aboriginal Student Support and Parnet Awareness Programme.

simply returned to their regular classes. It might be a lesson in organising and targeting for the Aboriginal youth and health workers to consider when they present programmes in future.

### **General Observations by Centre Manager**

There is a perceived value among most Aboriginal students in being in mainstream classes, and although they visit the Centre to socialise at recess and at lunch time, they do not readily attend talks and workshops at the KAC. Mainstream students appear to under-value such programmes as the health and sexuality workshops, and are content to see them reserved for the Centre's students.

Aboriginal supervisors from district office visit the Centre on occasions to talk with Wilf Carr, the AEW or the students, but basically the Centre is functioning autonomously, and is providing a valuable service to the Kwinana community. It seems to have the backing of the parent body, and families visit the Centre regularly.

A proposal was discussed two months ago with the district superintendent and presented to the feeder schools' representative at a cell meeting, regarding the use of the Centre in 1995 as a fast track facility for primary schools. This would allow not only Aboriginal students who were at risk because of low literacy and numeracy skills to be tutored, ready for mainstream integration, but also students from other ethnic or deprived backgrounds.

The feeder primary schools (who were using the First Steps programme) felt that there was not the perceived need to use the KAC for anything other than what it was at present. In general, the students who attend the Centre are well catered for and are learning the basic skills needed to help them survive.

**Homework classes** are run at the Centre two nights a week but these are poorly attended. Once the 3.10 bell goes there is very little commitment or interest on the part of the students to stay on. Even the mainstream students are not keen to attend homework classes. The teachers running the classes make the sessions as interesting as possible by offering all kinds of incentives, such as afternoon teas, games, excursions and sweets.

There is little or no evidence to support the theory that the KAC has encouraged the retention of Aboriginal students into post-compulsory learning programmes. However, time may change this

recalcitrant attitude. No student, as yet, has transferred from the KAC to mainstream and then entered a post-compulsory schooling programme.

### **Recommendations from the 1994 Report**

1. All students should have access to the Centre, including non-Aboriginal students.
2. That the AEW continues to support the KAC programme.
3. That the KAC manager (teacher) is fully funded by the Education Department.
4. That students continue to be integrated into mainstream classes at an appropriate rate.
5. That the Centre is utilised for out-of-hours activities as much as possible, i.e. homework classes.
6. That the community is encouraged to visit the Centre and to take part in some of its programmes.
7. That a link is maintained with the local council through its youth worker programme.
9. That a flexible curriculum is maintained based on student centred learning.

In conclusion it should be emphasised that I wrote this report as a favour for a colleague. My commitment or role in the report writing was ambivalent. On the one hand, I was frustrated at what had or had not taken place in 1994 viz. the Aboriginal students. On the other hand, I was mindful of the necessity to present 1994 in a favourable light to ensure that funding from District and Central Office would continue in 1995.

### **End of the report.**

In January 1995 I took up my new duties but before I report on my experiences as Co-ordinator of the KAC and Aboriginal Education, it is necessary to say what happened in 1993 and in 1994 in regard to attendance and participation at KSHS. This is important on two counts. Firstly, it is not sufficient to rely on the official school reports referred to previously for an accurate understanding of events in those years. The reports rarely mention the students themselves, and are largely impersonal. Secondly, some comment on the years 1993/94, taken together with the school reports, will hopefully show a contrast between those years and my regime.

Between 1993/94 Aboriginal children aged 12-15 who had a poor history of primary school attendance and who had never attended senior high school, were given the opportunity to visit the KAC between 9.00 am and 1.30 pm, Monday-Friday. 'Students'<sup>137</sup> were free to come and go as they pleased, and to make use of all facilities at the KAC. However, students of the KAC were not

allowed within the grounds of the school campus except to visit the canteen. The latter, as well as the rule that denied mainstream students access to the KAC, were to prove difficult to enforce.

Attendance of the very few Aboriginal students both in mainstream and the KAC were irregular, and when they did come to school the level of participation in daily school activities was minimal. Most students were only turning up to school very reluctantly, usually to ensure the continuance of 'Ab. Study' payments. Most did not want to be there and many teachers (a majority of teachers) did not want them in their classes. In general Aboriginal students were perceived as a nuisance. Consequently, many teachers, although publicly denigrating the KAC as a waste of the taxpayers' money, privately welcomed its opening, not least because almost immediately the school's Aboriginal population re-located there. However, the transfer of students from mainstream to the KAC, whilst boosting the numbers attending, did little or nothing to assist further participation in school activities, whether academic or extra-curricular, and palpably did not further student's literacy or numeracy skills.

In short, for two and a half years the Aboriginal Learning Centre merely assisted in the development of some few young Aboriginals Nintendo skills, and the air-conditioning in the unit provided them with some relief from the heat during the summer months. This appears to be a harsh verdict, but I believe it to be a true assessment of the years 1993-94. When I took over the role as Co-ordinator of Aboriginal Education and teacher of the Aboriginal students at the KAC in December 1994<sup>138</sup> I already had it in mind to try to institute some changes in the day-to-day running of the KAC<sup>139</sup>. The implementation of any new policies or ideas was only possible because of the positive attitude of the students. They were hungry for change and keen for innovation. However, before I attempted any changes I determined that it was both politic and polite to speak with the parents/guardians of my students, and consult with members of the local Aboriginal community<sup>140</sup>.

What was really needed was for me to *listen* to their concerns, rather than be telling them my ideas. Although the KAC had been open for over two and a half years, it was extremely rare for parents/guardians, or any Aboriginal people to visit the Centre. Also, it was very unusual for any

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<sup>137</sup> Aboriginal children who were not enrolled in mainstream schooling.

<sup>138</sup> This position gave me responsibility for all Aboriginal students at school – both in the Centre and in the mainstream – as Co-ordinator of Aboriginal education.

<sup>139</sup> This statement does, I realise, imply criticism of former school policies. However, it is not intended as a criticism of teaching practices at KAC. I regard my time at KAC as simply the next stage in the development of the students and KAC. Or, more graphically as Mr Carr handing over the baton to me, in the manner of a relay runner.

<sup>140</sup> Some important notes on approaching Aboriginal parents (and the students?) are included in pp.49-60 as well as in Appendix Six

teaching staff from the main school campus to come across to the KAC. During my first year at KSHS, while teaching in the mainstream (1994), I had visited the Centre on numerous occasions. I was familiar, therefore, with most of the students who were regular attendees, and had met occasional visitors and rare attendees. I had also met many Aboriginal adults - some of whom were related to my students - at the Medina Aboriginal Cultural Centre. These contacts were to stand me in good stead.

During December, then, I spoke to many parents and to the youth services team from the local community, and I put the word out to as many young Aboriginal people that the Cottage<sup>141</sup> would be 'open-house' from the first day of the new school year. Upon commencing my duties in January 1995 and for most of terms one and two, 1995, I held a combination of formal and informal classes in the KAC for an ever increasing number of students.

As attendance grew appreciably<sup>142</sup> the key question was 'what would *we* do?' 'How would we spend our days together?' For obvious and good reasons the starting point was 'Aboriginal Studies'<sup>143</sup>.

The problem with 'teaching' Aboriginal Studies to my Aboriginal students was that they clearly knew more about the subject matter than I did. Over and over again I was found wanting. However, perhaps surprisingly, because I was supposed to be the teacher, this did not prove to be embarrassing. On the contrary, the students did not appear to resent the fact that their teacher was so obviously ignorant of his subject. The students were neither angry nor condescending in their manner, but appeared eager to educate me, and discuss topics with one another. There is some bushland adjacent to the Cottage, and often my students would take me for a walk, and we would spend hours, either wandering, sitting or exploring while discussing various aspects of traditional and modern day living styles of Nyungar people<sup>144</sup>.

My job description specified that I was to raise literacy and numeracy standards, together with attendance figures. The latter was quickly addressed which meant that my employer was quickly placated, initially at least. Increased enrollment and ongoing student participation in the learning process made for other difficulties with which the school as a whole, in the short term, proved

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<sup>141</sup> 'Cottage' is interchangeable with KAC.

<sup>142</sup> Official school records show this precisely, week by week, day by day. Senior school staff were reluctant for 'ethical reasons' to give permission to replicate this data. Confidentiality may have been the concern here. In outline, however: in the first term regular attendance at the KAC rose from 3 to 30, with 15 students studying in mainstream classes. By term 3 there would be 55 students in mainstream classes.

<sup>143</sup> This topic will be dealt with in some detail in the next chapter.



unequal to the challenge. Numeracy did not rank among the student's highest priorities. Indeed, numeracy was not really one of my own overriding concerns, either in a professional or private capacity.

To satisfy the institutional demands for numeracy we had maths lessons in Macdonalds. After a big 'feed' we would do our sums based on the prices on the menu<sup>145</sup>. To further our mathematical prowess we attended the fifth Test match between England<sup>146</sup> and Australia at the West Australian Cricket Association grounds in February 1995<sup>147</sup>. Based on the batting averages, over rate, wickets taken etc. we were able to complete several of our worksheets. Inevitably there was opposition from some members of staff. Some teachers opposed such innovative strategies and the school administration feared that precedents were being set. Nevertheless, although I would not claim that numeracy was actually substantively improved by a visit to a Test cricket match, attendance and participation rates most certainly were. Some staff were hostile because of such improvement. Visits to Fremantle prison, Adventure World, the beach, other senior high schools, fieldwork trips to the bush were organised with a view to making school attractive, and to facilitate an improvement in numeracy standards. It emerged that many students did not know how to work a calculator and I believe that frequent use of this instrument, in a practical setting, brought about many successes. Two basketball teams were formed (male and female) and an inter-school carnival and tournament were arranged to further this aim. Mathematical problems were set, based on the points system of scoring in basketball games and, gradually, there was a discernible improvement. Furthermore, an Australian Rules football team was formed, and a series of games took place between KSHS and Clontarf Aboriginal College. My female students and non-participating boys would set questions and the team had to complete the assignments - or a further game would not be scheduled. Artwork featuring the Aboriginal 'dot style' painting was completed with the help of the West Australian artist Mr Doug Ryder. Maths work was set based on these designs.

In order to offset feelings of jealousy and other more general opposition from staff and students, non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal students from the mainstream were invited to take part in our various projects and programmes. We encountered much open opposition from a section of staff,

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<sup>144</sup> I am aware that details on particular, actual encounters are the cornerstones of ethnography, supplemented by summaries such as the above.

<sup>145</sup> The manager and staff of the local Macdonalds restaurant in Kwinana were always helpful. Indeed the management often provided me with vouchers, certificates and rewards for the students.

<sup>146</sup> It should be noted that the then England Captain, Mike Atherton, and many of his team were warm-hearted in their response to the attention they received from my students. Regrettably I cannot say the same about the Australian team.

<sup>147</sup> I am grateful to Denise Gallon, Co-ordinator of Youth Services, Kwinana, for accompanying me to the WACA ground, and for loaning us the Youth Services bus.

and a latent enmity from some other teachers at KSHS. However, several senior staff were supportive and this carried the day. As term one progressed, however, another more pressing problem emerged that in turn led to other difficulties.

Attendance figures for Aboriginal students had steadily risen throughout term one. Although some classes had been held away from school, the majority of lessons were held in the KAC. At first students would remain there during morning recess and lunch break. However, soon students would go into the main school at these times, either to make purchases at the canteen, or to meet friends. Also, because numbers had increased, the KAC was not large enough to accommodate all the students, many of whom needed to 'let off steam' at break time. Indeed, on a day of high attendance the Centre was hardly suitable as a healthy, safe learning environment: conditions were overcrowded, the temperature was too warm and the lack of space caused tensions between some students. More telling still were the lack of resources. Moreover, there was only one toilet at the KAC. During breaks between classes, therefore, students needed to go onto school grounds to use the toilet and washroom facilities.

As a result of the new interaction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, or, in other words, between students from the mainstream and students from the KAC, plus the meeting of students and teachers, neither of whom were familiar with each other, there were problems for several months during 1995. These have not been wholly overcome, but for much of terms two, three and four, there were a succession of incidents which impacted on the life of the school. Often days and even weeks would go by when harmony would prevail. Yet, at times, the peace, or as many staff members would argue, the 'uneasy peace', would be undermined by a series of often unpleasant and disturbing incidents<sup>148</sup>. Such occurrences would only be exacerbated by my decision, supported by my Principal, to end formal/informal classes in the KAC, and transfer my students to mainstream classes.

For several weeks of our first term one of my students had participated in some 'option' classes in the mainstream. Many of my students were quite artistic. The head of the Art department, Ms. Jan Challenger, was a colleague with whom I had a good rapport. Jan also clearly liked young people. She had a heart for 'students at risk'. She agreed to let my students join her regular art classes with the proviso that I was in attendance at all times. Importantly, I believe for the innovation to be successful was the realisation on the part of the students that Jan and I were seen to get along well

together at school. Moreover, my Aboriginal student who had initially been welcomed into Jan's class had passed on good reports to his friends.

Next, I called in my marker on favours done for the Physical Education department during my first year at KSHS. Again, the head of department was 'user friendly'. He liked young people who liked to have a go at sport. All my students not only liked sport but most of them quite obviously had a talent for the sport offered through the Phys. Ed. department. Fortunately, the Phys. Ed. department was not resistant to Aboriginal students becoming involved in the mainstream<sup>149</sup>. The Home Economics department too was supportive in many instances, and as a result several students went into cooking and sewing classes. The Social Studies and English departments were also willing for the KAC students to be admitted into the mainstream, as were the staff of the Ed[ucational] Support Unit.

I was determined to maintain a form class<sup>150</sup> in the KAC at the beginning of each day and to continue my practice of arriving early to 'open up' for the regular early arrivals. It was decided to continue the after school hours homework classes too. I would keep KAC as my 'home base' and not shift offices to the Social Studies department. The AEW would also continue to operate from the Cottage.

Assured and confident of our support, all the KAC students agreed to give mainstream a go from the beginning of term two 1995. These students have now been fully inclusive in the life of the school for three years. Their progress will be reviewed in the next chapter. Central to the success of the students was the role of Aboriginal Studies in their timetable in an across the curriculum approach. I believe that Aboriginal Studies has been important to many of my Aboriginal Students in making school relevant to some degree as well as interesting.

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<sup>148</sup> Most notable, a minority of staff would provoke some male Aboriginal students by blatantly telling them that they were not welcome. On one occasion I myself heard a head of department tell two Aboriginal boys to 'piss off home'.

<sup>149</sup> I wish to acknowledge the head of the Phys. Ed. Department at KSHS, Mr Robert Grantham, and his staff, for their constant and unstinting support. Most of all I thank Rob for his support in encouraging the Aboriginal students to participate in the 1995 athletics carnival. It was the first year that Aboriginal students had been involved. They are now keen and regular participants.

<sup>150</sup> 'Form' lasts for 20 minutes when daily notices are given, attendance taken, P.A. announcements are made and most importantly in my view, pastoral care can be offered. It can prove to be an invaluable time of

### Summary

When the KAC opened it served a preliminary bridging function, and basically was little used, and had little connection with the mainstream school. When I took over as Co-ordinator I endeavoured to raise its profile, and by dint of much talk and work many Aboriginal students began to attend with increasing regularity. The focus was on attendance, not learning, though the latter was indeed the ultimate goal. The strategies employed were aimed at making the school an enjoyable place to be. Within the space of a term enough progress had been made for attendance at mainstream classes to be realistic for many students. Integration, or inclusion into the usual every day life of the school would be the next objective. The unknown factor was to what extent and how integration should occur. The speed of change in attendance was very heartening; goodwill was flowing and need to be put to good use.

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bonding between teacher and students, as well as where friendship between students can be consolidated. I found it was a time when any differences could usually be ironed out.

## CHAPTER SIX

### **Integrating into mainstream classes**

Aboriginal Studies has been part of the Kwinana SHS curriculum since 1992 when it was introduced as a pilot program for two selected Year 8 classes. At the present time it is a fully integrated part of the overall Society and Environment (formerly Social Studies) curriculum lower school (Years 8-10) and is included in Australian Studies units (upper school). Aboriginal Studies is not offered to all lower school classes but the intention of the staff within the Society and Environment learning area is to make it compulsory for all lower school classes (year 8-10) by the beginning of the 1998 academic year.

However, it is reasonable to assert that each year the Aboriginal Studies units are greeted with varying but significant degrees of resistance from students, teachers and parents. Nevertheless, the school continues with Aboriginal Studies (and indeed has plans to further implement Aboriginal Studies across the curriculum) and so accords with recommendations concerning social justice in several recent reports: *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody*, 1991 and *Daube Report*, 1994; *National Principles and Guidelines for Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies K – 12*, 1995: *Going Forward. Social Justice for the First Australians*, 1995; *Western Australian Aboriginal Education Strategic Plan*, 1992; *Walking Together: The First Steps*, 1994; *Walking Together an Evaluation of the Australians for Reconciliation Western Australia Project*, WAICOSS, 1995; and *West Australia's Other History*, WAACR and AFR (WA) 1996.

In this chapter I intend to seek an understanding of what the inclusion of Aboriginal Studies in the curriculum at Kwinana SHS has meant to staff and students. The chapter will involve three parts: an attempt to state precisely what is meant by the term "Aboriginal Studies"; why Aboriginal history and culture are included in the curriculum; and what role the inclusion of Aboriginal Studies has had in the life of the school. I will be concerned with such issues as i) the perceived benefits of teaching Aboriginal Studies for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and ii) the perceived success (and criteria for success) of the Aboriginal Studies programme at Kwinana SHS. Specifically relating to these issues is the decision to teach Aboriginal Studies instead of alternative units to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. It is as well to point out that there is a difference between Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal Education. Aboriginal Education is the education of Aboriginal people. To the extent that Aboriginal Studies is part of what is taught to Aboriginal people it is an element and this need to be clarified for an understanding of the relevant value of the

teaching of Aboriginal Studies<sup>151</sup>. If there is a single premise which informs Aboriginal Education it would be that teachers can, and do, make a difference to the learning outcomes of Aboriginal students. I would further contend that teachers have a responsibility to implement principles of social justice; that it is not enough simply to teach, but that we have a responsibility to teach in a way that is inclusive of all students. An 'inclusive curriculum' must address issues of race and racism, ethnicity and culture, gender and discrimination, social class and poverty, prejudice and stereotyping, power and powerlessness. These are central concerns of Aboriginal Education.

Several government enquiries since Budby in 1982 have recommended the *Teaching and Learning of Aboriginal History and Culture (Aboriginal Studies) within the Australian Education Curriculum*, including the report of the *Task Force on Aboriginal Social Justice* (1994) which points out that "the introduction of Aboriginal Studies in all schools was first mooted in the *Beazley Report* of 1984 and was endorsed by the House of Representative Report in 1984"<sup>152</sup>. "The inclusion of Aboriginal Aboriginal Studies in the school curriculum was further addressed by *The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (1991) (Recommendations 290,291) and *The National Aboriginal Education Operational Policy* (1993), (Recommendations 17,20 and 21).

Government initiated enquiries have not been alone in recommending Aboriginal Studies for curriculum inclusion. Aboriginal educators often promote the inclusion of Aboriginal Culture and History in the school curriculum in order to create a more familiar and less threatening environment for Aboriginal Students, for example F. Ogilvie<sup>153</sup> and J.Guider who states that "when children cannot find much at school which relates to their cultural background, learning is impeded<sup>154</sup>." Australians for Reconciliation too promote Aboriginal Studies, as an important link in cross-cultural understanding;

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<sup>151</sup> Within EDWA the responsibility for the teaching of Aboriginal children is currently with the Aboriginal Education Liason Unit (AELU) - now called Aboriginal Education Directorate - within Operation Branch. However, it seems to me that although AELU has a role the responsibility for teaching lies with teacher. The implementation of Aboriginal Studies is with the Aboriginal Studies Project within the Curriculum Development Branch - Aboriginal Education Directorate - as is the Languages Other Than English Project which has responsibility for the teaching of Aboriginal languages.

<sup>152</sup> *Report of The Task Force on Aboriginal Social Justice*, Vol 2, (1994), p.381.

<sup>153</sup> F. Ogilvie, "Education to Empower: The role of the primary teacher in Aboriginal Education", *Issues in Educational Research*, I (4) 1994, pp.27-30.

<sup>154</sup> J. Guider, "Curriculum, Classroom, Management and Discipline for the Aboriginal Student" *The Aboriginal Child at School*, 19 (\$), 1991, p.23.

B. Greenhill suggests the “mandatory curriculum inclusion of Aboriginal historical and contemporary culture<sup>155</sup>”.

Aboriginal Studies is then presented as at least a partial solution for problems concerned with Aboriginal access to education and with reconciliation in Australia. In theory the inclusion of Aboriginal Studies in the school curriculum should create more “Aboriginal friendly” schools by including in the school environment components that Aboriginal students are familiar with and with which they can identify. For non-Aboriginal people Aboriginal Studies should, in theory, lead to an understanding of Aboriginal culture and history and thus to a reduction in discrimination and then to reconciliation.

However, in practice at Kwinana SHS it is my perception that the Aboriginal Studies programme has met with three significant problems which seem to undermine the effective teaching and learning of the lower school units. First, the units are resented by many non-Aboriginal and some Aboriginal students and often by parents as well. This resistance tends to increase with the number of units studied and with the explicit relevance of the content material to the lives of the students (eg. Unit Three which deals with current issues is most strongly resisted by students<sup>156</sup>). Second, the difficulty in involving the local Aboriginal community in Aboriginal Studies is also of concern. Many members of the local Aboriginal community are reluctant to become involved with schools, though input from Aboriginal people is well received by students and provides primary source material for Units Two and Three. Third, some units, unit three in particular, are poorly resourced. It is not the purpose of this study, however, to explore these problems. For now, I can only attempt to highlight the role of Aboriginal Studies in “our story”.

Aboriginal Studies as we approached it is the study of Aboriginal societies past and present including the history, languages, cultures, values, lifestyle and roles<sup>157</sup>. It is studies in a context which promotes respect for the integrity of all people and places and emphasis on the understanding of issues (spiritual, political, social and economic) central to Aboriginal societies and on their relevance to the total population<sup>158</sup>.

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<sup>155</sup> B. Greenhill, *Walking Together an Evaluation of the Australians for Reconciliation Western Australian Project*, (WAICOSS, 1995), p.5.

<sup>156</sup> Many students from a non-Aboriginal background when confronted by issues such as Aboriginal health, education or juvenile justice it is not ‘their problem’. Many Aboriginal students feel anger and/or shame.

<sup>157</sup> At times Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies have been grouped together. The Aboriginal Studies Curriculum (EDWA) document has been designed about Aboriginal societies. The writers acknowledge that Torres Strait Islander people have a separate, distinct group of cultures, languages and history and therefore should have a separate curriculum statement.

<sup>158</sup> Aboriginal Studies Curriculum, (EDWA, 1997).

The teaching of Aboriginal Studies should involve the planning, delivery and evaluation of quality learning experiences and educational programmes by Aboriginal people which would promote a positive attitude towards Aboriginal societies, past and present.

Aboriginal Studies requires:

- The participation of all students
- The presentation of an Aboriginal perspective
- The involvement and participation of Aboriginal community groups
- A whole school approach which should be represented in school development plans
- The establishment of teacher support mechanisms which are represented in operational plans
- Close consultation and cooperation of all levels of the educational systems and the Aboriginal network<sup>159</sup>.

Aboriginal Studies remain a component of the key learning area Society and Environment. Aboriginal Studies programmes can be offered either as a discrete unit of study, or an integration into other key learning areas whereby Aboriginal content is included, or through the presentation of perspectives in daily lessons.

After three years of trailing and consultation with various teachers and Aboriginal community people, EDWA has decided to have only three units of study with the aim of having one unit for each lower secondary level.

As a programme of Aboriginal Studies began to be implemented, several of the Society and Environment staff at Kwinana SHS volunteered to share their thoughts, and before examining further the role this programme played, their comments make an interesting preface. They were responding to the question “Why is Aboriginal history and culture (Aboriginal Studies) included in the Senior High School curriculum?” though not all their remarks seem to be direct responses.

All the participants wanted their names to be associated with their answers. However, I have decided to maintain a uniform anonymity throughout the thesis.

- The understanding of Aboriginal culture and heritage is an integral part of the Cultural Understandings key competency within the national curriculum.

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<sup>159</sup> Aboriginal Education Unit, EDWA. I should point out that I have developed my own Aboriginal Studies programmes which at times incorporate some EDWA ideas. See Appendix Seven.



