WHY DO ABORIGINAL KIDS SWITCH OFF SCHOOL?

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (PhD)

FEBRUARY 2016
I hereby certify that this thesis to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due references and acknowledgements are made. It contains no material which has been previously submitted by me for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University's Digital Repository, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thought that this important part of a thesis would be the easiest to write, but this long journey has become an imbedded part of my overall complex life. The weave I discuss which permeated my research here is extended inextricably in who I am and the quality of people this journey has touched. I am blessed with this amazing depth of base level ochre (you will gain a deeper understanding of this in the thesis itself) which cements me in my culture, family, friends and colleagues. I present this weave at three equitable levels, family, friends/colleagues and community. Finally my acknowledgement of my journey partners in this endeavour.

My Wonnarua ancestors who have laid the foundation from time immemorial to those who have sculptured my very being, my Dad, sister Fay and my Mum who was been staunch in her belief in me. My immediate family and brother Stan who made sure I had good pants to go off to learn how to be a teacher and ultimately ensure my future as an Indigenous educator through to my loving sisters Neva and Kim who are extremely proud of me. To our futures, my nieces and nephews who provided the twinkle in their eyes of adoration for my role in securing expectations for theirs and their children’s futures.

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Karen Kincaid from the University’s post-graduate research branch (very much
humanising the long journey).

The thesis exists because my Indigenous communities still pursue elusive educational
equality in this country. They lead rich cultural lives but unfortunately most educators and
leaders in the school sector have not learnt to share in this. To the many Indigenous
parents, grandparents, carers, community members and educationists, and of course
the students themselves who generously took the time to share their stories and
experiences with me, this thesis is primarily dedicated to you. The balance required to
build this story is strongly tied to the contribution of the district, schools, their leaders and
staff that so generously, positively and willingly provided the important background and
knowledge about their Aboriginal students’ holistic experiences.

My long and challenging career in education has been hard fought but fortunately I have
managed on this journey to run into the highest levels of peers and human beings who
share in my passion for human rights and social justice. No higher an accolade can I
give to my unshakable and dedicated supervisors the late Professor Sid Bourke and
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<td>AAPA</td>
<td>Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABS</td>
<td>Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
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<tr>
<td>ACARA</td>
<td>Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority</td>
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<tr>
<td>ACER</td>
<td>Australian Council for Educational Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACLO</td>
<td>Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACU</td>
<td>Aboriginal Curriculum Unit of the Board of Studies</td>
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<td>AE</td>
<td>Aboriginal English</td>
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<td>AEA</td>
<td>Aboriginal Education Assistant</td>
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<td>AECG</td>
<td>Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (NSW)</td>
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<td>AEP</td>
<td>Aboriginal Education Policy (NSW)</td>
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<td>AERT</td>
<td>Aboriginal Education Resource Teacher</td>
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<td>AESIP</td>
<td>Aboriginal Education Strategic Initiative Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>AEW</td>
<td>Aboriginal Education Worker</td>
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<tr>
<td>AIATSIS</td>
<td>Australian Institute of Aboriginal &amp; Torres Strait Islander Studies</td>
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<td>AMS</td>
<td>Aboriginal Medical Service</td>
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<td>APSESBERC</td>
<td>Australian Parliamentary Senate Employment Education and Training References Committee</td>
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<td>APU</td>
<td>Aboriginal Programs Unit, DET</td>
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<td>ARCO</td>
<td>Anti-Racism Contact Officer</td>
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<td>ASSPA</td>
<td>Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness</td>
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<td>ATAS</td>
<td>Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme</td>
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<td>BOSNSW</td>
<td>Board of Studies New South Wales</td>
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<td>Council of Australian Governments</td>
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<td>DAEAC</td>
<td>District Aboriginal Education Advisory Committee</td>
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<td>High School</td>
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<td>HSC</td>
<td>Higher School Certificate (Final year of schooling in NSW)</td>
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<tr>
<td>HSIE</td>
<td>Human Society and Its Environment</td>
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<td>HSLO</td>
<td>Home School Liaison Officer</td>
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<td>ICT</td>
<td>In-Class-Tuition</td>
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<td><em>i.e.</em></td>
<td>Indigenous engagement</td>
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<td>IECB</td>
<td>Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies</td>
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<td>IEDA</td>
<td>Indigenous Education Direct Assistance</td>
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<td>IESIP</td>
<td>Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program</td>
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<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Definition</td>
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<td>ISTB</td>
<td>Itinerant Support Teacher Behaviour</td>
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<td>JJ</td>
<td>Juvenile Justice</td>
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<td>KI</td>
<td>Knowledge Integration</td>
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<tr>
<td>KLA</td>
<td>Key Learning Area</td>
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<td>MCEECDYA</td>
<td>Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs</td>
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<td>MCEETYA</td>
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<td>National Aboriginal Education Committee</td>
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<td>National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee</td>
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<td>NSWAEPR</td>
<td>New South Wales Aboriginal Education Policy Review</td>
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<td>New South Wales Department of Aboriginal Affairs</td>
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<td>Systematic Implications of Pedagogy and Achievement</td>
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<td>Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia</td>
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ABSTRACT

Why do Aboriginal kids switch off school? A holistic examination of system, school, students and their community in one rural district

This case study in one rural district in the state of NSW in Australia with high Indigenous enrolments was initiated by the local Indigenous community and Regional Education Authority to directly address serious concerns they had about Indigenous completion rates in their district. The study aimed to provide the first comprehensive holistic Indigenous examination of why Aboriginal students switch off school, when this takes place, and to propose key interventions to address the problem.

The study was longitudinal and followed 43 students, across two cohorts (Year 5 and 7) from six high schools, one central school and six primary feeder schools in the district over a four year period. Key informants and data were drawn from education systems (drilling down to regional level), schools and their staff, and the Indigenous parents/community from the district.

The research is grounded in Indigenous Methodologies which prioritize Indigenous voices including the author's unique perspectives as a leading Indigenous educator and his journey in the study as Indigenous researcher. It further utilises mixed-mode tools with an emphasis on qualitative data collection including over 160 interviews embracing the storied nature of Indigenous experience in their community and schools/district, alongside supporting data collected from survey and questionnaire and existing statistical databases.

Outcomes from the study clearly demonstrated the diversity of Indigenous students, their backgrounds, school results and consistently strong cultural family backgrounds. Defined engagement levels were established for the case students, namely engaged, disengaged and unengaged. These levels of Indigenous Engagement (‘ie’) call for specific strategic approaches if outcomes around retention are to be significantly improved. The research further highlighted the great strength and resilience in the Indigenous community in the face of what has become a deeply entrenched problem of misrepresentation of community by the system and schools and underestimation of both Indigenous students and community, which typically has resulted in stereotypical responses from schools and their staff.

The Indigenous researcher's own journey through the study and the impact of the research on his varied, high level, Indigenous educational leadership roles provided a further layer of personal and cultural dialogue throughout the study that offered a space for continuous reflection, analysis and interpretation. Through this reflection a level of clarity emerged which is captured through a critical use of traditional ‘Rarrk’ painting analogy possibly extending Indigenous interpretive approaches and the discourse around Indigenous research method.

The findings challenge the unproblematic interpretation of state level policy and opinions generated on limited or no data.
CHAPTER 1. “WHY DO ABORIGINAL KIDS SWITCH OFF SCHOOL?”

INTRODUCTION

As an Indigenous educator in New South Wales (NSW) with nearly 40 years teaching, leadership and community experiences I have run out of patience with those who blame my Indigenous community for our children not attending school and hence not achieving! The research that has been undertaken overly concentrates explanations of improved outcomes on attendance patterns of Indigenous students. It is as though in these patterns some ‘magic panacea’ for solving gaps in Indigenous students’ educational attainment is to be found. My research essentially started from the position that the statistics act as a distraction, and that little work goes to the heart of the issue and the heart of the community. The journey unfolded rightfully with the Indigenous communities themselves, in partnership with district educational leadership, searching for answers to their question, ‘Why do Aboriginal kids switch off school?’

I was privileged to be touched by the lives of Indigenous students their families and communities in their pursuit of an education in the rural district public school system of education in NSW - an education that they strongly believe will not only equip them to rightfully take up their equitable roles in contemporary Australian society, but also provide the cultural acceptance that will ensure such education is not at a cost to the very essence of their Indigenous identity and place in arguably the oldest living culture in the world. The findings revealed Indigenous desires for an education which is genuinely inclusive of extended family ties and rich family lives while providing access to the skills of the 21st century world. Added to these voices were those of non-Indigenous school leaders, teachers and specialist school staff. The inclusion of these groups supported a broad-ranging and holistic Indigenising approach that is a hallmark of the study.

It is essential that my own Indigenous background and roles are privileged, acknowledged and engaged in as Linda Smith’s (1999, pp.115-118) integral ‘self-determination’ as part of the Indigenous research agenda. This position is supported by Russell Bishop and Mere Berryman’s (2006, pp.1-5) statements of support surrounding Kaupapa Maori research where Maori are the key informants and drivers of their
research agendas. In the text of this research I am both informant and researcher. My vantage points and roles were numerous in the events narrated in the literature. The research was for a time a part of those roles as well as part of a personal journey of introspection. All this is reflected in the way I variously communicate my position in this thesis as me or I; as a member of my community, and as ‘the researcher’ (See Appendix 1.1 for multiple positions of researcher).

To ground the thesis in Lester-Irabinna Rigney’s (1997) Indigenist research; empower Indigenous voices and ensure and maintain the focus in an Indigenous privileged research genre, Indigenous student stories are located at the commencement of most alternate chapters. The first of these students is Lisa. Her story provides a launching point for the theme of improving Indigenous student outcomes that is the main goal of this research. I am living in hope that one day Australian society will be genuinely inviting of Indigenous peoples’ capacity to work and contribute equitably—a society that will be richer for the acceptance of Indigenous cultures. Lisa’s experiences and hopes sit at the heart of Indigenous students' lives at home and at school and the stark reality of the broader community they live in.

Lisa: “I just want to prove to them that we can make it and Aboriginals can get an education!”

Lisa was very well liked by a broad group of students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous at the secondary school. When her father passed away tragically they gathered to her side to console her. This event marked yet another significant period of immense heartache. Lisa had been cared for by her Nan from the age of seven years old. Nan had rescued her from parents who could not care for her due to drug and alcohol abuse. Nan looked after three grandchildren and also a nephew abandoned by his mother—a situation also related to substance abuse.

Lisa’s early schooling suffered while she was with her parents and this was reflected in her extensive absences from school. Almost immediately, as her Nan gained formal custody of her, her attendance and ultimately her school results improved drastically. Her Nan had very clear and firm beliefs about gaining a good education, even though she often reflected on the very racist school environments of her own schooling in the same community in which she still lived. She shared a story where she came top in the
school in mathematics and reading, but she couldn’t be promoted up to the higher performing students’ classes, because they were for the white kids. Not being able to take the obvious racism any longer she told the school ‘where to shove it’ and as a result found herself in a girl’s home. Nan had much to reflect on in a life that involved living on missions in the country and for a period of time in the city and recalled that she knew the researcher’s extended family in Sydney. Her brothers and sisters did it tough and unfortunately most became statistics of substance abuse. Even after her terrible school experience, Nan’s determination and noted importance of education in today’s life led her to complete her School Certificate and sewing courses at TAFE (Technical and Further Education) as a mature aged student. She had great passion, pride and push for Lisa’s own school life and did everything in her power to ensure Lisa had every opportunity available to her. She not only encouraged Lisa in her schooling, but ensured she was well grounded in her traditional Indigenous nation’s local culture, spending time around the dinner table talking about the past and her family’s deep-rooted cultural background. Lisa was a keen listener to these yarns. Nan stated proudly, ‘Lisa knows where we’re from and what we’re all about. We make sure they do that!’

Nan described Lisa as a loveable person who laughed a lot. The school’s reports indicate that the teachers agree. She was an average student academically, but with the support of Nan could complete her Year 12 and her ambition of becoming a hairdresser, or fashion designer and not just any hairdresser or designer. Lisa had her sight set on pursuing this career amongst the world’s rich and famous and it taking her to places like New York and Paris.

Lisa found her school a good place to be and teachers very helpful and caring. At times she has had to deal with racist remarks from the students, but her Nan’s firm grounding in her culture pulled her through this childish torment and she often reflect on all the positive friends from other cultures she has in and outside of school. Lisa reflected on the disappointing prospects confronting young Indigenous youth growing up in a racist town environment, but also very maturely put the situation in relative context. It is best if she tells the story about why it was difficult to get a job in the community for an Indigenous person:

Lisa: It’s very hard.
Lisa had enjoyed Aboriginal topics in some of her school subjects and looked forward to building on her cultural knowledge through selecting Aboriginal Studies as a subject in future years and perhaps to provide her with increased understanding of the situation she described above. In addition to enjoying learning about her people she really enjoyed maths (because she was good at it) and subjects like woodwork, art and music (the latter potentially being another career line for the future).

When asked what she thought of the Indigenous kids who were smart or good at school work, she said, ‘They probably want a future for themselves. They probably want to show all the other Aboriginal kids that they can do it too!’

Lisa probably doesn’t realise it, but she is one of those students who may pave the way for her Indigenous peers to achieve equal outcomes with all other students in this state and across Australia. Lisa clearly indicated why she wanted a good education, ‘Because most of my family are not [educated] – none of my family have gone to Year 12 – not any of them have. I just want to prove to them that we can make it and Aboriginals can get an education!’

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1 R= Researcher, author of this thesis
Community partnership driven research agenda

This research had its beginnings in an equitable and genuine partnership between a local regional Indigenous community, through the Regional Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (RAECG), and the district superintendent of the Department of Education and Training (DET) in NSW. They jointly raised the concern about the significant number of Indigenous students in the district schools who were ‘dropping out’ or not engaging with the school system. Their main concerns stemmed from a noticeable gap between Indigenous students and their non-Indigenous local peers’ literacy and numeracy results on state-wide testing; poor attendance patterns in secondary school, disciplinary problems and non-completions in Year 10. (Apen District, 2004, Slides 9-26). The RAECG and district superintendent in late 1998 approached my university’s Faculty of Education for support with regard to consulting and/or providing research which they hoped would address these negative trends and the need for assistance with regard to development or identification of appropriate successful literacy programs for these students.

The researcher, who had in the previous year been appointed the inaugural Professor of Aboriginal Studies at the University, with direct responsibility to develop Aboriginal research, was invited to this meeting with Faculty of Education staff and at the meeting agreed to undertake a study into the issues raised by the RAECG and district superintendent. In subsequent meetings agreement was reached on the focus of the research which was, ‘Why do Aboriginal kids switch off school?’ - ‘When this happens?’ and, ‘What can be done to keep them in school or attract them back to education?’ It was mutually agreed that the focus should be these key questions.

A current issue with wide ramifications

The inequitable outcomes articulated by the RAECG from their schools was not a new or solely local phenomenon, but was indeed one that had been fairly constant since the 1970s and gained more prominence in the later part of that decade and into the 1980s and onward both at a state and national level. Prior to the 1970s, the main focus of schooling for Indigenous children in NSW was heavily dominated by issues of assimilation policy promoted by the establishment of the Aboriginal Protection Board in 1883 (NSW State Records, n.d.). Initially the Aboriginal Protection Board’s role was
directed to easing the general ‘dying out’ of Indigenous peoples as a race. Once it was realised that Indigenous people were not going to disappear as a race, government policy moved away from ‘protection’ to ‘assimilation’. Assimilation developed a stranglehold on Indigenous people from the early 20th Century which led to the fateful policy of taking of Indigenous children from their parents under law to be sent to Institutions to be trained as farm hands and domestic servants. This process is now referred to as the children of the ‘Stolen Generation’ (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

J.J. Fletcher’s (1989) work on the history of Aboriginal education in NSW spells out in detail the State Government’s policy of exclusion of Aboriginal children from public schools, the creation of substandard Aboriginal schools on Aboriginal missions and reserves and clearly points to the failure of these segregated special Aboriginal schooling systems in the 1960s to early 1970s. Indigenous education only gained gradual momentum after the landmark 1967 referendum on Aborigines was passed, and for the first time provision of specialist education was placed in the hands of the Commonwealth Government, and taken away from past assimilationist regimes of State Governments.

The most significant shift in Aboriginal education during the late 1970s and early 1980s was the movement to Indigenous involvement and a strongly supported Aboriginal self-determination in policy development leading ultimately to the establishment of the Aboriginal Consultative Group at the national level, providing advice to the Australian Schools’ Commission.

The creation of the national body ultimately led to the formation of the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (NSWAECG) which was the principal body that developed and created the above mentioned RAECGs. At about the time of the establishment of RAECGs, as part of the process of a movement to strengthen the community base of the NSWAECG and a desire for greater self-determination (led by Robert Morgan, Keith Hall and the researcher), the NSW Select Committee of the Legislative Assembly upon Aborigines (originally appointed in November 1978) handed down its second report to NSW Parliament in 1981. This report was arguably, the most significant and comprehensive report to date then on Aboriginal issues generally in NSW. It included documentation of the state of Aboriginal education. Fletcher (1989, pp.328-329) succinctly sums up the concerns expressed in this second report on the Committee’s findings on Aboriginal education in primary and secondary schools at the time:
After considering the evidence of witnesses and the results of its own research, the committee concluded that Aboriginal pupils were failing due to poverty-caused disabilities, such as poor study facilities and health problems; cultural differences in communication which disadvantaged Aborigines; low educational expectations which resulted in the traditionally large drop-out rate; limited expectations by their teachers and their consequent consignment to low-ability classes; biased and insufficient material in school curricula on Aboriginal history and culture, which continued the cycle of cultural neglect and ‘put-down’; and chronic unemployment in Aboriginal communities, which diminished aspirations and dulled incentive among Aboriginal children.

Against this historical backdrop the concerns of the RAECG and district superintendent, which led to the present study revealed little change in schooling outcomes from nearly two decades before. The literature review in Chapter 2 highlights the various reviews and ongoing policy development in Indigenous education from the 1980s through to the most current, comprehensive research findings and recommendations of the NSW 2004 Review (NSWAECG & New South Wales Department of Education and Training [NSWDET], 2004). The foresight of the RAECG and district superintendent in instigating this research cannot be underestimated given its contribution to the more complex policy and program direction which followed at a state wide and national policy level.

A LOCAL INDIGENOUS EDUCATION RESEARCH INITIATIVE SETS THE SCENE FOR STATE-WIDE DIRECTION

Interestingly, the concerns being expressed in this local initiative were soon to be further confirmed and substantially exposed across the state of NSW in ‘The Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education, Yanigurra Muya: Ganggurrinyma Yaari Guurulaw Yirringin.gurray – Freeing the Spirit: Dreaming and Equal Future. 2004 [From this point called ‘the Review’]), which was the most comprehensive review undertaken in Indigenous education in the state. The then Deputy Premier and Minister for Education and Training and Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Dr Andrew Refshauge best summed up the Review’s findings in his background statement (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004, p.11) with regard to the main finding as follows:

Despite the many education initiatives implemented by the Commonwealth and NSW Governments over the past 20 years, Aboriginal students continue to be the most educationally disadvantaged student group in Australia.
This seminal Review of Aboriginal education in NSW, had four key terms of reference which were: to examine the issues surrounding Indigenous attendance, retention rates and academic outcomes; to review and develop systematic approaches to achieve quality learning outcomes; assess the effectiveness of the Aboriginal Education Policy on the key stakeholders, students, staff and school communities; and finally, to develop a state-wide action plan for Aboriginal Education under the auspices of the then Two Ways Together (NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs [NSWDA], nd.) policy direction promoted by the NSWDA (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004, p.16).

Given this development, the researcher’s work on this study soon moved into the much larger Indigenous state-wide policy review agenda for two significant reasons. Firstly, his appointment as leader of the Academic Reference Group to the Review and secondly, his competitive commission to independently review the Aboriginal Education Policy (AEP) implementation (Lester & Hanlen, 2004). The second role involved a series of case studies across four school education areas and a sample of 40 school sites. The early research field work and literature review carried out during 2001-2003 in the local district for this thesis study, proved invaluable as the background formation of both the academic advisory role and also to inform the AEP Review process.

**SHIFTING THE GAZE FROM ATTENDANCE AND SUSPENSION STATISTICS**

As Gray and Beresford (2002, p.27) have noted, the ‘policy love affair’ with attendance and suspension figures as the primary way to achieve Indigenous educational emancipation has proliferated since the mid1980s. The fixation on primarily Indigenous chronic non-attenders has significantly shaped perception around Indigenous communities’ educational needs, inaccurately representing Indigenous families and their communities as grossly dysfunctional and perpetuating the stereotype of Indigenous youth as delinquent. Yet, Barnes (2004) presents the evident correlation of attendance levels and academic attainment as very nebulous. He also notes the significant field of research focused on the attendance issue (Groome & Hamilton, 1995a; Bourke, Rigby & Burden, 2000; McRae et al., 2000a, 2000b; Purdie, Tripcon, Boulton-Lewis, Fanshawe & Gunstone, 2000; Gray & Beresford, 2002; Murphy, O'Loughlin & Parkin, 2002). It must be pointed out that very little emphasis has been given to those Indigenous students who regularly attend school and the higher attendance figures during primary years in NSW.
While the absentee level of Indigenous students was approximately twice that of their non-Indigenous peers and is still evident in the figures, overall attendance levels of Indigenous students was around 85%. In short, the vast majority of Indigenous students at the time of the study and continue to attend school regularly (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004, p.25; NSW Department of Education and Communities [NSWDEC], 2014c). This phenomenon has been overlooked or under reported. A significant feature of attendance figures is that of the group of students who have chronic absenteeism of over 30 days per year (double their non-Indigenous peers). The flow-on effect of such absences in decreasing average attendance figures for Indigenous students has been identified by Bourke et al. (2000, pp.16-17).

Colin Bourke (Bourke et al., 2000) along with another prominent Indigenous researcher, Jeannie Herbert (Herbert, Anderson, Price & Stehbens, 1999), led two significant reports into attendance of Indigenous students, both funded by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA). These reports provided important critical background to the study on national issues surrounding attendance and suspensions of Indigenous students from schools.

Bourke et al.’s work (2000) provided the parameters for the present study, namely the need to ensure a comprehensive or holistic approach methodologically (Beresford, 2003b, p.67; Mellor & Corrigan, 2004, p.45) to the issue of why Aboriginal kids switch off school. The holistic view addresses the issue longitudinally from four perspectives: 1) the system, 2) the school, 3) the students and 4) the Indigenous community. The study moves the focus away from yet another general study of Indigenous attendance, to a clear and more comprehensive focus on Indigenous students from two cohorts, a Year 5 and a Year 7. The students are followed over a four-year period of their schooling.

KEYS TO UNLOCKING WHY ABORIGINAL KIDS SWITCH OFF SCHOOL

Clearly a methodology had to be developed that would move beyond persistent research deficiencies. Bourke et al. (2000) provided the first key to a holistic approach. This directed attention to wide-ranging data sources and a multiple methods approach that drew on new traditions of Indigenous research that privilege Indigenous voices and an insider position-journeying into the rich detail of Indigenous lives and perspectives. In order to obtain a holistic picture the research sought in parallel the perspectives of non-
Indigenous informants in schools and system and drew on current policy and strategic
direction documents in Indigenous education, to cross tabulate and triangulate key
intersections of insight which could lead to a greater understanding of the problem under
investigation. The study involved 43 students and 82 interviews with them, plus a further
80 informants, surveys and questionnaires with a total of 614 respondents, document
analysis, observation and personal reflection. The holistic approach and variety of data
sources provided opportunities taken for triangulation of the data to enhance reliability
and validity (Denzin, 1978; Lincoln & Gubba, 1985; Patton, 2002; Golafshani, 2003) to
the study.

Indigenous Australians are not ‘poor’ whites in black skins. The Indigenous students’
cultural richness became very evident over the course of data collection. Unlocking the
all too often hidden personal and cultural life fabric in the data generated became integral
to the study. The emergence of rich lives of these everyday Indigenous students and
their families who so generously shared their stories and opinions became critical to the
study’s findings. Families fighting for their equal rights, social and economic
emancipation in which they trusted would come from accessing western education
systems. As an Indigenous researcher having access to this level of life story was
incredibly culturally empowering. The Aboriginal community in the study was confronting
the challenges of, in most instances, low levels of income, family dislocation (primarily
stemming from government policy in both the past and present), and community-based
racism; and against these odds, doing everything in their power to keep their families
together in a culturally rich environment. It is the primarily their stories that provided the
answers to the questions; Why do Aboriginal kids switch off school? When does it
happen?; and How can we attract them back to schooling or education?

JOURNEY TO DISCOVERY

Setting the Indigenous education scene for study

As indicated above there was a shift in Indigenous education to more open access to
schools after the historic referendum in 1967 which granted Indigenous Australians the
right to be counted in the national census and which gave the Commonwealth
government responsibility for Aborigines. With this historic victory in the referendum and
continued pressure from Indigenous supporters through the NSW Teachers’ Federation
and letters to the editor, in NSW this policy shift was symbolically enacted with the withdrawal of a statement in the NSW Teachers' Handbook in 1972, about the nature of access to school. Fletcher describes the rescinded policy in the following way:

\[\text{The} \text{ Department encouraged assimilation by allowing Aborigines to enrol at public schools, provided their home conditions were satisfactory and no substantial opposition existed in the local community; a principal uncertain about an Aboriginal child's enrolment was to refer the matter to the Department for a decision.} \text{ (Fletcher, 1989, p. 248)}\]

Policy development and direction in Indigenous education began to show progressive moves to improve the outcomes of Indigenous students and significant resources were finally provided firstly through the establishment of Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme by the Liberal Commonwealth Government under Malcolm Fraser (then Minister for Education) and latter even more significant resources became available under the subsequent Labor Commonwealth Government. These additional resources provided the opportunity for a general movement and political platform for Indigenous self-determination and the establishment of the first Indigenous consultative body the Aboriginal Consultative Group in 1975 to provide advice to the then Australian Schools Commission. This self-determination then spread to the establishment of the National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC) and subsequently through the provision of resources by the Commission to states to form state Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups, which gave rise to the NSWAECG and similar groups across Australia. This marked a significant shift in policy development by Indigenous people in education (Fletcher, 1989, pp.311-314).

The NSW Government led policy development with the first Aboriginal Education Policy released in 1982. Similar policy development at the national levels and subsequently other states followed. The same year also saw the significant investment in research and strategic shifts in programs for Indigenous people with the focus clearly on increasing levels of access, retention, attendance, teacher training and curriculum direction in Aboriginal studies. However, this heightened activity throughout the 80s and 90s and into the next century did little to improve outcomes for Indigenous students and the clear 'gap' between their non-Indigenous peers was proving near impossible to bridge (Department of Education, Science and Training [DEST], 2002). Various national reviews provided little solace from this unequal outcome and debate emerged around
the causes. Deficit theorising became dominant, where Indigenous communities, social and socio-economic conditions were to blame (Groome & Hamilton, 1995b; Dent & Hatton, 1996; Herbert, Anderson, Price, & Stebbens, 1999; Bourke et al., 2000; Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee [SEWRSBERC], 2000; Beresford, 2003a). This was reflective of similar developments overseas with Native Americans (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997) and Maori particularly prevalent in Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai and Richardson’s (2003, p.97) ‘The Te Kotahitanga Effective Teaching Profile’ which most clearly articulates the importance of a positive student outlook when effective teachers demonstrate the following:

…they positively and vehemently reject deficit theorising as a means of explaining Maori students’ educational achievement levels (and professional development projects need to ensure that this happens);

New policy and strategic approaches, stimulated by government reviews, seemed to flourish every couple of years, each time highlighting no significant shifts in outcomes for Indigenous students and providing more research and continued development of strategic policy approaches to address the issues (Commonwealth Aboriginal Studies Working Group, 1982; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, 1992; Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1988; Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), 1996; Collins, 1999; Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education Reference Committee [SEWRSBERC], 2000; NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004).

About the time the fieldwork for this study began, two dominant strategic approaches emerged. They were ‘What Works: explorations in improving outcomes for Indigenous students (McRae et al., 2000a) and Dare-to-Lead, a project sponsored by the Principals’ Australia Institute (Principals’ Australia Institute, n.d.), both being funded by the federal Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). The first of these initiatives provided advice on successful programs that work with Indigenous students and the second provided leadership and direction for principals across Australia on Indigenous education. Indicative of the many reports, policies and strategies around Aboriginal education these two programs symbolise the climax of program development and support to schools and school leadership.
In NSW, the next evolutionary stage in Indigenous education policy embarked upon was the most significant review ever undertaken in NSW and arguably Australia, ‘The Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education (Review)’ which was released in 2004. Its 71 recommendations were to form the blueprint for strategic Indigenous education in this state until 2012. The researcher’s academic leadership on the Review (2004) and policy review of the 1996 Aboriginal Education Policy (Lester & Hanlen, 2004) and this study’s background role at the time proved pivotal to the general thrust of these 71 recommendations and the subsequent NSW Aboriginal Education and Training Strategy 2006-2008 (NSWDET, 2006a).

**SYSTEMIC FACTORS - FIRST WORLD POLICY, THIRD WORLD OUTCOMES**

As indicated above, the 1980s and 1990s reveal frantic policy efforts and an abundance of activity to set the strategic direction of Indigenous education across Australia by both State and Federal governments. The NSWAEP led the first specific policy development to address Indigenous education but ultimately such policy did very little, if anything, to improve the outcomes for Indigenous students across the state. The flurry of policy activity did encourage the growth of research literature during the period and did, to some degree, provide many of the answers to the pedagogical, syllabus and leadership needs of Indigenous students as mentioned in the previous section.

Although the initiative for this researcher’s study preceded the NSW Review of Indigenous education (NSWAECG & NSW Department of Education & Training [NSWDET], 2004), the Review provided a heightened sensitivity both at a state level and significantly at the school district level. This sensitivity in turn provided a data-intensive environment for later stages of data collection for this study. The researcher’s appointment as the leader of the Academic Reference Group provided invaluable opportunity to experience first-hand the developments associated with the Review, and engage as a principal researcher in the evaluation of the AEP (Lester & Hanlen, 2004).

The researcher’s macro systemic appreciation of the situation in NSW was complemented by the micro case studies conducted within a single district across the six high/central schools and their six feeder primary schools with significant Indigenous enrolments. These engagements with district staff, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, working specifically in the Indigenous education domain provided a rich source of data.
and critical insight into the background and specific direction and programming undertaken to improve outcomes for their Indigenous students. These provided invaluable dual insights that informed the study. The next sections focus on the micro level.

SCHOOL FACTORS

Principals and school executive staff, staff intimately involved in Indigenous initiatives or policy directions in schools and Indigenous staff in schools provided the data for this element of the study across primary and secondary schools and the transition between these school levels.

Key issues were explored, primarily through interviews. In particular the focuses were on shared responses to school policy and welfare practices; program and curriculum interventions; outcomes around academic results, attendance, behaviour and community interactions; and the specific research questions for this study. Emergent themes explored across both school levels were the effect of mission and reserve life on students, racism, gender issues and the importance of teacher/Indigenous student relationships.

STUDENT FACTORS

The focus of the study centres on Indigenous students - the most misunderstood and disempowered members of our school communities – and the products of successive failed policies and strategic approaches that have had little if any effect on their school and life outcomes (Board of Studies NSW [BOSNSW], 1997; NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004; Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision [SCRGSP], 2007). The researcher thought that to understand their lives, both within and outside of school would not only be a significant input into resolution of the study’s questions, but

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2 Missions were religious responses to Christianise and ‘save’ Indigenous peoples ravaged by invasion and so-called primitive ways (Swain & Rose [Eds.], c1988). Reserves arose out of the assimilationist constructs of non-Indigenous Aboriginal affairs policy makers from the turn of the 18th century (Goodall, 1990; Fletcher, 1989) and still exist in communities serviced by some of the case study schools.
provide an insight into their perspectives of the schooling system. To achieve this end and to build up a level of trust and relationship with the students, the researcher embarked initially on matters to do with the students’ general backgrounds and interests and gradually built within interviews, both individual and group, and through simple survey questions, an understanding of my role as a researcher and build a mutually respectful relationship.

Within the respect development phase between the student and the researcher, the following detail was explored across each of the Year 5 and Year 7 cohort of students; student demographics; family background; a conceptual framework of the students’ social world outside of school; a student perspective of their school life, including critical phases of primary schooling, transition to secondary school and their perceptions of secondary school; and finally their perceptions of their performance and behaviour in school (see Appendices 3.3, 3.4,& 3.5).

This interaction with students was the most powerful of the data collected as it positioned these students in a context beyond the school system and provided a comprehensive background which moved the analytical framework well beyond the constraints of the study and opened the door to a genuine richness of lives for the vast majority of students. Indigenous students are locked in too often, the stereotypical straitjackets assigned to them by misinformation, racism and distortion of their reality. But, if given the right opportunity built on mutual respect, they can open up and respond simultaneously to their rich cultural backgrounds and true capacity to effectively engage in the educational process. This untapped depth has been laid by the genuine caring parents, carers and Indigenous community members who have unquestionably remained determinedly loyal to maintained these students’ interests and futures at heart and in pride of place, in their striving for more equitable outcomes. The student factors chapter and the following chapter on the Indigenous Community Factors, provided the core data as the basis of the real chances available, but generally untapped by schools, with regard to potential for consistent engagement in education of the vast majority of Indigenous students in the case study.
COMMUNITY FACTORS

The Indigenous community voice came through loud and clear from individual and group interviews with parents/carers, educationists and community representatives on school Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA) committees (where established) and greatly enriched the study’s understanding of the ‘real’ community factors related to their Indigenous children’s schooling. Their input unmasked the stereotypical picture so often painted in ‘deficit discourses’ in the literature and perpetuated in school environments. The study found that the vast majority of parents/carers and the community at large lived in high hopes of educational emancipation from their levels of poverty and the consistent high level of desire to improve the outcomes for their children.

Evidence of some families’ dysfunction was obviously a contributing factor in complicating children’s educational outcomes chances. However, hidden in this sad story is the enormous resilience of families and in particular grandparents picking up the pieces and against all odds in many instances, providing loving, caring and culturally enriching lifestyles for those suffering such family dysfunction. Often grandparents and other family members were able to turn past thousands of years of kinship history into contemporary support networks to ensure the overwhelming majority of Indigenous children get the best possible start and chance out of education. An education which was consistently sought after and only running second to the almost simultaneous desire of Indigenous parents, to make sure their children’s Indigenous identity was maintained.

Parents/carers and other Indigenous informants held high expectations and provided strong support for their children’s education. The majority sent their children/grandchildren to school very regularly. In general, these carers held their children’s school in high regard while, in a minority of cases, they reflected on specific incidents where they clashed with particular teachers or school administrators with regard to their children. Parents/carers and community members’ experiences with schools, relationships with teachers and school administrators more generally are forthcoming in this chapter.

These same carers have to grapple with the reality that despite their endeavours to get their children to school regularly, the outcomes for them have not significantly changed. They often ponder why it is that their children are not in trouble at school, but yet they
get stereotyped as behaviour and attendance problems? They know about the relatively small element of their community that is dysfunctional, and the related children who do not have the access to extended family networks and unfortunately will inevitably have encounters with juvenile justice systems and institutionalisation through incarceration. But they are still questioning why is it that their children, who attend school regularly, are not succeeding and getting the same educational outcome as their non-Indigenous peers?

Issues of community perceptions of critical issues such as racism, Aboriginal Studies and curriculum are explored in this study. In addition and in particular, the specific nature of life of those students who come from Aboriginal missions/reserves and their apparent over-representation in poor attendance and behaviour school statistics are explored in Chapter 8. As is the communities’ responses to the thesis key questions also explored.

**THESIS STRUCTURE**

Immediately following this chapter, the literature review outlines the major systemic educational policy, direction and historical literature along with the emerging role of Indigenous leadership in research and educational policy development relating to teachers, school environments and inclusive pedagogical approaches.

The methodological approach undertaken in the thesis is elaborated in Chapter 3. It includes the important accounts of the initial derivation of the study, and the positioning of the Indigenous author in context of both the research and his greater capacity to influence policy decision making. It describes emergent current Indigenous research methodology grounded in empowering Indigenous voice through narrative, outlining of data collection and procedures undertaken, and the adoption of Bourke et al.’s (2000) four criteria to provide the four key factors of an holistic triangulation of data sources to provide the clear analytical framework of the study.

The chapters from that point reflect the four factors outlined above starting with Chapter 4 on Systemic Factors followed by School Factors in Chapters 5 and 6 covering primary and secondary experiences respectively. The two remaining factors are dealt with in Chapter 7 (Student Factors) and Chapter 8 which deals with Community/Parent Factors.
A synthesis and holistic interpretation of the data presented in the five preceding factor chapters is undertaken in Chapter 9.

In Chapter 10 the researcher moves into an Indigenous reflection on the research undertaken and the impact of the research on him as a key research agent and senior policy developer during the research process. It tackles the uniqueness of his set of circumstances in particular with regard to the multiple lenses and vantage points which he, as an active Indigenous education policy maker, brings to the complexity of the research task. Stimulated by a student voice, the author explores an Indigenous methodological theoretical basis for the study, based on ancient Indigenous ‘Rarrk’ bark painting techniques from the Northern Territory, which concludes this chapter.

The final Chapter 11 explores the findings through the researcher’s key positioning as an Indigenous senior policy maker in NSW and nationally, highlighting the identification of key engagement points of Indigenous students and strategic interventions either undertaken or strategically planned as the basis of major reform in the sector.

WHERE THE JOURNEY LED

In the next chapter a detailed analysis of the literature surrounding the topic follows and includes discussion on key issues around Indigenous policy, leadership, national themes, racial connotations, the role of schools and teachers, and classroom pedagogical dynamics. It needs to be noted that a significant body of literature is based on government reports and studies around policy and practice at a state and national level, which establishes the important context of the study and direction of Indigenous education in Australia.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

Controlling influences in the literature

'We are the most researched people in the world' is a comment I have heard frequently from several Indigenous communities. The truth of such a comment is unimportant, what does need to be taken seriously is the sense of weight and unspoken cynicism about research that the message conveys. (Smith, 1999, p.3)

A scan of the available literature in Aboriginal education presented over the past decade in Australia presents a picture of extensive activity in the area. However, on closer scrutiny, feverish activity on policy, research and review activities has not been commensurate with the realisation of increased educational outcomes within the Australian Indigenous community. Indigenous Australians are the most educationally disadvantaged group in Australia (Long, Frigo & Batten, 1999; Gray & Beresford, 2000; Bourke et al., 2000; Australian Parliament Senate Employment Small Business & Education References Committee [APSESBERC], 2000; NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004; Hughes & Hughes, 2012; Commonwealth of Australia, 2014.) and all current trends would indicate that this situation will only continue to escalate, especially given the significant growing Indigenous youth population (Long, Frigo & Batten, 1999; Groome & Hamilton, 1995; Beresford, 2003a & 2003b; Barnes, 2004; Lester, 2004a; Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2013).

Indigenous education has been in very busy times - the policy and scholarly literature is crowded with advice, recommendations, best practice, programs, reports, reviews, performance measures, but again such rhetoric has had little effect on closing the gap between significantly lower outcomes for Indigenous students than their non-Indigenous peers at any level of education. One must ask for whose benefit has been this heightened desire to write about Indigenous education? Politicians, academics and educationists dominate writing and policy in the field and it is notable they are primarily non-Indigenous authors. Positively, however, at the policy level, most major Indigenous education
reviews and reports have now been placed in the control of Indigenous peoples through Indigenous shared working parties, reviews or taskforces (e.g. Department of Employment Education, Training [DEET] 1988, 1995; MCEETYA, 2000a; Buckskin et al., 2008; Ladwig & Sarra, 2009), or in some form of partnership approach as was evident in New South Wales in the partnership between the Department of Education and Training and the New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (NSWDET & NSWAECG, 2004) in the first comprehensive review of Indigenous education to be undertaken in that state.

There is a growing concern that Indigenous educational policy, literature and practice has been focussed on the more remote and traditional Indigenous communities commonly found in the Northern Territory, South Australia and Western Australia and yet there is also a need for more careful consideration of urban Indigenous communities' needs, as identified over two decades ago by Harris (1994). This latter issue is especially relevant to research relating to NSW – the focus of this thesis. Much of the available literature does not relate specifically to the NSW situation and to some degree has generated a wrongly placed emphasis in policy direction and has led to unquestionably ill-informed policy and practice related stereotyping of the contemporary Indigenous educational situation in NSW.

For more than 20 years State and Commonwealth government reports, reviews, senate investigations and contracted analyses of Indigenous education have formed a substantial element of the investigations and reporting of Indigenous education (National Reports to Parliament on Indigenous Education 2001 – 2008; NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004; DEST, 2001, 2002, 2003a, 2005; Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2008, Appendix 2, pp.108-114; Buckskin et al., 2009; Ladwig & Sarra, 2009; Luke et al., 2013). The most significant of these, and the one that has driven the government momentum in the domain, has been the historic, ‘National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy – Joint Policy Statement’ of 19893 (DEET, 1989). This vitally important policy statement was endorsed and achieved bipartisan support at the Commonwealth level and across every State and Territory in Australia.

3 Commonly referred to as the Aboriginal Education Policy or AEP but in this research is referred as the National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Education Policy or NATSIEP to reduce to an acronym and avoid confusion with the NSW Aboriginal Education Policy (AEP)
The policy laid the foundation for the potential for co-ordinated and concentrated action, and most importantly resource allocation, to address the Indigenous educational disadvantage and to promote educational equity. This policy was prompted by a number of preliminary reviews/reports (DEST, 2003a) but had its gestation clearly embodied in recommendations from the Commonwealth Government instigated an Aboriginal Education Task Force (DEET, 1988). This Task Force’s report became commonly known as the Hughes Report in recognition of the Chair of the Task Force and eminent Indigenous educator and past Chair of the National Aboriginal Education Committee (APSESBERC, 2000). While this policy was widely accepted nationally and dominated both national and state agendas over the next decade and a half, it must be acknowledged that the first Indigenous/Aboriginal education policy in Australia emerged from NSW in 1982, with the New South Wales Aboriginal Education Policy (AEP), which in a review by Crawford et al. (1992) was called ‘The First of Its Kind’ (Crawford et al., 1992) in acknowledgement of this fact.

The complexity of Indigenous education is clearly evident in the literature and detailed in analyses of the failure to make any significant gains in educational outcomes. Many authors have grappled with the broad nature and detail of the issues and most strongly agree that a ‘holistic’ approach is required to lead to any successful realisation of educational gains for Indigenous communities (Groome & Hamilton, 1995; Deyhle & Switcher, 1997, Harslett, Harrison, Godfrey, Partington, & Richer, 1998; Bourke, et al., 2000; Beresford, 2003c; NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004; Beresford, Partington & Gower, 2012). The most influential arguments in this field in Australia have been revealed as recurring themes in policy and review documents over the past decade (APSESBERC, 2000; NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004; MCEETYA, 2006; MCEECDYA, 2010). Colin Bourke et al. (2000) encapsulated these themes in a suggested systematic and integrated analysis of four key factors; systemic factors, school/staff factors, student factors and parent/community factors (hereafter referred to in this thesis as the Bourke et al. (2000) Four Factor Model). While the focus of Bourke et al.’s (2000) work was school attendance it identified four model themes comprising systemic, school, student and family/community factors have broader transferability. At the time the need to improve attendance of Indigenous students in schools was, and still continues to be, perceived as one of the primary causes of poor Indigenous educational outcomes, a point which is challenged in this thesis.
In order to understand the thesis’s primary question, ‘Why Aboriginal kids switch off school?’ there is a need to address the known complexities surrounding Indigenous education. Bearing in mind the recognised deficiencies of a fragmented approach (Bourke et. al. 2000), and the greater potential of a holistic perspective that acknowledges complexity, the Bourke et al. (2000) Four Factor Model has been adopted as the principle guiding framework of analysis for this study overall and for the literature review of this chapter. Taking this holistic approach was recommended as he tackled the primary focus of his study, Indigenous school attendance. Bourke and his colleagues quickly realised the complexity surrounding the study of isolated data in a one dimensional approach in trying to resolve or unravel the complicated educational disadvantage experienced by Australia’s Indigenous students. This study makes good use of these findings and structures data gathering around these more ‘holistic’ factors as pointed out in the following defining of each of these factors for this study and the reporting of the literature to each of these factors.

In the reviews and reports that form the backbone of the broader literature, **Systemic Factors** have been found by the author to relate to those issues to do with policy, regulations, curriculum, pre and post service training of teachers, school leadership, recruitment, resourcing, support provided to schools, environmental factors (health, housing, and employment) and macro community relationships/partnerships (Lester & Hanlen, 2004; NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004; MCEETYA, 2000a, 2006b).

**School/Teacher Factors** comprise fundamental issues such as literacy and numeracy, pedagogy, curriculum, leadership, staff profiles (in particular Indigenous employment), resourcing, racism, behaviour management, school environment, community environment, local community relations, health and well-being, and equitable access, retention, completion and outcomes of Indigenous students (Lester & Hanlen, 2004; NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004; MCEETYA, 2006a, 2006b; Hughes & Hughes, 2012; Luke et al., 2013).

The dominant themes that emerge in relation to **Student Factors** include cultural affirmation, inclusion, self-esteem/self-identity, well-being, engagement (with particular emphasis on teacher relationship engagement and pedagogy), racism, student attendance, retention and student outcomes (Lester & Hanlen, 2004; NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004; MCEETYA, 2006a, 2006b; NSWDEC, 2014).
Significant themes connected to **Community Factors** in the literature encompass the recognition of the cultural and social diversity of Indigenous contemporary communities, socio-economic environment conditions and the essential need to empower Indigenous communities to be able to effectively participate as equal partners in the education process. Community ultimately involves the broader domains of educational provision including community education development programs which would assist in achieving Indigenous self-determination and self-management leading to a more equitable and functioning community environment for Indigenous peoples (MCEETYA, 1995, 2006a; MCEECDYA, 2010).

**Existing policy and practical signposts**

Prior to a more detailed review there is first a need to highlight that despite the amount of literature available and even discounting the fact that much of it is predominantly ‘contemporary traditional community’ driven, there does appear to be ample documentation of the critical directions required to guide development in the area. In short there is information and ideas to harness. However, secondly, the data available clearly indicates that the progress to achieving educational equity over the recent decade has been minimal. Thirdly, there appears ample evidence in the literature for a high level of activity (primarily program based) and resourcing in Indigenous education to promote achievement of improved results. Fourthly, significant policy development, goodwill, priority and intention are acknowledged in the documentation at both a state and federal level and exist historically at a collective national policy level. Finally, overall the data and literature surrounding Indigenous education points to the fact that improved outcomes are still a long way from being achieved (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004; Hughes & Hughes, 2012; Luke et al., 2013).

This lack of progress compounded by the state of current significantly demographic Indigenous youth statistics point to a serious problem sitting at the nation’s doorstep that will escalate exponentially if not addressed (SCRGSP, 2011; ABS, 2013). While it can be argued that Indigenous education has always been at crisis levels from the earliest effects of the first white invasions of this country, the current reality suggests that at no greater time has the need for equitable outcomes in education been more paramount for Indigenous peoples.
This study attempts to look at the issue from a ‘bottom up’ approach in a fairly tight case study environment and purposely starts with a systemic policy framework setting the scene for the then school based literature review and then moving to the climactic literature around critical Indigenous constructs with students, and then similarly working through parents and community voices remaining true to the Four Factor model in the following sections. The literature is purposely drawn in the first two factors (systemic and school) from leading government reports, policy directions and academic papers. This literary background then forms the basis to look more closely at the literature surrounding the next two critical factors i.e. Indigenous students and parents/community, where the focus evolves from policy and practice in education to more academic sources.

**SYSTEMIC FACTORS IN THE LITERATURE**

The main source of detail at systemic level is national and state policy documents and reviews of Indigenous education. A consistent theme across such literature is the ongoing concerns expressed about lack of any substantive and sustainable improvement in overall outcomes from education for the vast majority of Indigenous students and peoples. Herbert et al. (1998) called for the critical evaluation of systemic factors that became part of Bourke et al.’s (2000) holistic factor schema adopted for this study and driven by the fact that it was the systemic failure that drove the studies agenda. Herbert et al. (1998, cited in Bourke et al. 2000, pp.2-3) reflected that the:

> Cause of truancy and unacceptable behaviour in the school … [is] attributed to individual failure and family malfunction … [The] experience of many Indigenous people is of an education system which has failed to provide the educational outcomes which they desire and expect … [and] … many … see this failure as a failure of the system, not the failure of Indigenous people.

Systemic factors in this study are defined as those factors controlled/managed by government educational authorities which impinge on the educational processes operating within a school/teacher’s capacity to engage with Indigenous students in an educational encounter. This section does not attempt an analysis of literature surrounding community factors which impinge on this process and particularly so, the environmental factors, social settings, socio-economic background, and geographic or demographic circumstances surrounding schools as places of particular learning
experiences. These issues will be addressed in the subsequent section on community and parent factors.

**National Leadership**

More than two and a half decades have passed since the drafting and signing of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP) and subsequent elevation of Indigenous education as a priority at a national and state and territory level in Australia. Significant program resourcing and activity has followed (DEST, 2003a; DEEWR, 2008; Hughes & Hughes, 2012, pp.39-44) at a national level in an attempt to stimulate the improvement and eventual equality of outcomes for Indigenous peoples in education. At the turn of the 20th Century MCEETYA elevated Indigenous education to a permanent agenda item in recognition of its importance and critical status for action (MCEETYA, 2000c, p.9). Several States and Territories have held major reviews of Indigenous education and subsequently developed strategic policy and planning documents to support the required urgent improvements in Indigenous education (Collins, 1999; Sarra, 2004; Buckskin et al., 2008; Ladwig & Sarra, 2009). Innovative measures have been undertaken within national and state education systems and include the pioneering of national level outcomes-based approach in Australian education (MCEETYA, 2000a, p.1). Unfortunately this heightened systemic response has generally not provided the significant turnaround in educational outcomes and equity for Indigenous peoples in this country – as attested to in the excerpts below (Department of Employment Education & Training [DEET], 1995; MCEETYA, 2000a, NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004; Beresford, Partington & Gower, 2012):

*The statistics tell us that more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are involved in education than ever before. But equity is not just a matter of numbers. Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders continue to be the most educationally disadvantaged groups in Australia.*

*… Equity is the yet-to-be finished business of the twentieth century. Much still needs to be done. And there is a sense of urgency – both to fulfil Australia’s promise of providing a fair go for all and to complete the work of this century before the end of the decade. Time is critical. (DEET, 1995, pp.22-23)*
The scale of educational inequity remains vast for Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and continues, despite considerable work particularly over the last decade by all governments. (MCEETYA, 2000a, p.1)

… whilst these improvements [showing marginal gain on a few very specific measures which are significantly below the non-Indigenous norm] offer hope to those who work towards educational equality for Indigenous people across Australia, the report shows that there remains unacceptable disadvantage across key indicators.

… Closing the education divide between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians remains one of the Australian Government’s highest priorities. How we address the education and training needs of Indigenous students, will ultimately prove to be the real measure of the success of our education and training system. (DEST, 2003b, p. iii)

Despite the many education initiatives implemented by the Commonwealth and NSW Governments over the past 20 years, Aboriginal students continue to be the most educationally disadvantaged student group in Australia. (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004, p.11)

Aboriginal educational disadvantage ranks as one of Australia’s most pressing social issues, and it is our hope that this book will encourage debate and contribute to the development of best practice in the field. (Beresford, Partington & Gower, [Eds.], 2012, p.viii)

It is timely to look at the systemic factors and the movement from a national level to that of the states that have primary constitutional responsibility for the carriage of education delivery in Australia (DEST, 2003a, p.2). At the national and collective national state consensus level, the motivation, policy framework and to some degree program development, has taken place to at least provide the hope of catalytic momentum for the required revolution in Indigenous education. Yet while both national and state educational systems have provided the intent, policy and resource framework in recent times to attempt to tackle the Indigenous education inequity, such efforts have either not had sufficient time to show the required quantum increase in outcomes, were flawed, or they may amount to little more than the rhetoric and resolution of guilt —‘throwing money’ at the problem and hoping it will go away. A brief overview of the policy momentum surrounding this follows.
Systemically the major thrust of policy stimulation of programs is through resource allocation has evolved from the NATSIEP and subsequently the acceptance of collective responsibility by the MCEETYA for Indigenous educational equity. The generally uncontested 21 goals of the NATSIEP (DEET, 1989, p.14-15) remained the umbrella, guiding development even after some 15 years up until the commencement of this study. These goals were further refined by MCEETYA into a set of eight priority areas (DEST, 2003a, p.2):

- Improving literacy;
- Improving numeracy;
- Improving educational outcomes for Indigenous students;
- Increasing Indigenous enrolments;
- Increasing Indigenous employment in education and training;
- Increasing professional development of staff involved in Indigenous education;
- Increasing involvement of Indigenous parents/community members in educational decision making; and
- Expanding culturally inclusive curricula.

All states were engaged in the process from two vantage points firstly, they were signatories to the NATSIEP and are active members of MCEETYA, and secondly they were directly responsible for the delivery of education in their states/territories and therefore responsible for equity of access, participation and outcomes of all students including Indigenous students.

The Commonwealth Government has attempted to influence or encourage state education systems and private providers through policy direction and specific tied funding grants – either the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Programme (IESIP) or the Indigenous Education Direct Assistance (IEDA) Programme (DEST, 2003a, pp.92-95). The national policy and program literature is dominated by government commissioned reports and evaluations of these program initiatives and is heavily influenced by the government movement to outcomes-based reporting against each of these programs (Kemp, 1999).
Much activity and new program implementation took place in Indigenous education across the nation in all states (DEST, 2003a; NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004). However, in a review of the NSW Aboriginal Education Policy (NSWAEP) (Lester & Hanlen, 2004) the situation was appraised as follows:

_This Review highlights that there is a lot going on in Indigenous education at both a state and national level. Indigenous education is a busy place but appears to be going no-where. Project activity is high, best practice encouraged and resource levels that have never been as high; but in reality, there is neither fundamental systemic acceptance nor change, taking place, that will improve significantly our (Indigenous) educational luck._ (p.110)

In a specialist commonwealth government funded program under the sponsorship of the Principal’s Association titled ‘What Works?’ (McRae et al., 2000a, 2000b & 2002), an attempt was undertaken, through a program under Indigenous Education Strategic Initiative (IESIP) called the Strategic Results Projects (SRP), to accelerate the pick-up and school based action that would prove that results could be achieved quickly given the presence of a number of critical factors, the most significant of these being tightly targeted funding and the goodwill of educational staff. The primary outcomes of the ‘What Works’ program highlighted and reaffirmed the general findings in the broad literature in the field, that if outcomes are to be improved for Indigenous students:

- _They must be given respect_
- _Their culture and its relevant implications must be respected_
- _They must be taught well_
- _And they must attend regularly (McRae et al., 2000a, p.180)_

Such themes are reflected in the general national direction in Aboriginal education in key areas outlined in the following section.
National systemic themes in the literature

An analysis of the literature covering systemic broad based policy and program development identifies five recurring themes:

- Involvement of Indigenous people in educational decision making;
- Achievement of equality of access to educational services;
- Achievement of equality of educational participation;
- Achievement of equitable and appropriate educational outcomes; and
- Co-ordination of services to Aboriginal Communities

To provide a framework to analyse the literature these five original NATSIEP themes have been utilised, making the analysis consistent with both the NATSIEP and also with the MCEETYA eight priority areas which directly related to the 21 goals and 5 themes of the NATSIEP. While many of these themes will be legitimately simultaneously touched on as they relate to the following sections and more detailed chapters in this thesis, it is the intent here to briefly make a statement on the national systemic values and direction in the literature under the above five NATSIEP key themes. The detailed analysis of the case study sections of the thesis will deal in depth with many of these issues as they specifically relate to very local school based operations and practice and in particular to the NSW state obligations as signatures to NATSIEP's primary goal:

*NATSIEP central goal is 'to achieve broad equity between Aboriginal people and other Australians in access, participation and outcomes in all forms of education. (DEET, 1989a, p.9)*

Indigenous people in educational decision-making: Indigenous empowerment

The national direction is very clear and definite in regard to greater shared control of Indigenous education matters and advocates genuine educational partnership at all levels, with the Indigenous community. Key long term philosophical and policy documents strongly support this approach especially following first the Hughes Report (DEET, 1988) and subsequently the foundations being laid in the NATSIEP
The critical importance of partnership and collaboration with parents and the community had become a mandatory component for leading statements and standards at a national level (The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the 21st Century, [MCEETYA, 1999]; National Statement of Principles and Standards for More Culturally Inclusive Schooling in the 21st Century, [MCEETYA, 2000]) and replicated at a state level as exemplified in the NSW document, Securing a Collaborative Partnership into the Future (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 1999) and its revised edition: ‘Together we are; together we can; together we will - Maintaining a collaborative partnership into the future via the Partnership Agreement 2010-2020’ (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2010). As previously raised in this chapter Indigenous educationists and community members have taken up significant leadership and partnership positions in the development of national policy and strategic approaches – Chairs of the both foundation documents, the Hughes Report (DEET, 1988) and the NSW Securing a Collaborative Partnership into the future (NSWDET & NSWAECG, 1999), were Indigenous. It is quite evident that Indigenous empowerment had been enacted at the national and state level education policy development forums.

At a state level a review of Indigenous advisory bodies was commissioned through a national review of Indigenous Education Consultative Bodies (IECB or more commonly referred to as AECGs). These Groups were established in the late 1970s to provide advice to governments at a state level and a collective national level opinion (Fletcher, 1989, Chapter 14). In summary the Review of these bodies indicated that they were providing important and significant advice across the education portfolio at a state level, however, they were not as effectively co-ordinated and productive in the provision of Indigenous policy advice at a national level (Bin-Sallik & Smallacome, 2003).

Another integral component of Indigenous involvement in decision making is in the general numbers of Indigenous staff employed within the system. These Indigenous staff provide a significant on the ground and working contribution to education based on figures drawn over the study’s data gathering period. There is reported minor growth in employment of Indigenous teachers and Aboriginal Education Workers (AEW or Aboriginal Education Assistants [AEA] as they are known in NSW). However, this growth has been supported through a significant recalculation of NSW figures in the employment category covering AEAs and due to this and changes to the way figures were collected in two states, Indigenous employment figures are difficult to track over the 2001 to 2004 period (the period of the study). In fact, there would be argument that in real terms the

At a national and state level it is evident that Indigenous peoples are quite clearly being encouraged to be involved in the decisions associated with their education, however, in the later section in this chapter on assessment of Achievement of Equitable and Appropriate Outcomes, it is indicated that quantum improved outcomes still remain out of reach in spite of the gains in Indigenous decision making empowerment.

**Achievement of equality of access to educational services**

National reports indicate that there has been minimal improvement in Indigenous outcomes from school education (MCEETYA, 2000a; DEST, 2003b; Commonwealth of Australia, 2014, 2015) over the time frame of the study, however, continued difficulty exists in more remote and isolated communities especially with access to secondary schools primarily brought about by transport problems and reported also in less isolated communities of NSW (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004, p.120).

Indigenous school students’ low attendance rates have always been a priority concern and subsequently a major driver of priority Indigenous education strategic development and planning, an issue that is strongly contested in this thesis (but argued more specifically in later chapters). Establishing national comparable data on attendance has consistently been problematic (MCEETYA, 2000a, p.29; NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004; Luke et al., 2013) and hence reporting on a comparative basis nationally has also been problematic. At a primary level the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous attendance was in most state systems within 10%. The gap in average attendance patterns was more pronounced in secondary schooling between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in government schools, which at a median in 2006 of 79% attendance was some 11% lower than their non-Indigenous peers at 90% (DEEWR, 2008, pp.48-49). The difficulties associated with apparent low attendance patterns of Indigenous students can and has been consistently addressed in policy over many years but in many instances it relies heavily on the basic capacity of schools to work
constructively with community and to engage Indigenous students, as the following example from a remote Catholic school in Western Australia demonstrates:

… that attendance had improved as a result of the development of close working and social relationships with parents and the community, combined with increased attention to the presentation of a relevant and interesting curriculum that provided students with the opportunity to experience success. (DEST, 2003a, p.44)

Achievement of equality of educational participation

The most relevant factors regarding monitoring of levels of educational participation are related to apparent retention rates. Specifically the NATSIEP highlighted the areas of preschool, compulsory schooling and post-compulsory age schooling as the three key points for monitoring. Equality of participation in educational services also embodies the concept of encouragement and inclusion into educational systems and therefore, would in reverse have to contend with the general capacity of the system to respond to issues such as racism and exclusion of Indigenous students via more formal suspension/expulsion policy and practice, and extending to the less formal ‘pushout’ practice of educational systems. Systemic responses to these two issues are identified as vital in the literature of equity of participation. Finally, gender participation characteristics require some level of analysis in an attempt to ascertain any significant variance with regard to current outcomes to systemic responses to Indigenous participation outcomes (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004; DEEWR, 2008).

Bourke et al. (2000, p.13) reported at a preschool level that, ‘…the representation of Indigenous students in pre-schools is similar to that of non-Indigenous students.’ Current figures would indicate that Indigenous preschool enrolments are increasing and commensurate with an increase in the number of preschools available. This trend is consistent across all states and territories and across urban, rural and remote demographic areas and would be required given current population growth (DEEWR, 2008, p.17; Commonwealth of Australia, 2013).

Retention rates for Indigenous school students have shown some improvement and in some instances have improved quite dramatically, reaching the highest levels yet enjoyed (Year 12 enrolments and retention rates [Dreise, 2014]). A reduction of the gap

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4 The pushout term comes from Dr Robert Morgan when I first heard him use it in NSW in the mid-1980s when highlighting that Aboriginal students were not failing, in his view schools were effectively pushing them out. I acknowledge more recent use of the term by Dr Eve Tuck (2013) in her description of New York youth being pushed out of schooling primarily around the US General Education Development (GED) school credential.
between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous Year 8 to Year 9 retention ratio in 2006 was reported (DEEWR, 2008, p.44), but unfortunately, such results are isolated and not replicated in other later years (Helme & Lamb, 2011). These isolated gains do little in fact, to change the comparative Indigenous student population retention norms. Apparent retention rates at compulsory and post-compulsory schooling level are demonstrate marginal improvement for Aboriginals but fall far short of their non-Indigenous counterparts in government schools by an unacceptably high level of 7.6 and 30.4 percentage points respectfully (DEEWR, 2008, p.45).

**Literature surrounding racism, suspension/expulsion**

The literature in the systemic environment to some degree avoids confrontation of the raw issues like racism and suspension/exclusion as they are swept up in language and definitions of ‘discrimination’ and ‘retention rates’ that while embodied in dominant policy discourses like the Adelaide Declaration (MCEETYA, 1999) and the Statement of Principles and Standards for More Culturally Inclusive Schooling in the 21st Century (MCEETYA, 2000b) have not been effectively implemented policy in practice at a systems level. Yet racism and exclusion of Indigenous students is the reality in the system and hotly and consistently contested within the literature as significant contributors to student ‘drop out’ and discipline matters in schools on a daily basis (Malin, 1990; Groome & Hamilton, 1995; Dent & Hatton, 1996; Long et al., 1999; APSESBERC, 2000; Beresford, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c; Lester & Hanlen, 2004; NSWDEC, 2015). As illustrated in the following quote, Indigenous students in the NSW Review clearly perceived unfair treatment of original acts of racism:

*During field visits a number of students complained that their school did not discipline other students for racist behaviour: … It was reported that in some schools teachers disciplined Aboriginal students for reacting to other students who persistently made racist comments rather than disciplining the other students. (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004, p.111)*

The NSWDET implemented a specific Anti-Racism Policy Statement in 1992 (New South Wales Department of School Education [NSWDSE], 1992) and developed strategies to curb racism primarily through staff development programs (Lester & Hanlen, 2004, pp.81-82). Such systemic approaches were laudable but have achieved little in decreasing the rate of Indigenous suspensions, which as reported in the NSW Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education in 2004 where around 4 to 8 times those of non-

Mitigating against the NSWDET Anti-racism policy was the inflexibility of student disciplinary codes especially covering bullying, disobedience and dissention, which were often responses to teachers’ lack of cultural understanding and capacity to deal with school behaviour issues (Bourke et al., 2000, p.26) specifically with Indigenous students. This lack of cultural considerations had generated disproportionately high Indigenous suspension rates that have remained a concern for a considerable time and are readily reflected in the literature as being at alarming levels and often discriminatory in practice (Gardiner, Evans & Howell, 1995; Partington, 1997; Herbert et al., 1999; Bourke et al., 2000; Lester & Hanlen, 2004). Improvements in Indigenous participation rates must start with providing an environment which is inclusive of cultural difference and understanding of alternate cultural perspectives and behaviours. A school environment which is both culturally nurturing and affirming while remaining safe and conducive to learning, might be the systemic goals articulated (MCEETYA, 2000b) but the practice reality appears distant.

**Indigenous gender considerations around participation**

*There can be no definitive answer to the question of whether school is harder for Aboriginal girls or boys. The answer will vary from setting to setting and cohort to cohort.*

*The overall higher levels of success in school of Aboriginal girls reflect the generally strong position of Aboriginal women in the community.* (Groome & Hamilton, 1995, p.14)

The literature is rather scant on issues and monitoring of Indigenous gender issues in general and briefly highlights issues of traditional cultural responsibilities (Herbert et al., 1999; APSESBERC; 2000; Bourke et al., 2000), family responsibilities (Herbert et al., 1999; Long et al., 1999; APSESBERC, 2000; Bourke et al., 2000; Sims, O’Connor & Forrest, 2003; NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004), educational outcomes where Indigenous females appear more successful (Groome & Hamilton, 1995b; Herbert et al., 1999; APSESBERC, 2000; Bourke et al., 2000), female school age pregnancy and its effects
on access and retention (Herbert et al., 1998; Long et al., 1999), and a worrying variance and apparent growth as earlier highlighted in school suspension rates of Indigenous female students in the period relevant to this study (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004, NSWDEC, 2014a). There is, as Groome and Hamilton (1985b) point out above and supported in more recent data (Helme & Lamb, 2011), significant variation in outcomes between geographic locations and associated ties to more traditional community lifestyle. While Herbert et al.’s (1999, pp.70-74) findings show that Indigenous females appear to have greater success at school, they would argue strongly with Groome and Hamilton’s (1985b) contention that they were in dominant positions in more traditionally oriented communities.

Overall academic outcomes for Indigenous students are extremely low and there is little reward in arguing marginal gender differences in outcomes however, there is some disturbing statistical data which was of note at time of the study in NSW which may require more detailed analysis and closer monitoring at a national scale. There appears to be an alarming increase in female suspension rates at double that of their Indigenous male peers and a staggering eight times greater than their non-Indigenous female peers since about 2004 (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004, p.81; NSWDEC Annual Report, 2014). Such increases highlight the need for a call to more specialised future research in this area.

Systemically there remains much work to be done to improve participation rates in schools to gain equity with non-Indigenous students. Some pleasing results were evident, however, the trend was not substantial enough to make the inroads required of set targets. Of concern is the enormous disparity in Indigenous participation rates in the post-compulsory years of schooling. At a national level while there has been the most productive retention rates to Year 12 to date (Commonwealth of Australia, 2015), there requires detailed consideration and strategic intervention to substantially replicate these improvements over the later years of school. School environments must be genuinely free of racism and inclusive of Indigenous culture to ensure continuity of participation. While literally having ‘bums on seats’ is an important first step, the emphasis must simultaneously target equitable Indigenous student educational outcomes to ensure the outcomes are productive and the seats continually filled.
Achievement of equality and appropriate educational outcomes

There are four major components measuring the assessment of equitable and appropriate outcomes as far as the NATSIEP defines in the general preparatory and schooling sector. The components are preschool and in the school sector literacy/numeracy, cultural affirmation/recognition and Year 12 successful completion rates. Above all else, there is little point in forcing Indigenous students to attend an education system which will ultimately fail them. At a school level on any measurable scale of academic outcome, Indigenous students fall well short of their non-Indigenous counterparts. While not specifically detailed in the NATSIEP goals nor highlighted in the National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People (MCEETYA, 1995, 2006) effectively prepared, trained and skilled teachers and educational leaders are required if Indigenous education is to take the quantum leaps required to make substantial outcome gains. Emerging in the priority areas in response to this has been the call to ‘increase professional development of staff involved in Indigenous education’ (DEST, 2003a, pp.2-3; Gore, Ladwig & King, 2004; Luke et al., 2013).

Responding to the demands of improving the quality of educators in the Indigenous education area three major thrusts have emerged – firstly, in pre-service teacher education programs at Universities; secondly, in-service professional development programs; and thirdly, in providing professional development in school leadership.

The literature reports on a number of fronts the need for increased preparation of teachers to teach in Indigenous communities and have the skills to implement mandatory Indigenous education policy (Groome & Hamilton, 1995a; Dent & Hatton, 1996; Bourke, 2000; APSESBERC, 2000; Heslop, 2003; NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004; Luke et al., 2013). Beresford (2003c, p.271) condemned teacher training institutes for their lack of commitment in the domain:

It is unfortunately the case that too little effort has been made to ensure that Aboriginal education is regarded by teacher training institutions and education systems as a specialisation based upon an understanding that intercultural teaching is a complex task requiring a diverse set of skills and knowledge.
Pre-service preparation in Aboriginal education through teaching Indigenous languages, cultures and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and educational pedagogy was still not universal nor the quality and compulsory nature of such program delivery guaranteed at the time of the study, with some 90% of tertiary institutions indicating they were implementing Indigenous study units in relevant areas like education. Many of these institutions are providing cross-cultural awareness training and a small number are involved in some form of Aboriginal Language program at time of the study (DEST, 2003a, p.71). The reluctance of higher education institutions to take on this responsibility was to be challenged, especially as state governments, like NSW agreed to make Aboriginal education training a pre-requisite qualification for teaching in this state, which came into effect in 2008 (Lester & Hanlen, 2004, p.133; NSW Institute of Teachers, 2008; Buckskin, 2014). If NSW can provide the lead, all future teaching graduates of the future may at least be bringing to Indigenous students and communities some base level of understanding of Indigenous pedagogy and culture which is specifically addressed at Recommendation 9 in the MCEETYA ‘Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005-2008’ (2006b, p.8). The issue then relies on bringing those graduates without such background up-to-speed in this area.

Lester and Hanlen (2004, p.5) found, in their NSW case study of some 26 schools with significant levels of Indigenous student enrolments, that even after extensive professional development following the release of DET Aboriginal Education Policy, there still remained some 57% of staff and community members who had not undergone the training in their program of study. Further to this, data was gathered on the number of teachers who had post-service formal qualifications in Indigenous Education and only 20 teachers out of 213 or 9.4% indicated that they had such qualifications (Lester & Hanlen, 2004, pp.42-4). While it is noted that considerable effort has been undertaken by educational systems in particular in NSW and also in South Australia and Western Australia (APSESBERC, 2000) in the domain of in-service training and inductions for staff in schools with a high Indigenous enrolment, it is clear that there were and there remain significant numbers of teachers with little or no professional development in Indigenous pedagogy or cultural awareness, a consistent frustration reported throughout the literature and reinforced in this study and more recently further supported by Luke et al. (2013).
Educational leadership, especially at a school level, proves to be a critical component of the potential for success in Indigenous education as clearly articulated in this quote from Groome and Hamilton (1995, p.44):

*We were continually impressed with the absolutely strategic importance of the principal in determining the school’s approach to Aboriginal students and their families. If he or she demonstrates respect to the Aboriginal students, relates well to their families and sets high standards for staff, there is every expectation of success for the Aboriginal students.*

There is extensive support in the literature for the findings of Groome and Hamilton above in regard to the extreme importance, pivotal and catalytic role of educational leadership in Indigenous education (MCEETYA, 2000; Beresford, 2003c; Heslop, 2003; Lamb, Walstab, Teese, Vickers & Rumberger, 2004; Lester & Hanlen, 2004; NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004; Sarra, 2005; Frawley, Dang & Kittiphanh, 2015). Bourke et al. (2000, p.22) took the matter a step further and highlighted that the selection process for principals is perhaps the most important process a school and community can undertake, being crucial to the overall success and educational atmosphere in a school. The primary national systemic response to the issue of building quality leadership in Indigenous education is predicated on the to date, very impressive ‘Dare to Lead’ initiative through the Australian Principals’ Association Professional Development Council and the programs’ growing success (Brierely, 2005). The Indigenous patron of the program and much respected educationist and elder from Western Australia, May O’Brien has the following accolade for the program’s success and challenge:

*Principals, you are the ones that make your school or break your school. You must have the vision and zeal to make things happen. I dare you to go out on a limb, and make the aims of this project a reality.* (Brierely, 2005, p.2)

The ‘Dare to Lead’ program initiative provides the valuable stimulus for leadership at the school level or ‘coal face’. Such leadership at a school level becomes critical to improving outcomes; however a further determinate rests in the preparation before school access in the preschool domain.

Pleasingly educational outcome results for preschool appear to be much better, at least amongst Independent Indigenous funded preschools, than results being obtained in the
Public school preschool system. In 2006 the highest level of equity recorded in National Reports to Parliament on school readiness scores was reached with non-Indigenous students with some 93% of Indigenous students at Independent Indigenous preschools. However, the results fell markedly short of these figures in government preschools, and actually dropped almost 70% on 2005 figures and only represented some 65% on the same readiness scores for schooling as their independent peer preschools. (DEEWR, 2008, p.xxii, 21-24)

Early years of Primary schooling are following the government preschool trend above and results in literacy and numeracy levels in Year 3 and 5 indicate significant gaps compared to their non-Indigenous peers. Poor outcomes in these early years can and do condemn significant numbers of Indigenous students to debilitating literacy/numeracy deficit which will compound their educational disadvantage from that point on. This is well documented in the NSW Review of Aboriginal Education (2004) where it was calculated that by Year 7 in writing and language that:

…the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students is so great that it corresponds roughly to as much as 58 months and nearly 60 months behind in writing and language skills respectively. (NSW AECG & NSWDET, 2004, p.23)

Closing the literacy and numeracy gap between Indigenous students and their non-Indigenous peers becomes a paramount priority for education systems and was rightfully elevated to this level in national systemic commitment and program development as articulated in NATSIEP (DEET, 1989a), Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the 21st Century (MCEETYA, 1999), the Statement of Principles and Standards for More Culturally Inclusive Schooling in the 21st Century (MCEETYA, 2000b) and the significant step of support and targeted funding of the very specific National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (NIELNS) (DETYA, 2000a). An important factor in closing the Indigenous literacy/numeracy gap is the extent of commitment to inclusive policy and practice in schools.

The Model of More Culturally Inclusive and Educationally Effective Schools (MCEETYA, 2000b) had its primary objectives of making schooling more culturally inclusive, relevant and engaging through improvements in curriculum, school environment and teaching professional skills. This Model represents the systemic guidance for schools to ‘create sustainable change and improvement that integrates the successful outcomes of

- **Community:** Partnership arrangements (including teachers and parents), Decision making, Planning, Accountability;

- **School:** Leadership and coordination, Environment, Organisation, Professional development, Curriculum, Monitoring, assessment and reporting;

- **Classroom:** Teaching strategies, Learning styles, Classroom organisation, Standards and targets, Intervention/additional assistance.

Critical to cultural affirmation is the curriculum principle that provides the clear direction of simultaneous development and enhancement of themselves and their identities as Indigenous peoples, while gaining contemporary skills required to function in the Australian community (MCEETYA, 2000b, p.18 Sect: 1.6[iii]). There appears to be no direct reporting at a national level against targets on outcomes in this important domain in the National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training outside of individual program approaches at a state level. The development of Indigenous languages has been guided by the Australian Indigenous Languages Framework (Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia [SSABSA], 1996) originally and now guided by the National Indigenous Languages Policy (Department of Regional Australia, Local Government, Arts and Support, 2012). Principally, cultural affirmation in curriculum is guided by Indigenous perspectives to the curricula at both primary and secondary levels, through specific Indigenous subjects being available in secondary education and via specialised Indigenous language courses including English as a Second Language – Indigenous Language Speaking Students (ESL-ILSS) program (DEEWR, 2008, p.136) both of which are integral components of supporting the children’s identity.

At the time of this study, the gap in 2002 between Indigenous and non-Indigenous NSW Indigenous student achievement of a Year 12 certificate varied between 14.7% and 38.5%, with non-Indigenous achievement in every state and territory jurisdiction outstripping that of Indigenous students. There was also uneven performance between states with some five out of eight states or territories showing an increase in the Indigenous attainment of Year 12 certificates in that year (DEST, 2003a, pp.35-36). In
addition to these educational outcomes at Year 12 there had been the development of four specific performance indicators that were monitored in 2002 under IESIP performance, monitoring and reporting framework. This framework provided outcomes data in senior education via Apparent Retention Rate from Year 10 to Year 12, Progression Rates of 15 to 19 Year Olds in Education and Training, Grade Progression Ratios and Senior Secondary Outcomes or Year 12 certifications (MCEETYA, 2000c, pp. 73-78). Unfortunately the national gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students for the period of the study showed no significant improvement in school overall results and in fact on some figures like Year 12 completions actually fell in 2006 (DEEWR, 2008, p.36). Current trends on Year 12 results the gap is now closing (Commonwealth of Australia, 2015).

Co-ordination of associated services to Aboriginal Communities

Around the time of this study a number of reports had highlighted the need for improved co-ordination of service delivery to Indigenous communities and particularly with government services (Beresford, 2003c, Lester & Hanlen, 2004) which would enhance external environmental, social and economic impact on Indigenous education. The major pushes for this area had rested with the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) with a national commitment to co-ordinate and involve Indigenous peoples and communities directly in the planning processes surrounding more appropriate, timely, equitable and efficient government service delivery. The National Commitment highlights four major area objectives in: Culture and Heritage; Economic Development; Social Well-being and Government services. At the time of this study pilot programs had commenced across Australia and the NSWDET that were playing a lead role in the development of the pilot program and commitment at Murdi Paaki in northwest NSW. Systemically MCEETYA at the time of the study was supporting the COAG approach to partnership which had the potential to provide the support for critical key factors which are integral to effective educational delivery and outcomes e.g. health, housing and community infrastructure, law, employment and childcare (MCEETYA, 2000a, pp. 56, 100-105). These factors are foundation indicators to poverty and disadvantage which is well articulated in 'Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators' (SCRGSP, 2007, 2011) and are dually acknowledged in this study. Any further in-depth pursuit of these well documented
disadvantages beyond noting them as factual conditions of Indigenous peoples in this country is not possible here as fall outside of the scope of this study.

This section of the thesis has explored the key foundations of action established through fundamental systemic policy and strategic planning at a macro national level. The literature in this domain is quite strong, clearly and purposely directed at achieving outcomes with the view to increase Indigenous educational equity through endeavouring to close the educational gap between Indigenous students and their non-Indigenous peers. Fundamentally, what it provides is the framework for action at the coalface of education interaction within the Western educational domain – in schools and classrooms. To many educationists the school has become an extension of the colonial battlefield, where cultures collide, power and dominance exudes from the education system, the day-to-day struggles and reality exist for Indigenous students, and yet, Indigenous peoples continue to put their greatest trust and faith in such an education system to provide the equitable playing field for their own community-led renaissance in Australia’s 21st century world. The next obvious step is to look at what the literature is saying about the micro environments or factors of schools before moving on to the students’ Indigenous perspectives and then finally assessing the literature for the response of leading Indigenous communities to the educational agenda.

SCHOOL FACTORS IN BLACK AND WHITE – KOORI/MURRI EDUCATION FROM A SCHOOL AND TEACHERS’ PERSPECTIVE

From the preceding dialogue the macro Indigenous educational systemic agenda is now well established and generally at policy levels well-reasoned, supported and arguably well resourced. Indigenous education frameworks and strategic directions were set in the 1980s which continue to drive the agenda. With the release of the 2008 Aboriginal Education Policy in NSW, which was built on the findings of the NSW Review (2004), on the surface, prospects brightened for Indigenous education. However, at the school level, the business end of education, it appears that quantum change\(^5\) is taking longer to effectively respond to such macro planning (DEET, 1995, 1988; SEWRSBERC, 2000, NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004; Luke et al., 2013; NSWDEC Annual Report, 2014a). A look at the literature surrounding schooling of Indigenous students and perhaps at the

\(^5\) Quantum change referred to here is the level of change required to significantly shift the outcome of the majority of Indigenous students to equitable levels with their non-Indigenous peers.
operative coalface of schooling, the teacher and classroom micro environmental factors of the classroom, bear closer scrutiny. This section will address two themes each with several sub-themes that appear in the literature. The first is ‘School Environment’ and the second is ‘Schools/Classrooms as Culture in Conflict or Inclusion’. The first theme covers the setting or environment of schools, while the latter encompasses the difficulties confronting the amalgamation of two diverse cultures into the microcosm of the school/classroom. Academic literature that addresses the fundamental features of school policy, leadership, curriculum, pedagogy, staffing, Indigenous student and community engagement and various chronological educational theories will be briefly explored below.

The school environment

Outside of more traditionally oriented remote Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, Western Australia, South Australia and Queensland, concern about school facilities has a low profile in the current literature especially in NSW (Gilbey, 1998, Nicholls, Crowley & Watt, 1996; Hughes & Hughes, 2009). It would appear that issues surrounding quality and equality of access to facilities, is one which is nearing realisation outside of significantly isolated communities in the aforementioned states. The principle issues surrounding school facilities and focusing on school services is the capacity to make these places more welcoming and inclusive of Indigenous peoples, as presented in the following teacher statement in Harslett, et al.’s (1998) work on Aboriginal education:

*It has become a lot better for Indigenous parents to come to this school. Visually around the school it has become a friendlier environment for everyone. The school has become much more open and people avail themselves to meet parents. The erecting of murals [Indigenous art] – parents came in for that. I have seen more parent involvement this year because of things like that. (Harslett et al., 1998, p.5)*

Indigenous murals are only a small part of the equation in making schools more welcoming. Much of the responsibility for setting a conducive, productive, stimulating and culturally inclusive educational environment rests with the school leadership and particularly with the principal as previously highlighted. Significant numbers of references are made in the literature with regard to the importance of school leadership (MCEETYA, 2000; Bourke et al., 2000; Beresford, 2003; Masters, 2004; Brierely, 2005; Sara, 2011;
Luke et al. 2013) for setting the tone for interactions with the Indigenous community and their children. This positive environment is essential if schools are to play the extracurricular roles within communities in such initiatives as ‘Schools as Community Centres’ as outlined in the NSW Review (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004, pp.57-59) where the school hosts intergovernmental agency support to the community in areas like health, community development, early childhood services, housing and welfare. Schools and their leadership often find themselves as the most stable and uniquely positioned resource in many of our isolated and rural townships, which demands particular leadership qualities that are often not part of the fabric of preparation for principals and school leadership positions. NSW has extended this framework through implementing several Connected Community centres and developed Local Schools, Local Decisions school management models (NSWDEC, 2011, 2014c). These types of initiatives require special candidates for these pivotal positions and as Vacha and McLaughlin (1992) (as cited in Groome & Hamilton, 1995, p.44) pointed out, have amazing capacity to affect the school environment:

… that the climate and characteristics of the school, and the way in which these are perceived by individual teachers, are the key determinates of success among at-risk students, far exceeding factors to do with the students themselves, their families or individual teachers. The basic factor in determining school climate itself is the attitude and approach of the school leadership team.