- Aboriginal Studies units fit easily into the Outcomes Statements within the WA curriculum.
- A knowledge of Aboriginal history is important to the understanding of the history of the Australian nation and its development as a nation.
- I believe that students in our schools need to learn to value Aboriginal culture as part of their national heritage. I feel that too many schools concentrate on teaching the history of European nations at the expense of learning about our own heritage.
- In my experience, most students enjoy the Aboriginal Studies units. Any negative feeling towards the units I have found to generally be a reflection of the opinions expressed by the parents of the students concerned. It is hoped that a continuation of Aboriginal Studies units might have a flow-on effect into the general community, enabling more educated debate and discussion on Aboriginal issues.
- The inclusion of Aboriginal Studies units contributes both to social issues and citizenship studies within the Society and Environment curriculum.
- I enjoy teaching the Aboriginal Studies units. There is plenty of scope for the teacher to use a variety of teaching strategies and methods. This is a plentiful supply of resource materials now, and the opportunity to use Aboriginal community members in our schools is always worthwhile (although the cost is often prohibitive.)
- I believe that Aboriginal students can, if the subject is taught well, develop a sense of pride in their heritage as more non-Aboriginal students gain knowledge and hopefully some understanding of Aboriginal history and experiences in this country.
- I think it is important to note that there is a danger of alienating Aboriginal people more if the units are not taught well in schools, by teachers who are not interested in the subject or who have racist attitudes (in the same way that Asian Studies or Social Issues could be ruined by teacher's attitudes).

- I am content that Aboriginal Studies be taught, but I am not sure that our present curriculum is the best way to treat it. My father grew up in the bush surrounded by Aboriginal people and I find some difficulty in accepting much of what is written in this course.
- I am concerned that as white historians of the time were biased in their recording, so too has this course a bias in the opposite direction. Where lies the truth?
- The only reason I can think of in maintaining Aboriginal Studies in any form, is to:
  1. Combat racial intolerance
  2. Show that Aboriginal people settled here first
  3. That people do have a different culture
 But I would not spread it over a 3 year period as:
  1. Lack of resources
  2. Teacher intolerance
  3. The resources having too many biased viewpoints
- Why do we teach about Europe or Asia or the environment or government etc? They are all part of our current experiences or the past experiences of our country and some of our parents or grandparents. Is it any less valid to teach about the Aborigines who
  1. Inhabited this land long before Europeans even knew it existed?
  2. Are certainly parts of the experience of students at this school?
  3. And are increasingly part of the experience of non-Aborigines since Mabo and Wik.

Another more immediate reason to teach the unit is that it gives the Aboriginal kids something that some of them may “own” to study and see other people valuing. Also it may break down some of the myths that dictate attitudes toward Aborigines and cause a few students to question some of their beliefs about other minorities.

Within the Society and Environment department there were 8 teachers, and by mid 1995 all were teaching classes in Aboriginal Studies, and indeed in 1996 all lower school classes (i.e. years 8, 9 and 10) were receiving such lessons. The material being taught was exclusively from the curriculum I had developed during 1994, the ideas given by Bernie Ryder (ch 1) and many given me by students lay behind much of the curriculum, but the ideas of Bernie and his Aboriginal Education Unit had needed some adaptation to be made accessible to all students. Put briefly, they could be seen as biased, I had to avoid offence and avoid non-Aboriginals feeling attacked. For

example, a “minor” event of West Australian history is the so called Battle of Pinjarra. This would be better described as a massacre, but while a historian cannot disguise or alter facts there are more and less sensitive ways of conveying these facts. I sought always to be helpful. At times it seemed to me that the time being spent in Aboriginal Studies was disproportionately large, but we were fulfilling EDWA edicts and some students enjoyed the classes. It could turn out later, in 1997, that much disappointment resulted when students were not taught Aboriginal Studies.

There is no doubt in my mind that because Aboriginal Studies was on offer to the Aboriginal students from the KAC it made the transition from the Centre to mainstream more appealing than if this had not been the case. Some of my Aboriginal students were already participating in ‘Options’(non-compulsory subjects). The fact that Aboriginal Studies was scheduled to be taught in four out of eight Year 8 classes, four out of eight Year 9 classes and two out of eight Year 10 classes. Moreover, the unit “Australian Society” was due to be taught to all four of the remaining Year 9 classes and two out of the remaining four Year 10 classes, and that there is a strong Aboriginal component in that unit – indeed the first six lessons are wholly centred on Aboriginal Australia – was crucial to winning students over to the idea of mainstream classes. Furthermore, the two Year 10 classes which offered “Australian Society” were two lower level classes which Year 10 KAC students were, due to truancy in past years, most likely to join. Society and Environment is one of four compulsory core subjects in lower school. This left the Maths, Science and English learning areas to be made appealing to my students.

It proved to be relatively easy to ensure that English would not prove to be a stumbling block to the progress of my students. The English learning area was almost wholly supportive of the idea of bringing the Aboriginal students across into the mainstream. Indeed, once it was decided which students were to go into which classes their teachers readily agreed to change their term 2 programmes in order to structure lessons around Aboriginal texts. For example, *Wandering Girl*, Glenyse Ward; *A Boy's Life*, Jack Davis; *No Sugar*, Jack Davis; *My Place*, Sally Morgan; and *I Heard the Pelican Laugh*, Alice Nannup are fine examples of Aboriginal writing and their adoption in the syllabus reflects the flexibility of the English teachers. It was agreed to place the KAC students in classes with their friends and if possible in classes where Aboriginal students were already present. I would go into class with the students and either specifically assist them with their work or ‘team teach’ with their regular classroom teacher. This arrangement would apply for all subject areas.

Whether such an arrangement was successful or not largely depended on two factors: If there was a good understanding and cooperation between myself and the teacher, and the attitude of the teacher towards his/her students – whether Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal. What proved especially interesting was how pleased non-Aboriginal students were to have a second teacher present in the classroom to assist them in their studies. This was a very welcome development as it removed the “shame” element felt by Aboriginal students of having a teacher devoted to their interests alone.

Maths and Science classes were to prove far more challenging for both the KAC students and myself. It was immediately obvious that the mainstream students whom those from the KAC were to join found the subject matter stultifying. It was perceived to be of little relevance and of no value. Nearly all the KAC students had only very basic Maths skills and inevitably were placed in the bottom classes for Maths and Science. Where the classroom teacher was “user-friendly,” some progress was made. However, five students were placed in a bottom Year 9 class where the teacher was openly hostile to Aboriginal people and, even with both myself and the AEW in attendance, the classroom was little short of a battlefield. It should be noted, however, that prior to our arrival the situation was hardly different. After a few weeks the AEW refused to go into the classroom. He was ashamed of the the behaviour of both teacher and students and felt the situation to be too embarrassing to be able to continue. My sentiments were similar. In the end I more or less took over the class for term 2 (the regular classroom teacher then took over my role as the ‘assistant’ teacher) and in term 3 I was able to persuade the deputy principal in charge of lower school timetables to move the students to another class. It was obvious that a pattern was emerging. Where the teacher was sympathetic there was harmony and progress. Since the inclusion of Aboriginal students in mainstream Maths and Science classes, many teachers in those subject areas started to question the course content they presented to their students over the years, and particularly in the Biological Sciences the staff began incorporating newer themes: far more environmental studies, landcare projects, Aboriginal water finding techniques, the medicinal and nutritional properties of plants and animals, field trips to give a few examples. However, very often teacher unsympathetic to Aboriginal students complained about these field trips and they were soon curtailed. In Maths too some staff began taking their students into supermarkets for practical lessons. The management of several shops and stores at the Kwinana Hub were very helpful. Recently Frank and Joan Drysdale the inventors of the *Numero* maths game have been to the school to in-service Maths teachers and to demonstrate *Numero* to staff and students<sup>160</sup>.

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<sup>160</sup> See Appendix Ten.

Students readily participated in the workshops, a commitment to purchase a class set was made, alas, however, to date no order has been sent. Where the teacher is keen to develop new skills and new subject matter

the students are making progress. When teachers prove resistant to change truancy and fail grades around irrespective of student ethnicity.

During term 2 I continued the practice of taking Aboriginal students on excursions, but now as a reward as well as a continuation of the learning process. However, there was always one condition which applied – each student had to invite a non-Aboriginal friend from school. This policy worked well. It furthered the course of reconciliation and prohibited any resentment that Aboriginal students had favoured status. Perhaps our greatest successes were the football games we organised (always mixed teams, never “Black versus White”), the occasions that Doug Ryder came and painted with the students (always group work and always mixed groups) and the camps to Dwellingup, Logue Brook, Nanga Dell etc. (again always mixed). Two years later Aboriginal culture and Aboriginality was fully inclusive in our school – there were a number of “whole school” programmes currently in operation under the reconciliation initiative<sup>161</sup>.

It would be a mistake to pretend there have not been problems. During terms 2 and 3 of 1995, although truancy rates were drastically cut and attendance and participation increased, it is not clear whether there was any significant improvement in literacy and numeracy. Indeed, I do not believe many gains were made. However, “going to school”, for many Aboriginal students started to become the norm. At the time of writing, at the end of term 4 of 1997 there have been some students who have been lost to the education system. Three of my students from KAC were killed in car chases during 1996-97. By the end of 1995 five students who had been regular KAC attenders had dropped out of school, In 1996 another four students ceased attending regularly. Others have moved from the Kwinana/Medina district but have enrolled at Hamilton Hill, Swan View and Lockeridge Senior High Schools.

Perhaps the most pleasing aspect of my four years at Kwinana SHS is the increasing numbers of Aboriginal students entering senior high school in Year 8. These children have been regular attenders in their primary school years. School attendance is part of their lives. Many of these students are not taking up places in the bottom classes. Most current Year 8 Aboriginal students clearly enjoy school and are vitally involved in the learning process. Several have older brothers

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<sup>161</sup> I believe that outside of the Society and Environment (Social Studies) and English learning areas such forward thinking programmes do not now exist.

and sisters in Years 9-12. I have noticed that having younger siblings in Year 8 has served to further the attendance and participation of the older students at school. Truancy is still a problem at Kwinana but has been significantly lowered amongst Aboriginal students. Nonetheless, there is little cause for complacency. Barbara Godwin, Chair of the West Australian chapter of the Australian College of Education has recently reminded us of what the Education Minister (WA), Colin Barnett has called “a disgraceful standard” of Aboriginal education. In 1997 there are still 20 per cent of Aboriginal children legally required to be at school who are not attending. Although some progress has been made at Kwinana, I concur with Colin Barnett that “a quantum leap” is needed to effect real improvements across the board.

## SUMMARY

Within the Society and Environment learning area at KSHS, Aboriginal Studies became now fully integrated into the curriculum. It has been since 1994. Therefore, one of Barnett’s three proposals announced in 1996 – “compulsory studies in Aboriginal culture in school (and university) education programs” has been adopted. Although there has been some resistance from a minority of non-Aboriginal students to the teaching of Aboriginal Studies, particularly in Year 10 where current issues are examined, overall the response of students and teachers has been positive. Certainly among Aboriginal students the subject has been warmly embraced. Aboriginal students at KSHS are an involuntary minority who have often experienced difficulties with school learning, due in part, to cultural inversion. For example, there is a tendency on their part to regard certain forms of behaviour, events, symbols and meanings as inappropriate because of their association with the mainstream culture. The teaching of Aboriginal Studies, or even the fact that Aboriginal culture has been included in the school curriculum has, I believe, assisted the process of gradual adaption to the mainstream culture and played a part in the academic success of some Aboriginal students. I say this because attendance and participation in the classroom setting clearly improved. Of course not all Aboriginal students see the opportunity to learn about their Aboriginality from a European/white teacher as one with which they wish to participate. Aboriginal Studies is far from a panacea for all the difficulties that confront an Aboriginal student in mainstream schooling.

However, the teaching of Aboriginal Studies within the Society and Environment learning area and the commencement of an inclusive Aboriginal Studies across the curriculum approach has had some, part to play in changing attitudes and behaviour. The inclusion of Aboriginal Studies is at best only a part solution to the problems of Aboriginal Education, but the presence of Aboriginal Studies in the school curriculum can be a significant influence in the reconciliation process and can

make inroads into a resistance mentality. Perhaps more tellingly, the reaction to the implementation of Aboriginal Studies as part of the school curriculum has diminished a resistance to Aboriginality on the part of non-Aboriginal students and their parents and families a KSHS. Many non-Aboriginal students have enjoyed the course content and have completed assignments and assessment tasks to a high standard. Often there has been a demonstrable improvement in term grades which has resulted in positive comments on school reports which in turn has furthered a positive parent reaction to the inclusion of Aboriginal issues in the school curriculum.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### A STUDY OF TEACHER ATTITUDES

“You can stand aloof from the sufferings of the world; you are free to do so and it expresses your nature; but perhaps that very aloofness is the one suffering you might have avoided”.

Franz Kafka.

As the teacher with responsibility for Aboriginal Education and as a teacher of Aboriginal Studies at Kwinana SHS, I was curious to learn how teachers viewed their Aboriginal students. Basically I wanted to see how my students were perceived by my colleagues and more importantly I wanted to find out how students would be received when they entered mainstream classes. For this reason I proceeded to interview my teacher colleagues as recorded below. It is hoped this will provide interesting reading; not only do the results tend to indicate the conclusions drawn from the literary review above, but suggestively inform the process of events well after the establishment in the curriculum of Aboriginal Studies.

It is important to point out at the outset that all the teachers who were interviewed were given a printed outline of questions<sup>162</sup>. However, although some teachers did submit written answers these were in addition to their answers given in conversational form<sup>163</sup>. All answers were tape-recorded. Moreover, it should be emphasised that a panel or “committee” of Aboriginal students from Kwinana SHS edited and selected the range of answers and responses given below. Some responses elicited some swear words and these have been largely omitted; some, however, have not. These “interviews” were carried out over an eighteen month period between February 1995 and September 1996. The editing and selection process took fourteen months from October 1996 to February 1998<sup>3</sup>. The extended versions of the taped interviews have been preserved and are in my safekeeping. I also am in possession of the hand-written responses to the more formal questionnaires.

Between February 1997 and February 1998 I seriously considered the possibility of not submitting my thesis for examination due to the content of these interviews.

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<sup>162</sup> Appendix Nine.

<sup>163</sup> All responses that follow are primarily taken from verbal questioning and answering sessions. However, some responses were duplicated in writing.



I spent much time agonising over how to present the responses to my ethnographic interviewing. Such questions as whether to present teacher responses by gender, learning area, age of the teacher, experience (years in the teaching profession), teachers of year groups, teachers who had Aboriginal students in their classes; whether to divide responses into negative and positive or to merely give a range of samples. I am conscious that the onus is on the researcher and writer to present findings in an appropriate format. Moreover, I am aware that the responses do not speak for themselves and should have been constructed by the writer in a more 'user friendly' manner. As it stands the reader has to plough through all the responses. However, the responses have come from one section of the school community (the teachers), they are perceived by the community, parents and students as a homogeneous group (albeit that teachers are loosely divided into two groups, whether good or bad, by most students). Aboriginal people do not divide the teacher population up into various categories. Aboriginal people usually regard teachers as representatives of the dominant white (alien?) culture. I believe that the teacher responses will not prove to be an arduous read. Furthermore, I would argue that for the purpose of preserving anonymity I can legitimately argue that I have been correct in not dividing responses up into learning areas, subject or year group. The results are tabulated in frequency charts at the end of the report.

Teacher responses

**Q1. Do you think that the current system relating to Aboriginal Education in our school is appropriate?**

Yes      or      No

Please explain your answer

- No. The Maths we “teach” to Aboriginals and other low achievers “is irrelevant bullshit”.
- No. I don’t think they should be a segregated group. I also feel that teachers need extra training.
- Yes. Integration is preferable to a separate learning centre. They have to learn to be like us at some stage or other.
- No. The Aborigines in school obviously don’t like it.
- No. Aboriginal students are in many way disadvantaged by the system and are subject to hostile resentment by “European” students.
- What system is this? I enjoy having these people (students) in my Year 9 science class.
- No. It’s obviously not working so [it] can’t be appropriate.
- Yes. At this school Aboriginal Studies is involved in all lower school students’ curricula. This allows for greater awareness of Aboriginal issues amongst students and can act as a forum for discussion.
- No. Our present system makes the Aboriginal students feel apart from the normal school system. Special teachers and Liaison Officers, cash for attending and special classroom and classes all add up to give them the feeling that they are “apart” from the normal school.
- The current education system at our school is almost wholly inappropriate for nearly all students.
- For most students the education system is a complete waste of time.

- Many students/most? students here are failing or going nowhere so it must mean that the education system is inappropriate.
- I believe that all Years 8-10 students should study at least one unit of Ab[original] studies in each of those years at school. Moreover, in English classes there should be a strong Ab[original] component ie: During the course of a year all years 8-12 should study at least one Ab[original] play, book, series of poems etc. In the areas of Maths and Science the work needs to much much more practical, ie) “Hands on” experiments which are relevant to day to day living. The emphasis needs to be on creativity. Sport, art, drama, group work and music generally should all have a much higher profile.
- Yes.
- I really don't know.
- They must hate it here.
- No. Too much time and money spent only on bloody Aboriginals leading to divisions amongst the students.
- No. It obviously suits some students but not others. I think you have to look at individual cases rather than the system. There appears to be lots of support of Aboriginal students.
- Who cares?
- No. I believe that all students should be in mainstream and that no students should be given special privileges
- You clearly don't. You [Mr Karginoff] want them all over here.
- Yes. They are often content to underachieve. Trying to integrate them is a good idea. However, they need to be motivated to integrate with other students and to obey rules and standards applied to other students.

- Fuck them. We'd be better off without them.
- They don't want to be in my class and I don't want them there either.
- No. Currently the W[est] [A]ustralian system caters for an overall basic group of students and allows very little for cultural differences.
- Yes. The school has attempted to take affirmative action to enhance learning among our Aboriginal students. I also feel that it has had some impact on both attendance and student outcome. However, we should all be looking for new initiatives to enhance learning among our Aboriginal students. White/non Aboriginal students also need to be made aware of cultural diversity and reject their bigoted attitudes. This is a major problem in this area.
- No. Something must be wrong or otherwise all Aboriginal students would choose to attend their assigned classes. In this school I see a number of Aboriginal students who do not want to be in class and who avoid going whenever possible!
- Yes. As long as they are treated exactly the same as everyone else - both financially and discipline wise.
- Look, I know you [Mr Karginoff] want me to say our current Education System is inappropriate. But, whatever you try to do for them won't work. They don't want to be here. All they want is the Ab[original] Study money.
- It's all a waste of time.
- Australians are made up of more than one ethnic group. So, why make so much fuss about them.
- The system is OK. They don't want to be part of it.
- What you [Mr Karginoff] don't realise is that you're dealing with Stone Age man.
- We should let the boys play more sport. And the girls too. They like that. And some of them are quite good.

- We should make them take showers before school like they do in the Kimberley.
- You [Mr Karginoff] are wasting your time with them.
- Why bother? Do you [Mr Karginoff] really care?
- You should just sit over there [in the Aboriginal Learning Centre] and read a book like the other bloke did all day. Why stress yourself out?
- Yes. The system is failing most Aboriginal students and many normal students too.
- We have more Aboriginal students here than ever so the school can't be that bad.
- Your [Mr Karginoff] being here for them is good and having a reasonable AEW [Aboriginal Education Worker] makes it better for the kids.
- I'm not sure. Many of the Aboriginal students were [truant] a lot so maybe things could be better.
- I don't teach any.
- If they like you it's OK.
- Perhaps they should all go to school together.
- Nothing will make them happy, whatever we do.
- You [Mr Karginoff] have made a difference. They like you.
- You're [Mr Karginoff] doing a good job. I don't know how you can stand it.
- They always look so unhappy.

- It would be good if you [Mr Karginoff] could get them out of the Cottage [Aboriginal Learning Centre].
- There is no system as such. They are expected to turn up at school and be like everybody else.
- Most stuff we teach the kids is crap anyway.
- No.
- No.
- No.
- No.
- It's OK. I guess. For some kids.
- I don't know why you [Mr Karginoff] took that job. You must be bloody crazy.
- Something needs to be done.
- I'm not sure. Maybe some improvements/changes should occur.
- They don't do anything here.
- The system needs to be drastically changed. In our area what we offer the students is, by and large, completely irrelevant.
- Last year out of about 75 year 12 students only 5 went to uni[versity] and that was a good year. So something's not working. None of this year's Year 12 are Aboriginal.
- The government just wants to improve the figures for retention rates so they give them money.
- No.

- No.
- Most kids seem to do alright. They don't want to do anything.
- My Aboriginal students can't even work the calculators I give them. It's a joke. Things must be wrong.
- Of course it's bloody inappropriate. These kids always fail.
- It's not working.

**Q.2 Do you allow the Aboriginal students in your class, if you have any, to have more freedom than your non-Aboriginal students?**

Yes                      or                      No?

Please explain your answer.

- No. Although I hassle my Year 8's who are late less than my other Year 8's.
- No. In my classes I hope I treat all students fairly, taking into consideration all sorts of cultural differences, not only Aboriginality.
- No. I try to treat each person the same.
- I don't have any, thank God!
- No. Why should I?
- Yes. I think that all students should be allowed more freedom.
- No.

- No.
- No.
- Yes.
- No.
- Yes.
- Yes.
- No.
- I don't have any.
- None.
- No Ab[original] students.
- I don't teach any.
- They don't come to my class
- Yes. I don't stress if they are late to class.
- Yes. I don't send them to a support class, I tell them to go take a walk.
- No.
- No.
- Sometimes.



- Maybe. I'm not sure.
- I hope I treat them the same. But I probably don't.
- Yes. I guess I try to be nice and so I let things go.
- You [Mr Karginoff] know I do.
- Of course.
- Yes.
- Yes.
- Yeah. I feel sorry for – [name deleted]
- No. Why should I?
- Yes. It makes life easier.
- No.
- No way.
- Yes. I generally give them more freedom. But I think all students should have more freedom in class. Of course, different people will understand "freedom" in different ways. Allowances have to be made: innovations need to be implemented. Despite the fact that non-Aboriginal students and staff persist in parroting endless "you are going to be treated the same as every other student because you are the same as everyone else", Aboriginal students are, for the most part, different to many non-Aboriginal students. For example, home life is different: many parents still regard school as unimportant and hostile. There is little support at home for the student and his/her studies.
- Yes. WE are all different. It's good to be fair but people are different.

- Yes. The students have to be given some extra freedom as they are different.
- No. Why?
- No. Definitely not.
- No. When they are late I send them away [for a late note?].
- Fuck off. Why should I? They've got to learn to behave normally.
- No.
- No. There should be equality between all students. Same standards and expectations should apply for all.
- No.
- No. Just because people like you [Mr Karginoff] do, I don't have to.
- No comment.
- I'm not sure. I suppose I do.
- No. They are expected to behave/work the same as other students.
- No. As far as our programme is concerned all students need the same skills and to practice safety and hygiene. So all are equal.
- No. If they don't bring a container I don't let them cook.
- Yes. Some students become aggressive if pressure to work is applied. If a confrontation is becoming imminent I leave these students alone as long as they do not disrupt other class members.

- No. Because of the nature of our classes all students are given individual help as much as possible.
- Not necessarily more freedom as all my students are encouraged to move around in the classroom according to need. It is more a case of having to encourage Aboriginal students to participate, as most of them are more inhibited than non-Aboriginal students.
- No. I treat all my students equally within the classroom. I endeavour to get all my students working and participating in oral questioning. I try to give everyone an opportunity to answer.
- Yes. I allow my Aboriginal students to sit and do nothing as long as they do not disturb other students.
- No. I have approximately half a dozen problem/troubled/ at risk kids and they all have problems. I don't know why Aboriginals need more freedom than other students.
- No. Everyone is treated the same.
- No.
- No.
- No. Absolutely not, those students must at least behave like the non-Aboriginal students. They are also required to complete the same amount of work and same type of work.
- No. But most of them behave like savages a lot of the time. What can you do?
- Don't have any.
- None.
- None.

- No kids.
- No Ab[original] students.
- No Ab[original]s.

All 70 interviewees responded to this question.

**Q3. Do you think that Aboriginal students should receive any special treatment  
*in our school?***

Yes                      or                      No

Please explain your answer.

- No. I try to deal with each individual's problems within the class.
- Yes. They need more one-to-one encouragement/contact. They also need to live within both cultures without feeling inferior or alienated. This takes extra planning and extra time for teaching.
- No. Only in that they get extra help. But all students who need it get extra help. Or, at least they should.
- No. Why should they?
- No. Why?
- No, not really.
- None at all.
- None. They get it too easy here.
- No. Why? They get given everything anyway.

- Yes. As for question 2. I might be a little more lenient on their behaviour.
- No.
- Yes. Teachers aides, AEW etc. A measure of extra tolerance can be helpful for all students.
- Yes. Anything to help them.
- Yes. Whatever it takes to get them to come to school.
- Yes. We should do a lot more for them.
- Yes. Having fucked them up so badly we owe it to them.
- Yes. Much more.
- Yes. Help should be available to get them to class on time.
- No.
- No.
- No comment.
- Simon [Karginoff] do you really think they deserve more than us?
- No.
- No. Nothing
- No. Same rules as everyone else.
- Should be the same for all students.

- How come the AEW is never in school. It's his job.
- No. Too much is done already.
- No. They give nothing back in return.
- No. They get too much "special treatment".
- No.
- No. I don't think so.
- I'm not sure about this. It may create even more resentment.
- No. It causes racist attitudes.
- No. It doesn't do any good.
- No. Why should they?
- No.
- No. Certainly not.
- No. It should be should be stopped.
- No. It's about time they learnt to behave like everyone else.
- No. I'm not aware of why their needs are different to white 'at risk' kids.
- No. There are many white children who need extra help.
- No. Why reward bad behaviour?

- No. It's wasted on them.
- No. They don't appreciate it.
- No. It's a fucking joke the way they get everything for doing nothing.
- Yes. I ignore them.

49 interviewees responded to this question.

21 did not respond in any way either verbally (on tape) or on the questionnaire.

**Q.4 Do you think that Aboriginal students should receive any special treatment  
*in the classroom?***

Yes                      or                      No

Please explain your answer.

- No. I deal with every student the same.
- No. I treat everyone the same in my classes.
- Yes. I realise that I am supposed to treat everybody equally but I know I don't. I make allowances for certain students. Especially the Aboriginal students. I want them to come to my class. They deserve extra help because some other teachers treat them so badly --especially some of the Maths and Science teachers. No wonder the Aboriginal students hate Science and Maths so much. I give them extra chances/encouragement whatever you want to call it. Some of my Ab[original] students are good value. I also give non-Aboriginal students...what did you call it "special treatment"? I guess I do. Trust you [Mr Karginoff] to come up with a phrase like that. Paul Kelly wrote a song about it didn't he? Most of the teachers here are so bloody thick they probably didn't even catch on...Yeah so I probably give most of the kids...give into the kids more that I should. But who cares.
- No.

- No.
- None.
- No.
- Probably. Sometimes.
- Yes. Often. I give them equipment.
- Yes. I help them with their assignments.
- Help with assessments. Let them come into class late without a not. Little things.
- No way. Why should I? They are a bloody nuisance. I don't know why they come to class.
- No. Just because you [Mr Karginoff] do I don't have to.
- Yes. The AEW comes into my class and sits with the Aboriginal students. You [Mr Karginoff] come in and work with them.
- Give them pens, pencils etc.
- Yes. I let them keep their work in the classroom so they won't lose it. Lend them pens. Things like that. And don't hassle them over school dress.
- Yes. You [Mr Karginoff] come into my class. That helps a lot. They like you so they don't muck around when you are there. I have changed my mind about them. They are just different that's all.
- No. But I think sometimes that I should.
- They hardly ever come to class. When they do they do nothing anyway.



- No. That would not be fair on the non-Aboriginal students would it?
- No.
- None.
- No.
- Yes. I need to assist them with planning, drafting, editing their work as they lack the confidence to seek assistance. I think they are embarrassed or ashamed a lot of the time. I also assist Aboriginal students to work in different groups, ie with non-Aboriginal students, as they lack confidence to participate in class activities such as discussions and role-play situations.
- No. Maybe they get more help than my normal students.
- Yes. More lenient with due dates on assessments.
- Yes. I do their assessments with them.
- Not applicable.
- Yes. I explain classroom instructions in more detail. I read through assignment work with them.
- Yes. I show them clearly what needs to be done.
- No.
- No. Same as question 3. Fuck'em.
- No. Oh!...sometimes I help get them started on their work.
- No.

- Yes. We share jokes together; usually about you [Mr Karginoff]. They really like you. The parents like you too. Probably because you care about them. They like me too. Probably because they know that we are friends. They actually work quite well in my classes.
- Yes. I lend them the calculators and stuff you [Mr Karginoff] gave me for them.
- Yes. I do now.
- Yes. Sometimes I let them go early to save trouble.
- Yes. I help them or offer them help at least. But only if they want me to.
- No comment.
- No. Other than treating them, like normal human beings.
- No. Yes I ignore them when they fail to bring equipment to class or if they do not participate in the lesson. I punish the white students for this.
- No. The AEW comes in occasionally and watches them.
- No.
- Not at all.
- If they're late I piss 'em off home.
- Yes. At times it is necessary to be aware of the cultural differences when dealing with texts that promote European value systems.
- N/A.
- No. The same as everybody else.

- Why? They're supposed to be the same as us.
  - No. Not really special treatment, although Aboriginal Educators/Education teacher comes in a couple of periods a week.
  - N/A.
  - No. Only if confrontation or a "scene" may be the outcome.
  - No, except in the same manner I treat all of our students.
  - Other than treating them humanely – No.
  - I don not have any Ab[original] students in my classes.
- 11 teachers responded in this way.

67 teachers made a response to this question.

3 teachers made no response either verbally or in written form.

**Q.5 In your training to become a teacher were you ever taught how to apply teaching methods to Aboriginal students?**

Yes                      or                      No

If yes, please list a few examples.

Please comment on your answer.

- Yes. I was taught/told to respect their culture. But not why this might be so. Do not insist on eye contact even on a one to one basis. To demonstrate an awareness of social justice principles. To be aware that social constructions such as IQ tests are not true indications of student intelligence, academic ability or potential. To include appropriate resources ie) Aboriginal myths, legends, arts and crafts, all aspects of Aboriginal culture and to highlight traditional Aboriginal culture. However, I was not taught anything about Aboriginal culture.

- There is the possibility that despite efforts by tertiary institutions to arouse teacher awareness, most Aboriginal students become labelled as low or under achievers because they are expected to participate in an education system designed for non-Aboriginal students. Is it any wonder that most of our urban Aboriginal students feel completely alienated?
- No. However, like many things in life through my experiences I have learnt and us [sic] my own techniques which may or may not be the same as other peoples.
- No.
- No.
- No.
- No. Despite not having training I have taught a number of Aboriginal students in my first years of teaching and they fitted into classes as mainstream students.
- No.
- Yes. No specifics, just an awareness of cultural differences.
- No.
- No. Nothing. However, I have worked overseas, ie in many non-European/non-American countries, and this has helped me to realise “we” need to adapt and not “them”.
- No. This is strange as it’s their country.
- No. Why should I have? All students should be treated the same.
- No. I don’t think it is necessary.
- No. Anyway it would not be helpful.

- No. What's the point? They don't bother coming to school.
- No.
- No. N/A.
- N/A.
- Yes. Aboriginal education was an optional unit at university. It mainly focused on a consideration of cultural issues rather than any specific teaching methods.
- No.
- No. I did a couple of courses of Ab[original] history and culture. But none specifically on how to teach it.
- No. It's irrelevant.
- No. Its not necessary.
- A waste of time.
- Why bother?
- Yes. Discussion occurred.
- No. I was trained in the U[nited] S[tates of America].
- No.
- No. We were taught something about them, not how to teach them.
- It never dawned on me there would be any (Aboriginal students) in class.

- No. Not at all.
- Nothing.

13 interviewees responded as above

27 interviewees responded with an obscenity

12 Interviewees failed to respond to the question.

**Q.6 Do you expect Aboriginal students to give up their Aboriginality and cultural characteristics in the classroom?**

Yes or No

Please explain your answer.

- I do not think urban Aboriginal s have any excuses for their lack of participation at school. Do urban Aborigines have a culture?
- What culture?
- That depends if you class getting pissed and stealing cars as culture?
- There is no such thing as Aboriginal culture! It's a joke.
- This is a bullshit question.
- Chasing kangaroos and chuckin' spears – that's not culture.
- Traditional Aborigines might still have some sort of culture but those in Perth don't.
- This is a stupid question. What culture?
- You don't seriously think they have a proper culture do you?
- I guess they have to in order to take part in the established Anglo-Saxon education system, ie) Have to sit in a chair. Can't wander around. Have to keep to a time schedule, homework, etc.

These are not part of Aboriginal culture. I would prefer it if all students could learn in ways that suit the, - including Aboriginals. This does not currently happen.

- No. I don't expect anyone to give up their culture or characteristics in my class.
- What do you want? For them to be running amuck [sic] in class?
- What do you think? Are you gonna [sic] let them shit all over the place?
- No. Aboriginal culture does not impinge on the classroom.
- This is a fucking waste of everyone's time.
- No. Definitely not. It is part of who they are.
- I'm not sure what is meant by "Aboriginal culture". What is "Aboriginal culture"?
- Yes and No. Inevitably some compromise has to be made. Where possible students are encouraged to draw on their cultural backgrounds.
- No. I encourage the kids to be themselves.
- No. When I have asked Aboriginal adults into my classes as guest speakers etc. It has worked really well.
- No. I expect all students to work within fairly broad parameters of appropriate behaviour in the classroom. As with other students, I would expect Aboriginal students to express themselves within these bounds.
- They are a pain.
- No comment.

- N/A.
- No.
- No.
- No.
- N/A.
- Yes.
- Sometimes.
- They need to behave in a civilised manner.
- Stealing and breaking up the place is not cultural it is criminal.
- You explain to me what you mean by Ab[original] bloody culture? Its crap.
- Within the classroom all are equal. If I distinguish one group for special treatment then I have an obligation to treat every ethnic or religious group as separate and distinct groups. That will not work in a large class group will it?
- No.
- There's nothing to "give up".
- No. I do not think that any student should "give up" their personality, background (the "you" bit being "you"). The only things that need to be left outside the classroom are behaviours, which hurt other people.
- Is violent behaviour part of their so-called "culture"?



- I do not know what characteristics they display are uniquely Aboriginal. The classroom environment itself – doesn't that expect them to give up/adopt to new ways of learning?
- No. Loaded question. Nobody need "give up" any part of their culture to be successful in class. But they must abide by common rules.
- Just because you [Mr Karginoff] let them be how they want to be and let them have everything the way they want it doesn't mean we have to. Why do you, and people like you always keep going on about bloody Ab[original]s?
- No. Impossible to do this; but if Aboriginal students have given up their traditional lifestyles and cultures, ie not living in a traditional way, I would expect them to conform more to traditional class rules etc.
- No. As long as students accept the need for good hygiene and safety in our area I believe they can do, as they like. I think there could be some positive value in the inclusion of these students in cultural units.
- No.
- No. I don't expect anyone to change the way they think and believe if it involves cultural differences.
- No. Absolutely not. In fact I try to encourage them to be proud and often show Aboriginal related videos to the whole class as well as white European type videos totally unrelated to Abor[iginal] culutre.
- No. I expect all students to be able to work together in the classroom abiding by the classroom rules.
- Certainly not.
- No. Why?

- Why do you ask about “Aboriginal culture”? What about “Australian culture”? They need to start being like the rest of us.
- These kids aren’t real Aborigines.
- There is no real “Aboriginal culture” down here.
- They are better off without it. They should start to try to fit in.
- Why would anyone want to expect them to change?

57 interviewees responded to this question

13 interviewees made no response.

**Q.7 What is your opinion about introducing Aboriginal Studies as a compulsory subject to all Year 8,9 and 10 students (all lower school students) and as an optional choice for upper school students?**

- I suppose it may give students the opportunity to be more aware of Aboriginal culture.
- Don’t you [Mr Karginoff] think that we have had enough of all this bullshit already?
- I doubt there will be any academic advantage in students being subjected to this crap in class.
- A waste of time.
- It’s irrelevant to life today.
- What has all this stuff Abo[riginals] got to do with modern day society?
- It’s not really going to help or be of use to most people.
- To what end?

- What's the point of it?
- No comment.
- Why not? If we are serious about Australia being multicultural and if we have any real respect for Aboriginal culture or if we want to engender respect for Aboriginal culture in our society at large. In so doing we want to acknowledge that Aboriginal people are human beings and thus have right too. We should genuinely and generally seek to open up differing cultures to our students and ourselves. Why no It would be a good idea. I saw Yothu Yindi in Ireland last year and the Irish thought they were terrific!
- This should not be necessary. Where would it stop?
- No. I do not think this is a good idea. Australians have such vastly different backgrounds. It would not be beneficial.
- Where would we draw the line?
- No. Australia's real heritage is well documented. Aboriginal culture is something different. We should encourage our students to be one. The teaching of Ab[original] Studies would be divisive.
- Students are not interested in all that stuff.
- It's got nothing to do with real life, has it?
- Why?
- It should be optional as other subjects are. We need to be careful that we don't bend to minority pressure groups constantly.
- If you do this then get the AEW to be involved. He doesn't do anything all day.

- I think it could well be/might already be a component of Social Studies. But I don't believe it should be a separate unit. It's not important enough to stop other work simply to do Aboriginal Studies because of political correctness.
- I believe we are all Australian.
- There are only about 40,000 Ab[original]s in W.A., so why bother?
- They are an insignificant minority who don't add anything to, or contribute anything to, our society.
- We don't need to study them to know what they are like.
- I don't think that it is necessary. All you need to do is read the paper every day to see what's going on.
- We need to be careful as it could create even more resentment.
- The Aboriginal population in our school is not even 10% so why take time out of the school curriculum to cater for them?
- They wouldn't appreciate it.
- I thought we were doing this through the Social Studies department.
- It is already compulsory in Year 8 Soc[ial] Studies; some Year 9 classes and one Y[ear] 10 class do Aboriginal Studies.
- I'm totally against it as it will further drive a wedge between Ab[original]s and non-Ab[original]s, highlighting one minority culture whilst ignoring other.
- There are probably more Italians, Greeks, Yugoslavs and Asians living in Australia than boongs, so why not teach those cultures instead? It would probably be more worthwhile.

- Compulsory for Year 8's – yes. For Year 9's – no. I don't think its is necessary but I would like to see it as an upper school option. I think it is important for students to recognize – be aware of – Aboriginal culture and heritage as well as (this may apply mainly to upper school) the issues that are relevant today.
- I believe all Years 8,9 and 10 students should study Aboriginal Studies for one whole term in each year. Also there should be a far stronger/much more content in other subjects. Not only in English. Australian Studies should be compulsory “option” (contradiction there, sorry!) in Years 11 and 12 too.
- A good idea.
- Yes.
- I see nothing wrong with Aboriginal Studies as a course for all students. But I would prefer to see it as an option, to be selected or rejected as is any other subject or unit.
- What would the value to this be?
- Not a good idea. This smacks of political correctness.
- I think Aboriginal Studies should be compulsory for all Australian school students and be offered as a valid choice in upper school.
- Maybe it's a reasonable idea.
- Not another smart idea from ATSIC?
- Seems like a good idea.
- Excellent.
- I'm not in favour of either the lower or upper school option. I think that integration is a preferred choice for me over time and through sport rather than a compulsory unit.

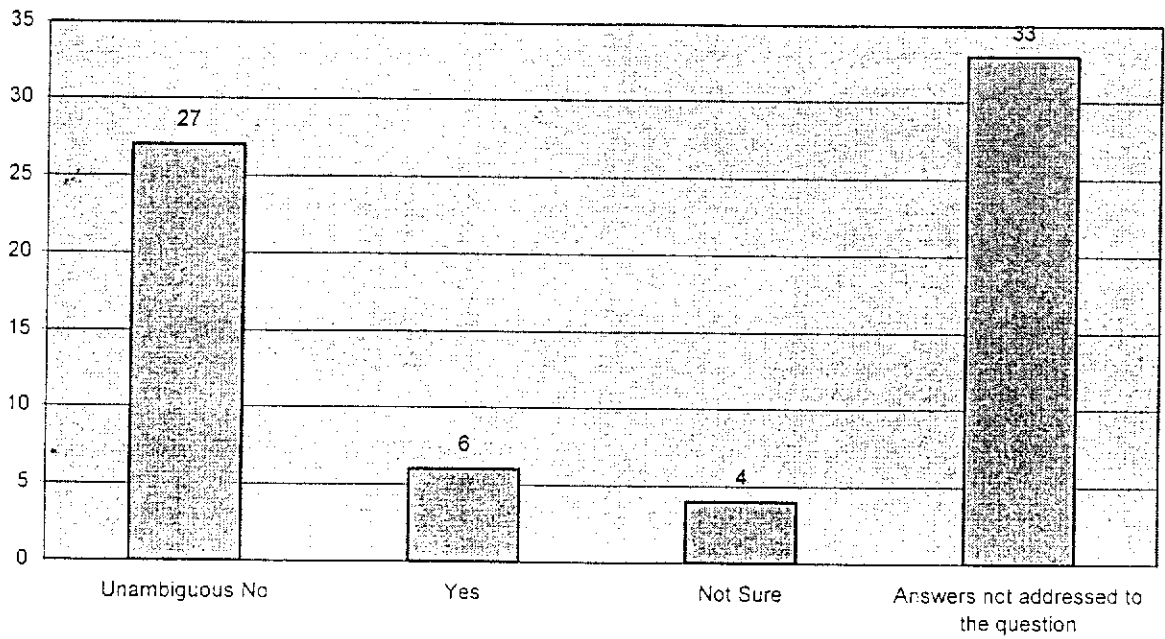
- OK As long as I'm not expected to teach that shit.
- Yes. I think it would give the other [non-Aboriginal] students a better understanding of the Aboriginal culture.
- Not necessary or helpful. Also it would meet lots of resistance.
- As long as other ethnic study subjects become compulsory...For example, Greek studies etc...Even better, multicultural studies. These subjects would probably be more worthwhile. Perhaps it needs to be noted or emphasised that Australians are made up of more than one ethnic group.
- What do you plan to do? Collect beer cans?
- How on earth would you find anything to talk about for a whole term? Maybe we could just get a guest speaker, some Aboriginal expert in to talk to the whole school in an assembly or something and deal with it in this way. It would get it out the way quickly and keep everybody happy.

The interviews comprise an extensive set of data. Attempting to collate the material is a suggestive exercise, and I have done so in a manner that outlines some possible conclusions.

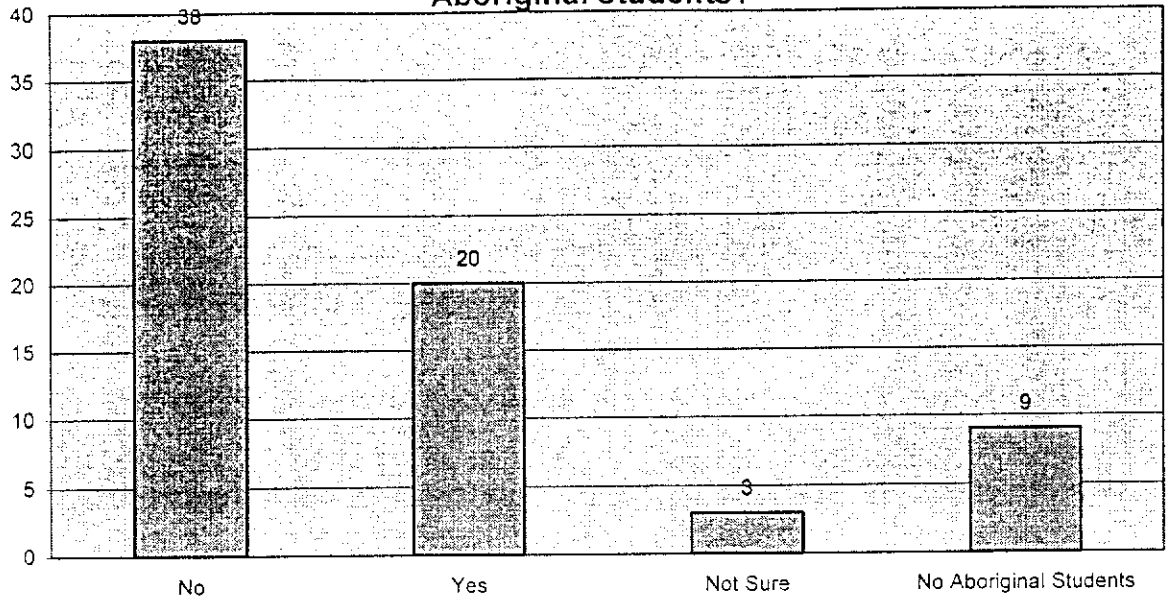
The responses to the first question indicate the difficulty of quantifying the data. Outlayed is "the current system relating to Aboriginal Education in our school is appropriate; some of the teachers responses either failed to address the question ("we should make them take showers") or turned the question upside down ("Yes. The system is failing..."). However, frequency tables may help. Here then is an attempt to summarize the data:

## FREQUENCY CHARTS – TEACHER SURVEY

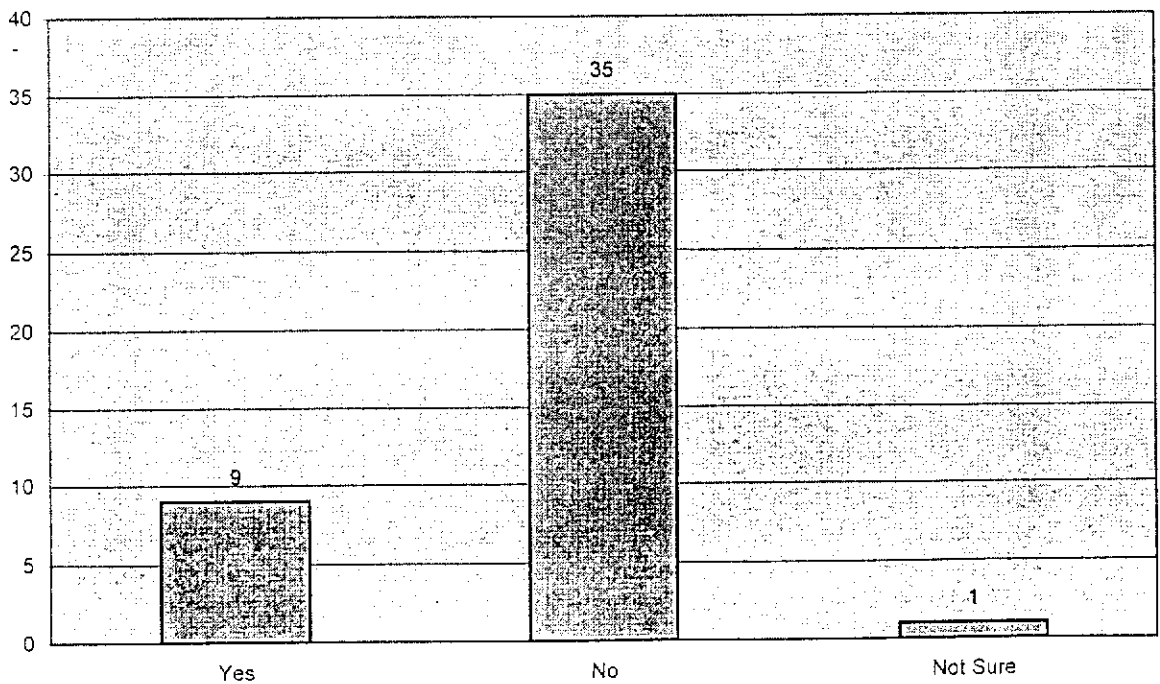
Q1 Do you think the current system relating to Aboriginal Education in our school is appropriate?