Integral responsibility for school leadership lies within the framework of school policy development. Implementation/interpretation of departmental policy is the capacity to set the directions of Indigenous interaction through in particular, policies surrounding community involvement, welfare, behaviour, equity and cultural inclusivity. How schools respond to their policy and practice will clearly mark out the success or otherwise of their interaction with Indigenous community. Beresford (2003c, p.242) notes the wisdom of Colin Tatz (1999) (a long time academic campaigner in Indigenous equity and minority group education in NSW) when highlighting a warning with regard to his work in Indigenous youth suicide when as quoted he says: “…there ‘are no universal strategies which apply to all Aborigines, even within the one State: the only path is the difficult one, region by region, sometimes community by community”.

There are no simple solutions to complex historical colonised Indigenous community issues. Positive school environments emerge through careful negotiation with all
stakeholders and paramount emphasis on a framework of inclusive development. The inclusive atmosphere of school is directly commensurate with its leadership’s capacity to work constructively on a local level with its community in genuine equitable partnership, which is perhaps the strongest message in the literature (Herbert et al., 1999; NSWDET & NSWAECG, 1999; MCEETYA, 2000b; Heslop, 2003; Nelson, n.d.; BOSNSW, 2008; NSWDET & NSWAECG, 2010). School climate is an essential component of what is perhaps the least analysed area of Indigenous education, the classroom learning environment (Mellor & Corrigan, 2004; Luke, et al., 2013).

The learning environment

While it appears the facilities may have improved for most Indigenous students in non-remote environments there do remain persistent concerns around the ability to attract experienced and culturally aware staff to schools with Indigenous students (Groome & Hamilton, 1995a; Partington, 1998; Bourke et al., 2000; Heslop, 2003). It is the school and perhaps more importantly, the classroom environment which holds the key to Indigenous success (Lester & Hanlen, 2004) including quintessential factor of effective teachers (Harris, 1994; Groome & Hamilton, 1995; Beresford, 2003a; Hattie, 2005; Amosa, Ladwig, Griffiths & Gore, 2007), articulated by Harslett (1999, p.1 quoted in Gray & Partington, 2003, pp.161-162):

*Effective teachers have an understanding of Aboriginal cultures and histories and of their students’ home and family backgrounds and circumstances and have an ability to develop good relationships with Aboriginal students and their families. Such relationships are typically built on consistency and fairness with all students while at the same time there is an understanding and appreciation of student differences and needs…*

The interaction between the teacher, and Indigenous students and the relationship established between them, enhances the potential for Indigenous students to succeed. Indigenous society is very much reliant on establishing personal relationships, which are based on traditional complex spiritual social and cultural inter-relationships that in themselves are perceived by Indigenous peoples as more important than education itself (APSESBERC, 2000, p.43). As Partington and Gray (2003, p.173), and Bishop (2008) point out (and which Munn’s [1998] earlier research also supports) developing a close
and trusted relationship between teacher and student especially when it comes to laying the platform for effective classroom management, is a most critical educational relationship. The very act of teaching or pedagogy is the most fundamental element in the creation of the foundation for learning for all children (Hill & Rowe, 1998; Hattie, 2005) but especially so for Indigenous students because it involves the essential element of personal relationship one-to-one with student and parents/Aboriginal community (Partington, 2006; Harrison & Greenfield, 2011 & Kearney, McIntosh, Perry, Dockett & Clayton 2014).

Work at a national and at a NSW state level on Quality Teaching (QT) (NSWDET Professional Support & Curriculum, 2003a, 2003b; Ladwig, Gore, Amosa, Griffiths, 2009) highlights the significance of pedagogy and in particular the important cultural ramifications where teachers from dominant cultures must understand the hidden or ‘invisible’ sociology of pedagogy (Bernstein, 1997), to ensure they are inclusive of all students (NSWDET, 2003a, p.14). This is further supported by the works of Cope and Kalantzis (1995) and Gray (1990) in Australia. The focused work in Quality Teaching (QT) across Australia and the specific work in NSW relating to correlations with the directions of this thesis is both exciting and much needed, especially considering the important aspects in the NSW QT Framework (QTF) where emphasis in pedagogy is focused not only on ‘explicit quality criteria’ but also in the inclusive nature and potential for Indigenous students in the Framework’s educational dimension of ‘Significance’. This is particularly so in the elements of background and cultural knowledge, inclusivity, connectedness and narrative - all elements found in the broader literature about effective teaching of Indigenous students (Malin, 1990, 1994; West, 1994; Dent & Hatton, 1996; McRae et al., 2000a, 2000b, 2002; Sarra, 2011; Beresford, Partington & Gower, 2012). Leonard West (1994, p.19) highlights in some earlier work, the importance of working from an Indigenous cultural base as a positive for classroom pedagogy in his concluding remarks on a paper addressing ‘Cultural Behaviour, Conflict and Resolution’ which continually resonate in current Indigenous educational climates:

“cultural behaviours of Aboriginal people should be seen as a positive resource to be used in the school. They should not be seen as a hurdle that the school should be trying to clear or bypass. The approach outlined in this paper is of going back to the cultural behaviours that are brought to school by the child and using these as the education base. We can then use culturally appropriate forms of communication and organisation to support the child in his/her development.”
Achieving pedagogically culturally inclusive classrooms is heavily reliant on the availability of high quality well trained teachers. Unfortunately, as pointed out earlier in this chapter, this is not a position of strength in the NSW nor national education system (Luke et al., 2013). With the implementation of Quality Teaching professional development programs, embracing an inclusive learning environment, there is greater potential for improved outcomes for Indigenous students. However, as strong as the literature is on the importance of pedagogy to Indigenous learning, the reality is as previously highlighted by Tatz (1999) that no general professional development will have the capacity to replace the essential component of tailoring pedagogy to meet the specific and diverse needs of the Indigenous community serviced by the school. This is highlighted in Quality Teaching through the ‘Cultural Knowledge’ element of the Significance dimension, which demands close working relationship with local Indigenous communities (Donovan, 2009).

MCEETYA’s Model of more Culturally Inclusive and Educationally Effective Schools (2000) encapsulates the work of significant numbers of writers focussing on the topic of the characteristics of effective teachers of Indigenous students (Fanshawe, 1976, 1989; Eckermann, 1987; Malin, 1994; Groome & Hamilton, 1995a, 1995b; Bourke et al., 2000; Godfrey, Partington, Richer & Harslett, 2001; Gray & Partington, 2003; Beresford, Q., Partington, G. & Gower, G, 2012). The following statement (MCEETYA, 2000b, p.4): provides both a good introduction into the discussion on curriculum issues in Indigenous educational learning environments and the importance of culturally inclusive pedagogy:

*Of key importance to the successful integration of new approaches into the mainstream of the school curriculum will be educators who know, understand and can work collaboratively with their Indigenous students; have high expectations and standards; and are flexible, risk-taking facilitators who are receptive to innovation.*

Systemically the curriculum established, developed and monitored from positions of central bureaucracy are all invasive and powerful tools that can and have maintained the hegemonic foundations of Australian society (Beresford, 2003a, pp.25-26). These dominant societal pushes are often referred as the ‘hidden curriculum’ (Harris, 1994; APSESBERC, 2000 ) that is all pervasive and culturally assimilationist in intent. Munns (1998, p.175), using the works of Johnston (1990) and Connell, White and Johnston (1991), argues that social justice requires that curriculum be refocused onto the needs
of the individual and builds on and is inclusive of their cultural diversity. Such arguments have found favour in curriculum evolution and are clearly realised in MCEETYA (2000b) policy pushes in this regard into inclusive curriculum which is continually providing the direction to the new National Curriculum being developed in Australia through the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA 2012).

The movement to inclusive curriculum approaches is applauded but the reality is that such approaches during the time of the study were still relatively new to the system and had not produced significant wholesale change to classroom practices (APSESBERC, 2000, p.74). Moreover, it appears that such implementation is still a long way off (Luke, et al., 2013). Hence, most Indigenous students find themselves in school environments which foster an antiquated curriculum. Although more recent trends arising from the ACARA (2012) and similar state-wide curriculum initiatives (Queensland Department of Education, 2011) in response to ACARA’s earlier directions in the area of Indigenous curriculum, would indicate some potential change in curriculum inclusion of Indigenous peoples in Australian schools will need to be incorporated in the future.

Bourke et al. (2000, p.45) highlights the difference in curriculum between schools with significant and low Indigenous student enrolments. In their study and more recently supported in Luke et al. (2013, p.218), schools with larger Indigenous populations were observed to have local language, history and cultural inclusion into the curriculum, while those with small Indigenous enrolments demonstrated little cultural inclusion. National and state current curriculum policy and direction indicates that inclusive curriculum such as Aboriginal studies and languages are evolving as compulsory components of curriculum across subjects as perspectives, and in their own right as separate defined subjects. An example of this in NSW has been the reported successes of the Board of Studies NSW (BOSNSW) curriculum initiatives in Indigenous education which has virtually seen a systemic adoption of Aboriginal studies across primary and secondary school levels for all students as exampled in the following quote from Lester and Hanlen’s review of the Aboriginal Education Policy in NSW (Lester & Hanlen, 2004, pp.133-134):

*There was consistent supporting data to the Review, from a variety of sources and most importantly from students themselves, that the implementation of Aboriginal Studies for all students is now a reality in schools. … Of note however, is the finding that while Aboriginal Studies had permeated the curriculum there is still some way to go in ensuring the quality, sequencing and consistency of its application.*
The quality component of curriculum in schools is one which several writers have articulated as a real cause for concern for Indigenous communities and parents. The message is that Indigenous people do not want ‘watered down syllabus’ – education should and must be an empowering tool, and any semblance of less than equal quality outcomes from education is quite clearly not tolerated amongst contemporary Indigenous communities (Munns, 1998, p.184; APSESBERC, 2000, pp.62-63; Heslop, 2003, p.234; NSWAC & NSWDET, 2004, p.12; and Luke, et al., 2013).

Indigenous invisibility in the curriculum and the need to fight for fundamental space in areas of history, culture and social domains has been an ongoing hurdle for Indigenous peoples and organisations such as Aboriginal consultative/advisory groups like the NSWAC — a struggle, which has continued over at least the past 30 years and has continued through rounds of negotiation with the new National Curriculum. Various initiatives for inclusive curricula from MCEETYA supported at state Aboriginal consultative group level provide considerable hope for increased cultural affirmation and lead to improved positive identity and self-esteem of Indigenous students (Bin-Sallik & Smallacombe, 2003, pp.15-19). Creating a space in the curriculum for embedding cross-cultural inclusions and cultural affirmation has provided the foundation for more the development of improved self-image, self-esteem and cultural affirmation.

Fundamental to inclusive curriculum is the need for genuine acceptance of Indigenous languages, including Aboriginal English (AE) and the integration of these languages as integral components of curriculum and language/literacy development. From the still unfortunate popular misconception of AE being viewed as a lower form of English (Dent & Hatton, 1996, p.50) to continuous debates at a national level surrounding the ‘Two-Way’, bilingual and bicultural programs currently being implemented in more traditionally orientated communities in Northern and Central Australia (Bourke et al., 2000, pp.38-39, and Waller, 2012), the foundation of the importance of and inclusive nature required in languages is best presented by Malcolm’s (Malcolm, 1998; Malcolm, Haig, Konigsberg, Rochecouste,1999; Malcolm & Grote, 2007; & Malcolm & Konigsberg, 2007) works with colleagues in this field which proves to be an excellent source of quality information on Indigenous languages and well supported through some of the authors earlier work:

*It is then, important to recognise that, where Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students come to school with the ability to understand or speak an Aboriginal language, they possess a significant resource encapsulation and substantial*
inheritance of linguistic and cultural knowledge. They also demonstrate that they have a ‘track record’ as successful learners in experiential contexts. School learning needs to complement this prior learning experience, building on it but recognising its priority as the foundation for all subsequent learning, and for living. (Malcolm, 1998, p.125)

Malcolm (1998), Sharifian (2008), Purdie et al. (2008) and McKay (2011) highlight the focal areas of Indigenous language acquisition and the complexities surrounding the history and teaching of English as a second language or second dialect. These works provide a sound introduction to complexity surrounding Indigenous language and teaching. These works further support that over 250 languages were known, there are now some 100 currently still in some use and many others can be reclaimed. All such work demands a clear understanding and awareness of the local Indigenous community and their support for such curriculum inclusions and clear policy direction.

An essential component of such affirming curricula developments above is conditional on the critical need to localise and customise curriculum inclusion in classrooms. This can only be achieved through the development of genuine community partnerships between Indigenous community leaders and parents and schools and their teachers. Without genuine dialogue and more importantly Indigenous control of such sensitive issues like language and culture, there remains fertile ground for considerable tension, disagreement, anger and unfortunately, which has so often been the case, disenfranchisement from education for Indigenous peoples. Indigenous communities await the outcomes from ACARA national curriculum developments to assess the potential of these directions in this realm of curriculum inclusion roll out over coming years (ACARA, 2012).

Schools as cultures in conflict or inclusion?

Schools have been the instruments of colonial policy from the time of those first established by the invaders. The first Native Institute at Parramatta set up by Governor Macquarie and the missionary William Shelley in 1815 (Fletcher, 1989, p.19), sought to ‘civilise’ Indigenous Australians. Throughout colonial history and until contemporary times schools and education have been seen as the primary tools to separate, assimilate, integrate or generally carry out the predetermined will of non-Indigenous
community expectations. Given such a background it is not unreasonable to think that schools have become synonymous with the considerable tensions between whites and blacks in this country. Understanding this philosophical impasse, there is little wonder that current movements in education to culturally inclusive national policy direction, while welcomed, had to convince often sceptical Indigenous communities about its intent. Also, educational policy rhetoric and associated equity outcomes appear very distant to the reality of classroom practice and school outcomes for most Indigenous students today. Colonial ideology and to some degree its perceived ongoing practice in contemporary Australian schools, provides a fertile ground for continuing negative perceptions and the ongoing reality of issues surrounding racism, exclusion, victimisation, cultural genocide and marginalisation. The manifestation of the effects of such past policy and practice must be eradicated if Indigenous students are to secure their rightful places and outcomes of a culturally inclusive and equitable education system, an exploration of this environment both past and present in the key themes of the literature is now addressed briefly in this thesis.

**Climate of Indigenous educational participation**

_White communities tried to cope with each real or imagined danger or embarrassment as it arose [from contact with Aborigines], and many methods were used, from bullets to blankets. In all of this the school as a means to an end has largely gone unnoticed; yet, at one time or another over a period of 150 years, the school has been used in the cause of pacification, Christianisation and Europeanisation, and a means of protecting white interests, maintaining segregation or assisting racial integration._ (Fletcher, 1989, p. 7)

The quote by Fletcher above indicates the commencement of a policy shift of schooling to assist in implementation of more favourable ‘multiculturalism or self-determination’ (Fletcher, 1989) continues to highlight the subtle and not so subtle use of education to ‘harness and train’ the often historically referred ‘Noble Savages’ of NSW over time. To establish and more importantly understand the current status of Indigenous educational access and outcomes in Australia, and more specifically in relation to this study related to NSW, a brief historical picture of educational colonisation needs to be established. It is not the intention here however, to go into the considerable detail that is well recorded by J.J. Fletcher’s (1989) account of the NSW situation and on a more general national
level by Beresford (2003b). It is the aim here to take a brief look at the literature surrounding the policies of the time that played such an integral role in the nature, quality and motivation of educational access experienced by Indigenous peoples in this country. It is truly the legacy of such policy that requires careful consideration today as education systems attempt to raise Indigenous educational access and outcomes to the equitable levels that non-Indigenous peoples enjoy in this country. After a brief overview of early policy this section will critically address the legacy of such educational policy which survives and grows in the living experiences and memories of Indigenous communities today.

**White superiority pervades education**

Beresford notes that the foundations of education policy was deeply entrenched in theory emanating from racial interpretations of Charles Darwin’s theories of evolution. The clear sense of superiority of Europeans over the group referred to as Aborigines abounded and set the tone for schooling policy (Beresford, 2003b, pp.42-44) from earliest invasion. The early colonial experimentation with education of Indigenous peoples had failed and missionaries continued educational Christianisation,

Fletcher (1989) points out that throughout the 19th century there was a mixture of access of Indigenous students to public schools and simultaneously there were separate missionary schools operating. Government policy during this time went through stages of attempted civilising the Aborigines through total indifference when early attempts of civilization failed, to finally acquiesce to access to public schools until racism (disguised as behaviour or health related issues) saw Indigenous students being systematically denied access to schools. With the establishment of the Aboriginal Welfare Board in NSW and similar boards emerging across the country and the continued push of white parents to exclude Indigenous students, the birth of separate Aboriginal schools on missions and government reserves began to gain favour. This became known as the ‘Clean, Clad and Courteous’ policy which Fletcher (1989) chose as the title for his book. This policy subsequently gave way to Minister for Education John Perry’s 1902 instructions to exclude Aboriginal children from public schools on the wish on non-Indigenous parents, commonly known as the ‘Exclusion Policy’ (Fletcher, 1989, pp.71-74).
Under exclusion policies and the then government policy of segregation onto reserves and missions where housing and infrastructure were poor or non-existent, separate Indigenous schools began to emerge during the early to mid-20th Century. These schools were generally under resourced and quite often staffed by unqualified teachers for example, often the reserve manager or his wife filled this role (Fletcher, 1989, p.83). This mix of teaching with often forceful and dominant powerful roles of reserve managers did nothing to assist an amicable relationship within the school system for Indigenous students. Reserve life had a far more disastrous effect on the Indigenous population through permeating every aspect of their very existence. Indigenous peoples often with no formal inter-relations, and often from different language groups between nations, found themselves herded like animals onto reserves in isolated places out of the view of non-Indigenous settlements and towns. It was in this environment that the physical and mental well-being of Indigenous peoples suffered considerably at the hands of the very dominant white society, which had by this time successfully stolen most of the fertile country, and clearly relegated Indigenous peoples to vermin, so well captured by Beresford (2003b, p.48) in Neville’s accounts of the period:

_Neville explains, prejudice drove the longstanding policy of banishing Aboriginal people to reserves where, according to Neville (1947, p.12), they sensed ‘and indeed are made to see, that they are not wanted within the compact residential areas of town’. Frequently camps and reserves were located side by side with the rubbish dump, the cemetery, or the sanitary site (Neville, 1947, p.34)._  

Throughout the mid-20th Century exclusion and isolation began to give way to assimilation (although some would argue today we still have not left this domain). During these times there was a mixture of segregation, but simultaneously in schools with supportive principals, teachers and community, Indigenous students began to get greater access to public education. There were obviously children still being denied access to public schools or only having access to schools on reserves or mission stations. It is critical at this time around the 1950s and ‘60s that we take particular note of the status of Indigenous peoples and their access to and the form of education made available. These were volatile times where Indigenous peoples found themselves caught between black and white worlds and their lives were very much their lives controlled by government policy and direction (Beresford, 2012).
The health, economic and psychological related conditions of separation and assimilation took its toll on Indigenous peoples during this time. Reported malnutrition, poor health from lack of clean water and sewerage infrastructure, distance from services and, being continually renounced as human beings through policy and practice. One of the most powerful blows to both health and psychological well-being of Indigenous parents, was having their children taken away to be institutionalised, commonly referred to as the ‘Stolen Generation’ (Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). Significant numbers of Indigenous families were torn apart through this policy. Indigenous children were re-located, assimilated and their up-bringing even facilitated intermarriage, the purpose of which was to eventually breed out their Indigenous ways and heritage. The psychological trauma caused immediate grief and was also long lasting. Generations and intergenerational parents have now been identified with a severe lack of parenting skills. Such skills were not developed while institutionalised through lack of parental role models (Beresford, 2003b, p.54). Such removal of children continues to play a significant part in effecting Indigenous engagement in schools today.

Throughout Indigenous involvement in education in this country the underlying early attitudes/beliefs that Indigenous peoples were intellectually inferior to their white peers consistently emerged and drove policy and debate during this assimilationist period. Again the timing of such public debate about racial inferiority is critical. Fletcher (1989, p.275) notes that one such debate came to light during a report from the Aborigines Welfare Boards 1960/61 that stated “Aboriginal children as a whole do not possess an intelligence quotient 'comparable to that of their white counterparts.'” It should be also noted that it was only in 1972 that the then Director General of the NSW Department of Education withdrew from the Teachers Handbook 1969 Edition, the right for Indigenous children to be excluded from schools at the request of non-Indigenous community members (Fletcher, 1989, p.250). These points are raised here to highlight that these events took place in the lifetimes of parents and grandparents of the children who attend schools today across Australia and in particular in NSW and in the author’s own school lifetime. The legacy of this history affects interactions with Indigenous education today and into the immediate future.

Schools have not, as a rule, been the safe, welcoming stimulatory domains for Indigenous students. The first policy by any state, in Aboriginal education in this country, was only released in NSW in 1982 (NSWDE, 1982). The policy direction from this period has been covered to some degree previously and will be specifically detailed as the focus
of the next chapter. It is timely now the historical skeleton has been sketched, that the chapter now moves to the contemporary theory and practice which has and continues to permeate school environments. The literature highlights issues such as the manifestation of racial superiority into Deficit Theory; school based assimilation practice, Resistance Theory, integration/multiculturalism, self-determination policy through to the contemporary policy claims of Cultural Diversity and related Quality Teaching Frameworks which are discussed in the following sections.

**INDIGENOUS KIDS**: STUDENT FACTORS

Issues surrounding Indigenous school education are not about to disappear because Indigenous youth populations are substantially increasing (National Board of Employment, Education and Training [NBEET], 1995; ABS, 2014). This is reflected in growth in Indigenous student enrolments in NSW public schools which from a 1987 base of some 14,252 students representing 1.9% of state enrolment (NSW Department of School Education [NSWDSE], 1995, p.14), had nearly doubled to 28,155 students accounting for some 3.7% of state enrolment (NSWDET, 2001, p.29) in NSW state schools less than a decade. One year on from the conclusion of this study’s primary data collection phase in 2004, the Indigenous student total in NSW public schools was 35,256 which represented some 4.7% of total public school enrolments (Accessed at NSWDET, 2005, p.258). This trend in growth of Indigenous enrolments in NSW government schools represented some 47,087 or 6.3% of all NSW enrolments (NSWDEC, 2012a).

There is a dearth of literature in the educational field which actually describes Indigenous students’ lives - and more importantly these students’ perceptions of their own lives which this study directly and purposely promulgates in Chapter 7. References to Indigenous students generally portrays their disadvantaged backgrounds and highlights more often than not, clear conceptual frameworks and perceptions of these students based on Deficit Theory (Spina, 2013). Such fundamental understanding of Indigenous students clouds considerably the literature and ultimately the very nature surrounding all who delve in Indigenous education. Emphasis in the literature primarily stems from discourse on ‘fixing problems’ such as behaviour, attendance, retention and ‘closing the

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6 The use of the term Kids in this thesis is to emphasise the common usage of the word in Aboriginal Language and in reflection of the thesis title.
gap’ in outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Yet the literature, especially that surrounding core strategies and policies to improve outcomes (DETYA, 2000b; NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004; Buckskin et al., 2008; Luke et al., 2013), carry consistent messaging around building Indigenous esteem, well-being, cultural affirmation and inclusion in schooling. These are at best the mixed messages Indigenous students tackle on a daily basis in schools.

Much has already been covered with regard to the systemic and school responses to Indigenous education in prior sections, this Indigenous Kids: Student Factors section will examine the dominant literature surrounding in the first instance more positive discourse around student cultural affirmation, inclusion, self-esteem/self-identity, well-being and effective pedagogy; and secondly, to assess the literature around negative stereotyping Indigenous student attendance, behaviour, retention and outcomes. By addressing these two contrasting positions in the literature we will gain an understanding of how Indigenous students emerge as an ill-defined ‘other’ in the school environment and these positions will be explored further as they relate to the following section in the outside community.

Positive Student Discourse Literature

The literature has dominant themes in particular around building Indigenous students’ sense of self-worth; perceptions of themselves as culturally rich; and their functional well-being (Groome & Hamilton, 1995b; Purdie, Tripcon, Boulton-Lewis, Fanshawe, & Gunstone, 2000; Heitmeyer & Craven, 2004; Bodkin, O’Rourke & Craven, 2010). In these regards much has been written about the school’s role in fostering these attributes in inclusive school environments (MCEETYA, 2000b).

From the earlier works of Groome and Hamilton (1995, p.47) as in the following quote, and supported in international works of Deyhle and Swsher (1997) on similar findings with Indigenous peoples in the United States, the need to ensure Indigenous students perceptions of self-worth were enhanced and given the history of access to education as highlighted previously, the Indigenous community itself needed to be convinced that schools were not a continuation of assimilationist practices.
…When Aboriginal youth are unable to develop positive relations with teachers, they can develop identities which are oppositional to those desired by the school. These images tend to further structure the negative course of the relationship. They see themselves as losers who are processed, defined and recycled within the mechanisms of school. Their existence as persons is devalued and they become targets for reform or exclusion. (Groome & Hamilton, p.47)

Such a community perception around schooling needed to be built on Indigenous children in schools need to be reassured of their self-esteem and most importantly their Indigenous identity as noted in Purdie et.al. (2000, p.ix).

When young people have positive conceptions of themselves both as Indigenous people and as students, attachment and commitment to school, and successful school performance will be more likely outcomes than when there are excessive contradictions or tensions between the various aspects of self.

While self-esteem/self-identity has remained a constant theme in the literature, the more recent work of Chris Sara (2011) has once again brought the concept to the fore. His work which has gained much publicity in the educational Indigenous arena, maintains pride in being Indigenous is at the heart of any pedagogical approach and in his own catch phrase of ‘Strong and Smart’ his first emphasis here is on being a strong Aboriginal first. The dominant pressure on students is to fight for their right to be Indigenous, which is demonstrated throughout the literature to be at the core of cultural affirmation, inclusion, identity and well-being. This very public and forthright acknowledgement of Indigenous identity appears to be an ongoing struggle which has persisted from earliest attempts at education from Invasion to the most dominant pushes of Indigenous education leaders from the late 20th into the current 21st Century. The foundation therefore of any Indigenous pedagogy must be formed on the fundamental basis of maintaining and building on the child’s Indigenous culture and world view.

The pedagogical frameworks supporting Indigenous inclusion

More recent pedagogical frameworks for mainstream schooling in particular these offered by Queensland (Qld) and NSW in the development of Productive Pedagogy (Queensland Department of Education, Training and Schooling, 2013) and the Quality Teaching
Framework (NSWDET Professional Support & Curriculum Directorate, 2003a) (respectively) provide the pedagogical empowerment to emancipate inclusive practice in classrooms across state and the potentially nationally. (See earlier policy development on Inclusive Education practices, MCEETYA, 2000b). Policy for the first time clearly articulated the importance of culturally inclusive schooling and was highlighted in new pedagogical frameworks which emerged at the time of this study (Ladwig & King, 2003; Gore, Ladwig & King, 2004).

Quality Teaching Framework in NSW provided the stimulus and basis of Indigenous education and policy development roughly following the timeframe of the Review (2004) in NSW and was strongly supported in both NSWDET (2009) policy and strategic directions at both the state level (NSWDET, 2006a) and at the national level (MCEETYA, 2006a). It was clear that policy and strategic direction was now complementary to the wishes of the Indigenous community and the partnership arrangements through the NSWAECG and the NSWDET (Review, 2004) had clearly enunciated at least the positive rhetoric required to provide the guidance to future action in pedagogy, curriculum direction and strategic approaches.

Even so, while the frameworks and policy might have been in place the outcomes of Indigenous students were consistently below outcomes from their non-Indigenous peers (Hughes & Hughes, 2012; Beresford, Partington & Gower, 2012). Unless significant outcomes are achieved under the Australian Government’s, ‘Closing the Gap’ strategy, Indigenous students will be continually in ‘catch up’ mode with their non-Indigenous peers (Purdie & Buckley, 2010). If potentially effective policy is now in place why then can’t Indigenous students’ outcomes improve? A significant component to the answer to this question remains in the fundamental underlying beliefs of those who deliver the policy in schools – school leaders and their teaching staffs.

On a very promising note, a common thread in the literature with regard to positive outcomes for Indigenous students is the importance of genuine interaction between individual teachers and Indigenous students (Herbert et al. 1999, pp.42-44) a view well supported in Hattie’s (2005) work on the critical role of teachers in this field. However, teachers’ and school managers’ lack of specific cross-cultural training and subsequent limited understanding on Indigenous culture greatly undermined the capacity for this positive relationship experience to develop to any systemic degree (Bourke et al., 1999, p.29-31). This relationship is vested in, as Ladwig & Luke (2013) would argue, the
foundations set in schools and education systems based on curriculum and pedagogical training of the teachers. However, this positive direction is more often outweighed by positioning by schools of Indigenous students and their communities, as the ‘other’ and the continued manifestation of them as the problem.

**Deficit Theory or Blame the Victim**

…it seems to me that the term disadvantaged is often used to categorise people. 
*While there is no denying that many Indigenous people are disadvantaged – by poverty, by long term unemployment, by the racist attitudes of the wider community – they are not disadvantaged by being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.*

Herbert’s finding above (Herbert, 1995, p.9 cited in Gilbey, 1998, pp.107-108) carefully constructs the dialogue parameters regarding Deficit Theory and the criticism of it, which dominates the Indigenous literature over the recent two decades or as Whatman and Duncan (2012) maintain since the 1960s (Groome & Hamilton, 1995a; Deyhle & Swisher, 1997; Harslett et al., 1998; Munns, 1998; Purdie et al., 2000; Beresford, 2003c; Gray & Partington, 2003; Lester & Hanlen, 2004; Shields, Bishop & Mazawi, 2005; Bishop & Berryman, 2006, Nakata, 2007). The focus of Deficit Theory looks to blame the victims, in this case Indigenous peoples, for their incapacity to adapt to western educational systems and achieve equitable outcomes. The above writers in the field rightfully condemn the approach espoused in the Theory, closely maintaining that such an approach prevents careful consideration of the inherent racially discriminative practices of the education system, school and teachers. The literature is clear on this issue and strongly maintains that educators and schools who hold firm to such a theory consistently demonstrate low student expectations and subsequently teachers develop poor relationships with students and their families and communities (Dent & Hatton, 1996; Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Phillips, 2011).

Schools are dominated by teachers and leadership that still hold to the concepts and theory of deficit principles (Munns, 1998; Bourke et al., 2000; Godfrey et al., 2001). These negative conceptual frameworks as Spina (2013, p.55) points out are ‘fanned by

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7 This term is borrowed from the early work and title used by William Ryan (1976) in his book ‘Blaming the Victim’
a conservative media which perpetuates negative discourses around Indigenous communities and public school students from low socio-economic areas (e.g., Comber & Hill, 2000; Little, 2012). It is little wonder that Indigenous students have slim hope of success in such an educational environment. This educational environment which feeds on stereotypical ill-founded data on two of the most prolific perpetuators of deficit propaganda, namely from attendance and behaviour patterns of Indigenous students.

**Indigenous attendance and behaviour myths**

Bourke et al. (2000) and Herbert et al.’s (1999) research addressing Indigenous attendance identified great difficulty in actually getting data from education departments around Indigenous enrolments and attendance. The data was either not kept separately or impossible to correlate across schools or state departments due to inconsistent data collection sets. This difficulty, in spite of specific recommendations in each of the reports above to collect and streamline such data, persisted at the time of this study and was acknowledged publicly in the NSW Review (2004, p.25):

> While attendance data are collected from schools annually, they are not routinely collected separately for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. As attendance is specified as one of the three key outcome measures for the Review, data on Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal attendance rates had to be specially collected. That was achieved through a representative sample of 200 government schools.

This Review (2004, p.25) also draws the strong correlation to sample data which claims a link between attendance with academic success, however an interesting article by Barnes (2004) reporting directly to the same Review indicates that such correlations between attendance effects on performance are extremely problematic. Barnes (2004, p.1) goes further and indicates that such simple statements supporting in a number of National Reports to the Australian Parliament (DEST, 2002, 2003a) have consistently perpetuated this incorrect and simplified assumption:

> The claim that attendance is a cause of academic performance is made repeatedly, but with little to back the claim. In all references given to substantiate it, the evidence is almost always qualitative, consisting mostly of personal judgment and opinion. Sometimes those claims reference other documents as if they provide substantiation of the claims, but following up most references leads to no solid data and analysis.
Importantly, Barnes (2004, p.1) adds that the findings of Borland and Howsen (1998) concluded that:

*Prior studies that report a positive relationship between student attendance and student performance may incorrectly lead policymakers to believe that policies that are directed toward increasing student attendance will lead to an increase in student performance. The results of this study suggest that no such belief should exist [italics added].*

Building from such background, doubt about the correlation between attendance and performance leading to questionable generalisations has also been more recently explored by Ladwig & Luke (2014). They evince similar doubts on such correlations based on data collected for the evaluation of the Stronger Smarter Learning Communities project (Luke, et. al., 2013). The complexity of the tasks associated with collection of accurate data, consideration of a vast array of complex determinants of performance as highlighted by Barnes (2004), clearly points to the need for care in pushing strategic directions based on poorly defined and inappropriate conclusions. The emphasis on attendance despite these challenges to the attendance data only serves to move thinking in Indigenous education to simplistic equations of success which will do little to improve genuine outcomes.

*In and of themselves, reforms and policies around attendance, like those on behavior [sic] management, are unlikely to generate patterns of improved achievement. The key remains systematic school-level reform of curriculum and pedagogy. (Ladwig & Luke, 2014)*

Of further concern with the data is that the calculation of attendance figures do not demonstrate the detail required to draw the conclusions in many reports and dictate strategic policy directions as in the past. The real issue is in the detail, when averages/means are taken to represent the Aboriginal student population. This is clearly explained by Barnes (2004, p.14):

*But there can be great variation between those students as to their individual attendance patterns and how that 84% attendance rate was actually arrived at. For example, it might be that each of the 10 students was away 32 days, in which case 84% is very descriptive of the attendance patterns of those students. Or it could be that two students were away for 160 days each while the remaining 8 students attended every single day – the average attendance rate calculated as above would still end up being 84%. If the attendance rate had been calculated as an aggregation of individual student attendance rates, then the figures would be quite*
different. In the last case the average attendance rate would be 96%, but the most common attendance rate (called the statistical mode) is actually 100% — which is descriptive of attendance for most of those students.

In comparing these two approaches, by far the better is to calculated attendance rates from an aggregation of individual student attendance rates (student level data), and not as is currently done by adding total days actually present as a whole and comparing them against total days possibly present for all students.

Through the above example of calculation of attendance of Indigenous students a clear picture of attendance patterns is not represented. Only when we aggregate the data on an individual basis will we determine the real attendance patterns of Indigenous students and as Bourke et.al. (2000) has indicated Indigenous student attendance patterns move much closer to the non-Indigenous norm across Australia. The current collection of attendance data the author believes has considerable impact on the creation of new ‘myths’ around Indigenous education and goes to the heart of adding to ‘deficit’ conclusions drawn about Indigenous students and community commitment to education. Compounding this myth cycle is a very similar situation around Indigenous behaviour issues or as the Review (2004) has indicated the primary tool for measurement being around student suspension data.

Information on suspensions is something else that has not been collected consistently to allow up-to-date statewide comparisons between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004, p.26)

As per the attendance data separate sample surveys provided the data required in the Review, but again this data didn’t spell out the detail on an individual Indigenous child basis. Once more Indigenous students are on the whole reported as grossly over represented in these statistics and obviously these students are potentially misrepresented in such average/mean data analysis and depicts consistently the messaging that Indigenous students present ‘problems’ in the system. When in fact closer analysis on an individual basis as highlighted by Barnes (2004) above may well present that a small number of chronic suspensions belong to a minority of Indigenous students, who skew the data. This is something to be explored in this study as it goes to the heart of ‘myth’ making or feeding deficit thinking on behalf of educational policy makers, school leaders and teachers.
A further common thread expressed within the literature is the extremely high proportion of Indigenous students who are being suspended or expelled from the schooling system (NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, 1995; Herbert et al., 1999; NSWDEC, 2014a). The NSWDSE (1996a, p.13) identified that Indigenous students’ suspension rates were more than four times greater than those of non-Aboriginal students. The same report (1996a, p.10 points to a disconcerting finding, that Aboriginal and Torres Strait students are being suspended at far more pronounced levels than their non-Indigenous counterparts even in primary grades. There has been little change from these earlier figures and indeed it is argued that suspensions of Indigenous students in the state school system are increasing and grossly higher than non-Indigenous peers (NSWAECG and NSWDET, 2004, pp.26-28, NSWDEC, 2014a). Suspension rates have been described in terms of a resistance to school by some Indigenous students (Munns, 1996).

Retention and outcomes of Indigenous students

*It is clear that, irrespective of the way performance is measured, Aboriginal outcomes continue to be at the lower end of the scale. Absenteeism and suspension have a significant effect on student performance. Gaps in knowledge resulting from high levels of absenteeism have a negative effect on student achievement and may lead to disruptive behaviour requiring remedial intervention. The low levels of literacy and numeracy skills possessed by many Aboriginal students, especially in secondary school, commit these students to failure. Their consequent disengagement with learning results in lower educational achievement which, along with low retention rates, translates to limited employment and life choices.* (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004, p.29)

The Review’s concluding comments on the school sector above clearly paint a dim situation for Indigenous students at the time of the Review. This is supported by a ‘Preface’ (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004, p.7) which is laboured with deficit connotations around ‘disadvantage’, ‘(for example, limited expectations, disrupted attendance, poor retention, non-compliant behaviour, inadequate literacy skills and under-achievement)’. Indigenous outcomes represented in retention/completion figures hanging their biggest concerns about improved outcomes around attendance and behaviour (as discussed in preceding section for their limitations as measures) modifications or perpetuations of deficit conclusions. Take any one of dozens of reports in Indigenous education over the past decade (National Report to Parliament, 2003-2008; Buckskin et. al., 2009; Ladwig
& Sara, 2009; SCRGSP, 2011; Luke et.al., 2013) and they will all highlight the incontestable fact of the poor outcomes of Indigenous students across Australia. Apparent retention rates in the Review (2004, pp.28-29) clearly articulate the shortfall between Indigenous outcomes with their non-Indigenous peers as well as their academic performances on then state-wide testing at time of study and the new national testing regime are consistently reinforcing the ‘gap’ between these students (SCRGSP, 2011; Hughes & Hughes, 2012). Conclusively the picture of Indigenous outcomes is bleak and this consistently reinforces Indigenous peoples or students as problematic. A situation which fuels the negative stereotypical implications associated with the ongoing ‘deficit’ labelling of Indigenous peoples.

**Indigenous Kids are the problem?**

Much has been studied and written about Indigenous kids as I have highlighted above and unfortunately most of it leads to negative conceptual and stereotypical ‘mythology’ based on deficit discourse. Dominant in the literature are the problematic nature of Indigenous kids in schools, be it focused wrongly (as argued above) around attendance or outcomes or more generally around the lack of clear understanding of who are these kids and what do they look like? Are these kids more than the consistent negative statistical data portray? I would argue that this detail is missing and so are the stories that surround these kids and their families. Are we to believe that the problems are all external to the school and found in Aboriginal disadvantage and dysfunction?

In this section the exploration of student self-identity in the literature indicated the importance of a student’s understanding of their Indigenous identity was fundamental and schools need to nurture and support this in inclusive school environments. However, this positive direction in policy direction has been significantly outweighed by the perpetuation of more negative ‘blame the victim’ deficit labelling – creating Indigenous kids as problematic and adding to these established myths reliant on perilous often unsubstantiated facts around measures of success based on attendance and behaviour patterns. To go to the heart of the Indigenous kids and discover their cultural, social and community bases, it is paramount that we seek explanation from their parents, carers, family and community. We must explore these kids through such community fundamental elements which will assist in consolidating who these kids are?
COMMUNITY FACTORS

The conditions as they applied to the children of the [a]borigines were sadly neglected, and the system of educating and segregating the children was causing the spirit of prejudice to manifest itself. There appeared to be not possible help for their development after the primary education. The association claimed, he said, that given equal opportunities they would be able to hold their own in the athletic world and in industrial and political life.

In this connection he instanced his friend Mr Lacey, who had been a prominent first-class cricketer, and Mr C Noble, who was recently ordained a minister of the Church of England. Wherever favourable opportunity had been given for development, he said, the [a]borigines had proved themselves capable of any advancement. (The Grafton Daily Examiner, 29th December, 1926. Maynard [2007] quote page 91)

The Indigenous community have consistently pressed for their equitable treatment and rights including education, and as Fred Maynard (Leader of the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association [AAPA]) in his grandson's book by John Maynard (2007) on the reflection of Fred's life, clearly articulates the critical need of access to education to achieve these equitable outcomes. This push has always driven Indigenous individuals and communities to seek such equity from education and the provision of opportunities to simultaneously keep and practice their culture while obtaining the skills and education to partake in all opportunities available to every other Australian in our society (DEET, 1988, Coolangatta Statement, 1999; Review, 2004, NSWAECG Constitution, 2009; NAEC, 1980).

A review of the literature around Community Factors will look briefly at the struggle to achieve Fred’s dream above through various community education consultative groups established to empower and bring about self-determination in education at national and state level (Fletcher, 1989, pp.310-336). Further, this section will point out the contemporary diversity of Indigenous communities' social, cultural and socio-economic circumstances as they relate to this case study and the subsequent need for localised community empowerment particularly through the NSWAECG structure.
Diversity of Indigenous Communities

One of the greatest misconceptions around Indigenous peoples in Australia is that they are homogenously defined i.e. the concept that they are all the same. With some 250 Aboriginal languages and dialects representing similar numbers of separate cultures and nations across Australia (Martin, 2008) such homogenetic constructs are misplaced and inaccurate. These misplaced constructs provide the basis of the stereotype that exists about Indigenous peoples in Australia.

These Indigenous diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds produce individual nations of peoples in Australia. Each nation exists within their unique cultural backgrounds, geography, spirituality and governance. The foundation of effective Indigenous relationship is firstly to acknowledge such diversity and secondly ensure relationships are built based on mutual respect with each of these individual nations and related communities (Luke et al., 2013).

Such complex diversity existed in this Case Study with the study covering two Nations and several discrete Indigenous communities including three Missions. Each community group needed to be both acknowledged and respected when working with them as a researcher. The researcher’s own Indigenous background while helpful in developing such relationships did not diminish the local respect and acknowledgement required in working with each of the communities involved in the research. The researcher as previously stated was commissioned and approved to conduct the research by the RAECG who was the principle advisory group to the schools, through their local community affiliates.

Community empowerment in Education

Consistently the literature surrounding policy and practice from Fred Maynard’s time in the early 20th Century (cited above) and has demanded the active and informed contribution of the Indigenous community in development of educational programs that will emancipate Aboriginal community current and past educational equitable reform. Acknowledging the above Regional AECP importance and work through their local school affiliates has provided the critical involvement of the Indigenous communities in the study. The researcher’s NSWAECG Life Membership of this organisation for close...
to three decades provided the important connections and support from this group. The RAECG had an active partnership with the Regional DET and therefore took the initiative to instigate the research with the researcher and this demonstrated clearly the important Indigenous community empowerment that was evident. This study would not have been contemplated, actively commissioned and supported without this level of empowerment. As a long term respected member of the NSWAECG the researcher fully supported and actively promoted this level of engagement with the local and regional groups. The insight required to conduct the research and the capacity to empower local Indigenous peoples, parents/community and students would not have been possible without this high level of support based on mutual respectful conduct of the study. The micro nature of Indigenous opinions such as these provided the detail required but while embedded in such detail the compounding reality of Indigenous socio-economic circumstances could not be overlooked and the following section succinctly highlights this macro level shadow over many in these communities.

**Compounding Indigenous social-economic circumstances**

> Across virtually all the indicators in this report, there are wide gaps in outcomes between Indigenous and other Australians. The report shows that the challenge is not impossible — in a few areas, the gaps are narrowing. However, many indicators show that outcomes are not improving, or are even deteriorating. There is still a considerable way to go to achieve COAG’s commitment to close the gap in Indigenous disadvantage. (SCRGSP, 2011, p.3)

The above starkly points out that Indigenous peoples disadvantage in Australia still continues across most of the nations key disadvantage indicators in education, health, justice and economic outcomes. This is an unsatisfactory situation on any terms, but as the 2007 Report below notes so rightly, is that such disadvantage relates to the many but not most Indigenous peoples:

> The Report focuses on the disadvantage experienced by many Indigenous people, arising from historical, social and economic causes. However, most Indigenous Australians live constructive and rewarding lives, contributing to their families and wider communities. (SCRGSP, 2007, p. III Foreword)
There is no argument from the researcher that comparatively many Indigenous peoples do not enjoy the same outcomes as their non-Indigenous contemporaries. It is my argument that in spite of this, most Indigenous peoples do live ‘constructive and rewarding lives’. It is unfortunate that the former creates an unrealistic and stereotypical image of all Indigenous peoples - adding considerable compounding weight to the ‘deficit projections’ of many educationists, on our Aboriginal children, their families and communities in education. These debilitation projections are explored by the researcher in the holistic appreciation and depth of understanding and exposure to rich cultural lives of these children and communities in the study and assist extensively in providing a much positive counter image of my peoples and their views on schooling.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored the literature surrounding the Four Factor Model fashioned by the author, from Bourke et al.’s (2000) foundation findings around Aboriginal attendance. Utilising this model the literature surrounding the key factors of the System, School, Students and Parents/Community supports the importance of firstly ensuring a holistic analysis of the domain and secondly to provide the extensive and complexity of the literature that contributes to the understanding of each of these important factors in understanding why Aboriginal kids switch off school.

The literature around systemic policy and practice clearly articulates much positive work in this area of Aboriginal education from the latter part of the 20th Century through to current developments, yet such efforts have not been reflected in significantly improved outcomes of Aboriginal students. Schools aided with this strong policy and emerging improvements in epistemology and pedagogical development, available appear to continue to have failed to deliver equitable outcomes for Aboriginal students, with little signs of improvement. A significant part of this failure and contrary to nationally agreed inclusive schooling policy is the ignorance and dominant negative perceptions or deficit positioning, of many of the school staff towards Indigenous students and their families/communities. In spite of this the vast majority of Indigenous kids themselves continue to persist with support of their families, with the hope that education will provide their emancipation from high levels of poverty and social marginalisation. Unfortunately such pursuits are fraught with deficit perceptions of them which must be overcome personally or obliterated from the schooling system where these beliefs continue to thrive. Finally the literature surrounding parents and the Aboriginal community highlights the importance of respect of the diversity of these communities, the importance of
genuine partnership with the schools and the importance they place on education to counter the high levels of disadvantage and social injustice large numbers of Indigenous communities live through on a daily basis.

This holistic approach to the literature has focused the critical analysis on the mismatch between systemic policy and school practice as the fundamental issue to be addressed in securing Indigenous equity. The policy is First World standard but the outcomes are Third World for Indigenous kids. This dichotomy i.e. between policy and practice, is compounded with the second dichotomy around school staff dominant negative perceptions around Indigenous students/community and the kids themselves and their families and communities’ perceptions of hope around schools providing culturally inclusive equitable outcomes they desire.

Such impasses require considerable effort on the schools’ part. Schools must guarantee implementation of policy which Indigenous peoples have invested considerable time and effort to negotiate and develop at both a state and national level. The literature positively promotes high quality teaching practice as the primary tool to be consistent with current policy development. If classrooms are to be effectively inclusive of Aboriginal students then the capacity to engage these students will be reliant of an understanding and acceptance of the diverse cultures, languages, histories and epistemological bases of Aboriginal peoples. This can only be achieved as so rightfully indicated in the literature, when genuine respect and equitable partnerships with Indigenous communities are achieved.

 Paramount to the demystifying of gross stereotyping of Indigenous peoples around issues analysed in the literature, particularly around attendance, suspensions and disadvantage, are the key geographical myths around Aboriginal population bases. Over 50% of Indigenous people live in the states of NSW and Queensland (with NSW the largest population) yet the literature promotes a stereotypical view that this population base is larger in more isolated communities of Northern Territory, Western Australia and South Australia. As long as the focus on Indigenous education is linked to stereotyped understandings of primary location of Indigenous populations, then the pressing problems will not be satisfactorily addressed and hence this requires a more concerted push to bring urban and regional Indigenous students into centre frame. This study of a NSW community will add to the framing of such a regional focus.
Wrestling with the Four Factors in a holistic approach to the research provided considerable challenges around the development of a suitable methodology. Further methodological complications emerged in the research given the unique set of circumstances around contemporary NSW and national policy development, and the researchers own Indigenous educational leadership roles during the time of the study, all of which are imbedded in the following methodological chapter.
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY - A HOLISTIC, MULTI-METHOD, MULTILOGICAL INDIGENOUS APPROACH

INTRODUCTION

Paulo Freire and Antonio Faundez (1989, p.46 cited in Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2008, pp.136-137) argue that for intellectuals and educators Indigenous knowledge ‘is a rich social source for any justice-related attempt to bring about social change’:

…and that they should “soak themselves in this knowledge...assimilate the feelings, the sensitivity” (p.46) of epistemologies that move in ways unimagined by most Western academic impulses...

Kincheloe and Steinberg (2008, pp.136-137) note that ‘an emphasis on relationships has been notoriously absent in the knowledge produced in Western science’.

Some [i]ndigenous educators and philosophers put it succinctly: We want to use [i]ndigenous knowledge to counter Western science’s destruction of Earth. Indigenous knowledge can facilitate this ambitious 21st-century project because of its tendency to focus on relationships of human beings to both one another and to their ecosystem.

‘I remember a salient point in my life when working with then Robert (Bob) Morgan, now Doctor Robert Morgan, a charismatic Indigenous educator, on the re-establishment/re-constitution of the New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (NSWAECG) in the early 1980s. He summed up, at that point in time, the alarming attrition rates of Indigenous students in our state’s schools by referring to them as the "push out rates".

This subtle play on words summed up the ongoing fact that Indigenous students while gaining entry into public schools are quickly shown the exits, as a result of alienation within the school system and external conditions experienced in the broader community. This despite having access to education, in arguably the fullest sense in New South Wales from the mid-1960s and following the unrestricted access officially documented by the removal from the 1972 NSW Teachers’ Handbook of the following racist policy which was used to deny Indigenous students equitable access to public schools:
...no child whatsoever its creed or colour or circumstances ought to be excluded from a public school. But cases may arise especially amongst the Aboriginal tribes where the admission of a child or children may be prejudicial to the whole school. (Herbert et al., 1999, p.20)

Indigenous students were entering a revolving educational door. Their exits manifesting in expulsions, suspensions, poor retention and attendance rates, and poor student outcomes as a response to a system which has generally failed to cater for their personal, educational and cultural needs (NSWDSE, 1997). This was pointed out by Binnion (1976) decades previously and Yvonne’s story above is salient in that it indicates when such needs are met with determination and genuine support from home and within the school, Indigenous students can overcome the many hurdles placed in front of them.

IDENTIFICATION OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM, EARLY HISTORY OF THE PROJECT AND KEY QUESTIONS

This research problem arose directly from concern expressed by both NSWDET district staff and the Indigenous community, about the poor achievement and reported poor attendance of Indigenous students in a particular rural school district in New South Wales. The school district and representatives of the Indigenous community through the Regional AECG sought involvement by the University of Newcastle in 1999 in a project to assess a major program intervention that aimed to improve literacy being implemented by the district, and the longitudinal effect of the program on both literacy and attendance of Indigenous students.

The school district was showing below average performance by Indigenous students on key performance indicators assessed through state-wide tests, known in NSW as Basic Skills Tests at primary school level, and as English Literacy and Language Assessment (ELLA) and Secondary Numeracy Assessment Program (SNAP) tests at secondary school level. A further major concern was the alarmingly poor attendance and retention patterns for Indigenous students. Attendance and retention rates for Indigenous students in the district were trending below state-wide means (NSWDET, 1998a). These trends

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8 It should be noted that the NSW Department of School Education ceased to operate from late 1997 and merged with other state educational authorities e.g. TAFE, and became known as the NSW Department of Education and Training from that point on in the study.
would be indicative of findings in two national reports, and also in the later stage of the data collection for the most comprehensive report into Indigenous Education in NSW, *The Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education* (2004). It was a common perception, expressed at initial meetings between the University, District staff and the community that Indigenous students appeared to be 'switching off' school before they reached secondary level.

The two key instigators of this research, the school district and the Indigenous community (represented by the RAECG), sought support from the University of Newcastle (initially from the Faculty of Education) to conduct research into two key issues of concern for them. The Faculty of Education was quick to ensure the involvement of the newly established Umulliko Indigenous Higher Education Centre at the University⁹, and subsequently the involvement of the researcher as Head of the Centre and with both research qualifications and senior experience in Indigenous education, as a critical partner in the project. The issues of educational literacy and numeracy outcomes and attendance and retention of Indigenous students in their rural school district were paramount concerns and they wished for more informed advice. In ongoing discussion a collaborative partnership between the three players began to emerge and detailed discussions on the scope, nature and possible funding for the project developed.

Unsuccessful bids by the District were made to the Aboriginal Programs Unit of the Department of Education and Training to fund the research. It was at this time that the researcher, as Head of Umulliko (University of Newcastle) volunteered to conduct the research into attendance and retention of Indigenous students, as his doctoral program. It was further agreed by the parties that the research into the effects of programmed intervention on literacy and numeracy would be postponed until another researcher studying for a post-graduate higher degree could be located for that specific project (which due to significant personnel changes and structural changes with then School District and dynamics of the Regional AECG and my own workload at that time, meant this additional piece of research was never undertaken).

Ongoing consultation continued over 1999 to structure the methodological considerations of the research into attendance and retention of Aboriginal students. The

⁹ The Umulliko Centre was established as one of six Centres across the nation funded by the Australian Government's Commonwealth Higher Education Innovation Program and Open Learning Initiative, with the express aim of increasing the number of Indigenous researchers and Indigenous led research in the University sector.
driving concern was the issue that anecdotal evidence from both the School District and the Indigenous community was that Indigenous kids were "switching off school" at what appeared to be an ever younger age. It was firmly stated that while in the past it was perceived that this began to take effect in Years 8 and 9 of secondary school, it was now apparent that such alienation from school was taking place in the latter years of primary school. This hypothesis is supported in the literature through the alarming growing rate of suspensions of Indigenous children in primary school (Department of School Education [DSE], 1995, p.10) and in the emergent poor attendance patterns (both patterns further supported in the Review, 2004, pp.25-28).

Establishing the research questions

In follow up consultative meetings between the partners in the research it became obvious that the project needed to focus on the retention of Indigenous students as attendance was both more substantially researched and the issue was more concerning why such poor attendance patterns emerged. In further refinement with partners, consensus was reached on the three key questions that needed to be asked; Why do Aboriginal kids switch off school? When do they switch off school? How can we attract them back to schooling? In answering these questions the triad partners hoped that clear advice on remedial action and policy direction could be established which would improve retention rates and subsequently have a significant effect on attendance patterns of Aboriginal students in school and ultimately improved outcomes for Indigenous students.

The nature of the research required an attempt to identify a moment in time or resultant action associated with a conscious decision by the student to no longer take an active participatory role in school. As with Bourke et al. (2000), the considered work of Azjen and Fishbein (1980) with regard to the Theory of Reasoned Action provided the basis to search for such critical decision making by the student. To best provide an opportunity to capture this moment or compounding moments, it was deemed appropriate to develop a longitudinal approach to the research. To achieve this in the most appropriate manner it was felt that there was a need to follow a Year 5 group of Indigenous students through a four-year period until they reached the equivalent of Year 8. After subsequent discussion with my supervisor and research partners, it was felt that the project could be extended to include another cohort commencing at Year 7 for a similar period of study.
There were obvious advantages with this approach given that a broad range of base demographic and policy data would be gathered which was the same for both groups. It would also assist in developing a stronger working and collaborative relationship with the secondary schools involved with data collection from the commencement of the project rather than having such involvement commence only when the Year 5 cohort reached Year 7. And importantly it would provide a capacity to compare both cohorts across a shared first two-year experience in secondary school.

The agreed approach emanating from such concern was to research the three key aspects of Indigenous performance: attendance, completion rates and achievement levels (on standardised state-wide tests) of two cohorts of Indigenous students at district level over time. The longitudinal research was to be based in the qualitative domain, primarily using the tools of ethnography in an Action Research framework. The data to be collected would be fed back to inform the Indigenous community, school staff and district management to assist in the development of responsive policy and practice.

However this plan had to be altered due to the dynamic situation which emerged with the retirement of the then District Superintendent who was a key originator and supporter of the research, the significant winding down of the Regional ECG and the demands being placed on the researcher (establishing one of six Indigenous Higher Education Research Centres as a major federal government initiative at the time). Under the circumstances the capacity to effectively follow through with several cycles of Action Research was compromised, but the initial data collection premises of requiring the critical involvement and liaison with key Indigenous Regional ECG community members and feedback to the Principals of schools would be maintained. However, the general thrust of advice and guidance from the research outcomes took on a more macro approach with the researcher’s successful tender as the principal researcher to review the 1996 Aboriginal Education Policy and subsequent appointment as leader of the established Academic Reference Group and as advisor to the state-wide Review of Aboriginal Education (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004, p.17).

**Aims of the study**

Although it could be considered a limitation of the study, while the research was restricted to a school district in rural NSW, the response to the data via strategic implementation
of collaboratively designed intervention may prove beneficial to schools with similar backgrounds or confronting similar student issues. The research did not originally profess to seek universal solutions but practical answers to local issues based on the Case Study approach. Despite this, it was always the view of the researcher when setting out to work with the Indigenous community and the District Education Office that if others outside of the case study could gain benefit from such solutions then this would come as an important by-product.

But, as with Case Study approaches to ethnography there generally is rightfully a caveat on the capacity to draw significant conclusions which extend beyond the case study itself (Gomm & Foster, 2000). However, the study provided a unique, and in the end a more powerful role, of informing state-wide policy and practice due to three principal appointments of the researcher during the latter stages of the research data gathering. The researcher’s appointments were as previously stated: academic advisor to the Review of Aboriginal Education (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004); appointed principal researcher after a competitive tender, to undertake the Review of the NSW Aboriginal Education Policy (Lester & Hanlen, 2004); and finally the appointment as inaugural Director Aboriginal Education and Training. Each of these appointments provided the researcher with significant opportunity to input into the direction of Aboriginal Education in the state and in the role of Director representing the NSWDET on the MCEETYA Australian Education Systems Officials Committee’s Senior Officials Working Party on Indigenous Education, which developed the national policy document *Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005-2008* (MCEETYA, 2006a). Lessons learned during this study provided invaluable insight to the researcher during his contribution to policy and practice at the local, district, state and national policy level.

The anticipated primary role of the research was to inform the key partners, school/district and the Indigenous community of the reasons why and when Indigenous students lose interest in schooling. Once these parameters were established, holistic analysis (Jacob, 1987) of the data generated by the research was to be used to develop strategies for improved retention and associated attendance and culturally appropriate outcomes for Indigenous students in the District/School Education Area.

The full involvement and collaborative nature of the research was agreed at several meetings by both the school district staff and management, and the Indigenous community through the Regional Aboriginal Education Consultative Group. Subsequent
letters of endorsement and support for the research were received (Appendices 3.1, 3.2 & 3.3).

The case study meets the important rigor associated with triangulation of the data obtained from involvement of the three partners i.e., school/district, Indigenous community and the researcher. Data collection will also utilise a variety of techniques to ensure cross-tabulation and rigour of the data gathered (Denzin, 1978).

The case target group

The case study target group was clearly defined by the research partners and fell within three discrete boundaries. First, the nature of the research specifically restricted the target audience to a single rural School District. Secondly, within this district, the partners had identified specific schools (secondary schools and feeder primary schools) with significant Indigenous enrolments (Aboriginal enrolments greater than 60 in secondary and 30 in primary [Aboriginal District Documents, electronic copy, PowerPoint, slide 12, 2004]) that would represent a geographical spread across the School District. Finally, the Year 5 and Year 7 cohorts of Indigenous students had been identified as most suited to the goals of this longitudinal study as they represent the years where the community, the School District and the national statistical retention data all indicated as the key time most Indigenous students begin to drop out or disengage with schooling (DEST, 2002, p.55).

The selection and appropriateness of the target group has been the direct responsibility of the district staff working in collaboration with the Indigenous community representatives. This is an important ownership role and responsibility that rightfully rests with the initiating individuals/groups involved with identification of the research (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Smith, 1999; Bishop & Berryman, 2006). Enrolment data supplied by the district on Indigenous students (NSWDET, 1998a, 1998b) as well as both Indigenous community and the District Education staff's local knowledge informed the selection of the target group and subsequently schools involved in the study.

The partners in the study and the enrolment figures of Indigenous students across the schools in the District readily identified four secondary schools and their six feeder primary schools which all had significant Indigenous student enrolments. However two
additional secondary schools and a central school became involved in the research owing to the fact that several of the students identified in the study fed into these schools. One of these secondary schools was a newly established school which began operation during the study. A total of 43 Indigenous students were recruited to the study (22 males and 21 females) which represented 44.8% of the total Indigenous student enrolments in the cohorts across the target schools. The Year 5 and Year 7 cohorts recruited across the targeted schools for the study represented 52.2% and 38.2% respectively of total Indigenous student cohort for these years.

In addition to specific data being generated from these cohorts’ attendance and retention patterns, school social behaviour, academic performance and family background, additional data were collected from within the broader staff, school, Indigenous community and school district environment utilising the Bourke et al. (2000, p.3) factors, issues and influence groupings. Prior to this data discussion the next section positions the Indigenous author in the full context of the study to help clarify the unique research approach undertaken.

POSITIONING THE INDIGENOUS AUTHOR IN THIS THESIS

As an Indigenous educator in my earlier teaching career I had to always struggle with the concept of ‘Am I a teacher who is Aboriginal?’ or ‘Am I an Aboriginal who is a teacher?’ In the days when I became a qualified teacher in the NSW teaching service I joined only a handful of colleagues who were Aboriginal teachers. Many factors played significantly on my coming to terms with working out which was the ‘right’ answer for me!

Having a limited pool of role models to draw upon made the task of defining my professional career perception more difficult. My contact with these too-few Indigenous teachers was virtually non-existent. My role models were primarily non-Indigenous teachers I had come in contact with during my own schooling experiences. Which begged the question, were my epistemological and pedagogical approaches grounded in western ways of knowing and teaching as these were the only examples I had been exposed to at that stage? So my initial thoughts led me to a premature understanding of myself as the former of the two questions, that in reality I was a teacher who is Indigenous. Purposely here I have moved from the terms Aboriginal and Aborigine to the use of Indigenous because, similarly to my consciousness about more international
terminology changes to what I now consider more acceptable definitions of my Indigenous peoples - so too has my positioning of myself as being an Australian Indigenous person who has the skills to be a teacher in non-Indigenous/western mainstream education systems. The critical and vitally important factor here was that I was very proudly Indigenous well before becoming a teacher!

Linked very purposely to the above final realisation of myself as an Indigenous teacher, was my primary motivation to move into this profession. At around Year 10 at secondary school or 16 years of age, I remember vividly making the conscious decision to go on to my Higher School Certificate (HSC) (buoyed at the time through gaining a solid School Certificate qualification and the fact that my non-Indigenous school friends were going on to the HSC), so that I could become a teacher. This would enable me to assist my Indigenous brothers and sisters get an education. Education, at the time for me, was the surest means of gaining emancipation and equity in Australia for Indigenous peoples and a point convincingly articulated by G.H. Smith (1997) with regard to Maori empowerment through education and subsequently by research in New Zealand (Smith, 1999; Bishop, 2005) and associated in critical pedagogy, as defined by Kincheloe and McLaren (2000, p.285 as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p.8)

To performatively disrupt and deconstruct these cultural practices in the name of a “more just, democratic and egalitarian society”.

Author’s capacity to influence Indigenous education policy

As pointed out above, the author from his later school days positioned himself as an advocate for Indigenous peoples and saw his chosen profession of teaching as the means to best achieve equity for his Indigenous peoples. This ongoing desire is further captured in the author’s autobiographical thesis work for his research master’s degree. Additionally the author strongly advocates and argues in his research master’s thesis, for his rights to an Indigenous space to explore his ongoing role as a change agent and to empower Indigenous voice:

It is fundamentally important to me that this research be wholly managed by myself as an Aborigine. This has presented its challenges for research methodology I have chosen and in providing final analysis of research detail exposed, but it was paramount that I maintain Aboriginal control of the
research process...I believe the interpretative analysis associated with the production and key issues surrounding my life history, was best kept intact by working in my own cultural perspective...The integrity of the research in my situation demanded the detail come from as primary a source as possible. For too long has the dominant non-Aboriginal society (which is andronic in its power base) dictated the outcomes of Aboriginal lives. It is time for Aborigines to take control of their own lives and forge an equitable existence in Australia's tomorrow. (Lester, 1993, p.4)

The author’s movement into management roles within both school and TAFE play a significant role in his capacity to affect major policy and practice in Indigenous education. These roles included Senior Education Officers roles, Head of Aboriginal Units in both school and TAFE, mainstream principal roles as the first Indigenous principal in Australia and promotion in these roles within TAFE, and his inaugural appointments as Chair of Aboriginal Studies at the University of Newcastle and subsequently as Director of Aboriginal Education and Training in the NSW Department of Education and Training. The professorial role was at the time of commencement of this study and through data collection periods to the end of 2004. In 2003 the then Deputy Premier and Minster for Education and Training and Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Dr Andrew Refshauge announced a major Review of Aboriginal education in NSW. As part of this review process a tender was released for the review of the 1996 Aboriginal Education Policy, for which the author successfully tendered. This provided the author, along with a colleague at the Umulliko Indigenous Higher Education Research Centre, Dr Wendy Hanlen, the opportunity to complete an evaluative research project using purposeful sample case study method. The author was also appointed to chair an Academic Reference Group which had the task of producing a number of position papers to promote innovative approaches to Aboriginal education. These circumstances provided a unique environment to play a significant part in contributing at a senior level, to NSW policy and practice in the area of Indigenous education. (See Appendix 1.1 for a timeline mapping these multiple responsibilities).

At the conclusion of the Review of Aboriginal Education and the tabling of the final Report (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004) recommendation 4 was that a Directorate of Aboriginal Education be established and that it be headed by an Indigenous Director (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004). The Directorate was to provide policy advice and monitoring support, to the newly formed Advisory Task Force. In open competition the author was appointed to this position in 2005.
Along with these critical appointments came opportunity to input into national Indigenous policy and this can be readily identified in the author’s role and contribution to the Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005-2008 (MCEETYA, 2006a).

The author’s field work for this study and formative conclusions with regard to the issues and action required to meet the demands of Dr Refshauge, “I want Aboriginal student outcomes to match or better outcomes of the broader population...” (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004, p.11) played a significant role in both policy development and strategic direction of programs and actions (NSWDET, 2006a, 2008; nd) required to meet this well founded, expectation of equality of outcome between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

Adding to this tapestry of various interwoven roles and responsibilities, including very privileged leadership positions, the author had a unique view of the Indigenous education world. This is further shaped by the author’s real world realities and connections to his Indigenous community. As a proud life member of the NSWAECG and in the past holding key executive positions in this Group, as Vice President and Executive Officer, there is a strong correlation of simultaneous commitment to the group as well as to the broader academic prescriptions demanded of me in at least these dual roles. Attempting a consensus between these complex interwoven realities is extremely problematic and at times oppositional.

The author as an Indigenous person first, is now placed in a complex inter-related Indigenous world view. Simultaneously as an Indigenous person, researcher, advocate, educational practitioner, educational leader and strategist, on a local, state and national scale, the author is placed in many vantage points. This should not be seen as a disadvantage but, as Kincheloe and Steinberg (2008, p.138-140) sees it, as an extension of and an integral understanding of Indigenous knowledges vantage points:

...A multilogical epistemology and ontology promotes a spatial distancing from reality that allows and observer diverse frames of reference.

...At the same time, a multilogical scholar values the intimacy of an emotional connectedness that allows empathetic passion to draw knower and known together. In the multiplex, complex, and critical view of reality, Western linearity often gives way to simultaneity, as text becomes a kaleidoscope of images filled with signs, symbols, and signifiers to be decoded and interpreted. (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2008, p.139)
Methodologically, this diversity of vantage points provides for a more enriched access to a broad human resource data base and the capacity to view the critical analysis from several vantage points in the study. The researcher in this instance has the added luxury of working closely with Indigenous informants in the study as well as having access to additional critical associated research for which he was directly responsible. This included a capacity to broaden his exposure to wider research communities and in the end a capacity to implement recommendations or actions originating from this study and the evaluative research surrounding the NSW Aboriginal Education Policy Review (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004). The outcomes of this study proved invaluable to the researcher in his subsequent review of Aboriginal policy and final implementation planning. While Kincheloe and Steinberg’s (2008) work on Indigenous critical multi-logical contexts provided the foundation for the author’s varied multiple vantage viewpoints, there was still a need to house such constructs in a more closely defined Indigenous methodological stance.

It is, indeed, these critical standpoints that transfer the research power away from Western paradigms to empower Indigenous peoples themselves. The simultaneity of researcher and researched provides a most powerful tool to inform the future of in this study, the future of Indigenous education, and as Lester Rigney so rightfully declares as not a conflict here in research but an emancipatory challenge to Indigenous people in positions of influence such as the researcher found himself:

...Indigenous Australians have to set their own political agenda for liberation. To the extent that research contributes to that agenda, it must be undertaken by Indigenous Australians. There must be a social link between research and the political struggle of our communities. This link needs to be in and through those Indigenous Australians who are simultaneously engaged in research and the Indigenous struggle. Only in this way can research serve and inform the political liberation struggle. (Rigney, 1997, pp.6-7)

In search of Indigenous ways of knowing

The lived experiences of my Indigenous ancestors, perpetuated in a contemporary existence through strong and familiar extended family relationships, coupled with my wide exposure to my Indigenous brothers and sisters through leadership and peer support and guidance gained through Indigenous peoples as members of the NSWAECG and at national level through the NAEC, has provided me with the skills of
knowing, in my Indigenous world. An Indigenous knowing which to use Freire and Faundez (1989) suggestions, I have immersed myself and assimilated the feelings of this sensitivity for my entire life. The researcher’s epistemological grounding is saturated with Indigenous ways of knowing and the torment has always remained about where such grounding fits within the domain of dominant Western foreign ways of knowing or in my professional case, my teaching and academic roles.

Bishop and Berryman (2006, pp.4-5) point to the importance of student engagement in a learning environment that not only understands but builds on different cultural constructs of ways of knowing. Rightfully, in these environments students’ own culturally embedded epistemological platforms are freed to be explored, comprehended and respected in places of learning. Student voices bring with them deep ancestral origins and ways of knowing that provide the respectful framework for these students to negotiate Western educational space and ultimately provides for the capacity to engage successfully, on their own terms, with other ways of knowing (Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Bishop, Richardson & Berryman, 2002).

As the students’ emancipatory engagement in education was due to respect of their cultural epistemology, so too, is my position as a researcher immersed in and, as an active participant in the Indigenous social world and in this case, the Indigenous world of contemporary education. In this study the researcher becomes an integral component of the research endeavour and his unique positioning as, not only a researcher, but as a giver of voice to the Indigenous students, parents and community to clarify and empower Indigenous peoples on local, state and national educational platforms. The Indigenous researcher becomes the facilitator of other Indigenous people’s life stories, of relaying emancipatory messages seeking an audience, of resistance against subjugating Western sciences and of the insight to first seek equal dialogue with Indigenous communities and then to empower their voices. Voices in stark opposition to “neocolonizing postmodern global formations” (Sandoval, 2000, pp.1-2) and as Denzin and Lincoln (2008, p.11) define the Indigenists oppositional positioning:

Indigenists resist the positivist and post-positivist methodologies of Western science because these formations are too frequently used to validate colonizing knowledge about [i]ndigenous peoples. Indigenists deploy, instead, interpretive strategies and skills fitted to the needs, language, and traditions of their respective [i]ndigenous community. These strategies emphasize personal performance narratives and testimonies.
Given the above case for resistance to Western sciences and the importance of raising Indigenous voices at a local level, this study needed to actively and purposely promote Indigenous community perspectives. To this end the study privileges Indigenous peoples and rightfully their rich cultural interpretations of their lives in contemporary school and community environments. This is best represented by the positioning of Indigenous student stories at the beginning of selected related chapters in this thesis. Consistently reminding the reader that the study is about real people, in real situations, while simultaneously indicating the adaptation and or restrictions placed on these students lives in gaining equal outcomes from schooling. Maintaining the Indigenous informants’ rights to a voice in the study and the use of long dialogue/narrative from particular community members and students further enhances their voices and the importance of their stories. Of course this approach has its inherent difficulties of longer than normal length of thesis, but one which takes the time and space to provide this deep consideration and important Indigenous narrative. Imbedded in these stories lies over time immemorial of oral history which contemporary research needs to recognise, celebrate and emancipate.

**Research for whose benefit?**

This study, as earlier pointed out, fittingly evolved out of a strategic partnership between the Regional AECG and the district superintendent responsible for schools in that district. Both groups came to the University of Newcastle to see if research could be conducted about why Aboriginal students were not succeeding at school, and more specifically looking for answers to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes for their districts Indigenous students. Answers to these questions were primarily about improving outcomes for Indigenous students in the district’s schools and ultimately for the community ensuring improved futures and equity within the community, through the development of educational outcomes as an emancipatory process to improved job prospects and life chances. The motivation and benefit was generated by this collaborative partnership between the district school system and the Indigenous community. The foundation works of Linda Smith (1999) as a noted and respected Indigenous Maori researcher who emphasises fundamentally that Indigenous peoples must be the benefactors of any research conducted with or about the Indigenous peoples. In response to assist in ascertaining who will benefit from the research
conducted, Smith has developed priori questions which must be answered by researchers in the field of Indigenous education.

The most fundamental of Linda Smith’s (2000, p.239) eight key questions which need to be answered within this study for the conduct of ethical and culturally appropriate research - What research do we want done? - had been met through the effective partnership between local Indigenous peoples through the RAECG and the district superintendent. Such a partnership rightfully empowered the Indigenous RAECG in the research process in this study. Table 3.1 looks at this study and the researcher’s response to this key question of identification of the research question and the other seven questions posed by Smith (2000, p.239) to ensure Indigenous control of the research process for this study or as Smith puts it in Maori terms ‘Rangatiratanga’.

TABLE 3.1 Response to Linda Smith’s Indigenous research questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Linda Smith’s Indigenous Research Questions</th>
<th>Study’s Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What research do we want done?</td>
<td>RAECG and district superintendent decided on the research action which was then negotiated with the Indigenous researcher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whom is it for?</td>
<td>Research is designed to improve retention outcomes and answers to partners the RAECG and the School district.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What difference will it make?</td>
<td>Research has the potential to provide vital insight into Indigenous retention which will assist in developing strategic responses to improve Indigenous retention and engagement in school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who will carry it out?</td>
<td>The Indigenous author of this study in consultation with RAECG and the district superintendent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do we want the research done?</td>
<td>The research was designed in consultation with the RAECG and the district superintendent as part of a triad partnership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How will we know if it is worthwhile?</td>
<td>The study’s outcomes will guide the development of appropriate policy &amp; strategies that will increase Indigenous student retention rates and outcomes within the district.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who will own the research?</td>
<td>The research will be co-owned by the RAECG, school district and the Indigenous researcher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who will benefit?</td>
<td>Education departments at an inspectorate, state and national level involved in policy and strategic planning in Indigenous education. The Indigenous community primarily through the NSWAECG local, regional and state bodies will be empowered with more culturally supportive knowledge bases which assists their understanding of schooling &amp; Indigenous ways of knowing. Schools and teachers will have stronger pedagogical knowledge base to improve engagement and understanding of Indigenous students. In the long term better understanding of culturally affirming student engagement will improve outcomes from schooling. The Indigenous researcher will also gain a doctoral degree.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These critical questions of research on or about Indigenous people which Smith advocates in the above questions posed above in tabular format, are deeply enshrined in the Maori concept of Kaupapa Maori research, which in itself is founded on Maori cosmology. Importantly these deeply rooted Kaupapa Maori research questions are equally shared views of critical theory to ‘resistance and struggle at the local level’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p.9).

The primary Indigenous endeavour here is for self-determination, empowerment and emancipation from dominant non-Indigenous political research discourses which have consistently marginalised Indigenous peoples as Pihama points out below in the Maori Indigenous domain:

...intrinsic to Kaupapa Maori theory is an analysis of existing power structures and societal inequalities, Kaupapa Maori theory therefore aligns with critical theory in the act of exposing underlying assumptions that serve to conceal the power relations that exist with society and the ways in which dominant groups construct concepts of ‘common sense’ and ‘facts’ to provide ad hoc justification for the maintenance of inequalities and the continued oppression of Maori people. (Pihama, 1993, p.57 as cited in Smith 1999, pp.185-186)

Positioning the human face of research

As pointed out in the opening quote by Kincheloe and Steinberg (2008, pp.136-137) the fundamental appeal or beauty of Indigenous research is its capacity “...to focus on relationships of human beings to both one another and to their ecosystem.” This study is a study of Indigenous students and their parents/carers human faces confronting a schooling system that has consistently failed, en masse, to deliver equitable educational outcomes.

As the project unfolded and its findings were analysed, the fundamental element of ‘human relationships’ emerged at the heart of the findings. The primary ingredient in any relationship, the notion of respect, emerged as a most powerful but so often missing foundation, in the effective development of relationships, which emerged during the study. This fundamental human tenet was seen as the key to Indigenous parents/carers relationships with schools and most importantly between students and teachers in the study. Education was seen as an extension of Indigenous peoples' extended
relationships and as such mutual cultural reciprocal respect deemed essential as the principle starting point of such relationships. School and community partnerships need to be founded on such respect.

The richness of Indigenous relationships was consistently evident in the study. Students openly talked about their family and extended family relations both in importance to their daily lives and in play. Their voices indicated and richly communicated a strong family commitment to their everyday lives and their strong bonding to extended family networks. Parents and carers consistently referred to their desires for their children to get an education and improve their circumstances.

**Narrative as a Vehicle for Indigenous Emancipation**

...while there are no formulaic universals for ‘decolonizing’ research methodologies, there are compelling examples of systematic approaches, including narrative and performance genres, most of which include activist agendas working toward social justice, sovereignty, self-determination, and emancipatory goals. (Swadener & Mutua, 2008, p.41)

The reader’s journey through this study will confront largish sections where the author has been compelled to move to personal narrative of the Indigenous informants to this study. It is done purposely with the view to ensure Indigenous voices permeate the study, for it is within these Indigenous conversations of the student stories or through recollections of elders and others, that the true messages are told and weaved as integral parts of the work. I have chosen to weave these messages carefully within the contexts of the data presented with the expressed view to enrich and ground this research in the participants’ lives. Lives, that most non-Indigenous teachers and educators do not take the time to share. Some, including my own supervisors from time to time, encouraged me to ‘cut to the chase’ and privilege the data earlier in the study, but as you will no doubt pick up in reading the study, I urge you to take your time and weave the data with the strategic scene setting cultural background and Indigenous narrative which adds significant weight to the study. But perhaps more importantly humanises its findings.

As you move through the study you will be exposed to weaving the stories of individual students into the study; having elders point out the background to their experiences of
education; or just providing the background to the extensive kinship and family cultural relationships establishes the rich context in which the study was undertaken. In Indigenous research the journey is an integral part of the destination. This importance of story is articulated by Linda Smith who clearly relates it to the integral relationship of Indigenous research act:

Storytelling, oral histories, the perspectives of elders and of women who have become an integral part of all [i]ndigenous research. Each individual story is powerful. But the point about the stories is not that they simply tell a story, or tell a story simply. These new stories contribute to a collective story in which every [i]ndigenous person has a place. (Smith, 1999, p.144)

Indigenous discourse through culturally appropriate narrative representations can provide the fundamental understanding and solution to what seems to be extremely complex issues, like Indigenous education. Bishop argues that a critical reading of

…narratives illustrate the impact of discursive positioning where some discourses offer solutions and others merely perpetuate the status quo. For example, despite most teachers wishing to make a difference for Maori students’ educational achievement, they are not able to do so because of their discursive positioning, whereas others, discursively positioned differently, are able to offer numerous solutions to seemingly immutable changes. (Bishop, 2008, p.452)

The use of narrative in this study provides the cultural lens into the reality of the lived rich world experiences of Indigenous students and their families and communities. A lens, which can be coloured with preconceived prejudices, or cleared vision to aide in cultural understanding. The importance of such clear vision offers the potential to seek new and fresh answers to often long standing problems, like achieving equitable educational outcomes for Indigenous students.

Research Design

This district-level case-based research that explores the phenomenon ‘Why do Aboriginal kids turn off school?’ is holistically structured around four identified factors that require further study in relation to understanding attendance patterns of Indigenous students

- Systemic factors;
School/Staff factors;
Student factors; and
Parents/community factors

Multiple sources of data were sought using the qualitative tools of ethnographic interview, observation and document analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) to elicit narrative (Smith, 1999; Bishop, 2008; Denzin, Lincoln & Smith, 2008); student questionnaires to determine students’ perceptions of the quality of their school life (Ainley & Bourke, 1992); and staff questionnaires to obtain staff demographic details and their opinions on the scope of Aboriginal education implementation.

Informants were drawn from groups that are salient to exploring the four factors outlined above. The groupings include NSWDET state office personnel in related areas of Indigenous education and student support (access to this group being achieved through the researcher’s successful tendering of the Review of the 1996 Aboriginal Education Policy); past students, school and district staff and management, and Indigenous educators; two Indigenous student cohorts drawn from Year 5 (primary) and Year 7 (secondary school) in the case district; and student parents/guardians and family and parent/community Indigenous education advisory groups (AECG and ASSPA).

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

Data were collected over a five-year period from 2001 through to 2005, a period over which the two cohorts of Indigenous students at the focus of the study transcended stages 3 to 5 of their school experiences representing the last two years of primary schooling and the first two stages or four years of secondary schooling in NSW. Utilising Bourke et al.’s (1999) four groupings of factors which gave a holistic framework to encompass the major considerations surrounding these key determinants on Indigenous student outcomes from schooling, were used as the focus of the research data gathering: systemic factors; school/staff issues; student issues; parents/community factors the data collection each of which are now detailed.
Qualitative data preparation and analysis

Interviews

Interviews were fully transcribed, typed, verbatim by the researcher after each exchange with each group of informants i.e. each student cohort, school staff and parent/carer group. Participants had the opportunity to edit these. There were some minor edits but typically no changes required.

There were multiple individual interviews. The student interviews extended to approximately half an hour and adult informants between 40 minutes and an hour each time. Focus groups were also transcribed verbatim and tended to also range to an hour. Pseudonyms and identity (IDs) codes were allocated prior to analysis and specific identifying material was at the same time edited to de-identify specifics such as location and school. There was a master list of IDs by school/role/Aboriginal/gender/location. At later stages as quotations were being selected for reporting further editing to remove material that would identify anyone, or a place or event was undertaken to ensure confidentiality. Rewriting in a vignette style was also sometimes employed if material was difficult to de-identify.

The researcher had access to school reports, newsletters, student records. These materials were used on site at schools and entered into a spreadsheet based on identification codes established. Interviews and all other materials were allocated an ID for reference and anonymity purposes.

Table 3.2 indicates the size of each cohort of students, the type of school they were recruited from and the sources of data per student cohort in the study.

| TABLE 3.2 Student cohort participant data, sources and number of schools participating |
|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Schools Participating                  | Sources of data per Students Cohort |
| Total M F                              | Primary Schools | Secondary schools | Central Schools | Initial Quest. | Interviews | Report Card |
| Student cohort Year 5                  | 24 15 9         | 6 5 1             |                   | 19 51 21       |              |              |
| Student cohort Year 7*                 | 19 7 12        | 3                 |                   | 18 30 13       |              |              |
| TOTALS                                 | 43 22 21      | 6 5 1             |                   | 37 81 34       |              |              |

*Note: Year 7 cohort High Schools included in Year 5 cohort
The second primary interview/focus group informants to the study were school interviews conducted under various staff categories in cohort schools and district offices and amongst parents/carers/community as represented in Table 3.3. The table also highlights the informant characteristic around Aboriginality, gender and type of informant role or the identified group they represented i.e. ex-student, teacher etc. It highlights the total number of both school/district and parent/carer/community levels of interview/focus group participation at 82 informants

### Analysis

The analysis undertaken follows Braun and Clarke’s (2006) description of thematic analysis and the informing of the data analysed on whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question. First stage was exploring the material in a grouped format. So this meant that interviews/focus groups were grouped by ID number into:

- various cohorts by year for students;
- groups of respondents by school and parent community by school;
- relationship groups;
- staff by role - executive, teachers, specialist; and
- staff by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal
This was the primary coding stage of Interviews tended to be coded initially by question to support comparison by question. Once familiarity with all the sources of information was established content coding was added to allow connection between participant interviews and other material.

At this point large manual spreadsheets were created to map out the connected material. The second main level of coding was to establish narratives across the material and student, parent and teacher information. This material contributes to the voices and the longitudinal element of the findings that are a significant part of this thesis.

Finally as findings were generated for the above, larger themes were identified in the process of synthesising these, and questions asked of the material to explore their power to inform the arguments that were being developed.

Synergy emerged between the study and the work of the researcher throughout those stages of analysis, when individual cases and stories were being identified and explored ‘to capture something important’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.82). As will be explained in Chapter 10 the researcher was constantly self-referencing and reflecting on his own journey during this process of analysis.

**Data collection timeframe**

Data was collected from 2001 through to 2005. Student interviews were conducted over three stages form initial contact in 2001, through to the critical transition period into high-school in 2003 for in particular the Year 5 and the final stage in 2004 (Year 5 cohort in Year 8 and Year 7 cohort in Year 10). District, school and parent/carer/community interviews were conducted throughout 2001 to 2005 but a concerted effort was made to conduct the majority of these interviews during 2002 (due to minimum student data collection in that year) and in 2004 to correspond to final year of the study. Other supporting data such as school records, student record cards etc. were conducted at the latter stage of the study so as to maximise the timeframe of data available over the period of the study.

In consistency with the studies Four Factor model each factor will now be discussed around the methodological basis of data collection and analysis as it relates directly to
this model. Purposely the study draws on both collected data and grey literature particularly around the then current policy directions being driven by a major review into Aboriginal Education in NSW and includes the researchers own formal contributions to this review process.

**Systemic factors**

Individual and group interviews were conducted by the researcher with key informants in school district management and district support staff. Other pertinent material from state office staff on systemic factors were drawn from the findings of the Report of the NSW Aboriginal Education Policy Review of the Aboriginal Education Policy which was led by the researcher after a competitive tender process. Nine interviews in total were conducted with seven district staff. The two Indigenous district staff members were interviewed a second time, one individually and a group interview with the both of them (at their request). In addition to the two Indigenous district staff members individual face to face interviews were conducted with the District Superintendent (the individual who with the Regional AECG initiated this study), his subsequent replacement under a new restructure within the NSWDET, the School Education Director (SED), a specially created position of Aboriginal Project Officer, the Student Services Officer, and Student Welfare Consultant.

Initially input to the research from Systemic informants such as the Aboriginal Programs Unit, senior departmental officers with direct responsibility for Aboriginal education and the NSWAECG was programmed within the data collection of this thesis but the subsequent announcement and implementation of the most comprehensive review of Aboriginal education ever undertaken by NSWDET during 2003-2004\(^\text{10}\) provided a unique opportunity to gather very current critically important information with regard to the study from these sources. The researcher at this time was appointed leader of the Academic Reference Group to the Review (2004, p.17) which provided access to key senior departmental officers and Indigenous staff in relation to critical evaluations of policy, curriculum, pedagogical practice and Indigenous community involvement. The Aboriginal Policy Review covered the three prime focus areas of this policy and

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\(^{10}\) The Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education – Yanigurra Muya: Ganggurrinyma Yaarri Guurulaw Yirringin.gurray – Freeing the Spirit: Dreaming and Equal Future. Published in August 2004 it represented a joint undertaking and significant monumental partnership between the New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group and the NSWDET.
fortunately overlapped the scope of this study in the two focus areas of - Aboriginal Students; Aboriginal Communities. The final prime focus area ‘All Staff-All Students-All Schools’ was not the focus of this study however, teaching and executive staff in the district and schools were important informants to the case study.

NSWDET policy, attendance data and curriculum documentation was accessed on key issues such as legislation, Anti-racism Policy, Aboriginal Education Policy, Welfare, Suspension and Exclusion Policy and Attendance Policy under the systemic components of the study. Capacity to access these resources at a state-wide systemic level proved invaluable to the holist approach involved in the study. However, this was countered with rich local data provided in the following sections from school staff, Indigenous students’ perspectives and finally from the Indigenous communities’ point of view.

**School/Staff factors**

Several data collection techniques were used to investigate school and staff issues in the schools in the study to ensure that the complexity of the issues and the significant numbers of potential informants were adequately canvassed. Focus groups (Morgan, 1997) were used by the researcher where required for groups of informants who were directly linked and shared the commonality of the school, education and employment with the NSW Department of Education and Training. Personal interviews (Minichiello Aroni, Timewell & Alexander, 1995) utilising semi-structured questions (Appendix 3.4), were used with school management and with Aboriginal educators employed in the school such as Aboriginal Education Assistants. These interviews were conducted and recorded verbatim in private (unless informants chose to work in agreed shared interviews) and ranged from 20 to 45mins each, after which informants were given an opportunity to change/delete any elements of the recording. A total of 59 interviews were held with 55 school staff with four key Indigenous staff being interviewed twice. Thirty of these interviews were conducted with school executive staff (including 11 Principals, eight Deputy Principals/Assistant Principals, 10 Head Teachers and one executive staff member, comprising 12 females and 18 males and including two Indigenous executive staff members); 15 teachers (two of whom were Indigenous, nine female and six male) from all the schools in the study. Nine Indigenous staff members of the schools were also interviewed (AEAs and one School Administrative Staff member) as well as one
school Counsellor with responsibility across several schools in the study were also interviewed.

In addition to personal interviews with teachers, who were either recommended to the researcher by the schools for their direct involvement with Indigenous students (e.g. teacher welfare officers), or were other staff who had demonstrated involvement with these students. The broader school staff base was also surveyed in the study’s five Secondary Schools to seek critical opinion on issues such as teacher profiles, school curriculum and policy and practice in the school with regard to Indigenous student issues using a researcher developed survey which included a previously developed matrix (designed and used by NSWDET to assess schools’ implementation of the NSWAEP, Appendix 3.5) for staff to indicate where their school was at with the implementation and school/teacher development of the NSWAEP (NSWDSE, 1996). This survey assisted in gaining a more confidential input than can be gained within the constraints of focus group and personal interviews and also provided a broader cross section of the school staff with several Indigenous inputs from staff and community totalling 114 responses (22 executive staff, 80 teachers, five administrative staff, six Aboriginal school staff and community responses, and one unidentified response).

School curriculum, policy and demographic data were gathered during school visits from school documentation available e.g. School Annual Reports. Researcher observations supported by field notes and reflections were also used to further inform the study.

Snapshots of classroom lessons were undertaken in secondary classrooms utilising the availability of the Quality Teaching in NSW Public Schools: Continuing the discussion about classroom practice (NSWDET, 2003b) publication and the recommended ‘Coding of Classroom practice’. The researcher was formally trained in the implementation of the Quality Teaching Framework and Coding practice’ and acted as a specialist advisor to schools outside of the study, on the implementation of this Framework. Twenty-one lessons were coded across six secondary schools involving 13 teachers (five males and eight females) across nine subject areas.
**Student factors**

The 43 Indigenous students engaged in the study were the key informants and focus of the thesis project. Students were recruited to the project via a letter of invitation redrafted in Plain English (Appendix 3.6) as requested by DET in its approval to participate in the research which was sent by the school (Appendix 3.7) to the parents or carers of all the schools’ Aboriginal students in either of the Year 5 cohort for primary schools and the Year 7 Aboriginal cohort for secondary schools in 2001, who were identified for the study by the School District in collaboration with the Regional AECG. Only one Secondary School nominated in the study failed to recruit any students which indicated a lack in follow-up of students by the school concerned to encourage their Aboriginal students to return the parental approval form permitting the children to be engaged in the study. This was despite several requests from the researcher and offers to assist in the process.

Students were recruited to the project via a letter of invitation as indicated above (Appendix 3.6) and student focus groups were the primary source of data. They were supplemented with a personal survey developed by the researcher to gather general and specific background of students and to assist in building up rapport with students (86% of students in the study completed the Student Profile survey at Appendix 3.8). A student questionnaire on Quality of School Life (Ainley & Bourke, 1992) which was implemented across all Year 8 and Year 10 students at four of the key secondary schools in the study (Appendix 3.9) with over 600 students taking part, with 6.5% of the responses being from Indigenous students in the schools (which was commensurate to the 6.2% of Indigenous student population across the district).

A total of 82 interactions (personal interviews, focus groups or initial personal survey) with students engaged in the study took place with an average of 2.2 contacts per student (after discounting 10 students who had only an initial contact at the start of the research but then either left school [2], were transient students [2], transferred to another school outside of the case study area [3], were placed in Juvenile Justice system [1], went missing/unknown of whereabouts [1], ran away from home and could not be located [1]). Of the total commencing 43 students 51% were male (22 males and 21 females). Males were dominant in Year 5 cohort with 63% (17 males and 10 females) and in Year 7 cohort; females represented 69% of informants (5 males and 11 females).
School attainment was assessed through students’ results in the NSW Basic Skills Tests (BST) in primary and the SNAP and ELLA tests in secondary (Source Student School Record Cards). This included analysis of the students’ record cards (70% of school student records in the study were accessed to provide this data) and supported by interviews with school staff and Indigenous community members’ comments.

Document analysis involved analysis of school attendance, suspensions and exclusion data from school district and school records that were made available by the schools.

**Parent/Community factors**

A total of 33 Indigenous informants (40% of all non-student informant contributions to the study) and two (2) non-Indigenous parents of Indigenous students in the study provided the parent/community input into the study. This group of informants included Indigenous staff employed in the schools primarily because of their composite role as, for example, Aboriginal Education Assistant and Indigenous community, and was especially relevant in several cases where the persons were both an employee of the DET and executive member of the Regional or Local NSW AECG. Their input as community was vital to the study. In one instance the informant was not only working in one of the schools in the study and an executive member of the Regional AECG, but also held a senior executive position in the local land council and was a dominant player in both school and community affairs. The pool of community informants further included:

- parents;
- one legal guardian;
- four grandparents who had primary care of their grandchildren with one grandparent having formally obtained custody of her three grandchildren;
- seven Aboriginal Education Assistants;
- one Aboriginal tutor in a school;

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11 This dual role of both employee of the Department of Education and member of the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) is common within the Indigenous community and the researcher himself has for over 20 years held a dual roles as both a senior officer in the Department of Education and senior executive positions on the State AECG simultaneously. This has been due to a very limited pool of professional/para-professional Indigenous educators over the past and in particular in the earlier years of the operation of the AECG.
- a school Indigenous administrative assistant;
- two district staff officers who work directly with Indigenous students as an Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer and Aboriginal School Liaison Officer;
- two members of separate school executive staff, including a Principal;
- two teachers each from different schools in the study; and finally
- two ex-students from one of the schools in the study who had left school at the minimum leaving age without completing Year 10.

Two focus groups were conducted at two of the schools with the Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness program (ASSPA), a program established to increase parents’ contribution to school policy, direction and resource expenditure for Indigenous students at a local school level. All other community informants were interviewed individually or in small supportive cohorts of two or three (at the informant’s request) using semi-structured interview/focus group questions (Appendix 3.4) and endeavouring to establish the level of community involvement in the school educational process as set out formally in the shared Partnership Agreement between the NSWDET and the NSWAECG (NSWDET & NSWAECG, 1999)

Community profile and demographic details were accessed through focus groups, interviews and documentation available from schools and in the public domain.

**Indigenous holistic world views**

The researcher was in the privileged observer position in so far as the researcher was the single entity working across the entire research data base and across all school sites. The researcher as an Indigenous person has significant cultural collateral when dealing with other Indigenous informants in the study given over 35 years leadership in Indigenous education in schools, TAFE and the University sector. Associated with this was the general support of Indigenous communities shared understanding of the holistic nature of Indigenous lives and the intrinsic link between traditional culture and contemporary lived lives of Indigenous peoples in Australia. This is a point well made in comparison to our Indigenous brothers and sisters the American Indian (to use the terms of the author):
These bodies of research give legitimacy to looking both outside the school, into the local community and the broader society, and inside the school, within the classroom interactions, to identify the roots of educational failure or success. In doing so, we believe that the issue of “trust,” specifically the power relationships between students and teachers and American Indian communities and the Anglo community, is pivotal in understanding why some students “learn” and others do not. (Deyhle & Swisher, 1997, p.164)

The essence of the research premise by Bourke (himself Indigenous) based on the Bourke et al. (2000) holistic analysis was to ensure all aspects of the four areas of systemic factors, school/staff issues, student issues and finally parent/community factors, were collectively analysed. The researcher is simultaneously advantaged through his cultural background as well as the interpretation of this data through the ethnographer’s lens (Jacob, 1987). This provides a unique holistic view of the data collected and the educational environment under study (Groome, 1995a; Beresford, 2003b, p.67). The researchers personal field notes, Indigenous cultural knowledge and reflections were used to inform these observations.

**Data Analysis**

Multiple methods of data collection improve the possibilities for validation through triangulation. The shared partnership in the research design and implementation between the school district, the Indigenous community and the researcher ensures triangulation of results through negotiated validation of the findings which is similar to that obtained in community-based action research as indicated:

*Community-based action research seeks to enact an approach to inquiry that includes all relevant stakeholders in the process of investigation. It creates contexts that enable diverse groups to negotiate their various agendas in an atmosphere of mutual trust and acceptance and to work towards effective solutions to problems that concern them.* (Stringer, 1996, p.35)

The quantitative components of the research involving the student questionnaire will be analysed within the parameters established within the questionnaire methodology of describing participant backgrounds and summarising their attitudes towards school
SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH

Increasing access and outcomes for Indigenous students across Australia has been a primary focus of governments and community over the past two decades. Major government reports and policies have targeted these Indigenous education issues consistently (Herbert et al., 1999, p.xi). At an international level Indigenous communities have articulated their educational needs under the Coolangatta Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People in Education (1999) which has as its underlying philosophy, other international declarations and conventions for the children of the world.

The critical circumstances now surrounding high attrition rates of Indigenous students across Australia is undermining the potential for equitable educational outcomes for these students. The research undertaken is in direct response to the need for informed advice as articulated by both the school/district education office and simultaneously the Indigenous community. Its design is based on the need to develop actions to overcome the high attrition rates and associated poor attendance patterns of these students. The research domain will inform not only local action on these critical circumstances but prove to be an important informant of policy and action to the critical review of both the Review of the 1996 NSW Aboriginal Education Policy (Lester & Hanlen, 2004) and the 2004 Review of Aboriginal Education: Yanigurra Muya: Ganggurrinyma Yaarri Guurulaw Yirringin.gurray. Feeling the Spirit: Dreaming an Equal Future, through the researcher’s role as Principal Researcher of first mentioned Review and academic advisor to the latter. While the research is not technically following the line of Action Research, the capacity of the researcher to inform and empower the partners to both the Reviews into a dynamic process encompassing the "look, think, act" routine (as Stringer [1996, pp.16-17] describes it) has become a reality due to his emerging role as Academic Adviser and later Director of Aboriginal Education and Training, charged with the task of implementation of the overarching Review of Aboriginal Education.
Feasibility of the Study

The literature search for the study demonstrated a significant opportunity and scope for the conduct of a longitudinal case study within the domain of Indigenous attendance, retention and outcome from school. Most studies in these areas were very local in nature, involving a single school experience in generally attendance/retention (Mander-Ross, 1995) or single issues addressed such as suspension rates (Gardiner et al. 1995), or covering a specific aspect addressing reasons for poor academic performance of Indigenous students (Eibeck, 1994).

Significant national reports/research were the major source of data on this topic area and in particular the foundation findings of works of Herbert et al. (1999) and Bourke et al. (2000) are excellent examples in this domain. However, each of these works and other similar commissioned reports, generally by government, are reliant on short case study histories or exemplars of good and bad practice in the area under investigation. The "Report on the inquiry into the effectiveness of education and training programs for Indigenous Australians" (SEWRSBERC, 2000) also highlights the inherent difficulties of absenteeism for improving Indigenous educational outcomes. This Report also comments on the effects of racism, curriculum and teacher preparation in the development of an inviting education system for Indigenous peoples.

Ethical considerations

The research was conducted with full consent of both the University of Newcastle Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval H8640300, Appendix 3a) and the NSWDET Strategic Research Directorate (Approval SERAP 00.62, Appendix 3b) which included letters of support/commitment to participate by the RAECG (Appendix 3.1), DET District Superintendent (Appendix 3.2) and an exemplar school (Appendix 3.3).

Of utmost consideration in the research was the 'duty of care' and subsequent responsibilities associated with Child Protection Undertaking which is a requirement of research clearance by the NSWDET. An equally high consideration is the protection of anonymity of the student informants involved in the research. Both of these considerations formed the highest priority for the researcher who was closely informed by NSWDET policy (NSWDET, 2006b) in regard to these central ethical considerations. Any interviews with students were either co-supervised or carried out in a fashion to
ensure adherence to these directives. Information sessions were held with the Regional AECG prior to commencement of the research and schools were extended this opportunity as well, with five schools taking up this opportunity.

All data gathered and informants' privacy, anonymity and school location has been protected through non-disclosure of such details and data was de-identified upon entry and transcription. Coding processes were only available to the researcher and the supervisor and kept password protected and in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home. All vignettes were constructed to immerse the reader into the lives of the Indigenous student informants and aide as a continuous reminder of the depth of culture and daily lived experiences of their and their family’s lives in the genuine pursuit of a complementary western education (additional consent was gained from each student involved, Appendix 3.10).

The research methodology and process is consistent with the key objectives of Indigenous research which is a collaborative partnership between the researcher and the Indigenous community. The research has been identified by the Indigenous community and the researcher has actively negotiated fully in the construct of the method and agreed outcomes of ownership of the research findings and future possible publications. These approaches meet the Indigenous ethical protocols associated with the conduct of research Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) (AIATSIS, 2002). Community consent for the research was forthcoming in a supporting letter (Appendix 3.1).

Each participant was given an Information Sheet and Consent Form (Appendix 3.10) outlining the key aspects of the researcher, aims of research and ethical procedures involved (especially highlighting the confidentiality issues) and were asked to sign a letter of consent. Parents/guardians and their students were given in addition to the Plain English written information sheet (Appendix 3.6) verbal information regarding the research at an information session and if required provided individual verbal consultation on the research. This was important given the high level of illiteracy amongst Indigenous communities. The Regional AECG as partners to the research, have been informed of the research and were given the opportunity to refer community members to the researcher for any follow up clarification and monitoring of community response throughout the research.
Interviews/focus groups were undertaken with students and other informants in a confidential environment in a location in which they were comfortable. The researcher's Aboriginality assisted in putting the students at ease with the process. Interviews/focus groups were taped with the permission of the informants and provided such recording did not detract from the gathering of informants' contribution (note taking was to replace taping in such instances but was not required). Tapes were transcribed verbatim, de-identified and coded. Informants were given the opportunity at interview to nominate any comment for publication in the final report. Taped recordings were destroyed in view the presence of a nominated AECG Regional committee member. Informants were given an opportunity to edit/delete or amend the tape of their interviews.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS ON METHOD

The methodological framework of this study endeavours to work within an Indigenous ethical and methodological lens. The study provides the essential opportunity for Indigenous Peoples' voices, viewpoints and experiences to dominate the data informing the study with a view to ensuring the primacy of their culturally based analytical understandings in this research in the manner developed by Linda Smith (1999), Graham Smith (2000) and Russell Bishop (2005) in their own Indigenous Maori research traditions reflecting the enlightenment of Kaupapa Maori research methodology.

For too long Western research institutions have dominated the Indigenous agenda, prescribing antidotes and relegating Indigenous peoples and culture as totally discounting our vast knowledge base that has accumulated in Indigenous Australia over time immemorial. This emancipation of Indigenous research which permeates the nature of this study is captured in Denzin and Lincoln's (2008, p.6) précis of the work of Bishop (2005) with regard to an Indigenous standpoint on Western epistemological and ethical frameworks:

There are conflicts between competing epistemological and ethical frameworks, including (Western) institutional human subject research regulations. Research is regulated according to positivist epistemologies. Indigenous scholars and native intellectuals are pressed to produce technical knowledge that conforms to Western standards of truth and validity. Conflicts over who initiates and who benefits from such research are especially problematic (Bishop, 2005). Culturally responsive research practices must be developed. Such practices would locate power within the [Indigenous community. What is acceptable and not acceptable research is
determined and defined from within the community. Such work encourages self-determination and empowerment (Bishop, 2005). (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p.6)

The Indigenous researchers own “way of knowing” along with that of the Indigenous informants to the study have been purposely positioned as the “central resource for the work of academics” and in this instance myself as an Indigenous researcher. The additional “multi-logical” nature of the researcher is seen as an advantage in perceptions being drawn from a number of vantage points with regard to analysis and empowerment of the Indigenous peoples in research and through their viewpoints. The simultaneity of the researcher’s diverse roles and capacity to influence the Indigenous educational agenda, is seen as a strength in Indigenous research with Rigney (1997, pp.6-7) even demanding people in such positions be “engaged in the struggle” for Indigenous rights.

These cultural lenses have been widened to include valued non-Indigenous perspectives and a depth of knowing through these informants’ school or management roles that involved teaching or administering programs for Indigenous students. The bulk of these non-indigenous inputs was gathered at district and school levels and reported in the relevant corresponding systemic factors Chapter 4 and school factors Chapters 5 and 6.

The researcher’s exposure to Indigenous informants further mirrored his own Indigenous experiences, which encompass highly committed Indigenous family, extended networks of supportive parents and carers, with rich cultural lives, who on the whole had the highest expectations of their children and their schooling. Unfortunately, this is not the picture of Indigenous parent expectations depicted in the literature. Until relationships are built on ‘respect’ in a cross cultural environment, there can be no guarantee of genuine partnerships between schools (and their teachers) and the Indigenous community/parents/carers (and their children).

From this point the thesis now deals with each of the four factors commencing with the Systemic Factors in the first instance.
CHAPTER 4. SYSTEMIC FACTOR

INTRODUCTION – SYSTEMIC FACTORS GUIDING INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

The educational heritage of the Aboriginal community in New South Wales is abysmal; there is no proud tradition on which to look back. The education doled out to Aborigines, including the parents and grandparents of our present generation, was second, perhaps third rate, and it is hardly to be wondered at if Aborigines today do not see the school as particularly relevant to their needs, or are suspicious of what it is being used for. The educational tradition among Aborigines helps to explain the continuing failure of the school to be as successful with Aborigines as it is with the rest of the community…Indeed some of the sadder events in this book relate to Aboriginal children who, while their soldier fathers were overseas fighting for ‘truth, justice and the Australian way’, were being denied justice by the society their fathers were fighting to protect.

(J.J. Fletchers preface to his book, Clean, Clad and Courteous: A History of Aboriginal Education in New South Wales (Fletcher, 1989, p.10)

Indigenous peoples of NSW as the first part of Australia invaded by Britain, were subjected to the longest period of invasion and subsequently bore the brunt of government policy generally and particularly on matters dealing with access to education. Fletcher (above) clearly spelt out the stark reality of educational policy for Indigenous Australians in NSW up until the mid-1940s and later where he further comments on the fact that in more recent decades Indigenous education policy and practice had picked up momentum and demonstrated a level of improvement (Fletcher, 1989). This chapter will concentrate on recent national and NSW state policy as it affects Indigenous students in the case study. It is vitally important to understand the foundations of the educational history of such policy as it still has clear repercussions on the current lived educational experiences of Indigenous parents and grandparents and their interaction with schools today, as can be clearly evident in the following quote from the District Welfare Consultant:

I think that the Aboriginal community don’t think schools are theirs; there is no ownership, whereas with a lot of non-Aboriginal people the school is theirs, they feel comfortable in going to the school, participating in school activities, participating in decision making processes in school, like P&C school councils. Aboriginal community members are not doing that. Why they are not doing that is probably because they don’t feel comfortable, they don’t feel it is theirs.
R: Schools are still a pretty daunting environment?

Yeh, and if you’ve had a pretty sad experience in your childhood in school environments, be you’re Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal you’re not likely to rush back to a school setting to participate. Ref: 3.10201)

The above quote highlights the importance of historical implications of systemic policy and practice on the contemporary perceptions of Indigenous peoples in Australia and in particular in NSW. This chapter will highlight key policy and practice in Indigenous education at a national, state and district level as it affects Indigenous students in classrooms across NSW with particular focus on the district level at the time of the case study. The researcher in his role as a key Indigenous educator in NSW for three decades will draw on his first hand involvement in formal reviews of Indigenous education at the time of the research, to capture the policy climate of the time and weave interviews and data from the case study to illuminate systemic factors permeating the classroom lives of Indigenous students. This will address the first of the four factors/issues raised by Bourke et al. (2000, p.3) as requiring holistic appraisal of determinants in Indigenous equitable educational opportunity and outcomes. The three other areas addressed in subsequent chapters are; school/staff issues, student issues and parents/community factors.

The systemic factors will be addressed from a national perspective through to the state policy climate onto district factors which create the scope for schools to the realisation of classroom practice as it relates to the Indigenous students in the study.

SYSTEMIC FACTORS OF NATIONAL INDIGENOUS EDUCATIONAL POLICY AGENDA – GOVERNMENT REVIEWS, REPORTS AND STRATEGIC DIRECTION

The fundamental purpose of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy is to develop appropriate ways of responding effectively and sensitively to the educational needs and aspirations of Aboriginal people. This requires a holistic approach, under the guidance of Aboriginal people, to achieve educational equity while accommodating cultural difference and recognising socio-economic disadvantage. (DEET, 1989, p.9)
The above quote articulates the national policy agenda over the period of the 1990s and into the first five years of the new century. Incrementally\(^{12}\) (DEST, 2003a, p.2) the Commonwealth Department of Education Science and Technology (DEST) funded programs such as the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Programme (IESIP) which includes programs as the Supplementary Recurrent Assistance (SRA), National Indigenous Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (NIELNS); and the Indigenous Education Direct Assistance (IEDA) Programme which allocates resources for the Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ATAS), plus several other funding program initiatives including the Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness Program (ASSPA) and the Vocational Education and Guidance for Aboriginals Scheme (VEGAS); and through such funding had endeavoured to influence the states and private education providers to implement the national policy agenda outlined in the quote above (DEST, 2003a, pp.92-93).

States and Territories in Australia having been signatory to the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP) and obviously required to comply with the funding associated with the Policy had readily endorsed and accepted the national policy agenda. A relevant example of how one state collaborates in Indigenous funding provision and support is in NSW where the DET Aboriginal Education Initiatives Plan supplements the Commonwealth in program areas through the then specialist service and policy unit the Aboriginal Programs Unit (APU) supporting administrative costs, teaching positions, some Aboriginal Education Assistant (AEA) positions and other state-level initiatives (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004, pp.37-38).

Government reviews and reports have been integral in driving the Indigenous education agenda at both a state and national level over the past three decades. It is not the intent here to replicate an historical chronology of policy development but to highlight significant milestones along the way. Three significant governmental reports provide excellent detailed advice of the policy development and program implementation during the scope of this study from 2000-2004 (SEWRSBERC, 2000,pp.19-40; DEST, 2003a, pp.108-115; NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004, p.35).

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\(^{12}\) The pace of change can be attributed at times to the fact that the Commonwealth has no immediate jurisdiction in delivery of state educational policy and programs and hence has to endeavour to influence the states generally via funding agreements to follow particular policy direction (DEST, 2003a, p.2)
A significant report addressing Indigenous employment and training was tabled in 1985, the Review of Aboriginal Employment and Training Programs (commonly referred to as the Miller Report [Miller, 1985] after its Indigenous chair Mick Miller a Queenslander) provided the initial impetus to move on Aboriginal education and training agenda at that time. Supporting this push and direction was the all Indigenous body the National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC). This body was formed to provide advice on Aboriginal education to the Commonwealth Minister of Education and the Department of Education, and produced several significant policy and support statements on Indigenous education in the late-1980s (DEET, 1989, pp.6-7). The author was a member of NAEC at the time. This important policy foundation platform provided the opportunity under the Chair of Paul Hughes (one of the leading Indigenous educators in the nation) for the Commonwealth to establish the Aboriginal Education Task Force. The timing of this coincidentally falling in the symbolic year of the Australian Bi-centenary of the so called by non-Indigenous peoples, the ‘Settlement’ of Australia, 1988.

Hughes Task Force Report provided the impetus, background and key recommendation calling for a national policy on Indigenous education, which in turn promoted the historical collaboration of all governments of the Commonwealth, States and Territories to endorse the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy – Joint Policy Statement (NATSIEP) with the following major educational priority:

3.1.1 The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy aims to improve the availability, responsiveness and effectiveness of educational services as a means of achieving equity of access to and participation in education, and equitable and appropriate educational outcomes for Aboriginal people. (Commonwealth of Australia, 1989, p.13)

The Commonwealth response to the NATSIEP was the establishment of the Aboriginal Education Strategic Initiative Program (AESIP) with four objectives;

- Increase Aboriginal involvement in educational decisions;
- Equal access to education by Aboriginals;
- Equity of participation by Aboriginals in education; and
- Equitable and appropriate educational outcomes for Aboriginals. (DEST, 2003, p.109)
The next major push and support and national co-ordination of Indigenous education policy was directed by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA). MCEETYA’s first role in overseeing such policy developments was to commission a review into the effectiveness of the NATSIEP, resulting in the 1995 National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. The foundations for Indigenous education were further cemented in this document with reaffirmation of government commitment to Indigenous education and the following key principles surrounding such engagement:

- **Self-determination in education** – putting the authority to make decisions in the hands of Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders;
- **Diversity** – empowering Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders to exercise the maximum degree of choice in education;
- **Subsidiarity** – shifting responsibility for and about education for Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders as far ‘down’ administrative systems as possible, given the demands of accountability and the efficient delivery of services;
- **Affiliation** – ensuring coordination between groups as far ‘up’ the administrative system as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations wish, to pursue shared aims and to achieve economies of scale, and;
- **Efficiency** – of the available resources, minimising the amount of money spent on administration and maximising the amount of money spent on actually providing educational services for Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders. (DEET, 1995, p.27)

The above principles become integral to the overall strategic push from this point of time on. In particular MCEETYA developed from these NATSIEP principles several key policy areas highlighting literacy and numeracy, professional development of teachers, development of culturally-inclusive curricula and increased Indigenous employment in education and training. MCEETYA’s active involvement produced several key documents in the field which were guiding both policy and curriculum development in Indigenous education and its inclusion in more broader educational policy directions e.g. A National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, 1996-2002 (MCEETYA, 1995); The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty First Century (MCEETYA, 1999), and in 2000 developed ‘A Model of More Culturally Inclusive and Educationally Effective Schools’ (MCEETYA,
as a framework for action amongst its Council membership. Guiding the direction of MCEETYA since 1999 has been the establishment of their Taskforce on Indigenous Education including representation of key Indigenous educators heading up various educational units within their own states. The terms of reference of the Taskforce fell into three main areas: raising the issue as a national priority; enhancing outcomes from the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiative Programme (IESIP); and specific advice on the key strategic direction on two of the most pressing and priority issues of the time, namely Indigenous literacy and numeracy, and school attendance.

At a state level Indigenous education has become a priority area through each state and territory signing up to the NATSIEP and subsequently being integral responsible players in MCEETYA. The then NSW Department of Education (NSWDE, 1982) which pioneered Aboriginal education policy in Australia, in 2004 as the renamed the NSW Department of Education and Training (NSWDET), (similarly, other states and territories began to include technical education in their portfolio. [Collins, 1999, Buckskin, 2008]), undertook an extensive review of both its AEP (Lester & Hanlen, 2004) and also a major review of all aspects of Aboriginal education within the state in areas of its responsibility such as pre-schooling, primary and secondary schools, TAFE, and Adult Education (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004). The Lester & Hanlen (2004) Review of the 1996 NSWAEP and its 37 recommendations informed the more extensive and comprehensive Review of Aboriginal Education (NSWDET, 2004), which had its own extensive 71 recommendations over nine key areas. These recommendations and both reports will form the basis of a strategic and comprehensive analysis later in this chapter when the research investigates the external policy and practice issues which lie outside the schools domain. The NSW review, with similar results of their counterparts in other states, territories and nationally in Australia (Buckskin et al., 2008; Ladwig & Sarra, 2009; Buckskin et al., 2009), quite clearly acknowledged the enormous gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous outcomes on most, if not all, any educational measurement criteria available.

The task ahead to reduce the gaps is daunting at the very least, but there remain significant amounts of goodwill and trust amongst practitioners and the Indigenous community respectively to mount the required effort to turn these results around (Lester & Hanlen, 2004). Given the significant growth in Indigenous youth population there is a considerable urgency to resolve the many issues raised in these reviews but haste should not be at the expense of well thought through collaborative strategic approaches.
with the community. Dr Colin Gellatly’s position (2004, p.93) sums up the complexity of the task in Indigenous communities when addressing the then volatile issues in inner-city Sydney suburb of Redfern during the riots in 2004:

*To conclude, there is no quick fix to the long-term issues being faced... The problems are entrenched, complex and multi-faceted. Whilst many well-intentioned people have put forward solutions... experience has shown that ad hoc and poorly designed solutions only exacerbate the situation.*

**Indigenous policy leadership**

A priority inclusion in all government policy, reviews and reports and also in most academic papers on Indigenous education (DEET, 1989a & 1995; APSESBERC, 2000; MCEETYA, 2000a & 2000c; NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004), had been to recognise the need for Indigenous empowerment through self-determination. It is pleasing that in each of these important government policy directions Indigenous people have either chaired the review process or were in relatively genuine partnership through significant Indigenous representation. As is the case in NSW, there is a formal documented partnership between the NSWAEHG and the NSWDET (NSWDET & NSWAEHG, 1999 & updated Partnership Agreement 2010) that clearly articulates very formally, the relationship and responsibilities of each partner for improvements in Indigenous education within the state. While such close involvement appears evident at senior management level the reality at a more local school community level is that such genuine partnerships and relationships are in the main, poor or non-existent (Lester & Hanlen, 2004) and require considerably more development and encouragement. Extending from this national policy vantage point the thesis will explore in more detail firstly the key outcomes of the NSWAEHG & NSWDET Review (2004) including the findings of Lester and Hanlen’s (2004) Aboriginal Education Policy Review; then address the specific Case Studies School District’s policy and practice implications on schools’ delivery of education to Indigenous students.
OVERVIEW OF NSW ABORIGINAL EDUCATION CONSULTATIVE GROUP INCORPORATED AND NSW DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING

2004 REVIEW OF ABORIGINAL EDUCATION

The 1996 NSW Aboriginal Education Policy in its final section on Monitoring, Reporting and Review (1996, p.16) called for Schools and state office directorates to report as follows:

*Year 5 (2000) a summative report on the effects of the five year cycle of policy implementation. This report will inform a review of the Policy for the next five years (2001-2005).*

This report was never undertaken in the timeframe given and the 2004 Review was undertaken only after considerable agitation by the NSWAECG, NSW Teachers' Federation and interested bodies lobbied the NSW Minister for Education and Training, Dr Andrew Refshauge (NSWAECG, 2004, p.11) to undertake the promised review, which commenced in August 2003, concluding in August, 2004 with the final publishing of ‘The Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education – Yanigurra Muya: Ganggurrinyma Yaarri Guurulaw Yirringin.gurray – Feeling the Spirit: Dreaming and Equal Future (from this point on referred as the 2004 Review or Review). This Review was the most comprehensive investigation of Aboriginal education and training ever undertaken by the NSWDET and involved extensive consultation with visits to schools, TAFEs, consulting with educational administrators, Indigenous community and parents individually and in groups focused through the NSWAECG and key stakeholders such as NSW Teachers’ Federation and Parents and Citizens’ groups (for scope of consultations see 2004 Review Appendix D, E and F, pp.235-259). It also involved a major literature review conducted by the Department and a separate evaluation of the 1996 Report on the NSW Aboriginal Education Policy Review in which the author of this thesis actively participated as an academic adviser to the 2004 Review (p.17) and was separately competitively contracted to conduct the 1996 Policy Review, which contributed to the overall 2004 Review findings.
The Review

Fundamentally the 2004 Review demonstrated the increasing gap between Indigenous student outcomes from education and that of their non-Indigenous peers up to 60 months behind in writing and language skills. Further data informing the Review indicated Indigenous students’ absences, suspension and attrition rates were markedly higher than their non-Indigenous peers and led to the following concluding statement on Indigenous school performance:

*Given the growing Aboriginal population and the increasing numbers of Aboriginal students in our schools, it is imperative that we redress these inequities effectively and rapidly. Social dislocation, low self-esteem and negative attitudes are certain outcomes. Strong and urgent action is needed to redress these imbalances. (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004, pp.29-30)*

The Review outlined the extensive nature of funding and program development which in the past had been undertaken with primarily resources from the Commonwealth Government in grants which have been outlined in the preceding section. Strategic approaches from preschool programs through literacy/numeracy, curriculum development and the employment of increasing numbers of Indigenous personnel in the form of consultants, teacher assistants, centrally based policy/program officers, community liaison officers and to later development of employing in school tutors for literacy and numeracy development through the ATAS. The system was a hive of activity yet the Indigenous student results were demonstrating no significant improvement. Primarily the Review indicated that direct funding to schools and large amounts of resources allocated to particular initiative through the centralised Aboriginal Education Unit were having minimal effect. It was obvious that policy and strategic directions required high levels considered revision.

The policy backdrop to the Review in NSW was the foundation work on policy development in the country on Indigenous education with the 1982 policy, which was followed by a revision in 1996. The latter became the focus as previously mentioned of its own review by the researcher and Dr Wendy Hanlen (2004) which formed an integral component of the full Revie
Review of the 1996 NSW Aboriginal Education Policy

The Report on the New South Wales Aboriginal Education Policy Review (NSWAEP) was tendered out and the successful tender was The Umulliko Indigenous Research Centre, University of Newcastle. The author was the principal researcher supported by Dr Wendy Hanlen as a co-principle researcher. Its terms of reference were basically to report on the effectiveness of the AEP across its three key focus areas:

- *Aboriginal Students (curriculum, teaching and assessment programs will be challenging and culturally appropriate);*
- *Aboriginal Communities (Aboriginal communities and the DET to become active partners in the whole education process),*
- *All staff – All students – All schools (all DET staff and students will have knowledge and understanding of and respect for Aboriginal Australia).*

From the analysis of these three focus areas recommendations for future policy development was to be formulated. In attempting to prioritise these recommendations the following rationale was adopted for the NSWAEP Review:

- *Indigenous student outcomes must be the primary focus of effort.*
- *Direction of focus and effort must be at the place where change can have greatest effect; classroom and school practice.*
- *Finite resources to be directed to where they can have the greatest effect on the largest number of Indigenous students.*
- *The Indigenous community must be genuine equitable partners in the process and especially at the local school/community level.*
- *Specialist interventions must be accessible to the vast majority of Indigenous students.* (Lester & Hanlen, 2004, p.6)

One key finding of this review was that Aboriginal Studies was being taught but not being effectively implemented in NSW Schools. Primarily the report noted that the quality, scope and sequence of the programs could not be guaranteed. In fact through poor sequencing and repetition of more material traditional cultural items continuously taught, year after year, there was evidence that non-Indigenous students were being turned off Aboriginal studies and best exemplified by the researcher’s recollection of a Year 3
children indicating ‘We’ve done the Aborigines!’ meaning they’re sick of repeat limited lessons on traditional Aboriginal artefacts.

The second major finding was that Indigenous students appeared to have been at best had been very little impacted by the policy in terms of their outcomes based on state-wide standardised testing. While there was lots of activity on the ground, there did not appear to be a systematic attempt at resolving key issues around numeracy and literacy, with the exception of early data on Scaffolding Literacy and Count Me in Too numeracy programs (Lester & Hanlen, 2004, pp.45-62).

Finally, there was clear indication that a philosophy had developed around ‘all care but no responsibility’ within the DET and subsequently accountability for the policy could not be ultimately identified (Lester & Hanlen, 2004, pp.140-142).

The overall effectiveness of the 1996 AEP was at best marginal. The implementation and resource bases increased in the area of Aboriginal Studies, however, there could not be a claim for significant improvement in Indigenous student outcomes. In a repeat of history the systemic response supported the concept of 1st World Policy but 3rd World outcomes for Indigenous students. The guiding direction of this review clearly articulated where the major effort needed to be directed if significant change in Indigenous student outcomes were to be achieved, and this was through action specifically improving classrooms inclusiveness of Indigenous students. Improvement in school practice in this domain remained firmly in the management responsibility of district office as articulate in the following section.

THE SYSTEMIC INFLUENCE AND SUPPORT FOR INDIGENOUS EDUCATION AT A SCHOOL DISTRICT LEVEL

NSW public education in 2003 catered for 90.6% of all Indigenous student enrolments in schooling in the state and represented some 29.5% of total national enrolments in all schools (government and non-government, making it the most significant provider of education to Indigenous students nationally [DEST, 2005, p.27]). This trend continued through to 2014 with NSW growing to 31.7% of the national total and Queensland growing to 29.9% (ABS, 2014). In NSW the closest systemic management and subsequent effect on public school education was at the time of this study, enacted
through NSWDET School District administrative structures. The Districts, led by a District Superintendent provide their schools with policy, guidelines and support services. The District, during the thesis study became reclassified as School Education Area (SEA) and managed by a School Education Director (SED) replacing the District Superintendent. In the District structure, 64 schools formed the district and later 47 schools were included in the respective SEA.

The Superintendent and SED had primary responsibility for the leadership and delivery of education and services in the schools. In the District’s structure this involved approximately managing up to 30 educational and professional consultants providing advice and services to the schools in the District (Interview Refs: 3.10421 and 3.8021). The Districts reported directly to the DET Central Office and when the SEDs were established in a realignment of the Department, the SEDs reported to the newly created Regional Director. Both the District and SEA organisation during the study worked under the common 1996 Aboriginal Education Policy. In this thesis ongoing reference to Districts will be maintained as this was the established structure at commencement of the thesis and schools involved in the case studies remained current in either District or SEA structural arrangements.

**District systemic support for the Aboriginal Education Policy**

It should be again noted here, as was reported in the introductory chapter to this thesis, that the District Superintendent and the Regional AECG in partnership, both sought the implementation of the study on Indigenous students and programs, as a case study with the view to improve outcomes for Indigenous students in the District. Thus, there existed a genuine interest and willingness to improve Indigenous engagement from schooling as the foundation of intervention, policy and program delivery expressly represented by a desire to research the domain and seek an academic partner in this endeavour.

This section will provide the background of existing strategies, programs, practices being implemented at a District level in Indigenous education. It will also address the characteristics surrounding the interventions and the general environmental factors and outcomes of schooling for Indigenous students from the view of the District’s systemic factors influencing Indigenous student outcomes.
District’s view of the Indigenous Learning Environment at commencement of the study

The District management and Regional AECG input into the parameters and selection of schools to be involved with the case study immediately captured some of the more defining aspects of the inner and outer learning environments of the students in these studies. Schools were chosen based on their high Indigenous student community numbers which in turn, prescribed the inclusion of three significant Aboriginal Missions/Reserves which schools serviced. The general socio-economic conditions of Indigenous peoples in rural locations in particular in this study, dictated the social context for most of the students and certainly positioned the majority of schools servicing these students in the low socio-economic environment (NSWDAA, 2009). This was particularly true of the primary schools who serviced very specific Indigenous community clusters and to a lesser degree the Secondary schools who serviced a broader variety/cross section of community profiles in general (Ref: interviews with each principal of the schools in the study). Many of the schools were in receipt of Disadvantaged Schools Funding or equivalent, which further supported the described social environment.

The detailed analysis and description of the school and the Indigenous communities they serviced is covered in detail in Chapter 5 School Factors and to minimise the repetition of these details only passing reference is made to the environmental characteristics in this section. The comments made here also add weight to similar and oppositional future references made in the school, student or community chapters which follow.

Racism

Community racism in the study was an issue explored in interviews with the District executive and support consultants. There was strong agreement among those interviewed that racism existed across the District and played a more dominant role in a few towns in the study. A non-Indigenous senior District staff officer captured the general sentiment on racism within the District’s community in reference to Indigenous peoples:

… part of it is linked to racism and discrimination in our area there is a fair bit of that! Even though some people would say there is no racism but it is pretty obvious by their actions and reactions that there is racism... (Ref: 3.10421)
And another non-Indigenous senior officer made comments which reflected the strong racial attitudes of a particular community which had recently confronted a nationally embarrassing racial issue involving Indigenous communities and a decision of the local council.

I was in Apen buying a sandwich at a shop just after the public protest march against the council's [recent racially provocative decision] and there was another person at the counter with me and some comments were passed about the numbers in the protest march and there was immediately a division in the shop, high emotions... and there were quite a deep and emotional views that shock me in this day and age that people would have. So I think it's a pretty tough environment for the Aboriginal community generally, but I think schools as in so many cases are amongst the safest and most enlightened places but there is still no doubt a need for mounting cultural awareness and I think cultural awareness means training of the staff and so on. (Ref: 3.8021)

As demonstrated by the above quotes racism is still a very real concern for Indigenous communities and Indigenous students in schools. The District's response to racism is generally dealt with under the banner of equity and through the establishment of Anti-Racism Officers at a school level and under the responsibility of the Student Services Officer at the District level. Interviews with this Officer indicate that racism would be dealt with as a formal complaint and be registered and investigated. It was further acknowledged that very few formal complaints are registered from Indigenous people and that some may go directly to other Indigenous support staff within the District Office for resolution and generally these would be registered by those Indigenous officers, as indicated by the District Student Services Officer:

I get relatively few concerns raised directly with me or with [Welfare Officer] on race based issues. We have some certainly go through to [ACLO] and the ones that I'm aware of usually turns out not to be specifically race based. And that's not to say it doesn't happen, it doesn't occur, isn't going on, but the ones I've been aware of are usually, when you've done a bit of discussion, are usually not specifically race based... And of the total that we get that the [Welfare Officer] and I log that comes to us, very, very few are based upon concerns of discrimination based on race. Now that maybe that people are not complaining or that our stats are pretty wishy, washy, we can only go on what we've got, but most parental concerns that come to us would be alleged victimisation of kids, harassment, bullying, being excluded have not been on their rights. The number of complaints that relate to Aboriginal students would be in proportion or less than in proportion to their population within the District. (Ref: 3.10321)
While interviews with District staff clearly indicated that many of the communities serviced by schools are racially hostile there would appear not to be a spill-over of this into formal complaints in the school sector or through the School District Office. However, one Indigenous officer indicated a concern with what she calls ‘reverse racism’ as she pointed out in the following quote.

>You know, there’s some schools, I mean I can’t come right out and tell you which school it is, but you get some schools where Indigenous programs are seen as, um, being reverse racist. You know, they have all these programs for Indigenous kids but they don’t have anything for the non-Indigenous kids? (Ref: 3.7510)

This ‘reverse racism’ issue is very well articulated by anthropologist Gillian Cowlishaw (1990) in her article ‘Where is Racism?’, in which she challenges the assumptions by non-Indigenous community to funding and program initiatives under affirmative action, at the core of the ‘reverse racism’ being picked up in schools by the Indigenous officer above. Cowlishaw’s work points clearly to this racial overtone in many rural communities and the virtual ‘hatred’ of Indigenous individuals and communities being in any way compensated for their economic disadvantage.

Above we have seen that formal complaints mechanisms established within Districts appear not to attract Indigenous input and this raises a number of issues concerning the level of effective communication with the Indigenous community from the District Office and their perceptions of the communicative relationships being fostered in schools.

The issues of institutional racism around inequitable school outcomes for Indigenous students in school were not raised as racism in interviews with school and district staff. All interview comments revolved around overt racism with minimal to no comment regarding systemic covert racism and issues such as this were dismissively referred to as general equity issues.

**District/Area perspective on communication with Indigenous communities**

*Well I think the processes are generally inappropriate. Generally it’s by the written word. Letters go home, newsletters go home and there’s probably an unrealistic expectation that that formal communication can be understood by the general population. The language is probably inappropriate in many cases. We know that*
The above quote from a senior officer working in student welfare clearly indicates that significant shift needs to be undertaken in a majority of schools to improve communication with the Indigenous community which was clearly a significant challenge to the District. However, it is relevant again to note that as previously outlined that the rationale and motivation for this thesis work was from a partnership between the RAECG and the Department of Education District Superintendent. It was at this level of cooperation which highlighted the plight of Indigenous students with regard to poor outcomes and capacity to hold these students in schools. Unfortunately over the period of the author’s research this strong working relationship between the RAECG and the District was diminished. This was primarily due to operational matters with regard to the poorly functioning District Aboriginal Education Advisory Committee (DAEAC) which had the responsibility for providing strategic advice to the District. It was also the Department’s formal arm of consultation primarily with the AECG and with other agencies working in Indigenous education like the Commonwealth Department Education, Science and Training (DEST). As the newly appointed School Education Director (SED) clearly indicated below, the DAEAC was not functioning and required a reconstitution especially in light of the restructuring at the time with the Department’s move to Regionalisation:

Yes, we had one last year but it’s died this year and they are going to reconvene it between now and the end of the year he tells me. But it died when, we thought we were transitioning to a new model...So we did up to last year and I sat in on those meetings but as part of the restructure of the department and everything else, it’s slipped... But formally, I don’t think there is a lot going on formally - we’ve had a problematic age in the [Apen] area. (Ref: 3.8021)
In the instance of the Apen School area the SED further indicated that the level of communication between the school and Indigenous community was so volatile that the community threatened the withdrawal of their children which necessitated a major review of the school. The newly appointed principal of Apen ‘literally knocked on every door’ at the Aboriginal Mission which the school services in an attempt to improve school community relationships (Ref: 3.8021). While Apen School was an extreme case in perception around school and Indigenous community relations the following comments of indicate that much improvement is these relationship was required more generally across the District’s schools.

A leading Indigenous member of the District team who is directly involved in working with the community and heavily involved with the RAECG was very concerned about the relationship between the Indigenous community members and schools:

*It’s not good... I think, community people... I think they still feel intimidated in lots of cases, when they go to school. What we talked about this morning, like, they don’t feel that they can approach a school, when they do go to the school they’re sort of treated like foreign, not so much like foreigners, but they’re not, there’s not that welcoming, you know.* (Ref: 3.7610)

An important aspect to emerge in interviews was the importance of having a level of cultural understanding to help foster Indigenous community relationships with the schools. This aspect has been reportedly done more effectively in the primary sector than the secondary sector of the study. While different levels of success in achieving cultural understandings between schools and the community (Ref: 3.7700) the following statements from an interview with the District Superintendent clearly highlight the nature/extent of such difference and where the Schools were positioned with regard to their relationships with the Indigenous community:

**Superintendent:** Oxford has developed that cultural understanding and has people on staff who has the cultural empathy, who is working very carefully with the local community and that, has been an obvious target. Bunburry because it is not necessarily involved with the Mission is not working as closely with the community, however there are groups within their community that they work with. In Apen because of the historical nature of the principal who was there previously it has taken a long time to improve relationships and I think those relationships are now starting to improve in that the principal often will visit [the Mission] and parents of kids in their home or at [the Mission] or at the medical centre or places on their turf. And people are beginning to respect him more as far as those issues are concerned. If we go into the high school, there is very little of that. I believe very
little cultural understanding – there is cultural understanding amongst individuals but I don’t think that has become a school culture, in terms of understandings about Indigenous people and their needs and community involvement at the secondary level is nowhere near as effective as the primary level but you could also say that not only with Indigenous but with all parents, The community involvement is not as good.

R: Do you see community involvement as a critical component of the attack?

Superintendent: Yeah I do... I think, some of the Aboriginal parents would have not had a very successful education themselves. I don’t want to make that sound negative, but in terms of the feelings they had about school and their experiences at school – I think they were probably not very pleasing. Therefore schooling now, although if we were to ask individuals they would all be ‘I want the best for my child and therefore education is important, I believe those expectations are there. When we get down to the nitty gritty there are some people, and I don’t know whether fear’s the right word but concern, worry, whatever those words are about education and about the bureaucracy. And I think that we need to be able to break that down and so therefore the value of community participation will increase as those barriers are broken down and we are able to communicate with all sections of the community and via that communication, get more of a partnership and I don’t think that partnership is there at this minute, individually it is but corporately I don’t think it is there. (Ref: 3.10421)

How accurately the District/Area identifies and makes sense of local Indigenous expectations for their children are vital to its development of strategic goals and objectives in Indigenous education. While the above quote indicates one senior voice on Indigenous expectations for their children, the overall expectations at this level becomes paramount.

District/Area perceptions of Indigenous expectations from Education

The aim in this section is to identify the District/Area staff’s perceptions on the topic of ‘expectations’ in their own words. The first group reported here are non-Indigenous participants interviewed about Indigenous parents’ expectations:

I think they have very high expectation of our schools. They want the same outcomes for their kids as anyone else and in fact I think they see it as the way forward and whatever disadvantage they suffer, extreme conditions in some cases, I think they see their children succeeding at school. (SED: 3.8021)
Just the same as any other group but I would think they would expect their kids to be able to go to school, be safe, learn, be happy, progress. (Student Services Officer: 3.10321)

This is supported by an Indigenous voice:

...maybe it’s also something which reflects on parents, parents’ expectation. If they don’t particularly want to go to school they don’t have to go to school. They don’t see it as a big deal if the kids have a day off here or there.

And the other thing is it’s not a, they don’t see it as a problem if they arrive late in the morning, in which case in many of our schools, they’ve missed part of the literacy block, so that again is not helping their development in literacy skills. (Aboriginal Project Officer: 3.7700)

An Indigenous District staff member specifically speaking about chronic poor attendance amongst Indigenous students and the unfortunate presence of alcohol and substance on one of the Aboriginal reserves/missions which feed particular schools said:

Well look, there are, there’s 101 reasons and as I said, every child is an individual. Every child has a different reason, but the most common, especially with Indigenous students, that I’ve found, is the value of education. You know, there’s no, if, if the parents don’t hold education in high esteem, then certainly the kids don’t. There’s no support in you know, mum and dad can say, oh you know, I tried to send them to school, and you know full well that they don’t, but you can’t come out and say that, I mean, you know, that’s just, it’s just this continued ongoing cycle that I never got anywhere, I’m doing alright, I, you know, not going to school didn’t hurt me, so my kids can stay home with me and, and at least if they’re home, you know, I know where they are, and they’re doing the housework or they’re looking at minding babies, or, then, on the other hand, you have the parent who is, an abuser of alcohol or drugs or whatever and so they don’t really know where their kids are or what their kids are doing, and so that’s another vicious cycle that the kids get into. (Ref: 3.7510)

And from another Indigenous District staff member;

... A lot of the community, a lot of people are saying to me that, like I said, the expectations are from some parents. Well I think, like parents will say, oh well, our kids are not going to get a job, but they’re not going to go anywhere. I suppose I’m just, probably focused it a little bit on [Apen] when I said that because that’s, that’s the opinion there.
But when you’re talking, like, [Oxford’s] a different community, [Underdale’s] a different community. But I think underneath it all, all the parents want their kids to do the right thing and to get an education. I fully believe that you know. And some people just, for whatever reasons, whether they don’t have the skills, or there’s other problems there, that prevent them from helping their kids, and being able to do that. (Ref: 3.7610)

The Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives reveal a common thread with regard to Indigenous parents wanting the best for their kids. However, they differ as seen above, when Indigenous informants raise the issue of different perceptions of schooling priority based on their experiences of a particular Indigenous community Mission environment. The reference here can only be described in proportionally higher levels of chronic cases of student absenteeism and the description of a minority of family backgrounds, as dysfunctional parenting attributable to substance abuse and in the last quotation the difficulty community have with projecting potential positive employment outcomes.

Leading on from the District’s understanding of Indigenous communities’ expectations of education in the study was the District’s perceptions of outcomes of the Indigenous students they service through their schools, based on current policies and practices.

**District Comments on Critical Indigenous Outcomes**

Chapter 2, Literature Review highlighted the specific details with regard to Indigenous outcomes which overall indicated a significant gap between these students and non-Indigenous students on every available measure supplied from the District. This section of the thesis will explore key aspects of this data and the related components of the more critical elements impacting upon the data i.e. policy, curriculum, attendance patterns and the response to these through specific Indigenous program initiatives at this level.

**Aboriginal policy implications**

District/SEA staffs were asked to comment on the two critical and relevant areas of policy as it related to the study, the implementation of the Department’s Aboriginal Education Policy (AEP) and policy surrounding student welfare. Comment here will be on the AEP
as welfare policy issues will be addressed in the following attendance subheading in this section.

The District prior to the commencement of this research had employed a specific officer, a retired principal, to ensure the implementation of the AEP and to raise the level of literacy and numeracy amongst Indigenous students in the District as key functions of her role. This officer reported during interview that all the schools had received training in the AEP (Ref: 3.7700). However, the issue of the effectiveness of such training was raised by the comments of an Indigenous District staff member:

...well when we talk about our AEP for instance. That’s been a real concern. It’s been a real concern for me, because I believe that it hasn’t been implemented, and it hasn’t been implemented properly, and the way it should have been, even though we have schools that say yes, it’s been done, we’ve completed all the modules and all of our staff’s been trained, I don’t believe that’s happened. I don’t believe that’s happened. But the fact is that we’ve had, and I’ve been in, in a situation with a couple of other people where, two principals have said, why do we have to do this, we don’t have Aboriginal students at our school.

...I think it’s pretty low on their agenda, and I think that’s where a lot of it stems from, because they don’t see it as important, you know. (Ref: 3.7610)

While it has been reported that efforts had been made to ensure the formal implementation of the professional development package of the AEP at District level, there was also clearly a level of scepticism associated with the implementation. Another key issue with regard to Indigenous student data at a District level centred around attendance and suspension patterns of Indigenous students and it is therefore necessary to explore the District/SEA’s response to these critical elements of policy outcomes.

**Attendance and suspension patterns implications**

**Attendance**

*Well I think the policy is pretty clear, government policy is 6-15 [years of age] you attend school or under an approved form of schooling. At times its peoples understanding of what policy is and their attempts to some extent get around it or to ignore it. I think the punishment or consequences side of it to the kids that don’t attend is a ‘toothless tiger’. I think there has probably been or I’m not aware of any conviction of parents in our area or I’m not even aware of any within the state. There might have been one or two but I’ve dealt with some of the cases we’ve got and they just say, so what? We’ve had, I’m aware through [Pete], who has had a*
number of conferences with parents at different times and achieved nothing really in terms of getting the kids back to school because we have been not sufficiently persuasive that... to attend school is a good way to go, for the benefit of the student. (Ref: 3.10321)

This opening quote clearly sums up the current feeling of welfare staff in the District specifically about the more extreme cases of Indigenous chronic non-attending students and would directly apply to earlier quotes in this section of the study with regard to dysfunctional families, often with substance abuse issues and more often than not from Aboriginal missions and reserves in the communities (Refs: 3.10321, 3.10421). Chronic cases of non-attendance were the source of frustration for all staff working in the welfare area. But the cases also need to be considered in proportion to the total Indigenous student base, as one of the key Indigenous staff members working in the area indicated:

But I can tell you in the schools, your chronic non-attenders would be three to five per cent which is not a huge amount in one set of circumstances, but one is too many. (Ref: 3.7510)

There were many reasons given for the poor attendance rates of Indigenous students and in particular the chronic non-attenders who skew the overall attendance data. In the following interview excerpt from a senior district officer working in student services there is a classic example of ‘deficit’ blame being the cause of all negative outcomes for Indigenous students:

Dozens of reasons I think. One of them is parental expectations and experiences of school which were not very positive. So, another one that relates to that is the discontinuity in family responsibilities in parents to be able to care for and lead their children, is really very difficult because of, in some cases, substance use or abuse. In some cases lack of parenting skills and supporting appropriate parenting. The influence of other persons within the community on their parenting skills... (Ref: 3.10321)

A further observation of another welfare officer clearly indicates the importance of intervention on attendance issues and associated with this were strong ties to the community as an essential component.
...what we’re finding is that schools are able to make some sort of improvement in their attendance rates depending on the sorts of programs that they run. If there is no direct involvement with the community and the school getting the kids to school then they will go out early. I’m instancing Oxford Primary where the work that Oxford Primary is doing in its work with the local community and its breakfast program and its integration programs, then those programs are improving attendance rates. But if it’s just left and there is no direct involvement and no direct, no programs that are directly associated with it then the drop outs occur, further the dropouts become quite young. (Ref: 3.10421)

Suspensions

The above statement about the dropout rates getting younger has been one of the specific concerns of both the District and RAECG’s motivation for the study that is being reported here. It is further clearly and alarmingly pointed out that Indigenous students are increasingly and disproportionately singled out for suspension from school as early as kindergarten. One senior welfare officer points out:

*The last few years we’ve noticed an increase in the number of kids being suspended in early years, like Kindergarten & Year 1. And the prognosis long term doesn’t seem real good when that’s where there starting and what messages are we giving these kids at this point of time in their life. So it is a real concern. Social skills seems to be an issue, something that needs to be addressed, whether the parents lack the skills, not practicing, not role modelling, I’m not sure. But Aboriginal kids many of them are getting into strife at school, not enjoying school and therefore not attending school. They come to school and the teachers, which I said are generally not Aboriginal have totally different expectations of what’s being modelled by the Aboriginal kids in terms of their behaviours, social behaviour with other students. So that’s an issue that needs to be addressed and it is very much two way, it’s perhaps the expectations of the teachers is unrealistic. The teachers need to look at what do they expect, and the parents need to look at what these kids learning is and what should they learn before they come to school. (Ref: 3.10221)*

The suspension at younger ages and at greater rates in both boys than girls than their non-Indigenous peers meant that these students were missing large amounts of time from school, which certainly did not assist in their education. An analysis of their suspensions indicated that they were for non-compliance and violent behaviour (swearing at teachers, threatening teachers or students [Ref: 3.10221]). District/SEA staff indicated a level of concern about the high number of Indigenous suspensions but as the below quote indicates there was a lack of specific detail in the general figures they had available. It was strongly felt that the suspension rates were dominated by, as the
quote below states, ‘re-offenders’ and similar difficulties exist with the holistic reporting of Indigenous enrolment figures:

When we get them here [suspension figures] it’s a bit hard to, to tell in terms of you can’t, the figures just give you an overall figure. You don’t know whether it’s one, two, 20 kids. Sometimes it’s re-offenders, if I could use that word that put the suspension rates out of proportion.

You’ve really got to then go back to the school which is something we do and say, you know, this is what these figures are saying, what’s it saying at your level? It’s the same with attendance.

You could look as though a kids had 74 days off, maybe 30 of those were on suspension, you know, the figures we get here are just bland figures; you’ve got to go back in then to find out particulars. (Ref: 3.7720)

Access to details surrounding Indigenous attendance and suspension figures seem to be continually problematic for departments or in this instance for Districts to produce and subsequently for the researcher to analyse. The researcher as an Indigenous educator of some 30 plus years continues to be amazed that the ‘race’ card always seems to be drawn and used when it comes to getting specific detail on Indigenous students. It is puzzling that the education system (and I include NSW TAFE in this regard) consistently used the issue of discrimination when asked to systemically collect data and analyse it in relation to Indigenous engagement in public education. This was first confronted in a significant way in TAFE when I was Head of the Aboriginal Education Unit and now in the collection of data at a District/Area level during the research for this thesis. The issue is obvious, if we wish to improve outcomes for Indigenous students we must have access to enable detailed responsive strategic planning to take place. This is not a discriminative practice, especially if Indigenous people themselves see the importance of understanding the facts so as to use them to improve outcomes. This issue is articulated by a non-Indigenous officer specifically recruited to work on specific Indigenous attendance issues within the District:

The thing that we can’t get figures on is attendance, unless we go out and manually do it, because for some reason or other, I suppose it’s considered discriminatory, to pull out the Aboriginal students figures. We get an overall attendance pattern but you don’t get a pattern for Aboriginal students that you compare against the state average for Aboriginal students or a state average for all students. (Ref: 3.7720)
This same officer manages to successfully move the debate from one that is focused on welfare issues to the issues about how do we retain Indigenous students and engage them in the educational school environment, the focus rightfully moves to what happens or doesn’t happen for Indigenous students in classrooms:

I don’t know. I think if you’re talking about kids that are out for periods of time, certainly that affects their attendance figures, but, I just think that the kids that don’t come to school, it’s not because of welfare, it’s more or less because of their inability to be able to succeed, or their low self-esteem because they’re not achieving, and so many of the kids, particularly in high school, have developed avoidance type tactics to get out of work. (Ref: 3.7720)

**Classroom and school implications**

Well it’s clear from the data, the hard data and from anecdotal evidence that the Aboriginal students are not attending school and when attending school, tend not to be engaging in learning to the same level as non-Aboriginal students. And a multitude of factors that are probably contributing from an education point of view, the relevance of the curriculum, the appropriateness of the pedagogy, the structure of the school itself, the school day are important issues which need to be addressed. And I feel in many cases are being addressed but continue to need that review and changing. (Ref: 3.10221)

This section will explore the specific areas of literacy and numeracy and curriculum perspectives as they relate to Indigenous education in the District/Area schools from the vantage point of the District staff with responsibility for these areas as they relate to Indigenous programs. The specific issues surrounding literacy and numeracy like those visited in attendance and suspension are increasingly focusing on the need for intervention as early as possible, as indicated in the following quote from a senior welfare staff member who stresses this point or suffer the inevitable consequences:

But that’s my understanding is changing next year, it will go back to a K-1. But be more heavily supported in terms of resources. I mean the resources have to be put into that preschool-K1. If the success isn’t there and the literacy isn’t met at that point, then you are not going to have a chance in [Years] 2, 3, 4. The kids are really starting to show indicators of not coping, not wanting to be in the system, in Years 3 & 4, suspension rates are to go up, attendance to go down, so you can imagine what it is going to be like when they transfer from primary to high school. Many of them don’t transfer, they get to sixth class if they make it that far and they don’t
turn up at the high school at all. They might be enrolled but their bodies not there. (Ref: 3.10221)

Literacy and Numeracy

Yeah, I think there's, a lot of work that we need to do and I, I believe that we really have to start with the younger kids, you know, we're looking at preschool and kindy and start there and try to, I don't know how we're going to do it but I think we need to, we need to get to those kids so that they umm, I think they'd have more of a chance of making it through the system. (Ref: 3.7610)

Indigenous staffs, as above, agree that the issues surrounding literacy and numeracy must be resolved as early as possible in the Indigenous child's exposure to schooling. Another Indigenous educator highlighted the disadvantage and stark reality of not improving outcomes for Indigenous students in this critical area:

I think that comes into it in the senior years of primary, and then the beginning of high school. It's like putting a 4 year old child in with a group of 14 year old and saying, survive, you know! Their skill level is just not up to par, so why go somewhere where you're made to feel that you're not good enough! (Ref: 3.7510)

The task of teachers in later years in coping with the lack of these fundamental skills is near impossible. Inevitably without these skills the future was grim for Indigenous students and the outcomes very predictable and the cycle commences.

Well it's not too late, but the kids are usually so unmotivated. School has not been a place of success, it has been ongoing failures, they're bored, that tends to lead to inappropriate behaviours, and they get suspended. You've got nonattendance, suspension, boredom; they drift into antisocial criminal behaviour. And they feel as though the system has let them down badly, which they're right the system has let them down badly. They probably don't voice it so concisely but I think they just feel that school is not relevant to them. So they just don't go! (Ref: 3.10221)

As can be indicated the District/Area staff are very familiar with the problem and have prompted the implementation of specific programs to try to address the issues surrounding literacy and numeracy, and with some reported success according to the
officer responsible for their implementation, when referring to in particular, to key targeting of resources specifically in literacy and in particular efforts to involve Indigenous specially trained literacy and numeracy tutors as an extension of a DEST funded initiative:

...this is the fourth year of operation, and in those schools that we have put literacy grants, we are seeing, in most of them improvements. In fact we have pockets where our Aboriginal students are above the state average for all students.

_R_: That’s pleasing!

_Not just Aboriginal students, but for all students. Some schools are doing better than others, as far as the implementation of the AEP is concerned, all schools have been trained. Parent participation, we have 48 tutors working in our schools now, that are Aboriginal people, and all of those we have spent many hours with, in terms of assisting them to be helpers in the classroom, giving them skills, which not only will help them in the classroom but also with their own kids at home._ (Ref: 3.7720)

There was also a level of minority opinion with regard to the push for improved literacy and numeracy outcomes from one Indigenous educator at this level, who strongly maintained that an over emphasis had been place on this area and the real priority was improving Indigenous attendance at least simultaneously with other issues such as literacy and numeracy. It should be noted that this officer was dealing with significant truancy issues.

_I mean the first thing, say, literacy and numeracy. All the money that they’re putting into literacy and numeracy, yep that’s fine, but the kids they’re targeting are kids who don’t even have their bum on a seat. So to me that’s, well, it’s not a waste of money, but they’ve got to do it together, they’ve got to first get them to school, then get their literacy and numeracy program going. They can’t say here’s all this money for literacy and numeracy and not deal with attendance at the same time._ (Ref: 3.7510)

Lack of fundamental skills in literacy and numeracy was obviously an enormous disadvantage and the extent of the disadvantage was supported in interviews and in the data previously discussed earlier in the study. Poor attendance by a core of Indigenous students exacerbated the problems of acquiring basic skills. But for the vast majority of Indigenous students who were regularly attending school the question of relevance and
the engagement in the education process must be considered. District staff was asked to comment on the curriculum as it related to Indigenous students.

Curriculum

My personal view? … in some cases is, it may be, the curriculum’s not matching the kids’ needs. (Ref: 3.7720)

As suggested in the above quote from a non-Indigenous district officer and well supported across interviews of key District/Area staff including the most senior members of this team, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous informants were deeply concerned about the apparent lack of flexibility particularly at the secondary school level of the curriculum.

In the first of the following quotes the Indigenous informant clearly felt there was limited scope to seize on gifted and talented skills that Indigenous students might display. In the second and third quotes the frustration being experienced across the secondary school curriculum was graphically illustrated by senior management responses:

And it’s not, it’s not flexible enough I don’t think, for Koori kids. Because, I mean, if you’ve got kids that really are talented and have a lot of potential in a particular area, I don’t reckon there’s enough flexibility in the system to be able to sort of focus on those sort of areas, you know, where they can sort of, take them further. I mean, think about a high school, you know, some kids that might be really good at, whether it’s art, or whether, and they mightn’t be any good at English, or good at English, and like, writing poems and stories and all that sort of stuff, instead of sort of focusing in on what their strengths are, that doesn’t happen. (Ref: 3.7610)

The biggest issue, I think the biggest issue is that the system, it does in the primary schools I think have the capacity but not in the high school to be horses for courses. I think that they are offered a one size all fits education. And they except it or they reject it or they find themselves incapable surviving in it. (Ref: 3.8021)

Further in response to perceived inflexibility in the curriculum and the apparent lack of capacity to meet individual needs of students and particular comments with regard not only curriculum but pedagogical issues.
...some element of flexibility of negotiation with the curriculum, the history, geography is another classic example, where that is just simply not working on the ground you know, someone has thought it was a great idea, let’s teach Australian geography and let’s make sure everyone learns a bit of Australian history. Admirable sentiments but it’s application as a directive from the top across 2228 schools including our 48 District schools has been a disaster, most schools spend a lot of their creative time thinking about how they are going to timetable things like geography and history instead of spending that time sitting down with kids negotiating with kids what they want to study within clear perimeters but negotiating what they want to study, when they want to study, how they are going to be assessed, different assessment strategies for different, for example Koori students for different variety. I mean that’s what they should be spending their time in but they are spending their time going ‘how can we get physics on line six when we’ve got, languages here’ and that’s what high schools spend their time doing, trying to manage what is a hopelessly fragmented curriculum. (Ref: 3.8021)

Response through specific Indigenous program initiatives

It was patently clear that the Region/SEA had mounted a substantive and co-ordinated strategic attack on Indigenous education which it referred to as the Aboriginal Project. The major thrust of such an attack was clear senior leadership and building a team approach across the key support staff in the District focused through the appointment of a specific responsible officer (non-Indigenous recently retired principal) to manage the co-ordination of the effort. It involved dedicated Indigenous staff, welfare support staff, and literacy and numeracy consultants. Its tri-level focus was to achieve improved attendance/suspension figures, raise literacy outcomes and focus effort on AEP.

Through interviews a number of key initiatives were identified ranging from transition programs at key stages with particular emphasis on pre-school to kindergarten; breakfast programs; piloting and ongoing delivery of the In-Class-Tutor program for literacy and numeracy (consistently well supported in interviews as a well-regarded and successful program funded by DEST); professional development on the AEP including cultural and curriculum issues, involving all schools; Aboriginal mentors; Full Service Schools Program; Links to Learning; Aboriginal Careers Aspirations Project; and a mixture of youth programs through collaboration with the Aboriginal Youth Group and with local TAFE colleges with the ESKY (Employment Skills for Koori Youth) program. (Ref: 3.7610, 3.7720, 3.7510, 3.10421).
In a presentation to visiting field researchers undertaking the gathering of data and submissions for the Review of Aboriginal Education, the SEA (prior District) highlighted key areas of success they had achieved or challenges still remaining and summarised this in several slides which they presented to the Review field team. Copies of the actual slides (see Figure 4.1) indicated firstly the things that worked, then the barriers being confronted, and finally some wish lists.

### District Strategies that Worked

- **Partnerships with Aboriginal communities**:
  - Career Aspirations Project (CAP)
  - Transition to school programs
  - Involvement of Aboriginal persons in district and school based committees
  - Collaboration with Government and related NGO agencies

### District Strategies that Worked (cont)

- **Professional support and development**
  - Aboriginal Project Officer
- **Case management within schools**:
  - Full Service Schools Program
- **VET participation rates in senior school years**
- **Alternative programs**:
  - Links to Learning
  - Full Service Schools Program

### Barriers to effective strategies

**Funding**:
- Short term funding (FSS)
- Uncertainty of continuation in funding (Links to Learning)
- Imbalance between DEST and DET funding (In-class tuition and APU funds)
- "Compartmentalisation" of funding – Federal/State leads to duplication at local level
- High costs of administration and meeting accountability requirements in comparison with funds allocated – APU

### Barriers to effective strategies (cont)

**Staffing**:
- Lack of Aboriginal teachers (0.53%)
- Lack of service support for Aboriginal teachers
- 1 Aboriginal Education Consultant (AEC) for 254 schools 2003 and 281 schools 2004
- AEs not allocated according to current school populations (8 – 19 – 36)
- Resource Teachers Aboriginal (RTA) and Aboriginal Education Resources Teachers (AERT) not allocated according to current school populations
- Other – lack of State-wide data on Aboriginal students

### Apen SEA “Wish List”

**Educational Outcomes**:
- VET programs in Years 9 and 10
- Professional development support leading to pedagogical change – Quality Teaching
- Tutoring "In-class" or in-school (DEST)
- Case management and support at school level (eg CAP/FSS)

### Apen SEA “Wish List” (cont)

**Student Support**:
- Alternative educational programs within and outside school (Links to Learning, Community Solutions, Juvenile Justice)
- Long term targeted support and programs for higher achieving Aboriginal students (Career Aspirations Projects)
As can be seen from the key concepts represented on these slides, integral to any program implementation is building a solid Indigenous community base or partnership, which features as the first major area of success. The SEA then report on the successful programs being implemented and then look at what can be described as structural and funding impediments to effective strategic direction. Finally, obviously a number of areas which can be in many ways directly related to the ‘barriers’ are ‘wish lists’ covering the areas of improving educational outcomes, student support and departmental or systemic improvements which are directly relevant to this chapter.

Interviews helped capture the essence of what these programs aimed to do and the successes, difficulties and challenges undertaken.

*We have one school this year that’s running virtually a breakfast program to get the kids in, that’s [Apen], because it’s, gets the kids in from [the Aboriginal Mission]. They’ve had improved attendance. We’ve still got about five chronic [non] attenders, and that affects their figures. One other school has, this is its third year, and in fact three of their kids this year got excellent attendance figures, a certificate for Term 3. They run a bus, where they go around to the mission, pick up the kids, and take them to school, and they have a bit of a breakfast program and if the kids haven’t got lunch, they make lunch and then they support them in literacy.*

*Two of our high schools, one’s had, they’ve been pilot schools, and they’re funding phone ups, and we’ve paid for an Aboriginal person to actually go out into the community, to speak with parents, try to get the kids to school. The time we get to high school if they haven’t got a good attendance pattern then you know, unless we can get the parents to insist that they come to school and see the importance of it, we really, [it’s an] uphill battle. (Ref: 3.7720)*
In the interviews the trade-off is often raised between prioritising resources between attendance and literacy and numeracy programs. Interestingly the final comment in the following quote hints at the importance of the significance of schools making cultural shifts to be more accommodating of Indigenous students and their cultures:

“Well the attendance in this district is a real concern. It’s a real issue, and I think it has been for, well, I’ve been here, what, going on four years now, and I feel that attendance has been one of our biggest, biggest problems. There’s been a lot of money and most of our programs that have been funded have been for literacy programs.

I suppose I’ve had a concern about that, because I think well, if you don’t get the kids to school, how can you teach them?

You know, so I think there should be more focus and more money goes into trying to get the kids to school, but keep them there. You’ve got to, the schools have got to come up with ways of, of well, I don’t know, I think maybe a lot of the schools have to change lots of things, the culture of their school has to change to keep these kids there.(Ref: 3.7610)

This section of the study has positioned the District’s direct systemic response to Indigenous students. It has provided evidence of a clear priority for Indigenous education and reported on programs that had been implemented to improve student outcomes. It highlighted three key areas of AEP implementation; improved attendance and reduced suspensions and curriculum approaches primarily in the areas of literacy and numeracy. With this district strategic background established the thesis question was put to District management and support staffs, do Aboriginal kids switch off school? Their responses follow.

DO ABORIGINAL KIDS SWITCH OFF SCHOOL? AND IF SO WHY?

There was unanimous agreement amongst all District/SEA informants that Aboriginal kids in large numbers switch off school and this is clearly evident in the retention rates for the District outlined in slides provided by the District (NSWDET, 2004).

I think one reason they switch off is that very early in their schooling they either, they fail, some of them fail as early as kindergarten, and that can be because of poor attendance and parents not seeing the importance of them being there.

They think kindergarten’s just a play year.
And because they start to fail they get into disruptive behaviour, and that of course could lead to suspension down the track. You know it all compounds as the kid goes through school. Certainly I think we’ve got to look at doing more for our kids and to [go] right through in supporting them with perhaps programs that they can cope with a little more than the present structure says. (Ref: 3.7720)

A variety of reasons were given for this phenomenon which included the following responses to the reasons why this takes place. In the first instance the Indigenous district office informant clearly feels the school system does not cater for Indigenous students and this is followed by a similar response from senior management in the SEA who explores the need and potential support an Indigenous specific school might attract:

So they’re disadvantaged at preschool if they don’t go to preschool, and then, sometimes I think it’s just the fact too that you, that you’re an Aboriginal person. I feel you’re disadvantaged anyway, right from the start. You know, and I don’t think school, I don’t think always meets the needs. It’s like we talked about curriculum and stuff like that, doesn’t always meet the needs of our kids. They just can’t cope, some kids just, school’s just not where the kid should be sort of thing, you know what I mean?

R: Yeah!

Some kids just don’t fit in, into the routine. They don’t fit in to being umm, because a lot of our kids have freedom, they really do have freedom, as to where they go, what they do, and, and make a lot of their own decisions. That’s a lot of them, of course, there’s a lot there that umm, but the kids that normally don’t go to school, and, and, you know, don’t get switched on, and then when they come into school and they have timetables and routines and they’re being disciplined and that, sometimes that gets a bit, bit hard for them to handle as well. (Ref: 3.7610)

And from management this point of view;

I think they have [given up on school] and I don’t think anything has changed. I think if they had another alternative that we offered them, that offered them an education rather than a school, that enabled them to be schooled rather than having to go through a school, I think they would go to it in droves. (Ref: 3.8021)

A counsellor’s response to this phenomenon begins to unravel an important point which may be easily overlooked. In the cases cited there is a level of condition that differentiates between statements about all Indigenous students or the response to some of the Indigenous students.
It depends so much on the family that they come from I think. I’m sure that your research would show that Aboriginal families that have employment that are educated, that have bigger life chances would do better but I guess in general the Aboriginal population have less life chances than other people. So do they switch off, yeah? I think they do switch off and I guess more and more there should be additional programs or alternate programs that can help to keep kids that are not making it at school, at school. (Ref: 2.310520)

The following excerpt also refers to the family background with regard to the tendency to ‘switch off’ school but also draws attention to within school factors specifically the level of respect demonstrated by staff towards Indigenous students:

You know, but, I just think of some of our kids too, I mean, unless I think some of the teachers too, start respecting kids as human beings and stuff like that, you know, I think it has to start from there as well. Because a lot of the time, a lot of these kids are labelled and all that sort of stuff, even before they come to school. (Ref: 3.7610)

From the district’s perspective as representing the systemic viewpoint, there is a consensus of belief that the majority of Indigenous students do ‘switch off’ school. This process involves the students’ responses to experiences of failure, alienation caused by the lack of cultural inclusivity, alien western school culture and lack of cross cultural respect for the students. However, care needs to be taken not to generate a level of stereotypical labelling or generalisations about all Indigenous students, as the complexity and diversity of Indigenous student backgrounds continue to play a significant role in their level of school engagement. Having established this important caveat, and understanding, that the district strongly professed that a vast majority of Indigenous students did ‘switch off’ school, it is timely to discuss the systemic response to this identified student response. It is critical in understanding this dynamic and critical decision to endeavour to put a timeframe around when this process took place for these Indigenous students.