**Q.2 Do you allow your Aboriginal students in your class, if you have any, to have more freedom than your non-Aboriginal students?**

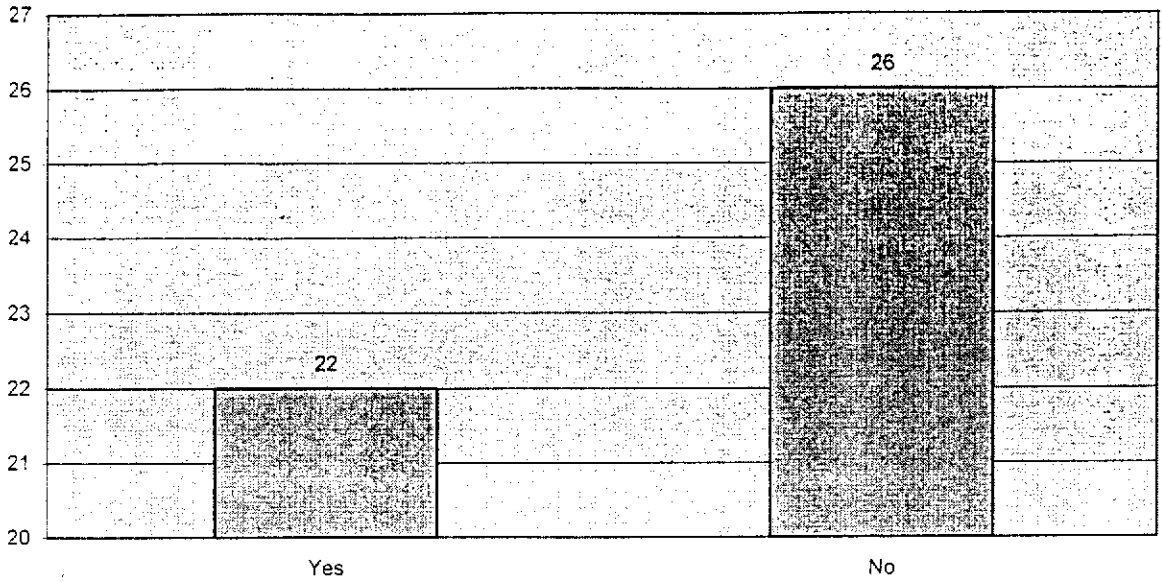


**Q.3 Do you think that Aboriginal students should receive any special treatment in our school?**

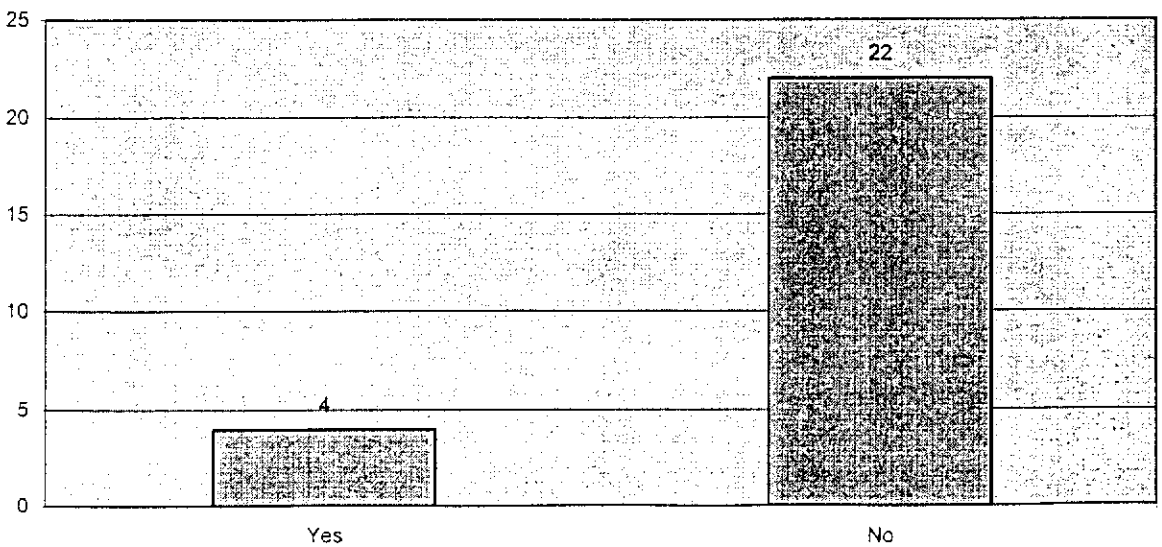




**Q.4 Do you think that Aboriginal students should receive any special treatment in the classroom? Note - Some teachers noted that they should not, but do, help!**

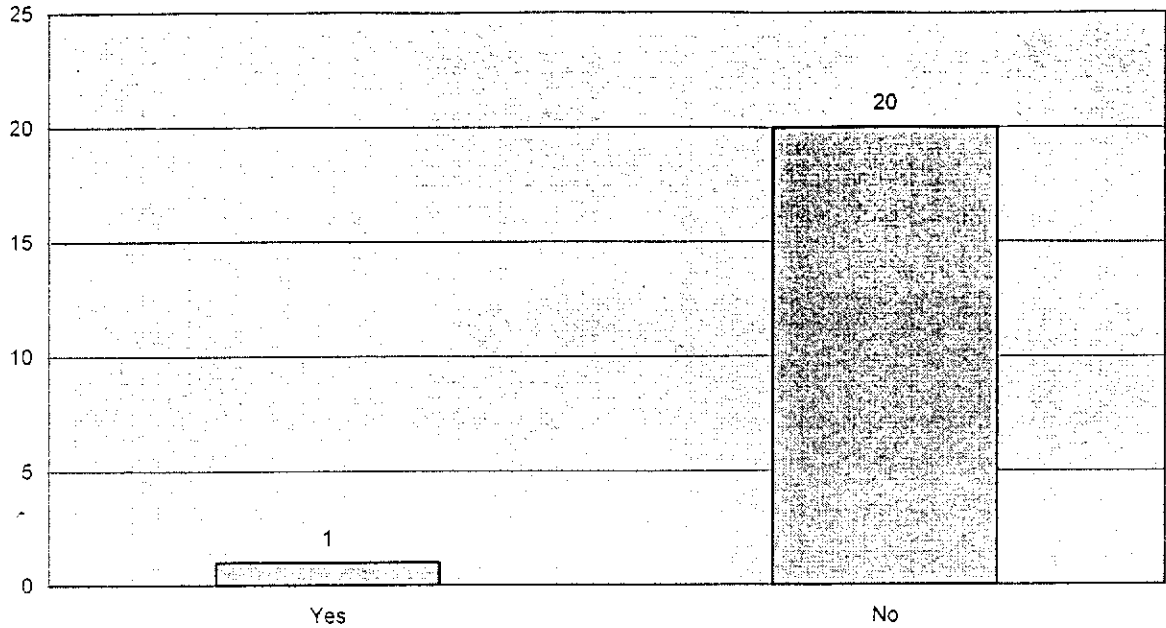


**Q.5 In your training to become a teacher were you ever taught how to apply teaching methods to Aboriginal students? Note - Only unambiguous and relevant answers are charted here.**

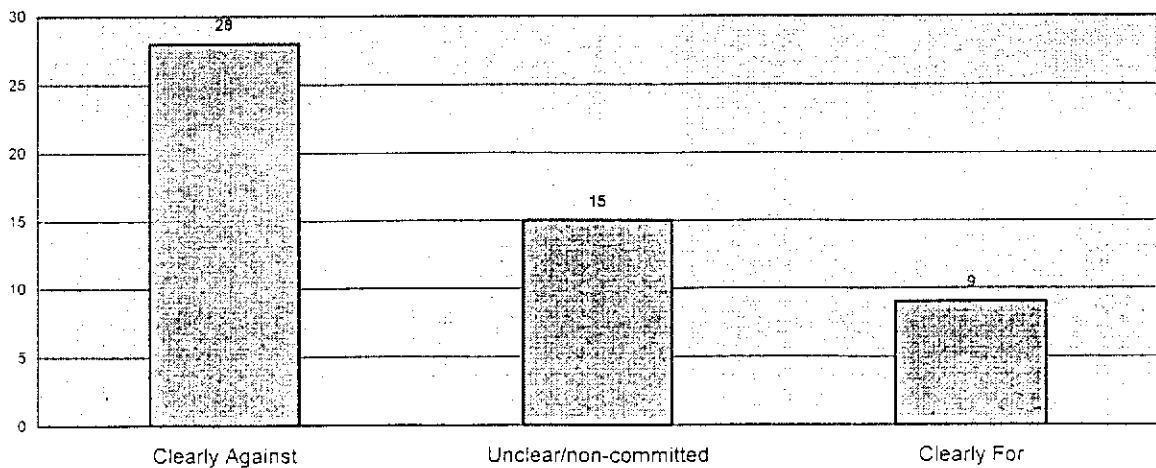


**Q.6 Do you expect Aboriginal students to give up their Aboriginality and cultural characteristics in the classroom?**

**Note - This question produced many unclear answers.**



**Q.7 What is your opinion about introducing Aboriginal Studies as a compulsory subject to all year 8,9 and 10 students and as an optional choice for upper school students?**



With regard to question one, the feeling that the system was not appropriate is clearly stronger. The many answers that failed to address the question provide much interesting data. Foremost perhaps

is the role of answers like “It’s all a waste of time”, or, more wordily, “the current education system at our school is almost wholly inappropriate for nearly all students” and, slightly more extremely, “for most students the education system is a complete waste of time”. Eight of the responses indicate an attitude involving substantial disillusion, including the highly cynical “The government just wants to improve the figures for retention rates, so they give them money”. Only 4 of the responses are overtly aggressive towards Aboriginals, and overall the tone of the responses is not unsympathetic. This is true for the survey as a whole, although questions 6 and 7 about Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal Studies show a number of responses which it is hard not to categorize as prejudiced – “Aboriginal culture? It’s a joke” seems a fairly typical response. Of 57 responses to question 6 (do you expect Aboriginal students to give up their Aboriginality and cultural characteristics in the classroom?), 21 clearly question the idea of some distinctive “culture” pertaining to these students. Of the 20 responses, which do not question the idea of “Aboriginal culture”, only 1 or 2 ascribe specific cultural distinctiveness to the Aboriginal students.

Perhaps this observation summarizes much feeling ... “If Aboriginal students have given up their traditional lifestyles and cultures, ie, not living in a traditional way, I would expect them to conform more to conventional classroom rules etc”. Broadly speaking, while it would certainly be true that the teachers see the Aborigines as a distinct group, if not necessarily “culturally” distinct, a substantial response to their position as teachers of large classes questions the value of distinguishing Aboriginals from other ethnic groups:- “There are probably more Italians, Greeks, Yugoslavs and Asians living in Australia than boongs, so why not teach those cultures instead?” Or less aggressively, and more succinctly, “I believe we are all Australians”. These views may reflect some short-term pragmatism on teachers’ parts, but hardly seem to address the accepted idea that there are distinctive problems in dealing with Aboriginal Education. Of 49 responses to Q.3 (do you think Aboriginal students should receive any special treatment in our school? 36 clearly said no, where as only 9 clearly responded yes. Despite the thoughtful tenor of some teachers remarks, and indeed the not unsympathetic general tone, for whatever reasons (and non-contact with Aboriginal students and concern for the non-Aboriginal majority of their classes are clearly important) most of the teachers don’t appear to be concerned with strategies for Aboriginal Education. Perhaps this simply reflects the lack of training, which Q.5 about their teacher training seems to indicate. Certainly, the disparity between answers to questions 3 and 4 suggests that teachers are more sympathetic in fact than in theory – although not approving of special treatment for Aboriginal students in the school, in practice many of the same teachers do provide, in their own classrooms, some special treatment. Nevertheless the heavily weighted response in favour of no special treatment in the school must be regarded as note worthy.

Having made this point, the disparate nature of teachers' views must also be noted; the variety of positions taken would seem to deny much possibility of consensus. Of 52 responses to Q.7, regarding the introduction of Aboriginal Studies as compulsory to Years 8,9 and 10 as well as an option for the upper school, the great majority were against this, whereas 8 expressed clear views in favour of the idea.

Not surprisingly my own experiences in the staffroom lead me to report an often high degree of tension in the arena of Aboriginal Education. The interviews reported above make some personal references to myself – some aggressive, some helpful and encouraging; this personal tension was a constant factor in my years at Kwinana, making my position at times very difficult. What were the attitudes of the students? The next chapter explores this issue.

### **Summary**

It is hoped that the reader will re-read these interviews. An endeavour has been made to be objective, but there is clearly a great deal more for perusal here than the point I have brought out.

The interviews were conducted across the board with the teachers at Kwinana SHS with a view to investigating their views and attitudes about Aboriginal Education. The answers proved occasionally aggressive, often neutral and sometimes showed sympathy towards Aboriginal students. However, we may say that the range of views expressed did not, for example, show broad support for the provision of special treatment for these students. Indeed, oddly, while recognising the distinctiveness of the Aboriginal students as a group, in fact as a needy group, most of the teachers did not seem to favour attempts to meet their distinctive needs.

Moreover, there is some evidence which denotes sympathy combined with a degree of prejudice were present which precluded deliberative action. These sentiments appear to summarize the middle ground of teacher response; it is this, which I refer to else where as "soft racism". A general lack of information, thought and preparation and a will to improve the lot of Aboriginal students seems to lie behind the responses of teachers in regular contact with Aboriginal students. The underlying sentiment is one of mild hostility. Fortunately a small minority of teachers do not fit this mould and have a practical concern, which translates into thoughtful action.

## **Chapter Eight**

### **A STUDY OF ABORIGINAL STUDENT ATTITUDES**

“My father’s point was that you don’t enslave a people and get away with it”.

Thom Steinbeck

#### **Section one**

##### **A qualitative study**

In this chapter I focus on the study of Aboriginal student attitudes at Kwinana SHS. The study has been divided into two main sections. In Section One, as with the study of teacher attitudes Aboriginal students were given a printed questionnaire. The questions on the questionnaire were intended to provide a focus for students. During individual interviews students were asked similarly worded question. However, they were at liberty to discuss other issues relating to their life at school. Most students did not make a written response. However, all students made verbal contributions. Some of these oral answers were effusive. As with the interviews recorded in the previous chapter the Aboriginal students edited the responses. Sometimes in the course of answering specific questions, interviewees gave invaluable insights into their life at school. Therefore, sometimes responses to specific questions may appear “off target” but, nevertheless, students were allowed to decide what was to be edited or included. Naturally I had a say in this in my capacity as teacher and researcher.

The second section is somewhat controversial. In complete contrast to the technique of ethnographic interviewing employed in both teacher and student interviews I determined to conduct a more formal or controlled questioning of the Aboriginal students.

Due to the answers/responses received from the Aboriginal students I resolved after much contemplation to organize this more formal survey of student attitudes. (The students themselves were willing to participate in such a survey). My concerns in respect of the tape recorded interviews were twofold. I emerged from both the tape recorded and anecdotal interviews and conversations in an extremely vulnerable position, for, it became clear that the students held me in high regard. This was, to some degree a surprise to me. I had felt that I had a reasonable relationship with my Aboriginal students but I had not realized the apparent depth of their affection for me. Consequently, I feared that interested parties reading this study would be suspicious at to its impartiality. I determined, therefore, to organize a monitored, or professional, or standardized questionnaire/survey. Of course I realise that this may be seen as unfortunate for it suggests that the

qualitative work may be inferior to the more “professional” survey. I am aware that this might give detractors ammunition with which they may wish to discredit research. Nonetheless, such standardized reporting does provide an alternative perspective. It is important to acknowledge that there are problems inherent in such a method, especially in cross-cultural research. The findings of this survey are outlined in section two. Although students willingly identified themselves at each session I have removed their names from official documentation.<sup>164</sup> I wish to point out that all the students would have been happy to have been identified with their responses at all stages of the project. This was, perhaps unsurprisingly in stark contrast to most of the teaching staff interviewed at Kwinana SHS.

This simple survey was handed to all Aboriginal students in July 1995 to serve as a focus for their thoughts, feelings, experiences in relation to their life at school. These questions served as a basis for the ethnographic interviews which followed during the course of the year.

**ABORIGINAL EDUCATION SURVEY  
STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE**

The following survey is related to Aboriginal education and I would appreciate it if you would complete the questions below. Please answer all questions honestly, as this is your chance to express your feelings and opinions about the current education system. Please indicate your gender. Male or Female. (47 male and 28 female).

Thank you.

1. What is your Year group? 8 9 10 11 12.

2. How do you feel about attending school?

.....  
.....  
.....

3. Do you enjoy school? Yes or No

4. Which subject do you enjoy the most and why?

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<sup>164</sup> Fictitious names could have been used, however, students, in the mainstream, opposed this technique.

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.....

5. Do you feel that the cottage helps you in any way? If so please explain.

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.....  
.....

6. Do you think that we need to learn more about other cultures in the classroom, if so, which one and why?

.....  
.....  
.....

7. Do you feel that what we learn in the classroom is relevant to real life? Please explain...

.....  
.....  
.....

8. Do you feel that as an Aboriginal student, you are treated equally to the other students in the school?      Yes      or      No  
What makes you feel this way?

.....  
.....  
.....

9. If you had the choice to change one thing, within reason, in the school, what would it be and why?

.....  
.....  
.....

Thank you for participating in this survey.

Please hand the completed survey to Mr Karginoff before Wednesday 15/08/95.

**Q1. What is your gender? Male or Female**

47 Male

28 Female

All students responded to this question.

**Q2. What is your year group?**

All students responded to this question. However, I have chosen not to identify year groups for the same reasons that I have not identified individual students by name. Primarily to preserve anonymity.

**Q3. How do you feel about attending school?**

- I hate it.
  
- School sux [sic].
  
- School sucks.
  
- This school is shit.
  
- I hate the teachers at this school.



- It's boring.
- It's crap.
- I have to come. Mum says.
- I have to [attend].
- It's OK.
- It's OK. I guess.
- Yeah...well, its not so bad.
- Fucking boring.
- It's a waste of time.
- You [we] don't do nothing.
- You [we] don't learn nothing.
- It's shit.
- Some teachers are cunts.
- They hate us.
- It's good.
- If we don't come to school we don't get paid.
- Better than being at home.

- I come for a feed.
- It's good on the days I have Special B[asketball].
- I hate being here.
- This school's crap.
- Fuckin' shit.
- Them white dogs hate us.
- Better than I used to.
- The Cottage is good.
- They don't do nothin' for us.
- Mr – hates us.
- Mrs – she's a slut.
- We never do anything good.
- What's the point?
- It's OK.
- You[we] have to come.
- [Shrug of the shoulders]...OK. I suppose.
- It's good.

- Good.
- Good...good.
- You [we] get to meet our mates.
- I get to play on the computer.
- Homework classes are good.
- Art's good.
- You [I] get to talk with the yorcas [girls].
- I like to see all them whites [non-Aboriginal girls] girruping [being friendly] for me.
- Nothing.
- You [I] [have] got to.
- I don't care.
- I don't mind.
- It's too hot at home.
- Special B[asketball]'s good.
- The teachers are always picking on me.
- If I could be with you [Mr Karginoff] all day it'd be ok.
- Why can't we go out more?

- We need more excursions.
- You [Mr Karginoff] should get us out of here.
- You [Mr Karginoff] don't know what it's like for us.
- You [Mr Karginoff] know what some of them teachers is[sic] like.
- I'd like to burn this place down.
- It's a hole.
- I come for a smash [fight].
- I come to make them white boys all hot [sexually excited].
- You [we] don't learn nothin'.
- That bitch in cooking's always picking on me. She never lets us [the subject and one friend] cook. She's always looking' for an excuse to send us out. I hate her. I'm goin' to kill her.
- They're always picking on us. [The teachers].
- They [the school] don't want us here.
- They hate us.
- They're racist. [Teachers, students, the school].
- It's shit.
- When you [Mr Karginoff] take us out... on camps and things that's good.

- Why aren't you [Mr Karginoff] the principal? You should be in charge you're the only one who sticks up for us.
- Mum says they're [the school] gonna fuck you for being good to us.
- What do you [Mr Karginoff] think? What do you want me to say? You know it's no good for us. Most of them teachers hate us.
- Nothing much.
- I'm hungry... I can't concentrate on my work.
- Mr – he's always goin on about my clothes.
- It's better since you've [Mr Karginoff] been helpin' us.
- You and Mr – are alright and Miss – but them others is dogs.
- Coming here at recess [to the Cottage] [morning and lunch break] that's good. That helps.
- I hate English.
- It's a waste of time.
- If them whites hadn't come here I'd be out chasing kangaroos in the bush now.
- They hate us.
- I can steal stuff.
- Shit. I hate it.
- Why do we have to come?

- It's stupid.
- It's dumb.
- Mrs-'s nice.

**Q3. Do you enjoy school?    Yes    or    No**

All students made a response to this question.

67 students responded with a negative answer.

8 students responded positively.

**Q4. Which subject do you enjoy most and why?**

- It's all shit. No, not really. I like Art. Miss – lets us draw what we like. We get to draw Aboriginal designs. Also it's good 'coz you [Mr Karginoff] come in.
- Yours [Mr Karginoff] because you don't pick on us. We have fun in you class. You teach us thins. [Social Studies].
- Social Studies. We do stuff about us. The teacher's good.
- Art. Miss – likes us. I'm an artist.
- Form [class] because we're in the Cottage. You [Mr Karginoff] look after us. We talk, mess around... stuff.

It was at this point during the dissemination of information from the tape recordings – and indeed to some extent while the interviews were taking place – that I became concerned as to the way the student responses seemed to be heading. Increasingly, it became clear that many responses were going to be a catalogue of complements paid to me.

- Yours. You give us respect. You [are] kind.

- Your class Mr K[arginoff]. Because you listen to us.
- Your'n. You're a Noong [Nyungar] sir! 'Coz we do stuff, learn about our culture. You're funny. You're on our side. You speak to us.
- Sport. Because we play basketball and get to go outside.
- Social [Studies], Art, Special B[asketball]. The teachers don't pick on us.
- Form [class]. You give us a feed. We messing... talking... you let us come in [to the Cottage] early. You are always there for us.
- Mum says you're like one of us. Art, when you got that bloke [Doug Ryder, Aboriginal Artist] and we did them paintings for those three weeks. Also Social [Studies] is good when we learn about our culture.
- Camp. Going on camp. That time we went on the lake out in the bush [Logue Brook dam] and our table won that quiz. That was brilliant. Our team won but you was helping us... you helped everyone with the answers. Even Science is OK when you're there... when you come in to help. Then that cunt... Mr – leaves us alone.
- Yours. Form [class]; it's our place. Social's good too... and Art.
- Maths is worst. Art's best we can listen to the radio. Miss - OK. She likes us.
- Miss [sic] - class. She explains the work and you come in.
- I like Mr – he's not like people say. He's soft.
- Going home time.
- Recess [break]. That's all... And going home.
- I only come [to school] for [a] fight.

- Art. The teacher leaves you alone.
- The classes you [Mr Karginoff] come into and help us.
- I only come, we only come [to school] because you [Mr Karginoff] are here. I never, we never come [sic] to school before.

All students who have not already had their response to this question recorded responded in a similar way to the last two responses.

All students responded to this question/topic.

**Q5. Do you feel that the Cottage (Kwinana Aboriginal Learning Centre) helps you in any way? If so, please explain.**

- Yes. It is our place and I feel safe here.
- Yes. Because we can meet together and its our place. Nobody can come in and spoil it.
- Yes. I feel at home here; its my room and Mr K[arginoff] lets us leave our things here.
- I can change for Special B[asketball] in the Cottage and leave my money here.
- My lunch money is [safe?] here. It's our place... [I] can do cooking...its good... I like to play on the computers.
- [I can leave] my file here. My gear doesn't stolen. When we have classes here we can do work and learn...Mr Karginoff says this is like our home.
- The other teachers don't come here. It's good. They never come here. I don't want them comin' here. There's no smashin' [fighting] here.



- The wadjalas<sup>165</sup> [whites] don't come here.
- You [Mr Karginoff] and Uncle Matt [Matthew Moody, AEW] is here for us. We have a feed an' we have fun. It's like home for us.
- Yeah. It's good...its good here. It's our spot. It's like home.
- I don't have classes in the Cottage but its nice to come across at recess [break time]. It's safe and no teachers can bother you.
- We can change for Special B[asketball here]... My Mum comes and brings our lunch money. You's [Mr Moody and Mr Karginoff] here... this is stupid Mr K... this is our place...
- Why are you [Mr Karginoff] asking these questions? ...this is our spot... if they took the KAC away I wouldn't come to school.
- Yes. Its good... because in the morning its always open when I come to school... and you [Mr Karginoff] gives us a feed... I don't know... it's good.
- Before I never come to school. Now I come every day. I can leave my file here.
- Homework classes [after school] is good. We get help with our assignments.
- Them whites don't come here... If they come here I'm smashin' [fighting them]. We doing art here... that's good. I'm leaving my stuff here.
- Yes its our place.
- Yes.
- It's the only good thing about school. Why? Because its ours.
- We good here. The Cottage is [a] good place for us.

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<sup>165</sup> It was made clear to me by my students that other than wadjalas, or white culture was meant.

- We's boss here...I want to get an education... go all the way to Year 12 and the KAC helping me [to] get through.
- Yes. You [Mr Karginoff] makes us behave. We got no shame here.
- This place is for us Nyungars. We is boss here. We Can be messin' here. This is our sacred land. It's ours.
- Mr K[arginoff] we is always going to be able to be here aren't we? They [the whites] won't be takin' it from us.
- It's ours... it's our place. WE can keep our things here. It's safe... our things is safe here. Mum brings me my lunch to this place. We can drawin' here... and we learnin' things... it's good.
- Yes. It helps us... the Cottage means we comes to school. We learn things about our culture with you [Mr Karginoff]... You makes us feel good... you give us respect.
- Our flag is flying over this place. This is our land. This is our school.
- We get a feed here.
- This is our spot.
- We got no shame here. Nobody botherin' us here.
- We can use the phone. We has homework classes an gets a feed. We have fun times in this place.
- Them whites don't come here. Raymond can come here [a non-Aboriginal student] he's allowed!
- Mum can bring my lunch money over [here].

- Nobody lookin' at us.
- You's [Mr Karginoff] here.
- When I'm feeling bad [sad?] I can come here. Can sit... sleep... can be left alone.
- You [Mr Karginoff] lets us put our pictures up... and our art can go up [on the walls]. You respect our work.
- We have homework classes in here.
- They [the school staff?] leaves us niggers alone in here.
- You [Mr Karginoff] knows its good for us in here.
- People thinks we [are] all "slows" [educationally backward] in here. But we don't care coz we's "boss" [independent] over here.
- We have form [class] here. It's a good start to the day. We all meets together and has a talk together. We collect our books. I only comes to school.
- We know they [ the school] want to take the Cottage away from us but if they try that there's gonna be about five hundred Noongs [Nyungars] up here fighting.
- Why they [the school] don't leave us alone here?
- It's good here.
- [Smile].
- It's good for us. This is our spot. It's too cold outside.

- We can keep our bikes in here and so they don't get stolen. I can keep my lunch in you [Mr Karginoff's office] and you put it in the fridge.
- Mum says she gonna make a song about you [Mr Karginoff] because you the king of this place for us.
- This place is like the centre [Uluru].
- I can keep my clothes here. [Sports kit].
- I like to play on the computer in the morning when you [Mr Karginoff] comes in the morning before – gets here.
- I can keep my file here and my pen.
- When we come in here we have fun.
- I like it when you [ Mr Karginoff] talks to us, tells us things.
- You [Mr Karginoff] lets us talk in here. We learn about our culture from you.
- Nothin' bad happens here.
- Yes.
- It helps me.

11 students responded with the last statement.

All students responded to this question and all students inferred or clearly stated "I feel good here" [at the Cottage].