WHEN DO ABORIGINAL STUDENTS SWITCH OFF SCHOOL?

While, there is consensus at a district level amongst informants that the majority of Indigenous students ‘switch off’ school - opinion about when that takes place varies. There is a level of general agreement that the results of ‘switching off’ are most evident
in secondary school and easily demonstrated in drastic reduction in attendance patterns for a significant number of Indigenous students (as covered in the Literature Review Chapter) at or after Year 8. There was however, growing consensus among district informants that in reality the process started significantly earlier in the primary area and around the end of stage 2 or at about 10yrs old. Also, the following alarming district informant comments of a genuine growing concern that Indigenous students are ‘switching off’ at even younger ages and can be evidenced in Kindergarten (first year of schooling in NSW). This is exemplified in district statistics around attendance and suspension patterns and particularly so in the first Indigenous response below by the Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer (ACLO).

I: Well what we’re noticing now is, is it’s happening in primary school, I mean, probably about 10 years ago you might have said, you know, Year 8, but now, I think in some cases, you’ll probably say, I could probably say, in some instance, probably Year 4, Year 5.

R: Yeah! Ok! And in some instance younger?

I: And some instance younger. I mean, we have this, these young kids in Kindy.

R: Yep.

I: You know, you really fear for what’s going to happen to those young kids, so yeah, and, and, we seem to be, I think, we’re finding now, there’s a lot more, a lot more problems in that the primary, infant/primary area, you know, where kids are, there’s a lot more suspension now that’s happening with kids in kindy and 1st class, and you know...that seems to be on the increase I think. (Ref: 3.7610)

And again from another Indigenous district staff member:

When do they do it? Some kids will do it early because it depends on, it depends on both their background, what they’ve had, access is not the word, but what sort of a lifestyle they’ve had to lead, whether they’ve had to, get in the car with their older brother, sister, uncle, cousin, aunt, whoever, and drive a 100 miles an hour, and, you know, think, this, wow, this is good, let’s keep doing that, whether they’ve had to, whether they’ve been abused themselves, and school’s not the place to go because I’m, you know, you tend to grow up and be way...kids are at that age, so, so it depends on their experiences, but I would generally say if I had to nail it, I would say 5th-6th class. (Ref: 3.7510)

Further from two non-Indigenous senior district staff members:

Oh anything from about Year 3 onwards. (Ref: 3.7720)
I think for some, what I want to say, some before they even go [to school] and others probably go to three? I think it’s when it happens, I think what the statistic would tell you when they switch off. I think they terminally switch off when they hit high school and they survive a year or two and then it’s probably a life of agony, just wanting to get away and when they are old enough to they go and I think their parents would take them out as well. (Ref: 3.8021)

The second Indigenous informant above highlighted behaviour which had led students into misadventure and stealing of cars etc at very young ages. These comments were very topical at the time and reflected the deaths of young Indigenous teenagers from one of the missions where students lived who were part of the study. Special comments and opinions about these students off the missions and reserves requires some individual discussion, as significant opinion and sometimes stereotypical statements were very evident amongst district informants to the study to these social, geographical and cultural hot spots unique to Indigenous communities in the study.

DOUBLE JEOPARDY? – STUDENTS FROM ABORIGINAL MISSIONS AND RESERVES

Two senior non-Indigenous staff within the district office had very specific and real concerns for the apparent family dysfunction which was particularly pronounced in Mission/Reserve communities and this had a compounding effect on children from these environments and their school outcomes. The depth of this concern and a clear reference to children outside of these Missions/Reserves who appear to be coping better with school, raises the question of the ongoing effects of these church and government initiated forced removal of Indigenous peoples from their traditional lands to sedentary life and control of the government through ‘Mission managers’ as a term commonly used amongst Indigenous peoples:

Well I think we appear to have a more significant problem where we have missions. I don’t know where’d we stand, but I think, assimilation of some sort, that is the kids that go/live in the Nature drive area seem to have fewer problems and the number is less in terms of attendance, behaviour problems, it’s not to say they’re not there, but they’re not as great...and the same at Underdale. Based on those sorts of comparisons of kids living on a mission and kids that are, higgledy piggledy [integrated] in the general community. It seems as though there is something about a Mission culture, a Mission environment. And one of it is the geographic isolation to start with, which is no fault of any ones, well probably is a fault of people way
back saying this is the way it is [policy makers], but it is no fault of the Aboriginal community. Well Underdale is the same, it is a lovely place where it is but it is still a little bit isolated. And Apen’s Mission’s very isolated. It hasn’t got the transport access. (Ref: 3.10221)

This same district officer reflects on the cycle of family dysfunction and his understanding about the cause of this:

In the communities in particular where the Aboriginal students come from missions, such as Apen & Underdale, there appears to be a significant number of parents who themselves have significant social issues such as substance abuse, they themselves being possible victims of abuse and in turn the children be victims of abuse. (Ref: 3.10221)

A very senior member of the district leadership, paints a very daunting picture of the utter despair around the environment on the Missions/Reserves where many of these children are living in situations where such lives lead to ongoing poor choices noting also that it is not uniquely an Indigenous issue:

... some kids not just from Aboriginal communities or Aboriginal families, some kids in this District are living in basically a war zone. That’s what it is. It’s a war zone from the time... well, all the time. At times they are escaping from that and a result of the escape from one war zone they put themselves in endanger in another, because they’re behaving in ways which are self-injurious, substance use or abuse, community injurious, so there stealing cars and smashing them up and wrecking them and breaking into homes and into businesses. So on one hand they're escaping things but they are putting themselves at risk in their escape. (Ref: 3.10321)

The officer then looks at a particular hostile Aboriginal mission and entertains the view that in these cases, development of a separate school option may be a potential option to overcome a level of community dysfunction:

...So there is certainly discussion at the moment about whether there is a need for the Apen community to have an Aboriginal school for example? Well there would be many people that would say yes. There would be some who would say yes, but there would be some that would say no. I think there is an opportunity for that community to look at that as a possibility but because it is an example of taking on responsibility, it will be interesting to see if anything comes of it. Certainly the Federal Government makes it possible. (Ref: 3.10321)
These perceptions of Indigenous students from Missions/Reserves became critically important to the overall images portrayed and could lead to the development and generation of stereotypical conclusions about children from these ‘apparent’ volatile communities. Care needs to be exercised that findings like these are not used to oversimplify and contribute to stereotypes. This outcome has been evident in the perceptions regarding poor attendance patterns of Indigenous children from missions/reserves.

The case-based information drawn from one of the most noted dysfunctional communities, revealed that the majority of Indigenous children from this environment had outstanding attendance patterns in school—a finding highlighted by another senior manager in the district:

*The other thing that was and I guess we’ve worked mainly informal, we got a report earlier this year that there were very large numbers of students of the Apen Mission community not going to school, we were missing a lot in the net between Apen Mission, Boatly [neighbouring high Indigenous populated town where families moved between] and so on. So we dealt with that very quietly and conducted a door knock, we literally knocked on every door in the Apen Mission community and it turned out with the exception of six or eight [Indigenous students] that were well known to the Juvenile Justice and were being case managed by Juvenile Justice, we weren’t missing any - and the principal has been telling us that, you know we are getting 100% attendance of those that were available to come to school, we are getting 100%. (Ref: 3.8021)*

It was clear at a district systems level, that there existed a need for a critical look at resolving the heightened level of family and ultimately student dysfunction which appeared to be emanating from Mission/Reserve community environments. However, as can be noted by those familiar with the area, the reality of situations is often clouded in stereotypical belief and misrepresentation of the facts. The specific details surrounding Indigenous children and their families form these Missions/Reserve communities became an issue to explore in the other three factors of the research i.e. school, community and student.

**CONCLUSION**

This chapter briefly explored the systemic response to Indigenous education across the nation, within the state and finally focused on the School/District/Area. There was ample
evidence that the Indigenous policy agenda at a national and state level had moved significantly to an Indigenous driven agenda or at least a shared partnership between education authorities and the Indigenous community (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004; NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2010; MCEETYA, 2006; Commonwealth of Australia, 2015). This level of partnership was best exemplified by the joint approach from the District and the RAECG that provided the rationale and direction for this thesis. The chapter then moved to the detailed view of the District’s response and support for Aboriginal policy and programs specifically designed to improve outcomes for Indigenous students within the District.

In unfolding the district’s response to the Aboriginal Education Policy specific responses around key learning environments of Indigenous students were considered. Issues around racism, educational expectations, student outcomes, policy implications, attendance, suspensions, class & school circumstances, curriculum and an examination of the programs initiatives undertaken specifically in response to improving Indigenous student outcomes. In all these areas it was very evident that the district had undertaken considerable targeted program responses to improve Indigenous outcomes and in line with both national and state Aboriginal policy, had actively endeavoured to engage with the Indigenous community in the strategic approaches undertaken.

The chapter then turned its attention to the basic premise of the study, Do Aboriginal kids switch off school? And the contributing questions of why and when does this happen? In answer to the first it was clear that a vast majority of Indigenous students tended to switch off school. However, the diversity of Indigenous students’ background and environmental circumstances prohibits universal categorisation of particular attributes to any specific norm in the case study to this point.

It would appear that a general consensus at a systemic level in the case study that the experience of a clear sense of initial ‘failure’ seems to trigger the disengagement. The process associated with the child’s sense of failure manifests itself in student’s downhill spiral of cyclical withdrawal from the educational process. Critical to this process is the alienation generally experienced through an alien western school culture, lack of cultural inclusivity and cross cultural respect for students. Given that acknowledgement of the fact that significant numbers of Indigenous students do appear to ‘switch off’ and a level of explanation at a systems level of why this takes place, the next question to answer is around the estimated timeframe for the commencement of this process.
While there is consistent messaging in interviews and found in District attendance figures, and supported by similar trending in the state-wide data (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004, p.25), that indicated a significant downturn in attendance patterns for Indigenous students. Declining attendance took effect from Year 5 onwards at a state level and this was replicated in the District, with marked decline in particular from Year 6 to Year 9 and there was general consensus that the disengagement of Indigenous students commenced between Years 3 and 5, or perhaps towards the end of Stage 2 or around 10 years of age in the case study.

Given the above district staffs were provided with an opportunity to use a 'magic wand' to suggest some strategies that they would like to see implemented to significantly improve Indigenous student outcomes in their district. The following responses provide a level of creative and innovative approaches to encouraging Indigenous students back to school education:

We work in a model that is largely deficit driven and so I think that we throw a lot of resources at Indigenous students, we throw our ACLOs [Aboriginal Community Liaison Officers], our itinerant teachers of one form or another and unfortunately often behaviour teachers, so I think the schools responses is to subsidise that lower forming disengaged end as we do right across the spectrum not just in Aboriginal students, to the detriment and the expense of students in those other areas. Where I think, and I know you are probably not asking this question, where I think the schools response probably needs to be is in case managing and I can't see why we can't with just 6% of the population as in case managing every single Koori student in our system. (Ref: 3.8021)

First of all appoint teachers by interview to all areas with large Aboriginal populations. Because of the situation that happened at Apen primary two or three years ago, when we were then or are now able to appoint teachers by interview for all teachers for that particular position, that has therefore helped in terms of types of teachers we are getting into that particular school, but that was only a one off. OK so that's number one. Now linked into that is an understanding of culture, the teachers must understand the culture of the groups in their area as distinct from global Aboriginal culture. How that occurs obviously has got to be a huge interaction between the community and the school. Then much, and this is really waving the magic wand, then much better co-operation understanding liaison with the community. Where the community is involved continually in the school and their presence is felt within the school. And that we're able to be sitting down working the problems out. That would also mean a greater understanding between the various agencies, police, DOCs, JJs (Juvenile Justice) whoever help. (Ref: 3.10421)
The preceding two comments from senior non-Indigenous district staff are balanced by the following Indigenous respondents’ comments on what needs to change or be maintained to break through the Indigenous inequity:

Well they’ve put a lot of effort into that area. They’ve been running a attendance program for four years now. It’s a combination of a whole lot of things, you know, it’s a combination of goodwill, fair policies, a combination of good partnerships, a combination of the fact that the Aboriginal community are well accepted in that school. Maybe teachers are more understanding.

A whole lot of things. It’s not just one thing; it’s a whole lot of things coming together. (Ref: 3.7720)

They [noting a particular school] have a really good program. They employ a couple of good tutors, Koori tutors, and stuff like that. I think there’s a lot more happening now, to keep the kids interested in school, because there’s a lot more, with these literacy programs, there’s a lot more Koori people being employed, you know!

...And I think it’s working because, I mean, you’ve got these people in there all the time, and they’re in there, they’re mixing with staff, they’re talking with staff. Not only are they helping the kids, and the kids are seeing that, you know, seeing there’s a lot more, Newton is one school, and they’ve got eight tutors I think.

And they had about 10 or 12 last year that they trained, so you got Koori people in and out, and I think people are starting to feel a bit more at ease when they come in and stuff like that as well. (Ref: 3.7610)

Systemically the policy rhetoric is of the highest domain in this country and at a district school level of the case study there is considerable effort, determination and willingness to turn this rhetoric into reality. The above quotes highlight a level of genuine vision and hope for the future at least at the critical end of the policy implementation spectrum within the education system. If change is to be effective then its primary site of action must be within the school fence and critically in the hearts, minds and actions of teachers in classrooms. This is the domain the study will next examine.
CHAPTER 5. SCHOOL FACTORS - PRIMARY

Ray: “...was proud of his indigenous background...”

Ray is enrolled in Year 8 at Lanes Secondary School and doing well at school with little effort which sometimes frustrates both his mother and father but they are generally happy with his progress. While Ray’s primary school had a large Indigenous student population, his new secondary school has a much smaller proportion of Indigenous students. He is the eldest in a family of three children, is enthusiastic about playing soccer and skateboarding with his mates and playing around with his computer. Both mum and dad work although his mother was currently between jobs. His dad, who is Aboriginal, has a university degree, works in education, and is deeply committed to the preservation of his culture. He loves teaching his children traditional dancing and passing on to the next generation his rich cultural background. The family lives in their own home, in a small rural town, on the traditional lands of Ray’s father’s Indigenous nation.

The thing that Ray most disliked about secondary school was the daily bus travel which took at least an hour both ways. This didn’t give him much time to do the increased amount of homework he got in secondary school. It also reduced the time available to engage in sporting activities, which he loved. Even so he enjoyed the greater freedom that secondary school offered and he got on well with most of his teachers, who he thought were pretty good.

He liked Physical Education (PE), sport, art, woodwork and computers and, although he was performing in the middle of the top classes in the school in mathematics and science, he hated the workload those subjects demanded. He was felt lucky because he was coping well in his classes with very little effort. Ray was in the top bands for both his SNAP and ELLA results in both Year 7 and 8.

His father played a significant role in developing his son’s Aboriginal identity. An identity Ray recalls only being supported in school when he recalled studying Indigenous peoples in primary school and a recent history lesson on massacres around the European invasion of Australia. Ray was proud of his Indigenous background, was familiar with most of the history he had been taught and was still very comfortable with
Aboriginal studies lessons at school, but given his father’s high level of cultural involvement, he didn’t see the need to choose an Aboriginal Studies elective in the future.

He enjoyed playing with his friends, two of whom he had since primary school and one who was Indigenous. He made new friends easily at secondary school.

Ray was very aware of the opportunities and the importance of education in gaining a job in the future and, with good advice from his father who he really respected, he would make decisions on whether to go onto the end of Year 12 or not, depending on what educational requirements he would need to get the type of work he chose to pursue. So he was open about what he wanted to do and whether or not he would continue on to his Higher School Certificate. He got strong support from both his parents and while they would like him to continue on to the end of Year 12, given his father’s work in education they also appreciated that other options were available through TAFE.

Author’s note:
Ray’s story reminds us and provides the introductory grounded setting to this chapter on school factors, that once again Indigenous students come from diverse backgrounds and many have very positive family and community backgrounds. It reminds us that to teach Indigenous students effectively, schools and their teachers must spend their time getting to know their students and families. This is the fundamental platform for engagement with kids like Ray.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional Indigenous education took place in natural settings, providing all the stimulus and content required for the young within the community. It relied on lived knowledges developed since time began. This education was relayed through complex Indigenous literacies and oral stories as told by the child’s extended family. This education collectively contributed to the development of the child’s world. Such education continued beyond childhood through public ceremony extending into more formal passages of ‘initiated’ (i.e., secret/sacred) learning through initiation and onto elder status.

The contemporary non-Indigenous education that takes place in schools bears no resemblance to the above described traditional ways of learning. Over the years
Indigenous students have often shunned formal, foreign, approaches to education starting from the earliest attempts to ‘civilise’ or ‘Christianise’ Indigenous traditional ways (Fletcher, 1989, pp.13 – 38). Some believe this situation continues today in our schools based on research into student deliberate ‘resistance’ to assimilationist school practices as highlighted by Munns (1998).

This and the following chapter provide insight into schools in a region in the NSW system – a system that contains the largest population of Indigenous students in mainstream education in Australia. The chapters will explore the perception of teachers and executive staff in their implementation of policy, syllabi, and practice as it relates to Indigenous students’. Critical perspectives on issues such as curriculum, pedagogy, special initiatives designed to meet the Indigenous students’ needs and in particular the success or otherwise of these endeavours on Indigenous students were sought during the study.

A unique vantage point is gained through access to Indigenous workers and educators in the school. This group also includes a small number of teachers who are Indigenous; however the primarily group of informants are those who provide paraprofessional support– the Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEAs). AEAs are attached to the majority of schools in the study. A key focus is the examination of the role of the school in endeavouring to cater specifically for the needs of Indigenous students with reference to the schools’ levels of collaboration with Indigenous parents, carers and the community of the school.

In this and the next chapter common themes will be explored, including school personnel; program and curriculum implementation; the outcomes for Indigenous students; and the interface between the school and Indigenous communities they service. The critical question, ‘Do Indigenous students switch off school?’ will be addressed separately for both the primary and secondary settings.

In this chapter the focus is the Year 5 cohort of Indigenous students across six primary schools in the study. It documents critical themes associated with stage 3 schooling for Indigenous students (that is in their final years of primary school).

The concluding section will directly address the question “Do Aboriginal kids switch off school?” Interviews with the schools’ executive and teaching and Indigenous education staff provide the main sources of data for this chapter.
It became obvious that there was a clear delineation between those students in the study who came from communities which were defined as ‘Missions or Reserves’ and those who came from more mainstream integrated town housing environments. Another issue that surfaced was discrimination based on race, an area that was given historical prominence in earlier chapters. Racial policy on education was invoked in 1902 by Minister for Education, John Perry. The ‘exclusion on demand’ policy meant that Indigenous students could be excluded from government schools on the demand of white parents up until 1972 (Fletcher, 1989, pp.63-84). Discrimination was a topic both raised and aired in the interviews.

This chapter begins with some background on the primary schools in the study. This is followed by an exploration of policy and welfare, which then moves to consideration of programs, curriculum and interventions undertaken. Finally the focus moves to outcomes for Indigenous students. Interviews with school staff provided the main source of data for the findings reported in this chapter.

**BACKGROUND TO THE PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN THE STUDY**

The rationale for the selection of the schools in the study was presented in Chapter 2 identifying schools with significant numbers of Indigenous student enrolments and the poor performance of Indigenous students on state-wide testing results in literacy and numeracy (Apem District, 2004, electronic copy, PowerPoint Slides 15-18). The selection of schools occurred in consultation with the NSWDET District Office and the RAECG covering the schools involved in the study.

Primary Level case study schools grades ranged from Primary Principal Grade 5 with a teaching principal through to the highest grade, Grade 1 primary school with a non-teaching principal. Secondary schools ranged from Principal High School 1 to 2 (only two grades of schools).

Students in the study schools had limited access to Indigenous staff in their schools which was a general trend across the District. Of particular note is that only 0.53% of all teaching staff were Indigenous (District Documents, 2004, electronic copy, PowerPoint slide 31) and one of these held a Principal's position. Most Indigenous staff in schools in
the District were employed either as AEAs or in specifically externally funded programs like the then newly introduced pilot, In-Class-Tuition (ICT), funded by the federal Department of Education Science and Training (DEST). Ten of the 12 schools in the case study, had access to a fully funded permanent AEA and a further school had used externally funded temporary resources to employ an Indigenous person in a support role. There was only one school in the case study, across both primary and secondary, which had an Indigenous School Administrative Support Staff (SASS) officer working in the school’s front office.

It was common across the schools to find mural and posters that were welcoming and inclusive of Indigenous students and contained Indigenous themes. The vast majority of schools were flying the Aboriginal flag within school grounds which affirmed the welcome to the Indigenous students and parents/community. Seven of the schools in the case study (primary and secondary) had Aboriginal resource or home rooms where Indigenous students could gather. The AEA was generally housed there, and typically there were specialist Indigenous resources also available. These rooms were generally not present in schools where the Indigenous student population proportion of the total was small i.e. less than 5%.

**PRIMARY POLICY PRACTICES AND WELFARE SUPPORT FOR INDIGENOUS STUDENTS**

**Aboriginal Education Policy (AEP) implementation**

When asked at interview to discuss the implementation of the AEP with regards to the needs of Indigenous students, most schools could not nominate any specific policies outside the AEP which were demonstrably designed to meet the specific needs of Indigenous students. The two areas of policy potentially affecting significantly the education of Indigenous students to be reaffirmed and emerge from contributing questioning at interview were in the areas of the AEP and school welfare policy development.
Primary schools in the study made it very clear that they all implement the Department’s policies and develop their own policies for all students in their school with no specific reference to Indigenous students, as one AEA of a school put it: ‘No it’s all the same, what goes for one goes for them all’ (Ref: 2.312410); and a principal emphasised: ‘I don’t separate Aboriginal children in our welfare policy, I would never do that!’ (Ref: 2.112520).

While in documented policy in the schools there was no evident differentiation based on race, there was differentiation in practice, specifically in regard to welfare where there was flexibility in provision to cater for some specific needs of Indigenous and other disadvantaged students, as the following example from an executive member of staff indicates:

Yes. In this school you’ve got to take Indigenous culture and Aboriginality into context. So our welfare policy has provisions in there to cater for Aboriginal kids and I think we go above and beyond for all our kids. I mean we buy them shoes, when the parents don’t have shoes, we give them clothes, we give them breakfast, we try to establish good home school liaison by teachers going out to meet the parents and go to the houses, and there’s not too many schools where that’s sort of thing goes on. So as far as the welfare of the kids goes, I believe as teachers we go above and beyond. As far as what we have on paper, what you have on paper and what actually do in a job is two very different things. There is nowhere written on paper that when young so and so comes to school and hasn’t got shoes because they were left at home or whatever, that we go and buy him $5 shoes from Crazy Clints, that’s not written anywhere, but that’s done. And we give the kids breakfast and give the kids lunch. (Ref: 2.111021)

All schools in the study were well aware of the AEP. Both executive and teaching staff readily acknowledged its existence but there were two very distinct views on its currency and internal level of support within the schools. In relation to the former, most schools indicated that the Policy had lost a lot of its initial momentum and as one Indigenous teacher said ‘it is a really good policy that is sitting around collecting dust’ (Ref: 2.211611). This sentiment was also supported in a further interview with another teacher who said:

I: District office had the big push for the Aboriginal Education Policy and since that’s finished, I think 2000 was the last year of the implementation, wasn’t it. It has sort of died in the bum basically, I think most schools it has been a token gesture. That’s my opinion anyway.

R: And this school’s involvement in the policy?

I: We didn’t implement it fully no; we did bits and pieces, enough to get by to please the powers to be. (Ref:2.211421)
With respect to ‘support’, the AEP was noted as still being used and reviewed on a regular basis:

At the start of that policy launch, we profiled the school on the matrix and made a decision as a community where we were up to. And that was done through sampling the teachers, the P&C, the school council, the ASSPA committee, all those stakeholder groups. We did that again last year. And in some areas we’ve made improvements and in other areas, it looks as though we haven’t because we haven’t been able to move ourselves up to the next box on the matrix. But I think we’re a far more aware school than we were before in terms Aboriginal issues. Reconciliation is an interesting one; I don’t think any of us really know what reconciliation means to be honest with you. Principal (Ref: 2.111821)

Of note, the only significant drive to implement the policy was from the sole Indigenous principal within the study that was in her first year of appointment. An executive member of her staff drew attention to the lack of momentum and impetus of the AEP on most teachers preceding her appointment:

I: So certainly from our Principal there is a good level of support, she’s very proactive in that area…

R: So have you been trained in the Aboriginal Ed policy?

I: I can’t remember having any formal training basically read through it and gone through it myself as part of merit selection and stuff like that and become familiar with it.

R: Would that be reflected across staff in the school?

I: Generally I think that would mostly be the case. If you asked where was the Aboriginal policy in their school? They would take days to find it, if not weeks! Then again if you asked them what the impetus or the general point of the policy they wouldn’t be able to tell you. I’m not being negative I’m just being a realist. (Ref: 2.111121)

Lester and Hanlen (2004, pp.141-143) review of the NSWAEP found similar situations with regard to the currency of the Policy indicating that the initial launch in 1996 was quickly overtaken by other more dominant policy launches and in particular the Department’s mandatory requirements under Child Protection. They also found that there was significant goodwill amongst teachers in general towards the Policy and its Aboriginal studies components but that due to lack of knowledge about Aboriginal education and the subsequent lack of confidence in the area, teachers were hesitant to take the next step in getting immersed in the implementation - a point not lost in the
following reflection on the lack of local knowledge by local teachers as reflected in the following statement by an Assistant Principal:

To know the history [local Indigenous history], and for us to understand it, and I think a lot of staff because they don’t have that training, don’t feel in a position...they want to give the right information and they want to do it the right way. And I think that probably holds them back from doing so. (Ref: 2112020)

School welfare policy

In a school of 500 I don’t think they stand out at all. Most of our Aboriginal kids are quite well behaved. Principal (Ref: 2.112221)

It is interesting because I guess in my former role, I would have come to the school with an expectation that the majority of problems, discipline problems, behaviour problems would have been with the Aboriginal kids. In this particular school I think the majority of the problems are with the non-Aboriginal kids and I’m not sure what the reason for that is. The Aboriginal kids seem to be quite settled overall. Maybe it’s because a lot of them have been here for quite some time, they’re not mobile, except for that one family that goes home. So they are fairly settled and they have been at the school for quite some time but I’m not sure what the reason is that they’re just fairly settled kids. Principal (Ref: 2.111310)

The author is drawing attention to the above views because they were not common school views as will become evident in this section. School staffs typically held a level of preconceived views on Indigenous students’ behaviour and welfare, namely that Indigenous students were over represented in welfare and discipline issues.

As raised in the previous section, Indigenous students' needs were specifically catered for in schools' welfare practices, even though no direct reference was made to Indigenous students in any written school policies in the case study. It was also very clear from interviews that Indigenous students featured prominently in the schools’ student welfare activities, and disciplinary action. School executive often noted that extreme care has to be taken that this prominence is not interpreted in a way that promulgates stereotyping of Indigenous students.

Each school had a welfare policy and several schools had implemented welfare teams to care for all students in terms of their wellbeing and specific learning needs, although
this latter responsibility in a couple of schools fell to a separate learning support team. Some schools went to considerable lengths to ensure their welfare systems were closely informed by scholarship in the field, including drawing on particular theoretical models supported by community consultation. In one school the effort was as extensive as the situation was complex:

I: We’ve undergone a big cultural shift at this school in the last two years, where we’ve become what we call a ‘beliefs based’ school. Prior to that, we had a welfare system that was aligned to Glasser, but implemented through a levels approach and children moved through levels and out of levels, in response to their actions and agreed consequences for those actions. It was very effective for 90% of the kids, and totally ineffective for the other 10%. It was having a very negative effect on parents’ perceptions of how the school operated, because they got these so called “blue letters”. Which became known as “the bluey”? “My kid got a bluey the other day”… we weren’t addressing the needs of some of our hard-core students through that approach. So we sat down as a community and did some training in the principles of the Australian Quality Council. We made a commitment to become a quality school. Put the whole staff through that, and selected key members of the community. P&C President, the School Council President, and the AEA, and head of ASSPA and that sort of thing, and that conversation has taken us, all of the latter part of 2000, all of 2001 and the present time. Where we’ve consulted everybody, or as many people as we could, all the kids, all the teachers, and as many parents as we could possibly get to do so. We asked the question/ questions: “What do you see as good qualities of a school?”, “…of a friend?” and “…of yourself”. That’s not exactly the questions, but that was the nature of the questions… And to cut a long story short, we ended up with our corporate core values, which we call school beliefs of learning together, safety, respect, caring and responsibility. Fairly generic, and it’s one of those things that the process was more important than the product… And it’s been very effective for probably 95% of our kids. So, we’ve been able to engage another 5% but we’ve still got 5% of staff will say, they [5% of students] now know how to play the game. They can write their personal improvement plan, but when push comes to shove they’ll still resort to violence to resolve a conflict. That’s our big issue.

R: Is there any difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous in that remaining 5%?

I: I think it’s fair to say, again, those young Koori boys are over-represented in that last 5%. Principal (Ref: 2.111821)

In most schools in the study, Principal and school welfare teachers indicated that Indigenous students’ representation in both welfare and disciplinary matters was in proportion to their numbers in the school population. Overall only a small number of Indigenous students were involved in welfare or discipline matters in a school in comparison to total school enrolments. For example, at Underdale Public School where 36% of their students were Indigenous only two or three Indigenous students (6% of
Indigenous) compared to seven non-Indigenous students (8%) out of a total school population of around 140, as identified by the principal, were involved heavily in welfare and behavioural matters at the school (Ref: 2.112121).

When questioned further, there was general agreement amongst all the schools that a small core\textsuperscript{13} of Indigenous students made up their major welfare and behaviour problems. While the number of Indigenous students involved remained fairly constant across four of the six schools, two schools had markedly larger numbers of Aboriginal students making up the core.

In both the instances above the schools serviced Aboriginal Missions in their communities. It was also notable that often the core group of Indigenous welfare and behaviour problems in a school came from one or a few specific Indigenous families and that were often repeat offenders:

\textit{I: There seems to be a little group that we see again and again, and then there’s another group that might have a, you know, you might have a one off incident and you may not see them again at all. But there is a small group of students that we would see again and again. Their names would come up. There would be incidents in the playground or the classroom.}

\textit{R: Can you identify any factors about that group at all?}

\textit{I: One underlying factor, no. Some of the things that I’ve seen would be dysfunctional families. One parent here, another parent there. A lack of security in knowing who’s going to be home when they get there. School Executive (Ref: 2.112020)}

While behaviour problems of Indigenous students in the case study proved to be a disproportionately high incidence in welfare matters which schools dealt with, there were other key issues raised with primarily regard to the socio-economic poverty that a large proportion of Indigenous students found themselves. This brought about a lot of activity for welfare committees around health issues (including physical and mental health referrals to specialist assessment), supplementing meals, school uniforms, support of general school equipment and outside activities like sport and excursions. During the

\textsuperscript{13} Descriptions began to emerge in schools of a small group of Indigenous students who dominated Indigenous welfare issues in schools. This group of students also tended to be overly represented in poor attendance as well. They formed a particular reference group and will be identified as the ‘Indigenous core’ from this point in the thesis.
study all schools were appreciative of the additional resources available under Indigenous community managed Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness (ASSPA) program funding provided by DEST.

While Indigenous students might be appearing in disproportionately high numbers in schools’ welfare and behavioural programs, it is important to note that schools stressed in many instances that the Indigenous students were also well represented in reward programs:

_We are in the process of reviewing it in fact with the student welfare policy they are going through a stage here at the moment of developing a whole of school award system for all children…So we try to create a lot more positive environment. Every five weeks we give an ice-cream and free play for all children that haven’t been to the planning room or time out. And I would say in most cases the majority of the Aboriginal students would be getting those rewards._ Principal (Ref: 2.112221)

**PRIMARY SCHOOL PROGRAMS, CURRICULUM AND INTERVENTIONS**

All primary schools openly talked and listed many interventions that they were implementing in schools for the specific benefit of Indigenous students and many of these were fairly universal interventions most often funded by the Commonwealth DEST and in many instances targeted at improving the literacy and numeracy levels of students. There was fairly broad implementation of Aboriginal perspectives to school curricula, but interviews indicated that the implementation of this was heavily reliant on individual teachers and there was little indication of the AEP directed systemic implementation being undertaken. Overwhelmingly, schools agreed that the state set syllabus and curricula on Aboriginal studies and perspective across the curriculum provided great flexibility and scope for schools to implement Aboriginal studies. Some schools indicated that a major hindrance to the effective implementation of Aboriginal studies was the lack of training and subsequent lack of confidence of many teachers to implement the curriculum.
Targeted programs and interventions for Indigenous students

Two types of interventions were evident for Indigenous students. Firstly, there were additional resources allocated to meet the specific needs of Indigenous students, these included staff establishment enhancements built into school establishment and secondly, additional resources applied for by the school to mount specific initiatives generally supplied through District or through the NSWDET Equity Programs and primarily by the Commonwealth DEST. Both resources generally targeted improvement in educational outcomes and closing the gap in outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students or in the case of equity programs overall, raising of school outcomes which would include Indigenous students.

Staff ‘establishment enhancements’ (i.e. specialist Indigenous staff allocated on the basis of Indigenous student population) to schools generally were either AEAs or in a couple of schools an Aboriginal Education Resource Teacher (AERT). Both positions were above normal establishment and specifically targeted at improving outcomes for Indigenous students. Not all schools in the study had access to these resources. Only two schools identified they had access to AERT. One primary school did not have access to an AEA, although this school was successful in applying for additional funds and employed an Aboriginal staff member to work as a temporary employee in a similar role at the school. Both these positions were to work across the school to improve in particular literacy and numeracy levels. The AEA also had as part of their duties to assist in liaising with the Aboriginal parents/carers.

All schools proved very resourceful in making successful applications for funding for a very broad range of programs and from different funding sources. The largest amount of funding received by schools was directly related to the socio-economic status (SES) of the schools drawing area (ACARA, 2015). All of the schools’ communities were in low socio-economic areas and this had an effect on funding for the majority of these schools. Four schools were eligible for funding under the Priority Schools Funding (PSF) program. One school which had an Indigenous population of over 20% was not in receipt of PSF reported that there was a difficulty with the implementation of the community survey that was used for determining SES. Unfortunately, this made them ineligible, though the principal reported that they should have been and was making sure the survey was more effectively implemented in the next round of funding (Ref: 2.112520).
The second major source of funding that most of the schools had access to, was funding from the Commonwealth for a program piloted during the research period in In-Class-Tuition (ICT). This program provided resources to employ additional temporary staff in classroom as tutors in literacy and numeracy. The program was very well received gaining high praise by those schools involved as a principal and executive staff member reported on some specific outcomes:

*Principal:* That’s excellent and we have that program [ICT] running across the whole school, where our tutors and mainly they’re Aboriginal parents who have been trained who go onto the classroom and assist the students in their reading and language programs.

*Executive Teacher:* They work with the teachers to start with to identify the areas of need and then come in to work specifically with students with target outcomes.

*Principal:* We’ve specifically assessed those students in recent weeks and we have noticed their benchmarking in reading levels have improved quite dramatically and we’re extremely impressed and we would love to be able to see that continued. (Ref: 2.112221 and 2.112320)

A few of the schools had homework centres established under DEST funding but these had to be closed if the school took on the ICT model of intervention. Schools also highlighted fitness and meal programs that they had operated in direct response to the needs of Indigenous students and two schools had been very proactive in the area of transition programs into kindergarten as noted by a principal of one of the schools:

*We also had funds from the Aboriginal Programs Unit to support our kindergarten students in their transition to school. We had 10 of our 60 kindergarten children were Aboriginal this year and we employed initially a teacher to work in the two kindergarten classrooms supporting Aboriginal kids with that transition… kindergarten teachers are particularly happy with the progress of those students in the two kindergarten classes that were targeted for literacy this year. We’ve just collected data for the evaluation and overall there has been improvement by all of the children who are involved… except for one kindergarten child who had difficulty right from the beginning of the year making the transition from home to kindergarten. (Ref: 2.111310)*

**Culturally inclusive curricula – Aboriginal Studies/Perspectives**

3. *Schooling should be socially just, so that:*
...3.4 all students understand and acknowledge the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures to Australian society and possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians... (MCEETYA, 1999)

The above statement taken from The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century clearly articulates the mandate for all schools across Australia to incorporate Aboriginal studies into the syllabus for all students. The AEP as previously stated also adds weight to the compulsory nature of Aboriginal studies in schools under the focus areas of Aboriginal Students and All Staff – All Students – All Schools (NSWDSE, 1996). In interviews there was general consensus that the NSW syllabi had enough scope to effectively incorporate an Aboriginal perspective with particular reference to Human Society and its Environment (HSIE) key learning area and mention of successful integration in science, maths, English and art as pointed out by the following teacher:

I think Aboriginal education has been integrated pretty well in most of the new syllabuses that I've noticed in your HSIE and science and things like that. I don't think there is that many schools that teach Aboriginal studies per se in primary school. They have their token sausage sizzle and flag waving once a year. As far as the syllabuses go they are pretty good, you'll find an Aboriginal content in about every unit, yeah. (Ref: 2.211421)

While accepting that there was general consensus amongst the school that Aboriginal perspectives were possible, one cannot but pick up on the cynicism expressed above by the teacher when referring to 'token sausage sizzle and flag waving'. There were a number of informants who clearly articulated that while the curriculum may provide the opportunity, the reality was that if successful implementation was left to teachers in classrooms the quality of implementation would vary:

I think there is the scope there, but I think that it takes a certain type of teacher. As a white person in a white community we don't understand Aboriginal culture well enough to be trying to teach them. These are big picture stuff but I think there is the scope there, I think that at some schools and some classrooms yes, we as department, as an educator as a whole I think we do a very good job. I think in some schools, in some classrooms we do an absolutely terrible job. I don't know why? School Executive (Ref: 2.111021)

I think it's a very culturally based curriculum, white Anglo Saxon culture. I think in the last couple of years there has been an emphasis or push for the department to
try to be seen to be inclusive of Aboriginal issues, but I think there is still a long way to go in terms of overcoming teacher training and teacher attitudes and issues like that. School Executive (Ref: 2.111121)

With these admissions the implementation across the schools in the study was very inconsistent. One school had clearly made its mark on Aboriginal studies as critically documented in survey work they did amongst the parents on Human Society and Its Environment (HSIE) implementation:

* I think everyone here is very conscious here that in their class they have several Aboriginal children and the Aboriginal perspective…actually in the survey we did for our HSIE, I’ll give you the facts on that one. We surveyed parents for our annual report about what they knew about Human Society and Its Environment; it was interesting that most parents, when I asked them to name what are the topics the kids are learning about at school. Many of them said the kids never tell me anything or whatever, but the one that was highest was Aboriginal education, so the wider community knows that we will learn about this and we will learn about the perspective. Principal (Ref: 2.112520)

A deputy principal in another school, acknowledging the syllabus was available to implement the required Aboriginal perspectives, believed the real issue lay not with the curriculum, but with the pedagogical approach taken in the classrooms, where the improved outcomes need to be addressed:

* I: …well there is across curriculum Aboriginal perspective in all of the KLAs [Key Learning Areas], well the HSIE one does that and the science and the tech. We’ve got a lot of Aboriginal stuff into the maths one too, but I don’t think it’s actually the key learning areas that are the problems. It’s the strategies that teachers use to implement the key learning areas, which are not catering to all learning styles.

  R: Can you expand on why?

  I: Well they are not hands on enough! They’re not teaching kids and letting them work in groups. I mean in every classroom I say to kids, I’m not the only teacher. You know, you’re a teacher I say. So it’s probably not the Key Learning Areas despite the fact that it is an overcrowded curriculum in primary schools now. I think it is more the implementation of the Key Learning Areas and that links into training and development. We don’t get the time nor the money to do much of this anymore! (Deputy Principal Ref: 2.112320)

The final word on the syllabus and curriculum in Aboriginal studies/perspectives comes from a teacher when asked if she has enough flexibility and scope in the curriculum to embed Aboriginal studies:
I do these days. In the 20 odd years that I've been teaching there's just been an increasing emphasis on the Aboriginal perspective and you, as a normal classroom teacher, if you couldn't bring an Aboriginal perspective into their work there really would be something wrong with that teacher. And there's a lot of beautiful literacy now. Literature sorry, that you can use that brings the Aboriginal perspective. So I don't think there's any excuse for an Aboriginal child feeling left out. I think you've got enough scope to sort of bring the Aboriginal perspective in if you really want to. (Ref: 2.213720)

**Transition programs into Secondary School**

Transition from primary school into secondary school is seen as a key exchange point for all students, including Indigenous students. All of the primary schools in the study offered some form of transition program to ease the transfer between schools and this was obviously a process that was deemed important by most schools. Two schools in the study offered specialised orientation to Indigenous students including an orientation camp and special linkage arrangements using the AEA, but other than that programs were designed around all students with some programs catering for students with behavioural or intellectual difficulties and some of these would be Indigenous. Schools went about their orientations in different ways.

*Most schools followed the more traditional two day orientation with visits to the local secondary schools with lectures, tours and general exposure to life in a high school. One school had three programs developed to look after students at risk from behaviour problems which was supported by the Itinerant Support Teacher Behaviour (ISTB), an extensive interaction with the high school doing a unit on ‘flight’ using high school staff and the normal two day orientation (Ref: 2.111310).*

Principals at most schools indicated that the vast majority of their students would make the transition to secondary school very comfortably. Of real concern were those primary students who were having problems with either behaviour and/or attendance:

*I: Looking at our cohort this year, a few of them will have problems in the fact that they are the ones that I see now that are the ones jigging school and they have attendance problems and learning problems. And they won't get the pastoral care in high school that they get with us, so I can see a lot of them not going to school quite frankly.*

*R: And the Aboriginal kids or is that, who you are referring to?*
I: That’s who I am referring to now, but there are other kids that that will happen to as well. I’m sort of putting names…

R: Is it disproportional or are they going to suffer similar problems?

I: I think they will all suffer similar problems as far as that’s concerned and because these are the kids that are not engaged. (Principal Ref: 2.112320)

An AEA also had this comment to make with regard to the potential of the behaviour or poor attendance of Indigenous students being carried onto secondary school:

I guess it is the same for any kid moving from primary to high school, but I think it is…I’m not really sure. We’ve had some Aboriginal kids that have gone through and they were attendance problems here and they’ve carried that through to high school and they’re attendance problems at high school too. So I think that is also a lack of support from the family, not enough encouragement to go on and do whatever, they’re just taught to settle for whatever they can get. (Ref: 2.311211)

While it would appear that most students transfer with a minimum of fuss, of those students who are having difficulties at primary, there is a core who will continue their behaviour and attendance patterns into secondary school, despite school transition programs for these students.

One principal indicated that the transition issue into secondary school is not as critical as often reported but reaffirms the transfer of poor behaviour in certain cases and highlights that the problem can be in evidence when they first enrol in primary:

So there’s that instance that I’ve just outlined, you know primary to high is a major transition point for all kids. In my humble opinion it’s over exaggerated as a significant transition point. The large majority of children go from primary school to high school with no problems whatsoever.

I’m seeing young people who are disengaged with school before they get here. Basically that’s my big concern. And it goes back to what I was saying about those young Aboriginal boys. I think some of them are sort of lost before we find them. So I see a switch off point before school. So it’s not a switch off, it’s a lack of switching on. (Principal Ref: 2.111310)

Primary Principals in the study mounted programs to assist in the transfer of students which including Indigenous students, but no specific Indigenous program was identified.
Interviews with students clearly indicated that most did this transfer with a minimum of fuss. They also highlight that a minority of students with either poor behaviour or attendance will transfer this pattern across to their secondary school settings.

The next section explores the school/student interaction as it relates to specific outcomes for Indigenous students.

**PRIMARY SCHOOL ACADEMIC OUTCOMES FOR INDIGENOUS STUDENTS**

Indigenous outcomes in relation to literacy and numeracy across Australia are significantly below their non-Indigenous peers. This trend is replicated in NSW and, as pointed out in the Introductory Chapter, equally as poor in the district where the study was conducted (District Documents, electronic copy, PowerPoint, slides 15-19, 2004).

While results across the district may have been be typical of Indigenous results across the state and nation, it is important to note the sometimes subtle differences across individual schools in the study. This section will address the primary schools’ general academic results of Indigenous students from the perspectives of the schools’ executive and teaching staff.

The district results for Indigenous students in the Basic Skills Test (BST) over the 2001-2002 period were consistently below the state figures for all students by between 4.3 to 6.8 percentage points in primary school across both literacy and numeracy, with the exception of Year 5 numeracy. In the district under study the Indigenous student results were above the state Indigenous BST results. Primary schools involved in the study fluctuated between being 6 to 9 points below the state average for all students with the exception of two schools that performed above the state average for all students (District, Basic Skills Test, 2002).

Results could differ across literacy and numeracy as pointed out by one principal:

> Literacy’s still, from my perspective, is not as high as I’d like it to be. It’s around about the average for Koori kids but it’s not up around the average for all kids and that’s where we’re aiming for. However, maths, that is up at that level, so it’s up at the same, it’s up at normal state level. (Ref: 2.113021)
Newton primary reported that it had performed consistently 2 to 3 points below state average for Indigenous students and obviously some 6-9 points below state average for all students. In more recent years the school had shifted kids out of the bottom bands and achieved Year 3 literacy at state average for all students. The principal offered a reason for this improvement:

Year 3 literacy is at state average, that’s a first. A number of Aboriginal children who are performing above the state level for all students and above the state level for Aboriginal students, and that's really exciting and I believe that it's very much to do with the ICT program as a component of our overall whole school in-class support. That's probably one of the most significant things we've done in the last couple of years. To provide that support to students within their classroom, rather than withdrawing them for intensive programs and then putting them back in the classroom. And I think the reason it's been so successful is the improvement in pedagogy or teaching that those support people have been able to bring to the classroom. So the classroom teacher has been up-skilled through exposure to these specialists... And the children have received better tuition, class ratios have been smaller. So things are looking promising. (Ref: 2.111821)

Yale Public School indicated it had generally always performed above the Aboriginal state average in its BST results and has noted in the period of the study that there has been considerable growth from Year 3 to Year 5 results which the principal puts down to the ICT program, using Indigenous tutors and the positive work of the AEA in his school (Ref: 2.112221).

Three other schools in the study reported achievements for their Indigenous students above the state mean for all students. Two of these schools had small candidatures, so reporting on them could be misleading, but in both of these schools, the majority of students were doing very well and represented in the higher bands, as one principal explains:

…all of them did quite well. We had no-one in [bands] one or two for maths and no-one in Band 1 for English, but Student B should have done better but she’s never here. Student B Band 5, Student W Band 4 and Student G Band 4 and similarly in maths, so certainly not down the bottom, chunked middle to top. (Ref: 2.112520)

The ICT program was noted by a few principals as having obviously a very positive effect on student outcomes in the schools involved. While these results overall were promising
there were deeper issues around school/student interactions which were prominent in the discussion linking Indigenous student outcomes, behaviour and attendance.

**Attendance patterns of Indigenous students**

Indigenous students’ poor attendance patterns at school are consistently highlighted in the literature as evident in Chapter 2. Obviously the link to attendance and performance of Indigenous students is often made. Nationally, enormous amounts of effort have gone into getting Indigenous students to attend school regularly. Schools in the study, however, indicate a somewhat different story on attendance patterns.

Consistently five of the six schools in the study when asked about the attendance rates of their Indigenous students indicated that they were roughly equal with those of non-Indigenous students. A single school indicated that approximately one third of the school’s Indigenous students had poor attendance records and partially this was explained due to the servicing of a significant Aboriginal mission community on the outskirts of town. However, in the majority of cases School executive highlighted that it is a small core of students, generally from one or a few families, who had chronically poor attendance patterns.

The principal at Oxford Public notes:

_in general terms I’d have to say that in most cases there’s no difference [between attendance patterns of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students]. And basically I think there’s, I can probably pinpoint two or three kids who are under the home-school liaison program. Who are Koori kids, but in actual fact that would be pretty much the same for the general population. There’s been quite a significant improvement in attendance. It hasn’t always been that way. And we’ve had a, just a percentage, ... I think over past four to five years, the numbers are pretty much the same for the general population... as I said it hasn’t always been that way, but we’ve been able to kind of turn things around and obviously turn things around by using a whole variety of different programs. Not attendance programs by the way, academic success, and the attendance will follow that... (Ref: 2.113021)_

When questioned about the composition and reasons behind these identified small number of chronic non-attendees, a few of the schools identified family relationships and the issue being with a particular Indigenous family or two, with some having family
visitation obligations some distances away from the River school’s community as exemplified by the River Public School:

Attendance is an issue across the whole school but in particular with our Aboriginal students. We’ve got a couple of families who go home for long periods of time to Moree and their absences impact on our overall absences. For example we’ve got one family who didn’t start back at school until the beginning of term two this year, so that meant that they were on our books for the most part of term one which really had an impact on the overall figures. That family has already left for this year, gone home so they’re away from school for the last two weeks of term. Those sorts of things really impact on the overall figures. (Ref: 2.111310)

Partial attendance at school or lateness to school was a recurring theme amongst schools with regard to the abovementioned core of students, as highlighted by the Principal at Newton Public:

Other element of attendance, that I don’t know whether it’s part of your study, but it severely impacts on the kid’s ability to access the curriculum we have on offer, is late arrival. A kid who will come into school, we are a 9.15 start, and we would probably have maybe 10 kids, some of whom would be the same kids every day, who historically walk in the door, sometimes between half past nine and quarter to 10. The impact of that is significant, in that they have missed the daily muster, assembly. “This is what’s happening today kids, this is what’s happening tomorrow”. So they’re on the back foot. They just don’t have the broad understanding of what’s going on, and then when they go into class, we’re a school that devotes the first 2 hours of the day to literacy programs. So they’re constantly walking in once that literacy session is up and running and that’s a disruption for the rest of the kids, the teacher and for that child themselves… (Ref: 2.111821)

Again it must be stressed the majority of Indigenous students attended school regularly and as the following quote from the principal of Yale Public School highlights, there is a correlation between good attendance and subsequent good behaviour, demonstrated by the vast majority of Indigenous students:

…overall over the school there are a few students who are Aboriginal descent who are very high absentee rates and that has an effect across our school here and most of our Aboriginal children are very, very good with their attendance as a general comment and whether it comes in later, generally their behaviour is very, very good and they want to come to school. (Ref: 2.112221)
Indigenous students’ behaviour in Primary School

Schools were asked at interview if there was a link between attendance patterns and academic outcomes and behaviour. A teacher from Oxford Public raised the issue of the cycle of poor attendance, poor outcomes, and then acting out poor behaviour:

Well if a child is not attending, it doesn't matter who they are, they're missing out on work and they're falling behind all the time. And when that happens their confidence goes, they're into trouble because they haven't done such and such. They can't find this, they weren't here for that. So it's a vicious circle and they tend to then stay away more because they know that when they come...they're going to get into trouble anyway because they weren't here in the first place. So attendance, yes, poor attenders, the children then misbehave in a sense because they haven't got the work completed and then a spin off from that is that the behaviour is not on task. They tend to lash out a bit more I suppose. (Ref: 2.212720)

The Indigenous Principal of River Public held a different view:

I can't see a link between attendance patterns and behaviour because as I said that one particular family where the students have long periods of absences and it is certainly not behaviour problems, and I'm only using them as an example. So I don't see a link between behaviour and attendance patterns. As far as academic achievement, I would have to say we've got both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students who have got poor attendance patterns, but still perform very well at school. (Ref: 2.111310)

While obviously there were examples where there is little correlation between attendance and either/or both behaviour and attendance, it was common amongst the majority of schools to have students with behaviour problems at school, having also related poor attendance and resulting in the main, with low academic levels. This was most noticeable amongst the small number of students with poor attendance, as highlighted previously from a single or few key Indigenous families or the ‘Core’ students as I have designated them. Some schools also raised the issue that students with behavioural problems were more likely to be boys in five of the six primary schools in the study. The principal of Newton Public illustrates this:

Academic outcomes, I think it’s a fairly simple alignment the more you attend school the more you are likely to learn. There are significant issues in my experience for young Aboriginal boys and their behaviour at school. Who, looking at it through the system’s eyes we would say they come to school poorly adjusted for school. They are not good at taking turns, they are not good at sitting down, and they are not really terribly much into pen and paper tasks. Some of them are impeded by having poor hearing, transient Otitis Media, these sorts of things.
Those kids, those young boys, very often become clients for the behaviour programs, and very often get into a cycle of suspensions and time away from school and reintroduction to school and feeling left out because you’ve been away for four days and making the same mistake, so next time you get a bigger suspension. And...so, yeah there are, I believe young Aboriginal boys are very predisposed to end up in the school's discipline system. (Ref: 2.111821)

Suspension rates of Indigenous students tended to follow the general trend for behaviour in that a small group of Indigenous students were over-represented in suspension numbers as highlighted by the principal at River Public and following comment by Oxford Public's principal when commenting on Indigenous students' behaviour patterns with specific reference to suspension rates:

No, in fact you know I would look at the figures, I would say that if we take the number of incidents in the playground between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students we would have a very small number of Aboriginal students involved in the ‘planning room’ and in fact off hand, I can only think of one of our 42 students who would be involved in incidents in the playground and he’s the only one whose had...only one Aboriginal student with two short suspensions. One girl has had one suspension but that was over an incident that involved a whole lot of other people, so proportionately we would have less Aboriginal students having problems in the playground for example. (Ref: 2.111310)

If there’s any difference it would relate to one or two. Actually I did some statistics for the annual school report and it showed that of all the behaviour issues that we’ve had, one percent...they’re attributable to one percent of the, all suspensions, are attributable to one percent of the entire school population and the one percent are usually repeat offenders. So, we’re talking, we talk about one percent. We’re talking about seven kids, seven kids in a population of nearly eight hundred kids. (Ref: 2.113021)

Poor attendance and behaviour of Indigenous students across all the schools in the study tend to be overly disproportionate in number, but in at least five of the primary schools, this has been further clarified as primarily isolated to a small number of students who were chronic non-attenders. The sixth school which services an Aboriginal mission reports to have a significantly lower level of attendances and higher instances of behavioural issues than the other schools. In all schools the importance of working with the community was seen as a high priority and integral to improving outcomes for Indigenous students and each school made specific efforts in this regard.
Aboriginal communities are entitled to negotiate the decisions that affect their children’s schooling through active partnership with the Department of School Education at all levels. NSWDSE Aboriginal Education Policy, Principle (1996, p.8)

It was very clear from interviews with key staff within the case study’s primary schools that all had taken this responsibility very seriously, and the most significant action undertaken to implement the above Principle was through the establishment of school ASSPA committees, which were funded by the Commonwealth DEST. All schools had operating ASSPA committees although many were in differing states of operation but all principals indicated that this was a primary source of Indigenous community input into the school. However, in most instances these committees were involved more in the decisions surrounding funding that they had through the DEST and there was only a couple of examples where these committees had significant input into the schools’ policies and practices as evidence by the following two principal comments:

_We have an ASSPA committee and they’re quite heavily involved in the school and that seems to be increasing at the moment. There seems a lot more interest and a lot more people turning up to ASSPA meetings and looking at just the excursions and sporting trip as maybe in the past, but involved in academic programs and showing a genuine interest in their children and valuing the education. We don’t have as far as I know, have any involvement in the AECG around the area. We don’t have a lot of Aboriginal parents getting involved in the school canteen. However we are trying to get them involved in workshops in literacy and numeracy. (Ref: 2.112221)_

And from the principal of River Public School:

_And we’ve got an ASSPA committee which is up and running very effectively. The parents are now starting to take control of that and come up with ideas about the sorts of things that they should be doing with their ASSPA funds. So I’ve been trying to empower them to take over the role, because they have been a bit reliant on me. But I’m starting the process to transfer that responsibility to them. (Ref: 2.111310)_

An AEA, from the same River Public School, whose following statements represent the general case across schools in the study — reports the frustrations involved in getting community involvement in the preceding years prior to the more recent appointment of the principal referred to in the previous quote:
I: Well, being involved in the ASSPA committee for the last three years, there has been very little community involvement in that sort of thing. We constantly arrange to have meetings and one or two parents would show up which is really disappointing and we even had a boy who was an Aboriginal boy but his mother wasn’t and she was actually one of the ones turning up to the ASSPA meetings. So I mean there were definitely good points but not enough community involvement at the moment I think. The only way you can get them up here is to put on a free feed or something. Which is disappointing?

R: And if you put on free food would they come?

I: Ah yeah, we’ve done it before, I think two years ago we had a beginning ASSPA committee meeting and we said we were going to have a barbeque and a bit of a chat and we had about 10 to 15 parents show up. And the next meeting we had 2 parents. (Ref: 2.311211)

All of the primary schools demonstrated a genuine commitment to engage the Indigenous community and this often included extensive outreach into the Indigenous communities’ neighbourhoods or in three of the examples into the missions/reserves serviced by the schools. This is clearly articulated in the following two accounts of the efforts schools were willing to go to, to secure genuine commitment and community opinion on a range of school issues. In the first the principal of Newton Public notes the initial difficulty in getting Indigenous community involvement, and then elaborates on the activities undertaken.

… the support of the Aboriginal community is not always apparent. There are not good roll-ups at our ASSPA meetings. No Aboriginal people come to our P&C meetings on a regular basis, and we currently, for the last two years have not been able to get an Aboriginal representative on our school council. So, that figurehead, systemic representation is not there. Our Aboriginal people are also less inclined to come to our more formal school activities like school assemblies and speech days. That’s a sweeping generalisation, some do, but they’re under-represented by percentage. Our more informal things, particularly if it is an Aboriginal focus like Koori day, NAIDOC week, we get a wonderful response. So, it varies. And it worried us, and two years ago, having run a series of focus research workshops across the school, facilitated by … She’s a person who has lots of experience in social issues. She’s a sociologist. We ran a series of focus research workshops, to try to get information about violence and engagement and where we heading as a school and it was through that process that we decided to become a “beliefs-based school”. Because we felt we were not giving the opportunity for everyone to be part of the routine, and again at the focus research workshops, and we conducted five of them. We replicated it five times at five different times to try to give everyone the chance to come. Again, the Aboriginal people were unrepresented by percentage. So we formed a group… which was DET personnel, the local Aboriginal Medical Service (AMS) personnel, health workers (a lot of my parents are in these organizations, an Aboriginal youth network down the road or was down the road, supported by the AMS and DOCS [Department of Community Services]) and we
formed our own interagency team. And we wrote up a questionnaire, and we decided if 'Mohammed won't come to the mountain, we'll take them out to Mohammed'. So we went and we door knocked, but all the doorknockers were Aboriginal people. My AEA was working with me at the time as a Resource Teacher Aboriginal, he’s an Aboriginal guy. The Aboriginal sexual health worker from the AMS, she just had a pile on her desk and as people came in “Do you have kids at Newton Public School?”, “Yes”, “Would you like to fill out a confidential survey?”, “Yes”. So we got 65 responses, 65 families, which was probably, could have been 80% of our families, and the results we got were really interesting. And they were questions like: "Have you been involved?"; “What sort of way have you been involved?”; “If you haven't, why not?”; “How would you go about expressing your concerns if you had them?”; “Is the school a fair place?” - all these sorts of questions. The results we got back were enlightening, and with the exception of two responses that were very anti the school and basically anytime, which I think was because of a fairly recent specific issue. But they're entitled their opinion. Except for those two people, the feedback in general was, “We’re very happy with the school”; “We don’t get involved because we’re happy with the school”; “If we weren’t happy we’d soon tell you”. That was interesting! (Ref: 2.111821)

In the second case the principal of Oxford Public outlines the productive use of individual student profiles in discussion with parents in the non-threatening lunch environment at a local bowling club:

You know, some of the stuff that's done by ASSPA and people like that, that is where the real strength is coming from those. Really, actually, that's where the real strength’s coming from. It's coming from the strength we have in our [Aboriginal] tutors and people like that. I went down to, they have a couple of times a year they have feedback to parents from the in-school tuition program. They go to the bowling club for lunch. That’s where the feedback happens, and they, the tutors and that [the teachers managing the program] take the kids’ portfolios, they take the kids’ work, they go and sit down with parents they have lunch together. They talk about what’s happening in the school. Parents ask questions and the tutors are the ones who are doing the feedback. It is quality, real quality communication. We work pretty hard on that communication thing. I mean we just don't do that. When it's portfolio time, we get parents come to the school, they sit down. We make sure we go to the lands council. Up to the lands council and we have an afternoon tea and the parents come down and sit around with the staff. We transfer our staff meeting there, so that, we make that a staff meeting day. So that all the teachers have to go, are obliged to go. Even if they don't have any [Indigenous] kids in their class they need to talk to parents about. They’re still obliged to go because that's part of what we [do], that's part of our culture I guess. (Ref: 2.113021)

While these accounts clearly demonstrate the considerable efforts undertaken in two of the schools in the study, there were still clear examples of a range of teachers who had
not been affected by such efforts to get the Indigenous community involvement. These teachers hold onto negative stereotypical beliefs and limited effective engagement with Indigenous students due to their ignorance and lack of willingness to find out about Indigenous children’s lives. As pointed out in the following quote they fail to build on these attributes in critical areas of classroom practice as highlighted in terms of DET’s pedagogical push with Quality Teaching Framework’s key dimension of Significance, including but not exclusively, the related critical elements of Background and Cultural Knowledge, Connectedness and Knowledge Integration (NSWDET, 2003c).

I: Yeah, I would have to say that not all of our Aboriginal kids are switched off school. We’ve got some very good kids across the whole school, but there are a couple of students I have noticed that are switching off, or have started to switch off and I would have to say that it is as a result of not only what is happening in their home-life but what’s happening in some of the classrooms where I would say that teachers’ expectations of some of their students are unrealistic and also I think there’s a level of ignorance on the part of some of our teachers who don’t understand what’s happening in some of these kids’ lives and are not prepared to make changes to accommodate what those kids’ needs might be. I also think that in some classrooms a lot of the learning for our kids is not relevant, that they can’t see the relevance between what they’re doing at school and their outside life. So I think relevance is an issue. Teachers’ ignorance of kids’ home lives and also I think there’s in some of our classrooms teachers expect kids to conform too… they don’t see that kids can be individuals, they want everyone to be the same, and they don’t cater for that individual difference.

R: When you talk about lack of relevance what are you referring to, lack of relevance to Aboriginal kids in school?

I: Well I think that some of the things the teachers talk about is coming from a non-Aboriginal perspective and the kids don’t see the link between their lives and what the teachers talking about. We’ve got, not a lot of teachers, but we’ve got some teachers who have got white middle-class values and don’t understand what the Aboriginal kids are bringing to school and don’t take the time to build on what those kids are bringing to school. (Principal Ref: 2.111310)

DO ABORIGINAL KIDS SWITCH OFF PRIMARY SCHOOL?

When the fundamental thesis question was put to all informants there was strong support that Indigenous students do switch off school but as equally strong was the analysis that it did not involve all Indigenous students. There was also a level of discussion about when this took place and a couple of critical timeframes were generally agreed upon. The reasons for those Indigenous students who were identified as ‘switching off’ primary school was varied but a level of consensus existed around Indigenous students’ success
or otherwise with their schooling experience and the level of perceived family support for education, appeared fairly common amongst informants.

The switching off process

There was general agreement amongst school informants that some Indigenous students did demonstrate a significant disinterest in schooling. This was manifested ultimately through signs of a vicious cycle of circumstances evolving initially stemming from poor attendance. This then led to poor performance, which progressed to deterioration of behaviour and in a small cohort of individual students, suspension and in two reported instances expulsion in primary school. The poor attendance was identified as resulting from primarily either the perceived lack of parental support for the student and their education, or a point of disengagement from school due to lack of success and/or difficulty in keeping pace with the classroom program (often associated with poor attendance). This cycle was clearly identified during a joint interview with a long time AEA (over 16 years experience) who had undergone teacher training and now was teaching at the school and with the new AEA appointed to the school, when the teacher explained the process:

But see with the classroom teachers right, when the kids fall behind and the kids are crying out for help, a lot of times their attitudes are yeah we’ll fix them up for this week then next two weeks they’re going to be away, so it’s no good fixing them up for this week. So we will just let them play in the corner. And in the meantime the kids are getting bored sitting in the corner playing so they are going to start misbehaving and they get suspended for it. And then we’ve got to be the bad ones and say to the parents, your child got suspended because he mucked up. But then they’re never [given an opportunity to put their case], the child will go home and say but I mucked up because the teacher wouldn’t listen to me, or the teacher wouldn’t give me any work. That’s never brought up into the discussion of how the child got himself or herself into trouble in the first place. A lot of times I think the parents are just fed up with the way that they get treated. Like blackfellas read body language. You walk up to a person and their first reaction is to back step. They’re talked down to and I think the Koori parents are just sick of it. (Ref: 2.211710)

Other informants clearly levelled the disengagement directly at parents’ disinterest in either the child or education (the latter being often explained as related to those parents’ prior poor experiences at school) and the lack of family support. On several occasions
the student was identified as having dysfunctional parents, often with reference to substance abuse, domestic violence and a link to prevalence of circumstances like these on some Aboriginal missions/reserves in the study area.

The second major factor in Aboriginal students being perceived as switching off, was connected to student experience of poor performance in classroom assessment or tasks, generally around academic type programs in literacy and numeracy, or as simple skills acquisition as early as kindergarten, as the principal of Underdale Public:

Some Aboriginal kids, some and I tell you when, the minute they first fail at school and I will leave it at that because in kindergarten, they have trouble cutting out, ‘Well I’m not doing this! You don’t have to tell me what to do, you’re not my mum’. (Ref: 2.112520)

**When and why do the Indigenous kids switch off?**

School informants had a broad range of opinions about when the Indigenous students showed signs that they had switched off, or were starting to switch off, school. Some indicated that it happened prior to school and others put the timing of such disengagement to stages 4 and 5 in secondary school. While the latter was generally perceived as the time the students demonstrably left school or stopped attending (which is clearly supported in the retention rates of Indigenous students in the Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education, (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004, p.109), the reality was that the majority of school informants indicated that it happened around the transition from Stage 1 into Stage 2 or around about early Year 3 as the following assistant principal points out:

And a lot of the time we see the change happening from the transition of Year 2 to Year 3. So going from infants to primary... where styles change, you know so there’s almost, sort of the writing becomes so important, because they do, I mean and the concepts become much more difficult and there’s a big jump from what’s expected in stage one to stage two. And I think if a lot of the students are struggling, that’s when we see a lot of these problems begin to manifest because once the challenge becomes more and more difficult for them and if they’re not coping behaviour becomes an issue... because that’s an avoidance strategy. (Ref: 2.112000)
Again the rationale behind the early stage 2 was directly linked to diminishing perceptions of student support from classroom teachers as students move to greater student independence and resourcefulness, and the subsequent experiencing of a sense of lack of success, often resulting from poor basic literacy and numeracy skills development.

A teacher who had responsibility for student welfare at her school and worked with another teacher in terms of the ICT program, painted the following picture of the process of Indigenous students who did cope with the lack of early success and ultimately provides advice on how to build success to keep them engaged:

*Immediately if the work, if they feel that work, is above or even that they, it may not necessarily be above them, but they just can't get their thoughts around that particular process. Or if they're not, if the teacher can't get to them quickly enough they lose patience quickly. Which is I think perhaps part of, just part of their culture, but they want help and they want it straight away, because they do want to succeed and achieve. So they want the help now and if you can't get to them quickly enough, they very quickly will throw the towel in. The lady you're going to speak to next, Pam [synonym] and I have been job sharing and we've been doing a fair bit of consistent work with the Koori children. Just to find their little successes and every child's got a different way for you to approach them and for you to win them over and it might, you might have to take their artwork as the be all and end all and build everything from that…write their stories about their artwork and things like that until you get their self-confidence to a point where they'll basically look at most things that you put in front of them. Usually [the Kooris] have very low self-esteem. Their self-esteem about the physical aspect of themselves is quite good because they're so beautifully talented with all the physical side of things. They're usually fantastic sports people but the academic side of things because they have had no literacy and numeracy support at home they find those skills very difficult. But they tend to respond so beautifully if you can arrange a one to one or a helper in your classroom. Unless they're having their agro day, they'll work very, very nicely with assistance and try very hard. They do like to succeed.* (Ref: 2.213320)

From the school informants' perspective, the Indigenous students' primary school environment has proven to be integral to subsequent development of the young adolescent.

**CONCLUSION**

This chapter explored firstly some background to the all the schools in the study. It then specifically addressed the data relating to primary schools in the study, establishing the level of commitment to compulsory requirements under the AEP. It became evident that while the policy and practice indicated a level of philosophical support at the primary
level, the data strongly indicated that beyond initial short lived enthusiastic implementation around the AEP release, little ongoing commitment and systemic implementation was evident. Primary teachers openly admitted to having little knowledge of the policy and in particular around Aboriginal children’s family lives or history.

A level of care was evident in primary schools’ welfare policies and schools went to great lengths to indicate that such policy was not specifically directed at just Aboriginal students, for fear of being deemed racial in intent. Schools consistently saw their roles as important in providing welfare assistance to considerable numbers of Aboriginal students. Such benevolence could be readily interpreted as stemming from deficit connotations on behalf of most of the schools perceptions of their students backgrounds. Most of the schools serviced low socio-economic environments and this often dictated such connotations.

The chapter then explored three other key concepts around program interventions specifically for Aboriginal students at a primary level (including a specific look at generally Commonwealth and other funded special initiatives through to transition into secondary schooling); feedback from schools around outcomes of Aboriginal students with specific look at their academic performance, attendance and behaviour (at a primary level their attendance and behaviour patterns appear to be dominated by small numbers of chronic non-attenders who subsequently are also overly represented in behaviour issues in these schools); and explored how the schools interacted with their Aboriginal parents/carers/communities.

Finally the chapter put the thesis three core questions around Aboriginal kids switching off school. At a primary level the data indicated that not all Aboriginal kids switch off school. Some appear to not switch on, others continue on fully engaged in school (although both these groups would appear to be in the minority in primary). The bulk of Aboriginal students appear from the data, to ‘switch off’ or disengage with schooling at around stage 2 of schooling (around 9-10 years old) and at this level of schooling there is guiding evidence that failure and lack of timely teacher intervention and support plays a significant role.

In the next chapter the focus is on the secondary level and follows through the trends outlined above in relation to problematic transition. This chapter has established that primary school engagement is paramount. School executive, teachers and Indigenous
school educationists clearly articulated the importance of a good educational foundation, not only within the primary domain but even in the transition into kindergarten. Engagement was identified as the key to the Indigenous students’ ongoing positive educational experience and movement to the next school level.
CHAPTER 6. SCHOOL FACTORS - SECONDARY

The previous chapter focussed on primary school, and was organised around four key areas. They were, policy and welfare support mechanisms; school programs and interventions for Indigenous students; outcomes and the schools' interactions with the Indigenous parents/carers and the Indigenous community in general. This same organisation will be followed in this chapter covering both the Year 5 and Year 7 cohorts' period in secondary education including the critical early years (stage 4), and for the Year 7 cohort, their final years leading up to post-compulsory education or senior secondary education (stage 5).

The researcher established in interviews with staff that the two student cohorts were not particularly unusual and in general were seen as a typical of Indigenous students. One feature of note however was that one school in the district experienced some reorganisation of schools within one cluster of schools, but from all accounts this appeared to have minimal impact on the cohorts under study. Even though the Year 5 cohort were in fact the first to be enrolled in the new multi-campus and the Year 8 cohort had some students transferred from the original school to the new junior campus. Certainly none of the students involved raised the organisational change as an issue.

With respect to policy and welfare support mechanisms in operation, similar to the primary schools chapter, school executive, teacher and Aboriginal para-professional staff interviews provided the core sources of information about this area.

SECONDARY SCHOOL POLICY, PRACTICES AND WELFARE SUPPORT FOR INDIGENOUS STUDENTS

The dialogue with secondary school staff on policy was very different from that experienced in the primary sector. When asked to comment on school policy and its practices in the school, the discussion moved quickly from a relatively superficial reference to the non-discriminatory nature of the schools’ policies to issues surrounding behaviour management and in particular suspensions of Indigenous students. Policy surrounding student welfare primarily focused on behaviour patterns and how schools
dealt with suspensions. The second most significant discussion on policy was that of anti-racism, heavily skewed to the nature of racism particularly in the town and to a lesser degree spilling over into school. There was virtually no reference to the AEP — as though it didn’t exist!

The reporting in these sections on policy practice and welfare, because of the focus of the interviews, is dominated by issues of behaviour management and suspension and this emphasis in itself, reflecting the policy focus of secondary schools in the study.

**Policy implications**

Secondary executive and staff emphasised that while policy in the school was non-discriminatory there was no specific policy which was solely designed for Indigenous students at their schools. Staff responded that their policies were, ‘pretty much straight down the line’ (Ref: 2.25111); and ‘There is no differentiation there in terms of ethnic origin.’ (Ref: 2.16121). One principal went so far as to say in respect of the non-discriminatory nature of the policy in their school that they monitored this closely and would act if they found it to be discriminatory:

_I can’t think of any policies that would discriminate, obviously we try to make sure our policies don’t discriminate against kids. I can’t think of any John and I would say that if we become aware of any we will do something about them. If I was aware of something, we would have tried to address it._ (Ref: 2.18421)

The single reference to the AEP in policy terms in interviews was in one comment by a staff member alluding to an Aboriginal elder criticising the school for its lack of implementation of the AEP at a school professional development day organised by a neighbouring AEA for schools in the cluster:

_But she lost her way [the elder] because she suggested that none of us had seen the Aboriginal policy and documentation. We’ve got it all on our desks and we are insulted by that. This is the staff in general. We go to those things, it’s not a problem._ (Ref: 2.26321)
Questions around curriculum raised some issues in regard to the AEP. One principal clearly aligned the school’s efforts in curriculum to the targeting of AEP directions and the AEA indicating the AEP would be discussed virtually monthly at staff meetings. However, one teacher with a long history of support of Aboriginal students felt very strongly that the momentum of the policy had faded and that schools needed to be held accountable for their implementation of the AEP:

I: …the Aboriginal Education Policy has just disappeared. I thought there was plenty of good stuff. I think it as the then diagram on the opening – the three over linking circles. I thought this is good! It just doesn’t happen. Those schools have to have in their management plans annual review, they have to talk about what’s happening in Aboriginal education.

R: Not any more. It dropped off in ’03.

I: I wondered whether that was still being done. I know they were only tokenistic gestures, but put it on the agenda and they know someone’s watching and some people won’t do anything unless some people are watching them. Surely it was tokenistic someone watching you, but I think it’s better than absolutely nothing. (Ref: 2.26021)

There was by comparison considerable discussion around ‘racism’ raised by participants.

Reference to racism was stimulated generally by current events unfolding in one of the communities, more so than by the actual Anti-Racism Policy (1992). At the time of the interviews significant community debate on a racially contentious decision by the Local Council on an Indigenous matter was prominent within a particularly large regional town within the case study. The issue gained national press and media coverage, so it is not surprising that it was topical at interview. One executive staff member summed up the situation regarding community opinion, indicating that the non-Indigenous community as a result of the issue may have moved toward greater tolerance:

I: And the pendulum may have swung around enough – there’s enough support now – the numbers are working out.

In the school, kids are very aware of what is racism. You still get incidents of racism. We have Anti-racism Contact Officer’s positions on staff, who deal with those situations, if it’s brought to their attention. I think generally teachers as a group aren’t racist. Obviously in any group you’re going to have people who might be racist, but because of the position they’re in, are aware that they can’t do or say some sorts of things. We still have the odd racist incident. There was a comment
made in my class the other day – not about Aborigines, it was about Asians because we are dealing with multi-culturalism and the changing immigration policy and they were sort of like, “Oh yeah, they’re taking over” and that sort of business. That tends to be nipped fairly quickly in the bud I guess.

R: Do students assist in nipping that in the bud?

I: Some are more aware and whose parents probably wanted the flag flown, but generally in my experience, when those sorts of comments are made, kids will say, “Aye, you can’t say that”, sort of thing. (Ref: 2.16620)

Executive and school staff clearly painted a very racial environment for Indigenous students outside the school and this was particularly so in certain towns which the schools serviced. One principal highlighted how this racism in one of the communities, had affected significantly the implementation of work experience for Indigenous students:

And the real world often isn't great and so that I'm not speaking locally, I'll give you two examples from Apen [pseudonym]. I had a lovely Aboriginal boy, nice kid, well brought up, excellent in all ways who we placed at one of the car dealers up there and after that first day of placement the manager rang me and said, ‘Chris, we'll have to ask this lad not to come back’ I said ‘Gee, you know he's never given any trouble’ and he said ‘yeah, but you hadn’t told me he was an Aboriginal boy’ and I said ‘Does that make any difference?’ he said ‘yeah, the customers won’t want an Aboriginal kid working on their car’. We had a problem with the AECG up there where kids reported back to mum and dad that when they'd gone down to one of the local shopping malls, the manager came running out with a camera and took their photographs and when they asked why he was doing that, he said ‘so I’ve got you on record’. His assumption was that these kids were down there for no good. Now unfortunately, around that town, yes, a number of Aboriginal youth have given everybody a bad name as happens in any group and no doubt this manager had had bad experiences with kids who he identified as Aboriginal, but the particular group of kids we're talking about were again wonderful kids that wouldn’t give anyone any trouble but that was racism that they found. Any wonder why they don’t want to be mixing with people they didn’t know and trust. (Ref: 2.18221)

While the majority of comment was directed at the community outside the schools, there were some examples presented about racism within the school. An Aboriginal teacher on staff raised the issue of covert racism by colleagues in his school and by students in their perception of positive discrimination for Indigenous peoples around welfare. While these covert racial tones were reported, so too was the importance of these issues being confronted in topics in subjects like Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE) and confirmation from executive that when racial issues were
discovered they were effectively managed by the school’s Anti-Racism Contact Officer (ARCO). It was indicated by informants that these incidences were very few in number.

There existed a curriculum response to counter racist and other discriminatory practices. It was pleasing to hear from a teacher about the level of responsibility being taken up by students to ensure a racist free school environment and the level of growing acceptance of Indigenous students:

**I:** It’s the generalisation that’s upsetting. However, now more than probably in the last many years, if a kid says something that stereotypes Aboriginal people in class, they’re howled down, “That doesn’t mean they’re all like that”. And that kind of response is more normal for kids and that’s really very encouraging. It’s kind of an honesty in that they’re saying, “Yeah, that might be Johnny Smith or Mary Blogg, but that doesn’t mean – what about this one, this one, this one?” For example we’ve just had our Year 10 school captains voted in and Jake Tomas [pseudonym] has been voted as School Captain. Last year we had Peta Jones and Jean Cloak [pseudonyms] – both Koori kids as part of your captains and vice-captains structure. They’re seen as “that’s cool. It’s ok to be Koori”. Kirby is very dark, the others are fairer, but that doesn’t seem to be a matter. The kids are accepting Kooriness.

**R:** The kids voted them in?

**I:** Yeah, predominantly. Staff and kids have – each staff member gets one vote, each kid gets one vote, so there’s six times the number of kids voting. It certainly wasn’t loaded by politically correct teachers by a long shot. (Ref: 2.26021)

The most critical policy area highlighted by staff at the secondary level was student welfare and more commonly around suspension issues.

**School welfare policy**

Most schools had welfare policies which were managed by welfare committees with generally a senior member of staff responsible for this area. One new school was still drafting their school’s welfare policies and another indicated that its policy was under major review. The school’s welfare policy covered all students in the school and did not separate different groups. There was a blanket welfare policy. There was specific reference in some school policies to ‘at risk’ students and this group would be inclusive of any Indigenous student who was deemed at risk:
We run special welfare programs for all students whether they be Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal in terms of low achievers, recalcitrant students, students in Years 8 and 9 that show a disinterest in schooling, to try and get them motivated and get them interested. There are no special programs for Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal. It's for students that are identified that are in need because they have a learning problem basically connected to their low self-esteem, low motivation, disinterested in schooling and a lot of that flows from the home situation because the parent body doesn’t attach a lot of importance to education. Head Teacher (Ref: 2.15420)

While schools pointed out that their policies were common to all, in a majority of secondary schools there was a level of unofficial sanctioning of how policy was implemented on an individual basis and to groups such as Indigenous students:

The executives of the school are very supportive. They understand that there are certainly different needs, that Aboriginal students have different needs. Convincing the staff of that can be interesting because they believe we should treat everyone the same. (Ref: 2.15220)

This was also reflected in the efforts of some school executives to ensure Indigenous students were not being discriminated against in school suspension rates, using more successful non-confrontational techniques:

We’ve had a marked reduction in suspensions. Again in the time I’ve been here, suspension rates – again – it’s probably a system that wasn’t as amenable to working with Koori kids when they’re in trouble. It’s like you’ve done the wrong thing (bang). It might not not have been a suspendable sort of thing, but the kids get his back up as you can imagine and then it’s ok you’re suspended. I think that really, it’s a lot of credit to our deputy and principal than rather than a stand up aggressive approach to Kooris when they are in trouble, it’s a “let’s work through this” which lessens the aggression. We have had the odd aggressor, which has resulted in kids being suspended, but I think in terms of that it’s being involved in a fight, or whatever. It's tended to be dealt in a way that doesn’t make the problem worse. Student Teacher Learning Difficulties (STLD), (Ref: 2.16620)

While the efforts of some school executive were commendable in moving to reduce the number of suspensions and try to adjust policy so that it was less discriminatory in practice, one school appeared to go out of its way to ensure everybody was treated the same. This was taken to a degree where identification of Indigenous peoples as a group was openly dissuaded by executives through their actions of treating everyone the same.
This attitude was also reduced to make stereotypical statements with regard to some ‘fair skinned’ Indigenous students identities being questioned. There was in the same school also a worrying attitude generally to students from low socio-economic areas and the relevance of schools to them as highlighted in the following quotes from a principal:

Our community is Anglo Saxon, Caucasian, whatever you call it and the percentage is very high, if I said 97%, I’d have to go higher in fact, 98%, because of the 44 students, I could identify possibly four or five students as being Aboriginal and in fact this morning I went into a classroom and a kid was out of uniform and when I heard his name I knew he was an Aboriginal student but I didn’t realise he was [making reference to his lack of Indigenous stereotypical characteristics such as light skin colour]… (Ref: 2.18321)

I go back to what I said earlier about the curriculum not being challenged, maybe school is just not a place for them as we know it today, school is not the place, I think school is not a place for a lot of the low socio economic students that we have…and I think the other aspect is that we ourselves really don’t fully understand the requirements and understand the different communities and what they require. I guess one would have to say it’s not high on the agenda of a lot of staff and in this school because no one is singled out, we are treating everyone the same and if there is a concern or an issue we’ll address that for that person rather than as a whole. (Ref: 2.18321)

In another school the head teacher of welfare, demonstrated an attitude that could be described as so stereotypical, ethnocentric and steeped in ‘deficit theory’ and in this instance, unsurprisingly most Indigenous student cases went to the AEA, by-passing him. This same teacher could not understand why the Indigenous students did not seem to relate to him. The first quote illustrates the problem, not least his reference to ‘helplessness’ and ‘it’s a cultural thing’:

I: For our kids here it’s being able to see outside of the immediate of what lies down the track. Our Aboriginal students tend to have very little vision for what’s in their future and so they find it very difficult to apply themselves with their study not recognising that there’s something down the path for them. I think there’s all those descent into helplessness of what lies in their future. For some of them it’s a learned helplessness, they’ve learnt to know that the welfare system will pick up the tab for them when they want to go on excursions, that they have to do certain things – that they can go to AEA’s room when they want to get out of a lesson and use that as an excuse. They’re good on using the system, but they have very little vision as to what that leads to down the path. Those few students who are – I think they’re going to really excel when it comes to the next two years – Years 11 and 12 are kids who have a plan for where they would ultimately like to end up. I talk to kids that are constantly truanting and ask them, “Are you wanting to achieve your school certificate?”; “Don’t care?”; “What would you like to be when you’ve
finished school?"; “Nothing, just stay at home!” To me, that would be the biggest issue for them – being able to have that vision that gives them the impetus to get up and do the work to finish.