**Q 7. Do you think that we need to learn more about other cultures in the Classroom, if so, which one and why?**

All students answered in the affirmative. All students stated quite firmly that they wanted, indeed, expected that they learn about their own culture – the Nyungar ways. However, it is important to note that all students did not see this merely as instruction on how Nyungar people had lived ie) traditional lifestyle prior to European settlement. Students wanted to learn about present day Aboriginality and current issues relevant to Aboriginal people.

Many students expressed an interest in learning more about the United States of America.

Because of the uniformity of the responses I suggested that a group of students formulated a response to the question representative of the common view. The group was selected by their peers and comprised three male and three female students. Four students were from lower school and two students from upper school. This was their response:

- “Yes, we need to learn more about our culture in school. We want to understand our ways and what we doing and where we gong in life. We don’t just want to learn about chasin’ kangaroos and all that stuff. But that’s good. We want to know about our people now. We know about what the white done to us in the past. We knows that they’re racist and hates us. Some do. Not all. We need to know about how we going to get jobs and stuff. Getting an education is our only chance but school needs to be more useful to us. Needs to help us with day to day life. It needs to be more relevant. More meaningful. We want to do more of our art and be able to play more sport. To be able to do the things we like and are good at. Do more Social Studies type things like we do with you [Mr Karginoff]. We want modern thins to learn about our culture and ourselves”.

**Q8. Do you feel that what we learn in the classroom is relevant to real life?****Please explain...**

- You [Mr Karingoff] know its all crap. Its all boring.
- I feel shit because what I have to do is all shit here.
- No, I feel what we do at school is a waste of time. All we do is get in trouble.
- They [the Teachers/the School?] don't know nothing about my life. They don't know about me. They don't know me.
- I don't know why I come here everyday.
- Why we bother with it [school]? It's boring. I hate it.
- I hate it.
- It's boring.
- I gets in trouble all the time.
- What we do in class is a waste of time.
- It's a complete waste of time.
- Mostly a waste of time. Not just for us Noongs [Nyungars] but for us all. For all Students. We don't learn nothin.
- I only go because I have to. I meet my mates.
- What do we learn that's worthwhile? Nothing that's going to get us a job. We gonna be on the pension, on the dole all our lives. Teachers don't care about us. We got no future.

- It's got nothin' to do with my life.
- The work we do in class is boring. What's it got to do with real life? What [are] we doin' here? Only passin' time.
- Cooking is good. That's useful. I can cook at home now. Sometimes I can. Cooking at school is good [in Home Economics] because all the stuff... pots and cooking gear is there. Sometimes we cook at the Cottage but some people don't clean up after[wards].
- We do some work on our culture in Social [Studies] that's interesting. I've learned a lot. But some of the wadjalas [whites] say racist things about us... Why do they hate us?
- Most things we learnin' about is a waste [of time?]. Even the teachers is not interested in it. Why they make us do this rubbish everyday? In English they show us videos which we seen before. I'm always sent out of Maths because I haven't got any equipment. I hate school.
- Mr – teaching me to be like Michael Jordan in Special B[asketball]. You [Mr Karginoff] and him [Mr -] got me a special promotion with Macdonalds [sponsorship]. If I don't be[come] a basketball star I'm gonna be an artist. Miss – gonna help me.
- Some's OK.
- Boring.
- We don't learn nothing.
- No.
- Nothing.
- When I finish Year 10 I'm leaving school. I hate it here.
- Me and [name erased] only come coz of you [Mr Karginoff]. You'd be lonely without us!

- It's not useful. Won't get me a job.
- What we gonna do after this place?
- Mum wants me to repeat Year 10... and make me do all that shit again.
- It's nothing to do with my life.
- They [the teachers] don't know anything about us. They don't know what we think. They don't know how I feel.
- It's not really relevant at all to me.

33 students responded to this question as recorded above.

14 students said "I don't know".

14 students said that the teachers were racist to them in class.

9 students said they could not concentrate in class and that they did not understand anything.

All students responded to this question.

**Q 9. Do you feel that as an Aboriginal student you are treated equally to the  
Other students in the school? Yes or No**

What makes you feel this way?

Most students appeared to be reluctant to comment on this question. I believe I sensed that many felt a sense of "shame" in the Aboriginal sense of the word. They were embarrassed by the question. All students made some response.

All students said they felt that teachers treated them differently to non-Aboriginal students. All 70 students answered 'NO' to the question.

Some students identified certain teachers as overtly racist.

Some students identified certain teachers as kind but patronising.

All students commented that they felt alienated at school.

All students said they were no different from other students.



However, all students also said that they were Aboriginal and were, therefore, different.

All students said that they should not be treated differently.

All students believed they were penalised in some way or other by most teachers because they were Aboriginal.

**Q 10. If you had the choice to change one thing, within reason, in the school, what would it be and why?**

- Change some of our teachers. It would be good to get rid of some teachers and get some different ones. Get rid of the Maths teachers. And the Science teachers. They don't teach us nothing. They hate us.
- Have a proper canteen. Have somewhere where you can get a proper feed.
- We should be able to play more sport.
- More sport. Proper showers.
- We should be able to wear our own clothes. We don't have to wear uniform but we have to wear what they [the school] tells us.
- We should be allowed in here [the KAC] all the time.
- There should be more computers. More computer games. We can only use the computers in here [KAC]. Mr [name erased] won't let us use the computers. He hates us Blacks.
- New basketball courts. We should be allowed to go in the gym at lunchtime.
- This place should be burnt down. It sucks.
- Get rid of them white dogs.
- I'd like to be able to have more Art lessons.
- Have no longer recess times so we can get a proper feed.

- We should be able to go down the Hub to MacDonaldis in break time.
- You [Mr Karginoff] should teach us all the time.
- We should go on more camps like the one you took us to... where was it? Logue Brook. That was wicked.
- More camps. More excursions.
- More excursions.
- The school should provide us with equipment [pens, pencils, calculators]. I keep getting sent out of class and then I can't do no work. In maths I sent out all the time.
- We should have two teachers in every class. You learn more like that. When you [Mr Karginoff] and Miss [sic] Armstrong teach us its good. I know... we know what's going on then. Two teachers is good.
- We should have a footie team. Like we used to with you [Mr Karginoff]. That'd be good. We used to have fun. That Mrs [name erased] stopped it. She's a bitch.
- We should get a new principal. One that cares about us. One that would do something for us. He don't care about us.
- Do more things. Be outdoors more. Play more sport. There should be better classrooms.
- Better classrooms. Most rooms don't even have curtains. It's too hot.
- Get air-conditioning. It's too hot in summer. And too cold in winter. The heaters don't work.
- Better teachers. Teachers who care about us. Who help us learn.

- Better teachers. Teacher who like us. Most teachers don't like us. That Mr [name erased] hates us. He called me a "little black cunt", my Dad's gonna kill him.
- How come we don't have any black teachers? That would be good. Perhaps not. They'd be drunk all the time.
- We should be able to come over here [KAC] when we like. Sometimes schools get too much. We should be able to come here. It's peaceful.
- I scared to come to school sometimes. There's too much fighting. There should be less fighting. It's not good.
- More basketball. More time for playing basketball.
- We should play basketball against other schools like we used to with you; when you used to take us. That was good. We always won. We was the champions.
- In Art we should be able to do what we want. That new teacher, she's weak [not very talented?]. Miss -, she was better. She used to go off at us but she was best.
- You [Mr Karginoff] should take us hunting kangaroos. That's be wicked fun. We should go out more. It's not natural being locked up here all the day. More excursions.
- More computers. They don't let us use the computers. The computers is good. Not just the games. You can learn stuff on the computers.
- Get rid of the wadjalas [whites]. Then it be good. This is our school anyway. We was here first. They haste us. We gonna be smashin' [fighting] them and then they gonna know. It be better if they weren't here.
- We should be able to choose what we want to do. We should be allowed to choose which subjects. An the teacher. We should be able to choose which class we are in.

- We should learn about life stuff. Things that's gonna be useful to us later on. Like Mechanical Workshop. But that's not good we don't do any proper mechanics. They should buy some old cars for us to work on.
- I would have more activities where the white students could join with us to learn that we [Aboriginals] are not bad people. They think all we do is fight, drink, steal cars and go on the pension. My Mum and Dad work and I don't claim the Ab[original] Study money. If we could have more contact... learning together we could be friends. Not all the wadjalas [whites] is bad. I got lots of wadjala friends. We need more camps together like last time. It was good.
- I used to hate school. Now its OK. I getting along alright here now. We needs more help with our works in class. Homework classes is good. We going good here now.
- We need to have more fun. We've had fun with yours Mr [Karginoff]. You make school OK... We startin to be like them white kids now. We got respect now. I think we should have more getting together with them [the Whites/non-Aboriginal people?].
- Change some of them teachers. Why they bad to us.. treat us like shit? It's not right... Some's OK but why some of them treats us that way? We needs good teachers.
- I'd like to burn this fuckin' place down... not this place [the KAC] but that school. They [the school/ the teachers?] is racist against us. They don't care about us... Sport's good. We should have more sport... And Art... And learn more about our ways... our culture.
- We should go out more. Do more things. Why they [the school?] stoppin' us from playing basketball? We come here but we don't have no fun.
- I like to shoot all them white dogs. That's change plenty around here. They think they's better'n us. We should show them... Some's OK but I get made mad in this place. People always is picking on me.
- Why we need to do Maths and Science? It's be better doing something else. No one learns nothing in them classes. They teaches us nothing there. We only gets in trouble. We should do something else. We'd be better off kicking the footie that doing them subjects.

- Do more fun things. We never goes to the beach... go to the pools [swimming pool] or go out. It's so boring here. You [Mr Karginoff] should take us out of here more. Like you used to.
- We should learn more about our ways, our culture... We need to do more things that's gonna help us [in the future].

24 students made the above response or a very similar response.

All students responded to this question.

These verbal responses were not unique to the interview situation. Such comments were often made in the general/everyday life of the students at school.

It does not seem profitable to attempt to tabulate this data as was done with that from the teachers; there is a far greater degree of uniformity, and, indeed, unity about the answers. The number of occasions on which the Aboriginal students identify the members as a distinct group is immediately noticeable, and there is no contrary indication. Indeed the students not only identify the numbers as a distinct group (see Q.8) but as being seen as such by others. Frequent references are made to the numbers as "we", the prevalence of this identification when discussing the question about the value of "the Cottage" could be attributed to the fact that the Cottage almost promotes a form of segregation. But the warmth of student reports on the topic suggests that the group identity is pervasive and important. Responses to Q.2 do not necessarily have anything particular to say about Aboriginal issues (the survey in section 2 makes some attempt to distinguish Aboriginal from non-Aboriginal student attitudes); this and Q.3 (do you enjoy school?) may merely identify a generally low opinion of school. However, there are a multiplicity of answers which indicate that perceived racism is an important negative influence on their school experience. Some of the students responded repeatedly in an aggressive fashion – "Get rid of the wadjalas" I would point out that aggression is no more the preserve of Aboriginals than it is of teachers. It should be noted that this aggression is consistently set within a race-related frame – "there's gonna be about five hundred of us Noongs up here fighting" (a statement which shows a pleasing warmth of feeling in favour of the Cottage!). It is difficult to know to what degree the students are reflecting issues projected on them by non-Aboriginals, but one cannot but note the correlation between the occasional references to themselves as kangaroo hunters and the issue expressed by some teachers. There is some wry self-reflection here, as with the suggested difficulty of obtaining sober black teachers.

This is perhaps a suitable point to obviate charges that I may tend to overlook negative aspects of Aboriginal student behaviour. Light-fingeredness was to be encountered at times, and contrary to

the notion that this is a “cultural” phenomenon, it is here simply labeled as stealing. Again it hardly seems necessary to suggest that this is not an Aboriginal student preserve.

When it comes to discussion of positive aspects of school life a similarly clear picture emerges; certain teachers are regarded as kind, caring.... and one is labelled, contrary it is said to appearances, as soft. Classes run by those teachers and myself are regarded in a positive way. I was glad that one answer at least says more than “Mum says you’re like one of us”, as one student says “You make us behave. We got no shame here”. I might be felt that the references to “messin’ about” etc suggest something far removed from the reality – that effective discipline was a key feature of good classes. If there was “messin’ about” it was because it was allowed. In fact, in my classes, the students had many more rules imposed upon them than was the case elsewhere in the school. Students for example, would not be allowed to enter the room until an orderly, quiet queue had been formed. Respect was engendered (“You give us respect” one student comments).

It is clear that going on camps is regarded positively, and, interestingly a concern for integration with non-Aboriginal students appears in this setting. The classes of 2 teachers beside myself, in Physical Education and Art, consistently are viewed positively; one boy identifies with Michael Jordan and another student says “I’m an artist”. This is a pleasing contrast with the view that “we gonna be on the pension, on the dole all our lives”. Another girl identifies cooking classes as having been of value. Only one identification is made with the idea that “if we don’t come to school we don’t get paid”. But although the “common view” response to Q.6 says “getting an education is our only chance”, partly because of the counter-weight “but school needs to be more useful to us”, individual statements that view school as a place to learn useful skills are infrequent.

It is hoped that the reader will re-read more than once the ideas the students express. The core of the study is ethnographic and this is the most concentrated source of material. How does one respond to the idea that one of the main pluses of school is that “we gets a feed”? Well, perhaps it’s a positive. But one certainly regrets that perhaps the most thoughtful comment wishes that “the white students could join with us to learn that we are not bad people...My Mum and Dad work and I don’t claim the Ab. Study money...we could be friends”. It seems a plaintive note of aspiration to say “we startin’ to be like them white kids now”.

There is an unavoidable conclusion to this survey – that the Aboriginal students feel racism to be a considerable factor in their school experience. Before proceeding to an account of the second survey I intend to make a few observations about this.

Many non-Aboriginal people argue that Aboriginal people are overly sensitive when it comes to the issue of racism. However, I would argue that people either behave in a racist way or they don't, and if one is on the receiving end of bigotry the degree of prejudice is not the first consideration.<sup>1</sup> For Aboriginal people, more particularly for my students the issue is clear-cut. Some teachers demonstrate racist tendencies, other do not. Some non-Aboriginal people have argued, as indeed many teachers, perhaps those who display racist tendencies, that Aboriginal people in general, and the Aboriginal students at Kwinana in particular are sensitive and inaccurate in their identification of racism. However, there is a clear-cut negative correlation between the responses found in "Teacher attitudes" (it will be remembered that all the teachers at Kwinana SHS are non-Aboriginal) and responses found in "Aboriginal student attitudes". There is also a clear positive correlation between genuine kindness and student attendance and participation.

My position as teacher at Kwinana SHS is instructive; the Aboriginal students like me – they come to school because I have a degree of responsibility for them. Moreover, their parents/guardians come to school because their children like me. The students turn up to class and are attending class with an intention to participate (if either my self or another sympathetic, user friendly, non-racist teacher are the classroom educator). Those who do not adhere to this sentiment often argue that the charge of racism is made when Aboriginal students refuse (capriciously!) to adhere to school or classroom rules. I would argue that students display a belligerent attitude or manifest unacceptable behaviours precisely when the perceptions of the students are that the teacher exhibits racist tendencies. Again, kindness is the key, or in other words, the principle of "a fair go" is vital for positive student outcomes.

Sir Ronald Wilson, President of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission stated

The antidote to racism is education and reason. Too many people get their information from poisoned wells. Too few Australians have met Aboriginal people and discovered at first hand the common humanity which binds us all. The facts about our history, Aboriginal people and government policies are available to all and easy to find.

I urge all Australians to give Aboriginal people what we wish for ourselves : A fair go.

## Section Two

As indicated above this further study was undertaken with a view to counter-balancing the subjective and over - personal responses of the students, particularly as they related to me. The form this took was to use the "Easy-Mark Attitude Measures" service. For this analysis students are asked a series of 60 questions which breakdown into 12 areas:-

1. Enjoyment of school
2. Attitude to teachers
3. Attitude to other students
4. Attitude to school management
5. Perception of safety
6. Attitude to course content
7. Perceived value of Education
8. Quality of teaching
9. Self as a student
10. Family attitude to school
11. Perception of pastoral care
12. Perceived teacher attitude

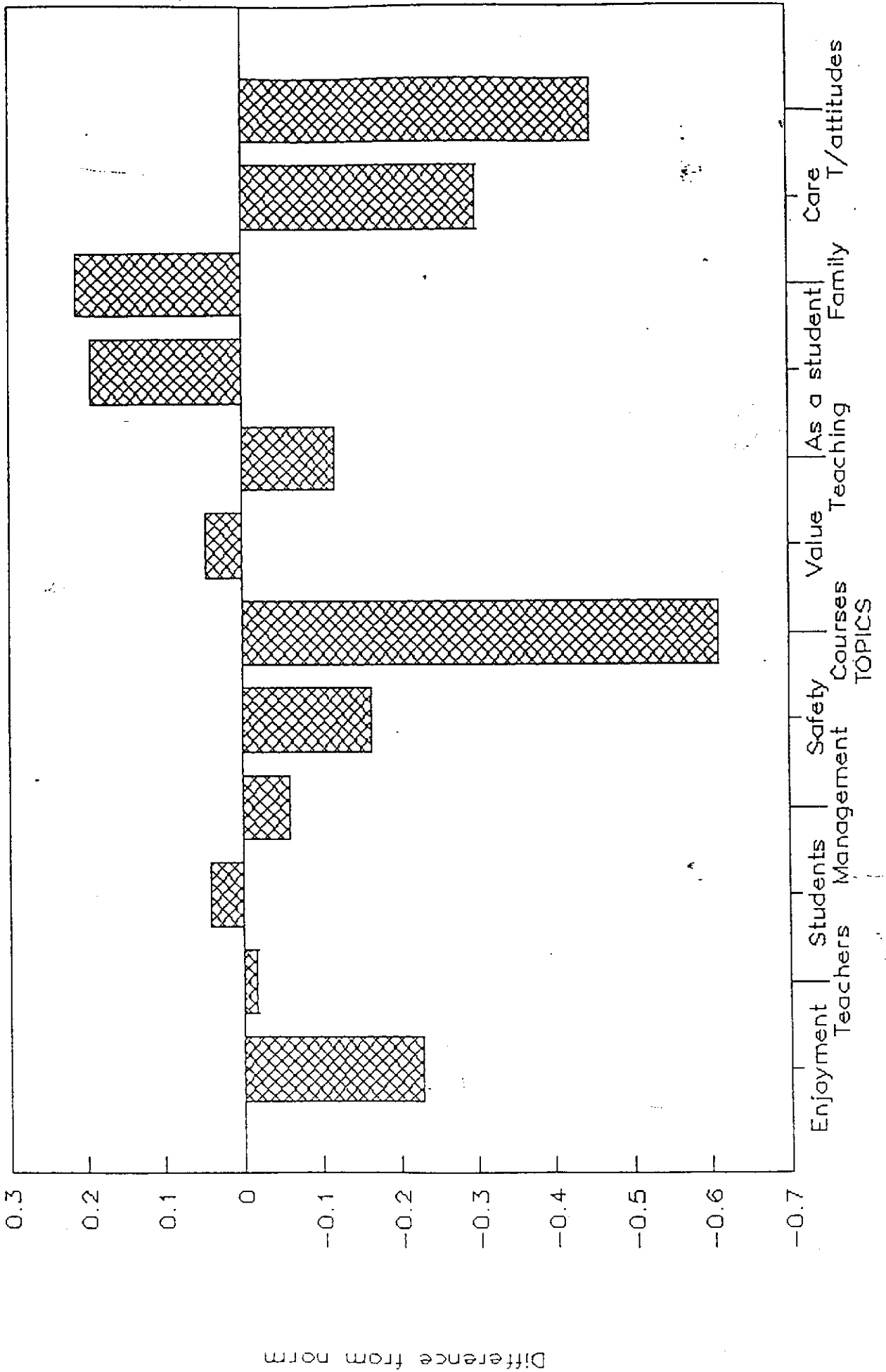
The point of the survey is that responses are compared with an extensive data base which provides "norms". All Aboriginal students at Kwinana SHS voluntarily participated in the survey in term 4 of 1997.

The detailed results are given below in Appendix Ten. In fact they are easily summarized, and some useful conclusions may be drawn. The following graphs state the results for each group. The degree of conformity is remarkable.



# DIFFERENCES FROM THE NORM

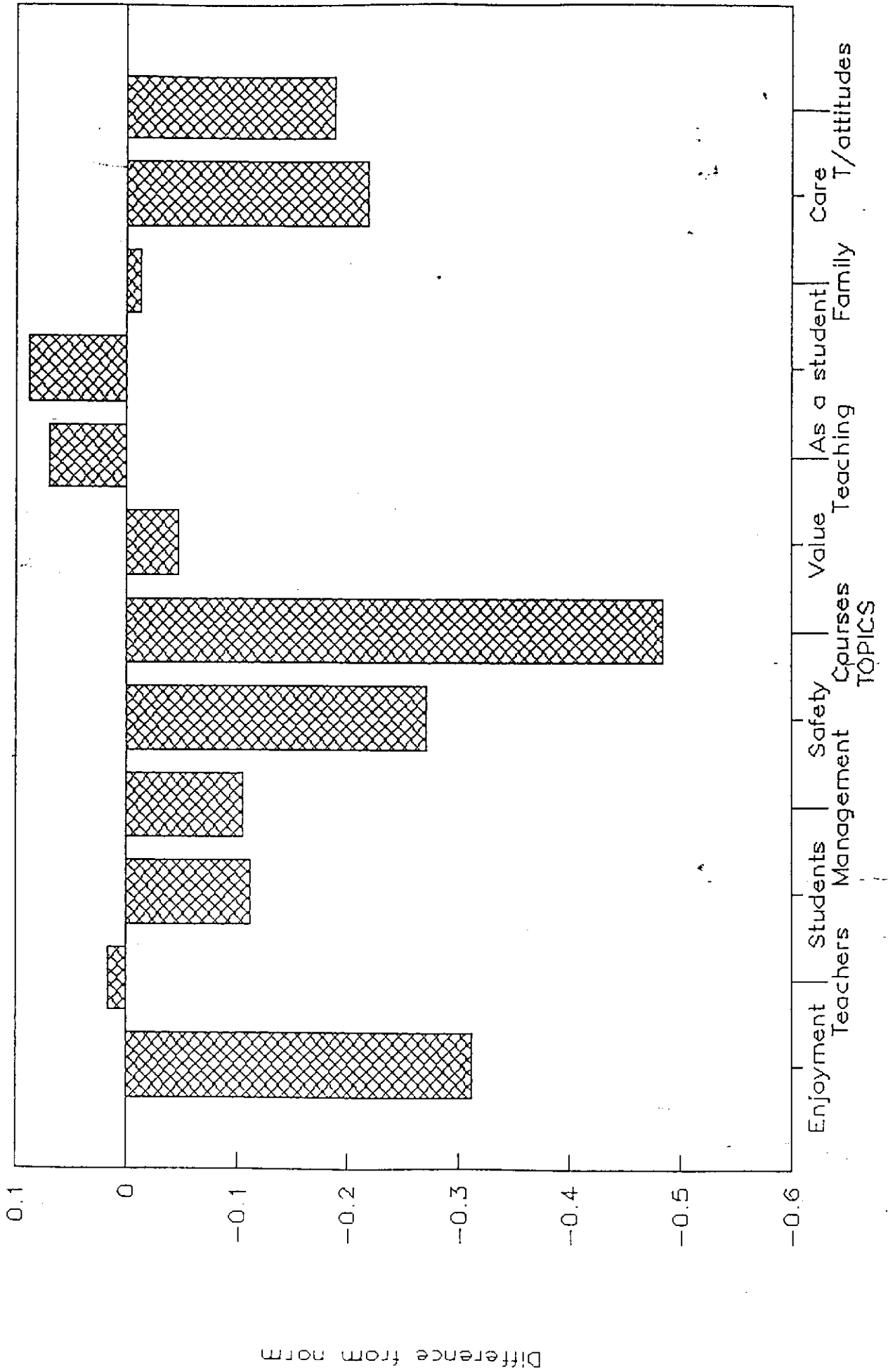
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Difference from norm

# DIFFERENCES FROM THE NORM

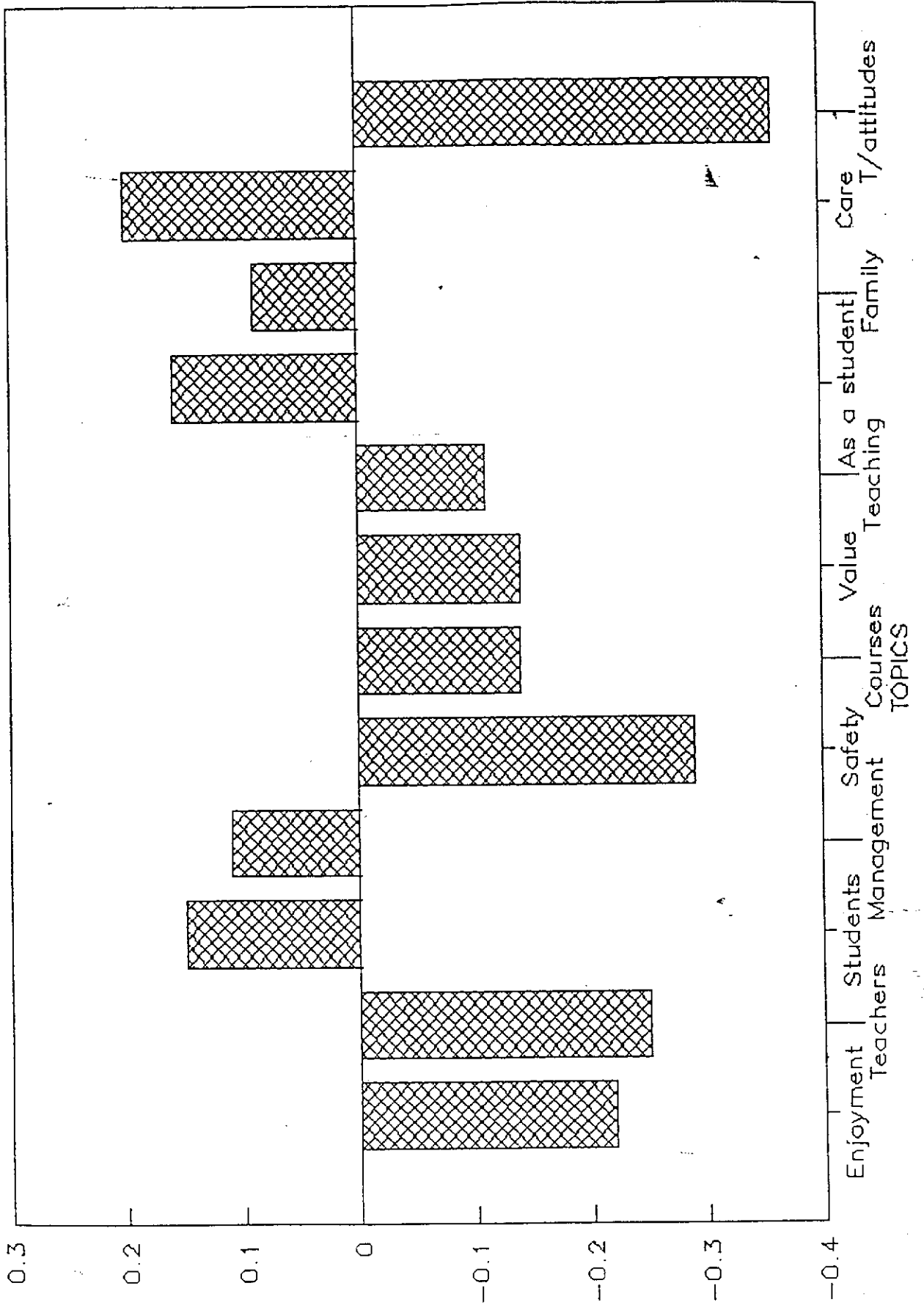
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Difference from norm

# DIFFERENCES FROM THE NORM

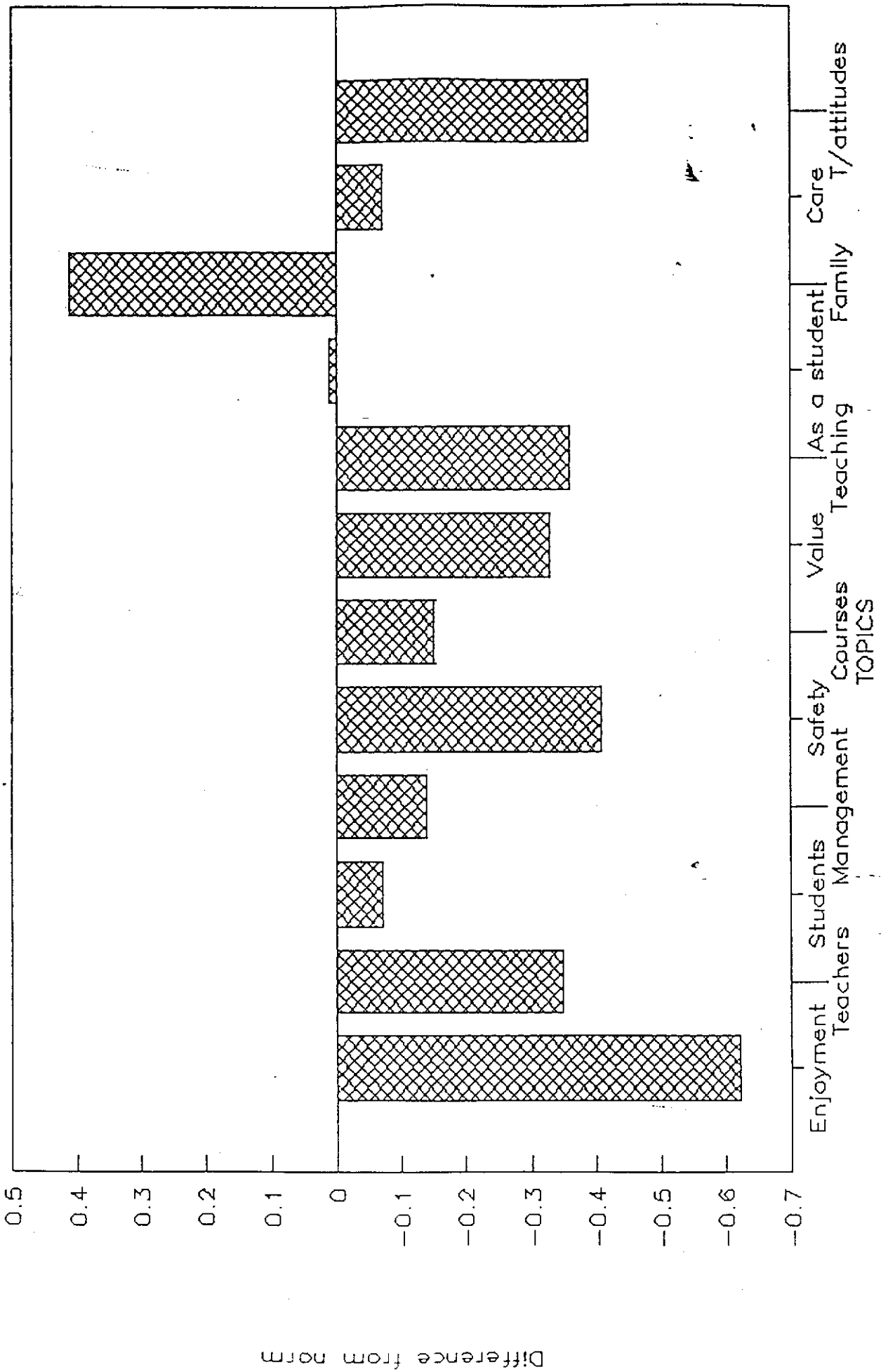
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# DIFFERENCES FROM THE NORM

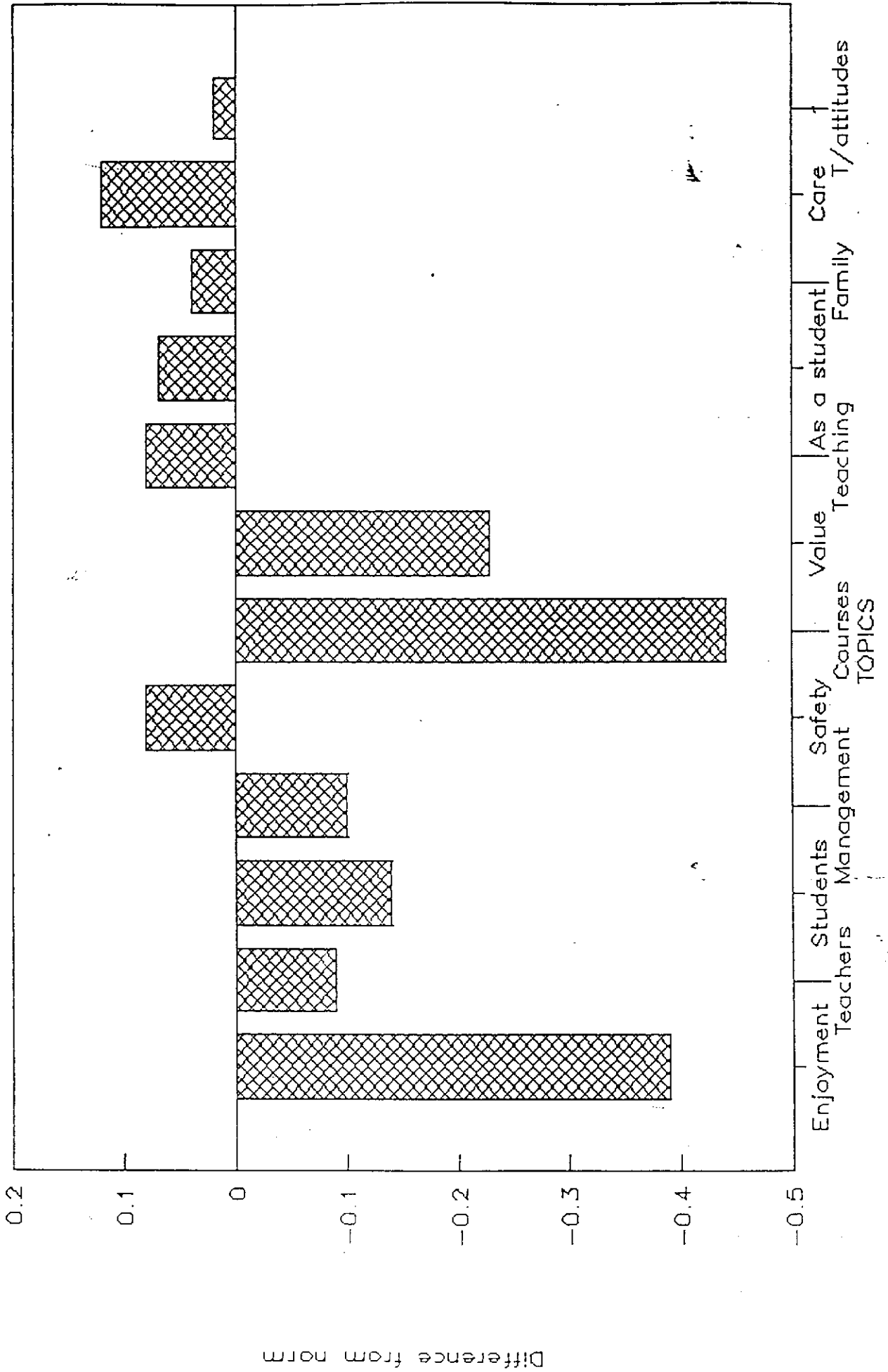
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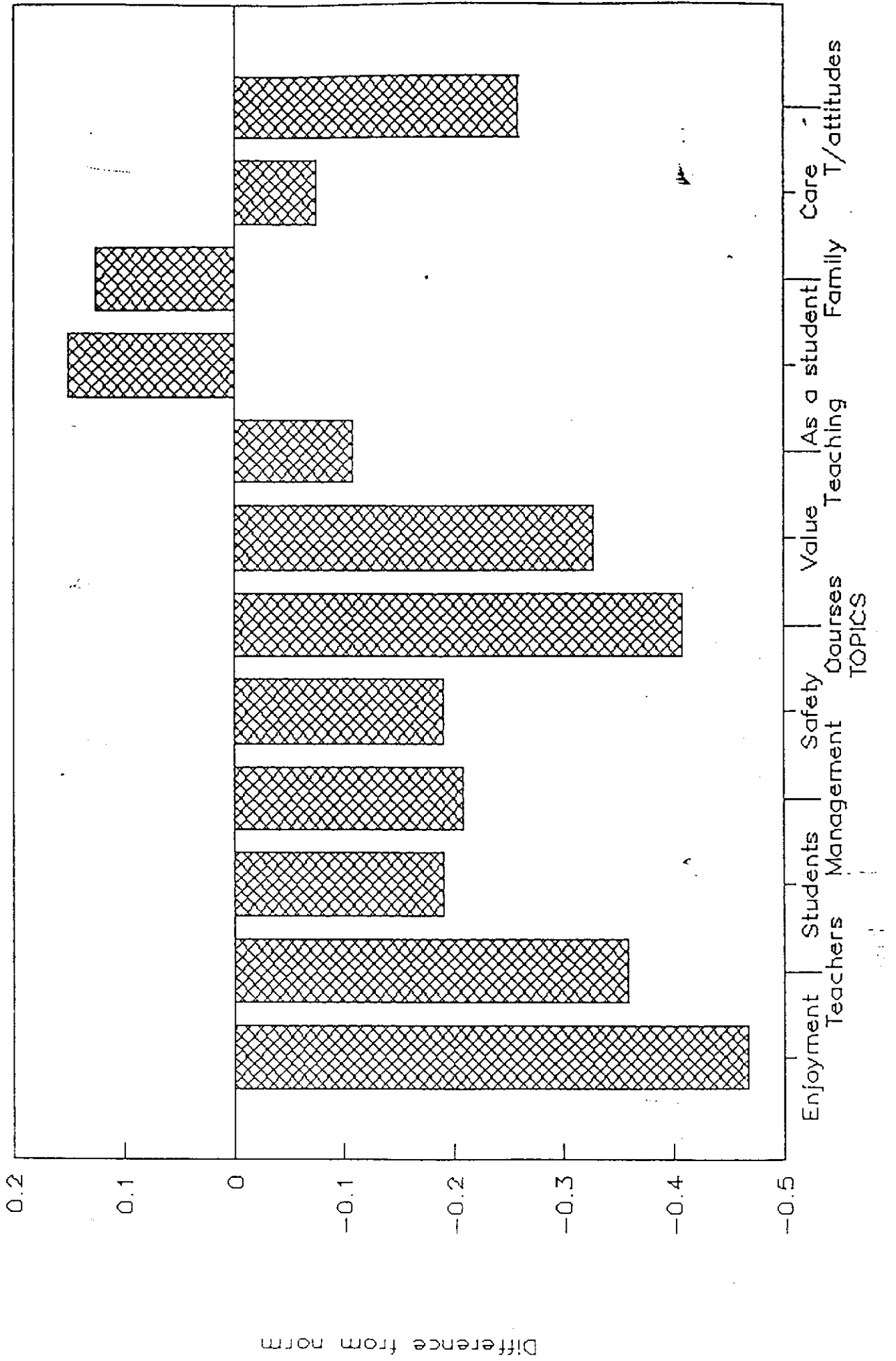
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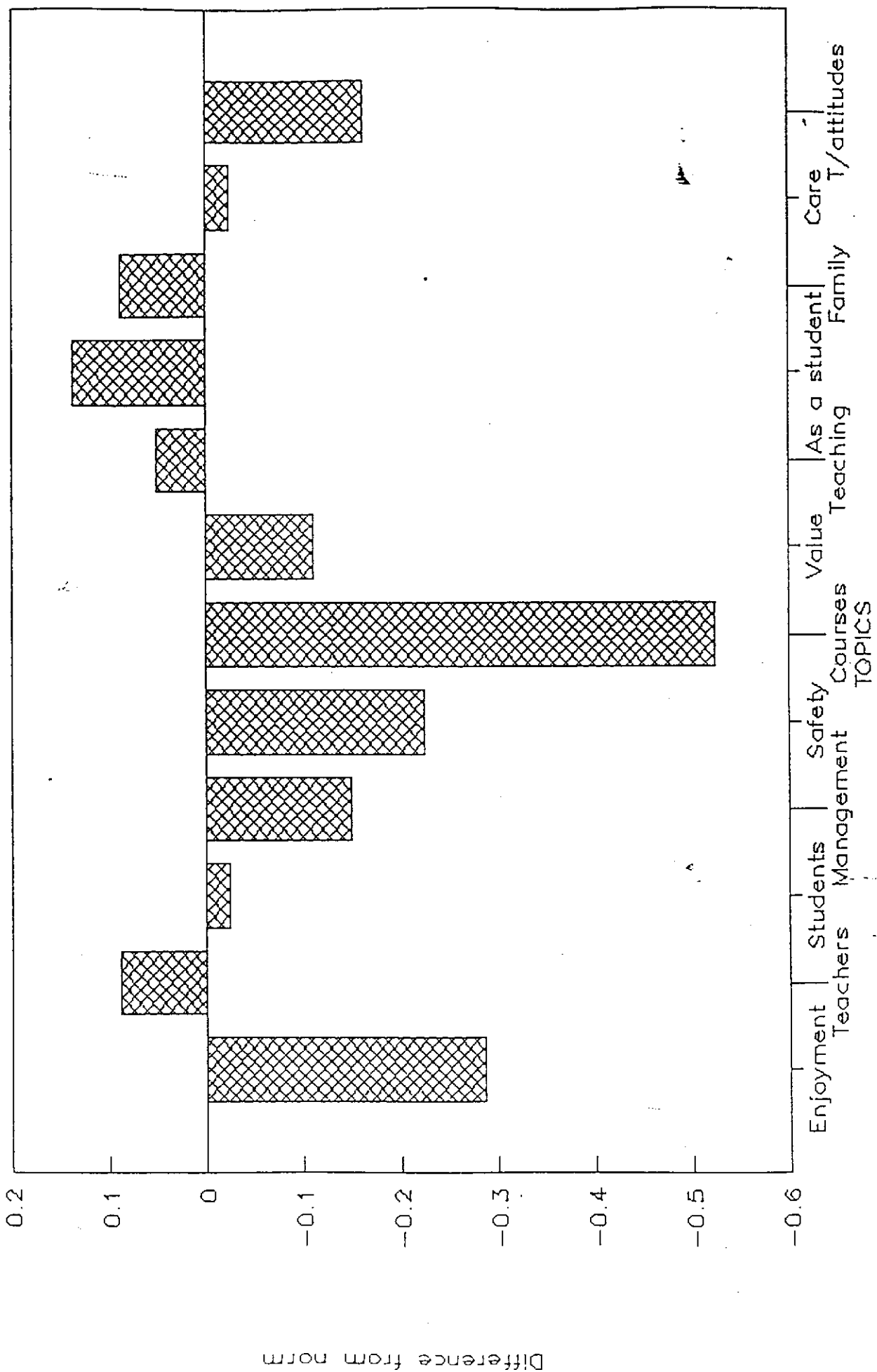
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# DIFFERENCES FROM THE NORM

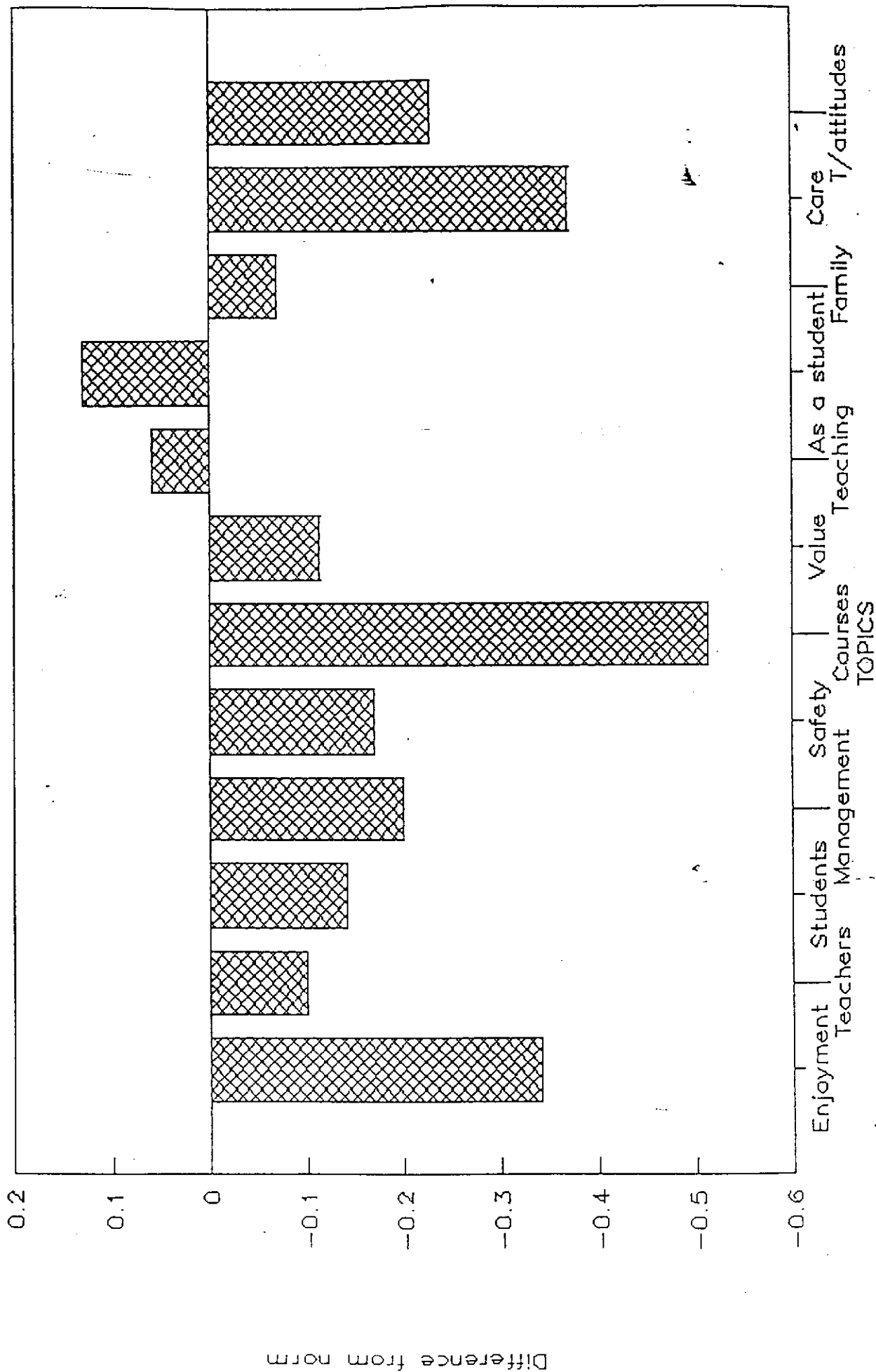
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Difference from norm

# DIFFERENCES FROM THE NORM

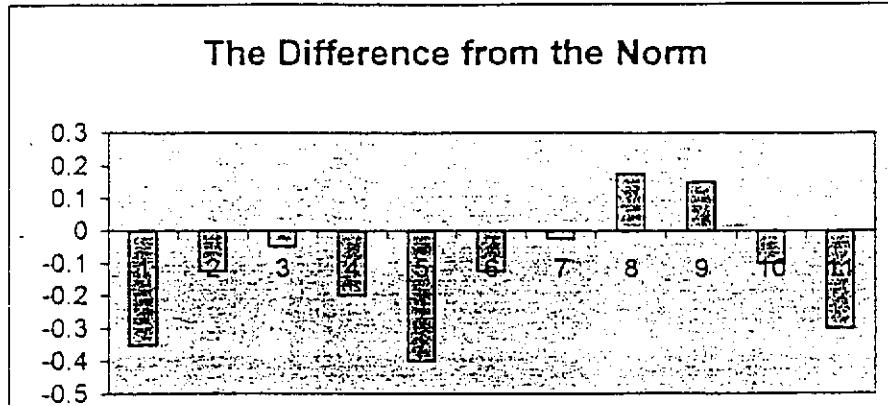
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Difference from norm



There is variation in these results, notably in the degree of negative weighting with regard to teachers, fellow students, school management and pastoral care. However, these variations do not significantly affect the general pattern. The following graph averages the eight graphs already depicted:-



Toward the end of Appendix Eight which details these results are further useful frequency charts showing how all the year groups answered each of the questions.

Towards the end of the Appendix Thirteen graphs detailing these results can be found further useful frequency charts showing how all the classes answered each of the questions.

It is clear that the students' surveyed do score significantly lower than the norms in the three areas of school enjoyment, perceived relevancy of course and perceived teacher attitudes.

In addition to this there are negative views of their own attitude to teachers, to school management, to their perception of personal safety at school, to the value of education and, to a lesser degree, pastoral care. Only in two areas do the students show above norm averages, in the perception of themselves as students and of family attitude to school.

The first conclusion I would draw is that where there is overlap these results confirm the validity of the interviews reported in section one. While it is possible that these results are not specifically "Aboriginal", since they might simply reflect Kwinana conditions, we can say that this sample of Aboriginal students enjoy school less, have a lower opinion of their courses and of their teachers' attitudes than the norms projected by Easy Mark.

A second conclusion would be that the positive results with regard to self-viewing and family attitude provide some ground for hope. It should be clear that the negative factors reported here are to use a term touched on earlier, "in-school" problems. The suggestion would seem to be that "answers" should be "in-school" too.

### Summary

The two methods of “survey” and “interview” which I used both indicated that my Aboriginal students were generally not enjoying school. There were mitigating factors in that:-

- a) some teachers were perceived as kind
- b) and through “the Cottage” some attention was felt to be being paid to Aboriginal needs.

Nevertheless, negative teacher attitudes, which I have termed racist, and poor relevance of course material were felt to contribute strongly to dissatisfaction as well as disaffection.