**R:** Do Aboriginal kids enjoy school?

**I:** I definitely believe they do.

**R:** Why?

**I:** I think it’s a two part thing. Part of it is a cultural thing. There is almost an expectation that they don’t have to do well at school. That as they look at the other kids, the Aboriginal kids who have gone through, they see their behaviours, they see their lack of effort. I think it almost becomes a perpetual thing that the young ones look at the older ones and see that they haven’t had to do it so they do it themselves. But I think there’s also a sense that somehow, and I don’t know what this is, they’re just not connecting. (Ref: 2.15521)

His perception of his capacity to connect outstrips his capacity to relate:

> On a personal level I really struggle to connect with our Aboriginal kids. I just want to [connect] so much; I have them in my class. I have no issue with them in my class. I would tend to think of myself as one of those people who is a little bit more relaxed, who does respect the kids, who probably lets the kids get away with more than other teachers do. I just find it’s such a tenuous relationship and I can’t put my finger on what’s different and why I can’t make that better connection there. It seems to be reflected right across the school. So I think your studies are worthwhile! (Ref: 2.15521)

In at least two secondary schools a detailed computer student welfare tracking system was in place to keep track primarily of student behaviour and disciplinary measures and interventions undertaken. These systems record everything that a child might do that warrants, in the executive or teachers’ eyes, documentation. The permanent records could be very detailed and damning. The researcher was alarmed at the documentation pertaining to one student—the level of detail reminiscent of that of a criminal record. The student openly recognised his discipline issues, but the level of detail seemed excessive.

Teachers can download behavioural issues at will without repercussion. What is worrying with such a detailed system is that one or two classroom teachers seem to have been responsible for recording many of the disciplinary instances. The question this surely raises is, whether this was a reflection of the student’s behaviour or that of a teacher who
lacked effective student management skills? The detail involved in these systems would challenge the hardest prison record system. An executive staff member also pointed out that the tracking system needed to be carefully monitored to ensure students were picked up quickly if a pattern of behaviour became evident, he also indicated that this was not necessarily happening on a regular basis (Ref: 2.15521).

In some schools there were incentive or reward schemes in place to reward positive behaviour and attendance as indicated by a deputy principal, who implemented a VIP (Very Important Person) card system rewarding positive behaviour. He noted the system needed to be adjusted to meet the specific needs of Indigenous students when it was realised that it discriminated against them. The quotation below also elaborates on the special considerations being undertaken with Indigenous students in the way of suspensions (a topic addressed in a following section) as well:

I guess in terms of discrimination, I’ve labelled one of the key factors with the VIP card – the positive side. No unexplained absences from school is one of the five criteria for getting the card and that does make it more difficult for Aboriginal kids because their bringing in of notes explaining absences is much lower. We’ve tried to counter that – so I guess when we see a problem we try and counter it.

This real sense of discriminating against Koori kids, what extra could we do for these kids in that case?

Yes. And I think applying the discipline side of the policy is probably a bit of affirmative discrimination with Aboriginal kids, because you’re trying to keep them here at school and you’re trying to find another way rather than send them home.

It’s been explained to me in a different way, like picking a different pathway because if you lead up a certain pathway the kids treated from this point on will get suspended but all of a sudden opportunities are given not to go down that inevitable pathway.

That’s what we’ve tried to do. In the last couple of years, the suspension rates across the school have dropped by about 10 per cent. Because I’ve been trying to find those alternate paths for Aboriginal kids! For them it’s dropped by a bit more – by about 15%.

The boss was showing me statistics for this year and it doesn’t look like it’s disproportionate for Aboriginal kids. They’re probably running at about five/seven per cent. (Ref: 2.16821)

Like the VIP card above, all schools have undertaken a range of interventions to improve outcomes not only for the whole school but specifically for Indigenous students.
SECONDARY SCHOOL PROGRAMS, CURRICULUM AND INTERVENTIONS

It is obvious from interviews conducted with school staff that all schools are involved in special programs and interventions for Indigenous students ranging from breakfast programs, through to providing Aboriginal resource rooms to classroom tutoring programs for literacy and numeracy. It was also very evident that schools in the study have inclusive Indigenous curriculum and in a number of cases made a special effort to deliver Aboriginal Studies as a subject, often with very small numbers of students.

As was the case for the primary schools, most program interventions in the secondary schools in the study were reliant on external funding to the school and a significant component of this came through DEST at a federal level. There was also substantial evidence that schools in the study not only made efforts to maintain Aboriginal Studies courses but had taken considerable effort to ensure Aboriginal perspectives were incorporated into a broad range of subject areas like English, art, history and geography.

Targeted programs and interventions for Indigenous students

In interviews with both executive and teaching staff several special program initiatives were highlighted for Indigenous students. These programs fell into three types of major interventions: student welfare, academic support and curriculum initiatives. Student welfare covered interventions such as breakfast and meal programs, school requisites, mentor programs, uniforms, attendance programs, Aboriginal resource rooms, and behaviour modification programs. Other alternative programs included those such as Croc Fest (performing arts Indigenous festival for students), and alternate programs for kids at risk. Academic support, took the form of programs in literacy and numeracy which included In-Class Tutoring, literacy initiatives, homework centres and additional tutoring. Curriculum initiatives in Aboriginal studies will be addressed in the following section.

To give some sense of the broad picture of interventions the following comment is illustrative, and arose from an interview with a much respected executive staff member in the Indigenous community in response to the researcher’s question about the scope of interventions for Indigenous students:

Well, with the AEA, we target kids on health issues, on absenteeism. Each year advisor is given a list of kids who, across the whole year of absenteeism. Carol
[pseudonym] and I sit down every now and then and look at the absentee rate. We can identify from our day sheet kids who are not coming, regular non-attenders. We try to intervene…Sue doing home visits to try and identify why kids aren’t coming or whether they’re still in the area. The tutoring programs we run. It’s a grant given through the district office to identify kids who may need – and these are post-compulsory kids, Year 11 and 12 – to try and support them in time management, organising assessment tasks, achieving the outcomes of assessment tasks through help with research skills, work habits, homework habits. So that’s a tied group of money where we get external tutors to try and support those kids. We try and filter some of that money into juniors as well, because by the time they get to Year 10, if they’ve developed poor habits, they may not be here anyway. The other program is an intervention program on behaviour. Sue provides food. It’s an informal breakfast program, lunch program. If the kids are hungry we use money out of Aboriginal retention money, so if that’s an issue with kids. We interview kids as to why they are not coming. If it’s food or equipment, we use our resources to try and help that. Different departments are given different equipment specifically for Aboriginal kids. They could be calculators, books. They stay with the teacher so the kid isn’t under-resourced. We have an alternate art program, which is from the retention ongoing support money to allow kids to express themselves, have time out. If it’s a discipline area, they are withdrawn from class and they do something else. While they are doing that, they learn social skills and then there’s a one-on-one literacy that the tutors do too, where they withdraw a kid from the mainstream class and help them with their issue. And then we have people going in the classroom where staff are happy to have tutors go in with kids to help and support. (Ref: 2.15220)

There is undoubtedly ample evidence that significant initiatives were being undertaken across all the schools in the study. What was not clear was why such an effort was not significantly improving the outcomes for most of the Indigenous students.

In analysing the vast array of interventions it was evident that most of them targeted students who were proving to be major disciplinary problems in the school and/or those with chronic levels of absenteeism (the latter also manifesting in poor academic skills particularly in literacy and numeracy). One head teacher of welfare clearly sums up the situation at a school level:

*I’ll tell you John, I don’t know the names of Aboriginal children in this school, I know how many there are, I don’t know the names of the successful ones and the good ones who we could promote, I know the names of the ones who are always in trouble and so maybe at the beginning of every year like I do with kids with disabilities, we need to know who they are and how we can promote them and how is our school responding. I guess we are only ever dealing with the bad ones, well I won’t say bad ones, the ones with behavioural problems that I don’t know whether we will ever do anything about. I think we need to be promoting the ones who are just ordinary people, because we don’t know who they are. (Ref: 2.110120)*
A highly respected AEA, who held key positions within the community argued that schools needed to keep a closer eye on what help all students needed especially in Year 7. The comment was provided in the context of response to school executive level support:

**I:** It’s getting better but then that depends on who the principal is or deputy principal is and head teachers and year advisors, they are all reliant on how they work in together and what is in the schools management plan, what they have got in there and are they sincere about it.

**R:** How would you describe the sincerity of the school?

**I:** The sincerity is that now they are looking at, there has been less suspensions, more sitting, listening and what can we do and trying to action what they can do to try and help those kids in the classroom and out of the classroom. Everything possible they can do, the sitting down and case loading so now what we do is, the students will be case loaded to a certain teachers and those teachers will monitor them, our Year 7 Koori kids, [teacher named] monitors those Koori kids, she monitors the Year 7s and checks any problems, if they need any help what help they need and that so it’s been a big chance around and kids are starting to settle down. (Ref: 2.38510)

Another important factor impacting on the success of interventions is the quality of the staff involved, their background knowledge, understanding of Indigenous students and their individual circumstances and willingness to get involved or make an effort:

Okay well, you have your teachers who are your dedicated teachers who want to help whoever they can, whenever they can and they try, but then you have teachers and dare I say it, teachers who have taught for a long time at the school, who just say ‘Oh they are Koori kids, there is nothing you are going to be able to do’ so they throw their hands up, all too hard, they’re never in class or they have bad attendance, what can I do. (Ref: 2.29220)

Because most interventions are funded from outside resources to the school (with the exception of Aboriginal curriculum and In-Class Tutoring initiatives) they do not have any direct impact on mainstream educational provision in the school. In reality, these programs do not impact on the majority of day-to-day teaching which is conducted in the schools and to which Indigenous students are exposed. This was a particular issue where classroom teachers did not have high expectations for their Indigenous students as pointed out by another head teacher of welfare:
From an executive level, I think we've been struggling and trying hard to raise the academic performance of our Aboriginal students. We have in some cases bent over backwards to provide opportunities for our Aboriginal kids to excel. I think there is a really strong commitment, certainly from our executive staff to allow our Aboriginal students to excel and reach the best that they can be. I don't know if that transfers down the majority of our teaching staff. I think there is almost a sense of self-fulfilling prophecy with our teachers, that these kids are not going to amount to anything and therefore they don't put the initial work in and it doesn't take long in a classroom set-up that if a student is not achieving, well, they begin to pull back and when they pull back, the teacher will often pull back from them and – I know that there is a strong commitment from our executive staff and there are a lot of teachers who are really trying to give these kids what they need. I would say that some of our highest truancy happens amongst our Aboriginal students. If they are not achieving in the classroom, they pull back – by just not even going. (Ref: 2.15521)

Engagement of Indigenous students in inclusive classrooms becomes critical to this process. Aboriginal Studies as a stand-alone subject or implemented as perspectives across subjects within the curriculum commenced in a systemic way in NSW with the first Aboriginal Education Policy in 1982 (NSW Department of Education [NSWDE], 1982). The effect of this movement in syllabus and curriculum was an important factor in trying to make classrooms relevant and engaging to Indigenous students.

Culturally inclusive curricula – Aboriginal Studies/Perspectives

In the last couple of syllabus reviews, I think the Aboriginal people must be quite affirmed by how much Aboriginal perspectives have been written into current syllabuses and it's up to individual schools to deliver that. It has been a huge shift. Whether it’s far enough to keep everyone satisfied, I wouldn’t want to comment, but I could say that in the last decade there has been a huge shift in what we teach in Aboriginal history, culture – even contemporary issues. Head Teacher HSIE (Ref: 2.15621)

The feeling expressed above was consistent across all secondary schools involved in the study with regard to, in particular, Aboriginal perspectives across a variety of subject areas. In many secondary schools there were genuine attempts to mount Aboriginal Studies as a subject across all stages, despite difficulty reported in attracting sufficient numbers to mount the subject. Some schools were running it in spite of these difficulties:
We offered it in Year 11 for next year and we had six kids in their first round who wanted to do it. We looked at that very carefully in that it’s going to stay in there to see what happens in the second round because I know Peter [pseudonym], the principal would be very happy – would support it running with 10 kids. It’s something we do offer. We offer it in Year 9 and 10 as an elective as well. I haven’t seen the wash up of how many people indicated whether they’d like to do it. It’s supported to run if we can get numbers. The perspectives across the curriculum – I know in our area, we do a lot on indigenous health, we talk about food, we talk about alternative medicines, and we talk about historical – especially when we talk about tolerance and prejudices. We talk about the referendum and what happened before that – the stolen generation. From my faculty’s point of view, we have perspectives running through it all in all areas. In other areas, I’m sure they’re doing the same thing. In the new history and geography syllabus, there are Aboriginal perspectives. I know they do, in English they do Indigenous poetry and writers and film-makers. I’ve got a son who came through that and I’ve seen what sort of things he’s doing in each year. (Ref: 2.15220)

Executives and teachers generally related positively to the scope, capacity and implementation of Aboriginal perspectives being both feasible and active across the study schools. Nonetheless there were some among those interviewed who felt that a minority of teachers were not engaged as the following two quotes from a principal and a teacher, illustrate:

I think it has grown and I think people have matured in their approach to teaching their subjects and adding various perspectives so I think people are naturally now and I’m talking about most teachers, you will always find those that won’t do what they are supposed to, but most are very happy to include an Aboriginal perspective as they have to do with multi-cultural perspectives in the school work and other things. That is maturing on the part of staff and more so society. So I don’t really see issues there anymore compared to when Aboriginal Studies were first introduced. (Ref: 2.18421)

I’ll just mention the new syllabus, I think it depends on the teacher, it’s very much a mandatory part of each of the syllabi, there is Aboriginal culture and acknowledgement of it, I think it depends on the teacher, if you’ve got somebody that (sic) is comfortable with it as most of us are then it’s fine, you have no trouble implementing it but if you have got somebody that (sic) hasn’t grown up in a town with a Koori population, well let’s face it John, for various reasons some people aren’t comfortable with Koori people. (Ref: 2.29120)

The racism alluded to in the second interview is elaborated further in Racism section of this chapter.
Two issues that arose in the interviews which require brief comment, was the requirement to ensure Aboriginal Studies was founded on a local study of the Indigenous community served by the school and secondly that community were involved in its implementation. These two issues are exemplified in the following two statements from two AEAs from different schools:

…I you need to know what the local Aboriginal culture is because Aboriginal culture is so diversified, you have to understand where you are living and what the Aboriginal culture is about and where you are at now, that sort of thing you know. (Ref: 2.38510)

I have concerns about that [the requirement] because some of the teachers it’s really good but some of the teachers don’t check on what they are doing. They don’t check with me, they don’t check with anybody and one of the teachers argued with one of the Koori kids that there was only one Aboriginal flag and the Koori kid came to see me and she said ‘Mrs So and So reckons there is only one Aboriginal flag’ and I said ‘well did you tell her there was two’ and she says ‘Yep, I told her in front of the whole class’ and the teacher said ‘no there is not, you are wrong’ and she said ‘no I’m not wrong at all, there are two’ and she said ‘well how come I only know of one’ and I said, ‘well there are two’. I said I would get the little brochure printed out and take one of them to class and give it to her and she said, oh she knows now. So I think it’s good that they do an Aboriginal perspective but I think they need to check on what the perspective is and make sure that it is correct and it’s suitable and culturally appropriate. (Ref: 2.310010)

Obtaining Indigenous local opinion on the culturally appropriate approaches to take to curriculum, were vital to effective implementation of Aboriginal studies and not only clearly articulated by the AEAs above but substantiated in curriculum documents (BOSNSW, 2008).

While the schools in the study reported overall improvements in the implementation of Aboriginal perspectives across a varied subject spread and clearly evident levels of commitment to specific Aboriginal Studies as a subject, some school educators raised the concern that even with such effort, the majority of Indigenous students still weren’t engaged in classrooms. This lack of engagement by Indigenous students was often attributed to poor foundation skills in literacy and numeracy, making any curriculum innovation near impossible to access, and the quality of the teaching in the classroom, which had only been given prominence systemically by the DET in the latter years of the
period of this study through the introduction of Quality Teaching in NSW public schools: Discussion paper (2003b) as covered in chapter 9.

One school responded to the Indigenous lack of engagement by establishing an Indigenous only class drawn from what was described as the ‘Year 7 from hell’, that was dominated by students who came from the local mission (Ref: 2.19420 and 2.19521). The intervention was designed to foster Indigenous culture and subsequent self-esteem and to tackle poor literacy and numeracy levels in a safe and secure environment. This project was implemented with a level of success and was designed specifically to cater for the needs of at risk students. Another school was also contemplating a similar intervention that did not come to fruition at the time of the study.

Aboriginal Studies was very well received by Indigenous students as will be illustrated in the following chapter, however, some concern was expressed by school staff about the appropriateness of the subject and in particular the HSC level subject, as reported by a principal:

*One aspect of relevance that concerns some people that perhaps Head Teacher History has already mentioned to you is that the HSC Aboriginal Studies doesn’t seem to be all that relevant to some of the Aboriginal people, that what they’ve been telling me. That’s what [named Teacher of Aboriginal Studies] and [named Head Teacher History] are telling me, that the senior course isn’t a course designed for Koori kids it tends to be designed as a theoretical course designed for all.* (Ref: 2.19921)

School staff across the schools in the study generally agreed that Aboriginal studies and perspectives were well supported across the curriculum in their schools, although at times such implementation was heavily reliant on the existing staff capacity and commitment to implement this curriculum. Even with this level of district support in the curriculum, the gap between Indigenous students and non-Indigenous students at a state level was not closing. Improved outcomes for Indigenous students were rightfully a key target of the innovation in syllabus and curriculum in both the 1982 and 1996 Aboriginal education policies in NSW but results indicated minimal improvement in this regard as highlighted in The Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004) and this continues to be the trend in more current literacy results in NSW (NSW Auditor General, 2012). Student outcomes from secondary school for the case study will be addressed in the following section.
The three following quotes reveal the range of opinion about Indigenous students and their engagement across the secondary schools in the study:

I think it’s an individual thing rather than a Koori thing. Some Koori kids are outstanding and you get them in the classroom and they've got a real will to succeed. You’ve then got others and when they do turn up, they’re uncontrollable. For me as a teacher, you look at it as a holistic thing. You don’t, being Koori, you don’t say, “Oh, little Johnny over there, he’s not good, because he’s black”, you take them for what they are and for the most part they're trying their best. But, you can see those kids, and in particular the Koori kids I guess. You see the ones who aren’t doing well and you wonder what drive and determination they have. Like what drives them and what the background is behind it, because they’re really, really negative towards their outlook. They can’t see how this is going to benefit them. They can only see the end of the period or the end of the day. There is no foresight in where they are going. But the kids that do well can see that foresight and I think that makes the difference. Aboriginal Teacher (Ref: 2.25111)

I do feel that there is – in the school there is a sense that we as teachers feel that our Aboriginal students are failing and we tend to look at that failure in terms of the fact that they don’t try and they’re lazy and I think that that general opinion is generally carried out into the wider community as well. We have more difficulty placing our Aboriginal students in work placements than we do non-Indigenous students, in general terms. Some just don’t want to go into work placements and others…it’s just more difficult finding something suitable where the people are happy both sides. I think there is a sense in which there is that feeling that Aboriginal students are lazy and they just want everything to be handed to them on a silver platter. That’s the sort of feeling I get from teachers and that’s the sort of feeling carried out into the wider community. Head Teacher Welfare (Ref: 2.15521)

...in the last three years I’ve had a lot of contact with the 40 or so Aboriginal kids in the school, particularly those in [Years] 7 to 10, I’ve found those kids are great kids and proportionately as many good kids there as in the rest of the school and obviously you get some kids that are disinterested and not interested in study and not interested in self-improvement but that is with all kids in society today and I don’t think there is a disproportionate number of Aboriginal students that are any different to mainstream kids. Head Teacher (Ref: 2.18621)

The middle quotation from the Head Teacher Welfare was very much a minority opinion expressed in interviews, but one which was reflective of the then current feeling of a large section of staff at that particular teacher’s school as demonstrated in a school survey
Indigenous students were disproportionally over-represented in comparison to their non-Indigenous peers amongst those with poor attendance and those with significant behavioural problems. Although in both of these areas the data was skewed by a small percentage of Indigenous students who were absent for long periods or consistently in trouble resulting in having high levels of suspension from school. In many instances these students also came from either/or one or two dysfunctional families or were off the mission serviced by the school.

Schools varied in their responses to the Indigenous communities, but in some cases schools did go to great length to engage their communities, primarily through ASSPA initiatives or outreach programs including and innovatively titled approach known as ‘Pizza with the Principal’ (Ref: 2.18221).

**Secondary School academic outcomes for Indigenous students**

Overall Indigenous students as reported by the majority of schools were performing on state-wide tests below their non-Indigenous peers and half the schools in the study were performing below their Indigenous peers across the state in both literacy and numeracy. There were three exceptions to these results; the first was two schools that were above the mean for Aboriginal students in literacy. The other was one school that reported its Indigenous students had exceeded the mean score for all students on literacy. It is notable that this school did not draw its Indigenous students from the mission, unlike the neighbouring school in the study whose Indigenous students had state testing results below that of the state mean for Indigenous students. One school executive member reflected that they were getting the kids to come to school but could not improve their results:

*I: They are below state average, going on BST [state-wide testing figures] figures and value added.*

*R: Is that state average for all children or the Aboriginal state average?*

*I: Both! It was just interesting what we said the other day that the kids are coming, we pride ourselves on the fact we get a lot of Koori kids here every day, but the engagement is the issue. (Ref: 2.15220)*
Retention of Indigenous students was another major issue raised and a number of schools proudly point out that they were slowly increasing their enrolments into Year 12, but in reality the numbers were still nowhere near the retention rates of the non-Indigenous students. Although schools were actively addressing this issue, through a range of interventions, which have been previously outlined and one school was using Vocation Education and Training (VET) in schools with good success:

*In other areas, I'd have to say we have a number of students who have progressed right through to Year 12 and taken on VET subjects, not many but more of those are starting to come through and do the VET subjects. When I first arrived here, it was predominantly the Aboriginal kids that identified, did not want to go beyond Year 10 for whatever reason, but the few who we have in those senior years have all done well in their VET subjects and that's the area they are interested in, as the majority of students are, so it's good to see that. (Ref: 2.18321)*

One school had reported the most significant and successful cohort of Indigenous students within the study. These students were a product of a major initiative which commenced prior to this study but involved a Careers Aspiration Program with the view of exposing students to career in Years 9 and 10 involving individual plans to achieve their career goals. The results were outstanding but unfortunately funding had ceased and the school had not taken up the initiative beyond the funded model. The principal highlighted the outcome of exceptional retention numbers of Indigenous students:

*Good and bad John, as you'd expect in that we've had some outstanding successes with Aboriginal students and last year's HSC was probably the best example where we had seven or eight students who completed the HSC and three of them have gone to university and one is doing medicine and I think that is terrific and I may be wrong, of all those students they were not from the Oxford mission area so that is the bad side of it because I think that we are not retaining the students and I think the lack of retention is in the very early years and I think that is coming from the primary school as well. It doesn't mean I don't want to try to do something about it but I think it is a problem that has to be addressed as early as possible. How do I describe it? As I said, good and bad, I think we are doing some really good things but there is a whole lot more that can be done. (Ref: 2.18421)*

One of the most debilitating aspects associated with performance and retention of Indigenous students was the repeated reference to the poor attendance patterns of a significant number of Indigenous students which is covered next.
Secondary attendance patterns of Indigenous students

Consistently schools reported that they had significant issues with Indigenous students being absent from school, having fractional truancy, specific absences on particular days of the week or absences over long periods of time. When asked to clarify this detail in most cases the schools were referring to a small group of Indigenous students who made up the most of the absenteeism. The number involved in this group of chronic absentees ranged between 5 and 20 Indigenous students who made up somewhere between 10 to 30% of the total Indigenous population in each school. Attendances were commensurate with retention rates, and absences of Indigenous students increased drastically as they approached the legal leaving age of 14 years and 10 months (Apen District, 2004 PowerPoint slide 11). The proportion of Indigenous absences tended to be higher in schools that serviced Aboriginal missions and the comments of a principal from one of these schools follows with regard to development of attendance patterns being established:

**I:** Their [Indigenous students] attendance is fairly good. I’m not saying it’s quite as good as the non-Aboriginal community, but it’s not bad. If you take out those 15 or so that aren’t good attenders. But if you put them together as a group of 50, those non-attenders bring those averages significantly down. Some are doing very well. We had two or three kids last year or this year who had 100% attendance.

**R:** Any reason for those students who aren’t attending?

**I:** Most of them had patterns well in place before they arrived at this high school. They’ve come across from the primary school with a similar sort of pattern. The high school environment, as high schools are, is probably even more threatening to them. At least in primary school they had one or two teachers. In high school, they’ve got about six teachers, moving around the school and all that sort of stuff, which is most confronting for a lot of Aboriginal kids, but in most cases, the pattern is already in place. It’s very difficult to break that pattern. (Ref: 2.16521)

There was another group of students who either missed school on particular recurring days, or were fractional truants and again it was a small identifiable group of students who were repeat offenders. The recurring absences on particular days related often to availability of money in the households of these students as identified by a member of the school’s executive:

**I:** Overall? The majority of the kids [Indigenous] are sitting above 85%. We – just going on my latest Year 8 figures, I’ve got about 20 kids falling below 50% and out of those, probably three Aboriginal kids. On average a day, we have about 15% away across the school. Aboriginal kids would be lower than that. I would say on
average, we’ve probably got 10 to 15 Koori kids who have one day off a week. We’ve got some kids that aren’t coming at all. I’ve got one girl in my year who’s back in Year 8 this year. She did Year 8 last year and she’s been two days this year…

**R:** Is there any reason, have you been able to define?

**I:** Not really, you know, “I’ll come tomorrow”, and they don’t come. Carol [pseudonym] has gone out to do home visits with the HSLO [Home School Liaison Officer] all the promises in the world – “I’ve been sick, I’ve been away, be there tomorrow.”, they might come the next day and then they’re off again. Because the gap is so broad some of them are ashamed to come back.

**R:** What about the kids who are dropping 20 percent about one day a week. Is there reason for that?

**I:** Tired? Don’t want to come on Fridays because there is sport, pension day. This is their day where they can stock up and get food and clothes before the money runs out. You go downtown today [pension day] and it will be awash with people. Tomorrow the kids will rock in with their new school uniforms every fortnight. New clothes, new backpack, new books and then five or six days later, we won’t have that. “Where’s your jumper?” ‘Someone else is wearing it.’ “Where’s your books? “Don’t know!” “Where’s your backpack?”

**R:** So parents are making the effort to try?

**I:** Yeah. And bags full of food. It blew me away a couple of times. I was monitoring a girl, who every second Wednesday she was away, and she’d come in on Thursday and she’d have this bag crammed with food, those multi-packs of chips and a box of muesli bars. I’d say, “Do you want me to mind it and give it out to you each day?” I used to do that for her so she’d have it for the fortnight. Because she knew, that by the end of the weekend, there would be nothing left. (Ref: 2.15220)

A large percentage of the fractional truancy was clearly attributable to choices that Indigenous students were making about either particular subjects like maths or not going to particular teachers’ classes. A head teacher explains:

*If the student doesn’t like a teacher, they just won’t go to class. For our Aboriginal students, that is their primary reason. You ask them, they say, “I don’t like the teacher, I’m not going to class.” There never seems to be the issue about them not being able to do the work or anything like that. However I think that does underpin a lot of that. I think the teacher becomes the focus of that that they can’t do the work in class and they feel unsettled in class. But most of the issues for not attending class are to do with the teacher relationship. (Ref: 2.15521)*
When discussing the chronic non-attendees most people related their circumstances to a vicious circle of poor attendance, low literacy, behaviour problems, suspensions and again poor attendance. The link was highlighted in an interview with a relatively new Aboriginal teacher:

*Usually, if their behaviour is bad, they've got poor literacy and numeracy skills, they tend not to turn up. I don't know whether it's embarrassment because their skills are so bad. So, who cares? It's like a negative effect. If they don't turn up, they're not going to get better are they. They're digging their own hole. The kids that [sic] do well in literacy in numeracy and sort of in the middle of the kids, come and try and better themselves. It's the kids that have that [sic] low level, they can't see any way out. It's like I said before. That cycle. It only takes one to break through it.* (Ref: 2.25111)

As indicated above it is clear to all that one impact associated with the cycle or forever falling behind is behaviour issues, and as noted in the next quotation in following section from a secondary school principal, behaviour can become extreme.

**Indigenous Students’ Behaviour in Secondary School**

In the following quotation the principal of Yale High School sums up the situation of suspensions across the secondary schools in the study:

*I think if you look at the data, the suspension rate for Aboriginal children is high but I think we might come back to what we were talking about before and that is you only need one or two constant offenders to skew the result for everybody and while if I got out any group of kids out there, there would be a certain number who have major behavioural problems who are often in trouble, suspended and that sort of thing. Maybe because the sample for the Aboriginal kids is smaller, I think there would be a higher percentage of kids with major behavioural difficulties amongst the Aboriginal kids than in the percentage all over. I’ve often said that of the 730 kids that we have each year in the school, I reckon really our hard core is a number less than 20. Of the 70 kids that are Aboriginal in the school, the hard core problem kids is the number less than 10, so it’s small number but higher rate than for the population over all. There would be higher per capita rate of suspension for Aboriginal kids. However, we do look at all sorts of other ways and we have had systems where the kids work with the AEA, where we do other things, try ways, particularly when we know that the situation is at home, is unlikely to lead to a good environment for resolving a behaviour problem. We try to look at other ways of dealing with things. However, quite often the problem is a matter of a violence issue where the laws are very straightforward and we have been instructed that if people are violent they have to be suspended and then we start working with the problem. Principal (Ref: 2.18221)*
These experiences reinforce the fact that behaviour problems are generally connected with a small cohort of Indigenous students, but this has resulted in the creation of a stereotypical image that most Indigenous students are the dominant factor affecting behaviour issues in school. This premise or stereotypical labelling of Indigenous bad behaviour is well supported across all secondary schools. Suspension rates?

_They get distorted by an individual. We have one Aboriginal boy who is pushing the limits as far as suspension goes at the moment...He is a repeat offender._’ (Ref: 2.17320).

While schools had in place firm policy and approaches to deal with suspensions, most schools were very aware of the disproportionate number of Indigenous students suspended and were working on strategies to reduce the number even if this meant being flexible around policy. This was apparent in the opening quote to this section and also the next by an executive member of staff at Handy High School:

_I don’t think they’re disproportionate. I think we tend to treat suspensions with Aboriginal kids a little bit differently. We make a moral judgement as to whether the kid is better off being at school than at home, because of what could happen next. I think there is a fair amount of empathy with the situation. Without excusing the behaviour, there has to be a lot of restorative justice. We try and adopt that stance with all our kids. Some people would say we go a little bit soft on our Aboriginal kids and are harder on non-Aboriginal kids, but in the stint that I’ve done as deputy, which has been a couple of terms last year, a term and half this year and end of last year – I think when I’ve been deputy, a lot of people can see the actions going to happen so they send the kids first. I’ve got a fairly good relationship with most of them and we try and get around it with something else – maybe just a level system rather than suspension. Referring kids away from suspension, to go to anger management instead, because there are some community programs you can get kids into._ (Ref: 2.15220)

There was a concern which was raised about the discriminatory nature of dealing with students when involved in violence. An AEA made this comment:

_I think I’ve known a couple of situations when we were talking about violence where one student against another student and one suspended and the other one is not and it’s usually the Aboriginal one that is suspended, I don’t like that. To me, if they are a party to fighting in the school both should be suspended, not one and it’s something that the kids bring up all the time and it’s something that the Aboriginal parents bring up all the time and I quite question it myself. It’s like going to court, you don't look at your past record unless it's serious, but in the school situation they bring up their past record and I have a situation where a kid’s just come back_
from suspension, as soon as he came back another kid threw a punch at him so he decked him and they were lucky that they let him get away with that but the other kid knew that the bloke he hit, that [sic] hit him back, could be suspended again for four weeks. Sometimes they set them up and to me that is not (Ref: 2.38510)

Lester and Hanlen (2004) found that in interviews with Indigenous community members this too was their single biggest concern with regard to discrimination in schools at the time.

Indigenous communities are therefore getting the message from schools that Indigenous kids are being harshly treated in racial encounters, which is counterproductive to school-community relations. Given the long negative and discriminatory policy and practice of schooling for Indigenous peoples, in the current lived histories of some parents and grandparents (as highlighted by J.J. Fletcher, 1989), it is paramount that schools ensure that such cases are dealt with equitably.

Secondary School/Indigenous community interaction

School community interaction included instances of a principal who took the course of minimal effort in communicating directly with the Aboriginal community treating everyone the same ‘rather than particularly isolate one particular group’ (Ref: 2.18321) and through to the extraordinary measures to achieve engagement by a deputy principal. In the latter case the individual was recruited to the school because they had proven experience working with Indigenous community. With the newly established school Indigenous team he instigated home visits in the community including the mission, to deliver important information such as concerning suspensions. Of greater note were the visits to homes providing positive feedback about students:

I remember going to see a parent earlier this year and the girl was in Year 7 last year. She was a knuckle merchant. If you wanted someone in the school belted, you went and saw this kid and she’d fix them up for you. We had a lot of involvement with mum in particular, trying to work around that with the kid. This year I went to see the family because the kids were going great. That’s the other part of our visits. Also when kids are doing well, we’ll go and tell parents. Mum opened the door, saw me and said, “Oh my god, what’s she done now. It must be bad if you’ve come to see me [deputy principal]”. I said, “I’m actually here to tell you she’s going really well. The fact that you hear from me when she is in strife, I
just wanted you to hear from me while she is going really well.” After she got her breath back, mum was very, very happy. We’ve been very pro-active that way. We’ve tried pro-active things – morning teas for the Aboriginal community, getting funding to employ people from the local community in the school, which has been fantastic for the kids. I’ve introduced in conjunction with the Aboriginal education team – we’ve introduced a cultural program in the school, which has led to some very nice things like the murals on the Koori room to try and draw that link between Aboriginal culture and European culture. We value Aboriginal culture in the school, so kids see the links and say, “yes we’re being included that way.” Working in conjunction with the ASSPA committee and also the community, we’ve introduced academic awards for students that are presented at presentation evening, so the efforts of Aboriginal students are being recognised and celebrated. That includes the Year 10 students and Year 12 students a community shield, which hangs up. Their name goes under a plaque they’re awarded that hangs up in the foyer of the school for people to see there’s another way we do celebrate Aboriginal culture, Aboriginal students and their achievements. Also we’re instituting camps for our Koori students to go on so they can learn about issues that have affected their lives. Quite often the issues that are affecting their lives act very severely on what happens at school. We can’t succeed at school unless we help those kids address some of the issues that impact on their life. (Ref: 2.16821)

Schools listed a number of initiatives that have been implemented to improve communication with the community - community ‘fun days’, ‘Pizza with the principal’, community workshops and surveys and Indigenous guest speakers. Communication was also enhanced through employing Indigenous staff in support roles, involving other Indigenous support agencies like Aboriginal Medical Services, mentoring and elders’ programs. There was ample evidence of proactive innovative approaches adopted by the vast majority of schools, but two programs occurred across the majority of schools, i) the ASSPA committees and ii) for those schools with the resources, AAEas.

Every school spoke of the ASSPA committee as being a focal point for their interaction with the Indigenous community but not all enjoyed a fruitful relationship. A couple of schools and one in particular indicated that the school had had limited success with establishing and maintaining an ASSPA committee, citing ‘lack of community commitment’ as the main problem. Interestingly, this same school had the principal who did not see the need to do anything special in his communication with the Indigenous community. Staff at the school did try to ring Indigenous parents/carers individually with reported limited success (Ref: 2.18621).

ASSPA committees were very much encouraged and schools indicated that they saw them as an important advisory group and actively worked to keep them functioning. While
most schools enjoyed improving communication with the Indigenous community, one school highlighted the negative attitude of a majority of teachers and their attitudes to Indigenous education when surveyed by the school. The hidden potential effect of this on school/community relations was noted by an executive member of staff:

*We did a survey last year with our staff, parents and students and we found that the group that is most critical of our Aboriginal education totally was our staff. The most supportive was our kids. The parents and staff were the most critical. Although we may have 10 or 12 teachers dedicated to Aboriginal education, there are a lot of cynics and therefore the communication that they'd have with the broader Aboriginal community would be pretty poor.* (Ref: 2.15621)

The four schools which had access to an AEA knew very well how important their role was in ensuring a positive, open and frank communication with their Indigenous community. AEAs were the front line of the school and community interaction. Schools used them actively to communicate directly with the community and drive in many instances community events and interaction. It was pleasing to see in most of the schools with AEAs, that the school executive and often an Aboriginal committee or team was supporting a whole of school interaction and management of Indigenous education and the executive taking the time to go into the community to meet the parents/carers face to face. This is exemplified in the following quote from a very active AEA:

> *I: I've noticed the uniqueness when there are AEA conferences around and we talk about our roles and responsibilities in the school and in the community. I've always maintained a role in the community where one day a week I am in the community. I see parents; I go around talking to parents about their kids and that, any of those that are on suspensions. That is my commitment to the community and to the parents, letting them be aware and know what's going on and also maintaining my contact, not only my role as AEA but also my role [as chairperson of a significant Indigenous organisation in the community] and it's making parents more aware because I tend to now pick them up and take them out to the school for meetings with the principal when the students are back from suspension. That was once hard to do but now it's not, parents are coming out. Parents are starting to come out and starting to talk and we have a Deputy Principal now who says if they don't want to come out I'll go to their place and usually a 'no no' in an Aboriginal community setting but it's happening, yes, he's come out and spoke to a family and said, that's [the Deputy] and he said that if they don't want me in the house then I can talk at the Land Council with them or we can talk somewhere where they are comfortable. So he is looking at the other side. He has looked at taking them out of the school situation and environment and [talking to them in an] atmosphere where they are comfortable at. And now the parents are getting more aware of yes, you've got problems go and talk about it, once it was 'them teachers out there, they

14 Quotation was edited to protect the anonymity of the informant.
are prejudice, they are racist and all this and that and only stems from what the kids tell them and naturally as a parent they believe the kids. They won't believe the school, they believe the kids.

R: Is that because of their past experiences?

Their past experiences yeah, yes.

R: So they think nothing has changed?

I: Nothing’s changed. But once they come out and meet the Deputy Principal and they meet the Principal and this is on a continued base, their attitudes change, they start to realise hang on, my son or daughter has been telling me lies, that’s not the situation, it’s not like that and they are all right people. A lot of the times that has happened and they stop and think now. (Ref: 2.38510)

DO ABORIGINAL KIDS SWITCH OFF SECONDARY SCHOOL?

Staff interviewed resoundingly agreed that Indigenous students switch off school. It was also clearly pointed out that this does not apply to all Indigenous students. The opinion was that school activates the switch:

I: When you are talking about Aboriginal kids as far as I know, when they first start school, are as well tuned as anyone else. I think school switches off Aboriginal kids rather than the other way around.

R: If that happens, when do you sense that happens?

I: I don’t think it happens here, I’m talking about high school, any more than it does with other kids. I think you get kids who are switched off when they come to us. I’d say it happens early. We’ve always had kids in the past switching off Year 8, say at Year 9… Principal (Ref: 2.18421)

In the main, secondary school was the site of final disengagement at around Years 8 and 9 and that this was significantly driven by a process which started in primary school. Reasons often stated for this disengagement were: poor basic literacy and numeracy; lack of individual support and a nurturing school environment; curriculum that was not appropriate; lack of perceived relevance of school by students; limited perceived career prospects/outlook and poor home environments (especially amongst students living in Aboriginal mission communities). Several staff members also remarked that
disengagement from school was also a phenomenon for a proportion of non-Indigenous students as well.

**The switching off process**

In the interviews with secondary school staff there emerged general consensus that most Indigenous kids did switch off school. It was also equally agreed that this was not so for all Indigenous students (Refs: 2.26221; 2.15420; and 2.110120). The relevance of schooling for students more generally was also questioned by some teachers and principals:

Yeah, but they might also switch off a lot of others things too, school is just a part of it and I think that’s what I said earlier, maybe school as we know it today, structured, formal etc. is not a place not just for Aboriginal kids but for other kids and the percentages may be as high as 40 – 50%. It was certainly lower in my day at school because we learnt and we sat there, we were frightened not to, but today of course with the looseness of the community and so forth, I don’t believe that school is a place for a lot of Aboriginal students, it’s very good for socialising and friendships, so if they’re finding it difficult, so are other students we have in school would find the same and that worries me very much about where we are heading in education. (Ref: 2.18321)

Many educators interviewed believed Indigenous students switching off school was an accumulation of gradual failure brought about from lack of foundation skills in literacy and numeracy not gained in primary school, compounded by increasing levels of absenteeism. In secondary school they face increased workload and more specialist content. Ultimately they confront the starkness of failure:

Oh yes. There are two lots of stats. There are the state-wide statistics about school refusal [students refusing to attend] which is starting late year four-early year five. And they’re amongst the groups of students who I’ve said that we’ve had our [focus on] that we’ve never seen, because they haven’t been going to school even before they got to high school age. Yes they do switch off school because I think the kids, even though they are aware of their parents’ hopes and expectations for them, they increasingly find school more difficult. They find as they can’t cope, they are falling further behind, they get frustrated, they don’t like the sense that they’re failing so they will go into avoidance. Deputy Principal (Ref: 2.16821)
The issue of accumulated failure highlights the concept of two converging pathways to failure - one brought on by poor attendance at primary school and the second, the struggle with schooling throughout because of lack of competitive literacy and numeracy skills. For some there is also the correlation between learning difficulties and eventual behavioural issues as a deputy Principal points out:

**I:** Looking at the couple of candidates who have become discipline problems in this school, yeah, I think they’re certainly disengaged.

**R:** Why?

**I:** Sometimes I think it’s related to learning difficulties. It’s too hard and therefore some of the misbehaviour takes over the engagement in the lesson. Subsequently if that’s persistent it can result in some of those suspensions which is once again is taking them out of the school rather than engaging them here. (Ref: 2.16121)

**When and why do the Indigenous kids switch off?**

The results of Indigenous students switching off school are clearly evident in terms of the numbers exiting at Years 8 and 9 (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004). It was further reported that disengagement was more pronounced amongst those students who lived on a mission. The following excerpts from interviews with AEAs highlight this:

*I think it’s around 15, 16, it starts getting harder. More assignments, more tests, more stress instead of trying to deal with it they give up and when they’ve got those negative influences, especially the kids from [the mission], well not just the kids from [the mission], because a lot of these kids who are in town, go out there to visit their relatives or stay with the others, it’s just those negative influences that are the main problem. Nothing’s being done about them; you don't hear or see anything being done about those children who are at home all the time. (Ref: 2.35010)

Several [readily referring to number of cases of Indigenous kids switching off school] Yeah, I know some of them switch off as soon as they get to high school and when they get to Year 8 ‘Oh, I’m sick of this.’ It's when they start getting into that age of you know, boyfriends, girlfriends situations, minds ticking over elsewhere, not focused, family don’t give a damn, they are doing their own thing anyway so they are not pushing them into the education system and we’ve got a scenery around there every Friday night is schoolie night, the kids, school kids, go to the beaches, get drunk, have parties because there is no entertainment for youth around the place and with that you get the ones who left school at an early age, that is where the bad influence is. They see those kids not going to school and they are talking about how good a time they are having. In reality they are not having a good time but they say they are and the rest of these kids, they switch off with
them, that is the bad influences up there on the mission because, they go swimming, they go surfing, they go fishing, they also go stealing too you know, that type of thing but kids do switch off. I know a couple of good kids, don’t do anything bad and that but they are fed up with school. (Ref: 2.38510)

In the second of the quotations the speaker drew attention to the added pressures on teenagers including the influence exerted by peers, and in general the accumulation of influences coming to bear in teenage years for kids already only very loosely connected to, or interested in, school, with little or no family support.

Other common themes, outside of the specific issues relating to the home environments of mission students, and poor literacy and numeracy and attendance, emerged around relevance of schooling to later prospects, lack of successful local role models and a sense of reduced or low expectations.

There was opinion expressed that for many Indigenous students, especially from the missions, that the curriculum was an issue, because it was overcrowded inflexible and irrelevant to their actual needs (especially employment needs). One executive staff member explained how Indigenous students switch off school in direct response to curriculum relevance:

Yes. I think it happens at different times of the day actually. Sometimes they can be switched right on because the work they’re doing is relevant. It has something to do with their world. Other times they think, “What am I ever going to do with this?” They can switch on and off, depending on where they are. They do verbalise, they tell you which classes they like, which classes they don’t like. “Why don’t you like it?” “I don’t like the teacher.” But it’s often not the teacher, it’s what they’re learning or what they perceive they’re not learning, or it’s not fun, it’s not in their style, it’s not hands-on, it’s too regimented. The kids who switch off don’t come. (Ref: 2.15220)

Closely aligned to teachers’ claims of irrelevant curriculum are the limited opportunities facing Indigenous people in the workforce. As highlighted in this chapter racism enters this equation as evident in a complaint to a principal by an employer about being assigned an Indigenous student for work experience. Indigenous statistics demonstrate that the unemployment level for Indigenous is three times that of their non-Indigenous
counterparts and is not improving (SCRGSP, 2007, p.3.39; Commonwealth of Australia, 2014). It is a position that provides little incentive for Indigenous students.

Making the positive link between education and career prospects for students was considered by those interviewed as very difficult for schools given the reality of often racist circumstances and challenging employment data. The response in one school was dedicated personalised career guidance:

*Some might, the majority don’t, but it depends on their goals and I think that is where we are falling down. We haven’t got this career path and… [the program] provided a little bit of that, but we don’t have that career path for Aboriginal kids as strongly set up as we should and I think that would be the area where the most need is.* (Ref: 2.18720)

Lack of local Indigenous role models who have successfully completed their HSC and have managed to obtain employment in their home communities in jobs or positions where no other Indigenous person has worked, was deemed by several school informants as critically essential for raising expectations. The importance of this role modelling was an integral rationale for the Careers Aspiration Program run in the past in one of the schools and as previously reported, led to a record number of Indigenous students doing their HSC (Ref: 2.18921). Role modelling was seen as integral to improved expectations as note by one deputy principal:

*Expectation, I think they have a lack of role models. The expectation is that we can do as much as we can here between 9 and 3 but we don’t know what’s going to happened after. I see a lack of expectation of success, lack of role models on a consistent basis, not just bringing one in to speak one time of the year. Lack of expectation of themselves and what we, expect of them.* (Ref: 2.19521)

Perhaps the core to Indigenous students switching off school in large numbers was the recognition of schools of the gap between literacy and numeracy between the Indigenous students and their non-Indigenous peers. Often it was this lack of fundamental skills which ultimately had led for many Indigenous students to a vicious circle of failure, via a lack of engagement in lessons, poor attendance, behaviour problems, suspension, poor attendance and ultimately alienation from the school system (Ref: 2.25111) as previously covered in this chapter.
In the interviews there was often reference to the need to engage Indigenous students in classrooms. The domain of the classroom is strictly the domain of the teacher and it is at this level that engagement must be. As one head teacher puts it:

*I think we have to motivate kids, we have to find that switch to switch them on and it’s not easy with all kids and I don’t think it’s really any more difficult with Aboriginal children because as I said I’ve taught some quite academic Aboriginal kids. I’ve taught some at the other end of the spectrum who have very little interest in school and don’t see the relevance, but there is always something there, you have just got to find that something that switches the kids on and it’s the teachers, you’ve got to be personable, you have got to get down to their level, you have got to be able to relate to these kids at all levels and I think I’m pretty good at that, even though I’m an old fogey to use that term.* (Ref: 2.18621)

A large proportion of Indigenous students who live on Aboriginal missions/reserves serviced by schools in the study are consistently singled out as the core of the students who are attendance and behaviour problems and ultimately make up an identifiable core of the students who switch off school.

**OUTSTANDING SCHOOL ISSUES ACROSS BOTH SCHOOL SECTORS**

There were three themes which arose in both primary and secondary school interviews. They were mission kids, racism, and the characteristics of a good teacher of Indigenous students.

**Mission Kids**

As previously reported, there are three Aboriginal missions serviced by schools within the case study. Two were outside the town and quite isolated. As will be evident in Chapter 8, it must be said most interviewed families located on missions recognised the importance of education and attendance. The researcher met and interviewed several parents and carers (often grandparents) who against all economic odds were actively fighting to get their children educated. This is not to deny there is also a lot of dysfunction evident in some families on the missions, much of which can be traced to fallout from the Stolen Generation and in particular loss of parenting skills (Human Rights & Equal
Employment Commission, 1997). Take into account also 200 and more years of often racist policy; general poverty; poor housing; poor health, and significant substance abuse (SCRGSP, 2007). In this study one student told a heart-wrenching tale of a critical moment when her mother was forced to tell her to go to relatives because she could no longer look after her and would be better off without her (Ref: 1.420).

Tales of dysfunctional families became the stuff of stereotype about the missions in this case study and shaped school executive and staff perceptions, creating a barrier to treating each family on its own merits. School staff on many occasions used deficit modelling to refer to the Indigenous communities, putting the blame primarily on Indigenous families. Often this extended to all Indigenous students. This is even apparent in the interviews with the AEAs:

*I think it’s mainly with the [mission] kids, because they’re not forced to go. Whereas if I got up whinging and whining, I’d be told to get on the bus and that would be it. They say, “go to school” and the kids will say, “No. I’m not going today,” and they’ll give a reason and they just give in. I think it’s easier to give in rather than fight them. But I mean we talk to the kids, we say you know, “you’re mucking up, you should be at school, what’s going on, how come you’re not coming” and they either give us a pretty bad excuse, or they’ll say, “Yes, yes they’ll be there.” We still only get Terri [pseudonym] about three days a week at the most. (Ref: 2.35010)*

Specific measures had been undertaken over a number of years and were still being instigated to improve the outcomes of children from dysfunctional families on the missions, for example, pre-schools and special classrooms have been established and there have been youth outreach programs. One school in the study when confronted with a significant number of Indigenous students from dysfunctional families piloted an alternate curriculum and the school’s executive was even encouraging of innovative curricula:

*When you talk about curriculum and relevance, I think that yes and no. I’m referring to the Oxford community in particular here. I believe the same needs are there but the relevance for some of those students is survival and coming to terms with some of the issues that exist within that community and they include things like sexual activity, alcoholism, drug use, dealing with poverty and I don’t think that we really address those issues in the way that they need to be addressed and that goes also for the white community as well. Things like conflict resolution, building self-esteem, strengthening resilience and so on and I think they are areas that while they’re not formally maths, science or English they will come in as we get more in to the quality teaching more… (Ref: 2.19420)*
Dysfunctional families on the mission obviously needed addressing and pleasingly there was a level of intervention in this regard. However, it was generally recognised more was needed, especially in regard to student outcomes:

Oxford is unique in a sense that when we talk about the demographics, the Aboriginal community is in the centre of town and we call it the mission, then we have got the families in town, around town, then we have them at X, Y and Z, so they are spread out and it shows within the schooling system that when you look at the stats, the statistics and the literacy and numeracy level of kids, the majority of kids who are outside of the mission excel, but the ones who are on the mission need assistance. (Ref: 2.38510)

As a final point, there is a need to draw attention in this study to a number of cases of mission families who, against the odds, reared hard-working, engaged children and supported them to success such as Ken whose story provides the narrative to start Chapter 10.

**Racism**

Open racism, more specifically community racism, casts a shadow over all communities in the study, and indeed is inherent in curriculum. Most of the comments that arose among participants about racism were levelled at one particular large community in the study. The incidents that prompted them received national and local press coverage. This community is described by a deputy principal as:

...red necked. It’s a very conservative community… I say that the attitudes in town here towards Aboriginal people leave a lot to be desired and there’s a lot of work to be done if there’s going to be any improvement. (Ref: 2.16821)

Education is clearly seen by many Indigenous people as the answer to countering the racism experienced in communities in the study:

Racism is a big problem here in Apen but if you could go and get the kids to really commit to getting an education, they would be smart enough to deal with that racism but trying to get them to understand that is difficult. (Ref: 2.310010)
Although this might be a clear desirable outcome of education, and examples were given with regard to a number of Indigenous students who had been voted into captain’s roles in some schools, schools themselves were not necessarily pure of heart on the issue. Earlier in this chapter, reference was made to students who were self-monitoring of racist slurs and humour in classrooms. Examples of racism emerged both in direct comment from school staff about incidents and in comments made by staff in interviews which could only be viewed as racially motivated or naïve at best, as evidenced in the following quote from a senior executive member of staff when referring to an Indigenous parent with a degree and who holds a substantive education position in the region:

Certainly, you mentioned Ray earlier and he comes from a very supportive family. Ray’s outcomes here at the school and achievements are very [good] – his father’s nearly white. (Ref: 2.17321)

Prior reference was made in this chapter to the head teacher of welfare who held extremely stereotypical views of Indigenous peoples which ironically were causing him much torment as to why Indigenous students did not relate to him. He was not alone in this deficit theorising. Another teacher reports with insight on the stereotypical response of some teachers to attendance:

I heard a teacher the other day, you know the report that’s come out, that principals are going to be accountable [for attendances of Indigenous children] and there’s funding towards it or something. I heard another teacher say, “Well we’ve got to get them here first.” I’m thinking you’re just thinking of one or two teachers when they do cotton on to those negative stereotypes that supports in their mind, their view that they don’t come. It’s wrong. Often they overlook those nice little kids who are here all the time who are quiet and don’t say boo. There are lots of kids who are just like that and because they’re just kind of not recognised as an Aboriginal kid because they’re nice in class and having a go and things. They don’t think about those who are there all the time. (Ref: 2.27020)

What is notable in the interview is that overt racism was not identified by participants as occurring inside the school gates (this despite further probing in the interviews). Most schools did not identify, nor document, any significant instances, and felt if any issues were to arise they would be managed quickly and effectively by the executive (Ref: 2.15621). For example, staff pointed to the curriculum, specifically PDHPE, where tolerance and understanding was being taught. They noted their schools were making particular efforts to ensure their policy and practices were not discriminatory and in many
instances took affirmative action to counter any discriminatory practices which adversely affected any group in the school, including Indigenous students. AEAs were seen as a vital tool of communication with regard to helping dispel any staff perceptions, or historically held negative views by the Indigenous community, about schools being racist environments. One teacher highlights the latter:

The one good thing about the AEAs supporting the school is the messages go home. They know what’s going on, the idea that the school is just a bunch of racist pigs that won’t look after us. That illusion is being dispelled because the message has got out there that people are trying to do the right thing. (Ref: 2.29020)

In conclusion, while racism was identified readily in the community by informants, there was not the same concern expressed by teachers and educators in the schools about it permeating significantly into the school. The school while not a racist free environment as informants identified, proved to be enacting its obligations to control the overt environment for all of its students.

**Characteristics of a good teacher of Indigenous students**

The data for this section came from two sources. The first was to ask a specific question at interview with executive, teaching and educational staff in schools, about their impressions of ‘what makes a good teacher of Aboriginal kids?’. This same question was also put to the Indigenous students in the study and their responses will be covered in the next chapter. The second source of information was based on 21 classroom observations of lessons using the coding system developed for the *Quality Teaching in NSW public schools: A classroom practice guide* (2003c) in four of the secondary schools in the study15.

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15Quality Teaching emerged in NSW during 2002 and availability of the Practice Guide was not available till 2003. It was therefore not possible to use this instrument in the primary context of the study for comparative reasons as data gathering in primary sector took place in 2001-2002.
What makes a good teacher of Aboriginal kids?

This question was asked of school executive staff, teachers and Indigenous educators and fundamentally and overwhelmingly the opinion centred on three key issues. The first was that teachers cared about Indigenous students. It was noted of an exemplary primary teacher, for example:

You know he understood them and he cared for them. That’s what other teachers need, to be caring to help kids to achieve. (Ref: 2.311611)

Importance was attached to teachers talking to parents in the community on an equal level to get to know what would enhance teaching and management of their Aboriginal students:

First off showing them that you care... A good teacher should be going in finding out, how do I get these kids up to scratch, how do I manage their behaviour? How do I talk to their parents?. But while ever you’ve got teachers and head masters who think they are above everybody else and are too frightened to approach the parents, too frightened to approach the kids... (Ref: 2.311710)

Have empathy for these kids, have an understanding of maybe their background, in terms of their personal socio economic background, what are their social needs, their personal needs. To be able to talk to them and I don’t mean talk down. (Ref: 2.18621)

Secondly, several secondary principals identified the most effective teachers with Indigenous students possessed empathy and worked on development of relationships between the students the Indigenous community and themselves as teachers, taking the time to build a genuine relationship:

First and foremost you have to respect Aboriginal people, you absolutely must, I think you have to empathise with the kids, you’ve got to put yourself in their shoes... Respect the community as a teacher, really know the background of the community people and last but not least, teach them... (Ref: 2.29120)

Relationships. I think that the students know who they can go and talk to and it’s that evenness. The kids know they will be listened to, they won’t get a blast, they know they won’t get this or that but I believe it’s all about the relationship. People are going to go into the playground and have their sun glasses on and don’t want to be there, those are the teachers that don’t talk to the kids, not the ones that ask ‘what are you doing on the weekend?’ And we have some outstanding Koori kids,
well we have outstanding kids, but I try to encourage the teachers to find out what these kids are doing, what they are doing after school. (Ref: 2.19420)

Finally, the following two interview responses encapsulate the overall importance of not only having a genuine relationship but a relationship founded on ‘respect’:

I would think one of the most important things would be for teachers to treat kids with respect, regardless of who they are and if kids see you being fair to them then that’s really important. Of course you have got to have all the teaching qualities but I wouldn’t just say that’s just for teaching Aboriginal kids, all kids but may be more particularly so with Aboriginal kids. (Ref: 2.18421)

The teachers who I see who have very few discipline and very few truancies from their classes are those that develop a relationship with the kids, who talk to them on an even level... who don’t expect to be respected, but earn respect because they treated the students with a degree of respect in the first place. (Ref: 2.15521)

WHAT PEDAGOGY WAS OBSERVED IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS?

The release of the Quality Teaching Framework (QTF) in NSW in 2003 provided an opportunity to utilise its coding tool to assess the pedagogy present in classrooms (on a 1-5 scale). Having been trained in the use of these tools and being an appointed academic consultant to a couple of schools with regard to implementation of QTF, it was opportune to use this coding on 21 lessons of 13 volunteer teaches across 10 subjects spread across Years 8 and 10 of four volunteer secondary schools in the study (Handy, Oxford, Apen and Yale High School [HS]). Table 6.1 and an analysis of these coded lessons in the thesis case study compared to the Systemic Implications of Pedagogy and Achievement (SIPA) (Ladwig et al., 2009) research project of the NSW Quality Teaching Program coding of some 664 students lessons in that study across the state is undertaken.

Due to the extensive difference of number of lessons observed between the researchers teacher observations (21) for the study and the SIPA (2004) project observations (664),
Cohen’s $d^{16}$ effect size was utilised to cater for this difference in sample size based on independent t-test run for each of these coded lesson observations.

### TABLE 6.1 Comparative coding of lessons – SIPA and Case Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SIPA Study (N=664)</th>
<th>Case Study (N=21)</th>
<th>Cohen’s $d$</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>Prob’y</th>
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<tr>
<td>Deep Knowledge</td>
<td>Mean 3.48, N=664</td>
<td>Mean 2.43, N=21</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>3.92</td>
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<td>Deep Understanding</td>
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<td>Problematic knowledge</td>
<td>Mean 1.61, N=664</td>
<td>Mean 2.14, N=21</td>
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<td>Higher order thinking</td>
<td>Mean 2.55, N=664</td>
<td>Mean 2.43, N=21</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
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<td>Metalanguage</td>
<td>Mean 2.47, N=664</td>
<td>Mean 1.62, N=21</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>5.54</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
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<td>Substantive communication</td>
<td>Mean 2.84, N=664</td>
<td>Mean 2.24, N=21</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>&lt;.01</td>
</tr>
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<td>Intellectual Quality</td>
<td>Mean 15.76, N=664</td>
<td>Mean 13.24, N=21</td>
<td>0.63</td>
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<td>&lt;.01</td>
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<td>Explicit quality criteria</td>
<td>Mean 1.84, N=664</td>
<td>Mean 2.00, N=20</td>
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<td>Engagement</td>
<td>Mean 3.30, N=664</td>
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<td>High Expectations</td>
<td>Mean 2.60, N=664</td>
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<td>0.59</td>
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<td>Social support</td>
<td>Mean 3.70, N=664</td>
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<td>0.48</td>
<td>2.39</td>
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<td>Students’ self-regulation</td>
<td>Mean 3.67, N=664</td>
<td>Mean 3.57, N=21</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>NS</td>
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<td>Student direction</td>
<td>Mean 1.57, N=664</td>
<td>Mean 2.43, N=21</td>
<td>0.81</td>
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<td>Quality Learning</td>
<td>Mean 16.68, N=664</td>
<td>Mean 16.81, N=21</td>
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<td>Mean 2.73, N=664</td>
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<td>&lt;.01</td>
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<td>Narrative</td>
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<td>Significance</td>
<td>Mean 46.42, N=664</td>
<td>Mean 43.33, N=21</td>
<td>0.96</td>
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</table>

Using Cohen’s $d$ effect size definitions of small ($d=0.2$), medium or moderate ($d=0.5$) and large difference ($d=0.8$) in the QTF dimensions Intellectual Quality (IQ) in the study was lower than the SIPA findings. This indicated that the case study students were not exposed to higher levels of key elements within this QTF dimension around pedagogical practices such as deep knowledge and metalanguage in particular and had moderate exposure in lessons in the areas of deep understanding, problematic knowledge and substantive communication than did their SIPA counterparts. While virtually no effect

\[ d = \frac{\text{Mean}_{\text{group1}} - \text{Mean}_{\text{group2}}}{\sqrt{\frac{\text{SD}_{\text{group1}}^2 + \text{SD}_{\text{group2}}^2}{2}}} \]

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was reported in the data on the two other dimensions of Quality Learning Environment (QLE) and Significance (SIG) larger effective differences in the specific elements of Student Direction (SD) and Knowledge Integration (KI) in the QTF can be potentially attributable to specifically more freedom associated with particular lessons observed in art and computing in the first instance SD and in the area of KI in the timing of the lesson coding being towards the end of the year when formal assessment processes had been completed.

These lesson observations were generally consistent with research findings amongst Indigenous and more generally students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, where there is a propensity amongst teachers to ‘dumb down’ their lessons to meet the teachers’ perceived low expectations of the students (Groome & Hamilton, 1995a & 1995b; Dent & Hatton, 1996; Bourke et al., 2000; Godfrey et al. 2001; Barnes, 2004; Lamb et al., 2004; NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004; Sarra, 2005; Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Beresford, Partington & Gower, 2012). An analysis of critical components of this chapter and some overall conclusions of the school factors across both levels of schooling will now follow.

CONCLUSION

This chapter explored primarily secondary school responses to Indigenous students’ educational needs and the critical viewpoints of staff and executives in the study as to their views on whether they thought Indigenous students switch off school. It explored more specifically issues around programs mounted for Indigenous students in secondary school and gained the reflections of school staff on emerging trends in academic outcomes, attendance and behaviour patterns and the engagement levels of schools with their Indigenous communities. Additionally the chapter discussed some issues which could not be readily delineated into the primary or secondary domain but were more germane to the local history and environment, such as perceptions relating to missions. Secondary classroom observations were also utilised to shed light on classroom pedagogy practice in classes with Indigenous student participants in comparison with state a coding of lessons undertaken in the Quality Teaching Framework in NSW, Systemic Implications of Pedagogy and Achievement (SIPA) in NSW public schools (Ladwig, Gore, Amosa & Griffiths, 2009) evaluation.
The two chapters dealing with school factors highlighted that significant negative shifts in Indigenous student engagement became clearly evident in secondary schools, via ‘drop out’ rates, increased absenteeism and increasing poor behaviour. However, of significant note, the foundation of such disengagement of students was well established in primary school.

Explored in this and the previous chapter was the effort of many of the schools in the study to develop and implement programs specifically to try to address poor Indigenous outcomes. There was also general agreement that the general school curriculum and Aboriginal studies options in particular had ample opportunity to incorporate Indigenous cultural affirmation and inclusion at both levels of schooling, however these were rarely realised in schools in the study.

There was a level of consistency between the two levels (primary and secondary) with regard to generally poor established relations between schools and the Indigenous community they service, although some notable innovative efforts were evident in trying to break down this barrier. In short there was little evidence of genuine Indigenous community involvement in the schools in the study.

The chapter revealed that attendance and behaviour took a negative turn for a majority of Indigenous students in the study when they reached later stage 4 of secondary school or around age of 14 -15 years and this finding very much reflected the state trending in this area (Review, 2004:25, 27). The majority of Indigenous students had disengaged from the schooling system by secondary school and were either generally no longer attending or experiencing great difficulty with completing assignments due to poor literacy and numeracy skills. This failure increasingly tended to lead to many of these students becoming behaviour problems in their schools. For the majority of Indigenous students this has led to them ultimately ‘switching off’ school. The general consensus amongst informants was that this trajectory begins during primary school years.

Two emergent issues which were shared between both primary and secondary levels involved discussion around the unique backgrounds of students from ‘missions/reserves’ in the study and also specific comments regarding racism. In the former there were very strong deficit perceptions and stereotypical attitudes held by school staff, found in Indigenous and non-Indigenous teaching, general staff and executive school staff. These same staff held belief that the schools in general managed to protect students from non-
Indigenous community racist attitudes, as though the’ school gates and fences’ tended to reflect a defence against such racism, which was reported at high levels in several key school communities. These external school perceptions however, did not provide any significant feedback with regard to the institutional racism of the school systems themselves on issues of equity of outcomes. Nor responses to the Indigenous concerns with regard to their concerns of the prejudicial interpretations of racism with regard to the unfair treatment of Indigenous students being suspended for their physical retaliation to racial taunts from non-Indigenous students. Understandings of racial discrimination appeared to be greatly lacking and this was in spite of appointment of ‘anti-racism officers’ in each school as part of the DET’s policy directive in this area.

Finally, the chapter investigate concepts of good teaching practice and pedagogical practices in schools. It was clear that teachers respecting Indigenous students based understanding of culture and family backgrounds, along with taking a personal interest in the students stood out as being the most productive components of a development of strong bonds between the student and teacher. The exploration of the pedagogy in classrooms supported the findings of the major review of Quality Teaching the SIPA (2004) and the long list of research in this area around low teacher expectations and lack of Indigenous cultural knowledge integration in the classrooms.

The next chapter will focus on Indigenous students, particularly their understandings of their lives generally and as students, their relationships with schools and teachers and the culmination of these encounters on the issue of ‘switching off school’.
CHAPTER 7. STUDENT FACTORS

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will outline a pivotal journey in the study undertaken by the researcher with 43 Indigenous Australian students from a number of primary and secondary schools over a four-year period of the students’ school lives. From the earliest often hesitant encounters we shared, through to the signs of familiar faces catching up to have a chat and check on where we both were at on our individual journeys, our lives crossed. Initial interviews were structured around a simple questionnaire which was completed by students, to establish base level data (Appendix 7.1) and to ease and assist in a comfortable friendly relationship being developed. Students freely gave their responses to questions asked and provided me, as the researcher, with the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle which I required to paint a picture of this group of Indigenous students’ story in my study. My challenge in this chapter is to replicate this picture so that the students’ stories and circumstances so willingly shared can help unearth and contribute to these students’ perceptions of their home and school lives in order to gain an understanding from their perspectives of both these environments. Ultimately, these student informants are the focus of the study and their opinions, interpretations, responses and actions with regard to their experiences will dominantly ground the study and provide the critical factors surrounding their risk of switching off school.

The methodology chapter presented the detailed rationale of the broad research design, the selection of schools and students, and overall data collection. This chapter will draw on a number of data sources including student survey, record cards, researcher observation, and interviews with key informants and most importantly be driven by the student interviews as the principle source. Such ‘mixed mode’ research tools have provided the detail to build a student profile and flesh out the background, character, opinions of these students’ general lives and provided a focus on their school experiences. Issues such as family demographics, students’ social lives, career perceptions, students’ own perceptions and those of the schools with regard to students’ academic and general school performance will be explored. To provide a deeper understanding of students’ backgrounds and to further provide the reader with a personalised exposure to the variety of students’ holistic background lives, individual
short life stories are woven through the study through vignettes present in selected chapter introductions. The students' voices are given primacy in informing the detail of the chapter and references to students, unless specifically identified, will be on the collective experiences of both cohorts to experiences around primary, transition into secondary, secondary schooling and more broadly around their perceptions of key issues with regard to their performance and behaviour at school.

The chapter will expose a diversity of Indigenous student lives and cultural environments that will contest often held stereotypical understandings of the broader non-Indigenous community, who often hold very limited understanding of this Indigenous diversity. The concept of Pan-Aboriginality (Price & Price, 1998 as cited in Purdie et al., 2000, p.5) has previously been discussed and the irrelevance of such simple categorization of complex diversity of Indigenous peoples across hundreds of cultures, languages and history does a gross injustice to rich lived personal cultures and experiences of most Indigenous peoples in Australia. Indigenous students in this study reflect this diversity of Indigenous peoples’ contemporary lives and environments. This diversity will be investigated with particular notation of the potential implications of the unique environments of several students living on three Aboriginal missions/reserves in the geographical bounds of the study.

Each of the students brings to the study their own intricate, unique, personal lives and environments which inevitably spill over to their school lives. The chapter explores this cross cultural blurring of Indigenous culture and that of the Western entrenched school environment. While this chapter will look at this overlap and endeavour to piece together individual student responses to their lives, as they relate to school, it will also draw some analysis of the students’ personal responses into the collective themes that guide this case study of Indigenous students. Getting to know these students is pivotal to the study’s important holistic comprehension of why Indigenous kids switch off school and how these students act or are victims of this process.

The binding theme of this thesis is the intrinsic weaving of the complex components of the individual students’ educational encounters within the holistic nature of the case study. The holistic analysis of such students’ educational encounters must unfold through the three aligned ‘factors’ and influences on an individual Indigenous child’s school life, as proposed by Bourke et al. (2000, p.3) through; systemic factors, school/staff factors and parents/community factors. Student issues which are the focus of this chapter
cannot be looked at in isolation from the other factors or issues as cited in Bourke above. It is not the intent of this chapter to provide the analysis of student issues against the other three factors as this will be the focus of the holistic analysis in Chapter 9. Detailed analysis of the student issues will form the final section of this chapter and provide the background for the holistic analysis of all factors/issues surrounding the educational experience of Indigenous students in the case study.

**Data sources informing this chapter**

There were multiple sources of information available to the researcher as outlined in the following list:

- Interviews with students (n = 81 the main source of data used in this chapter);
- Personal profile/rapport building survey (n = 64 [38 in 2001 and follow up 26 in 2003/04]);
- School Life Questionnaires (n = 614, administered across Indigenous & non-Indigenous students in Years 8 & 10);
- School record cards (n = 32);
- Parent/carer interviews (n = 18);
- School staff interviews (n = 55); and
- Observations of the students and their context gathered over the four year period of the field-work.

Data for this chapter come primarily from student interviews, supplemented with a range of other data collection such as information from a personal profile/rapport survey, school questionnaires, review of school student record cards, selected parent/carer interviews and, to a limited degree, the perceptions of teachers, other educational staff and my own observations of students over the four years of their school lives covered in this research. This time span involves (for what I have termed the Year 5 and Year 7 cohorts) data gathered from Year 5 through to Year 8 (Stages 3 and 4) and from Year 7 to Year 10 (Stages 4 and 5) respectively for each cohort, over the years from 2001 to 2004. Details of the methodology adopted and data collection methods and details have been specified in detail in Chapter 3 on research methodology.
The chapter will describe the Year 5 and Year 7 cohorts initially as separate entities and follow the lived experiences of these students as they move between school stages, that is, as the Year 5 cohort progresses from primary school Stage 3 through to Stage 4, and as the Year 7 cohort progresses from Stage 4 to Stage 5. Initially for ease of reference in most of the chapter, students will be discussed within their cohort. However, towards the end of the chapter, a comparative analysis will be undertaken of both cohorts to analyse any collective trends across both cohorts.

It is also timely to recall that neither cohort has any identified unique set of circumstances which might surround their school experiences as detailed in chapter 3 on methodology. They are to all intents and purposes as identified by school staff, representing an average group of Indigenous students within the case study schools with limited traumas or circumstances that needed to be considered with regard to their schooling experiences overall (Educationist Interviews, Appendix 7.2 Question 15)

**Background to the schools**

As previously highlighted in the Chapter 3 on methodology, there were 43 student participants (22 males and 21 females) in the study initially drawn from six (6) primary schools and three (3) secondary schools. These participants represented 24 primary students (15 males and 9 females) and 19 secondary students (7 males and 12 females) who were participants in the study. A fourth secondary school was originally included in the scope of the study, but unfortunately as no students could be recruited from this secondary school, only three secondary schools were part of the initial study. However the fourth secondary school subsequently became part of the study in the third year of data collection owing to the fact that it received graduating primary school students from initial case study schools.

While the majority of primary students graduated to the three initial secondary schools in the study, a few students moved to alternate secondary schools outside of the originally-planned scope of the study. This resulted in a fifth secondary school and a central school also being included in the study, bringing the total number of schools to 12 (six primary,
The previously outlined, selection criteria for schools in Chapter 3 primarily identified as schools with significant numbers of Indigenous student enrolments who were not performing well on state-wide testing results in literacy and numeracy across the district (Apen District, 2004, PowerPoint, slides 15-19). The selection of schools was also carried out in consultation with the NSWDET District Office and the RAECG covering the schools involved in the study.

Case study schools ranged from small primary school with a teaching principal, through to a large sized secondary school and a single central school which covers both primary and secondary students.

Students in these schools had limited access to Indigenous staff within the schools which was a general trend across the District. Of particular note was that only 0.53% of all teaching staff in the district was Indigenous (Apen District, 2004: PowerPoint Slide 31). The vast majority of Indigenous staff in schools in the District were employed either as AEAs or in specifically externally-funded programs such as the then newly introduced In-class Tuition pilot across several of the schools, funded by DEST. Ten of the 12 schools in the case study had access to a fully-funded permanent AEA and another school had

Notes
1. Original student numbers in brackets.
2. Schools with zero in brackets Apen HS no initial recruitment of students or schools which primary recruits fed into (River HS & Lane CS.
3. River PS was added due to its feeding into River HS.

FIGURE 7.1 Schools recruited for study and student numbers
used externally temporary resources to fund an Indigenous person in a support role. There was only one school in the case studies which had a School Administrative Support Staff (SASS) officer working in the school’s front office.

The researcher observed that all of the schools involved in the study physically provided Indigenous symbols and signs that would be demonstrably welcoming to students, such as murals or posters around the school highlighting Indigenous themes. The vast majority of schools were flying the Aboriginal flag within school grounds which further cemented the physical act of welcome to the Indigenous students and parents/community. Eight of the schools had set aside what were referred to often as Aboriginal resource rooms where Indigenous students could gather in what could be described as a ‘home room’ where the AEA was generally housed. One secondary school, the only Central School and two primary schools did not have resource rooms and each of these schools had a relatively lower proportion of Indigenous students than those with resource rooms.

DEMographics of all students in study

Background details on each of the students from both cohorts were collected at the first interview in 2001, the first year of the study, when students filled out a brief questionnaire (Appendix 3.8). This was followed up with a further profile interview session in Stage 4 of their schooling (Appendix 7.1). The initial questionnaire was designed to gather some baseline data and opinions of students about school, and also to act as an initial ‘ice-breaker’ between the researcher and students. Included as part of this questionnaire, students were asked students to fill out a brief questionnaire using a Likert response Scale (Likert, 1932) about the school. The Stage 4 profiling followed through on some more details on family background and some further general ‘ice breaker’ questions on personal matters such as career perceptions, some further confirmation of demographic detail and some potential relationship trigger information such as their pets, favourite colour, etc. This was followed up by an interview to explore the more detailed aspects of the students’ perceptions of the education they were receiving.
Students’ family backgrounds

The diversity of Australian Indigenous society generally and in NSW, is well represented in the case studies students’ family backgrounds and socio-economic circumstances (SCRGSP, 2007) with most students living in overcrowded housing, in low socio-economic communities with high unemployment levels, living in a range of single parent families, through traditional parent families, to a notable group of students who were being brought up by their nans, pops or other close relatives when the students’ parents were identified this group as dysfunctional and their children were at risk. Almost one third of the students lived on Aboriginal missions/reserves in three separate locations, while the remainder lived in integrated housing in towns, serviced by the schools in the case study. A small number of students came from Indigenous middle-class, tertiary educated family backgrounds.

Students’ families

In nearly half of the families in the study, the students identified their mother and father as normal carers. Approximately one third of students indicated that they had a single parent in charge of the household and the vast majority of these were their mums with two students identifying their dads as the sole parent. Of interest is the final identified group of carers which represented the students’ grandparents as ‘the person who looks after you’. It is interesting that in the researcher’s Indigenous world there is often reference to this level of care being provided from grandparents as a normal extension of traditional parenting roles and well accepted as such by many in the Indigenous community. However, in the case study this natural extension of parenting was not primarily done as a traditional role but as an emergency measure to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the child with dysfunctional parents. It was the case in every situation where the Nan or Pop was identified as the carer by the student, and was so graphically highlighted by one of them, including the ultimate implication for the size of a household:

R: Who do you live with?

Alice¹⁷: I live with my Nan. It’s all right.

R: How come you lived with your Nan?

¹⁷ Note: Student pseudonym is used in this chapter to help assist in personalising and humanising student contributions as well as assisting with flow of narratives.
Alice: Because my parents are alcoholics. They just drink every day.

R: And your Nan looks after you? Does she look after anyone else?

Alice: Yes. She looks after my little cousin, who is in Year 3 and she looks after me and her three daughters live with us and their boyfriends and her other little grandchild.

R: Alison [another student in the study] used to live with her.

Alice: We used to live together, but she moved out and lives on the mission with her dad.

R: How many people live in the house then?

Alice: Ten. (Ref. 1.420)

As in the example above, households were generally overcrowded with an average of 6 persons per 2 to 3 bedroom home as established in interview with students. The largest household population was 13 and, as in Alice’s case above, was over crowded due to looking after extended family. There are clearly identifiable negative education outcomes of overcrowded housing as pointed out in the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage – Key Indicators 2007 Report which clearly states:

Overcrowding in housing can have negative consequences not only for health, but for education and family relationships. During consultations on the indicator framework for this Report, many Indigenous people spoke of the effect that overcrowding has on children’s education and how it can contribute to family violence. (SCRGSP, 2007, p.10.2)

While overcrowding of housing appeared as a potential issue and is an obvious disadvantage as noted, little if any further reference was made to such overcrowding by informants as a major issue in the study as it related to the primary question of why Aboriginal kids switch off school. There is generally some discussion in other chapters around low socio-economic circumstances leading to disadvantage and the more obvious references to ‘family violence’ of some children but none of this is directly attributable in the data specifically to overcrowding.

The smallest household was two, where a student was being looked after by her pop and this was again a situation brought about by dysfunctional parents. No student
identified their family situation as the typical Australian nuclear family household of dad, mum and two children. The closest to this existing was in two households where dad was a step dad to the children.

Students’ home environments were generally talked about in positive terms by the majority of students. However, some students highlighted difficult domestic circumstances from time to time, often associated with relationships between the step father and mother of the student (Ref: 1.36). Evident in several families was the complexity of extended families in households and the genuine ties, responsibilities and support that they play in Indigenous communities such as the ones found in this case study. This is well represented when students were asked about who lives in your house. In the following example, the apparent normality of this existence, noting the student’s final response (The Nan here is different from the one referred to earlier.):

**Mel:** My mum and dad. My two sisters, my older sister moved out with her fiancé. I have another cousin, Norm, he moved out with us because he is having a bit too much problems with my Nan. My Nan adopted seven kids from my aunty because she couldn’t really look after them properly, so he’s come to move to, live with us because Nan couldn’t handle him because she had six other kids to look after so he come to live with us and he’s my cousin. He’s come to live with us and me.

R: Has your life changed in the last four years?

Mel: Not really. (Ref: 1.400)

### Family education

The importance of education as an emancipatory tool out of poverty through improving employment prospects was overwhelmingly identified by the Indigenous parents and community members (Community Interviews, Appendix 7.2 Question 6). The students also identified education as important for similar reasons (Student Interviews, 2003, Q20). Student responses regarding the highest level of education achieved in the household across both cohorts indicated that a little over a half of the households had Year 12 equivalent or higher as the highest level of education. In the households with less than Year 12 equivalent as the highest levels of education, the majority of households had less than the equivalent of Year 10 qualifications. Students in the study from mission/reserve home backgrounds had family educational attainment primarily at or below Year 10 equivalence as the highest level of educational attainment.
Of particular note were two households, from both on and off the mission/reserve, which demonstrated a strong family commitment to achieving improved educational outcomes. Both parents from the mission family had achieved their Year 10 equivalent. The three daughters in the family who all dropped out of school before completing Year 10 and therefore did not achieve their School Certificate, were now at TAFE doing an equivalent qualification and enjoying these studies (Narelle, Ref. 1.380). In the other family living in the town, the student’s mum, a brother and sisters have university educational experience and the student wants to seek employment after Year 12 as a mechanic (Tony, Ref. 1.341)

There was little difference between cohorts on family educational backgrounds. However, obviously students’ individual perceptions of when they would leave school and what their futures held for them was much more polarised and pragmatic in the Year 8 cohort who, at the time of final interviews, were on the doorstep to the reality of decisions surrounding whether or not to go beyond Year 10.

There appeared to be a strong correlation between household and in particular parental educational attainment and that of the students’ propensity to choose to stay on longer at school to Year 12. Students from homes where the highest level of educational attainment were beyond Year 10 showed a greater motivation to elect to stay onto Year 12. These students made strong statements which indicated either parental push or a strong understanding about the value of education to their chosen fields of future potential employment and therefore the importance for them to continue past Year 10 and most onto successful Year 12 results:

- Go to Year 12 cause dad wants me to get better job and that (John, Ref. 1.041)
- To get a better education...To get a job (Leon, Ref. 1.291)
- Mum wants me to go to Year 12 and get a good scholarship. (Van, Ref. 1.081)
- So can get better education. (Jane, Ref. 1.210)

In two instances, students indicated an intention to stay on longer at school even though their highest household level of educational attainment was at Year 10 or below. But of interest here is the fact that both of these students had listed a parent and aunty, or aunty
on their own, as the person who they could best confide in and would go to for important advice (Refs. 1.270 and 1.280). Insufficient data was available from the interviews of these two students to draw any conclusion about the role of the aunts in their decision to consider staying on at school. However, the role of the nominated significant person in the students' lives may lend weight to such critical decisions.

**Family influence on students**

There has been much written with respect to external influences on Indigenous students' performances at school and a lot of this has been rebuffed in arguments around ‘deficit theory’ which was covered in detail in the Literature Review in Chapter 2. Much of this discourse concentrated on the over-representation of the students’ external environmental factors as having a negative and near-impossible-to-overcome effect on the Indigenous students' potential to succeed at school. In the main, the environmental factors identified included poverty, poor housing and related health issues, family dysfunction, lack of family education levels and subsequent perceived importance parents/carers placed on education. Rather than dwell on this negative aspect of external pressures on students' capacity, the case study had the capacity to look for the more positive aspects, both external and internal to the students' schooling. The internal aspects of schooling effects on students have been dealt with in Chapter 5 and 6 and the issue of external influences will be explored, particularly the role of family, on students in the study in Chapter 8.

In developing the student profiles, during interviews students were asked to nominate who they would go to for advice about something which really meant a lot to them. They were also asked to nominate who had given them the most support and encouragement to keep going to school. Family support overwhelmingly played the most significant role in each of these domains.

In relation to the question about who they would seek advice from, students were given the opportunity to nominate both outside of the school and also internally within the school (the latter dealt with earlier in Chapter 5 and 6). Students in both cohorts resoundingly nominated family members and in particular their mums, followed by their dads, nans and aunties as the ones whose advice meant the most to them. Friends were
mentioned by only two students. Student responses were very definite and concise on this matter:

*My mum, I tell her everything.* (Mel, Ref. 1.400)

*I’d go to a family member, probably an uncle, aunty, Nan, Mum.* (Tony, Ref. 1.341)

Across both cohorts answers to the question of who gave the students the most support to come to school was dominated by family, with mums giving the most encouragement which was closely followed by dad and followed by a number of nominations for nans and pops and with only minor numbers indicating more extended family members. One student nominated friends. Students also understood the limitations of their surrounding environments and the emancipatory potential of education. Given some of the students’ limited educational family backgrounds and particularly, from those who understood and have personally experienced the restrictive life on missions/reserves, when asked who supports you staying at school, their understanding of the importance of education is clearly evident:

*Mum and dad. They say, “Go to school, you’ve got potential”. I think my mum and dad too – but myself. Because I look around and see all my family - they don’t go to school and they’re just like on drugs. I want to make something for myself. I don’t want to be stuck on the mission – stuck in this town forever.* (Amy, Ref. 1.420)

One student cared for by a single dad who clearly understood the importance of education responded:

*Damien: My father. He says you’ve got to go to school, do your work, get that Year 10 Certificate and you’ll definitely have a good life and you get a job. When you – you’ve got to get through school and do what the teachers tell you. If you want to go to Year 12 you get your Year 12 Certificate.*

*R: Does he encourage you – if you wanted to go to Year 12?*

*Damien: Yeah, he’d support me all the way.* (Ref. 1.061)

There is strong evidence in this research of the role played by family in encouraging children to go to school and to perform well there. Such evidence was also brought to
light in a NSW Board of Studies Evaluation of a Careers Aspirations Program for Year 9 Indigenous students (Lester, 2000, p.35) and further in the work of Pascoe, (1996); Gool and Patton, (1999); and Lysaght, Tuck and Adair, (1999). Such evidence serves to challenge the ‘deficit’ notion of Indigenous parents/carers not caring or supporting their children’s education. Further, understanding this critical positive role provides opportunity to direct resources strategically to support Indigenous students’ parents and extended families’ educational career knowledge base, so parents/carers can foster and extend this advice even further (Lester, 2000).

**STUDENTS’ SOCIAL WORLD – BOTH COHORTS**

Students from both cohorts were asked to describe their lives outside of school and specifically what they do in their free time, who they share this time with and how they perceived their home lives. There was little difference between the two student cohorts’ descriptions of their home and social lives outside of school. However, there was some minor difference in the older cohort, primarily due to their age (around 16 years old at the time of interviews). The older cohort had access to part-time employment in one case and in several cases these students also had discussion about experimenting with alcohol in describing of their social lives, ‘

*We do drinking, but we don’t do it all the time. (Ref. 1.420).*

**Students’ home lives**

Overwhelmingly students spoke about their home lives in generally positive, although albeit brief terms, as ‘good’, ‘pretty good’, ‘normal’ and ‘all right’. One student, Lisa who was being cared for by her Nan, spoke fondly about her rich cultural and social life that she shared with several other grandchildren her Nan also looked after.

In a minority of cases, students highlighted domestic and other violence as an unwelcome part of family life both off and on the mission and this was reflected as concerns expressed by following two students:

*R: What’s home life like for you?*
**Cathie:** It's good now.
**R:** What was it like?
**Cathie:** We had a step dad that was really violent, so we ended up leaving him.
**R:** So things have worked out.
**Cathie:** Yep. (Ref. 1.260)

**R:** What’s it like living on the mission?
**Leon:** Oh, it’s not that good, it’s like people just want to fight you every day.
**R:** They want to fight you? How do you avoid that?
**Leon:** Well I don’t really avoid it.
**R:** So you get in fights and stuff?
**Leon:** Yeah. (Ref. 1.291)

While a small percentage of students spoke about violence, overwhelmingly students although briefly in direct answer to this question, elaborated in other questions about the great fun and positive interactions with friends and relatives which added to their all but brief statements here. Overall there was a strong sense coming from these student interviews that the vast majority of students were surrounded by loving, caring and supportive parents/carers and in following sections are supported by close kinship ties and strong cultural bonds.

**Friends**

When asked to fill out the initial student survey in the first year of the data gathering, students were asked to nominate who their favourite person is in the whole world. Once again overwhelmingly, both student cohorts nominated their parents and grandparents as their favourite person. Friends were the next most nominated with six student nominations. There is great opportunity for schools to work directly with parents and carers here to help build student engagement in school.
In interviews, students highlighted a broad cross-section of friendships they had which included some with solely Indigenous and non-Indigenous friends, but most characterised their friends as a mixture of Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Many students listed their family relations among their pool of friends and, in the Year 5 cohort, there was a transfer of friendships demonstrated in primary school that carried over to the secondary school.

Typically the students in this study come from lower socio-economic rural environments where distances and fuel costs are prohibitive. For those living on more isolated missions and reserves the lack of access to transport reduces chances of friendships outside walking or cycling distance, but also increases the possibility for immediate, and extended family friendships, and the potential for these friendship networks, core values and kinship ties to extend into school friendships and relationships. These issues will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 8 on Parent-Community Factors.

The outcomes of friendships were described in terms of kindness, loyalty, support, sharing confidences, and similar interest with sport being a very highly commonly shared activity amongst most students.

**How the students spent their own time**

Student social lives were generally spent with a mixture of Indigenous and non-Indigenous friends or relatives in a wide variety of activities. The vast majority of students at interview openly identified they had at least several friends and appeared to have little difficulty making new ones, especially in the transfer between primary and secondary schools.

The only discernible difference between the two cohorts of Indigenous students is a subtle one in the terms they use for describing how they relate to their friends. The Year 7 cohort used terms like ‘hang out’, ‘hang around’ or ‘hang with their friends’, whereas the Year 5 cohort talked more in terms of ‘play with’, ‘play sport’ etc., although you could detect the transfer to the ‘hanging out’, apparently more mature, statements of the older students in the younger cohort.
Owing to the geographical location of the case studies close to significant rivers and coastal areas, it is not surprising that water activities proved dominant in their social activities such as swimming, surfing, body boarding and other associated activities including skateboarding. While no student identified fishing as an activity undertaken, this appears to be strange because the researcher is well aware of the close working and significant traditional relationship these communities have with activities surrounding food catching and gathering around waterways. It is possible that perhaps fishing and other food gathering activities are not classified as leisure activities in the lives of these students but more a way of life.

Sport was a big contributor to the social lives of the students outside of school and a vast variety of sporting activities were undertaken, namely football, touch football, soccer, cricket, basketball, netball and handball. Listening to music, reading and playing on the computer were the common passive activities undertaken by both cohorts. One Year 8 student who had a continuing behavioural problem at his school, listed his dad as his favourite person and also clearly articulated the close bond he had with his dad in the way he liked to fill in his time outside of school. In this instance, time available due to suspensions from school may even eventually lead him to a career:

**Damien:** Me and me[sic] dad usually go over to the pool hall in the city there or we used to go and do some shooting or something like that. Lately, we’ve been working on the car. Me and dad have just been up at dad’s Aboriginal friends and have been working on an XA4 [type/make of car]. Respraying it and fixing all the panels on it. That’s what I’ve been doing when I’ve been on suspension all day, every day.

**R:** What do you think about that?

**Damien:** I like doing that. Something I might do when I’m older.

**R:** Is that the sort of job you’d like to do?

**Damien:** Something like that. (Ref. 1.061)

The daily lives painted here did not portray the doom and gloom that in my career as an educator I have read and heard so much about. These students are a fairly average group who, while may be in many cases economically poor, have demonstrated in this study that they have a rich extended family net which they cherish and nurture. The children in reciprocity build and maintain these family bonds and talk proudly about
relations as friends. Some are ‘doing it tough’, confronted by considerable problems, including difficult home environments, but it must be recognised that by far, most of these students are in family homes, many with large numbers of family, where they are well cared for and loved by parents and family who understand and support them in their education. The lives of these Indigenous students to this point in the study demonstrated strong caring family bonds that demanded an equitable education which demonstrated the highest expectation for these students from the schooling system.

SCHOOL LIFE

This section of the chapter will look specifically at the students’ perceptions of their lives at primary and secondary school which were collected using structured interviews and a short student survey questionnaire broken up in two sections, short answer questions followed by six items with Likert 6-point scale responses to what the students felt about playgrounds, school, teachers, classrooms, school executive staff and lessons (Appendix 7.1). The data from interviews included a focus on transitioning from primary to secondary school, response to teachers, review of subjects, and with special consideration for the students’ exposure to Aboriginal Studies, the atmosphere of the school with regard to Aboriginal students and the students perceptions of the role of the AEA.

This section will address initially the experiences of the younger cohort’s (Year 5 cohort) reflections on their final Stage 3 primary years. It will then report both cohorts’ experiences in the transition into secondary school (or Stage 4), and finally the Year 7 cohort’s experiences in Stage 5 of their secondary schooling will be reviewed. In addition, exploration of the data around common themes will be undertaken across all stages.

Students’ perceptions of Primary School

Year 5 student cohort’s perceptions of Primary School

The Indigenous Year 5 Cohort students in structured interviews (that included several survey type questions), in their first year of secondary school were asked how they would rate their primary school experience in a rating out of 10, with 10 being the very best
experience. Primary experience received a mean rating of 7.4 out of 10 by students in this Year 5 cohort, which reflected their responses to primary school in general in both survey and interviews conducted.

In the first year of the study Year 5 cohort of students were asked to fill out a simple interview survey as previously indicated in Chapter 2. Students were asked questions on subjects they liked and disliked, and the corresponding subjects in which they thought they did well or poorly. In addition students were asked to identify in their view the best and worst things about their primary school experiences, and finally to answer questions surrounding their feelings about school and in particular if things make them angry or happy at school. Included in this survey was a 6-point Likert scale (See Appendix 7.2) on how they felt about; the playgrounds, school, teachers, their classrooms, executive staff (referred in the scale as ‘teachers who run the school’) and about what they were being taught. Each of the scaled scores will be discussed under the appropriate section following.

**Likes and dislikes of Primary School**

*Introductory questionnaire survey results*

Indigenous student responses to the interview survey questions on the best and worst things about primary school were fairly consistent amongst the students and relatively fresh and innocent, as might be expected of children around 10 years old. When asked during this interview survey to rate their feelings using a six-point Likert scale questionnaire as part of the interview survey (Appendix, 7.1), on how happy they felt rating from Extremely Unhappy (1) through to Extremely Happy (6) with variations on the scale including very un/happy and un/happy, about the six items assessed: the playgrounds; the school; the teachers; their classrooms; the teachers who run the school (executive staff of school); and what they were being taught (lessons).

The responses in Table 7.1 indicate that students were generally happy with the school with a mean of 4.43 (where a score of 3.5 represents a neutral position) and felt very happy with a 4.86 mean rating for the lessons. The Underdale and Apen schools rated primary school overall (School Mean) as being a place they were very happy (mean 5.33 and 5.11 respectively) and it should be further noted that both these schools draw from two of the three Missions for their students and both of these are reported in the study as the most dysfunctional communities. The two students at Yale Public School
appeared the least happy with their school (mean 3.08) but no strong conclusions can be drawn from such a small number of students. The survey results certainly do not paint a picture of these Indigenous primary school students having any major concerns with regard to their schooling (with all mean scores for all schools on the six areas assessed in excess of 4.00) at their current stage of education and this is further supported in the following analysis of the more general semi-structured interview questions of the survey.

### TABLE 7.1 Year 5 cohort interview survey ratings of Primary School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Playground</th>
<th>School General</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Classrooms</th>
<th>School Executive</th>
<th>Lessons</th>
<th>School Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oxford PS</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>5.50</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>4.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>River PS</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underdale PS</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>5.50</td>
<td>5.50</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>5.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newton PS</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>4.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yale PS</td>
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<td>3.50</td>
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<td>3.00</td>
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<td>3.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>3.08</td>
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<tr>
<td>Apen PS</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>5.33</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>4.83</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>5.17</td>
<td>5.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean all PS</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>4.51</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>4.86</td>
<td>4.43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Opinions on subjects in Primary School from interview survey**

Students in Year 5 were given the opportunity to comment on their favourite subject and the subjects they perceived that they did best and worst in by responding to the interview survey instrument (Appendix, 7.1). They were also asked to indicate the reasons behind their choices. Finally in the Questionnaire section of the Interview Survey, they were given an opportunity to rate ‘What they were being taught’ (Lessons) as indicated in the Table 7.1, which proved to be the highest result on this measure at a near very happy 4.86 mean rating.

In response to the Interview Survey question on, what was the students’ favourite subject, three quarters of the students indicated that their favourite subject was in the academic disciplines of mathematics and English. I defined English, here to include writing, spelling, journal writing or English itself. Half of these students nominated mathematics as their favourite subject. More physical skills development subjects such as handwriting, sport and art were listed by the minority. Students indicated consistently that they chose these subjects because they were in their terms; “fun”, “they were good at it”, “they learnt”, “it’s easy to do” and “I know my tables”. Most of these answers
revolved around the students’ obvious feelings of success in the subject and therefore
the positive feelings around it. This is interesting because, as will be seen, there was
only moderate correlation between students’ favourite subjects and the ones they felt
they did best in.

Less than half the students nominated their favourite subject as the subject they were
best at. More than half of the students again nominated academic-type subjects as the
ones they perceived they did best at, such as mathematics, English, reading and
spelling. Sport and art proved to be the next ‘favourite’ subject choice. As could be
anticipated, in making their choices students once again highlighted consistently when
asked why in the Interview Survey, that their choice revolved around their perception that
they were good at these subjects or that they gained success or it provided a challenge
in open responses to this question. But, it is important to note that a significant number
of these students chose different subjects from their favourite ones here and again many
nominated more academic subjects. One student who chose art as both her favourite
and subject she does best in explained this by, “I got art hands.” (Lorraine, Student Profile
Survey, 2001)

Mathematics, English (including spelling) and Human Society and Its Environment
(HSIE) were the subjects the students felt they did worst at. Perhaps predictably, their
decisions stemmed from their lack of success and understanding of the subjects. With
two different students, the subjects were very specifically related to sports skills in discus
and shot putt because they could not master the skills involved. It should be noted here
that, other than these two students in such specialised sporting areas, no student
nominated any ‘hands on’ subjects such as art, music or craft type subject areas.

No student in Year 5 cohort mentioned Aboriginal studies as a subject area they either
liked or disliked. In fact, Aboriginal studies were not mentioned at all until this cohort was
specifically asked in interviews when they were in Year 7 at secondary school. Their
interview responses specifically to do with Aboriginal studies will be reported on later in
this chapter.

At this point in the chapter it is worth noting the response of one male student Barry who,
like Bill in the previous section, listed his reason for HSIE being his worst subject
because, “You have to keep up.” (Barry, Student Profile Survey, 2001). Again this
student has identified specifically that he is beginning to show signs of his limited
capacity to keep up with the work in Year 5. Unfortunately, like Bill this student also subsequently becomes a major behavioural problem in school.

Primary School Year 5 cohort students’ perceptions of their teachers

Teachers in the various primary schools in the study were rated highly by students with a mean of 4.51 on the 6-point Likert scale administered in the first year of the study when Year 5 cohort was in Year 5.

The Year 5 cohort was interviewed following earlier survey data gathering, in their first year of secondary school and specifically asked about who their favourite primary teacher/s was/were and why. Students generally responded very favourably to this question and had little trouble identifying the primary teachers that they liked. Although two students could not name a single teacher, one student said she had heaps of favourite teachers at her primary school. There was no identifiable difference between student responses from the various schools in the interview data for this transition year.

In readily nominating their favourite teacher they were asked to indicate the reason behind their choice and just as readily the vast majority indicated because “they were nice”. Some students indicated that it was because the teachers took the time to help them and the following three quotes from students articulate some more detailed explanation and the length that some teachers went in support of the students:

Miss X. She helped me through if I had problems at home, I’d talk to her and she’d help me out and stuff like that and um she just like help me if I needed something she’d help me get it. If I didn’t have any lunch, she would help me with my lunch order and stuff. (Lisa, Ref. 1.310)

Mr Y. Cause whenever I needed help, he was there more than what my other teachers were and that and he’d help me out and stuff like that. (John, Ref. 1.040)

And in this instance Mrs C is the principal of the primary school the student refers;

Damien: Mr. Y, Mrs. R and Mrs. C.

R: Why were they your favourites?

Damien:: Because we got on and they treated you with respect and they were good to you?
**R:** Why is Mrs. C one of your favourite teachers?

**Damien:** She’s always nice to me; she’s always ready to talk to me if I have problems. She was understanding! (Ref. 1.061)

With the exception of the two students who could not nominate a single favourite teacher, students appeared to be able to readily identify teachers who were not only nice/helpful but, from the above student quotes, went out of their way to work closely and personally with students.

Overall student interviews revealed only minor concerns expressed about their primary school teachers. The main concerns with these teachers were they were, in student terms, ‘growly’, ‘mean’, or that they would ‘get up you’ for perceivably minor disciplinary matters. There was no mention by students of teachers being in any way racist or unfair in their treatment. In fact student responses were best summed up by one of the female students who responded:

_I didn’t have any worst teachers, but I only didn’t like them sometimes when they were grumpy. But overall they were all right._ (Margaret, Ref. 1.270)

**Student anger emerges as a critical concern from Student Interview Survey**

Three quarters of the students (both cohorts) who did the Interview Survey (Appendix 7.1 indicated that they got angry at some stage of their primary school experiences. Annoying or teasing students caused feelings of anger and one child associated closely with these feelings who felt not only he, but his family was being made fun of, but he did not elaborate on why this was so. Again, this area will be explored in the section specifically on racism later in the chapter.

The following three issues raised by students and leading to a sense of feeling angered, touch on areas of concern that perhaps at this early stage of the presentation of student data results requires addressing at this point. They warranted a more detailed analysis because they may assist in trying to identify areas which might indicate signs of Indigenous kids switching off school. Two of the three statements seem to relate directly to anger generated from school-related issues directly and the third relates to how an individual student is coming to terms with his own frustrations regarding self-management of his emotions.
The following two statements from two students, a female and a male are related to perceptions of criticism of their interactions with the classroom teacher and perhaps some reflection on the quality of the teaching in the classroom.

The first student statement cited is from Lisa with regard to a level of frustration which lead to anger was: “the teachers say ‘no’ to good things” (Ref. Student 31 Student Survey, 2001). This student in the same survey had mentioned education as something which she sees as really important, so her overall response to the survey was very focused, mature and positive. The NSWDET Quality Teaching in NSW public schools Annotated Bibliography (Ladwig & King, 2003, p.18) citing the work of Smith, Lee and Newmann (2001), highlights the importance of ‘student direction’ where students exert some control or choice of their learning environments. It is premature at this stage to draw any significant conclusion from this isolated frustration of a single student, but simply worthy of note in comments in the broader analysis of the chapter to come.

The second statement is a response or perhaps a cry for help in one student’s statement about what makes him angry “When I don't keep up with the teacher's work [sic]” (Ref: Student 20, Student Survey, 2001). Given that this student is one whose behavioural problems at school began to escalate from this point of his school life, to include extensive suspensions and eventual expulsion and alienation from the school system. Bill’s (pseudonym) school record card paints a very bleak future for him and at the time of the commencement of this research his record begins to speak for itself:

*Bill’s class work has been of a satisfactory standard this term. This has been overshadowed by Bill's poor classroom behaviour. Bill has been easily distracted in class; he is often off task and annoys his classmates with his talk and movement around the room. Bill needs to develop some respect and maturity in Yr 6. This has been an average effort from an exceptional student. (Ref: Bill’s Student Record Notes)*

Of particular note is the perception by the noting teacher on the record card of Bill as an exceptional student. I must admit that my brief exposure to Bill in limited interviews, the second one being conducted outside the courthouse as Bill was to appear in court on a criminal matter, I came away with a similar perception to the teacher’s comments, a clear sense that Bill was a gifted and talented student with enormous potential. Bill’s attendance patterns indicate massive absences from school and at least seven schools where he has either moved to or has been forced to move to because of his behaviour patterns. Munns (1996, 1998) work on Indigenous student resistance to education,
based on Willis’ earlier work in this field (1977, 1981, 1983), and seemed to fit the case of Bill. Bill’s circumstances will be further analysed in the final analysis section of this chapter when the issue of identifying Indigenous student groups is discussed.

The third male student Damien had a similar aggressive behavioural pattern as Bill above. He indicated that he got angry, “When I get out of control” (Ref. 6 Student Survey, 2001) and clearly pointed out his torment and frustration surrounding his own sets of behaviours at school. In a follow-up interview (Ref. 1.061) with Damien, he openly raised his struggles with controlling his temper and quite clearly knew the repercussions of acting out his anger, but unfortunately he had little success in the following years. Damien did not demonstrate the same high level of intellect that Bill did and, therefore, was not necessarily acting out any conscious or unconscious motivated resistance to the schooling system from the researcher’s observations and record card notes. He appeared to have deep-seeded psychological concerns stemming from traumatic events in his home life which he acted out in his aggressive manner at school.

**Year 7 student cohort’s perceptions of Primary School**

The majority of the Year 7 cohort students preferred secondary school over primary because of the more social aspects, closer alignment of subjects to careers, including access to work experience, and the diversity associated with a wider subject choice and the movement involved between different classroom, subjects and teachers. While there was a notable acknowledgement of the increase in workload undertaken over their primary experiences, most students accepted this trade-off for the above positive reasons. Ann sums up the cohort perspectives on the two levels well when asked which she preferred:

> Different. You get a lot more work in high school. I prefer high school, because you’re not in the same class, you don’t have the same teacher the whole day. You’re interacting with more people, it’s more social. (Ref. 1.390)

The minority of students who nominated their primary school experiences as most favourable were those who were generally experiencing behavioural difficulties like Yvonne who indicated her high school treatment as, ‘The teachers picking on you for doing little things.’ (Ref. 1.440).
Next, we will explore the experience of movement between the two school levels to see how this might have influenced, if at all, the both cohorts' opinions.

**Stage 4 and transition to Secondary School of both cohorts**

**Year 5 cohorts views on transition**

Student responses in interview to questions specifically around transition to secondary school appeared to be overall, unproblematic. In every primary school in the study a brief transition program had been arranged where students were brought to the secondary schools and introduced to its programs and processes, which the students in interview comments appreciated. As previously indicated (p.234), students rated their primary experiences at an average of 7.4 out of 10 and a similar rating was sought on the Year 5 cohorts’ rating of secondary school experiences, rating them at 8.3. Although care at this stage of any major comparison between the two sectors may be premature as these comments came at this early stage of their secondary school life.

The Year 5 cohort was asked in Year 7 what their feelings were prior to coming to secondary school. They indicated a level of nervousness and apprehension, mainly about the unknown nature of secondary school. The ultimate dispelling of much of this nervousness is best summed up by a Year 5 cohort student’s following interview quote:

**Barney:** I was pretty nervous.

**R:** Why?

**Barney:** Cause it was just like starting school again. It was just like going back to kindergarten.

**R:** What were you nervous about?

**Barney:** Bigger people picking on me and everything, but it’s not so bad. (Ref. 1.301)

While the Year 5 cohort students’ transition into secondary school was generally unproblematic, and in their first year in secondary school they indicated that once they had made new social contacts and developed subsequently new friendships, student interview statements overall were generally quite supportive of the secondary school experience. However, this positive experience appeared to wane as students began to
move into Year 8 and beyond and was generally commensurate with increasing workload and difficulty of the school work involved. Year 5 cohort students in a follow-up interview to their Year 7 experiences were positive about secondary school; in their Year 8 interviews they began to identify primary school more readily as their favoured educational experience. From Year 8 onwards, students responses to interviews begin to polarise into those that perceived that they were coping with secondary school and those that were obviously not (based on interview and student records). This is indicative of both cohorts, as reflected in the following two quotes from Year 7 cohort student interviews when they were asked while in Year 10 about their school experiences and what the best things about school were:

Reid: It's shit. It's just I'm not very good academically. I love electronics, metalwork and human movement. They’re the only things I like about school.

R: Do you have trouble reading and writing?

Reid: I have a bit of trouble. I'm not a good speller. I'm a bit slow at reading. I still get through it. I'm just a bit slow. (Ref: 1.361)

Cathie: I'd have to say I actually get called a geek, but I like learning. That’s about all.

R: Has that improved in the last few years?

Cathie: Very much.

R: Has anything changed to make that better?

Cathie: My mum helped me study. I'm in advanced English now. My mum’s at TAFE now. She’s doing retail operations. (Ref: 1.260)

Year 7 cohort’s perceptions of their first year transfer into Secondary School

The Year 7 cohort was given the same Interview Survey Questions (Appendix 7.1) as their primary cohort peers and asked to complete this based on their experiences in their first year of secondary study while in Year 7. The final section of the Interview Survey comprised, as with their Year 5 cohort, a six-point Likert Scale rating from extremely unhappy to extremely happy, where students were asked to indicate what they felt about critical areas of their school life i.e. playgrounds, the school, teachers, their classrooms,
the school executive (referred in survey as teachers who run the school) and what they were being taught.

TABLE 7.2 Year 7 cohort interview survey ratings of Secondary School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Playground</th>
<th>School General</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Classroom</th>
<th>School Executive</th>
<th>Lessons</th>
<th>School Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Handy HS</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxford HS</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>3.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yale HS</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>3.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean all HS</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>3.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Student response to the Likert section of the Interview Survey (Table 7.2) when asked how they felt about these items students rated teachers the poorest with a mean of 2.09, followed by the school executive with 2.85 with the secondary students most happy with their school playgrounds (4.04 mean) and what was being taught in lessons (4.06 mean). The School General overall mean was 3.48 and for classrooms 2.94. Individual schools differed on the scales in the following ways. Yale Secondary students were the most unhappy about their school (2.83 mean), which was consistent with the prior Table 7.1 results for primary for this school (2.00 mean). Oxford Secondary appeared very unhappy with their teachers (1.75 mean), compared with the other schools. Handy Secondary School felt the happiest with the lessons they were receiving (5.0 mean).

Socialisation played a big role in the students’ school life and this was particularly important in secondary school. Interviews of the Year 5 cohort indicate that initial transition into secondary school, and making new friends were relatively big issues for them and the Year 7 cohort overwhelmingly cited friends and socialisation in school as their favourite things about their secondary school experience. Both groups mentioned some favourite subjects also when reflecting on the good things about school but this was more obvious in the Year 7 cohort’s responses when in Year 8. Students began to mention more about their teachers as well as their positive and negative experiences in secondary school which will be addressed in the next section.

Table 7.3 looks at the means and standard deviations for both cohorts’ ratings of primary (Year 5 cohort) and secondary (Year 7 cohort) on the six previous scales and an overall School Feel scale (shown as School Mean in Tables 7.1 and 7.2).
On four scales, Teachers, Classrooms, School Executive and overall School Feel, the primary experience was significantly higher on each of these scales. There is obviously a deterioration of feelings beginning to emerge between primary and secondary experiences around each of these scales and more generally around student satisfaction with their school experiences.

**Students’ Perceptions of their Secondary School Experiences**

Students’ perceptions of their transition into secondary school suggested they found that it was fairly uneventful and that preconceived apprehensions soon resolved themselves as they made new friends. They also came to terms with the increased size of the schools in comparison to their much smaller primary schools and the constant movement between classes. This chapter now turns to student opinion about the students’ secondary school experiences including specifically addressing the key issues such as likes/dislikes, subject choice experiences including associated experience to Aboriginal studies with particular reference to students’ exposure to cultural knowledge and Aboriginal languages both in and outside of school. Their views on academic outcomes and general student feelings about the quality of the education being provided to them
in relation to perceptions of teachers and executive staff were also canvassed. Interviews undertaken with both cohorts further explored critical issues around how students responded to school in terms of their attendance, behaviour, and their results. The section finally looks at whether manifestations of perceived existence of racism begin to emerge in student interview discourse at this secondary stage of their education.

Student perceptions in this secondary section were elicited primarily by establishing their perceptions of teachers and school administration through student interview and supplemented by Ainley and Bourke’s (1992) Quality of School Life questionnaire which was in common use within schools throughout NSW at the time of the data gathering. This Questionnaire while supplementing the more substantive interview data forming the next section will be addressed first as it provides an interesting backdrop to the interview data and a point of comparison to the Indigenous informants to that of their non-Indigenous peers.

Perceptions of both cohorts about their secondary experiences will be reported simultaneously in this following section. Although at times specific reference will be made to individual cohort responses due to significant cohort difference or when referring to only Year 7 cohorts reflection of Years 9 and 10 experiences which was unique to these students during the study.

**All students’ perceptions of the Quality of their Secondary School Life**

Participating secondary schools and the single central school in the research were asked if they would be prepared to implement the ‘Students’ Perceptions of the Quality of their Secondary School Life Questionnaire’ (referred to as SSLQ from this point) for their Year 8 and Year 10 student cohorts. Four of the five schools (Apen, Handy, Oxford & Yale) agreed to implement the questionnaire to students in each of these two cohorts in their school. This questionnaire was chosen for two reasons firstly, its fairly common use within schools as a respected tool across NSW and Australia for measuring student opinion about schools during the time of data collection for the study; and secondly its capacity to measure student attitudes to such critical areas of schools in general, personal identity, teachers, and fellow students. The SSLQ elicits student responses to 38 statements about school which students’ record on a four-point Likert scale from
Agree to Disagree (scored 4 -1). Statements are further refined into six different aspects of school life which are referred to as ‘scales’ including items about teachers, student opportunity, achievement, status in school, their perceptions around identity and overall general satisfaction around school life. It promotes comments both around wellbeing (positive affect) and negative feelings (negative affect) on perceptions of school life (Australian Council for Educational Research [ACER], undated). A copy of the Secondary School Life Questionnaire (SSLQ) is at Appendix 3.9 and the results of the four secondary schools follow.

Background to implementation of the Secondary School Life Questionnaire

The SSLQ was completed during 2004 of the study by students in Year 8 (462 students) and Year 10 (152 students) totalling 614 student questionnaires across four secondary schools in the study. Forty students identified as Aboriginal (6.5% of all students) and 574 were non-Aboriginal. Total responses to the SSLQ based on race against each of the scales follows in Table 7.4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SSLQ Scale</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev’n.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Aboriginal</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>0.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Aboriginal</td>
<td>572</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity</td>
<td>Aboriginal</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Aboriginal</td>
<td>573</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement</td>
<td>Aboriginal</td>
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<td>1.90</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Aboriginal</td>
<td>574</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status</td>
<td>Aboriginal</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Aboriginal</td>
<td>572</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Aboriginal</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Aboriginal</td>
<td>574</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Satisfaction</td>
<td>Aboriginal</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Aboriginal</td>
<td>573</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Affect</td>
<td>Aboriginal</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Aboriginal</td>
<td>573</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Table 7.4 has only one significant difference identified around race and this was in the area of ‘Identity’ where Aboriginal students had a lower sense of self identity within the school setting compared with their non-Aboriginal peers (t= 2.61, df=612, p<.05) This is consistent with the specific literature around Aboriginal identity (Groome & Hamilton,
1995b; Purdie, et al., 2000; Bodkin-Andrews, O’Rourke & Craven, 2010; Bodkin-Andrews, Seaton, Nelson, Craven & Yeung, 2010; De Bortoli & Thomas, 2010) and indicates a level of students’ sense of alienation from western constructed school learning environments and also Aboriginal students’ generally lower levels of literacy and numeracy which impact on their capacity to succeed at school. It is worthy of note that state-wide data indicates that retention rates from Year 8 for Aboriginal students drops markedly from this point with the most significant drop occurring from Year 9 to Year 10 (NSWAECG and NSWDET, 2004).

TABLE 7.5 Secondary School Life Questionnaire – Gender/Race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>SSLQ Scale</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev'n</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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</table>

Comparative analysis (independent samples t-test) across each of the six scales has been carried out and each of these will be broken down to discrete areas to determine
any significant difference around racial background in the areas of school/race, gender/race and year level/race in the following analysis.

In Table 7.5, experiences with regard to a comparison between Aboriginal and non- Aboriginal students and their gender revealed only two significant differences. Firstly, Aboriginal female students had a lower negative feeling towards school than did their non-Aboriginal peers (t=2.007, df=290, p<.05).

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev'n.</th>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Aboriginal</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

18 For the Negative Affect scale a higher score indicates less satisfaction with school (Ainley & Bourke, 1992, p. 122)
The second area of significant difference emerged for Aboriginal males who had a lower mean score on the Identity scale than their non-Indigenous male counterparts (t=2.264, df=302, p< .05) and therefore had more difficulty learning about others and had experienced more difficulty getting along with others at school. There is no apparent reason for this set of fairly unique results which have no identifiable research to support such a result and no data appeared in the study to support this as well. However, Table 7.6 does provide additional support to this finding and highlights a similar result for Year 10 students on the Identity scale.

Table 7.6 produced a single scale where there was a significant difference - Identity (t=2.357, df=150, p<.05). As alluded to in the previous paragraph, this highlights the lower perceived ability to again learn about others and get along with peers and others in the school of the Year 10 Aboriginal students. However, while the number of respondents is relatively low (7 or 4.8% of respondents) the fact that these students have made it through to Year 10 perhaps is testimony to the capabilities of these students' ability to cope with and get along with peers and others in the school.

The thesis moves at this point from questionnaire data established in preceding sections to student interviews covering feedback on attitude to secondary school, opinions on subjects, exposure to Aboriginal Studies and their backgrounds to their own cultural knowledges and languages. Perceptions of teachers, school executive staff, and their own performance, attendance and behaviour at school were also explored in interviews of both cohorts' secondary experiences. Finally the issue of racism emerged for some students in this secondary environment and this is explored as well in following sections.

Likes and dislikes of Secondary School established through interview

Interviews took place in Years 7 and 8 for the Year 5 cohort and in Years 7 and 10 for the Year 7 cohort. In both cohorts the importance of friendships and the social side of school was evident. Pressures were associated with increased workload and there were changed patterns of subject likes and dislikes, in particular more liking for the less academic subjects and hands on activities such as sport, technology and art as they progressed through school. The greater number and diversity of teachers was viewed positively, however incidences of unfair treatment were emphasised along with
increasing levels of concerns expressed by students around teachers and executive staff at the school. Detailed analyses of these issues follow in this section.

Opinions on Subjects Undertaken in Secondary School

Students were asked to indicate their favourite subject in secondary school at both Year 7 and in the final year of the study when the cohorts were in Years 8 and 10. Obviously students are exposed in secondary school to a number of different options and some degree of choice of electives, although such choice is limited in Stage 4. Subject exposure is more discrete than in primary school with clear demarcation between subject and disciplines being much more evident in the secondary school subject structure. Also students are exposed to new subjects such as design and technology, languages and food technology and new formats for subjects such as science, history, geography, physical education and English (with special differentiation of the drama component), than was experience and exposure to these subjects in primary school. All of these new broader offerings made for exciting new experiences for most students and obviously would have a level of effect on their perceptions about subjects and associated choices. Bearing in mind this broader access to new subject options, it would not be unusual to anticipate greater diversity in the choices of subjects seen favourably. Students from both cohorts clearly were swept up in this greater subject exposure and the range of subjects listed by them at secondary school as their favourite subjects expanded to meet this new diversity of subject choice.

In the Year 7 cohort, subjects that I have defined as the more traditionally more 'academic' subjects e.g. English, mathematics, science, history and geography did not feature in students' favourite subjects as opposed to the new subjects with less academic connotation such as music, art, physical Education, design and technology. In fact the Year 7 cohort nominated these latter subjects ahead of the more academic option by a ratio of approximately 3 to 1 and best summed up as the reasons for this by the following female student quote when asked what her favourite subjects were:

\[ \text{Music, art and woodwork. They are more active, you get to move around the classroom. (Lisa, Ref. 1.310)} \]

While there was an overwhelming appeal of these less academic subjects, a much smaller number of students in Year 7 had indicated that they liked mathematics, English
and other subjects such as history primarily because they were getting a level of success from them as clearly indicated by the following then Year 7 female student:

Science, because I always get As. Maths, because we don’t have to do any work. English, because it’s real easy. (Carol, Ref. 1.350)

As the Year 5 cohorts moved onto Year 8 and the Year 7 cohorts onto Year 10 there favourite subjects were evenly divided between academic and less academic. Year 5 cohort’s choices now favoured the more academic options and the Year 7 cohort evened out. What was notable was the very clear identification of academic type subjects as the students’ least liked choice and this was a shared opinion across both cohorts.

When asked to list the subjects which were their least-favourite subject, overwhelmingly the more academic subjects were noted. Approximately three quarters of the Year 5 cohort and all of the Year 7 cohort nominated the more traditional academic subjects such as mathematics, English, history and science as their least favourite subjects. In both cohorts, the overwhelming reason for this choice was having difficulty coping with the subject and obviously limited literacy and numeracy skills began to take their toll as the following quotes attest and in particular the final quote of frustration articulated by the Year 10 student, when asked to nominate the students least-favourite subject:

Cathie: Maths and science.

R: Why?

Cathie: I’m not very good at them. (Ref. 1.260)

Maths, because it’s hard. Science, because I don’t get it. And English, because I think it’s a waste of time. (Anne, Ref. 1.390)

And further;

Kevin: Science and English. Because I’m not that good at reading and spelling, so English stuffs me up there. Science, I’m a bit out of my league on that bit.

R: Have you had trouble reading?
Kevin: Yeah. I did a bit of tutoring. That helped me. But I just stopped it.

R: Why?

Kevin: I don’t know. It helped me heaps. Even the teachers could see a difference in me. I just didn’t want to do it anymore. (Ref. 1.161)

While the movement towards less-academic subjects as indicated by the students’ choices above it should be noted that the Year 7 cohort survey nominated in their first year of secondary school, that ‘what they are being taught’ as the second item that they felt most happy about with an average response rate of 3.9 on the six-point Likert Scale. On this same scale, the same group of students were least happy with the teachers in secondary school. However, prior to moving to reporting on students’ perceptions of their teachers, it is timely to explore the students’ access to Aboriginal studies during their schooling.

Students’ exposure and response to Aboriginal Studies in schools

3. Schooling should be socially just, so that:

…3.4 all students understand and acknowledge the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures to Australian society and possess the knowledge, skills and understandings to contribute to, and benefit from, reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century (MCEETYA, 1999)

The agenda on Aboriginal studies was very clearly spelt out in the Adelaide Declaration cited above, from both the Australian Government and each State/Territory signing off on this Declaration in 1999. New South Wales had similar policy commitments (NSWDSE, 1996) for the period of the study which compelled schools to introduce Aboriginal studies into their curriculum. Students’ recollections of their exposure to Aboriginal studies and their feelings about the subject were canvassed at interview.

Both cohorts were extremely comfortable with and supportive of Aboriginal studies and generally related to this as a recollected perspective in a subject area such as history, English and geography. It appeared that Year 5 cohort students from two separate secondary schools were contemplating taking Aboriginal studies as a subject in Stage 5 at their respective schools. Year 7 Cohorts also indicated that a course was being made
available in Stage 6 for those who indicated they would be going on to senior secondary school. Students appreciated the perspectives that they were exposed to, and were keen to do more specific work in Aboriginal studies as indicated by the following Year 5 and Year 7 Cohort responses respectfully:

**R:** Have you done anything about Aboriginal people in other subjects?

**Jane:** Yes, in history or geography.

**R:** Are you going to do Aboriginal studies in future?

**Jane:** Yes.

**R:** Are you going to do it as an elective?

**Jane:** Yes.

**R:** What do you think about learning Aboriginal studies?

**Jane:** It would be fun, because you get to learn about what they do and that. (Ref. 1.210)

**Cathie:** I’m doing that [Aboriginal studies] through Year 11 and 12.

**R:** You are, you’re picking it as a subject. You didn’t do anything in any other subjects about Aboriginals?

**Cathie:** History, we’re doing Aboriginals and how they were disadvantaged. That’s about all.

**R:** Not anywhere else?

**Cathie:** Oh, and English, about the stolen generation (Ref. 1.260)

The following student comment highlights the integration of Aboriginal studies through the curriculum and clearly differentiates Aboriginal Studies the stand alone subject from the perspective to the curriculum model of integration of Aboriginal topic coverage in mainstream courses. It is worth noting here, as in the first of the earlier preceding quotes and in the following quote, the use of the third person to describe Aboriginal studies, as though they were studying some other group of people but not members of their own broader Aboriginal community. No detailed explanation was given to this issue but the researcher has witnessed similar positioning which is primarily related to positioning oneself in time. In most instances, contemporary living Aboriginal peoples will refer to the past to describe the lives of Aboriginal peoples. Also it often means the study of more
traditional lifestyles, which contemporary Aboriginal peoples, particularly in NSW where the earliest European invasions took place resulting in cultural genocide, have limited exposure to this way of living and so refer to it as something like a more foreign study. Lester and Hanlen (2004) highlighted that Aboriginal studies in schools was both heavily focused on traditional society and lacked the necessary scope and sequencing to ensure it related to and integrated contemporary Aboriginal life in NSW. This too could explain the distancing of the students to the study of Aboriginal peoples and the subtlety of Mel’s movement here of mixed reference to Indigenous peoples as ‘they’ and ‘we’:

**Mel:** I did it [Aboriginal Studies] in Kempsey, but I haven’t done it here.

**R:** Not even in history or anything like that?

**Mel:** Yeah, we learnt about it, but it’s just one topic. You know how you usually have Aboriginal Studies as an actual subject, well we just learn about one topic like Aboriginals being disadvantaged and how we get over it and that’s it. I think Aboriginal Studies would be helpful just to show what the Aboriginals went through back in them days and what they did and how they survived. It would be really interesting. (Ref. 1.400)

Students’ enthusiasm for Aboriginal studies was very evident and interviews with students tried to establish whether there would perhaps be any feelings surrounding such studies which might cause embarrassment. Students resoundingly indicted a genuine sense of pride in their Aboriginality and dismissed outright any sense of embarrassment about undertaking such a subject and best summed up by the following Year 7 cohort’s statement while in Year 10 at her school:

**Alice:** I did it [Aboriginal studies] in Year 8.

**R:** Have you done any in history?

**Alice:** Yes, in Year 7 and Year 10.

**R:** What do you think about doing Aboriginal studies?

**Alice:** I love doing it. I love doing assignments and that on it…

**R:** Does it make you feel funny being Aboriginal and studying Aboriginals?

**Alice:** No. I feel like I know more than other people.

**R:** So you’re comfortable with it?

**Alice:** Yes.
R: It doesn't embarrass you at all? Alice: No. (Ref: 1.420)

It was obvious from student comments from both cohorts that all schools were involved in integration of Aboriginal perspectives into the curriculum and that Aboriginal Studies as a subject was available in two of the schools at either or both Stage 5 and 6. It is interesting to note that these schools were originally chosen for the study because they had a significant Aboriginal student enrolment but, more than once, Aboriginal Studies electives were at risk due to low student numbers selecting the subject. Obviously the offering of these subjects in the latter two stages of schooling might be compromised by retention rates of Aboriginal students to these stages (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004, pp.29-30).

Students’ strong sense of positive identity and affirmation with Aboriginal studies in school must have been reinforced outside of the school environments and it was an obvious area for study in this research in the following section.

*Derivation of Students Aboriginal Cultural Knowledges and Languages*

The keenness to get involved in Aboriginal studies at a school level demonstrated by the students, begged the question about where the students got their sense of Aboriginality from, how was this imparted and prompted questions at interview about what the students’ feelings were on Aboriginal culture and languages and where they got their information about these sorts of things.

In interview with students, the researcher got a great sense of the students’ pride in their Aboriginal background and it was clear that the school had an integral role in supporting this, which was apparent in the curriculum perspectives students recalled. The students’ diversity of family and community backgrounds as discussed earlier in the background research to this thesis became much reflected in the origins of the students’ cultural enrichment from their extended families. Students on the whole were extremely reliant on these extended families, especially in cases where the students might share an Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal parent. The schools’ roles in nurturing, supporting and filling in some of the cultural voids in these sets of circumstances were clearly enunciated by students who found themselves in these mixed-cultural positions and often conflicting difficult family circumstances:
Kevin: I don’t really know. I didn’t speak it that often. I mean dad’s side did. But my mum is non-Aboriginal. Just my dad is.

R: Have you got contact with your dad?

Kevin: No. He’s a violent drunk. So we left him and come down here and have a better life than what we had up there.

R: Where would you get your cultural information about being Aboriginal?

Kevin: Don’t know.

R: You’re a bit isolated from it now?

Kevin: Yeah.(Ref: 1.161)

While some students found themselves in cultural isolation, the vast majority of students relied heavily on extended families. This is well illustrated in the following student’s colourful and enthusiastic explanation when asked about her cultural background and exposure to her Aboriginal language and culture through her pop, her extended family and generally growing up on a mission. Also note the supportive role given by the school in the student’s response:

Margaret: Good. I reckon it’s mad. I want to learn Aboriginal.

R: Your own Aboriginal language?

Margaret: I don’t know. My pop told me. My pop knows how to speak it.

R: Is it Worimi?

Margaret: I don’t know.

R: He can speak an Aboriginal language, your pop?

Margaret: Yes. I had this little message thing in Aboriginal language because we went on this little day out thing. They gave us an Aboriginal book thing. It was out of school, in the last holidays. That’s when we learnt about Aboriginal food. My pop read it out to me – even though it had the English down the bottom.

R: So he’s cool?

Margaret: Yeah.

R: Where do you get your information about Aboriginal culture?

Margaret: Sometimes in school, sometimes out of school because I always talk to my pop a lot.
R: About Aboriginal culture?
Margaret: Yes.
R: And he’s very knowledgeable?
Margaret: Yes. (Ref. 1.270)

The issue of Aboriginal language is probably more problematic than culture given the history of Aboriginal language genocide in NSW (BOSNSW, 1998; Lowe & Ash, 2006) and across Australia (Thieberger & McGregor, 1994, p. xii; Purdie et al., 2008: McKay, 2011). While there has been pleasing inclusion of Aboriginal languages in NSW syllabus during the late 1990s, there appeared little evidence of these developments flowing onto the schools in the study and no students identified the teaching of Aboriginal languages in schools. However, students did articulate a strong enthusiasm for learning Aboriginal languages in schools and it was well reasoned in the following student’s response to the issue:

I think we should learn more. I think we’re too white. I reckon we don’t really know nothing about our own culture really. We should be able to learn our language and like speak our language. You hear Japanese speak their own language, and we don’t even know ours. It makes me wild. I reckon learning an Aboriginal language in school would be good. (Alice, Ref. 1.420)

Students demonstrated a strong commitment to their Aboriginal cultures and languages and highlighted an eagerness to learn more. Students also in some instances demanded access to affirmation of their Aboriginal background in schools. This was evident through students’ active engagement or level of enthusiasm to undertake Aboriginal Studies as a subject, as clearly articulated in students from both cohorts, who were looking forward to future elective studies in this critical area of study for them. Students also touched on the success they perceived emanated from doing such studies primarily because of their enthusiasm for the study and their obvious insider knowledges which would assist in their potential success in Aboriginal Studies.

Interview data from students in both cohorts on the courses of studies offered to them and their perception of these, indicated that the students in this study were moving away from more academic studies to more ‘hands on’ physical type subjects and that they
expressed a genuine desire for affirmation of their cultural backgrounds from the schooling system. Obviously externally set syllabi from the Board of Studies NSW have the capacity to engage significant numbers of students in either the more traditional academic subjects or the more ‘hands-on’ active subjects of study. The course infrastructure exists and, as evidenced by students, is being implemented in the schools in this study to be inclusive of Aboriginal studies in the schools’ programs. The next most important ingredient in the formula for engagement must rest in the hands of the deliverers of the practice at the important classroom coal face, the teachers and importantly the student perceptions of them.

Secondary School students’ perceptions of their teachers

As previously discussed in the transition section of this chapter, students ratings of teachers by the Year 7 cohort were the poorest across all items at 2.09 averages on the 6-point scale. This result was not replicated in subsequent interviews with both cohorts and in fact the status of teachers appeared overall to be quite high from student interview responses.

In interviews, students were asked to indicate who they thought were the good and bad teachers at their secondary schools and to provide some reason for this choice. Students indicated quite readily the good teachers, listing a number of them quickly and spoke spontaneously and passionately about the reasons they were, in their eyes, good teachers. While they readily and quickly identified who they thought was a bad teacher, the list was not as long. In fact, at one particular secondary school, half of the students in the Year 7 cohort could not name a single teacher whom they thought was bad — or in one of these cases the choice was based on extraneous reasons not related to classroom practice or student relationship. Students also had much more difficulty explaining why they disliked a teacher and, while only mentioned once in the Year 5 cohorts’ interviews, the Year 7 cohort in a minority began to refer to racism as a possible reason for disliking a particular teacher.

Both cohorts’ interviews in Year 7 indicated a less-sophisticated explanation behind their defining what makes a good and a bad teacher. Year 7 opinion in both cohorts indicated a rather simplistic reasoning behind their defining teachers either negatively or positively. A good teacher was someone who was in their consistent terms ‘nice’ or ‘helpful’ to them and in the instance of those not-so-good teachers, they were ‘growly/grumpy or angry’ teachers. In defining the quality of a teacher, some students related their responses to
the level of ‘choice’ given the student over their school work. In later interviews, students developed a more sophisticated explanation for their nomination of good or bad teachers, especially in light of the relationships established between the student and their teachers, as this one Year 7 student began to develop:

**Damien:** Oh, it’s a bit of a weird one, um Mr X, cause he helps you a lot with woodwork. Mrs Y, she’s a good PE teacher. Mr Z, he was a good PE teacher as well and probably Mr C.

**R:** Why are they good teachers?

**Damien:** Because I get on with them and they get on with me, they help me with my work. (Ref. 1.061)

The students’ growing maturation during their secondary school years was very much reflected in their interview responses about teachers. While certainly an isolated case, one student in defining a good and bad teacher, had these specific comments to make:

**R:** How would you describe a good teacher?

**Jerry:** A teacher that does her job properly. Teaches you what you need to know and gets on with it. Not just stands around and talks and stuff. (Ref. 1.091)

And in relation to description of a perceived bad teacher Jerry comments;

**Incapability. When they can’t control the class or something!** (Ref. 1.091)

Students’ descriptions of what makes a good teacher had not changed from their earlier interviews in secondary school in that some very common themes were maintained i.e. relationships between the student and teacher, caring and nurturing in an inclusive cultural environment. In the first student’s comments following, I think the student summarises a good teacher as one who is respectful of the students and their culture. The second student’s comments also highlight the close personal understanding required to facilitate a respectful relationship, and the final students’ comment reflect the reciprocity involved in relationships:
**Alice:** I think maybe being brought up around Aboriginal kids. I don’t know if they respect us. I know Miss A does. She used to teach at [neighbouring community] back in the old days when they used to be racist and stuff. She didn’t like it. All the teachers are nice here but Miss A goes out of her way to do stuff for the Koori kids. That’s why everyone likes her. She just won the teacher’s award. All the Koori kids were so happy for her because she deserved that award…

**R:** Are there other teachers that are good?

**Alice:** She’s the only one that’s really –

**R:** What about Mr B?

**Alice:** Yeah. Just them two. They’re the ones that really care about Koori kids. (Ref. 1.420)

**Anne:** My drama teacher, because he’s really nice. Mr D, because he’s always there when you need to talk to someone… They’re not just teachers, they are my friends and I can talk to them and stuff.

**R:** What makes them good? What’s the ingredient that makes them good?

**Anne:** They don’t just talk to you about school work, they talk about other things. They’re not like I said just your teachers; they are also your friends. (Ref. 1.390)

Finally on reciprocity:

*The way they talk. If you treat them good, they treat you good back. One that’s real nice is our maths teacher, Mr E. He talks to us polite and we talk to him. He doesn’t say anything nasty or anything.* (Tania, Ref. 1.280)

The issue of racism in schools and the potential for victimisation based on race by teachers was only raised in a few instances, as indicated below, but all three instances came from the same school. To some degree, in many ways, the identification of these was rebuffed either by the students themselves or in other interviews with students. In the following interview responses on teachers, the racism theme was raised as unfair treatment and either rationalised out by the student or when questioned further for clarity, was dismissed to a degree. In the first student response, the contributing question of respect is raised for clarification:

**Mel:** A couple of teachers, they’re good, but they just pick at you all the time. One little thing that’s wrong they’ve always got to say something, whereas other students who might have 10 times worse things wrong with them and nothing happens to them and it gets really irritating.
**R:** Why do you think that is happening to you?

**Mel:** I just always think it’s because I’m Aboriginal.

**R:** Racism?

**Mel:** Yeah.

**R:** If I said to you, is respect important? Is that the difference between a good teacher and a bad teacher?

**Mel:** Yeah. But I always try and respect the teachers whether they are bad or good, but it doesn’t seem to work. I know I want to be respected myself so you’ve got to show a little to get a little.

**R:** So respect is, would you say, that’s a big ingredient?

**Mel:** Yes. (Ref. 1.400)

**Eden:** When, sometimes, I wouldn’t call it racism, just singling you out and stuff.

**R:** Why wouldn’t you call it racism?

**Eden:** I don’t know. They don’t take it in that way, they don’t like you and single you out. (Ref. 1.411)

And once again arose as follows;

**Tony:** They just pick on one person. Or a group and just keep on doing stuff like putting you on detention and things.

**R:** Do they ever just pick on Aboriginal kids?

**Tony:** No. Not all the time. (Ref. 1.341)

On the whole, students throughout the four years of the study did not raise any identifiable serious concerns about their teachers. In fact the positive and supportive comments and praise given to teachers overall, far outweighed the relatively simplistic concerns they had with teachers they felt were bad or poor teachers. Racism did not appear to be a significant issue with the students perception of teachers, except when raised in the three instances above and all in the same school, which is concerning. In
many instances, the students listed executive teaching staff amongst their favoured teachers who gave considerable help to ‘the Koori kids’.

**Students’ perceptions of their school’s Executive Staff**

While some of the Year 5 cohort had some difficulty identifying the school’s executive staff, the general consensus amongst both cohorts, across the majority of secondary schools, were that the school executive was doing ‘ok’ at running the school. It was evident in some student responses that the students would like some of the executive teaching staff who had developed close relationships with the Indigenous students, to hold more senior positions and even principal status. There were some interesting minority, dissenting comments and a comment on one student’s perception of the executive roles in the school. It is obvious in the first of these comments that the student was at the wrong end of many disciplinary decisions made by the executive, the other two speak for themselves and all three comments come from three separate secondary schools when students were asked did they know who runs the school and what they were like at it:

*R: The principal, Mr J and Mr K. How do you think they’re going? Are they doing a good job?*

*Damien:* No, definitely not. I don’t reckon. They just – all they’re interested in is suspending kids, suspending them straight off the bat. Not willing to sit down and like, talking and try to sort something out like a program for them. Mr J, he can be all right at times, but for him it’s like, bang, suspended, straight away. (Ref. 1.061)

And:

*Margaret:* Mr L?

*R: And the deputies and people like that?*

*Margaret:* Yes.

*R: Are they OK?*

*Margaret:* I don’t like Mr L because he’s growly. I wish Miss M was the principal.

*R: Why?*

*Margaret:* Because she’s cool.

*R: What’s so good about that?*

*Margaret:* I don’t know. She understands more than Mr L and I reckon she’d do a better job. (Ref. 1.270)
Further from a female student who commented:

**Lisa:** Not exactly.

**R:** Like the principal and deputy.

**Lisa:** Yeah. Mainly the deputy principal does mainly all the work and the principal just sits in the office and answers the phone and goes on his little day trips and something like that. The deputy, you mainly see him walking around talking to kids and stuff like that.

**R:** So how do you think they’re running the school – ok?

**Lisa:** Yeah, they’re doing ok. (Ref. 1.310)

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**STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR PERFORMANCE, ATTENDANCE AND BEHAVIOUR AT SCHOOL FROM SECONDARY VIEWPOINT**

Having a sense of where you are at, or how you fit in, in relation to those around you such as your family, peers and the broader community is an integral part of one’s social lives and this obviously flows over to their secondary school environment. This does not necessarily mean the creation of a competitive life environment but more as a compass to guide one’s life. It was therefore important to try to establish where the students saw themselves, their perceptions of their positioning with respect to the school’s compass/direction. At interview, both cohorts of students were asked to self-assess how they were going on three key areas: academically, in attendance and in their behaviour within the school environment. They were also asked if there was anything that stopped them from achieving in these areas.

While enquiring about the students’ self-positioning with respect to the school’s compass and their views on this, it became very evident that the school and the system certainly go to great lengths to position the students in their school environment. This was most evident in the detail gleaned from the students’ school record cards. The obvious comparison between the students’ perceptions and that of the school or even state-wide schools, about at least these three areas of academic, attendance and behaviour helps greatly to realign the compass and help understand a juxtaposed position. To further position the student’s compass to accommodate their community’s expectations or understandings will complete the journey. But at this time a detailed look at the students’
positioning will be provided and the more complete journey will unfold in the following holistic analysis chapter.

Secondary students’ views on their Primary School performance

Earlier in this Chapter, the more specific reflections on primary school life were addressed but without specific reference to the students’ perceived performances at this level. Both cohorts were interviewed in Year 7 and were asked about how they thought they went at school work in primary and why they held this opinion.

The majority of students felt that they had performed well or adequately at primary school and had fond memories of this experience but, as discussed earlier, there was mixed feeling around whether primary or secondary school was the preferred environment. A small number reflected on poor results and others didn’t have a clear picture of how they went, so had a level of confusion about their performances, such as this male student in the Year 5 cohort:

Well, I didn’t actually go very well, like some of my teachers said, but, I don’t know really how well I went. (Lisa, Ref. 1.310)

One student in particular seemed very confident with her performance and this was later reflected in his perceptions about secondary school:

Jane: I went pretty good.
R: You coped with all your work?
Jane: I was near the top of my class. (Ref. 1.021)

Students’ reflections on their attendance patterns in primary school indicated that most were strong attendees, with some minor disruption for health reasons and a couple of children noted attendance at funerals. However, as one student noted, breakdown in family did have ramifications to school continuity, but the extended family in this case and in several others student cases in the study, meant that the responsibility for the student’s wellbeing was being taken up by grandparents:
Lisa: Well from my mum and dad broke up and then from when I was four for four years I was mucked around and that stuff and then I was eight and I moved with my grandmother, my dad’s mum. With her, I’ve been to school every day. I have not missed a day in secondary school.

R: How’s that going?

Lisa: Good. (Ref. 1.310)

Students’ views on their attendance

Student responses at interview to their attendance dominantly indicated that the vast majority of students felt their attendance was good and, if they didn’t attend school, it was due to a legitimate short-term illness or, in some instances, through cultural extended family funeral obligations. In three of the four schools, students indicated that their attendance was good overall and in the other school had reported mixed results. In one instance, a student reported that she attended most days, which was quite true but she also indicated that she had around 50 days off in a year, with little acknowledgement that this was an unreasonable amount of days to be away from school.

Only in the more extreme and in a minority of cases students indicated they missed a considerable number of days of school and this was often related to either a chronic illness or associated with lost schooling through being suspended from school:

Damien: I’ve only been here only a bit more than half of this year.

R: Why?

Damien: I’ve been suspended.

R: But when you’re not suspended do you come to school?

Damien: Yeah, but I’ve got chronic asthma. Sometimes I get really sick and I’m away from school about three weeks or a month. Or I get the flu really bad or something like that. When one person in our family gets it, the whole lot of us have got it. We’re all in bed sick. It’s real bad. (Ref. 1.061)
Students’ views on their behaviour

The vast majority of students reported their behaviour at school as generally good. In one school, all students indicated they felt their behaviour to be good. A minority of students indicated that their behaviour was good, but conceded that they had, on a few occasions, been put on various behaviour levels and two indicated that, in the past, they had been given a short suspension. These exceptions appeared to be for minor infringements e.g. leaving school unauthorised to get a hamburger at a fast-food chain shop for lunch. Approximately 20% of students had been suspended for what they described as minor disciplinary infringements (Ref. Student Record Cards). A small core group of students acknowledged they had multiple suspensions.

There were only four students (three in Year 5 cohort) who indicated that they were ‘in trouble’ fairly constantly with the school with regard to their behaviour. Three of these students were from the same school and across both cohorts. Three out of the four were male. There were specific external personal stories surrounding each of these students and their ultimate acting out in school which led to multiple suspensions. The following student explanation of her behaviour at school was typical of what lies below the water of an iceberg:

Alice: Attendance, I haven’t really been this year. I’ve been to school all the time except for when I was sick [prior to mother’s illness]. And my mum, she got schizophrenia and was in and out of jail and I just couldn’t – it made me stress out and stuff, so I’d stay at home.

R: Unless there’s something wrong, you would come to school.

Alice: Yes.

R: So school’s been good for you?

Alice: Pretty much. Oh, I get stressed out with the work and stuff and the teachers don’t know what’s going on – like home life. They think I’m just doing it because I don’t want to, but they don’t know. They don’t know what’s going on. They just think I just don’t want to do the work, but I don’t like telling everyone my business.

R: Behaviour?

Alice: I have a bad temper. I stress out when teachers are in the wrong. They know they’re in the wrong and they don’t like to admit it because I’m the student and then I get in trouble because they reckon they’re in the right and I just get angry and I just go home and when I go home I get in trouble for it because I left school.

R: Have you been suspended?
Alice: Yes. I think it was last year. I haven’t been suspended this year. They were all short suspensions. I got suspended from the teacher and for bad language – it was while mum was in jail. (Ref. 1.420)

In each of the above student cases of their perceived and reported significant behavioural issues at school, there was a clear correlation between their behaviour, their poor attendance at school and related perception of their poor performance in school work, along also with students dealing with complex and challenging home situations.

Students’ views on their school results

Lisa: Results, my results are good – not that good because I’ve got to just pick them up, because in Year 9 – everything you do in Year 9 goes to the Year 10 certificate. I’m going all right but not all right. I’d probably be in the middle.

R: Is there anything that stops you from achieving?

Lisa: Not really, besides if I just stop trying – that’s probably the only thing, but I probably won’t stop.

R: Because you’re pretty determined?

Lisa: Yeah. (Ref. 1.310)

The vast majority of students from both cohorts indicated that they felt that they were doing well or reasonably well at their school work or, as in the above student quote in response to how they felt their results from school were, good or average. Students from two of the five secondary schools reported generally good success at school and the remainder of schools had mixed results. Three of the four students, who indicated that they had had behaviour and attendance problems, were non-committal on the subject of their academic performance, but two indicated they had difficulty reading and in comments earlier in the interview on this topic or in previous interviews, indicated that they were having difficulty keeping up with their classroom work or, as can be seen in the following student’s comments, how they were doing with the work posted to them while on a long suspension:

R: What about your results, how are you going in school?
**Damien**: I’ve got about that much work [student indicates with his fingers about 30mm depth between his finger and thumb], that I’ve got at the post office. It was sent. I’ve got to do every single bit of it, or I don’t go to Year 9 next year.

**R**: Do you know you can get help with study, you can get a tutor?

**Damien**: That’s just the thing; do you have to pay them?

**R**: No. They are free of charge; you need to talk to the school about it. You might be able to get some help.

**Damien**: Righteo, yep.

**R**: They might be able to help you catch up on all the work. So you’re battling a bit at school, can you read and write?

**Damien**: Yeah, enough to get by. (Ref. 1.061)

Both cohorts of students seemed confident enough with the way they were performing at school and a small number understood that they would need to put in more effort if they were to achieve the School Certificate. With the exception of those with compounding behavioural difficulties, students indicated a level of contentment with their results at school.

Students were also asked to indicate if there was anything that stopped them from achieving in any of the three areas of attendance, behaviour and school results. The majority of students responding to this question readily indicated that they did not perceive any obstacles and none indicated any further substantive supportive comments on this response beyond the discussion from the four students with significant behavioural issues at school outlined previously.

On the whole, students’ perceptions of their attendance, behaviour and results with the exception of the four students who readily indicated compounding behavioural issues, the majority of students’ perceptions indicated that they were overall generally attending school regularly, with minor student welfare issues and coping reasonably well with school work. It was obviously important to match the students’ perceptions to their student records to see how closely aligned their perceptions were with those of the school and against state-wide testing results.
While breaking down the student factors into the subsets discussed in this chapter, for example on the students’ perceptions of school, teachers and their performance, we can also create a holistic framework to bind the research, however, neither encapsulates the lived characters of individual students family lives and the fullness this obviously involves. To assist in this process, I have provided vignettes of students to represent the diversity of Indigenous students’ home environments and the ways in which these intersect with their school worlds to rightfully position these critical voices and lives as they relate to the study at the start of selected chapters in the thesis.

Racism: An issue in Secondary School for Koori students in the study?

The following questions were put to both cohorts of students while in secondary school, ‘How would you describe what it has been like being Aboriginal? Are you treated any differently than non-Indigenous students?’ No current student indicated that in their view they had been consistently treated poorly or described their school situation as racist. However, several students indicated that they had experienced racial incidents but defined these as isolated instances. Only one student indicated that a teacher discriminated against her on the following issue:

_Margaret:_ No. I haven’t been treated any differently. Everybody treats me the same as they treat anybody.

_R:_ Is there any racism?

_Margaret:_ No.

_R:_ You haven’t experienced anything?

_Margaret:_ No.

_R:_ Do you think they [teachers] pick on Aboriginal kids?

_Margaret:_ Oh some of them, but most of them are nice.

_R:_ Most teachers are nice?

_Margaret:_ Yeah.

_R:_ Sometimes you think they do pick on you.

_Margaret:_ Yeah. That girl picked on me the other day.

_R:_ That girl?
Margaret: Yeah that teacher.

R: Did she do that because it was you?

Margaret: No it was because I had a pink jumper on.

R: Why?

Margaret: Because I was staying at my mum’s house and I hadn’t gone home for a couple of days to get my school jumper and it was cold that day. We had a school assembly and she told me to get out of assembly because I had a pink jumper on and I wasn’t in the correct uniform. This other girl had a brown jumper on and she never told her to get out.

R: Was she Aboriginal?

Margaret: No.

R: So do you think it was because you were Aboriginal, is that what you thought?

Margaret: No. I don’t know.

R: You don’t know why she picked on you?

Margaret: No.

R: But you thought it was unfair?

Margaret: Yes. (Ref. 1.270)

The vast majority of students indicated that they had not experienced any racism of note, at their secondary schools and of these students some indicated that they had experienced ‘positive discrimination’ within their schools and appreciated the added support or benefits they received because of their Aboriginality, as Tony from the Year 7 cohort indicates in response to the above questions:

Tony: Sometimes, not all the time but.

R: What’s it like being an Aboriginal student at the school?

Tony: Good.

R: What makes it good?

Tony: I don’t know. Just all other things like excursions.

R: Are you treated any differently to non-Indigenous students?

Tony: No.
R: Do you find any racism in this school?

Tony: Not really.

R: Anything that worries you?

Tony: No. (Ref. 1.341)

The following student Mel, points out that acceptance of her Aboriginality is not universal amongst teachers and hints that this might be due to the fact that as Tony pointed out previously, Aboriginal students are often positively discriminated in terms of additional support which can sometimes lead to resentment by in this case, even teachers. Mel however points out that it has not diminished her strong sense of her Aboriginality:

Sometimes, but there are a lot of teachers in the school that do accept you for being Aboriginal and they love the fact that you’re Aboriginal, but there are a lot of teachers in the school that don’t quite accept the fact that you’re Aboriginal and they hold that against you, yeah it’s been all right, I mean we have a lot more opportunities than the non-Aboriginals, you know, we get a set amount of money sent to the school for us to pay for our fees and to pay for excursions and stuff. It’s good, I like being Aboriginal. I’m proud of it! (Ref. 1.400)

Racism from the students’ perspective in the study has not played a significant part in their collective school experiences. Obviously some students have incidences when they felt they were unfairly treated when compared to their non-Indigenous peers by some teachers, such as Margaret’s case above. The most serious incidents experienced around racism were in fact that found between the students with name calling and racial comments. Importantly while this was described in only a few isolated cases amongst the Indigenous students in the study, it can lead to physical and verbal assaults by Indigenous students and the outcome often causes unfair treatment in terms of disciplining of the Indigenous students based on this often physical response and associated verbal outbursts. This particular issue was raised in Lester and Hanlen’s (2004, pp.80-81) review of the NSW Aboriginal Education Policy where ‘racist taunts’ by non-Indigenous students that led to physical and verbal aggressive responses by Indigenous students, were not treated equally in terms of discipline administered. This situation is best exemplified in Ellen’s response to the key questions outlined in first paragraph of this section:

Ellen: Pretty good because we’ve got the AEA there for us, he does heaps of good stuff for us.
**R:** Being Aboriginal are you treated any differently than non-Indigenous students?

**Ellen:** By some people, some students.

**R:** What do they do?

**Ellen:** They just say all bad stuff to us.

**R:** Like what sort of stuff?

**Ellen:** I don’t know, I forget.

**R:** Stuff about being Aboriginal?

**Ellen:** Yeah, yeah, like, why don’t you go back to the mission and all this stuff.

**R:** How does that make you feel?

**Ellen:** Angry

**R:** Does that provoke any feeling or action on your part?

**Ellen:** No

**R:** Do you yell, swear do those things?

**Ellen:** Yeah, I go off at ‘em.

**R:** Is that what you get into trouble for?

**Ellen:** Yep (Ref. 1.030)

While it is pleasing that students on the whole did not identify significant racial atmospheres in their schools, none-the-less there was enough critical comment to indicate that where it was reported it was primarily between students. In the final interview in this section it was noted that such student based experienced racism often led to levels of frustration in some Indigenous students and schools were not identifying this phenomenon and responses to such ‘racist taunts’ from non-Indigenous students. This often led to the Indigenous student being disciplined and the non-Indigenous student getting off relatively free. Both students and as reported in the following chapter, parents and the Indigenous community finding this treatment so seriously discriminatory that it was the most racially contested issue in schools throughout the study.
CONCLUSION

This chapter painted firstly an understanding of the students in the study from home/family backgrounds, through friendships they had developed in their social worlds outside of school, to student perceptions of each cohort of their school lives explored chronologically from primary, through transition to secondary schooling. It further explored both in survey results and interviews with students their specific views on schooling issues such as subjects taught, teacher/executive staff relationships, through to general understanding of their experiences transitioning between primary and secondary schools and their thoughts on their performance, attendance and behaviour at school.

Student recollections of their family and community lives were very positive with most students readily acknowledging strong loving family connections, which were supportive and often culturally enriching. A minority of students openly spoke of broken family households and difficult domestic violence incidents and concerns expressed about general levels of violence in the community around life on ‘Missions’.

While the chapter address separately each cohort’s perceptions from primary, transition and secondary experiences little variance was displayed between the two cohorts with regard to their specific reflections on the three critical stages of school experience. The only noted difference in explanation came with the language used to describe some of these experiences i.e. ‘play with’ vs ‘hang out’ with older cohort.

A strong level of support was provided for the implementation and access to Aboriginal Studies and Languages in schools, which is well supported in the earlier data gathered around students’ family lives. The issue of racism experiences emerged in the data gathered and students provided, as they had done on all issues explored in the chapter, an informed generally accepted view that while it was identified in a small number of instances amongst teachers, the students rationalised that such concerns stemmed more from poor teaching practice or from teachers who were ‘growly’ at all students regardless of race. Such findings on perceptions of racism in schools were also well supported in the following chapter which looks at parent/carer and Aboriginal community opinions on this topic.
Student opinions in this chapter highlight that most Indigenous students generally enjoy the schooling experience and have positive statements around teachers and executive staff. Primary schooling was identified as the most enjoyable stage of schooling and transition to secondary was overwhelmingly seen as a minimal disruption. Secondary school with its new subjects and different atmosphere was seen as initially exciting but this soon gave way to an understanding that the students fondest memories of their schooling lay at the primary level.

They discuss the merits of particular subjects undertaken and demonstrate a movement away from more traditional subjects (e.g. maths, English) to those that have a more practical component which becomes in the study a critical decision of students based around success or more appropriately diminishing success around these more traditional subjects. Aboriginal studies and languages emerges as a viable and desirable option for most of the students in the study with students generally keen to take up options in these areas based on relatively strong cultural support received in their homes.

The chapter explored the student perceptions of success at school from a number of vantage points and found that students were generally open and honest with their responses around performance, attendance and behaviour, many of them admitting that there was room for improvement.

The overall conclusions with regard to student backgrounds and perceptions of their schooling experiences, provides an understanding of the rich cultural and supportive lives most of the students had experienced. Some whose lives while fractured by levels of dysfunctional parents have been stitched back together by caring grandparents in most cases. Others like Ray, whose narrative opened the previous chapter, clearly articulate a hope that education can emancipate Indigenous students and ultimately their communities from current high levels of economic and social disadvantage. Of critical importance is that this chapter clearly highlights that the vast majority of Indigenous students in primary years of schooling, held considerable hope and trust in the school system to provide this emancipation. Unfortunately, as they progressed through the school system, the majority of these kids realised that such hope began to diminish with regard to such educational enlightenment.

Students’ articulation of the importance of education demonstrated a clear commitment of their parents/carers views on their schooling and the devoted efforts undertaken by
these parent/carers. It was the parents/carers who made sure the vast majority of these students made it to school buses because their hopes and expectations lay with teachers and at schools to which these buses delivered their kids. The following chapter will seek the opinions of these very parent/carers and Aboriginal community members about their kids, community lives and school expectations.
CHAPTER 8. PARENT AND COMMUNITY FACTORS

Damien - ‘Some teachers treat you like you’re a dog and speak to you like you’re nothing and just they don’t treat you with respect.’

Damien could be best described as a ‘battler’. His academic skills are a little below average, he suffered from chronic asthma and had mild hearing difficulties and his estranged relationship over time with his drug-addicted and suicidal mum had given way to his being brought up by his dad who is Indigenous. His grandparents occasionally looked after Damien during these difficult times. His eldest brother died in a tragic accident that Damien puts down to his brother being in an intoxicated state. Damien had a serious problem controlling his temper. His volatile home life issues often spilled over to school, which resulted in numerous suspensions while in/during secondary school. In private conversations with the researcher Damien spoke of this situation that reflected his street-wise insights into his circumstances.

He had attended several primary schools before settling into River Primary School, where he reflected fondly about the caring and understanding nature of several teachers and the principal. The early disruption of schooling was caused through domestic issues between his parents and in particular his mother’s dependency on drugs. He was very close to his dad and when asked what he enjoyed outside of school his first choice was playing pool with his father in the city at a billiard parlour and working with him on cars as his favourite things to do, which also explained his interest in doing an apprenticeship to become a mechanic. He had another brother in his late teens that lived at home, was unemployed and was into recreational drugs. Damien explained his father was finding it difficult getting work as a labourer but was actively seeking work in areas such as roofing, bricklaying, lawn mowing and paving.

While Damien initially preferred secondary school over primary, the current rate of behavioural issues that he was confronting at secondary school, were quickly turning him off school. He had a very intricate understanding of the issues which sparked his often aggressive behaviour. Such behavioural outbursts at school were often the significant and sometimes drastic exposures and ultimate reactions to his home life, such as witnessing his mother stab herself:
R: How are you going at school?

**Damien:** Not real well, I’ve been getting into a few fights. I haven’t been doing that well – family problems at home and stuff.

R: Why do you get into fights?

**Damien:** People being like, they say stuff about my family or be smart to me or say something like real nasty. It just gets me fired up and yeah. They try and punch me or something and I just lash out.

R: What sort of things do they say about your family.

**Damien:** Like eat shit your mum [sic]. Your Dad’s a dog – just stuff like that.

R: Is being Aboriginal any part of the problem?

**Damien:** No.

R: What about personal stuff at home?

**Damien:** There’s been a lot going on at home. My mum’s a drug addict. She used to use speed and heroin but she got off that and when she wasn’t on that she’d be always taking tablets - real strong ones! She got back on them and dad doesn’t want her on them. Dad doesn’t want her doing stuff like that. Saying, cause she used to give me a bad life all through my life. Half my life I’ve lived with my Nan and Pop because of it. Dad’s just had enough and we was just saying tablets were no good for her. She went out and stabbed herself in front of me. She had to get taken away by an ambulance and she hasn’t been back in the house. Her and Dad have broken up because of it.

R: When did that happen?

**Damien:** About a month ago.

R: How are you feeling?

**Damien:** Not all that good.

R: Does the school know about it?

**Damien:** Yeah. That’s the day after; I just came back from suspension. The day after she did that I came to school and I was really angry and this kid come over and started saying stuff and I just went over and just smashed him.

R: Have you been trying to control your anger?

**Damien:** Yeah.

R: It just leads to more trouble.

**Damien:** Yeah I know.

R: I’m really sad to hear that. (Ref. 1.061)
Damien had missed a lot of school throughout his primary years due to his asthma and this had been compounded by multiple short and long suspensions of up to 20 days at a time. He was very aware of the need to succeed in school if he wanted to be able to pursue a job as a mechanic. He generally liked learning and, when he could see a relevance to his day-to-day life, he enjoyed it tremendously. He was keen on woodwork, English and science and took great comfort in Aboriginal studies which is supported by his Pop who is Indigenous. He gets good support from his Pop, Nan and Dad who he said would ‘support him all the way’ if he wanted to go on to Year 12.

Damien clearly articulated his concerns with the education system and in particular the key problems of teachers’ relationships with students. This was evident when asked what the not so good things about school were.

**Damien:** The way teachers treat you. Some teachers treat you like you’re a dog and speak to you like you’re nothing and just they don’t treat you with respect. They should treat their students with respect. Speak to them in a civil manner. If they like need them to settle down. Not just speak to them like they’re a piece of crap, which is wrong. They shouldn’t be allowed to do that.

**R:** If teachers treat you with respect, how do you treat them?

**Damien:** Well, the other day, I got spoken to like I was nothing. I didn’t do one thing to that teacher and I’m like... I just felt like I didn’t deserve that. I borrowed a pen and she said, “keep the pen out of your mouth”. She said, “You get that pen out of your mouth”, real loud and aggressive.... I chucked the pen down and the piece of paper and said, “I’m not going to get spoken to like I’m a dog”, she goes, “Oh yeah, chuck your tantrum and walk out”, I said, “Yeah, I am”, I walked out and sat outside.

**R:** What about more activities like woodwork or vocational studies?

**Damien:** Yeah, well I suppose you’re...just like, some teachers they do more theory then practical. Say in maths. Lots of Year 7s go in there and he writes a whole lot of rubbish up on the board and we just write it down and we’re finished. Sometimes you just write it up. All you do is writing. He doesn’t explain it to us or what it’s about. Other times he draws big diagrams and shows us and I really feel like I’m learning something. When you go to woodwork and metalwork you really do learn stuff. You learn to use tools and shape wood – I used a lathe a few months ago. And that was fun. That was mad. Some days at school I really enjoy and go home real happy.

**R:** What sort of days are those?

**Damien:** They’re just the sort of days I go to school real happy, say for instance after school, Dad say he will take me to do something and I can’t wait to do that and I’ll be happy all day. Just stuff like that. Like, we’ll go to the city, or we’ll go to the beach or something. I’ll be real happy, just stuff like that. Come to school, do
Damien was well aware of the obvious need to deal with his challenging personal life and its spill-over to some critical behaviour issues in school if he was to succeed. This behaviour required a level of understanding and care from schools which was evident in his primary years but seems to be missing in his secondary school experiences. The school did not employ any Indigenous workers and Damien was reliant on non-Indigenous support from the school counsellors and the few teachers with whom he shared mutual respect, if he was to survive his secondary school education.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the final group of voices essential to this study, namely the Indigenous parents, grandparents, carers, administrators and educationists some of whom have been represented in the individual stories so far presented in this thesis, including Damien's story. These are voices, which most non-Indigenous school educators far too often do not get to hear or share.