## Chapter Nine

### Conclusions

Thus far I have pointed the reader towards an understanding of our practice at Kwinana SHS. Additionally, I have attempted to draw some possible conclusions from my work and subsequent research. I have outlined my methodology and provided a background of reading with regard to Aboriginal Education, discussing also the questions of truancy. I have endeavoured to highlight some of the ways prejudiced racial attitudes manifest themselves, a focus which the chapter on teacher attitudes amply indicates. It is hoped the reader has received a picture of how, firstly, inroads were made into the initial truancy problem, and then, secondly, including an account of our methods with the presentation of Aboriginal Studies, how my Aboriginal students were incorporated into mainstream school. I shall expand and clarify this picture somewhat in this last chapter, but mainly, I shall complete the story, picking up chronologically from the point towards the end of 1995 at which I interposed into the text the 2 surveys. The reading will prove satisfactory to anyone who would want to build upon our initial success.

Late in 1995 the many [75] Aboriginal students who were attending school instead of truanting were all actively involved in mainstream classes. This meant 4 hours per week of Aboriginal Studies taught by myself or another of the Society and Environment teachers, and in as many other classes as possible I would attend, taking care to maximize my contact. There was also the Cottage. Each morning when I arrived at school I would find a group of students clamoring to enter, whether to play computer games or chat with friends. There were also outings. There was a feeling that it was good to be at school, at least some of the time. I had become something of an intimate; certainly I had an active "pastoral" role, since many of the students would privately discuss their problems with me, and in some respects I was a groupleader, not just an "authority figure"; furthermore I had met and even visited the homes of very many of the parents/carers.

I felt myself to be in a privileged position, and with a fairly unique insight into the quandary in which the Aboriginal people felt themselves to be. On the one hand the older Aboriginals believed that the only hope for their children for the future, was for them to obtain jobs and therefore avoid the dead end of current urban Aboriginal life, lay in education; and on the other hand they were suspicious, distrustful as to what their children's lot would be at school, as well as having the above

mentioned resistance to what is sometimes termed the “invasive” culture and its proponents efforts to “help” (impose). For somebody to be making an effort to help and actually be providing, perhaps, something of a resolution to their dilemma would put that person on the end of plentiful good-will. I was often referred to as the good wadjala.

In school there were causes for satisfaction. In my classes discipline was good. There were a variety of means of maintaining order, centring chiefly on the sense of respect I took care to foster; expressions of disappointment on my part were often sufficient to shame recalcitrants into reason; appeals to a sense of communal responsibility, that “we” wish to be well thought of, as well as carefully worded suggestions as to the advisability of pleasing the authorities currently supporting the Cottage and occasional camps and outings, these alike served their turn. The students, then, were attending school, behaving “well”; and, therefore, with the proviso that they not be faced with hostile teachers, an eventuality I was often able to prevent, they were, within reasonable parameters learning. It should be noted that these parameters could be rather limited, particularly in Maths, where the Aboriginals were often congregated in the weakest classes. For myself I was generally pleased with the way the curriculum in Aboriginal Studies was working both with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. The school was pleased to be able to report to EDWA its achievements. The issue of Aboriginal truancy was being addressed successfully. I was enjoying my contacts with the Aboriginal students and was generally looking forward to 1996.

There were negatives too. I had invested a great deal of energy in “my” Aboriginal students, and at the end of the year I was tired. I was also concerned that perhaps simply too much responsibility was devolving upon me; the load was being spread where ever possible, but I was identified with “the Aboriginal cause” to an extent I felt might be unhelpful, certainly in a way I found at times claustrophobic, since I was not sure I had a life-time vocation to Aboriginal Education. Furthermore, this identification placed me squarely in the “firing-line” so far as some of my teacher “colleagues” were concerned, leading at times to considerable stress. I did not wish the strategy of Aboriginal Education to depend overly on one person, or to be seen as focussed on one subject (Aboriginal Studies), but to be a whole school effort, a community project. For this reason I proposed to the senior staff of the school that the money allocated to the post I occupied as Co-ordinator of Aboriginal Education be used to fund two staff members, myself and another, sharing the responsibility equally and using the half of our time not specifically apportioned to the Aboriginal students in the traditional role for mainstream teacher, which could be made to fit well with their needs, without prejudicing the interests of non-Aboriginals. The school acceded to this

and Abraham Kassab was to join me at the start of 1996. I knew Abraham as we had taught together at Kwinana SHS during my first year there in 1994.

Abraham is of Lebanese origin and had been forced to leave his country at the age of 7 as a refugee, some of his immediate family having been killed. It's interesting to note that I have a Jewish background, at any rate we both easily identified with the needy minority Aboriginal group, and set to work. EDWA was still officially funding the Cottage as being for Aboriginal students; however, senior school staff decided at the end of 1995 that it should not be so used. It was therefore no longer an available physical focus. This however did not initially seem to matter; the students liked Abraham and having two members of staff on whom they could rely was an improvement. We could be approached in the corridors, outside, anywhere in the school for advice. We were an adequate focus, and the important Aboriginal group identity was maintained, without the physical meeting place. Prior to 1995 fighting between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students was a daily occurrence, this had stopped, and the non violence continued throughout 1996; for the first time ever at Kwinana SHS the school games day was "mixed" in 1995, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, and this was repeated at the Athletics Carnival of 1996. Each week I taught 2 "normal" classes ie, 8 lessons and 3 Aboriginal Studies classes ie, Aboriginal Studies for 12 lessons; Abraham had 3 "normal" and 2 Aboriginal Studies classes. Abraham also took a "homework" class, which was supposed to be a time for supervised homework but since the students rarely had homework, proved a good opportunity for "pastoral" care. I continued to work closely with the Aboriginal parents. In the whole the gains made in 1995 were maintained, consolidated and perhaps even accentuated.

Towards the end of 1996 senior staff took the decision that the Aboriginal problem had been "solved". Perhaps from their point of view it had; favorable reports could be made to EDWA and CV's could be upgraded. Further decisions flowed; not only was the Cottage not going to be used for Aboriginal students, its specified use, it would be used for another course. (In fact a Hospitality and Tourism course for upper-school students was programmed to operate in 1997). This was a relatively minor flouting of funding usage; it was also made clear that the money used to finance Abraham's and my post would no longer be so used. Our roles of structured, paid responsibility for Aboriginal students were terminated. I fought this decision with senior staff, and through a fraught and divided teachers' meeting, but the decision was made. That was it, suddenly, and, as I believe, not perhaps even legally!

I returned to school in 1997 as an "ordinary" teacher with no specific responsibility for Aboriginal students. My understanding is that the school continued to receive funding from EDWA

specifically for someone to have that responsibility. The money, however was diverted to fund a largely administrative post wholly unrelated to Aboriginal Education. Senior staff told me “We’ll keep this [post of Aboriginal Education Co-ordinator] up our sleeve”.

Be that as it may, in 1997 no-one was formally responsible for the Aboriginal students. The effects were immediate; firstly on the students psychology. They could not understand why they no longer had the care they had come to appreciate. I could not alleviate their disappointment and I could not officially contact the parents, whom I simply stopped seeing. Student disappointment and confusion soon produced anger. The fighting which had disappeared in 1995 and 1996 broke out again. I was no longer able to select which classes Aboriginal students could be in, and increasingly they were again confronted with hostile teachers, and with no one to help them. Furthermore, whereas in 1996 all Social Studies classes had run Aboriginal Studies courses, fulfilling EDWA edicts, in 1997 only half of them did; the focus we were told “will move on” to Indian Ocean and Asian Studies. This produced further real disappointment for some Aboriginal students. Selective truancy began to be rather common; class registers would show attendance perhaps at classes 1,2 and 5 but not 3 and 4. There was a clear pattern evident to me; it was the classes with teachers I knew to be hostile that were “wagged”. Things continued to deteriorate and wholesale truancy became increasingly prevalent. By the end of the year regular attendance had fallen from 75 to 32. This was still much higher than 1994, there was still evidence of gain, but it was hard to see even this being maintained.

It was not always easy to view events objectively, but I could at least see that the decline supported the conclusions I had by now reached. What had I learnt?

1. Where there was real care and understanding the Aboriginal community and students in particular responded actively and warmly. They wanted education and would receive proffered help.
2. The inclusion of Aboriginal Studies in the school curriculum certainly helped the Aboriginal students find interest at school and to integrate successfully.
3. That practical racism, that is to neglect, a lack of will to help, becoming at times overt hostility (it will be understood that in this thesis I have scarcely more than hinted at the things I have heard) almost a norm, preventing and sometimes opposing positive action, even among senior staff. If I were to report some of the things one senior staff member said to me, any reader’s credulity would be stretched.

Within the parameters which I was operating as Co-ordinator of Aboriginal Education and as a teacher and curriculum author of Aboriginal Studies it is hoped that my legitimate conclusions have emerged fairly clearly. There is cause for hope for Aboriginal Education in light of the helpful initiative suggested by for example, the Beazley Report and the practical steps taken by EDWA, funding, and for example, our work at Kwinana SHS, if only these can consistently find support in the field. However, in closing I wish to step outside my own area and suggest what seems to me the most important unaddressed issue, that of course, or subject relevance.

It will be remembered how low the Aboriginal students scored in the Easy Mark survey in this area, and also some of the disillusioned comments by teachers. Is there an answer to this problem? Well, there is an obvious proposal.

Aboriginal students consistently perform poorly in the areas of Maths and Science, perhaps because they are not culturally prepared to think in a logical way. However, in all practical areas, including "Art", in my experience, most of them show a natural ability. I have repeatedly heard suggestions that "we want to learn things that will get us a job" so the question arises as to why provision is not made for increased focus on practical training.

At Kwinana SHS the following system obtains.

Of 20 lessons per week designated classtime, 16 are spent on the four compulsory core areas, including 4 on Maths and 4 on Science. The remaining 4 lessons are termed the "options". The options are Manual Arts ie, woodwork, mechanics and metal work; Art and Drama, Home Economics ie cooking and Physical Education.

Almost invariably the way the system works tends to militate against the Aboriginal students. A small matter to begin with – a fee of \$45 per semester - needs to be paid before options classes may be attended. This is a school policy which I understand is a fairly normal practice. More importantly, some of the key teachers at Kwinana SHS in these departments were amongst the least sympathetic to Aboriginals (there were exceptions). This is particularly important in options classes, because the moment there is over-subscription for a course the teacher chooses who will be admitted, and very often, for whatever reasons, the teachers do not want the Aboriginals. That is to say they actively attempt to reject them. Furthermore, the teachers tend to take advantage of any opportunity to exclude the Aboriginals once present in class, and they are presented with such opportunities by virtue of typically Aboriginal "faults" (which I believe to be cultural) of time keeping, slackness with regard to the dress code, forgetfulness of classroom materials. For me this

is well illustrated by reference to cookery classes. Students were expected to bring suitable cooking dishes to their classes; were they to forget, despite there being literally cupboards full of suitable crockery, they would be dismissed from the class (I took to keeping a small supply of ice-cream containers plastic trays, etc. in an attempt to remedy this). The set up then meant that only 4 of 20 lessons per week were devoted to the subjects for which the Aboriginal students showed most affinity and most particular desire to study, and as we have seen, they often tended to be excluded from these classes. We worked hard in the areas of “pastoral” care liaising with parents, provision of Aboriginal Studies courses and “Aboriginalizing” other classes, with some success as has been indicated. The evidence suggests that the programmes we introduced were at best merely helpful; the key to success was personal care for the Aboriginal students. Racism is the foundationally negative factor, not course relevance. However, the area I would like to see addressed in conjunction with the pastoral aspect is this of course relevance. If Aboriginal students are failing in an area like Maths does it mean they are poor students or that they are being taught in irrelevant ways? Perhaps there is a research question here, but it seem obvious to me that Maths should be taught in contexts that make it relevant, and that students should be learning skills that fit them for employment. It may well be that urban Aboriginals are much less unwilling to positively engage non-Aboriginal society than many Australian people believe, if given a chance; they would learn the Maths if it was helping them be successful mechanics.

In conclusion then: - my experience at Kwinana SHS, both positive in terms of the obvious success enjoyed for 1995 and 1996 and negative in terms of events after financial and administrative support was withdrawn points consistently in one direction, that Aboriginal students responded strongly to care and attention when it was personal and genuine, but that, even in the presence of political will, on the ground, practically, the will to help these students was transitory and weak. It remains to be seen if the gains made will all be lost; its hard to know how important Aboriginal Studies can be, indeed, I can only with accuracy report that a programme of Aboriginal Studies served a useful function in integrating Aboriginal students into mainstream classes. I can say this, that much greater attention needs to be paid to the needs of this group of people; dedicated work can greatly improve the lot of Aboriginal students, and I believe, thereby improve in a disproportionate way the life of our schools. The racial attitudes of many teachers present a substantial barrier, for this to come down perhaps teacher education can help, but within the urban setting the Aboriginal people need to be equipped to help themselves to climb out of the “cycle of disadvantage” into which some of the teachers help lock them! It is a duty and a privilege to do this.



## AFTERWORD

Perhaps inevitably this is not the thesis which I had anticipated writing.<sup>166</sup> In order to satisfy the academic requirements for the degree of Masters in Education a prescribed format has to be more or less adhered to. Moreover, my thesis has been substantially revised and rewritten to satisfy the concerns and criticisms of an examiner. I hope that my efforts will meet with approval!

I am now teaching at Karratha SHS in the Pilbara. My new students and I keenly await the arrival of a large group of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students who are due to make the long journey to the North-West at the beginning of August. It will be good to catch up with many old friends.

Although my thesis has been in part an ethnographic study it occurs to this researcher that my thesis has been, to some degree at least, a biography of sorts.

You can define a net in one of two ways, depending on your point of view. Normally, you would say that it is a meshed instrument designed to catch fish. But you could, with no great injury to logic, reverse the image and define a net as a jocular lexicographer once did: he called it a collection of holes tied together with string.

You can do the same with biography. The trawling net fills, then the biographer hauls it in. sorts, throws it back, stores, fillets and sells. Yet consider what he doesn't catch: there is always far more of that. The biography stands, fat and worthy – burgherish on the shelf, boastful and sedate: a shilling life will give you all the facts and a ten pound one all the hypotheses as well.

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<sup>166</sup> See Appendix Eleven.

But think of everything that got away, that fled  
with the last deathbed exhalation of the biographee.  
What chance would the craftiest biographer stand  
Against the subject who saw him coming and decided  
to amuse himself.<sup>167</sup>

July 1999.

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### Appendices

1. Letters of support for the study from Curtin University of Technology; Medina Aboriginal Cultural Group; Kwinana Youth Services, Town of Kwinana; Aboriginal Liaison Officer, Cockburn District Education Office; Reconciliation Council, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet; Aboriginal Education Worker, Kwinana Senior High School; Community Health Worker, Town of Kwinana; Kwinana Senior High School. (9 pieces).
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**Appendix One**

**Note: For copyright reasons the content of Appendix One has not been reproduced**

**(Co-ordinator, ADT Project (Retrospective), Curtin University of Technology, 14.11.02)**

## **Appendix Two**

Catholic Education Commission of Western Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy Statement, 1994

**Note: For copyright reasons the content of Appendix Two has not been reproduced**

**(Co-ordinator, ADT Project (Retrospective), Curtin University of Technology, 14.11.02)**

## APPENDIX THREE

### COCKBURN WORKSHOP REPORT

The workshop group consisted of 45 people. I wish to emphasise that the ideas/issues recorded in this section are not my own, although I do agree with some of them. The notes reproduced here are, more or less, how I recorded them during the various sessions.

#### **Pre-primary**

##### Strategies

- Home groups – integration
- Parent involvement
- Small groups – emotional and social support
- Cultural familiarity
- Aboriginal children and parents together in group[s]
- Encourage a move towards diversity of Aboriginality
- Accept differences – positive discrimination
- Bus to collect children and parents
- Car pooling
- Positive role models
- Meet in morning – attendance easier
- Separate home groups for 4 and 5 year olds
- A.M. meetings for Aboriginals only
- P.M. meetings for everyone together
- All play together
- Identify Nyungar work – use Nyungar resources
- Eat together
- Fathers' night planned

### Results as identified by the group

- Parent contact and support at school increased
- All happier, easier, children and parents settling in quicker
- Fathers becoming involved
- Children attending more
- Home groups expanded to include extended families/friends
- Acknowledgement of different learning styles
- Staff much more positive
- Increased cohesion amongst staff
- Aboriginal parents on management committee

### **Primary One**

#### Strategies

- Homework classes
- 4 teachers + AEW
- parent as supervisor
- afternoon tea by children for parents
- sports carnival
- Aboriginal parents team
- Mixed parents team
- Sporting demonstrations by well known personalities, parents etc.
- Parents and students teams
- Be flexible with time
- Siblings can come to school in school time and for homework classes
- Support teacher/aide in class – to support students and teacher
- Early identification of literacy and numeracy problems
- Support strategies for teachers

### Results as identified by the group

- General/ overall improvement in attendance and participation.

## **Primary Two**

“Why do Aboriginal students have such difficulties with the schooling system from about Year 5 onwards”?

- The Aboriginal child is reared differently from European/Asian children
- Family background different
- Expectations of the school of the learner are at odds with home environment of Aboriginal children
- By 12 years of age Aboriginal child is at the level of independence of a 16 or 17 year old non-Aboriginal student
- The Aboriginal social structure has suffered/been damaged under competition from the Euro-Australian dominant culture
- Rigid laws governing Aboriginal adults are largely irrelevant to Aboriginal people in most communities
- The non-Aboriginal community is in a process of adapting to new social structures and formulating/coming to terms with these is extremely difficult for many given the rate of change in Euro-culture itself. The difficulty the wider community is experiencing is mirrored in Aboriginal difficulties – ie) the dismantling of Aboriginal culture has its equivalent). Result = confusion.
- Influence on and destruction of both Aboriginal and Euro-culture by criminal sub-culture based upon sale and distribution of illegal substances is having a huge impact at street level and of course in our schools.
- Conventional classrooms inappropriate
- Lack of alternative learning environment
- Teachers lack adequate training-beginning teachers unprepared
- Lack of on going professional development
- Teachers lack flexibility
- Lack of appropriate resources

### “What can be done in the classroom?”

- Teachers change bad habits – (these were not identified).
- Teachers develop new strategies
- Develop appropriate resources
- Establish a dual system of rewards and consequences
- No individual rewards – reward the group
- Clear instructions, establish rules; children must clearly understand what will occur in the event of meritorious achievement or transgression
- Rights of the group are more important than the freedom of the individual to do as he/she pleases
- A school policy be developed to support the teacher
- Accept that some students do not belong in a conventional classroom and must be catered for in other ways
- The authoritarian approach in middle and upper primary school classrooms is still fairly widespread and can not cope with an Aboriginal student who finds him/herself at odds with it
- A co-operative low-key approach is better method but it does not suit all students
- Young and inexperienced teachers coming into schools with significant populations of Aboriginal students have frequently had little or no contact with the Aboriginal community. Teacher Training Institutions often focus all the attention upon the Traditional Aboriginal Community and concentrate upon the ‘differences’ between Aboriginal Culture and the Euro-Australian culture. Thus trainees are told
  - a) Let Aboriginal students go to the toilet without permission whenever they choose to go.
  - b) Don’t expect Aboriginal students to sit still in their desks.
  - c) Answer any question immediately and do not insist upon the Aboriginal student putting up his/her hand and or quietly approaching the teacher with their request.

These are a few examples that were related, some group members pointed out that the motive of altering the trainee teacher to cultural differences is commendable but in reality to adhere to such practices, treating them as ‘gospel’, is patently ridiculous and only adds to the Aboriginal child’s difficulties in a classroom.



It was reported to me by one primary school teacher at the workshop that Aboriginal teachers in a traditional area like Groote Eylandt (Angrurugu Primary School) do not allow such license. There the focus was very much upon one-to-one, or one-to-five grouped instruction where the teacher demonstrates – the child observes. The teacher demonstrates – the child does one step and the teacher finishes the task. The teacher demonstrates – the student performs two operations etc.

The workshop concluded that:

- The school and the teacher need to make the effort to meet with the Aboriginal child's parents or caregivers (frequently the grandparents). Home visits are a good idea and accompanying the A.E.W. a very good idea. Naturally, teachers are reluctant to do these things but despite the tricky situations that may develop from time to time the effort is well worth while. With the community links between families disappearing the school unfortunately (for this involves time, energy and risk factors as well as stretching even more limited resources) needs to attempt to bridge the communication gap more than was necessary twenty years ago.

Some helpful hints from Primary Two identified by myself and some other workshop participants

- Education is the child's only hope to establish a better set of circumstances for himself/herself. This especially applies to the Aboriginal child (as with all children). The school needs to identify what Aboriginal students are good at and build on these successes to improve all round performance.
- Speak quietly even when chiding an erring child. Shouting is bad manners in Aboriginal society. Vital points do not need loud words. Frequently the child justifies himself to his parents on the score that the teacher over-reacted to his transgression.
- Be consistent. Neither let anyone off nor reward excessively.

- Concentrate upon group achievement. Emphasise the group's great effort. Notice individual achievement quietly later. Try not to single anyone out too much for good or ill.
- Ask for help when you need it. Find out all the agencies that can assist.
- Do not run away from a problem nor pretend things are well when patently they are not
- Though difficult to train children for and time consuming to set up, informal lessons work in many situations
- When in doubt a traditional set pattern is a great starting point in the operation of a classroom. Aboriginal instruction should be carried out with intense concentration at key times and a lot of informality much of the time. This does not mean 'riot'. Have a lot of games and activities for children to do. A listening post with a collection of appropriate tales and stories works well.
- The children have a large diet of videos at home in virtually every case thus the school need not replicate this as a reward. Make rewards active. Something to do/somewhere to go/something to make or cook.
- Be firm but fair. There must be a line of formality between the teacher and the student else how will you correct, guide and assist?
- Though not always practical try to work 'outside' the four walls of the classroom. The density of children to available space is incredibly high in primary school. One wonders that anyone learns anything at all in such a pressure cooker. A lot of drill and formal tasks (spelling, reading) can occur outside the four walls. Informal "outside" classroom areas (with shade) can be set up and work well.

## **Secondary**

### Strategies

- Seek out "the right people" – gain knowledge and understanding of students
- Build on local community knowledge
- Adopt an inclusive practice, eg. Designing emblems
- Adapt curriculum
- Design appropriate curriculum – develop new curriculum strategies

- Take issues back to the local community
- Initiate discussions with parents
- Question appropriateness of school policies
- Be prepared to drop or introduce policies
- Communication – essential at all levels
- Acknowledge difficulties re coming to school – “missed the bus”, it’s a good day to do other things rather than come to school
- Use visuals that are used in the community e.g. graphs
- Adapt information –easier access to learning
- Teachers as learners. Students to assist – especially in Aboriginal Studies
- Transition strategies to ensure students are ready for next class and known subject and classroom destination
- Staffing flexibility. User friendly teachers to teach Aboriginal students
- Team teaching
- AEW to be present in class
- Policy and practice should match
- Implement critical improvements
- Advocacy and behaviour
- Inappropriateness of MSB (managing student behaviour) policies
- Remember the 3 Rs – Reconciliation, Respect, Relationships

ALO – “good things are happening”

#### Good things

- NAIDOC (National Aboriginal and Islander Day of Celebration)
- Parent involvement
- Positive role models are present in school and are being invited to school
- Self-esteem has been raised
- AEWs more actively involved
- AEW’ more accepted by teaching staff

- Students increasingly involved in Aboriginal Week and Aboriginal Studies programmes
- Teachers of Aboriginal Studies increasingly willing bring Aboriginal speakers into the classroom
- Excursions are rewards and as part of the learning experience
- Home visits by AEWs and Aboriginal education teachers
- Barriers being broken down by good will
- Many ASSPA groups established
- Principals – flexible – therefore staff more flexible
- Increased ownership and responsibility given and taken by students
- Communication with parents improving – “getting to know your students”
- Challenge matches; sporting; inter-school carnivals; increased Aboriginal involvement at sports carnivals
- Aboriginal artist in residence

#### Bad things

- “Running” too fast – not developed appropriately
- Lack of professional interest. Staff not attending professional development sessions.
- Resistant to change. Lack of flexibility amongst some key staff members
- The Education System. Unprepared to try innovative ideas
- Not prepared to be fair
- Teachers and Aboriginal vying for ownership/power
- Mutual suspicion

**End of Appendix**

**Appendix Four**

## **Kwinana Aboriginal Alternative Learning Centre, December 1992- September 1993<sup>1</sup>**

The Aboriginal Alternative Education Project involved the setting up of a centre on the Kwinana S.H.S. campus but removed from the main teaching area. This allowed the target group, aboriginal students with an educational deficit, to study in an environment in which they felt safe. It also allowed a more flexible approach to the schools attendance procedures.

### **Changes to the programme in 1993**

Kwinana S.H.S. has introduced a five period day with a lunch recess between 1.36 pm and 2.06 pm for 1993. To allow for a continuous programme and allow DOT time for the teacher at the centre formal teaching occurs in the first four periods. Students attending the centre may choose to leave at 2.06 pm however most choose to stay on and complete class work or use the centres other facilities.

The centre has also become a focal point for aboriginals in mainstream classes before school and during both recess breaks. Students spend time catching up on unfinished work, talking or using the various facilities the centre has to offer.