These voices reveal Indigenous perceptions around the richness of culture and kinship ties that permeate the school communities; how they relate to schools and the staff including stories around their own past and current school experiences; their perspectives on issues around attendance, behaviour suspension and the success of Indigenous students. Further, they offer an exploration of school curriculum and Aboriginal studies; their opinions on life on the ‘Missions/Reserves’; and some invaluable advice on the key to engagement with both the community and its Indigenous students. They also contribute an exploration of the Indigenous response to the key question of ‘Do Aboriginal kids switch off school?’

INTRODUCING COMMUNITY

Given the importance of community voice, this section provides access to a discussion about cross-cultural respect and it is relevant to begin with a focus group interview about a critical incident:
I 1: If the teachers haven’t got respect for the kids the kids not going to have respect for that teacher, that’s true!

R: Is respect important?

I 1, 2, 3 (Together and very firmly) Yes very important!

I 1: I think respect is the root of everything myself.

I 2: And there’s a lot of teachers here that haven’t got any respect for any Aboriginal kids.

R: Why do you think that’s so?

I 3: There are a few of them here.

I 2: Because they don’t understand where a lot of the Aboriginal children, the family, their family...They don’t find out what sort of family life those children have got. Well I’ll just tell you about Pam’s [incident], this will point out what I am talking about. In Year 7, you know the walkway, there were about 30 students that walked across there, and one of the teachers was underneath, and someone spat and it fell on this teacher’s back. Well because this teacher, and the students said Pam done it and this other girl. She got into trouble. So when Pam got home, she told me about it and I said Pam I’ll go to bat for you if you’re telling me the truth. And she said, ‘I am telling you the truth! I did not do it!’ So I get on the phone, ring the teacher up and she said, ‘Oh if it happens next time I’m going to have the police involved, it will be an assault charge.’ And I said, ‘Excuse me I said you don’t even know my daughter. I said she would not do nothing like that I said. She went to Handy Primary she was never in trouble at Handy Primary, on her record card; she had gold stars from the principal. She was never in trouble. To tell you another thing my child is not allowed to run around at night. Once it’s dark they’ve got to be inside. I said, ‘You don’t even know my child, so you know, you shouldn’t be saying things like that. And I never spoke to that teacher for three years. And she is my daughter’s year advisor. And I still didn’t go near her. And then we had to go away one year and there was an awards day down at the thing. I went up and said I have to take Pam, she said, ‘Isn’t she a lovely girl.’ And I felt like saying, yeah you didn’t think that about two terms ago.’ But I thought no, you know that wasn’t the time or place.

I 3: You don’t want to brand yourself just the way they are.

I 2: But that’s what I’m trying to get at, can you see what I’m trying to say. They don’t know the child, they don’t get to know the child before they start…

I 1: But even if it’s another child, say living out at Apen Mission, they don’t know that child either because if they want to know what goes on in that kids mind, from out there, you know livin’;

I 3: It’s the living conditions!

I 2: Yes, it’s the living conditions. They want to go out there and take their blanket and go out there and sleep out there. And live out there and see what it is like.

I 3: What these kids got to put up with.
I 2: And it’s not only children from out there [Apen Mission]. It’s children from in town. (Ref. 4.0HFG)

The calls above by Indigenous community members for schools and teachers to get to know the Indigenous community is one of the most deep-seated and consistent messages relayed by members of the Indigenous community.

Engaging with the Indigenous community does not come easily to many who have no experience of Indigenous lifestyles and histories. As one Informant indicated one of the most fundamental of difficulties was the fact that “Half the staffs are frightened to go to the mission” (Ref. 2.311710). Even for the researcher with over 30 years working as an Indigenous educator, developing genuine relationships with Indigenous communities requires a lot of building of trust and respect between the outsider and the community. An important part of the process as an Indigenous person working in the research domain like this is to build on mutual friendship or family relation networks. This process is best exemplified in the following flow of what I have called ‘Indigenous Credentialism’ in discussion with an Indigenous Grandmother of one of the students:

R: How did your mum die?

I: Asthma. She was having a baby. The baby died and she died too. Actually, it was at Larpa (La Perouse). I went to school at Larpa.

R: So you must know the Lesters from Larpa.

I: I think I do.

R: Aunty Laura.

I: I know the Sims – Yvonne and them.

R: Yeah. They lived in Tasman Street – Aunty Laura and Uncle Gus?

I: Just up the road. That’s right.

R: That’s my mob.

I: I used to go up there all the time.

R: Aunty Pam.

I: Well we lived in Tasman Street with Aunty just down from there and I used to go up there every afternoon and I can still see that house now.
R: That was [establishing community network] important in our relationship because you couldn’t work out – I don’t think you could work out where I fitted in. That’s Uncle Gus. My father was Athol. They were brothers obviously and they lived next door to the Ellas [A famous Rugby Football family].

I: That’s right.

R: That makes it easier with us because we’ve established a shared contact.

I: Down a bit was Aunty Min, but next door to Aunty Min I remember a lady and she was a nurse and her name was Mary. She used to come over to (?) all the time next door when mum would get sick.

R: I was only young.

I: We used to go down the mish and we used to swim and dive in the (laughs) yes we did that – me and my brother. I absolutely love Larpa. I went to Larpa school. And I remember a boy. He called me Zulu at the school and I didn’t know what it meant. I came home to dad – dad used to work on Randwick Council. Dad said, “that’s what they call them over in Africa – the blacks”. I said, “Oh is it?” and I went back to school and bashed the piss out of that kid. You know what we used to do – me and Yvonne and them. We used to sneak down to the crematorium and we used to wait and watch them wash the bodies. Me and Yvonne used to get up to a lot of things. When I went to the home [child welfare institution], Yvonne was put in the same girls home with me. I got put in from here; she got put in from Larpa. And we run into one another [in the institution]. (Ref. 4.7101)

While obviously the researcher had his Indigenous background to draw upon, the example above clearly indicates that when a relationship was established the richness of the data seems to flow in the form of short narratives and stories, and in this case, some interesting comments covering a range of topics about racism, stolen-generation and the antics remembered in the informant’s childhood.

Accessing this community rich narrative data is vitally important in establishing effective relationships with Indigenous parents and carers, and a vital step to building up respectful relationships between teachers Indigenous students. Quite clearly this is the level of involvement with community and the school and teachers required as hinted at in the opening quotation to this chapter. During the course of this research the researcher engaged with many Indigenous people whose stories unfortunately cannot be told given they fall outside the parameters of this study. However, it is necessary to share some of the background of these community members in an endeavour to paint a fuller picture of the lives and histories of the Indigenous community as it relates to the essence of the thesis and significantly to the educational background of the community.
Indigenous community: Poor in wealth, but rich in culture and history

Rich educational stories

This section traces the educational themes in the personal histories of community informants and is invaluable to the overall defining of the relationship between the school and the community in this thesis. The title of this section draws on the fact that the communities and especially the missions/reserves while existing in low SES environments still enjoyed strong cultural ties with their ancestors.

The following quotation from grandparents who were carers of their grandchildren, offers insights into their own exposure to education in the past and the level of distrust and injustice they developed being exposed to this education. It is interesting to note that both of these grandparents (who were also respected elders in their Indigenous communities) ended up going back to education via TAFE:

I: I left school at 15.

R: Why did you leave school?

I: I didn’t really like school, I don’t know why, just didn’t like it. Things were too hard. I was a good reader, I did my maths okay, I just didn’t like school work and I guess the final thing came when I went to Sydney, this eye, I’m blind in this eye, it’s got a turn in it so I went to have it straightened and when I came back, I had a patch over my good eye so the other one could strengthen but when I’d got to school the teacher would say you can’t do your work, take it off, that’s what I did, I took it off, so it didn’t get a chance to strengthen and I decided to leave school. (Ref. 4.7310)

R: What’s your thoughts on education – the importance of it?

I: I believe in education. I came up with a bad – a bad – bad schooling, here in Apen Public. When I came through, Koori kids had to be put up the back in one classroom. White kids were up the front. We used to have competitions in Apen Public of reading and mathematics. I won it five years straight. I beat all the white things. I asked could I go up and they said “No”. My father came to the school and asked why can’t she go up, why does she have to stay up the back. Let her go up to a higher class. They said, “No. That’s for white kids”. So I walked in the office and told them to shove it up their arse. As soon as I did that, they locked me up and put me in a girls’ home.

R: How long were you there for?
I: Eight months. I left when I was 13 and never went back to school. Couldn't be bothered!

R: Have you had any other education since then?

I: I did the basic education at TAFE and two years of sewing. I only did that because I was bored. (Ref. 4.7101)

They didn’t want me there anymore. They told me I was a bad influence for the younger Aboriginals. I didn’t see how I was. I asked them if I could finish my Year 10, but I couldn’t, they didn’t want me at the school at all. So I left and started working at 16. (Ref. 4.7210)

It can also be reported that the student also turned to TAFE to gain her equivalent Year 10 Certificate. Sadly versions of this story of exclusion are continually reflected in the experiences of students in the study.

While community members’ perceptions of their schooling were generally unpleasant their reflections on the community as a whole, however, provide valuable insight into the functions of extended families, their histories and positive memories of that life. In particular those elders interviewed fondly recalled family life on the various Aboriginal missions/reserves and the close family bonds that existed and the role of all in the care of the children. Families could be very large at around 10 or so children:

I: Well, I put it this way. When we grew up out in the mission it was good. You couldn’t be out after six o’clock. Everybody looked after you. Everybody cared for you and watched out for you. It wasn’t your own father that came after you, it was your uncles and that. And if your dad was – my dad was a fisherman. If my dad was out working, it would be my uncle to make sure that I was in the house. We had respect. We didn’t cheek, we didn’t swear. There was no alcohol on the mission. No drugs. I remember the men used to drink off the mission – they weren’t allowed to drink on the mission. I remember when they didn’t drink in town too. They weren’t allowed to be in town in the pub. I think it was more discipline. You have those stories and you listen to those stories. My grandkids couldn’t believe I had no TV. Had no lights. Had to get up in the morning and light the fire to have breakfast. Come home and do the cleaning. My mum had asthma. She was very sick all the time. Me and my sister used to do all the cleaning and make sure the cooking was done and that’s how I learnt at an early age that a home is a home. And you were there. I think it’s the way we are brought up now.

R: In those days did most men work?

I: Yes. My father would fish or work in the pub or work in a farm. Everybody fished. They had to. There was no money coming in. You had to survive.
And the following comment from an elder clearly indicates that this communal upbringing and particularly the respect for elders was breaking down with perceived repercussions that led to ongoing stereotyping of Indigenous peoples:

_I:_ They stayed with my mum for a while but because mum is from the old school she couldn’t put up with kids being cheeky because mum is always the one who controlled us kids, she belted us so I was just saying the other day, all I remember my dad doing is whistling to us at night, once he whistled we knew we had to move and mum just won’t put up with the kids being cheeky and Yvonne did go there when mum was still getting around and she use to tell the kids what she thought of them and they didn’t like it.

_R:_ Yeah, kids are different these days; they are exposed to videos and language.

_I:_ The last few generations have been terrible. Terrible with drugs, drink, stealing, with the children, that’s all they do, bashing young people up, stealing.

_R:_ That’s the scary thing; the lack of respect for elders is a big issue. This is the first generation of kids that really doesn’t understand and respect elders in the community and that is really scary.

_I:_ A lot of them say to the older ones you know when the police come why is children all over the flat part down at the mission, they should all surround them and show them that they are watching what they are doing and hand them into the police but at the moment the kids are just getting away with way too much. They belted the old man not long ago and he was in intensive care on a machine. Koori’s kid bashed a white man, Koori kids bashed him.

_R:_ That’s not good is it? Not good.

_I:_ No, really sad.

_R:_ It’s probably only a small number of kids too.

_I:_ It’s just not those kids that are suffering, well it’s really not those kids that are suffering it’s the people in the community because they will class everyone the same. (Ref. 4.7310)

The elder/grandparent statements emerged as a high proportion of the inputs in the research and represented some 25% of Indigenous students. This high level of care from Nan and/or Pop (as they were referred by the students) reflected the high level of dysfunction at the parent level, with these grandparents having to fill the gaps of parents caught up in substance abuse. In all of the students under grandparent care the
grandchildren had been taken because of dysfunctional parents and not seen as a normal extension of Indigenous traditional kinship lines of responsibility. This is a significant issue especially considering the markedly lower life expectancy of the Indigenous population in Australia (SCRGSP, 2011, p.15) and the potential for grandparents not to be there to cater for current and future generations. This is an issue which requires closer examination in terms of its effects on the student group in this study as an important part of parental responsibility.

**Indigenous Grandparents: Bringing up children from dysfunctional parents**

The researcher grasped the opportunity to interview five of the 11 (representing 45%) of grandparents currently raising grandchildren who were part of the student base for the research. These grandparents were extremely open and responsive. Interviews canvassed the reasons for the grandparents being in this position, which articulated the dysfunctional elements of current Indigenous families while simultaneously displaying the benefits of strong extended family responsibilities.

The majority of these grandparents held elder status in the community and only one, during the research, lived on one of the missions/reserves in the study. The majority of the grandparents interviewed were bringing the children up with their spouse and one of the two single grandparents was a single pop. In all situations the grandparents had long histories of past and typically continuous employment and as was highlighted in an earlier quote they did not have access to social service payments:

\[ \text{I: I've lived here all my life. I went to the Aboriginal school on the mission, yeah, the mission school.} \]

\[ \text{R: How long were you at school for?} \]

\[ \text{I: I went until I as 15 and then after that I went to work with my father and he was a fisherman and I use to go up to Bunnett Point.} \]

\[ \text{R: And you used to work with my uncle?} \]

\[ \text{I: I worked with him in the railway, when I was young.} \]

\[ \text{R: Uncle, how come Mandy is staying with you?} \]
I: Oh, me daughter, got in the fast lane. We got siblings and me sister rang up and said me daughter is in the fast lane, then I went down and picked her up. I went down for Mandy and picked them of them up and I send them to school up here.

R: So you went down and picked your daughter up?

I: No, just the three kids. Boy and two girls.

R: So there is Mandy and Cindy and Clive.

I: Yeah, and Mandy’s mum’s name is Chris.

R: And Mandy’s father, where is he?

I: He’s a Jones.

R: Has he had anything to do with Mandy?

I: No, we went down and got her when she was only three years old.

R: So you had her when she was three?

I: Yeah.

R: And she’s lived here since that time?

I: Yeah.

R: How many in your family?

I: Nine brothers and sisters.

R: Did they grow up around here?

I: Yeah, they grew up here and in Apen…

R: You have done a good job, eh. Mandy seems to be different to the rest of the kids on the mission, how did you do that.

I: I don’t know, I just think she’s turned out different. She didn’t want to be the same.

R: Unc, I’ve got no more questions, have you got anything that you think I should know. I think you’ve done a very good job. You and …..

I: We look after them, the best children, the older one, the first ones, I really like them you know, because their mother died of cancer, she died when she was in her late 20s. She had two boys and two girls…

R: Who are they, Mary, Ken, Bill and Marj?

I: Yeah, that’s them.

R: And what was your wife’s name?
I: Pam.

R: Like the one that won the singing contest.

I: She was related to her.

R: And she was about 27 when she passed away?

I: 27 or 28 or something

R: And so you were left to bring up the kids?

I: Yeah

R: So you brought them up by yourself for a long time.

I: Yeah

R: Where were you living, here or Apen Mission?

I: Yeah, on the big smoke there.

R: You've done a very good job unc. You should be very proud.

I: Yeah, I took em to Sydney with them, paid to get them looked after for a while, while I went to work.

R: What were you doing then?

I: Labouring, cause when we lived and I worked at Oxford Bridge.

R: You worked on that too?

I: Yeah, worked on that and after that my niece said to me, you helped to do that and that was all done by hand, no ready mix in them days.

R: So you mixed the concrete yourself?

I: Yeah, mixing it, six on the mixer, three of gravel and sand, I was still a young fella in them days. You wouldn't know what a day's work was.

R: No I wouldn't, too fat.

I: Yeah, it was hard days in them days.

R: Yeah, especially in the heat like yesterday.

I: Yeah, we got no pension; we never had no pension in them days. You had to go and work.

R: And what about your brothers and sisters, did they work?

I: Yeah, they all worked - in the building game and on the track [railway line].(Ref. 4.7811)
The narrative above clearly positions Indigenous understanding of kinship ties and the importance of looking after your ‘mob/family’ and shines a light on the enormous efforts of Indigenous people’s commitment to work to fulfil this kinship responsibility.

In one case the grandfather/pop who gained sole responsibility for his then 8 year old granddaughter as the mother had died from an overdose and the father was later incarcerated for criminal activity linked to his own substance abuse, even then this was questioned within the community as a single working male bringing up a teenage girl. It also provides an insight and introduction to the inherent difficulties of substance abuse on an over-represented proportion\(^{19}\) of contemporary Indigenous families’ lives but also on the tremendous and unselfish role that these grandparents have displayed in picking up the pieces and, as pop indicates, their normal battles coping with puberty stages of development of the children and an unbounded vision of their grandchildren’s future educational prospects:

**R:** How come Yvonne didn’t go to her grandmother?

**I:** Well, it was a tossup, she didn’t know whether I’d take the two boys or I’d take Yvonne and I chose to take Yvonne cause at the time I couldn’t possibly try to work and that and look after two boys and that. So I thought one would be alright. And seeing that she was the oldest she would be going straight to school, ya sorta see.

**R:** Yeah, yeah, yeah so I can understand that. What’s been the biggest difficulties you’ve had bringing up Yvonne by yourself?

**I:** Nothing really, it’s been pretty good and that you know. Like I said, when it just started turn that way and getting into high school and that, that’s just about the difficult period of it, you know. They used to get into a bit of strife and that you know.

**R:** What future would you like to see for Yvonne? What would you like?

**I:** I would like to see her go to Uni, I would love to see her go to Uni.

**R:** What do you think she would do, what would you like her to do at University?

**I:** I don’t know, she’s always said to me that she wanted to be a solicitor. (Ref. 4.10611)

His expectation infers a genuine belief that education provided potential emancipation for the grandchildren out of their current socio-economic status.

All grandparents and all community members interviewed, held strongly to a great faith and expectation the education system could potentially offer, although at times very mindful of the shortfalls too often experienced by Indigenous students. This is picked up in the next section.

Community Values and Expectations of Education

*I want kids to cope with today’s lifestyle, they need their education, they can’t do without it* (Ex-student, Ref. 4.7310)

*But I do believe in the education and I’ll push them as far as they can go!* (Student Guardian, Ref. 4.7110)

*I guess most people just want their kids to complete their schooling and be able to get a job and be successful in that respect in their life. There are other areas to be successful in but I think that is the basis of your success is your education.* (AEA, Ref. 2.8810)

*My expectations are I’d like him to go right through to Year 12, not being quite a bright child; he’s having trouble with that at the moment.* (Parent, Ref. 4.5820)

*I: I’d see the parents want to see their kids to achieve the maximum goal that the kids themselves want to set. What I want to see the kids want to set from years gone by – I want to see them set their own goals and progress to their own ability.*

*R: The parents, from the survey, indicated they wanted their kids to go right through didn’t they?*

*I: Yes.* (AEA, Ref. 2:35711)

The above quotations from a cross section of the community members including elders, Indigenous school staff members and general community, including one non-Indigenous mum; reflect the general consensus on the value and their expectation of education and schooling. Of interest here was reference she made to a school survey about Indigenous
education conducted with parents in one school indicating the desire for their children to
go right through to Year 12. However, in the interviews in this study when informants
were questioned about their perceptions of the Indigenous community, polarisation
emerged.

What emerged was a dominant and very critical commentary about two specific elements
of the Indigenous community – the first regarding those living on the missions/reserves,
and the second was those families obviously affected by issues surrounding substance
abuse. In both of these themes the informants readily identified the minority of families
in question as having little regard or physical capacity in many instances, for the effective
care of their children. This is supported in the reality of grandparents needing to pick up
the pieces as noted in the previous section.

The following quotations from Indigenous community members clearly articulate the
above perceptions of others in the community, about these dysfunctional families
identified. The first of these is a focus group interview:

**I 1:** You got to look a bit more at the big picture with these kids...because, a lot of
the time they don't get that interest from their parents. And they don't and that's
the truth! Like some of those children will go home and mum and dad might not be
there. Or mum and dad just say, oh you're here, or something like that. They don't
say, how was your day?, how was school today? If you take an interest in their life
they'll appreciate it more they probably do a lot better at doing the work for you, if
you show them you care a little bit.

**I 2:** Like I was sitting with, and I won't mention names, I went to this house and I
walked in and was sitting down, the mother was, the little one was doing homework
from school. And the mother was there reading it out and she had to read it out
too, after the mother. Kept going on, 'What did I tell ya, didn't I tell ya that, what to
say. Should have 'efen' well listened to me!' You know this goes on.

**I 3:** And we've got to you know...

**I 2:** Brushing it under the carpet that those things don't happen, when they do!

**I 1:** It happens and it kept going on all the time and that little girl was in tears. But
she had to finish that work. You going to finish the 'efen' work, until I say so.', she
was saying. But this is what goes on. Its not 'come on love do this, we'll finish this
off. If you don't understand it I'll [h]elp ya.'

**R:** Least the mother was working with the daughter?

**I 3:** I was thinking that.

**I 2:** Yeah but she wasn't really, she was putting a lot of pressure on the child.
I felt like getting up and going 'bang' to the mother. But it wasn't my place! (Ref. 4.FG)

An ex-school student noted:

I think it's the way they've just been brought up. Most of the kids' parents on this mish – half of them are alcoholics and don't care about them and if they go to school or not... Low self-esteem about themselves! (Ref. 4.7210)

That education had the capacity to empower both the individual and the group was raised by two informants – an officer from the Department, and an Aboriginal teacher who had spent more than a decade as an AEA in the school. These are presented in sequence below. Both believed there was considerable scope to develop the relationship between the community and the school:

I think that is a very important point, I think that the Aboriginal community don't think schools are theirs, there is no ownership, whereas with a lot of non-Aboriginal people the school is theirs, they feel comfortable in going to the school, participating P&C (Parents & Citizens Committee) school councils. Aboriginal community members are not doing that. Why they are not doing that is probably because they don't feel comfortable, they don't feel it is theirs. (Ref. 3.10221)

Just basically parents need to be more informed and that education is the only way that's going to break a lot of the cycles that are happening in the communities. Because they've had a rough time with education they should be more supported to try to get their kids educated, to break that cycle (AEA, Ref. 2.311710)

This opportunity and potential for improved capacity and quality of engagement with the education and schooling system was indeed being captured in perhaps an unplanned manner through the closer engagement of Indigenous community members through their casual employment on the In-class Tuition program being mounted at several of the schools in the study. This is not a dissimilar outcome to the accessing of further education which arose from the employment of AEAs in the system over the past 30 years in NSW, but is certainly worthy of consideration as part of both an educational empowerment process and also, as a strategic approach to increased long term employment prospects for Indigenous people in education and particularly teaching:
I think one of the things John, and this is probably not so much the kids themselves, but it comes back to kids, there has to be more change in attitude a little bit too. With some of our people that we’ve employed as tutors as part of the in class tuition program, just looking at Oxford model here, where we have a large number of about 15 people, Koori people that are employed that are looking for further training and wanting to do courses where they can get some sort of recognition at the end of the course so you have got now, so there are families that have been given a parents or carers whoever they may be, given an opportunity and they come in and work as tutors and like what they are doing and want to further their own schooling and things like that so there has been an improvement there and that’s going to have more of a positive what’s a name on their kids as they are coming through because they are starting to value education but they are starting to see education as a different light because they are in the schools, they see how the school operates and stuff like that, so they see what’s going go and so they can see the benefits for themselves when they are asking for courses because I know we established a TAFE course. (Ref. 3.7610)

Indigenous Communities’ relationship with the schools

In reporting on the relationship that Indigenous communities enjoyed or otherwise with the schools, this section chapter will address four key areas of this relationship; firstly, the personal with regard to individual experiences; secondly, the collective primarily reported through Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness Programme (ASSPA) which were functioning in several of the schools in the study; thirdly, perceptions and relationships with teachers in the schools; and finally a specific reference to the relationships between schools and senior management in the schools, primarily with principals.

Personal school experiences of parents/carers

Individual community members recalled a variety of their personal levels of interaction with the schools during interviews, ranging from very negative extending to significant racial issues and near total breakdowns in communication to the very positive. Racism will be dealt with at a later point in this chapter. The following sections are focussed on breakdowns in communication.

Most of the individual school interactions involved parents/carers speaking to school staff with regard to the matter of behaviour issues and suspensions. Often this entailed multiple interviews on these matters and in the following quote it is evident that the only
way of resolving the matter for the student was to change schools, which was done with
the support of the two public schools involved and ended with a positive outcome for all
concerned:

Well, when she went to the school down here, I was going down pretty well every
week, it was just getting so depressing. I said to her, if you can't cope with the
teachers, just get out of it, so she decided she wanted to go [to a neighbouring
school] over the other side and I think I've been over there once [to deal with
behaviour issues]. (Ref. 4.7910)

Not all cases ended so positively. Gail, the mother of Kate, had experienced some
traumatic personal life circumstances involving a friend. Gail found the school less than
supportive at this critical time in the student's life. In point of fact the student ended up
running away from home and this was still so at the time of interview. Gail explained:

I had blues with them mainly when Kate started to wag school. I rang the school
and spoke to all the people concerned and I said, "Look, as soon as my daughter
doesn't turn up to school, I want a phone call". She wagged school one day and
three weeks later, we got a phone call from the school advising us she wagged
school three weeks ago. I went off my rocker and asked them about the phone call
I was supposed to get then. If I had got the phone call, I could have gone and found
her and kicked her up the bum and got her back to school.

Also at parent teachers [meetings] – out of eight teachers, not one teacher was
there. They had to go and do yoga classes and all that sort of stuff. We discussed
it with the vice principal and they said they will contact you. It was the Thursday
and we still hadn't had a phone call, so I wrote a letter to the school. The biggest
problem with that was, three of the teachers sent letters home for us to sign saying
they wish to speak to us about Kate. We made arrangements to see them at the
parent-teacher interviews and talk to them about any problems they had with Kate.
We got to speak to nobody, except for the year advisor. (Ref. 4.5910)

This situation proved to be a catalyst in Kate's tragic journey towards personal self-abuse
and homelessness. In this instance the issues acknowledged by all were not followed
through, and the parents were at the time justifiably concerned and focused on their
daughter's safety and whereabouts.

By contrast overall the informants interviewed were fairly or very positive about the
schools and the way in which they treated Indigenous students:
I think what they are doing at Primary school is good enough for me, no racism down there, you get it every now and then, the High school, my daughter has done her last exam today for Year 12, she came through here no problem, I couldn’t ask for anything more than what the school has done for her. (Ref. 4.8120&1)

In addition to the personal contact noted above, communities in most schools had an opportunity through a more formal approach to liaison with the school through the ASSPA committees.

**Functioning of ASSPA committees**

In many instances the functioning of these committees was heavily reliant on the Indigenous staff at the school and in particular the AEAs. These committees however, generally were not functioning very well and appeared to be run down as the following comments from committee members indicate:

**R:** ...How would you describe the community support?

**I:** None. The Aboriginals’ support? None.

**R:** What about ASSPA?

**I:** Oh, we’ve got ASSPA but I’ve been the treasurer for ASSPA since I’ve been here. I’ve been here eight years.

**R:** So you don’t have many participating in ASSPA? Many come to ASSPA.

**I:** The last one I had was I had about 15 people because I put on a feed for ‘em. To get these people, the community help here, you’ve got to lavish them. Put on a big lavish meal. That’s the only way they’ll come. (Ref. 2.311910)

Well being involved in the ASSPA committee for the last three years there has been very little community involvement in that sort of thing. We constantly arrange to have meetings and one or two parents would show up which is really disappointing and we even had a boy who was an Aboriginal boy but his mother wasn’t and she was actually one of the ones turning up to the ASSPA meetings. So I mean there were definitely good points, but not enough community involvement at the moment I think. The only way you can get them up here is to put on a free feed or something, which is disappointing. (Ref. 2.311211)
And also;

**R:** How would you describe the community support of the school and things like is there a local AECG, ASSPA committee?

**I:** We have an ASSPA committee. The last few months it has been ok attendance. The last two meeting there was only two people here, two mothers that came, so those meetings weren’t counted. They find that if you put on an afternoon tea or something like that, we find if you put on an afternoon tea they will turn up, or a luncheon. They’ve asked a lot of parents what time and what days can they come. Some parents say Wednesday after school in the afternoon and when Wednesday comes they don’t turn up.

**R:** It’s hard getting community involved. What do think the community thinks about the school?

**I:** Most of the parents like the school.

**R:** And they think that the school’s doing a reasonable job?

**I:** Yeah, yeah. (Ref. 2.312410)

Lester and Hanlen (2004) found in their Review of the Aboriginal Education Policy, as did a specific review of ASSPA committees conducted by the Department of Education, Science and Training (DETYA, 2000b) that these committees were not very effective in empowering Indigenous community in affecting school policy or decision making, which were prime objectives associated with the funding to ASSPA from the DEST. The following informant starts out by addressing the real level of communication between the school and the community making the point that there is a need to get the school to venture into the community rather than being reliant on the reverse. The informant also corroborates the effectiveness of ASSPA and especially the very limited scope of their capacity to affect school policy and practice and points out their main role is to allocate the money for projects but do not in fact relate these projects to specific school strategies for Indigenous students:

**I:** Formally, very, very little. Informally very little, there is few teachers who have friendships through football games, like their kids playing football and stuff like that but basically I actually, I said to [principal] about doing home visits and that’s my aim for next year to get him out to do some home visits with me, meet some of the parents. We spoke about getting the parents training, giving some sort of training but the department is talking about doing it now anyway so that they’ve got a better understanding of what school is about and maybe even making them more comfortable with coming in. We’ve got a few parents out of probably, there is around about 118 Koori kids, out of the 118, I could count that many, probably 10 parents and that would be at a stretch that have actually come into the school to
do something. You know like come in for ASSPA meetings, come in for meetings with the teachers and stuff. I mean if the kids have been on suspension, they ring me up and say ‘I can’t come in there can you deal with it’ and even when I’ve, like one little girl I know, I tried for weeks to get her grandmother to come up here to the school to talk. It’s hopeless, they’ve got excuse, after excuse and it’s only because they uncomfortable. I spoke to a meeting out at the TAFE with the parents, with the young mums group and some other parents about school, relationship between the school and the community and I spoke to them and I said you need to get [in contact with the school], you know, if something is wrong with your child.

R: So you’ve got an ASSPA committee?

I: This year has been a real wash out because Jack and Paul, Jack is our chair person and Paul has gone, they’ve started that [youth ] Years group, so they are really hard to try and but Raelene is the secretary or no she’s the treasurer, yeah she is the treasurer, her and I have been running it this year. We’ve had a few meetings, it’s pretty reliable though the ASSPA committee, you always have about eight.

R: And what sort of decisions do they make?

I: Where to spend the money.

R: So it’s basically regarding the money. Do they have any input to the school?

I: No

R: Management?

I: No, that’s why when all this change in the ASSPA will be good I reckon. We’ve already started talking about trying, [a member of the school executive] and I have talked about putting together programs and submitting them, so I think it will be better, it will involve the school more in to it. Whereas before there seemed to be a bit of a wall between the ASSPA committee and the school. (AEA, Ref. 2.310010)

While it is acknowledged that the community has some input to the school though formal mechanisms like the ASSPA committee there were other examples of mechanisms where the local Aboriginal organisations were also working productively with the schools in critical areas of employment, youth support, health and early childhood.

It is highlighted in the following quotation from an Aboriginal teacher how at times the effectiveness of communication of the school executive can miss its mark, even if trying very positively with an innovative approach. In this reported case, the principal is making an effort to get out into the community, but his language is inappropriate and so sours a good initiative:
Yeah it’s supportive but it is not open support. Like if in the community in general we get a lot of support from the Land Council, we get a lot of support from [local Aboriginal Health Service], we get a lot of support from [pre-schools name], that’s the preschool on the mish, but the parents are still sceptical of coming in and actually, like I said before, they just get sick of people talking down to them and like that authoritative figure, instead of being on the same wave length. Not above the parent. But the Principal goes out there and I mean they’re professional enough to talk to him face to face and not be silly. But other times they want to knock his block off. (Ref. 2.311710)

Education in schools is very much focused on the relationship that a student has with their teachers. This is no different in Indigenous contexts but to secure this relationship as indicated in the preceding longer quotation (AEA, Ref.2310010), schools and their staff need to be seen in the community and need to be known by the community and more specifically develop through such relationships an understanding of the students backgrounds both socially and culturally.

Community perceptions of, and relationships with, teachers

There is general agreement that teachers’ connections with students are critical:

Certainly they wouldn’t want to be a racist. You’d want to have a bit of understanding about the local kids and certainly want to help them. (An Aboriginal School Administrative Support staff member, Ref. 4.8810)

I: [A teacher] that understands the local Aboriginal culture, one that has got no hesitation in going into the Aboriginal community, one that is openly, will say hello to Aboriginal parents, students anywhere in the streets. Outside of the school, no qualms about coming to talk to the parents at home, when they get to the school, have time and put a bit of time into certain Aboriginal students that they know are struggling or not even those that aren’t struggling it’s the ones that you can see are gifted in some areas but no one has done anything to push them further to do something for them and they are going to waste away.

R: So expectations?

I: Yeah! Yeah! (AEA, Ref. 2.38510)

And the success of Indigenous students rests with committed teachers who go out of their way to make a difference and not those who appear to be going through the motions
with very little regard to the background and needs of their students. This does not go unnoticed by the Indigenous community as exemplified by the comments of the following AEA:

I: I don’t think that we have, it’s hanging on to the kids to get the outcomes, to get the good outcomes. You know, from Year 10, we’ve probably got 20 kids by the time we get to Year 12, we are lucky to have three, we had three last year. So therefore they are not good outcomes, are they? You know what I mean.

R: They are better than some schools!

I: Yeah, probably, but they are not good outcomes.

R: What do you put that down to?

I: A lot of lack of teacher understanding, the way teachers speak to the kids, the way they treat them, our kids, everybody knows, they learn differently, teachers don’t want to accept that because a lot of them feel we’re giving them special treatment and they don’t want to do it. A lot of teachers get into their classrooms and teach, they go in there, they teach a lesson and then they go on and teach the next lesson and they couldn’t give two shits really whether the kids have learnt anything or not. (Ref. 2.310010)

The most resounding message from the Aboriginal community about the key to what makes a good teacher was respect and its associated foundation elements which is about getting to know the children and developing relationships with their children as clearly indicated in the following focus group collective responses:

R: What makes a good teacher of Aboriginal kids? What are the qualities of a good teacher of Aboriginal kids?

I 1: Well respect is one.

I 2: Understanding.

I 3: Understanding of the Kooris.

I 2: Understanding of the culture is another.

I 3: Understanding where they come from.

I 1: And getting to know the child. And taking an interest, and I know it’s difficult when you’ve got 30 children in the class, but just taking just a little bit of interest in what that child does. Oh, what was your weekend like? You know, did you play sport? What did you do? (Ref. 4.FG)
The community identified many teachers that they felt comfortable dealing with and commented on some who were outstanding. It appeared that the common factor in the quality of the teachers was the teacher’s capacity to work with the students and parents on an equal footing. As highlighted in the next supporting quote from community it is a bit of a lucky dip for Indigenous students as to the quality of teacher they get especially with regard to acceptance of the students Indigenous background and culture. Also of note here in light of the next section on school executive, are the comments on bias when dealing with Indigenous student issues:

**R:** I want to talk more broadly about the kids and those sorts of things now, how do you think Aboriginal kids go at school?

**I 1:** At this school? That’s a sort of um a 50/50 question. It’s a pretty broad question because it depends on what class, what teacher. You get good teachers, you get [teacher named] next door you couldn’t get a better teacher. I said to her, I said...

**I 2:** She’s brilliant

**I 3:** We need a hundred of [teacher named].

**I 1:** She doesn’t look at anybody as different, anything else other than a person. And like some of these teachers in this school they’re just straight out racists. There is no other word for it, but unless I can catch ‘em there is nothing I can do about it because I don’t care you bring a kid into that office and the teachers been in there and they’ve writ their little complaint out and took into [the principal]. He automatically goes to bat for that teacher. That kid’s got no rights, nothing. He goes to bat for the teacher. He said I have to believe what my teachers tell me. But you’ve had other kids come as witnesses and so but that’s not right I seen what happen but…

**I 2:** That’s why the kids get their back up, over that, because they don’t believe them. They say, “What’s the use of going telling the Principal, or even telling another teacher what’s going on, when they don’t get any support!” (Ref. 4.FG Oxford)

Two ex-students, who were continuously suspended and ultimately dropped out of school before getting their school certificate, highlighted that they had taken on TAFE to get their equivalent school certificate and saw this as very important to their futures. In interviews both these students indicated that while school provided an environment where they constantly clashed with teachers and perceived their teachers to be unfair and racist. In contrast they received considerable support from their TAFE teachers. In these cases clearly an important point was the time and interest demonstrated by these
teachers, which, in turn, reflects the concerns expressed by the community about teachers not taking the time to involve themselves in students learning needs:

*I:* Fay is one of the best teachers I've ever come across. [She] helps me out. She always listens to you and she understands you. Tries to get the boys out of trouble! Helps the boys out!

*R:* She's the only teacher you have?

*I 1:* George. He's all right too, another good teacher.

*R:* Is there a difference between TAFE teachers and school teachers?

*I 1:* Yeah. You learn more. They've got more time for you and understand you. Explains things to you better! (Ex-Student, Ref. 4.7210)

Informants were mixed on the capacity of the teachers in the study to liaise and communicate effectively with the community and in particular their capacity to understand Indigenous students' backgrounds, citing good and bad practices. Teachers who take the time to get to know their students and familiarise and mix with the Indigenous community in a genuine way are perceived to be more trusted and productive in their work with students and the community.

A strategic response that students exhibit to poor school experience is to choose to leave the school environment but not education per se. This needs to be highlighted as in reality, they vote with their feet and sought more responsive and supportive alternate learning environments such as TAFE as demonstrated in the above quote. In the following interview there is the case of a student who left school in Year 7 but still had a desire to finish her education and found opportunities in TAFE that she could not find in the very formal secondary school structure, with teachers who could not effectively relate to Indigenous students need for cultural respect. The quotation highlights the disjuncture in experience between primary and secondary school perceptions of teachers as well:

*R:* Why didn’t you like high school?

*I:* There was too much racism. Heaps of things! The teachers...

*R:* What was wrong with the teachers?

*I:* I don’t reckon they was fair!

*R:* Can you give me an example?
I: We got into heaps of fights with a couple of groups of non-Aboriginals out there and they seemed to listen to them first and take their side before they even asked us.

R: What did you think of the teachers?

I: I don’t know. I wasn’t there that long.

R: What did you think of primary school? Where did you go?

I: Oxford. It was good. I loved it there.

R: Did you use to attend regularly there?

I: Yeah. I went through. (Ex-Student, Ref. 4.72a10)

While the importance of relationships between students and teachers was readily identified the study also extended its exploration of community relations with school management.

**Relationships between the Community and senior school management**

Leaders in schools hold a major responsibility for ensuring productive working relationships between the school and the community at large and in particular to the most marginal of all communities, the Indigenous community:

Oh yeah, I didn’t have any problems coming to the school and I actually got on ok with a lot of the teachers and even Mr [deputy principal named] and Mr [principal named] I sort of got to know him. I think we had a pretty good relationship with them. (Aboriginal Community Focus Group, Ref. 4FGOH)

The executives are pretty good, but on that cultural diversity level, there needs training. (Aboriginal Tutor, Ref. 2.35311)

The vast majority of community members interviewed were quite positive about the efforts of most of their principals to engage the Indigenous community. Examples of this willingness to get more involved with the community and in an endeavour to build up their own cultural understanding and rapport, meant in a number of cases, the principals
were prepared to move out of their school comfort zones and interact with the community in the community setting:

**Male1:** The principal, the two deputies and one and two teachers. It’s like we have pizza with the principal and it really works well, I think Underdale Primary School worked well.

**Male2:** Oh, unbelievable number of people came. Kids and parents came.

**R:** Do primary schools do anything like that?

**Female2:** No because we don’t get as much funding as the High School does. (Aboriginal Community Focus Group, Ref. FG4.8110&20)

They’ve gotten better, more understanding. I think since we’ve done the home visits and he’s seen how they live, I think that’s changed his mind on the punishments that he was giving and because a lot of the parents won’t come to the school, they just refuse to come in here and then they say to their kids ‘get on the bus or I’ll knock you out’, the kids can’t understand, well mum hates coming here, why should I have to come here. (AEA, Ref. 2.35010)

While it is pleasing to see the overall level of commitment of school executives, led by principals in most instances, to positive relationships and building up contact and trust in the Indigenous community, the endeavour is not without its difficulties:

**R:** Why would the community want to knock the principal’s block off?

**I:** I go out a lot of times with the principal to the Mission to see some parents and I can be speaking real easy with the parents, joking and laughing with the parents but still being serious about the children and about their work and school. And the principal might be just standing there and you know and he will chip in and butt in sort of go [over] everyone’s head. You know in the words he uses and they can’t handle it.

**R:** Is the community encouraged to participate in the school?

**I:** Yeah

**R:** And how often do they come to the school?

**I:** Only when we hold NAIDOC day but not so much into the school and the only other time is if we take the school to the mish. If I hold my NAIDOC days in here I’ll get like 20 to 30 parents. (Aboriginal Teacher, Ref. 2.311710)
Given the thesis case study schools were specifically targeted at the more high density Indigenous populated schools there was greater emphasis and focus on these schools to respond to Indigenous student issues. However, in schools with much lower density Indigenous student numbers the same pressure to perform and target programs for these students, despite the fact that in NSW some 44% of Indigenous students are in primary and a little over 27% of Indigenous students are in secondary public schools with less than 30 Indigenous students (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004), is not as evident nor perceivably as urgent an issue for some principals and executive as the following comment from an Indigenous educational consultant expresses her concern with regard to leadership on Indigenous issues:

*I think that is one of our major problems John is the leadership. If Aboriginal education for instance is not part of the priority or some of them it doesn’t come on a scale of 10, we just don’t get anything done. Sometimes even me as an Aboriginal worker, I can’t even get into a certain school in this area you know because the principal saying ‘we don’t need you, we’ll call you when we want you’ and we know for a fact that we’ve had parents scream out to us, ‘well why don’t you come to this school?’* (Ref. 3.7610)

The Indigenous communities’ and parents' frustration expressed at the end of the above quote is very evident and for the consultant who demonstrates a level of her own frustration with regard to the procedure, which requires principals to invite consultants into their schools. In essence without such invitation a significant number of Indigenous students may not be receiving the attention and services they might require. This level of freedom for principals is a little less flexible in the area of student attendance and mandatory requirements to report critical levels of individual student unexplained absences.

**ATTENDANCE AND SUSPENSION**

Indigenous parents and community members had exhibited a level of difficulty speaking on attendance and suspension patterns as in most cases they only had access to their own children’s data, as indicative of the two parent cases below:

*No. I don’t have any knowledge. My son is very regular.* (Aboriginal Parent, Ref. 4.05820)
I had a bit of trouble with my son, but he’s tormented really easily and he can’t handle it so he gets to the stage where he doesn’t want to come to school, but would come the majority of the time. (ASSPA Committee, Ref. 4.8110&1)

Many in the Indigenous community had an opinion about the number of Indigenous school aged students who they saw in the streets and running around on missions/reserves but in general did not have access to the overall data to make informed statements on overall attendance and similarly with regard to suspension data.

The informants in this section were Indigenous staff working in the schools and significantly from AEAs and regional consultants. In interviews three key themes emerged, firstly the characteristics of Indigenous attendance patterns; secondly the causes of these patterns; and finally the impact on Indigenous students’ outcomes. The issue of suspensions of Indigenous students is dealt with in its own section at the conclusion of the discussion on attendance.

**Extent of attendance issues**

Indigenous community members in interviews were limited in their informed understanding with regard to attendance patterns of Indigenous students and this is in spite of many of them sitting on school ASSPA committees where decisions were being made on funding for school initiatives. This is indicative of the effectiveness and actual empowerment of the Indigenous community in formal consultative process with the school on this issue, which is seen at national and state policy levels (National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Education Policy, [DEET, 1989b]; and NSW Aboriginal Education Policy, [NSWDE, 1982]) as a significant factor prohibiting the effective education of Indigenous students. One of the community focus groups clearly articulates this lack of understanding of the micro issues regarding attendance and the community reliance on an AEA for the non-confidential details:

**R:** What about attendance of Aboriginal kids at school? How would you describe that?

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20 Reference here is to note that personal circumstances and details of individual students obviously should not be made available to others and must remain confidential. Community involvement in any planning regarding attendance strategic approaches should obviously not involve discussion of confidential matters. Maintaining confidentiality is paramount but the community through ASSPA or Local AECGs do have a clear role in advising schools on the broader issues around attendance and suspension issues.
I 1: The attendance, do they attend school a lot?

I 2 (AEA): Yeah. What’s your feeling? [AEA trying to encourage community to answer question in focus group session]

I 1: You see I don’t see the records or anything, I don’t know who’s away or what. I know a lot of them wag. Cause I’ve seen a few, that’s all colours.

I 3: Yes, that is.

I 4: That’s true I’ve seen a lot of them. I don’t know, I can’t really answer that, sorry because I …

I 1: I think [names AEA] can answer that because she knows.

R: You might have an opinion that’s all.

I 2: Well I don’t think it’s that bad really, the attendance of this school, of a lot of the students. You might get one or 10 out of the 130 that do attend, attend this school.

R: That have bad attendance?

I 2: Umm about 10, about 10 out of the 138. But there’s not enough people, but there’s not enough personnel to deal with chasing that up is there?

R: So there is a small percentage of Aboriginal kids who wouldn’t come regularly?

All Informants: Yeah, yeah, yeah.[universal agreement of focus group]

R: So the majority of Aboriginal kids generally front up the majority of the time.

I 2: Yeah

I 3: Yeah

I 2: We [school] did an [assessment]…and there was about 80% attendance and he said to me that on Year 7 to 10 and I think he told me that there was a small percentage, what did he say…the there was a half a dozen Koori kids that need to be checked on. (Ref. 4.FG0H)

There was consensus in community interviews that there was only a small percentage of Indigenous students who were regularly absent from school. What could not be agreed was the solid data surrounding these numbers. Depending very much on the size of the Indigenous student body the number of ‘chronic non-attenders’ i.e. students with prolonged non-attendance, varied from a single person or family through to some 33% of Indigenous enrolments at one school. A school at the time of the research was overcoming some serious school management issues and severe breakdown in relations
with the Indigenous community. In many of these circumstances the ‘chronic non-attenders’ might be small in actual number but they are taking off the equivalent of often well in excess of 50% of the total school days. This important dynamic and critically important factor is best captured in the following first AEA then Aboriginal teachers’ descriptions of their individual schools, the first giving an insight into the school’s caring attitude towards its students:

I: Probably three or four that truant. We try and work with them first before we do have to ring home. We communicate with the community like home-wise that way. Touch base with the parents to let them know we do care about your kids while they’re in the care of us at the school and the parents appreciate what we do for them.

R: So the majority of Aboriginal kids at this school attend school regularly?

I: Yes. Attendance! We’ve got 13% Aboriginal kids at the school. Out of the suspension myself, I think that wouldn’t be no more than 10 to 13% out of all the kids that do get suspended at the school. (Ref. 2.35711)

I: Yes, yes. There is probably a few families out there that don’t send their kids to school but the majority do send their kids to school and like I said, the reason that lot of them are falling behind is like they will have three days off here, a week off here but they’re never picked up, when they come back to school, on stuff that they have missed out on. (Ref. 2.311710)

Also, in the next instance the AEA and Aboriginal teacher informants highlight that even if the student has near perfect attendance the school seems to fail in its capacity to progress the child even in the fundamentals of literacy:

R: So have you got some Koori kids that attend every day?

I 1: Yeah, we got lot of them attend nearly every day.

R: That’s what we have got to find out, of the 60 Koori kids is it five kids that are away all the time, is it 10 is it 30?

I 2: Alright, you want that sort of ratio. It’s probably 20 kids.

R: So it’s about 1/3rd of the kids?

I 2: That are away all the time?

R: Chronic
I 2: Yeah chronic. And then you’ve probably got another 15 that will take two days off one week, two days off the next week, and you’ve probably got about another 10 kids that are here on full attendance. But still not up here!

R: What do you mean not up here?

I 2: Still not getting range of academic skills.

R: Even the kids that are attending?

I 2: Yeah that’s what I said. I had one kid last year who basically only missed two days out of the whole year. Still illiterate! (Ref. 2.311611 & 2.211710)

In endeavouring to ascertain the pattern of ‘chronic non-attendance’ the researcher identifies some of the reasons for this small group of non-attenders (see chapters 5 and 6) including, as above, their lack of motivation to attend school and the responsibility to maintain family bonds/commitment which competes with school attendance:

R: The other thing with attendances, is the attendance pattern of Aboriginal kids skewed due to a small number of chronic non-attenders?

I: I think so, yes. Yes definitely a number of kids just don’t come because they don’t want to be at school and that sort of reflects badly on the rest of the kids that are away sometimes, who generally have family reasons or are visiting family further away. So I think it reflects badly on those ones. (AEA, Ref. 2.311211)

These chronic attendance patterns of a few begin to stereotype Indigenous students’ perceived high levels of absences. This matter will be taken up further in this chapter.

Why do kids stay away from school?

The community explored a broad range of reasons for Indigenous students not coming to school and they ranged from no real difference to other non-Indigenous students in the school, through to family responsibilities, health issues, unstable family lives, domestic violence, poor parental experience and results from education, and lack of success from the schooling experience which makes the catch up with peers on their return near impossible.
Significant factors which were associated with particular students’ environmental factors and home lives were raised as causes of absenteeism. In this regard there was consistent messaging from the community which indicated that those students living on missions or reserves often had very difficult family environments and in particular a lot of exposure to domestic, and personal violence, alcohol and substance abuse and subsequently lacked positive parental guidance and nurturing. Life on missions/reserves for Indigenous students forms a separate address in a subsequent section in this chapter.

Instability in family home lives is a recurring theme amongst those students who are ‘chronic non-attenders’. In the quotation immediately below the informant normalises the process of other Indigenous peers and then focuses on the family circumstances of the sole ‘chronic non-attenders’ life, while the second quote reaffirms the fact that chronic non-attenders only represent a small proportion of the Indigenous student population:

I: No! I don’t think there are any difference, any comparison, no!

R: So there much the same [referring to the attendance patterns of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students at the school]!

I: Yep!

R: Are there any Aboriginal kids that don’t turn up, like chronic poor attenders?

I: One in particular. He was supposed to play cricket with the school last Wednesday and he hasn’t been back since because he was naughty and they didn’t let him play cricket so he hasn’t been back to school since.

R: So other than that one example Koori kids generally come to school?

I: Yeah they come to school, yeah, yeah.

R: Do you think you can link attendance patterns with kids’ behaviours and their academic performance? How well they do at school?

I: Yes and no. Well that child I was just talking about ‘cause his dad’s working so he’s got nobody at home to push him off to school. So he just decides to stay at home. (AEA, Ref. 2.312410)

And, in the case of the next interview comments from an AEA whose school services one of the missions on a river, the informant outlines the work being carried out in a particular school to improve attendance outcomes but admits that in the case of students who come
from their local mission, the complex holistic issues which impinge on the capacity of student to attend school is highlighted:

**I:** We went through a couple of months, slowly getting them back and then we went through another six months where they were fine, then different issues would stop them from coming.

**R:** Like what?

**I:** The family feuds, something would happen, they’d get sick or an uncle or auntie or father will die and then they stop coming and when they do come back they don’t understand anything. We have a lot of trouble with the Koori students who go swimming in the river, pick up boils and sores, so we’ve got to send them home and because it takes so long for a boil to go away and they know they are not allowed to be here, it’s hard when they come back. Even if you took the work home there is no one at home the majority of time to help, plus a lot of the parents are saying to me, ‘I don’t understand this work’ if the kids have gone to them. There are a lot of parents who can’t sign their kids’ forms, they don’t know what a signature is, they’ll just write their name. (AEA, Ref. 2.35010)

The pattern of attendance for the minority of Indigenous students is often cyclical, revolving around periods where the community are significantly reliant on welfare payments, which tragically spells a time of increased antisocial activity and use of alcohol and substance abuse amongst some community members, again this being a heightened issue for students who find themselves in crowded often poor housing on mission/reserve environments:

Their home life has a lot to do with it, pay days and I don’t know, a lot of the kids don’t see the importance of education and I would say the biggest pattern to deal with would be their home lives. Not the majority, smaller [numbers]. Kids that seem to be, a few Koori kids that we’ve done who seem to be in more of a stable home life, they don’t have any issues but the kids that seem to come from unstable home lives, you could see a pattern in their attendance where pay days, that’s the day they get money or mum and dad are drunk. (Ref. 2.310010)

Finally, attendance patterns can be improved and cycles broken, through generally changed family or home circumstances is evident in the findings found earlier in the section involving an increasing number of interventions by grandparents, which had often led to improved attendance. The following example of the multitude of factors that played a significant part in turning around a student who came from an alcoholic family background, which including initial intervention of the grandmother, and a subsequent change in secondary schools has turned the student’s school life full circle. As a result of the changes the student became so switched on to schooling and education that she
is now actively pursuing her senior education away from the public school domain to a private boarding school in Sydney with the help and intervention of a local Nun and the Nan paints the picture:

**I:** Yeah, Alice used to have quite a bit off [absences from school].

**R:** Has that changed lately?

**I:** Yeah, not in the last five months, oh she did miss a bit of school because of all the stuff that’s been going on but she’s improved compared to what she was down here [referring to her old high school].

**R:** And when she was here, how often would she not go to school?

**I:** Oh dear, I couldn’t really remember, things just go from my head and that’s it. I’m getting too old to remember things.

**R:** But there has been an improvement? Why do you think she’s improved in the last little while?

**I:** I really couldn’t tell you, I just think she just preferred the environment over there a lot better than over here.

**R:** So the change in schools made the difference, even in difficult times at home that change was strong enough?

**I:** Yeah, even now she says she’s started to go to counselling, it’s good. She’ll be going down to boarding school hopefully after Christmas.

**R:** Yeah, where is that at?

**I:** [Names private school] at Glebe.

**R:** Glebe, why down there?

**I:** Ahh, I guess because a nun who is helping us and she suggested and a few other Koori kids have gone down there, they say it’s very good so we decided we are going to help her. (Ref. 4.7910)

Community were well aware of the consequences associated with poor attendance at school. They clearly understood that the more time you took off school the greater the chances were that you would not learn and subsequently be grossly disadvantaged in employment opportunities. Interviews revealed a connection with students falling behind in school, unable to catch up on work and eventually facing an impossible position and subsequently leading them to poor behaviour, as demonstrated in this AEA’s experience with as she puts it ‘a handful ‘of students:
R: Do you think that attendance and behaviour affects academic outcomes?

I: It all depends because there is only a handful.

R: Of those kids because there not attending do you think that it affects, those kids that are not attending regularly do you think it affects their academic outcomes?

I: Yeah, if there not coming to school they’re not learning and they get way behind with the class, and some of them they refuse to catch up, or they are made to catch up and they find that much harder because they are not going to school.

R: Does that then lead to behaviour problems you think?

I: Yes if they’re made to catch up, yeah. (Ref. 2.312410)

What’s happening to those kids who are turning up?

In an earlier section in this chapter we heard from an informant about a critical issue surrounding those majority of Indigenous students who do turn up regularly to school but whose results are markedly below that of the average for all students from education across the state.

To get an insider view of this phenomenon two Indigenous district consultants working specifically in the area of attendance, openly discuss what happens to the Indigenous these students, students whose parents often against all odds manage to ensure that their children do go to school very regularly but currently based on data, are students who the system is failing:

I 1: [Informant 2] talks about attendance, what we’ve identified that there has been an improvement in attendance in some of our schools but what happens is that you get a group, a core group of kids that keeps the statistics to a low level because they are a core group of kids that are chronic non-attenders you see and they are keeping the stats low although there has been an improvement, with one of our schools in particular.

I 2: If that core group are in primary school, now they are in high school so that school is now looking really good.

I 1: So the stats can shift.

I 2: Or the kids have moved out of the area, the kids that have been the chronic non-attenders, or the family actually move, usually it’s a family.

R: …my feeling is that the majority of Aboriginal kids regularly attend school.
I 1 and 2: Oh definitely they do.

I 1: There is the majority of Aboriginal kids out there that get along in the world as we know it on a day to day bases who cope very well and don’t get any recognition because they are not behaviour problems, they are not kids who stand out because of anything negative, I mean when we do have Aboriginal kids who stand out because they are achieving really well, they are not as pin pointed as, it’s more ‘oh that Koori kid did really well’ and that’s the end of it, they are not brought out, mind you that is probably the way the child would want it to because a lot of the kids, not just Koori kids don’t want that ‘how wonderful and great they are’ sort of thing in front of their peers, so the majority of our kids are doing really well but don’t get recognised...

I 2: When you ask the teacher how so and so is, ‘oh great’ but can you give me any real in-depth detail on them ‘well no’ because they are not a child that you have to target for being either good or bad.

R: Well when I speak to teachers about these kids I say, here is an example ‘Betty Smith was one of your kids’….‘Betty, Betty, Betty, oh yeah she was’….‘What have you got to say about her?’…..‘She was a lovely girl, she was not an ounce of trouble’….‘Did she get her school certificate?’…..I’m not sure, no I think she left just before it’. Does that ring bells?

I 1 and 2: Yes

R: I think in the system, that is where we can get the biggest shift.

I 2: I think that is where a lot more resources have got to go into those kids. (Ref. 2.37510&7610)

The final statement of Informant 2 above, clearly points to the need to prioritise the direction of resources to students who do attend school. These Indigenous educators’ practical experiences, highlight a disproportionate effort going into a minority of students who represent the ‘chronic non-attenders’. This group of students who are also subject to significant absences and in line with earlier informant comments also lose valuable time in school through suspension for misbehaviour. As often pointed out through a vicious circle of poor attendance, falling behind peers, leading to frustration in class and ultimately leading to behaviour problems and the inevitable suspensions, thus the cycle continues. The next section deals specifically with the suspension issue.
BEHAVIOUR/SUSPENSION

As pointed out in the introductory chapter statistically Indigenous student are disproportionately overly represented across the state in suspensions and expulsions from public schools and this is represented in the district data also. In the immediate prior section the issue of attendance and the vicious circle described, led to subsequent poor behaviour, that obviously played a dominant role in the high suspension rates of Indigenous students. In community interviews several relevant views further added views/detail is offered that contributes to an explanation of these suspension figures and also in this section we explore some remedial action currently being undertaken by schools. A very pertinent and relevant comment is also addressed in this section, by an elder in the community, when trying to digest the issues surrounding contemporary Indigenous youth and their behaviour towards the elders in their communities.

At the time of the research there was a significant focus in the district and for that matter across the state, on suspension rates of Indigenous students. The District in response encouraged schools to look to better behaviour management strategies and a closer analysis of their school procedures with regard to suspensions. This resulted in a number of the schools being identified in the thesis case studies as having moved to piloting specific programs to redress the imbalance as outlined by a District consultant who is working specifically in the area:

Well, some of the schools I actually deal with, some kids that their less eager to send them home on suspension, they are starting to do in school suspensions but then again with OH&S and all the risk assessments they have to do now I don't know how that is going to effect it all for next year. (Ref. 3.7510)

A recurring theme throughout the thesis and supported again in the following quote argues that one of the most important factors leading to ultimate suspension and in serious cases expulsion stems from the teachers inability to effectively communicate or engage with Indigenous students. The informant cites examples which have previously been noted in this chapter from students themselves engaged in TAFE, that the pedagogical approach in TAFE is far more conducive to improved communication and engagement. How teachers relate to Indigenous students is an important component of improving and maintaining a good and productive educational environment and the all-important relationship between teacher and student:

R: Suspension rates at the school, how are they?
I: They are pretty bad with Koori kids.

R: Is there any reason for that?

I: It seems to be mainly always because the way the teachers talk to the kids, our kids. You know I’ve had kids from here go to TAFE and they absolutely love it because they get spoken to like an adult and get treated like it. The difference in being spoken down to and being spoken on a level is really a big issue with our kids because the teachers raise their voices and go on and the kids get their backs up straight away. A lot of kids would simmer down but our kids would rather give them a mouthful and tell them where to get, so then they are out and suspended. (AEA, Ref. 2.310010)

A disturbing theme raised by a number of informants but particularly by an elder and one the researcher in his Indigenous educational background has heard reported several times before, was a serious breakdown in the respect for elders. This is a phenomenon which has only seemed to surface in Indigenous communities in quite recent times. This elder’s statement appears earlier in this chapter and highlights the effects of substance abuse in the community resulting in crime and a total disrespect for Indigenous elders in the community, which disturbed the elder considerably, as he saw it as a significant breakdown of his cultural background.

Some students coming from violent home situations and lacking the understanding and respect of elders, perhaps for good reasons as in their situations they have little to respect, unfortunately this manifests itself into them, acting out their own violent situations. While one can understand this perhaps from the environmental influences on the child, one cannot accept this behaviour in a school or community situation. Many of the results of suspension and expulsion have been as a result of violence either against a fellow student or in some cases verbal assault on teachers. However, a recurring theme in both this thesis research and one that was also detected up by Lester and Hanlen (2004) was the very real perception of significant numbers of Indigenous informants that a large number of suspensions due to violence between students were unfairly treated by the schools. This led in many instances to a disproportional number of Indigenous students getting suspended for their actions and not an equal number of the other party (generally referring to other non-Indigenous students). This was perhaps the most volatile racial set of circumstances consistently reported on by Indigenous students and community members and very well-articulated in the following interview as an introduction to the next section on specifically on Racism:
I think I've known a couple of situations when we were talking about violence where one student against another student and one suspended and the other one is not and it's usually the Aboriginal one that is suspended, I don't like that. To me, if they are a party to fighting in the school both should be suspended, not one and it's something that the kids bring up all the time and it's something that the Aboriginal parents bring up all the time and I quite question it myself. (Ref. 2.38510)

While violence is deplored both by the Indigenous community and the school, in the above case non-discriminatory responses are required which treats incidences equally for all concerned. Further such violence is something which at its heart in the Indigenous communities sense, is strongly evidenced in the need to harness respect within their own communities and also with schools and their staff.

RESPECT, RESPECT, RESPECT

Recurring throughout various answers to a range of interview questions was the strong reference to emphasis on ‘respect’. It was a critical element in teacher relationships with Aboriginal students and in relationship between the community and the school. The following quotes from a variety of interviews entwine the importance Indigenous community places on respect as fundamental criteria for engagement between teachers and students, the school and community, and finally the importance placed on respect within the Indigenous community:

I 1: But its, sorry, if the teachers haven’t got respect for the kids the kids not going to have respect for that teacher, that’s true!

R: Is respect important?

All Informants: (Together and very firmly) Yes very important!

I 1: think respect is the route of everything myself. (Ref. 4.FG)

Respect is a big thing in our school. If you can give respect to a kid, a kid will give respect back. If you can’t give respect, in today’s society, you won’t get respect at all. It doesn’t matter if he’s a good kid or a bad kid. You will not get respect. I believe to be a good teacher you’ve got to be amongst the kids. Interactive! Be like them. You can still be a teacher and be like them as well. (AEA, Ref. 2.35711)
**12: Just that they learn their culture, respect it, respect elders, respect people and go through life. (Ref. FG4.8110)**

And further in relationship to programs run externally to the school in the Vocational Education Training, the following informant highlights again in the following two quotes, the integral notion of relationships established through respect:

[Named an Aboriginal centre] – they had programs up and running for Aboriginal kids so we’d go down there with 19 kids every week one day a week. We’d go down and do a SWOP program with them. SWOP means school to work orientation program. The kids got a lot out of it. They respected the people, they were all Indigenous [and some] non-Indigenous people too. (AEA, Ref. 2.35711)

We’ve had other kids go to TAFE and do a TAFE program. It’s a cultural identity program to find their own identity. It deals with literacy and numeracy. The kids loved going to these places, being with their people and knowing what respect is all about. (AEA, Ref. 2.35711)

**RACISM**

In earlier chapters from both the perspective of the district staff and school staff racism in the community was quite apparent. This has been supported by Indigenous community informants but there was clear indication that such from their perspective, had not in any significant way spilled over into the school environment. In the following interview quotes, informants clearly indicate and acknowledge racism in the community but generally that schools appear to have to a level, prevented such attitudes to permeate their environment:

**R:** The levels of racism in the community outside?

**I:** There’s a lot of racism I think. From having my eyes open and seeing and hearing different things!

**R:** How would you describe racism in the school?

**I:** There isn’t any. The kids blend really well. (Parent, Ref. 4.5820)
And an interesting following comment on the evolution of race relations amongst the
students and on the changing racial environment in one community in the study:

**R:** How would you describe the broader community in terms of racism? Racial
environment?

**I:** It's heavy, the majority of it's hidden and it's only started to get like that in the last
20 years with the influx of retirees. It's surprising to see that the most racist people
are the elderly and because they are vocal and they go around to clubs and they
get around in groups and it's not a local situation and when I mean local I'm not
talking about someone who's come here 10 or 20 years ago, I'm talking about
families that have grown up with my father and my grandfather and we're talking
about the local locals, that racism has never been there, it's more of a brother sister
type relationship, you've grown up together and our fathers have grown up together
and that but when you get these people in, coming in with their attitudes and some
of them are blatantly open about it and others just hide it until they get with a group
and then let it out and it's still there. The hidden racism is still there, the attitudes
are still there.

**R:** How does that spill over to the school, do you find the school a racial
environment?

**I:** It's quietened down from five years ago when there use to be a lot of fights, there
hasn't been any fights, no racial slants around, no splitting up of groups within the
school where as there use to be black against white, that hasn't happened for five
years and I think it is because Aboriginal kids are starting to go out with non-
Aboriginal and it doesn't care, they don't care what mum and dad say anymore
because they've got their own minds these days. (AEA, Ref. 2.38510)

While not in itself racism one community member pointed out that teachers were not so
much racist but did not go out of their way to as in the previous section indicated, get to
build relationships based on respect:

**R:** What about the teachers, do you find any racism amongst the teachers?

**I:** I don't think its racism, I think they are just set in their ways, doesn't matter black
or white or anything, get into class or else instead of you know 'how you going?
Come in', they don't understand and they don't feel they should change their ways
for these children and I don't think its racist a lot of the time. I think it's just set in
their ways and their ways it! (AEA, Ref. 2.35010)

Finally a comment from an Indigenous teacher who was at the time recently appointed
to the school he had attended as a student, which gives an interesting historical
perspective on the racial environment in the school:
I: School, as a former student, I believe the school is still good. The environment's there. The teachers are there that are willing to help the kids to learn. On the basis of the kids, if they want to learn, they've got to put the hard yards in as well as the teachers.

R: Racial environment?

I: There is not a racial environment in this school that I've seen. I saw it last when I was at school 23 years ago and that was only once. (Ref. 2.35711)

COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES ON ABORIGINAL STUDIES AND THE CURRICULUM

A lot of things, yes, but they could put more in about Aboriginal history. They state back there in the old days that Captain Cook was the first one to discover Australia. He wasn’t the first person to discover Australia. We were first here. We were always here. That’s what I couldn’t understand. They write stuff in these books and it’s all a pack of lies. Australia wasn’t discovered at all. (Ref. 2.3571)

It is unfortunate that Indigenous community members still feel it necessary to raise this most fundamental of issues concerning the mistruths around the promulgation of discovery and ultimately the continuation of ‘terra nullius’ conviction that Australia had no prior ownership before the invasion of the British. We as Indigenous Australians didn’t exist as legal entities around ownership and the curriculum in schools in NSW and across Australia echoed this omission. This is in spite of Aboriginal education policy being established since 1982 in NSW and the legal overturning of ‘terra nullius’ in the now famous ‘Mabo’ case in the High Court of Australia some 10 years on from this ground breaking policy, in 1992. And it is clear from the study’s parent/carer/community perspectives that Aboriginal studies should be an integral component school curriculum. While community acknowledged the past injustices and racial omission in school syllabus, they held strongly to the view that this needed to change. As can be seen in the following focus group that were aware and concerned about the demise of past attempts at teaching Aboriginal studies and the burden often carried by a minority of compassionate and dedicated teachers that Aboriginal studies relies upon to champion its cause within schools in the study:

R: What about Aboriginal studies and things like that?
I1: There’s none of that in this school at the moment.

I 2: I think this school could be doing more.

I 3: Yes.

I 4: Yes.

I 1: I think they could be doing more with their curriculum. Some faculties are doing a little bit more than the others, some are not doing any. But I think for Aboriginal studies there was never enough push, there was never enough promotion. When they would put it on line they would put it on line with subjects which were pretty popular with other kids. So it never ever gave it a chance of getting off the ground really. I mean they had Aboriginal studies for quite a few years. But again, it was those committed teachers that were there that were driving it, promoting it. When they left it just didn’t happen, the other people just didn’t do anything about it.

I 2: There are probably two teachers that have spoken with me about getting it up and running again and that’s about it. (Ref. 4.8113 FG)

The Indigenous communities in the study held strongly to the belief that Aboriginal studies should be a compulsory subject for all students in the school. In support of this they also held to an additional two other important considerations regarding the teaching of such subjects/course content. The importance of making the syllabus local and contemporary in content and an equally clear message of assurance that the quality of the teaching would be high are well articulated in the following three quotes from community interviews.

...you get your history lessons and your Australian history and things like that but you need to know what the local Aboriginal culture is because Aboriginal culture is so diversified, you have to understand where you are living and what the Aboriginal culture is about and where you are at now, that sort of thing you know. (Community Focus Group, Ref. 2.38513)

The kids – it’s all different today. You’ve got to learn both sides, where before we only learnt on the mission, so that’s the way we were taught. Today, you’ve got to teach them both sides - the schooling, the interaction with white fellas. (Student Guardian, Ref. 4. 4.7110)

I think it’s a good idea if they can find the right people to teach and that sort of thing. (Nan, Ref. 4.7910)
Community held views in the study provided a clear mandate to the implementation of Aboriginal studies for all students across both primary and secondary schools. So too did they hold specific views on life on missions/reserves for Indigenous community and the implications/impact on Indigenous students’ educational needs.

**Double jeopardy – Kids from the Mish/Reserve**

As we have seen in earlier chapters around the three other factors making up the holistic appraisal of Indigenous education, perceptions around the three Indigenous missions/reserves in the study have generated significant stereotypical views of life in these uniquely all Indigenous communities. Negative stereotypes of poor and violent existence in these communities have been readily provided by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous informants in earlier chapters on this topic. However, much ‘myth’ or ‘stereotyping’ around these missions/reserves has not provided the important detailed analysis of the lives of the majority of students living in these environments. Resoundingly education analysis in this study has provided contrary documentation which has provided insights to quality lives of most of the Indigenous students in the study who were growing up in these environments. A little more than a half of these students speak of rich cultural ties and have fond memories of their extended families and loving parents or carers as found in earlier chapters. It would be wrong to not acknowledge at the same time, that these environments do have levels of violence and substance abuse (which again is well referenced in informant disclosures).

The study’s education findings polarised these communities into virtual halves, those kids who were regularly attending school (50% of mission with attendances at over 90%) and those who dominated chronic absences (covering 57% of the total absences for all Indigenous students with attendance figures available). While this study did not and should not have addressed an in-depth study of life on these missions/reserves, which was obviously out of the scope of the case study, it did manage through the parents/carers of the 10 students in the study, to provide an opportunity to look at the implication of such a community’s impact on their school educational experiences. These challenging communities still manage to ensure that in this study some 60% of students attend school regularly and have produced at least two high achievers (7% of the study’s students or 20% of students from the mission). Community were as equally divided on their descriptions of the mission along these polarised delineations but to reflect briefly
on the past mission life an elder and carer of one of the children in the study, provides
the background of some of the semblances of life that has been continued by many of
the carers in looking after the children on the mission especially around kinship
responsibility:

Well, I put it this way. When we grew up out in the mission it was good. You couldn’t
be out after six o’clock. Everybody looked after you. Everybody cared for you and
watched out for you. It wasn’t your own father that came after you, it was your
uncles and that. And if your dad was – my dad was a fisherman. If my dad was out
working, it would be my uncle to make sure that I was in the house. We had respect.
We didn’t cheat, we didn’t swear. There was no alcohol on the mission. No drugs.
I remember the men used to drink off the mission – they weren’t allowed to drink
on the mission. I remember when they didn’t drink in town too. They weren’t
allowed to be in town in the pub. (Ref. 4.7110)

In comparison there were clear indications of the violence and dysfunctional families that
lived on the Missions. However, in acknowledging this volatile environment the
community delineated their expressions across the polarised lines mentioned above and
as the second quote indicates clearly indicated that mission kids did not perform as well
at school in at least half of the cases:

Drugs, alcohol, people fighting. They don’t work. There’s a lot of them out there
that don’t work, but then again there are a lot of – there’s a few families that that
work, they push their kids - the kids come to school. The kids may not be one
hundred percent attendance, eighty five to ninety percent. (AEA, Ref. 2.35010)

R: Do you think the kids on the mish do better or worse at school?
I: Worse.
R: Why?
I: I think it’s the way they’ve just been brought up. Most of the kid’s parents on this
mish – half of them are alcoholics and don’t care about them and if they go to
school or not. Mostly drunk... Students have low self-esteem about themselves.
(Ex-student from Mission, Ref. 4.7210)

There was a definite understanding in the Indigenous community that most Indigenous
kids who perform well at school do not generally come from the Mission, which
compounds the stereotypical response to these students and as this study has shown
does not give adequate acknowledgement of the 60% of Mission kids who are regular
school attenders and have caring parents or grandparents. The following informant, who is very much a general and educational leader in her community, who has a Mission located in her community, had this to say about outcomes and parental support available to Indigenous students both off and on the Mission:

**I:** We call it the Mission.... then we have got the families in town, around town, then we have them at Paradise Gardens, Browns Lakes, Pines, Torres, Oxford Point, so they are spread out and it shows within the schooling system that when you look at the stats, the statistics and the literacy and numeracy level of kids, the majority of kids that are outside of the mission excel but the ones that are on the mission need assistance.

**R:** Why do you think that is an issue?

**I:** Could be the home environment, lack of support. Sometimes the parents don’t have the confidence with High School kids, the Primary school kids yes they can support them, they go to the Primary School and see the kids at school and that but when it comes to High School it is a different atmosphere altogether, they don’t seem to have the confidence, they don’t have the self-esteem to go out there, probably because they are lacking the education themselves and never went to high school and they don’t seem to want to push the majority don’t seem to want to push their kids through to complete Year 10 or 12, so it can be like a bad role model type thing. (Ref. 2.38510)

This study has found that somewhere around half of the Mission kids in the study face very different potential outcomes from their school experiences than their Indigenous peers not living in these circumstances. The ‘double jeopardy’ this group of students face stems primarily, as found in the study, from dysfunctional families that take refuge in substance abuse. Again this study can but note these serious inhibitors to Indigenous students gaining an education and a further in depth analysis of students found in these dysfunctional families is a study in itself and beyond the scope of this study. However, of significant importance to this study is the stereotypical development of all Indigenous kids within these few families, who consistently, as we have seen in the prior chapter, dominate high levels of absences and subsequently lead to behaviour problems in schools. And finally, the stereotypically held beliefs about Indigenous students off the Mission that had created a level of self-fulfilling prophecy in schools which must be challenged:

_I can see the two sides to it. I think from the other side, you see when the kids are coming across the road from Apen Primary into Apen High School they come with the stigma, or label or whatever you want to call it, these are Mission kids. So before they even get there, there labelled as being different. So, I think there is a different expectation for the teacher’s point of view, that these kids you know, because they come from Mission they won’t succeed. So I don’t think they try too_
hard because they don’t have great expectations. (Community Focus Group, Ref. 4.FG)

DO ABORIGINAL KIDS SWITCH OFF SCHOOL?

R: Do you think Aboriginal kids switch off school?
I: Not really no.

R: So you don’t see any evidence of the kids here at any stage of the kids switching off at a particular time, you know?
I: Only when they get into trouble.

R: What happens then?
I: They refuse to do anything. They’re reprimanded, put in time out.

R: Then what happens?
I: Well if they don’t go to timeout they get three extra days, if they go they only get that one day, they then just go back to class and carry on as normal.

R: How many of the kids wouldn’t pull their wait and do that, is there many?
I: There is only a handful.

R: And what does that lead to eventually?
I: Well the phone call goes home to the parent and an interview where I sit in on the interview with the parent and the Principal and hopefully at home can talk to the child and he or she comes back to school.

R: Are there many Aboriginal kids that get into this situation?
I: There would be lucky to be three or four.

R: So it is a minor problem.
I: Yeah that’s right there’s 50 Aboriginal students here.

R: And there would be a similar number of Non- Aboriginal kids, it would be proportional.
I: Yeah same ones all the time. (AEA, Ref. 2.312410)

The lead informant views above represent the general consensus of community opinions on whether or not Indigenous kids switched off school. It also highlights the process
involved and how it is sparked by poor behaviour, which was noted in the previous chapter when students began to realise failure as the trigger to disengagement. The informant then quantifies the level of this disengagement to represent a small proportion of the norm for this group and similar to their non-Indigenous peers. She also notes the repeat offenders who get into trouble. She in reality is primarily referring to the group identified in this study as the unengaged i.e. those kids who are not engaged from the earliest levels of schooling and can happen as early as Kindergarten:

**R:** Do you think Aboriginal kids switch off school?

**I:** Yep, I do. I do think they switch off, well I’m in primary school, I notice it in Kinder.

**R:** What makes you think they’re switching off? What can lead you to believe that?

**I:** Their home life, when they come to school.

**R:** How do you get the indication that they’re switched off?

**I:** That’s happening in Kindergarten, up at this, well where I work it is. Too many problems, family issues! They’ve been to school, they…

**R:** What sort of family issues?

**I:** Mate, where we are its alcohol and drugs and heavy drugs. The kids are getting neglected.

**R:** So you feel comfortable, so the community won’t know that…?

**I:** I wouldn’t care less if they knew, that doesn’t bother me in the slightest, I’ve always said this.

**R:** So you would say that’s the biggest issues?

**I:** Yes it is. The parents of this generation have gotta take some responsibility for the way their children behave.

**R:** So have kids got too much on their mind when they arrive?

**I:** Yeah they come to school the poor little darls - they’ve been up all night. The parents have been partying all night. They haven’t had any tea, they have lack of sleep. Half of them they mess up ‘til around little lunch. They’re absolutely ravenous. Like, I’ve got a Koori room up there, and in that Koori room, I’ve been, out of my own pocket feeding, to keep that Koori room resourced with food for ‘em. What we do is, when they’re messing up, is go and get them out of class and take up and give them a feed. (AEA, Ref. 2.311910)
A non-Indigenous mother of one of the Indigenous students identified another group of students who seemed to switch off school at around Year 8 and attributed this to being normal adolescent behaviour (AEA, Ref. 2.38510). This would be a normal perception to make but given the increasingly large numbers of Indigenous students ‘voting with their feet’ through dropping state-wide attendance figures to around 75% compared with their non-Indigenous cohorts of around 88% by Year 8 (Review, 2004). In questioning the community more about the reasons behind why they thought the Indigenous students, their children and grandchildren, who were attending school regularly were ‘switching off’ school they provided the following reply:

R: What about those kids that are at school are supported in the best way they can be, but are still not getting results? Why is that so?

I 1: That’d be the teaching.

I 2: That would come back to the classroom.

I 3: Yes

R: So what are the issues there?

I 1: Well some of the teachers are not doing quality teaching.

R: Got all the words…

I 1: They all laugh.

I 2: You go into a classroom and you stand up in front of 30 kids and you just teach your lesson and when you finish you go and just leave. And you couldn’t care less if kids are learnt anything or not. The kids are not going to learn anything…

I 1: So long as their getting that pay cheque in their hand their right!

I 2: Now just for an example…

I 3: And unfortunately there are some just like that.

I 2: Yeah, which is sad, but I was telling Joe yesterday about this, at a primary school level, this child he was in Year 5, he would not work for this teacher, in Year 5. They’ve hardly done any work, the books were messy, he’s in Year 6. He has turned himself around, his books are that neat, he’s willing to work, he’s (h)avin a go and one of the tutors said, ‘How come you’re doing all this work and your books are so neat?’ and I said, ‘I’m really proud of ya!’ And he said, ‘Oh, it’s the teacher!’

I 1: They can make a big difference. And they do make a big difference.

R: Yeah, they do. (Community Focus Group, Ref. 4.FG)
The importance of teachers and good teachers is not missed by the Indigenous community and the factor here relates back to earlier points in this chapter around the importance of cultural respect between the student and the teacher. The importance of teacher student relationship is well established in the literature and particularly in the work of Newmann et al (1996a, 1996b), Hill and Rowe (1998), Ladwig and King, (2003), Hattie (2003, 2005), and Bishop (2005, 2008).

CONCLUSION

The Indigenous communities are represented through parents, grandparents, carers, staff working in schools in para- professional and professional roles as school administration officer, AEAs, teachers and one principal, spread across several separate, distinctive and diverse Indigenous communities in the study. As demonstrated in this chapter a small percentage lived on Missions/Reserves but most lived in the towns serviced by the schools in the study. These communities provided the important background to the students and also provided insightful comments on critical issues around the Indigenous communities where they lived. Parents and carers openly shared how they cared for their children and provided the love and generally a strong commitment to the emancipatory capacity of the schools where the vast majority of them entrusted their children, sending them very regularly to these school, with hope of a better more equitable future.

The schools in the District that were chosen for the study involved several communities with clearly identified Indigenous communities. These communities were very diverse and even within these communities clear delineations existed between elements in these communities, like differences in this chapter around students off or on the Mission. Further delineations existed in socio-economic circumstances, levels of racial intolerance and associated changing opportunities for employment as clearly articulated in the following interview by one of the Indigenous District education consultants:

No. Oxford…Oxford is different to Apen in the way that the community umm, in general, not the Koori community, the community in general, seem to me, now this is just my personal view, seem to me to be more acceptable of Aboriginal culture, and Aboriginal people, than in Apen. So, where as you know, the kids here have a light at the end of the tunnel, they can get a job, you can see Koori people working, whereas in Apen, I mean, now, it’s starting to come out that there’s more, more opportunity for Aboriginal people in Apen, but prior to say six months ago, I would
have thought, ahh, it’s so hard, you know, but there seems to be more community, with the wider community, is starting to take notice now, and trying to help out with different programs. (Ref. 3.7510)

The chapter looked in detail at how the Indigenous communities responded to their valuing of Western education; how levels of family dysfunction were resolved in many instances with grandparents taking on care of their grandchildren; what life was like or perceived to be for those students on Missions/Reserves; how schools responded to them and what they thought of schools, teachers, Aboriginal studies and their general relationship with schools. Additionally delicate issues were explored around racism in the community and school, attendance and student behaviour around data and their own opinion on these matters. A key question was put with regard to the outcomes of students who in the community’s eyes were regularly attending school and associated with this, was the clear understanding that teachers played a vital role in engaging the students. Such teacher engagement was linked closely to the teacher’s and school’s capacity to build mutual respect with the student and their Indigenous community.