The other main change for 1993 was the funding source for the teachers salary. In 1992 the teacher was funded from Commonwealth funds as a STAR programme while in 1993 funding came from Ministry of Education funds.

### **Student Participation**

During the year 16 children have attended on a regular basis for various periods of time. Unfortunately the itinerant nature of many families has resulted in a constant turnover of students. An example of this was the loss

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<sup>1</sup> The above is an extract from the original which, as with the 1992 report I have left in the original format including grammatical and type written errors.

of four "regulars" at the end of term two due to families moving out of the district.

Currently there are five students officially enrolled, all of whom attend regularly and another five who turn up spasmodically. While not enrolled the later are always welcome and there are positive signs of increasing attendance and improved social development. One has expressed a desire to attend the centre for the rest of the year with the aim of moving back into the mainstream in 1994. Two others claim they will attend regularly as it is a condition of their CRO.

### **Transition into mainstream**

A number of students have made small steps towards moving into mainstream classes. Two girls attempted a part time programme during the later part of 1992 and first term 1993. Unfortunately it was a case of forward and backward steps as on a number of occasions they chose to truant from mainstream classes.

One 15 year old boy requested a move into year 8 in term 1 1993 on the understanding that if he could cope with the work he would progress into year 9 in term 2. His academic achievements were not good but for social reasons he was moved into year 9. Unfortunately some serious behaviour problems have developed with this student which caused injury to other students and as a consequence his position at the school is in doubt.

### **Movement from the mainstream**

Two students have been moved from mainstream classes to the centre. This decision was made because students were not coping with class and as a result becoming non attenders. Their progress and attendance has shown a marked improvement.

### **Social Integration**

The freedom of access of all aboriginal students to the centre before school and during the recess has resulted in students feeling more valued as part of

the school community and has increased participation in all aspects of school.<sup>2</sup>

### **Kwinana Senior High School Aboriginal Learning Centre 1993 Evaluation and Report of STAR Programme<sup>3</sup>**

The Aboriginal Alternative Education Project involved the setting up of a centre on the Kwinana Senior High School campus but removed from the main teaching area. This allowed the target group, aboriginal students with an educational deficit, to study in an environment in which they felt safe. It also allowed a more flexible approach to the schools attendance procedures.

#### **The Programme:**

**Target Group:** Aboriginal students between 12 and 15 years of age who are not attending school and/or experiencing educational difficulties. Some may be experiencing behavioural and social difficulties.

**Purpose and Outcomes:** The program involves the introduction of a remedial course for students who are experiencing educational and learning difficulties.

The purpose of the course is to develop independent learning skills, increase self esteem and increase retention rates to year 12. Emphasis will be placed on language, literacy and numeracy based around cultural and physical activities.

The project aims to:

1. increase the participation of aboriginal students in post compulsory schooling.
2. increase the relevance of secondary schooling to Aboriginal students.
3. increase the literacy and numeracy skills of Aboriginal students.
4. increase the self esteem of aboriginal students.

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<sup>2</sup> This was an interim progress report prepared for the Director of Personnel, Cockburn District Office.

<sup>3</sup> This extract is in its original format taken from the 1993 report on the Kwinana Aboriginal Learning Centre.



5. increase the opportunities for aboriginal students to develop independent work skills, and
6. integrate chronic school refuses back into mainstream schooling.

**Strategies:**

1. Provide a positive work environment which improves the students self esteem and develops independent work skills.
2. Placing students on a self paced program.
3. Develop an interesting and relevant curriculum.
4. Provide information on community resources through visits and participation in their programs.
5. Provide formal support structures to aid transition of students back into main stream programs.

**Criteria for Evaluation:**

The extent to which students:

1. remain for year 11 and 12.
2. attend school regularly.
3. improve their performance on educational assessment programs.
4. perform well on self esteem tests (before and after the program).
5. receive positive feedback from teachers of the mainstream program.
6. display increased participation/commitment to the school, and
7. develop independent learning and working skills.

**Evaluation data:**

Please see the attached statisitcal and evaluation proforma.

**Appendix Five**

### **Changes to the programme in 1993.**

Kwinana S.H.S. has introduced a five period day with a lunch recess between 1.36 pm and 2.06 pm for 1993. To allow for a continuous programme and allow DOT time for the teacher at the centre formal teaching occurs in the first four periods. Students attending the centre may choose to leave at 2.06 pm however most choose to stay on and complete class work or use the centres other facilities.

The centre has also become a focal point for aboriginals in mainstream classes before school and during both recess breaks. Students spend time catching up on unfinished work, talking or using the various facilities the centre has to offer.

The other main change for 1993 was the funding source for the teachers salary. In 1992 the teacher was funded from Commonwealth funds as a STAR programme while in 1993 funding came from MOE funds.

### **Student Participation**

During the year 16 children have attended on a regular basis for various periods of time. Unfortunately the itinerant nature of many families has resulted in a constant turnover of students. An example of this was the loss of four "regulars" at the end of term two due to families moving out of the district.

Currently there are five students officially enrolled, all of whom attend regularly and another five who turn up spasmodically. While not enrolled the later are always welcome and there are positive signs of increasing attendance and improved social development. One has expressed a desire to attend the centre for the rest of the year with the aim of moving back into the mainstream in 1994. Two others claim they will attend regularly as it is a condition of their CRO.

### **Transition into mainstream**

A number of students have made small steps towards moving into mainstream classes. Two girls attempted a part time programme during the later part of 1992 and first term 1993. Unfortunately it was a case of forward and backward steps as on a number of occasions they chose to truant from mainstream classes.

One 15 year old boy requested a move into year 8 in term 1 1993 on the understanding that if he could cope with the work he would progress into year 9 in term 2. His academic achievements were not good but for social reasons he was moved into year 9. Unfortunately some serious behaviour problems have developed with this student which caused injury to other students and as a consequence his position at the school is in doubt.

### **Movement from the mainstream**

Two students have been moved from mainstream classes to the centre. This decision was made because students were not coping with class and as a result becoming non attenders. Their progress and attendance has shown a marked improvement.

### **Social Integration**

The freedom of access of all aboriginal students to the centre before school and during the recess has resulted in students feeling more valued as part of the school community and has increased participation in all aspects of school.

### **Increased Retention Rates**

There is no evidence to indicate that the operation of the program has made any significant contribution to increasing retention rates in years 11 & 12 in the last two years.

## **Analysis of results**

The program caters for the target population with some very positive outcomes for students involved. The program is to an extent a failure in as much as it is only reaching a small number of the potential target population. The program requires an active campaign amongst the local aboriginal community to encourage the target population to attend. If the program continues in 1994 resources will need to be found to mount such a campaign. The Cockburn District office has been approached in relation to using the resources of their Aboriginal Liaison Officer (ALO) to do this.

**Appendix Six**

## **APPENDIX SIX**

### **Recommendations for speaking with Aboriginal parents/guardians and students**

I had learnt that many Aboriginal parents had had negative or frustrating experiences either during their own time as students or as parents and were reluctant to approach the school. The onus was, therefore, on the teacher to initiate contact with parents. The following are some considerations which could be borne, in mind, and may be of value, when approaching Aboriginal parents, based on my experiences at Kwinana.

#### **Speaking with Aboriginal parents**

It would appear from my observations that many/most teachers at Kwinana (and other metropolitan schools) hold negative attitudes towards Aboriginal students and their families. Many teachers have preconceived ideas about the attitudes parents should have towards school and the kinds of support parents should provide. Equally, many teachers are surprised or disappointed at the apparent negative attitudes or lack of support demonstrated by Aboriginal parents. I have to say that the latter has not been my experience. I believe all the parents/guardians of my Aboriginal students wanted their children to come to school. I have observed an acute awareness in the Aboriginal community that education is the only way forward for their young people. The community fully comprehends the equation: school attendance and classroom participation can equal employment and success. However, many Aboriginal parents/guardians believe that schools either hold or even promote racist views and favour non-Aboriginal students in the event of a conflict situation. Teachers' realisation that these unexpected attitudes exist can lead to confusion, resentment, frustration, conflict or a breakdown in communication. A basic understanding of possible reasons for Aboriginal parents/guardians attitudes can be of help to teachers wishing to alter the attitudes and enlist the support of parents in the education of their children.

There are, therefore, many significant reasons for the negative attitudes demonstrated by some Aboriginal parents/guardians. Perhaps most notable is the overwhelmingly

negative experience most Aboriginal adults had during their own school years, coupled with an appreciably negative attitude towards the current education system because of the unhappiness in school experiences of their young people.

Different parents will of course respond in different ways to approaches from the school, but I have found that caring is the key to positive relations between school and home. If parents/guardians become aware that the individual teacher wants the Aboriginal student in class and sees the student as valuable then support will be forthcoming. Aboriginal parents, like nearly all other parents, want to know that the school is welcoming and accepting and that school is a safe and worthwhile place for their children to be spending five days a week for forty weeks of the year for between ten and twelve years. The following practices relate to the teachers' communication with parents/guardians.

- i) It is best not to wait for a negative circumstance before initiating contact with parents. Make the first contact a consequence of something positive, or purely as a time to introduce yourself. I realise that we are all busy and that I was at an advantage in my role as Co-ordinator of the K.A.C. because I had time to initiate discussions with the families of students, but it really pays to take time to talk with and listen to parents/guardians. If rapport can be established between teacher and adult the relationship between teacher and student will often be positive.
- ii) The personal approach is best. Letters often do not arrive in parents' hands. In Particular, avoid impersonal standardised letters. Make use of an ALO or AEW to initiate a meeting with parents/guardians to perform introductions and to provide support for parents during meetings. I was particularly fortunate in having an excellent ALO, Dean Wynne, and AEW, Matthew Moody, in 1995.
- iii) The meeting with parents should ideally (especially initially) be outside of school grounds. Again I was fortunate in that the KAC, Medina Cultural Centre and Kwinana shopping centre (the HUB) are all within a short walk from the school.



Meeting with parents in their homes if they are willing, is also a good idea. One meets other family members and can gain an appreciation of the family background.

- iv) Teacher interest should be expressed as concern for the student rather than for the subject matter.<sup>1</sup>
- v) Demonstrate an appreciation of Aboriginal parents by listening to their concerns and showing that their opinions and suggestions are worthwhile and valued. If they cannot be implemented, take the time to explain the reasons why they cannot.
- vi) Avoid apportioning blame when describing a negative situation involving Aboriginal parents.
- vii) “Personality and mutual respect are the cornerstones of effective relationships with Aboriginal parents”.<sup>2</sup> Some people appear to have more personality than others because they are more outgoing. However, in my experience many Aboriginal people have a great capacity for merriment – as indeed do many non-Aboriginal people – a sense of humour can go a long way towards creating an atmosphere conducive to study in the classroom and generally furthers harmony in school.
- viii) Maintain regular contact with the parents/guardians. The exchange of a word or the briefest of conversation in the carpark at going home time or when parents bring lunch money to school etc is essential. Always make the most of opportunities to make or consolidate relationships with the family.

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<sup>1</sup> It is doubtful if any/many teachers of lower school students could take their subject matter seriously. In my experience often curriculum is irrelevant. The opening line of a Simon and Garfunkel song comes to mind: “When I think of all the crap I learned in high school it’s a wonder I can scarcely think at all”. I realise that this seems a little gratuitous and maybe even offensive to those teachers who are attached to what they teach.

<sup>2</sup> *Aboriginal Attendance: Some Practical Strategies*, p.31.

## Speaking with Aboriginal students

Teaching “manuals”<sup>3</sup> all assert that traditional Aboriginal child-rearing practices emphasise and develop different attitudes and values in children. In particular, Aboriginal students develop an attitude of independence at a much earlier age than many non-Aboriginal students. The relationship between Aboriginal students and their parents, extended family and adults, is more like interaction with equals. For the most part, non-Aboriginal students are trained to, and therefore expected to, adopt a respectful or even subservient attitude in their interaction with adults. Aboriginal students often expect to be treated as equals with their teachers in discussions. During conversations they may expect the right to interject or make comments as asides, as adults do. This can lead to conflict when teachers are not prepared to allow this to happen. Often conflict between Aboriginal students and their teachers occurs when the teacher is not prepared to be flexible. Therefore, students may get along well with one teacher but not with another.

Below are some formulations that I have realised in talking with Aboriginal students which may facilitate effective communication. I have found them of immense value. They deal mainly with affording mutual respect and consideration.

- i) Do not wait for negative circumstances before initiating personal contact with Aboriginal students. Make the first contact a consequence of something positive, or purely as a time to introduce yourself.
- ii) Conduct meetings with Aboriginal students in neutral or non-threatening surroundings.
- iii) Allow students to have the support of an AEW, ALO or parents (if they want) if a sensitive or controversial issue occurs at school.
- iv) Arrange seating so no one seems to be superior or in a dominant posture.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, *ibid*.

- v) Show that you are prepared to listen and believe the students. Pay attention to the students when listening to them.
- vi) Provide ample, suitable opportunity for the students to relate their version of events.
- vii) Avoid apportioning blame until the facts are established.
- viii) Avoid speaking 'down' to the students. The belittling of any student should always be avoided.
- ix) Avoid raising your voice or shouting.
- x) Make sure school rules are clearly explained and understood. Explain the justification for each rule, as well as the consequences if the rule is broken.

**End of Appendix**

## **Appendix Seven**

Aboriginal Studies unit outlines for Years 8-10 (EDWA)

**Note: For copyright reasons the content of Appendix Seven has not been reproduced**

**(Co-ordinator, ADT Project (Retrospective), Curtin University of Technology, 14.11.02)**

## Appendix Eight

Numero maths game outline.

**Note: For copyright reasons the content of Appendix Eight has not been reproduced**

**(Co-ordinator, ADT Project (Retrospective), Curtin University of Technology, 14.11.02)**

**ABORIGINAL EDUCATION SURVEY (NUMBER ONE)**  
**TEACHERS ONLY**

1 Do you think that the current system relating to Aboriginal Education in our school is appropriate?

YES                      or                      NO

Please explain your answer.....

.....

2 Do you allow the Aboriginal students in your class, if you have any, to have more freedom than your non-Aboriginal students?

YES                      or                      NO

Please explain your answer.....

.....

3 Do you think that Aboriginal students should receive any special treatment in our school?

YES                      or                      NO

Please explain your answer.....

.....

4 Do you think that Aboriginal students should receive any special treatment in the classroom?

YES                      or                      NO

Please explain your answer.....

.....

5 Do you give any special treatment to the Aboriginal students in your class?

YES or NO

Please explain your answer.....

.....

6 In your training to become a teacher were you ever taught how to apply teaching methods to Aboriginal students?

YES or NO

Please explain your answer.....

.....

7 Do you try to implement any of the teaching strategies you have been taught to improve the learning opportunities of your Aboriginal students?

YES or NO

Please list specific examples.....

.....

8 Do you expect Aboriginal students to give up any aspects of their Aboriginality in the classroom?

YES or NO

I realise that this is an awkward question. However, if there are any cultural characteristics which you consider are not conducive to good classroom management please explain.

9 Please give your opinion about introducing Aboriginal Studies as a compulsory, one term unit/subject for all lower school students and as an optional choice for upper school students.

10 Please give your opinion about having separate classes for Aboriginal students.

**ABORIGINAL EDUCATION SURVEY**  
**STAFF SURVEY QUESTIONS (NUMBER TWO)**

We have approximately 75 Aboriginal students at Kwinana SHS. We would like to support you in improving educational outcomes for them and improving the positive learning environment for all of our students. Please complete this survey to help us find some starting points. You do not need to identify yourself.

1. How well do you understand urban Aboriginal culture?  
a) very well    b) reasonably well    c) a little    d) not at all  
Please explain your answer .....

.....

2. Would you like to participate in PD to improve your understanding of urban Aboriginal culture?  
a) yes    b) no  
Please explain your answer .....

.....

3. How well do you understand Aboriginal learning styles?  
a) very well    b) reasonably well    c) a little    d) not at all  
Please comment on any observations you have made in regard to Aboriginal learning styles.

4. Would you like to participate in PD to improve your understanding of Aboriginal learning styles?  
a) yes    b) no  
Please comment on your answer

.....  
.....

5. Have you participated in successful programmes for Aboriginal students in other schools which might have some application for Kwinana?  
a) yes    programme/s: .....

.....

b) no

6. Please add any comments you would like to make: .....

.....

.....



## Appendix Ten

Easy-Mark Attitude to School Inventory (1993) My School.

Whole school overview: your Easy-Mark results analysis.

**Note: For copyright reasons the content of Appendix Ten has not been reproduced**

**(Co-ordinator, ADT Project (Retrospective), Curtin University of Technology, 14.11.02)**

## Appendix Eleven

Research proposal for the degree of Master of Education (by research/thesis), Curtin University of Technology, W.A.

Amended title:

**"A study of attendance and classroom participation among Aboriginal (Nyungar) students in a West Australian metropolitan senior high school".**

Chairperson: Assoc. Prof. G. Giddings, Faculty of Education.

Supervisor: Dr. John Hall, Faculty of Education.

Associate Supervisor: Dr. Bruce Waldrip, Faculty of Education.

Original full title:

"A study of attendance and classroom participation among Aboriginal (Nyungar) students in one West Australian senior high school: with special reference to teacher attitudes and strategies (if any) to improve retention rates".

Simon P. Karginoff, B.A. Hons., (London University); Dip. Ed., (with distinction), (Curtin University of Technology, W.A.); Ph.D., (Murdoch University, W.A.); M.A., (with distinction), (Edith Cowan University, W.A.); A.A.C.E. F.R. Hist. S.

Student ID: 9359691

18 June 1996.

Revised 20 August 1996.

Revised 7 November 1996.

"A study of attendance and classroom participation among Aboriginal students in a West Australian senior high school".

## 1. OVERVIEW:

The metropolitan senior high school looked at in the study is Kwinana Senior High School, located south of the Swan River, Perth, Western Australia. The Kwinana/Medina suburbs have been described as "low socio-economic" areas. There is over 42% unemployment in the region and a high incidence of crime. The school has been designated as a "Priority School" by the Department of Education of Western Australia (EDWA). Moreover, Kwinana S.H.S. has been adjudged as having within its student population a large number of students from the designated category "Students at Risk" (STAR). Because of these criteria the school receives some additional funding from both the Federal and State governments. The Kwinana/Medina area has had an Aboriginal (Nyungar) population living within its locality for a period of time exceeding 45,000 years. The number of students whose parents, parent or guardian acknowledge their "Aboriginality" currently enrolled at the school is 76 out of a whole school population of £ 890. Kwinana S.H.S. is a state, or government school whose students are both male and female. There are £ 75 staff of which 60 are teachers, most of whom are full-time.

The thesis seeks to analyse the attendance and participation of the Aboriginal students at Kwinana S.H.S. in the period December 1993 (term 4) to December 1996. During this time the Aboriginal population has fluctuated for a multitude of reasons from 18-85. It should be pointed out that there are many other students who possess Aboriginal heritage but for various reasons their parents or guardians have not acknowledged this on the school enrolment form. In many cases, however, the students themselves are aware of their "Aboriginality" and in a significant number of cases students readily admit their Aboriginal ancestry. These students are included in the study. However, such case studies will at no time be referred to by name.

The thesis will suggest reasons for the varying levels of school attendance and classroom participation of the Aboriginal students; examine the role of Aboriginal Studies (years 8-10) and Australian Studies (which has a strong

Aboriginal component) (years 11-12) in improving participation; teacher attitudes towards Aboriginal students, Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal Studies; an analysis of retention rates and possible reasons for the "exclusion" of students from school. This latter will necessarily look at both absenteeism (or truancy) and exclusion (or expulsion) from school. Lastly, the study will include a survey of student attitudes towards school, curriculum and teachers. This will inevitably mean a look at the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. (With the exception of an Aboriginal Education Worker - and there is not always one on staff - there are no Aboriginal staff members).

The study will involve 4 distinct parts:

- i) A study of school and classroom attendance and participation of Aboriginal students and possible reasons for variation.
- ii) The role of Aboriginal Studies - not merely in curriculum - but including the broader theme of Aboriginal culture.
- iii) A study of teacher attitudes.
- iv) A study of Aboriginal student attitudes.

The study includes the interviewing of students, teachers, parents/guardians and the wider community, and an analysis of these interviews. Furthermore, the thesis will incorporate reflection/reporting of the author's practices.

It is as well to point out at the outset that the thesis does not intend to be a statistical analysis of school attendance and will not seek to elaborate and analyse school and classroom attendance data.

## **2. OBJECTIVES: (Purpose)**

The overall objective of the study is to investigate and seek an understanding of why there has been a distinct, if not dramatic improvement in attendance and participation of Aboriginal students at Kwinana Senior High School over the past 3 years.

### 3. SIGNIFICANCE: (Rationale)

Any implications of the research on the changed attendance and participation of Aboriginal students at Kwinana S.H.S. are, at this stage at least purely speculative and may be unwarranted on further investigation. Clearly attendance and participation for a significant number of Aboriginal students has dramatically increased. However, this may change. Nevertheless, implications of the following kind could be possible:-

- i) the discovery of a common theme [and this may not be related to the teaching of Aboriginal Studies] which might provide motivation or direction for the teachers and students of Aboriginal Studies at Kwinana S.H.S. This necessarily includes implications for the issues of student resistance and community/parent involvement.
- ii) the value of a key teacher with specific responsibilities for Aboriginal education at schools with a significant Aboriginal enrolment.
- iii) how/whether teacher attitudes generally influence school attendance and participation.

Perhaps more importantly, the Aboriginal (and non Aboriginal) students and their parents and a significant number of teaching staff, as well as many people in the local community have expressed a strong desire to have "our story" told. This I have determined to begin. However, that it is "our story" at Kwinana S.H.S. and that "we" are all involved in its telling is perhaps of the greatest significance.

### 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

#### 4.1 *Literature Analysis*

This will include current literature on Aboriginal Education. For example: Aboriginal Attendance: Some Practical Strategies, (Ministry of Education, Western Australia, 1993); National Principles and Guidelines for Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies, K-12, (Curriculum Corporation, 1995); Western Australian Aboriginal Education Strategic Plan, (Ministry of Education, 1992); Neville Green, Desert School, (Fremantle, 1983); Ralph Folds,

Whitefella School, (N. Sydney, 1987); The Aboriginal Child at School, (Queensland University Press, 1974 to date).

The literature review may allow me to understand official and unofficial arguments which surround the issue of Aboriginal education. Also the literature analysis is to provide a knowledge base for the proposed "ethnographic" interviews.

#### 4.2 *Ethnographic interviews*

These "interviews" will be designed to elicit responses to the question "what is the point of attending school?" or such like. The ethnographic interview process will be concerned with capturing understandings of each cultural group/each professional group involved in Aboriginal Education.

Interview subjects I will include or will seek to include:

- i) Most Aboriginal students at Kwinana S.H.S.
- ii) Some non-Aboriginal students at Kwinana S.H.S.
- iii) All teaching staff at Kwinana S.H.S.
- iv) Many parents/guardians of students
- v) Many community persons.

My understanding of the distinctive features of the ethnographic interviewing has been gained from a survey of Graham Hitchcock and David Hughes, Research and the Teacher: a qualitative introduction to School-based Research, (London, 1989), especially pp.79-107 and pp.144-147 (not on the Ed. 621 book list). The most insightful texts were N. Bogdan and S. Biklen, Qualitative research for education: an introduction to theory and methods, (London, 1992); M. Ely, Doing qualitative research, (London, 1991). Perhaps the quintessential element is whether the "interview" is *in vivo* or *in vitro*.

In addition to "structured" interviews (ie. with "set" questions) "anecdotal", or for the want of a better word "incidental" or conversational, material will be analysed.

#### 4.3 *Analysis of interviews*

I will, therefore, seek to involve a qualitative research approach while analysing the interviews – the main aim of which is to reach an understanding as to why attendance and participation have improved.

This research will not seek verification or rejection of an hypothesis but rather an understanding of why students' attitudes, behaviours, expectations, experiences have been altered.

The responses of the interviewees are, however, to shed light upon the subject but not to express an unchanging view of the matter or to illuminate any ultimate truth.

#### 5. ETHICAL ISSUES:

During the proposed research project these ethical issues will be dealt with in the following manner.

##### 5.1 *Anonymity*

The anonymity of interview subjects will be protected at all times. Interview subjects will be identified only by interview group and fictional name. However, should subjects wish to have their names given their wishes will be adhered to. Permission in writing will be asked for. [I have already received many letters of support].

##### 5.2 *Permission for reproduction of the interviews*

Permission will be obtained from all interview subjects for the interview to be recorded, either verbally or in writing, and analysed for the purpose of the study.

I wish to stress that I have received **informed consent** from parents, guardians, and students. Moreover, prominent members of the local Aboriginal community have been consulted and have given their warm support for the



project. All those involved in the study have been advised that they may withdraw at any time.

### 5.3 *Culturally sensitive material*

Any reference that may be sensitive or offensive will be checked with the appropriate person and omitted from the study where requested.

## 6. TIME SCHEDULE:

- Review of literature – March - June 1996
- Interviewing – July - October
- Analysis and writing up – November - February 1997.

## 7. REFERENCES:

Publications referred to within the proposal have been fully referenced in the text.