The community also responded to the study’s core question with regard to whether Indigenous kids switched off school indicated that it did take place but noted not for all Indigenous students. There was some consideration about when these students ‘switched off’ and community identified three clear timeframes here. The first was in kindergarten, or then at around Year 4 or finally at a time when they appeared to be no longer achieving at school. This perceived lack of achieving was closely associated with the communities’ articulation of the importance of teachers’ capacity to relate to the Indigenous students, reinforcing the importance of respectful relationships.

While the above chapter provides ample rich data around the fundamental question of the study and strongly reinforces the previous three chapters on systemic, school and student factors, it is the narrative and intricate life stories of these community informants which become inseparable from the mere responses to questions raised. It is the Indigenous voices through the narratives painted here that you begin to gain an insight into the cultural nurturing richness lying beyond the raw data that is the story which teachers seldom seek. It is in the knowing of the family and its intricate cultural background where understanding and respect lie. It is here where the real answers lie and in this and the preceding chapter on the students, I have endeavoured to provide
the weave of this rich tapestry at the heart of the communities’ genuine desire to improve their children’s future prospects through unlocking the chest to Western education in a culturally inclusive quest for equitable outcomes. The holistic analysis of these four key factors, systemic, school, student and community that follows aims to seek answers to the three key questions of the study - Why do Aboriginal kids switch off school? - When does this happen? - and finally, How can we get them back to education?
CHAPTER 9. AN HOLISTIC PERSPECTIVE

INTRODUCTION

One of the true pleasures of being an Indigenous educationist and life member of the NSWAECG travelling to many meetings in communities in NSW has been to witness the innocent, starry eyed, enthusiastic faces of our Indigenous pre-schoolers taking part in cultural performances. I often pondered why these wonderful kids, just bursting with pride, skills and confidence, could so quickly become the statistics of failure within our schooling system. In too many instances, the sapping of their confidence, and reversal of this vibrant start, occurred across roughly the same length of time as it initially took to build their pre-schooler self-confidence. For me this reversal raised the fundamental question of why do so many of these kids switch off school?

This led me on the path toward obtaining a holistic understanding of the problem of disengagement, its dimensions and causes, taking care to privilege at every turn Indigenous voices. In coming to terms with the significant complexities of Indigenous education, the cultural story of family nurturing of Indigenous children, and the depth and richness of their lives, has too often taken second place to, or been rendered invisible by, the statistics of education failure. This has led to the creation of new stereotypes – and a prevalence of opinion about my peoples which paint them venomously as poor carers, poor parents, uncaring and without clear educational expectations for their children. I quite purposely position this thesis to inject a sense of proportion, lift that particular veil and reveal their hopes, and desires for their children’s futures. This chapter does not repeat the findings of previous chapters, but brings those findings together as a whole as a means to get to the heart of disengagement and explore the additional layers of information offered by that process of comparison and synthesis.

Despite the poverty in which the vast majority of Indigenous people find themselves, the case study reveals lives that are strongly bound by a loving, caring and supportive cultural environment. The student stories foregrounded in key chapters are there to ground the reader in the lives of these young people rather than the negative statistics and stereotypes that betray so many of these lives. These amazing Indigenous children
and their families, whose worlds the researcher was so fortunate to share personally, also revealed their confrontation with the schooling system.

In this chapter the primary purpose is to draw together the systemic, school, community and student factors that illuminate why Aboriginal kids switch off school, with a case focus on a particular district of NSW. The district is fairly typical in terms of proportion of population that is Indigenous – there is a relatively high concentration of Aboriginal students and their families, and captures a representative grouping of state schools engaging with Indigenous education policies at the turn of the new century in NSW, notably the AEP. The district is also a critical example of one with poor outcomes for Indigenous students on state-wide literacy and numeracy testing, high absenteeism, high levels of suspensions and poor retention in the district, particularly in schools with a significant Indigenous student enrolment. The chapter will coalesce findings around the:

- systemic educational climate at the time;
- contemporary educational mythology, including attendance and behaviour of Indigenous students;
- school responses to Indigenous policy, implementation and practice;
- students’ and communities’ expectations and views of education;
- student responses to life in and out of school;
- critical factors impinging on Indigenous students’ educational situations;
- unravelling the perceptions exposed in this study of racism both in and outside of school; and
- addressing how, when and why Aboriginal students switch off school and what measures are required to remediate this situation.

This study arose in direct response to a call to action simultaneously from the Regional AECG and the School District in which the study subsequently occurred. A meeting with the newly established Umulliko Higher Education Research Centre, put them into contact with the researcher as explained in Chapter 1. This unique set of circumstances namely; Indigenous ownership, seeking effective partnerships and an intention to develop Indigenous researchers (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [AIATSIS], 2002, Smith, 2000, p.239) situated the request within the framework of ethical research with or about Indigenous peoples. It was clear that the district was losing the battle to effectively educate Indigenous students. Subsequent follow up consultations were focussed on finding the answer to the questions: ‘Why do Aboriginal
kids switch off school?': 'When does this happen?' and 'What can we do to attract them back to education?' The direction of the study was not to replicate the then very recent findings of two major research studies into the specifics of attendance and retention of Indigenous students by Herbert et al (1999) and Bourke et al. (2000), but to seek confirmation and to capture the local detail behind the findings of these reports.

The Deputy Premier, Minister for Education and Training and Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Dr Andrew Refshauge’s announcement in 2003 of a comprehensive review of Aboriginal education and training throughout the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) sectors, certainly placed this case study into a much bigger agenda. This was especially so given the appointment of the researcher to chair the Academic Advisory Committee to the review and his subsequent award of a competitive tender in late 2003 to Review the 1996 NSW Aboriginal Education Policy (NSWDE, 2004). Subsequently, in 2005, the appointment of the researcher to the inaugural Director of Aboriginal Education and Training and this role primarily entailed the responsibility to lead the enactment of the recommendations from the Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004). The release of the Review in 2004 coincided with the final year of data collection for this thesis. The Review report provided a wealth of current and first hand working knowledge about the state of Indigenous education that provided both context and complementary data for the case study in this thesis.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES’ EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS AND MISINTERPRETATION

Previous chapters on community, schools and students have revealed that the clear majority of Indigenous parents and carers in the study, many despite extreme levels of poverty, make a significant effort to get their children to school. This is also evident in the results of the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision (2007). This study highlights that a number of individuals make this effort against amazing difficulties and odds, such is their faith in the benefits of education - it was strongly evident that Indigenous parents had high expectations for their children from schooling. They understood and articulated in one way or another the potential emancipatory nature of education, and that it could lead to increased access to employment and ultimately break the vicious cycle of poverty that so many had experienced. There were very powerful statements from a small number of parents
whose lives were affected by substance abuse and high levels of dysfunctional family situations, who wanted to give their children every opportunity to succeed at school. Students themselves in these minority cases also went to extraordinary lengths to get to school. Such are the untold stories which many teachers and school leaders never get to see or hear, so there is little clear evidence available to challenge the proliferation of negative assumptions about Indigenous families and education.

This can be perpetuated at the highest levels. In my role as Director of Aboriginal Education and Training, 2005-2008, I recall one occasion when I had to seek urgent counsel with the newly appointed Minister for Aboriginal Affairs who like so many before him, after taking up the office undertook the mandatory trip to Western and North-Western NSW small and relatively isolated, river townships which have significantly high proportions of Indigenous people. Many of these townships do show higher concentrations of Indigenous poverty, powerlessness and community dysfunction. Emanating from one such visit, the minister issued one of his first media releases that captured the headlines. Like many before him he levelled the blame for poor attendance and outcomes on the Indigenous people and in particular, parents in these communities, blaming them for not getting their kids to school and essentially painting all Indigenous parents with the same brush. This deficit labelling of the community does little to address the real problems remote communities and parents face. In counsel with the minister after his visit I pointed out that less than 20% of Indigenous students were found in the areas he visited, and that most Indigenous people were located in urban and regional centres. Secondly given that primary school attendance was above 87% for most Indigenous students (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004 p.25.), why then are they not succeeding? This is a question that substantially rests with schools!

The focus in Indigenous education has been to ‘blame the victims’ instead of focusing on what is happening and not happening in schools. As demonstrated in Chapter 2, the incessant reference to Indigenous poor attendance is based on limited and limiting data. Even to compile data for its own Review the NSW department had to obtain a representative sample of 200 schools in the absence of any reliable attendance data (NSWAECG and NSWDET, 2004, p.25). Difficulties with lack of attendance data sets were also noted as a major problem which greatly hampered both the Herbert et al. (1999) and Bourke et al. (2000) studies in this area.
What was strongly indicated in this case study was that a small number of chronic non-attending Indigenous students skewed existing data. Indigenous mums, dads and carers have borne the brunt of incorrect and ineptly collected data about Indigenous student attendance. This incorrect data then drives the focus of interest of educators and policy makers wrongly blaming the majority of Indigenous parents for not sending their children to school and jeopardising meaningful engagement between the Indigenous community and the school. In addition, a strong and consistent message from the Indigenous community was that parents and carers were not being adequately informed and involved in relevant school issues and matters.

At another level even when some schools did make the effort to mail their communications to Indigenous parents, this was typically without regard to the proportionately high level of illiteracy amongst many Indigenous communities. A number of schools had various forms of ASSPA committees formed and operational to some degree, however, these committees appeared to be primarily involved in decisions connected with the distribution of relatively small amounts of money provided by the Commonwealth Government under this scheme. These committees were not found to provide any substantive input into schools’ educational programs beyond advising on allocation of funding to assist special celebrations and some small resourcing needs such as excursions or library books (Lester & Hanlen, 2004, p.24).

While there was clear opinion expressed that the Indigenous community was not well informed of, or effectively involved in, key decisions at a school level, there was an underlying clear perception within the broader Indigenous community that they had clear knowledge of life within their own communities in the study. I have often heard of this referred to as the ‘Koori Grapevine’ within my community.

While on the topic of stereotypes it is evident from this case study that some Indigenous people are not immune from such influence. This is particularly evident with respect to Mission culture and lifestyle. Very strong messages were relayed to the researcher about the conditions of the Aboriginal missions/reserves and in general about what goes on in these Indigenous communities. This spilled over into an understanding and identification of those Indigenous students who were ‘in trouble’ constantly with the school and generalising this to the mission communities, giving rise to a perception that mission kids were ‘trouble’. Indigenous parents knew the students who were in trouble with both the school and the law. This knowledge manifested itself in stereotype within the community.
about what the ‘troubled kids’ behaviour was like that was in fact not borne out substantially in the data, but which translated into messages from many parents to advise, ‘don’t draw attention to yourself at school’, ‘be good, keep out of trouble’, ‘don’t be like those naughty kids’, ‘don’t trouble your teachers’. Such messages which were clearly meant with good intentions but unfortunately led kids to withdraw from the very level of interaction with schooling and education they needed to succeed. The kids in these instances did exactly as they were told and most of them, particularly throughout secondary education, did not raise questions with the teachers and did not engage, or took on a minimalist engagement stance with classroom interaction. These Indigenous kids became invisible in classrooms, causing no fuss and not drawing attention to themselves, and therefore disengaged from normal classroom activities and ultimately from learning. This issue will be further addressed in the overall fitting together of the ‘Indigenous education jigsaw puzzle’ in the concluding chapter and importantly the following section highlights the ultimate student outcomes from schooling.

INDIGENOUS FIRST WORLD POLICY, THIRD WORLD OUTCOMES

NSW was the first State to introduce Aboriginal Education Policy in Australia and this heralded many more such policies at state and federal level. It is a tragedy that despite sustained policy attention and innovation (Chapter 2) the gap in literacy and numeracy for Indigenous students still exists. It is also a problem in part because schools and districts seek to compare themselves with each other on the basis of Indigenous results which downplays this gap and detracts from the real target of equitable performance against all students in the state.

In this study Indigenous communities consistently reported that they did not have effective feedback or active participation in the important issues surrounding their children’s education at a school level. This is particularly the case with regard to the detail on overall performance and outcomes of Indigenous students across their schools and comparative data on district results across the state. Communities openly admitted they did not know of this information during interviews and, when advised of these results, (as described in chapter 8) were alarmed at the data surrounding the students’ performances and gap between their results and their non-Indigenous counterparts. Some AEAs had access to some of this information but, beyond this level, little evidence was given by community of knowledge of these results. The lack of clear articulation of such
knowledge is tantamount to misrepresentation or at least could be perceived as hiding of this information and therefore denying Indigenous peoples’ capacity to redress or protest over such disparity and inequitable outcomes or in the least demand accountability.

The ramifications of such lack of knowledge and the lack of clearly articulating these results in a format that can be understood and digested by parents and carers, has in many instances led to false hopes and expectations. In good faith, the vast majority of Indigenous parents/carers have made every effort to get their children to school and unwittingly believed that their children, who on the whole have not been reported as behavioural problems within the school, were achieving. Communities at interview reported justifiable alarm at not being effectively informed of their kids not being literate! While this is a very serious outcome and legitimate concern it is noted that the researcher was advised of efforts that had been undertaken by some schools to redress this poor communication.

The phenomenon of ‘Pizzas with the Principal’ best captures a novel and innovative way schools were trying to improve communication with the Indigenous community. This was supported by a number of outreach programs which at interview, in school newsletters and annual reports, demonstrably gave the impression of a level of effort in this area. However, such positive efforts were undone by other principals whose ventures into the Indigenous community, so upset a particular Mission community that the local AEA had to rescue the principal from a hostile community response to his poor communication skills and inflammatory statements. The communities consistently cried out for greater understanding and the need for teachers and executive school staff to ‘walk in our shoes’ for a period of time.

In reference to all of these communication strategies, little consideration or examples were given with regard to more formal engagement with the community on the more important and strategic advice with regard to school policy and practice. To some degree these communication strategies proved to be more practices of public relations and of no deeper strategic direction or in one case being flippantly referred to by one Indigenous member of the state AECG as ‘Kodak Moments’21, to indicate the superficiality involved.

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21 This was in reference to only getting Indigenous people up to take photos to be used by schools as evidence of engagement with the community but obviously without an understanding that the community could readily see through such tokenistic involvement.
in such interactions with the Indigenous community. Again, as previously mentioned, such strategic advice was generally limited to poorly-attended and relatively-ineffective ASSPA committees. There were no significant student performance data presented to this study which indicated these committees be developed or empowered to perform a more sophisticated strategic role in the school. Advice, that in the NSWAECG signed ‘Partnership Agreement’ with the NSWDET (1999), schools are fundamentally obliged to undertake. The communities, who so generously shared in interviews for this study, highlighted that Indigenous student outcome data at a school and regional level can be skewed by small numbers of Indigenous students and often a single large individual family in a school, which could very much cloud the true performance of Indigenous students on then state-wide and now national literacy and numeracy testing.

Many statements by participants about attendance in the study were qualified in ways such as, ‘not all Indigenous students’, ‘for some’ or ‘some families’. These statements clearly indicated that there were distinctive groups or individuals amongst students and the Indigenous community. This insidious tendency helped promulgate stereotypical views of Indigenous outcomes.

Concern was expressed by the communities which had a very definite awareness of continuing or even new emergent stereotypical mythology that can so easily flourish across the schools and broader community about Indigenous peoples. This became heightened during a particular nationally-publicised racial set of circumstances that flourished at a point of time in a particular community in the study, noted for its racism by non-Indigenous staff at both district and school levels. It was very clearly and often put at interview by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous informants that a critical minority of Indigenous students and/or families were perpetuating the standard stereotypical negative character of Indigenous contemporary life. This manifested itself in the ease to which again both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities recognised and described this minority of dysfunctional individual or family behaviour. This dysfunctional minority individuals/group drove the Indigenous agenda in schools in the study. That is, significant amounts of physical, monetary and human resources consistently were disproportionately ‘thrown at these problems’ too often in schools. When the researcher entered schools this minority of students pre-empted and dominated the discussion on Indigenous education, they were well known and readily identified by all. They represented and dominated the stereotypical opinion about Indigenous people. They existed in a small proportion of the case study group of students and, while as a
researcher I heard much about these students, in most cases they were often the hardest to track down for interview, because they were rarely at school, either suspended or generally not attending. This became such an issue that in one case, the researcher could find and only make contact with one student outside the court house prior to a hearing for his juvenile justice case. In this instance the researcher found the student to be noticeably intelligent (supported by his early results on his student record card) and extremely articulate. Subsequently the researcher came to the view that this student was, as Munns (1998) reported in his work on resistance theory, a clear resister of the school system.

THE ENDURING MISSION STEREOTYPE AND STORIES OF RESILIENCE AND SURVIVAL

Unfortunately, compounding the stereotypical perception of Indigenous students and the community as a whole were the consistent messages about the problems emanating from life on the 'mission'. Indigenous community informants as well as others drew on and promulgated negative stories of life on the missions, consistently highlighting substance abuse and associated physical abuse and aligned issues emanating from these communities.

There were three missions in the case study. These densely populated artificial Indigenous communities constructed on the outskirts of towns were established as a direct outcome of earlier Missionary attempts to Christianise Indigenous peoples, or through state government racial policy in the lead up to and during the 'protection era' between 1883 – 1969 (Fletcher, 1989, p.57) when Indigenous peoples were perceived to be dying out and becoming extinct!

In the study 10 students or a little less than one quarter of the students in the cohorts came from the three Missions. While there was clearly a level of community dysfunction on the missions, another reality was that several of the students and their families had their own and different stories about their 'Mish'. Some of the families were very strategic in the ways they responded to adversity. There were examples of parents and grandparents very successfully isolating their children from dysfunction around them. Two of the student informants who lived on a mission, demonstrated strong attendance and no significant behavioural problems at school and one of these students had
subsequently become the first student from his particular Mission to complete his HSC and take up a teaching degree at university (this student’s story opens the final chapter of the thesis). Another two students living on the mission while being pushed out of school for attendance and behaviour issues had moved into relatively successful and unproblematic TAFE programs to get their equivalent School Certificate qualifications. Three other student informants had clearly indicated that they had been removed from their Mission and subsequent family dysfunction, to be raised by their grandparents primarily so they would have a better chance in life.

It is important to point out that living on a mission is not always producing a disengaged Indigenous student. The resilience of Indigenous families stands out across a spectrum of environments. Even in dire conditions families purposely made choices for the benefit of their children’s education.

In summary, the outcomes from schooling for the vast majority of Indigenous students in the study, across the district and across the state falls strategically far shorter in the key areas of literacy and numeracy than their non-Indigenous peers and the reality is that Indigenous outcomes were proving to be a vicious cycle of negative outcome. This is further compounded by significantly larger growth in the youth population compared again with their non-Indigenous peers which requires, as indicated by the instigators of this research, the district and regional AECG’s significant understanding of the issues and an appropriate strategic response. To achieve this there is a genuine need to establish what these Indigenous students look like.

KOORI KIDS AT SCHOOL

In my interactions with them, the Indigenous students were pleasant and responsive. As an Indigenous educator the strong impression overall was that they responded in ways that did not set them apart from their peers over and above the distinct difference of their strong Aboriginal cultural and extended family ties. The majority attended school regularly and had loving and caring parents or grandparents who encouraged their education. A small group (a large percent of these coming from the missions/reserve communities), did not show the same levels of school attendance nor in a few instances the same level of family stability. This group stood out within the indigenous school and whole school population.
Students in the study had both Indigenous and non-Indigenous friends and had clear close affiliation with their extended families and kinship affiliations. All students were proud of their Indigenous culture and the children from the Missions tended to demonstrate a greater consciousness of both culture and kinship relationships.

**General perceptions about school**

The students themselves talked fondly of their schooling experiences and had a healthy respect for the teachers and executive staff of the schools. In their early primary school experiences these students enjoyed academic subjects but then, typically after some poor results, they moved towards more practical and hands-on subjects such as art, craft and sport. In their later primary experiences and markedly in early secondary school (they had not identified problems in transition) most students felt they were coping and succeeding. However the state wide BST results and school student record cards were telling a story of failure for most of that group. The students themselves, as they moved through secondary school, began to develop a heightened sense of their poor results. From around Year 8 or 14 years of age, the bulk of these students’ attendance, academic and behaviour outcomes diminished considerably. Only five students’ record cards indicated that their success in primary school carried through to their secondary experiences.

The researcher early in the study identified two student groups, those who were regular school attenders (>85% attendance) and those that were not (<85%) based on student record card data in primary school. Within the group of students identified with at least 85% attendance in primary school, a small group of students can be identified who have demonstrated clearly higher attainments in state-wide literacy and numeracy testing. This third group consists of four students representing a little over 13% of students, who also have an average attendance pattern of 94% throughout primary schooling. Based on school record cards and in particular the attendance patterns established in primary school, the data would indicate three groups of Indigenous attendance patterns; chronically poor attenders (7 students or 23%) with less than 85% attendance and collectively this group accounts for 57% of the total Indigenous absences of Indigenous students in study; those attending for at least 85% of the school year which represents the vast majority of students in the study (77%) and a significant sub-group of these students (12 students or 40% of the sample) with attendance patterns similar to their
non-Indigenous peers of around 93%. Further, two thirds of students with primary attendance data available in the study had average attendance patterns in primary school of at least 90%. De-mythologising the data also on students from a mission background is worthy of note with respect to attendance patterns.

Of the 10 students from missions, five had attendance levels above 90% and four students accounted for slightly over 69% of total absences in average attendance figures in primary years for this group. Of these four students two held the highest levels of average absences of 66.5 days per year each. One of the students from a mission with above 90% attendance was one of the four previously mentioned students with high results from state-wide testing. Again, we are often led to believe the ‘doom and gloom’ of mission students’ lives, yet the figures would indicate that, even amongst this group, it is a minority of students with chronic attendance patterns (although a larger percentage in comparison with all the Indigenous students’ attendance figures of 23%). We now have a picture of what these students look like, an outline of their attendance patterns, and a little about some of the attainment of the higher performing students.

Analysis of record-card data comparing primary to secondary comments clearly indicated the majority of students’ school experiences, in the study, had deteriorated as evidenced by comments around behaviour, attendance and performance (with difficulties noted in the areas above more than doubling from 25% in primary to 55% in secondary). Accompanying this trend was an increase in the number of students receiving suspensions during secondary school. However of note, was the high level of suspensions of the minority of these students, again skewing the overall suspension data for all students in the study Demonstrably, many of these students who were now finding themselves in ‘trouble’ had recorded details of diagnostic tests indicating significantly low levels of literacy for their age. Add to this ‘destructive cocktail’ issues around family dysfunction evident in a minority of students in the study which, in many instances, led to them admitting to aggressive behaviour as a coping process against tormenting peers, or in two student cases leading to incarceration with juvenile justice.

In addition the significant behaviour and attendance issues referred to above reporting on record cards indicated an emerging group of students who, while not being suspended in the vast majority of cases (82%), had recorded specific problems around their submission of student assignments. Non-submission of assignments threatened their capacity to pass their minimum school certification, the School Certificate.
Secondary academic performance is obviously a major consideration for Indigenous students who have their own interesting and somewhat contrasting views which follow, on their academic lives at school.

Patterns of engagement

Chronic non-attenders the unengaged

Interview data and student records of 30 of the students in the study clearly indicate a complex jigsaw of responses of Indigenous students to the system. It is clear from the data that we are talking about at least three different types of students’ interaction and response to the system or schooling. Firstly, there are those students who literally never engage or as the researcher has termed them ‘the unengaged’ in the education process from their first day of school (in the study seven students or 23% of the students). These students are readily identified in the chronic attendance data and student records where their reports of becoming significant behavioural problems in the school systems were documented and they were entangled in the web of a vicious cycle of poor attendance, lack of literacy/numeracy skills (through poor attendance), behaviour problems and eventually suspensions.

The disengaged

Earlier this thesis introduced the majority of students (77%) who were once engaged in the system up until around the end of stage 2 and who generally when faced with ‘failure’ a majority of this group begin the relatively quick process of disengagement which is generally crystallised more specifically in stage 4 (around 14-15 years old and involved 21 students or 70% of assessed student records). This process is highlighted at this time with increased poor behaviour and attendance patterns beginning to emerge in those students who had begun to see little or no hope in schooling. This group begins to split very much into those who leave school or are pushed out from the system, at or before minimum leaving age, through continued suspension and or expulsion for anti-social behaviour and associated loss of school time including increased absences and truancy.
Those who stay in school (again, a majority of students) are disengaged from the learning process and become the ‘Peter Brady22 kids’, lost in the system until they finally leave school at the minimum leaving age. Some persevere until the end of stage 5, some leave with the School Certificate and others who had trouble with meeting assignment requirements, leave without the certification.

The engaged

There was a third group of students who were relatively well adjusted to the schooling system with sound academic performance and equal attendance to their non-Indigenous peers. The majority came from very supportive stable family background, maintained a genuine engagement in the school system and certainly were well placed to continue their education into stage 6 or HSC levels. Unfortunately, this last group of students was very much in the minority (representing four students and around 7 % of students in the study).

INDIGENOUS EDUCATION OUTCOMES

_How can it be that, in a country like Australia, there is a group of young people whose early years do not prepare them adequately with the skills and confidence to enjoy a meaningful role in society and a share in the country’s wealth? (NSWAECG and NSWDET, 2004, p.7)_

The above opening paragraph of the preface to the Review (NSWAECG & NSWDET, 2004) starkly paints an abysmal outcome from education initiatives over the preceding 22 years since the first Aboriginal Education Policy was launched in NSW in 1982. In Chapter 2, this thesis highlighted the tremendous policy efforts made to overcome the obvious massive disadvantage experience in Indigenous education in this state and across the nation. Program after program, policy after policy, paved the way to address the needs of Indigenous Australians, including the small cohort of students whose

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22 The use of the term ‘Peter Brady’ is a reference to an old black and white television program the author grew up with. Peter Brady was the name of the Invisible Man in the show. The analogy is to these Indigenous kids being invisible to teachers in school classrooms and not getting the teachers attention.
parents volunteered them for this thesis study. Unfortunately the most comprehensive review of Aboriginal education ever undertaken in NSW and arguably across the nation proved that what had gone before to resolve the inequity in education proved to be extremely limited in positive outcomes for these very students (Review, 2004, pp.20-31; Lester & Hanlen, 2004).

It had become paramount that the rhetoric needed to be followed by significant gains in closing the gap in educational attainment between Indigenous students and their non-Indigenous peers’ outcomes. The Review (2004, p.12) to some extent bravely admits this past failure and in doing so urges a new and effective approach to Indigenous education in this state, ‘There is reason to believe that what we are currently doing is not working. Put simply, it is time for a new approach.’ This thesis became a guiding tool to the formulation of what the researcher saw as overturning the ‘more of the same will bring about more of the same’ and the quest to discover the more refined, more easily digested and most effective strategies which could drive the new Indigenous education agenda. The challenge with this limited case study was to endeavour to draw out the micro detail which would assist in understanding and maximising the knowledge and practices that would work with Indigenous students from a systemic viewpoint, guided by Indigenous informants and those gifted educationists who have in their own worlds successfully grappled with these issues on a daily basis both in and outside of schools.

In continuing to look for reasons for the gap in outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students it is necessary to consider any potential impact of racism in explaining the differences.

**Racism stops at the fence?**

One issue that needs to be addressed because it tends to be sublimated within the institutionalisation of schooling is racism. Overt racism tends to stop at the school fence as a theme through this study, but covert racism exists throughout. Racism was an all invasive and, in one particular community in the study, an all-powerful barrier for Indigenous people in general and particularly for students and their broader employment opportunity in mainstream businesses. This was readily testified by all informants to the study at district, school, and community levels and very sadly so readily recognised and graphically reported by students themselves in earlier chapters. Given this invasive cloud
of racism which permeated the community at large, it was extremely enlightening to hear consistent messages from district, schools and the Indigenous community and students, that it was not as invasive in the school setting from a systemic level.

There were obviously racial incidents reported or perceptions of racist attitudes particularly from other students which often led to physical confrontation from primarily a response by Indigenous students, but overall any references to racism in the schools tended to be a minority response by informants. Often these responses would be rationalised away in student cases as the teacher was effectively picking on a whole range of students, or that some teachers were just as the students termed ‘growly’ and this was their general disposition towards all students. As quoted above in an earlier section, students who attended TAFE reported that their prior secondary school teachers were in the students' terms ‘cheeky up there’ inferring a level of racist tendencies. This more reflected a comparison with their new very positive image of teachers in TAFE and the capacity of these teachers to be perceived as more caring partners in the learning process than their secondary school counterparts who tended not to share in nominated cases the same respectful attitude to students. Responses from students in general were more attuned to generally poor perceived teaching, and a lack of positive relationships and understanding between students and teachers in the secondary school environment. This was notably more evident amongst Indigenous students as they moved through secondary school and was more a response to the self-realisation of the students’ increasing difficulties with coping with school, as so readily testified through a significant growth in students’ inability to complete assignments as student record files attested (85% of student record cards accessed had recorded outstanding assignment tasks).

As with the findings of Lester and Hanlen (2004, pp.81-82) the Indigenous communities’ major concerns, with regard to perception of racism in the school, were strongly influenced by the way student conflict and in particular physical behaviour, was handled, when Indigenous students got into fights at school over what were often reported racially motivated issues/incidents with non-Indigenous students. The Indigenous communities’ concerns were directed at what they saw as the unfair treatment of the Indigenous kids being suspended for physically violence responses and the non-Indigenous students not being equally penalised for their racist comments or actions that provoked such physical attack. The community accepted the need for their children to be punished for their part in the behaviour, but equally felt that students’ racist remarks/actions should be treated in an equal fashion, i.e. suspension. The researcher’s experience in this very common
Indigenous community complaint was to coin the phrase ‘racism is equal to a kick in the guts’ and should be treated by schools as they would any physical violence and hence sending clear messages to both the students and a sense of equitable handling of such issues at a school level, to the Indigenous community. The Indigenous communities were very well aware of racial tensions and discrimination in the broader community and, particularly in one community, this tension was extremely high at the time of the study fieldwork.

Of considerable note and concern, given the heightened level of racism acknowledged outside the school gates (although it should be noted that across the case study different levels of racism were reported in communities), was the position that Indigenous students would be exposed to, in any work placements, in these communities and more importantly what schools were doing to prepare Indigenous students for such potentially-hostile racial work environments. This thesis has highlighted an instance where a principal reported about a businessman who indicated he could not provide work experience to an Indigenous student for fear of losing customers, and students made very disturbing references on shop employees' discriminatory treatment of them. Given this racially-hostile environment, one has to ask what the schools are doing to prepare Indigenous students for these work-experience placements, which have become such an integral part of increasing career opportunity in schools. No documentation or informant interview offered any data that would indicate that this issue had even registered with schools, let alone was being addressed. This was similar to outcomes found by Lester (2000 & 2001) in evaluative research on careers programs conducted for the Board of Studies on its Career Aspirations Program and in an independent Oxford Careers Aspiration Program run by the local Aboriginal Lands Council, where specific recommendations were made to improve preparation of Indigenous students for hostile racial employment environments. To the researcher’s knowledge, these recommendations have never been implemented but, as can be seen in this thesis, the potential racial issues remain in the workplace where Indigenous students are placed.

While it is disturbing to be so often reminded of the inherent racism that still exists in our communities, it is pleasing that the bulk of external racism reported tended to stop at the school gates and was not reported as a significant issue amongst school staff but was obviously present in incidents between students. On a very positive note in several schools, it was reported that the first Indigenous school captains had begun to emerge
through generally popular student voting, a good note to end the discussion on the communities in the study’s racial environments.

Answering the question - Do Aboriginal kids switch off school?

Universal agreement

The resounding response to this question was for the vast majority of Aboriginal students in the study (63%), was ‘Yes’, but it was clearly pointed out that not all Indigenous students became disengaged and a group (around 13.3% of students in the study) were continually engaged in the school process. A minority of Indigenous students, about 23.3% of the study, could not disengage because it was clear from record cards, school interviews and Indigenous educators and parents/carer interviews that these students had never engaged with the schooling process from their first introductions. It should also be noted that switching off schooling does not necessarily mean that they have switched off education. As one of the three students who moved to TAFE to continue their education followed in her elder sisters footsteps successfully and very purposively moved on to TAFE to upgrade their qualifications and chances of gaining employment.

Stages of school engagement of Indigenous students

The study has identified at least three critical stages of the engagement process; the unengaged, the disengaged and the engaged Indigenous students. Firstly, the most identifiable group of Indigenous students in any school are those students who have literally never engaged in the schooling process (23.3%, [Student Records, 2004]). From day one of school they demonstrated disastrous attendance patterns that locked in a ‘vicious cycle’ of circumstances as previously highlighted, which meant that they found it near impossible to break free of these patterns. These students in the case study and across NSW schools have become wrongly synonymous with Indigenous education and dominated the policy agenda response at a local, state and national level. These students unfortunately owing first to their chronic non-attendance at school and secondly to the subsequent related lack of literacy and numeracy skills become problematic
chronic disciplinary problems in the school resulting in skewing the Indigenous student data on attendance, suspensions and to some degree the academic record of all Indigenous students. They have fed the deficit-driven agenda of not only a majority of teachers and executives in schools but also government ministers and senior Indigenous and non-Indigenous educational administrators. In NSW, it took a major comprehensive Review (2004) to finally isolate the data which has for so long wrongly painted a picture of Indigenous educational issues and more importantly, wrongly driven strategic direction to curb the gap in Indigenous educational outcomes. These unengaged students who in the majority come from dysfunctional families require early identification for interdepartmental case management as their inherent problems of social dysfunction cannot be addressed solely by the schools.

The disengaged Indigenous students

The disengaged group of Indigenous students identified in the study are the bulk of the Indigenous student base (63.3%, [Student Records, 2004]) representing the many Indigenous students who slowly ‘drown’ in the school system and appear in the poor retention statistics across the case study schools, and in district and state data sets. They represent the fresh faces of the early childhood students referred to at the start of this chapter, who through increasing exposure to school slowly lose this enthusiasm and eventually most of whom will be pushed out of school or disengage from the processes by around the commencement of stage 5 or at about the minimum leaving age of 14 years 10 months in NSW. Some will battle on to the end of this stage but most will clearly demonstrate grave levels of inability to supply the required assessment tasks to fulfil their School Certificate requirements. Others in smaller numbers may just scrape through to achieve such accreditation and, as noted in the thesis, some teachers and school executive staff will go to considerable lengths to nurse these students through to gain this base level school qualification. This group of disengaged students are ‘ripe for the picking’ and provide a capacity now they have been identified for very specific and specialised strategic interventions to provide the capacity to re-engage them. This fundamental critical mass as identified in this study was attending school regularly up until end of stage 4, did have high expectations and enthusiasm for school. With targeted strategic approaches they can be easily turned around to be once again engaged in the process. The final student story in the concluding chapter proves this can happen.
The engaged Indigenous students

Finally, there are the relatively small numbers of engaged students in the study who have performed well on all state-wide tests, have strong references on their report cards and generally have adapted well to schooling (13.3%, [Student Records 2004]). In most of these cases the students came from very stable family backgrounds where parents had higher levels of education than the majority of student family households in the study. These students too were readily identified by schools and, of those who went onto stage 6, the final years of schooling, were proudly shown off by school principals, teachers and Indigenous educators as significant accomplishments of the school and community. Unfortunately, their numbers are small enough to justify such limelight and, often in spite of the school system, their success was more to do with their parental background and/or the good fortune to build a respectful relationship with a teacher.

Having identified the three groups of Indigenous students above, the question now rests with when and why does this this disengagement happen?

When do disengaged Indigenous kids switch off school?

The initial perception about when Indigenous students switched off school was a sense that it happened in the later stages of primary school, during Stage 3. It was quickly established through interview that not all Indigenous kids switched off school and in fact the group who was identified with regard to switching off school was the ‘engaged’ group of students, those who were engaged at the start. After commencing the research, the communities and Indigenous educationists changed their perceptions to a timeframe as early as stage 1. However, there was confusion here with those that were as the study found were never engaged or the ‘unengaged’, who led to the belief that the timeframe was around this first stage of schooling.

From interviews with students and teachers, supported by school records, the process of switching off was redefined to attempt to gather that moment in time when those students who were engaged began to disengage from the school system. It was not so much as a point in time, but more a point in school experience. The study had identified through primarily the input of teachers, Indigenous educators and student record cards analysis, that when a student realises their first perceived failure, was the time when the
disengagement begins, and for most this seemed to take place at around the end of stage 2 or at around age 9 to 10 years old. While the attendance data are skewed with chronic non-attenders’ figures overall, the attendance patterns from end of stage 3 begin to show a drastic downturn for the disengaged students (Review, 2004, p.25). It was at this time that students’ lack of consolidation of basic literacy and numeracy skills began to ‘bite’ or have an effect on their success.

Student interviews provided some insight into the students’ change in attitude to subjects and a general movement away from more traditionally academic type subjects e.g. maths, reading, spelling, towards more hands on subjects e.g. art, sport also around this time. This may also account for the perpetuation of stereotypical belief that Indigenous students prefer these ‘softer’, ‘hands on’ subject options. It is also at this time that students made very critical comments about their cries for help and awareness that they were not keeping up with the work, which generally went unanswered or was not identified by teachers. But this is only one explanation explored in the data and specific analysis of the reasons why this disengagement takes place will be explored in the following section.

**Why do Aboriginal kids switch off school?**

The heart of this study is to not only to identify the students who disengage, but also to discover why they ‘disengage’. Isolation of this group is strategically important for three very good reasons. Firstly this group of students has been grossly marginalised and overlooked by schools and the education system. Secondly, this group comprised the largest number of Indigenous students and therefore strategically targeted interventions can be developed to first, stop disengagement and to re-engage those who have disengaged. Such strategic action for this group would obtain the quantum shift in improved Indigenous outcomes overall that is required to turn around Indigenous student school outcomes. Lastly, because this group of students generally attended school in large numbers on a regular basis (until they slowly drifted away prior to or at about the minimum leaving age), so engagement strategies can be effectively implemented prior to this physical disengagement. We must first ponder why this dominant group of engaged students, those fresh-faced, pre-school kids reported at the start of this chapter, who are so keen to learn, slowly drift into the educational ‘doldrums’ of the disengaged.
As an old surf lifesaver, I have often heard it said that ‘drowning is a very silent death’ and it is this vision which clearly conjures up the picture of Indigenous students in the ‘disengagement stage’ of their school educational experience. For a start Indigenous school aged students represent 5% of the Australian school population (ABS, 2012) and most Indigenous students are not found in significant density of numbers in NSW outside of more remote western NSW rural towns. Their Indigenous student population in the district under study for the study was 6.3% in 2002 (Apen District, 2004), so the number of Indigenous students in each school in the study at most represent in primary school a maximum of 36%, but most had less than 6% and similarly in secondary schools which had 6% average Indigenous enrolment (NSWDET Enrolment Statistics, 2002). If you spread these enrolments across stages and subsequent classes, Indigenous students were very much a small percentage of students in each class. A small percentage who can and have been overlooked, or as I have previously indicated become ‘Peter Brady kids’ i.e. invisible. On an individual basis these students’ individual cries for assistance tend to go unanswered by busy teachers in classrooms. The students, parents/carers’ messages consistently ringing in their ears, ‘to be good’, ‘stay out of trouble’ and ‘don’t draw attention to yourself’ are ever present. Unfortunately they become so well practised that their student voices and actions in class become invisible to the very teachers who can offer help. They sit lesson after lesson, day after day quietly slowly drowning until they can take no more and slowly drift away, leaving school or just not attending in significant numbers from about Year 8 or at the minimum leaving age onwards, most with very limited literacy and numeracy levels compared to their non-Indigenous peers (Review, 2004, pp.22-24).

Around 63% of the students who had been engaged in schooling later disengaged from the process. It is this bulk of students who with strategic effort would get the most productive results primarily because we can now identify them and provide the appropriate interventions required. These students spoke fondly about education and schools and indeed showed great interest in the more academic-type subjects in their early school primary experiences but this all began to unravel at around the end of Stage 2 as we have seen earlier. The bulk of Indigenous students in the study were very keen students who switched off school and these students in their earlier years appeared through student statements to be very much engaged in the process. While student interviews demonstrated a level of positive engagement with school, their state-wide testing results (BST) indicated the fundamental foundation skills in literacy and numeracy were not being effectively developed. This has gone unnoticed or not effectively
strategically addressed by teachers in the first two stages of schooling. As found in the Review (2004, p.21) and supported in this study’s students’ record cards of BST results, the lack of these fundamental skills place Indigenous students across the state at around 19 months behind their non-Indigenous peers by the end of stage 2. In this study, the researcher could find no systemic literacy or numeracy programs in primary school which would indicate a capacity for schools to drastically improve Indigenous student outcomes in this area. The closest systemic approach was the introduction of the Reading Recovery Program which, as the Lester and Hanlen (2004, pp.52-53) review indicated, demonstrated little success with Indigenous students.

Finally, educationists have been consistently misled by the heightened priority and popularity of the Indigenous attendance myth, which is predicated on the wrong belief that we need just to get Indigenous students to attend school regularly to improve outcomes. In fact, Bourke et.al. (2000), Herbert et.al. (1999, p.21) and the Review (2004, p.25), all indicate that the vast majority of Indigenous students attend school regularly even when considering the chronic non-attenders’ figures which skew these data. This is well supported in student record cards (Student Records, 2004) of attendance in primary school of students in the study, where two-thirds of students had average attendance in primary school greater than 90%, two-fifths had at least 93% average attendance, and 60% of all absences were the product of 10 students or about one-third of the Indigenous students in the study ascertained from student records. Unfortunately the Review (2000, p.25) figures do little to break down the real attendance level of the majority of Indigenous students because they include chronic non-attenders’ figures which unfortunately help perpetuate the myth around Indigenous attendance. Indigenous students are attending school and educationists who believe that if we can get them to school we can make a difference - well they are there, and it seems schools are not making a difference to these students’ outcomes primarily because schools cannot keep these students engaged in the schooling process!
The levels of engagement of Indigenous students become the paramount consideration when designing strategic approaches to significantly improve outcomes of students. Attendance and behaviour (mainly suspension data) statistics have for too long wrongly focussed the direction of policy and programs in Indigenous education arguably at the simultaneous quadruplet policy levels of schools, districts, states and nationally. Each feeds the others’ poorly-based, statistically-incorrect perspectives and the perpetuation of the ‘Indigenous education problem’. The devil being in the detail, and a detail that in NSWDET in the Review (2004), openly acknowledged to not having the capacity to provide systemic Indigenous attendance figures and having to resort to representative samples of 200 schools to gather the critical attendance data. The study has identified at least three subsets of positions of engagement in the schooling process for Indigenous students based on triangulation from school, community and student interviews and supported by analysis of student school record cards. Those Indigenous students in the study who basically never engaged in the education process or the ‘unengaged’ (23.3%), those who were once engaged and then ‘disengage’ from the process (63.3%) and those who consistently remained ‘engaged’ in schools (13.3%). Arguably each of these three groups requires detailed strategic approaches to address their specific educational needs which was not the past nor arguably the current strategic policy direction which is premised wrongly on a pan-Aboriginal philosophy (Price & Price, 1998; Review, 2004, p.92; Bourke et al., 2000, p.20), or one size fits all. By acknowledging not only the important specific local nature of response to Indigenous students’ needs, Indigenous education policy and strategies, must ensure at least each of these ‘ie’ sets of engagement are specially understood and individual local school strategies developed to support each of these levels of engagement.

It should also be understood that Indigenous students can and do move between levels of engagement and are not restricted to the most commonly found movement between engaged and being disengaged. The attendance data and teacher comments on student record cards in the study indicated clearly that students once ‘unengaged’ can move to engaged (often the intervention of a grandparent can do this in dysfunctional families or

\[23\] The researcher has called this approach ‘Indigenous Engagement’ and used the stylised acronym from it as ‘ie’ as a means to identify the approach required to improve Indigenous outcomes and a play on the Latin derivative of i.e. - id est meaning ‘that is to say’.
perhaps a teacher who takes an interest) or that disengaged students can re-engaged, this being so well-illustrated in the following opening student narrative in the next chapter. This movement, mostly brought about through unique sets of circumstances, proves that if strategic interventions are undertaken, students and in particular, the bulk of students can be engaged in schooling to at least the levels of their non-Indigenous peers, which is well supported in Bishop et al.’s (2001; 2003; & 2006) works with Maori in Aotearoa (New Zealand).

Call for ‘*ie*’ strategic systemic intervention

The challenge is undoubtedly coming to terms with what are the most appropriate interventions for each of these separate stages of engagement or perhaps more importantly determining what the issues are which need to be attacked for each of these groups of Indigenous students. This section of the thesis will identify some of the critical issues which require specific strategic intervention. In the concluding chapter the researcher will outline some of the NSW and national responses to some of the issues which have been identified at these levels. Each of the individual engagement groups would obviously require specific local Indigenous active leadership in designing the programs that would meet the demands of the specific issues to avoid the further perpetuation of stereotypical policy and practice and a continuation of the pan-Aboriginal myth. This in itself, the lack of genuine Indigenous input to schools’ policy and programs, is perhaps the most fundamental of change required at a school level (Lester & Hanlen, 2004, pp.112-114)!

An illustration of ‘*ie*’ issues for the ‘unengaged’ Indigenous students is exemplified in reflection of the vignette of Damien in the opening to Chapter 8:

*R*: What about personal stuff at home?

*I*: There’s been a lot going on at home. My Mum’s a drug addict. She used to use speed and heroin but she got off that and when she wasn’t on that she’d be always taking tablets - real strong ones! She got back on them and dad doesn’t want her on them. Dad doesn’t want her doing stuff like that. Cause she used to give me a bad life all through my life. Half my life I’ve lived with my Nan and Pop because of it. Dad’s just had enough and we was just saying tablets make my Mum go stupid and she went out and stabbed herself in front of me. She had to get taken away by
an ambulance and she hasn’t been back in the house. Her and dad have broken up because of it.

**R:** When did that happen?

**I:** About a month ago.

**R:** How are you feeling?

**I:** Not all that good.

**R:** Does the school know about it?

**I:** Yeah. That’s it, the day after; I just came back from suspension. The day after she did that I come to school and I was really angry and this kid come over and started saying stuff and I just went over and just smashed him. (Damien: 1.061)

This interview helps to position very clearly this small group of students who have captured the focus of Indigenous and non-Indigenous policy makers and unfortunately their desperate cries for help have generally gone unresolved, primarily due to a lack of adequate collaborative professional services to deal with enormous levels of family dysfunction. The best schools, with the best leadership and teachers can neither resolve this atypical student’s family situation, nor provide the care for the student himself. This particular student’s family life had been hell and there was little wonder the student had not engaged in school from his earliest enrolment. Survival is the only thing on many of these unengaged students’ minds.

The bulk of students in this position require comprehensive case management from a multitude of service agencies involving mental and physical health specialists, family counsellors, therapists and specialist educational support not afforded to schools to the level of intervention required for these students. Most often it is not the sole child in a family involved, but several others and intervention must be on a family level if we are to breakdown the ‘vicious cycle’ merry-go-round on which these students find themselves. In schools it is these students, who are most in need, who find themselves on the end of long suspensions and expulsions and unfortunately for most, as the researcher starkly found when trying to get interviews with these students outside courthouses - found themselves in juvenile justice hearings for any manner of illegal activity including their own personal harm. These students represent the sharp end of the spear of Indigenous education stereotyping, but just as the sharp end is the narrowest (critical point), so too are their representation in the Indigenous student population. Yet they have been
wrongly identified as the core of representation of the Indigenous student statistical data and again, been blamed wrongly, for their impossible, in most cases, catastrophic personal set of circumstances.

These students require the best of support and significant intervention if both the community and social welfare agencies are to provide them with the personal safety, care and nurturing to enable them to get engaged in the schooling system. A system because of lack of expertise and lack of co-ordinated specialist support services which can only reward these kids with suspension and expulsion for behaviour they act out at school. Unfortunately, what this does to the rest of Indigenous students is only paint a picture which is wrongly negative and feeds the teachers in the school system the stereotypical behaviour that has in the past supported their deficit theorising of Indigenous peoples. This is a terrible additional burden to be placed on these fragile Indigenous students, for the Indigenous community knows well these fractured lives and is responding through, as seen in significant numbers of students in the study, grandparents picking up the pieces and generally doing an amazing unsung nurturing role for these students. However, with shortened life spans for Indigenous peoples a reality, this vital kinship resource is running out.

As can be seen in this thesis, gross stereotypical responses and calculated omissions of detailed analysis of Indigenous attendance and suspension figures, have led to false assumptions and misguided responses to Indigenous students’ educational needs. The most tragic story of this tale is that the most vulnerable group of students, the ‘unengaged’ have had very limited and often futile and misguided attempts at managing socially constructed complex family circumstances that have their roots in over two centuries of catastrophic policy and racist action in the longest colonial affected state, NSW. Schools alone cannot untangle this mess, nor should these desperate families also be asked to foster the blame for all that is not well in Indigenous education.

‘ie’ for the engaged Indigenous students

This smallest identified group of students in the study (13.3%) represented those students who had worked out schooling and have the necessary skills, knowledge and capacity to make the most of their circumstances, the ‘engaged’ students. These
students primarily came from stable family home environments with every chance of their parents having a satisfactory experience and outcome from school or further education themselves. This group of students was the first to be called on by principals to demonstrate Indigenous educational capacity and success at their school, as these students represent in the study, a significantly lower cohort of students making it through to the HSC levels compared to their non-Indigenous peers (Review, 2004, pp.28-29).

Most of these students demonstrated a level of personal commitment/determination and/or special support from parents or significant teachers in their lives to complete their school journey. Each of their journeys was unique and there were several examples of students in the study who demonstrated these qualities. On the whole, given the relatively small numbers in the study that had indicated a will to go onto stage 6/HSC at school, most were driven by individual purpose, some to prove what Indigenous students can do, some who stumbled into the right teacher at the right time and others who had family support which assumed that they would go onto this final leg of schooling. These unique journeys make it difficult to work out the equation of success which best will get most Indigenous people through schooling. These students are generally the exception and not the rule that is searched for by educationists to pave the way to the Indigenous success pathway. In fact, most of these students succeeded in spite of the school system with most stumbling onto specific teachers who provided the required stimulus to succeed in what becomes a less enticing environment for most Indigenous students, or because of the generally relatively successful and stable parental backgrounds. These students are very much the product of the emerging educated ‘black middle class’ in Australian society who have managed to carve their way out of poverty’s vicious cycle.

It is clear amongst this group that they all generally shared a level of external support and belief in that they could achieve the HSC. This became perhaps the critical factor behind their own motivation (which in itself often stemmed from external levels of support) which was common amongst those that wished to go through to the highest levels of secondary schooling. It was also very clear in the study that, if an Indigenous student wanted to have a go at the final stage of schooling, in many cases, there was genuine and substantive support and understanding evidenced by senior school management and school staff both Indigenous and non-Indigenous for these students, to ensure they had every chance of success. In several instances, teachers and executive staff of schools, often with a push from the Indigenous educators in the school, tended to bend the rules to accommodate students’ completion of assignments or in
instances of poor behaviour. It was clear that those students who wanted to have a go received heightened levels of support from most of the secondary schools in the study. Schools were genuinely proud of these students.

‘ie’ for the disengaged Indigenous students

In the study, 63.3% of students were identified as moving from a state of initial engagement in school but over a period of approximately five years disengaged from their school education. About the same timeframe it took to build up their prior-to-school persona. As previously indicated this was a direct response to a number of factors but primarily occurred because of a lack of fundamental skills acquisition (primarily in literacy and numeracy) to a level to gain success from schooling. In simple terms disengagement begins when they first realised failure in the system. This significantly large group of students hold the key to reversing current poor outcomes from school primarily because they are regular school attenders (at least until end of Stage 3) and therefore schools can capture and maintain their engagement in schooling with already proven pedagogical approaches. These same approaches with culturally inclusive and respected teachers can also re-engage those students disengaged, which will be the focus of this section.

Ladwig and King (2003) supported particularly in an Indigenous educational domain by Bishop and Berryman (2006), clearly articulate that student engagement is a crucial element to improving student outcomes and in Bishop and Berryman’s case vital to Maori students. Engagement of students can best be supported through inclusive pedagogy as Ladwig and King (2003, p.4) put it:

So, why focus on pedagogy? Simple: the answer is because it matters most when it comes to improving student outcomes, and because we now have a good idea of just what kind of pedagogy works.

Ladwig and King (2003) further highlight the foundation work in this area of Newmann et al. (1996a and 1996b) and in particular the critical finding of these works which demonstrated educational gains from improved teacher pedagogy regardless of race, ethnicity, gender nor socioeconomic status. These findings are reinforced out of more recent research conducted on Quality Teaching Framework by Gore, Ladwig, Griffiths
and Amosa’s (2007) and Munns’ (2007) work on appropriate pedagogical approaches on successful engagement Indigenous students in NSW.

The above studies indicate that Indigenous engagement can take place when teachers engage in inclusive pedagogical practice. The final stages of data gathering for this study mirrored the introduction of Quality Teaching Framework in NSW which assisted greatly with matching the study’s findings regarding ‘disengagement’ with the clear correlation with the Framework’s pedagogical foundation and capacity to avert disengagement or relight the engagement of these disengaged Indigenous students.

After careful analysis of the Framework and in particular, the importance of its ‘Significance Domain’ which included the vitally important Indigenous culturally related areas of cultural knowledge, inclusivity, background knowledge and connectedness along with the equitable importance of all other areas. It became evident that the Framework provided the firm pedagogical platform to base any intervention to stop disengagement and affirm the re-engagement of this dominant Indigenous group identified in the study. The Framework provided simultaneously the potential capacity to engage the students in quality pedagogical approaches that would get outcomes and also meet the needs expressed in the study of parents/carers who clearly articulated a need to maintain the students’ Indigenous cultural background.

The fortuitous timing of the NSWDET’s strategic roll out of the Quality Teaching Framework provided the ideal vehicle to promote the match between it and the need to improve engagement and outcomes for Indigenous students. This was well recognised first in Lester and Hanlen’s Review of the NSWDET Policy (2004, Recommendation 7), and the following Review (2004, Recommendation 10). Clearly there was now a fundamental shared pedagogical base that Indigenous engagement could be built upon.

‘\textit{ie}’ does not have to be a lifetime sentence although we want it to be

As clearly articulated in Ken’s story at the start of the penultimate chapter and a glimpse of his movement from being disengaged to once again being engaged in his senior secondary education, students can move between these levels of engagement and in Ken’s case improved teacher relationships provided the productive environment for this
to take place. If teachers and educational leaders understand these levels of engagement and in particular tailor their strategic direction to counter any disengagement in the first instance and secondly, to re-ignite those disengaged students, then a significant shift is possible, has been identified in this study, the vast majority of Indigenous kids who currently slip through the school system. Add to this group in the study (63.3%) the continuously engaged group of students (13.3%), all of whom are regular school attendees up to Stage 2 in primary school, and you have effectively engaged the vast majority of students in this study. To achieve this quantum improvement students need to be carefully and productively monitored by the system and pleasingly this has now been articulated at both a state and national level through the Personalised Learning Plans (PLPs) which are now mandatory for all Indigenous students in NSW and encouraged nationally (MCEETYA, 2006a). The quality and consistency of PLPs is the next challenge to ensure ongoing engagement of these students. The success of these plans is heavily reliant on close, genuine and respectful relationships with the Indigenous students’ parents, grandparents and carers. These plans are currently rolling out in schools across Australia and hopefully these plans will provide the critical community partnerships and quality teaching required to redress current unsatisfactory gaps in outcomes of Indigenous students.

**CONCLUSION**

This chapter draws together the material presented in the previous five chapters covering Bourke et al. (2000) four factors around attendance, it commenced with the rationale behind the research—a project steeped in genuine partnership between schools and its Indigenous communities in a quest to seek answers for the underperformance of the districts Indigenous students. From this foundation it built upon the Indigenous communities perceptions and desires from education and highlighted the mismatch between policy and outcomes, and then moved to building up a picture of the Indigenous students’ response to education.

The chapter scoped the profiles of these children and highlighted the rich cultural extended family engagements outside of school which were generally not acknowledged or understood by the vast number of school teachers and executive staff. Students themselves mapped their responses to school and how they were performing and responding to both the social and academic nature of their schooling experiences.
Analysis of the issues around attendance and suspension were also explored and the inherent problem of the system’s lack of specific collection of Indigenous data on both these critical issues had led to negative stereotypical theory and the consistent perpetuation of incorrect conclusions. The next section involved the perceptions and data analysis around the systems/schools responses to Indigenous education.

While the need for such study was clearly and genuinely a motive of the partnership between the school district and the Regional AECG is acknowledged positively, analysis of the data around school interventions and responses tended to follow similar negative stereotypical solutions as the above issues around attendance and suspension. Such inaccurate conclusions promoted a significant environment for deficit theory to flourish. School had not significantly changed their behaviour and its messages were about this issues remaining with the Indigenous communities’ perceived dysfunction. This school perception was not significantly supported in data from the Indigenous parents/carers and community, who looked to education for the emancipation of their current lower socio-economic status. It was also clear that little effective equitable dialogue was taking place between schools and the Indigenous communities they served. Pleasingly, schools appear to have been generally affective with regard to keeping at bay major racial tension, although care needed to be taken with regard to handling of some disciplinary matters around racist statements between some students.

The focus of the study was then addressed and a clear indication that Indigenous students were in dominant numbers switching off school and a clear identification of the three types of engagement levels established as well as a clear timeframe of when and why they switch off was established. The final sections of the chapter looked at ways of addressing each level of engagement through ‘ie’ and highlighted some of the state and national responses to the engagement issue for Indigenous students.

Given the personal as well as professional nature of this research journey, the next chapter documents the evolution and development of the Indigenous researcher, and an Indigenous method.
CHAPTER 10. THE COLOURS IN THE PALETTE – A METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Ken: ‘School has always seemed a long way from the life on the ‘Mish’

Ken24 was shy and reserved in the first interview but while he did not have a lot to say, he seemed quietly self-confident. He lived on the Mission or ‘Mish’, as he and the other students who lived there referred to it, yet seemed much more settled than the others. Ken was the eldest of three children and felt his two younger brothers looked up to him. He nominated Cathy Freeman the Olympic gold medallist as one of his own role models. Family life was stable. When asked who he would go to for important advice he readily indicated that his mother was his strongest confidant. Both his parents had an education to Year 10 and were working. His mum, who was non-Aboriginal, was employed in education and his Aboriginal father was in the building industry. His fondest reflections about ‘Mish’ life were all connected to family, specifically having his cousins available to play with and living close by to his ‘Nan’ who was especially dear to him and clearly a pivotal person in his life. Nan was a respected elder in the community and supported adult Indigenous students locally. She played a key role in providing the cultural knowledge that was deeply important to him and strongly encouraged him to get an education.

Ken had a number of friends. His best friend was non-Aboriginal and he particularly liked sleeping over at his place. He had fun as a child and couldn’t recall ever getting angry at school. He thought highly of his primary teachers and lessons, and applied himself. He found maths enjoyable but his worst subject was English, not least ‘...because you have to keep your book neat!’. His attendance was excellent around 94%. School records for Year 5 show him as ‘a co-operative student’ ‘who worked very hard’:

24 Ken is a pseudonym used to maintain his anonymity both in the text here and in reference details. Like previous personal vignettes utilised in this thesis their stories arose from compositories of interviews with themselves, their parents/carers, educationists and school records. In Ken’s case however, he completed a Personalised Interest Project, in his course in Society & Culture for his HSC on his involvement in my research. This provided a unique opportunity for Ken to share a different perspective on my research, which has added a broader dimension to his vignette and places a student spotlight on the research’s findings.
He enjoys most activities and has improved considerably in the literacy area. Well done Ken! Keep up the great effort in Year 6. (End Year 5 Comment on Ken’s Record Card)

Ken’s primary school performance was strong showing satisfactory through good to excellent progress in all his subjects and he was above average in his literacy and numeracy results on state wide testing. Ken anticipated at this early stage that he would go on to Year 10 and move into a career in building like his father.

Then the situation changed. His good results did not continue into secondary school, and on state wide testing in Years 7 and 8 his results in literacy and numeracy showed a return to elementary levels. His commitment waned. Toward the end of Year 10 he began to receive ‘Unsatisfactory Course Progress’ remarks on incomplete assessment tasks even while his attendance was good. At this critical time one particular teacher took a personal and active interest in his education. She went out of her way to help him. In a further twist of fate opportunities opened up for other positive experiences with some of his other secondary teachers. This input clearly had an impact and his results from school improved dramatically. He persisted and stayed on to commence his senior secondary years, his horizons changed, and he was on his way to becoming the first Indigenous male and only the second person from his ‘Mish’ to complete the HSC.

The Personal Interest Project (PIP) in the subject Society and Culture brought Ken and I back into contact. He rang me independently and explained that for the project he wanted to work through his own identity issues and investigate the role that the ‘Aboriginal Education Policy 1996’ had played in the formation of his own personal identity. He indicated further that he wanted to explore his role as a participant in my thesis, specifically what role he had played in affecting any policy change I had been able to make in the area of Aboriginal Education. This was perhaps the most rewarding outcome I could have ever realised. In his final project he wrote:

My PIP … journey had begun with the realisation that I would become the first [male] Aboriginal student from the Mission to sit for the HSC. I started to question my own sense of identity and the impact that this level of education has had on me. Being labelled a coconut, brown on the outside and white on the inside, felt pretty uncomfortable. Achieving the HSC threatened my acceptance in my Indigenous community. School has always seemed a long way from the life on the ‘Mish’.
Then, I remembered that I was once the subject of a research project myself, from the ages of 11 to 14. The data from that research assisted creating the NSW Department of Education and Training in their implementing of the mandatory NSW Aboriginal Education Policy.

Suddenly I came to the question that started to make sense to me. I wanted to find out the impact that this document has had on my identity and socialisation as an Aboriginal student in a mostly non-Aboriginal environment. A question started to form in my mind, ‘How has the NSW Aboriginal Education Policy influenced the life of Aboriginal students? A Personal Case Study (Ken, 2006, p.2)

The assignment provided him with a great opportunity to reflect on his and other Indigenous students outcomes from education:

My micro world experiences in Junior School had not seemed that important in my life, but John pointed out to me that he had classified me as a ‘disengaged’ student. I attended school every day and just did what I got told to do… (Ken, 2006, p.16)

His growing success in education provided him with the inner resolve to counter often negative tags around achieving in education and being branded by some of his peers as a ‘coconut’ or ‘tall poppy’. His internal reflections during his project provided important cultural affirmation and inner strength reinforced by his strong family cultural ties, not least those provided by his Nan. Ken’s conclusion clearly spells out the potential capacity to empower Indigenous students through effective engagement with culturally inclusive schooling:

**Conclusion**

My PIP journey has come to an end, after being in my life for the last nine months. The whole adventure has given me more knowledge about my own identity and my culture. Prior to my research, both secondary and primary, I had very little idea about the history of education in NSW for Aboriginal people.

I have been motivated by important issues in my micro world, the achievement of my HSC. This was the goal that leads me through the investigations into the impacts of the NSW Aboriginal Education Policy on my own life and the lives of other Indigenous students in this state. The magnitude of the issue is beyond the confines of this project, but for the chance to learn what I have, I am very grateful.
The NSW Aboriginal Education Policy has gone through significant changes over time to meet the needs of the Aboriginal students and to get those students through to the HSC. The HSC isn’t perceived to be important to a life on the ‘Mish’, but I have been touched by the fingers of this policy and the staff that had been influenced by this document.

This project has taught me to be aware of my personal bias in regards to issues involving Aboriginality. It has taught me courage in the face of ‘shame’ situations, especially when interviewing and surveying staff including the principal. The PIP has given me insight into non-Aboriginal perspective on education. This cross-cultural perspective allowed me a chance to develop my social literacy skills.

The Focus Group allowed me to understand the commonalities that all Aboriginal students share, but, in particular, those issues regarding their identity. This gave me the opportunity to examine what I had been doing all my school life – walking between these two worlds.

Studying the historical background of this policy has shown me that the world has changed and is changing still. Australia has gone from not recognising Aboriginal people as citizens, to appointing the first principal of a TAFE college. Becoming the first male kid on the ‘Mish’ to get their HSC has seemed so much more achievable because of what I’ve learned from my PIP.

I have now got a clearer understanding of my own identity, especially my Aboriginality.

My PIP has forced me to confront my own prejudice and to develop tolerance towards the prejudice of others. It has forced me to confront my fears of being labelled a tall poppy and a ‘coconut’.

On a final note, my PIP journey has allowed me to learn many important lessons that will help me enter the big wide world after the HSC. I will take with me with a very clear sense of the importance of John Lester’s famous 3Rs, ‘Respect. Respect. Respect.’ (Ken, 2006, pp.31-32)

(Postscript: Ken went on to University and now has an appointment as a Primary teacher.)
So many Indigenous students are like Ken, waiting for that engaging teacher or set of circumstances to reignite their initial natural interest in, and engagement with education they had in primary school. Ken’s story is a fabulous one at an individual level but a clear indication that with the right level of engagement Indigenous kids can achieve at the highest levels in school and beyond.

This chapter represents a cultural watershed in the work. A place from which to crystallise and realise the nature of complexity I was both observing and living. I began with a series of methodological positions and roles which required a sharper, more cultural, focus. It was when the thesis began to take shape that the lack of this became apparent and I had to ask questions about organisation, chronology, voice and complexity. I was without a clear ‘position’ and I was looking for connections that would bind the research and my personal journey in a way that would achieve a coherent blend of these. Ken’s story was pivotal in this process. The experience with Ken touched a deeper chord, an experience that supported a new direction in thinking about method and positioning and helped to highlight the fundamental premise that Indigenous potential is not obvious to most educationists.

THE EDUCATIONAL MASKING OF RICH INDIGENOUS LIVES

There is tremendous emancipatory capacity within education to turn around life chances and outlook. Indigenous parents recognise this. Yet so much is still open to chance. Ken presents a rare but important success story for his peers and the community. His success provides a beacon for the mission kids to know that they, like Ken, given the right chances, can do it too! A story seldom told and too often underestimated by most non-Indigenous educators and unfortunately even some Indigenous educators.

Ken’s life was typical of most of the Indigenous students in the study. Lives, which have been consistently distorted through stereotypical non-Indigenous mythology propped up in the contemporary period through not so new racialised statistical data ‘magic’. A magic that has been so powerful and persuasive that it has systematically built a level of what I initially so wrongly called ‘black magic’, when in fact it was quite the opposite – ‘white magic’. This ‘white magic’ has forcefully induced a blindness to what the realities of family lives of Indigenous peoples and their children are really like and has torn at the very
essence of our being – that rich culture with strong family kinship ties. In contemporary society, not dissimilar to the references to ‘savages’ in the past, Indigenous families have been so wrongly portrayed as peoples who do not care for their kids, who live in dysfunctional families bereft of nurturing, culture and dreams. And so demonstrably portrayed in the more recent systemic attacks on our society under the banner of the Northern Territory National Emergency Response (commonly known as the NT Intervention) introduced by the Howard Government in 2007, which wrongly portrayed Indigenous communities as rife with abuse of their children only to turn up barely a handful of such cases which was not significantly different to non-Indigenous levels (Carney, 2007).

For me, Ken’s story rekindled memories of what my own life was like with a supportive family steeped in culture and pride that shaped my own educational aspirations. My study reaffirmed in me a different story of Indigenous peoples living contemporary lives—of children with strong positive experiences and rich family history and culture, and lives strengthened through strong extended families that provided the essential networks and safeguards to enrich them.

The students in this study despite their economic circumstances described strong positive elements of their lives in culturally supportive environments. This positive narrative was repeatedly relayed by the children themselves, parents, grandparents and the Indigenous educationists. The model of economic deficit masks the positives. I have seen, against all odds, Indigenous parents and grandparents managing to get their children and grandchildren, to school, in the hopes, that by doing so, their children would get a much better opportunity and chance to share in the additional educational benefits that most Australians enjoy and often take for granted. This is a vastly different perspective to that portrayed in the deficit theorising which fuels stereotypical beliefs and educational responses.

It is evident from the findings in this this study that the real educational aspirations of the children’s parents and carers have been overlooked, misunderstood or even overridden by the vast majority of teachers and by educational administrators’ ethnocentric stereotypical perceptions.

While the study has detected some small efforts of schools to better get to know their communities through ‘Pizza with the principal and community’ but in reality most of these
efforts fell short of the level of ‘cultural respect’ required to achieve genuine ‘knowing’ on a personal level. There are small numbers of teachers and some school executive staff who have made the effort to build those respectful levels of understanding with the community. These same people enjoyed strong relationships with their Indigenous students, hold high expectations for them and ultimately formed productive educational environments with the students. Ken’s story reflects the positive effect – that can change students’ futures through even one single respectful teacher.

Ensuring the prioritisation of these Indigenous lives proved a complex undertaking for the researcher interweaving with his own story and thesis journey. In Chapter 3 I referred to the multi-logical position of the researcher based upon many separate and simultaneous vantage points, and it is to this I now turn.

**REFLECTION ON THE METHODOLOGICAL POSITIONING OF THE RESEARCHER**

Stated in my earlier methodological chapter, in an endeavour to explain the critically important inclusion of the researcher’s multiple positioning as an Indigenous researcher, wishing to ensure privileged voice to Indigenous informants and simultaneously being a potentially influential advocate and policy developer on a state and national scale in education, I used the term ‘weave’ to describe the integration of each of these critical vantage points into the thesis argument. It was only in finalisation phases of the thesis that I discovered/found my way to a more culturally appropriate explanation of intertwined complexity of this multi-logical positioning (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2008, pp.138-139) which ultimately provided greater clarity for me and will, hopefully, for the reader.

In the multiple vantage points I experienced as a researcher in Indigenous education and as a leading Indigenous educator in NSW and Australia, there occurred a blurring of the research act and the pragmatic political scope of my other experiences. I found the experience of undertaking the research played a considered role in the formulation of my professional positions. I was also consciously aware that history was being made in connection with the directions I was forging alongside the research I was engaged in. Perhaps this is no more evident than at one stage I was getting to work early for my role as state director of Aboriginal Education and Training to catch up on some late transcription of interviews and I found myself getting very clear messages through the
headphones from the participants in my research. In effect their voices were seguing into critical policy and operative practices that would have state and national significance. I was literally living the study's experiences through my senior management role. This was a pervasive and engrossing continuity of policy to practical application scenario. It was the Indigenous voices which laid the foundation for action at that time and kept me extremely well grounded during my time as Director. The challenge was to create a culturally methodological space for this dynamic to exist in the study.

The weaving was not convincing in the writing. It was clear from supervisor feedback and my own level of frustration, that lack of clarity around this multi-vantage culturally methodological space was causing a level of confusion and required additional clarification. In an endeavour to resolve this issue I looked afresh to my own culture to capture this multi-vantage point and explore my philosophical and conceptual position. It needs to be said that this period was also one of personal ill health and mental anguish.

The next phase of my journey involved a pilgrimage to the ancestral lands around central Australia, although not my own ancestors from my Wonnarua Nation in NSW, I was drawn to this country spiritually somehow, seeking some solace or meaning to my life at this time. I did not find the answers to my many personal and cultural questions in the pilgrimage itself but discovered the resolution and meaning of my work because it was while I was in central Australia that I received Ken's call—a call that coalesced the personal and professional purpose of the study. It provided the final stimulus to map the essence of the study and perhaps put me unknowingly in the hands of the ancestral peoples of the Northern Territory and the use of their traditional literacies of 'rarrk' crosshatching such as the example below:
Terry Ngamandarra Wilson
Natural pigments on bark.
Purchased with funds provided by the Aboriginal Collection Benefactors' Group 2005
Art Gallery of New South Wales
Approved for use by Gallery’s Cara Pinchbeck (Aboriginal Curator)
For the study my methodological realities are perhaps best encapsulated in the ‘rarrk’ crosshatching occurring in Arnhem Land bark painting. The depth of vision associated with the use of finely painted lines in this artwork is beautifully captured in the following explanation by Djon Mundine, a noted Australian Indigenous curator and so beautifully represented in the preceding work of Terry Ngamandarra Wilson:

*Arnhem Land bark paintings are commonly built up, first, from a base sealant coat of red ochre (although Djardi Ashley often uses a translucent water-glue mix). The ground colour is then overlaid freehand. The basic design framework of the painting, which may include any figures in solid yellow, black or white, is then established. Finally, any infill detailing is done with rarrk (crosshatching, that is, overlaying grids of parallel lines at acute angles to each other). In Western art practice, the practice of overlapping parallel series of lines is used in drawing to show various levels of shading. In Yolngu painting, a layer of white lines is usually laid down as an open lattice, and then crossed with a sequence of yellow, white and red sets of coloured lines (although black is sometimes used as well). This grid allows the colour below to set an extremely subtle tonal effect through the small, square or rectangular windows created. The finest of these lines are traditionally executed with a brush made with a few long strands of human hair bound to a stem. As Wityjana, an artist from Ramingining explained: ‘Marrawat, (brush from human hair) this is what we use to write with – it has knowledge because it comes from our head.’*25 (Mundine, 2007, p.100)

While the whole analogy of the description above resonates extremely well with the methodological challenge of my initial concepts of weaving these various vantage points throughout the study, in further reflection it clarifies a number of my primary findings in the study.

First, the concept of the red ochre base to these Arnham Land paintings highlights the foundation of Indigenous research. I had access to experiences and lives not many non-Indigenous teachers and school executive staff get exposure to. It is this cultural reservoir that Indigenous writers (Rigney, 1997; Smith, L., 1999; Battiste, 2006 and Bishop & Berryman, 2006) so readily refer in Indigenous research methodology. The red ochre base captures the depth, richness and strength of my Indigenous communities which eludes most teachers and educators. The lack of exposure to this culturally rich environment assists in the maintenance of the deficit view about Indigenous peoples and communities.

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25 Witiyana, personal communication to the author (Djon Mundine), Ramingining, NT, the afternoon of Paddy Dhathangu’s funeral, August 1995.
Bishop and Berryman’s (2006) work with Maori with regard to the importance of the cultural relationships argues for the outright rejection of deficit thought, and that all teachers must ‘positively and vehemently reject deficit theorising as a means of explaining Maori students’ educational achievement levels...’ (Bishop & Berryman, 2006, p.273).

Secondly, Mundine’s description of inclusion of solid figures aptly captures those in Indigenous education who can make a difference, namely: parents and carers, Indigenous educators, teachers and school leadership. However, fundamental to these figures, we must highlight the dominance of the red ochre background because deep cultural and cross cultural foundation is paramount to understanding respectful relationships. Those few non-Indigenous educators who take the time and show genuine respect to the Indigenous communities they work within, understand this rich base. Engagement of Indigenous students comes easy for those who take the time to build cross-cultural respect. I met several of these educators during the study and throughout my career of over 35 years. These dedicated teachers along with their Indigenous colleagues and community, have held together and pioneered Aboriginal education and studies throughout NSW and Australia. They have managed to touch significantly the lives of Indigenous students and Ken’s story clearly demonstrates the powerful effect these often humble people can have. I too was fortunate enough to have been touched by some very special teachers who inspired and guided me, both in my school and in subsequent higher education studies. How different would be the outcomes of Indigenous students if we genuinely could multiply this level of cultural respect.

Thirdly, the ‘rarrk’ or crosshatching appears as acute angles to previous coloured layers and to some degree, represents a geometrical oppositional contrast. Against this the dominant red ochre base permeates the comprehension of the full reflection of the piece of Indigenous bark literature. In my research such carefully manufactured lines represent the layered nature of understanding and my multiple vantage points as researcher, Indigenous person, advocate, policy maker, educational historian, leader, and teacher, framing symbolic windows which provide the holistic vision of data and researcher position

Finally, this unique Indigenous literature represents clearly the Indigenous knowledges entailed in the story told through the work and executed with the marrawat as an instrument of Indigenous knowing – or coming from the head.
In the latter years of the researcher’s candidature considerable insecurity and anguish emerged around the pressures of work and writing compounded by some critical personal life challenges and ill health culminating in a level of falling confidence. The serendipitous correspondence from Ken at a critical juncture triggered an epiphany that enabled me to position myself in the method. Final presentation of this thesis represents a level of triumph over these contingencies and a level of professional satisfaction that like most on a doctoral pathway is an experience, not necessarily enjoyed in the process, but best celebrated at its conclusion.

CONCLUSION

As an Indigenous educator working as a teacher in an Indigenous environment I asked myself if I was a teacher who was Aboriginal or an Aboriginal who was a teacher. Now coming full circle the same questions apply to my role as a researcher. The answer I have found is that I am an Indigenous researcher as opposed to a researcher who is Indigenous. In this I am indebted to the foundation works and engagement with people like Linda Smith, Graham Smith and Russell Bishop amongst my Maori brothers and sisters and further afield with the works of Marie Battiste and Bray Boy from North America and at more local level, Colin Bourke, Paul Hughes, Robert Morgan and the more recent work of Lester Irabinna Rigney, whom I have felt as close companions at my shoulder during my coming to terms with an appropriate discourse in my Indigenous methodological journey. I now firmly believe that the complexities surrounding my Indigenous methodological base have been clearly clarified through the analogy with the traditional art forms of my brothers in Arnham Land and what I am now comfortable with what I term my ‘Rarrk Indigenous Methodological’ approach in this study.

As I discovered in my journey, an Indigenous researcher needs to engage in intimate and personal relationships with Indigenous peoples. This reflects a state of mind that can be found analogously in the source of colours for rarrk works and captured in the words of Narritjin Maymuru (1982), an Arnham Land painter:

> One day this man placed three rocks (ochres) and some white clay (pigment) in front of me. The red rock he said, was his blood, the yellow rock his fat, the black rock his skin and the white clay his bones. These colours made up his palette. His
eyes were full of gentleness and knowledge and his work reflected his state of mind.
CHAPTER 11. FUTURE DIRECTION AND DISCUSSION: A WAY FORWARD?

INTRODUCTION

The aims of this thesis were to find out why Aboriginal kids switch off school, when this happens, and what can be done to keep them in school or attract them back to education. These questions were posed to the researcher by a rural school district of the NSW Department of Education in partnership with the RAECG, who wanted to improve the outcomes for Aboriginal students in a regional rural district. A fortuitous set of circumstances brought the researcher together with this partnership to address these questions, and in turn my own personal and professional journey as an Indigenous educator and researcher became inextricably entwined in the research. This journey provides a further unique set of Indigenous cultural insights and a dynamic which enriches the study and the methodology. During the research process it became clear that my multiple roles and vantage points were not only instrumental in linking the research with policy but in embedding and privileging the voices of Indigenous peoples.

This final chapter focuses quite specifically the key findings and their impact on and implications for policy development and future strategic direction in Indigenous education and research. The first section presents the findings specific to the core questions identified above. The next section reflects the fact that data collection in the study was guided by Bourke’s four factors (Bourke et al., 2000), beginning with Systemic, then School, Student and finally Parent/Community Factors. These factors provide four different and complementary lenses on the research problem that taken together can provide a holistic picture. There is interplay in the thesis between the sequenced holistic examination of the problem with the multiple vantage points and personal narrative of the researcher. In the final sections the Chapter moves into a discussion of three themes that emerged from the holistic analysis which are important to understanding the ‘switch’ and then provides the policy impact of the work that occurred during its trajectory and future directions in policy and research, as well as practical strategies to resolve some of the issues that are still prevalent today.
DO ABORIGINAL KIDS SWITCH OFF SCHOOL, WHEN DOES THIS HAPPEN AND WHY?

This study found that the majority of Aboriginal kids in the study did switch off school, and many never switch on. Only one in every 14 Indigenous students in the study were consistently engaged in schooling. While student engagement has been a long-standing and current concern of educationists in studies of socio-economically disadvantaged students and minority cultures, including Indigenous students (Newmann, 1989; Newmann, [Ed.], 1992; Finn, 1993; Applebee, 1996; Finn & Gerber, 2005; Morrison, Cosden, O’Farrell & Campos, 2003; Murray, Mitchell, Gale, Edwards & Zyngier, 2004; Bishop & Berryman, 2006, pp.4-5; Munns, 2007; Munns, O’Rourke & Bodkin-Andrews, 2013.), this study provides the clear delineation of such engagement into three definable areas (see below) and so provides opportunities for better targeted intervention on this basis.

When and why a switch occurs has been the key focus of most of the data collection and analysis for this thesis case study. By Year 8 most Indigenous students’ attendance and behaviour patterns deteriorate (Student Records, 2004; Review, 2004, pp.20-29). Disengagement begins before or around the end of Stage 2 of primary schooling at around nine or 10 years old. For the majority this tends to occur with the realisation of their earliest failures in their schoolwork. They gradually fall further behind at primary school and remain behind for the rest of their school life until they reach the minimum leaving age and exit, a process well documented in the Review statistical data (Chapter 1, 2004) and in the more recent findings of Dreise and Thomson (2014) in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results. For most it is a silent withdrawal. They sit quietly in classrooms not engaged in the work, remaining invisible, not making a fuss or drawing attention to themselves, and as a group sinking slowly out of sight and disappearing from schooling. This silent demise stands in stark contrast to the high profile of the relative few Indigenous kids who are constant non-attenders and always in trouble.

KEY FINDINGS

The key to unlocking Indigenous student disengagement is located in System, School, Student and Parent/Community factors.
System

The study explored systemic factors at a District, State and National level to establish the standing of Indigenous education policy and practice as it related to time of study. It was clear from the nature of the concerns expressed by the district and local AECG, that their motivation for initiating the study emanated from an inherent need to drastically improve outcomes for Indigenous students. Aboriginal education policy rhetoric, at both state and national system level did not match reality. Regardless of intention in the period under study the system did not produce equitable outcomes. Indigenous student results from standardised testing were significantly below those of their non-Indigenous peers (Review, 2004). Nor has much changed in that such gaps persist today (Hughes & Hughes, 2012; Commonwealth of Australia, 2015)

School

The school district data collected from principals, teachers, school reports as well as national testing of students between 2001 and the end of 2004 indicated a significant disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student outcomes for the district. During this time there were a number of program interventions put in place to reduce the imbalance across the state, and at district and school levels. Unfortunately, beyond the Indigenous tutoring in schools program which reportedly was getting some positive results, most other interventions were not achieving improved results. There appeared to be a lot of ‘busy work’ – lots of little projects, which clearly signalled that affirmative action was being undertaken, but too little if any effect. The majority of these programs also remained outside of the core curriculum so did little to change pedagogical practice in classrooms. As summed up in the study policy was ‘not bolted in but bolted on’.

From surveys and interviews with teaching and executive staff of the schools in the study it was clear that almost all of these critical players were keen to get involved in improving outcomes, but were hesitant because they felt that they did not want to get it wrong. It was evident from this finding that there was a considerable need to build confidence in working with Indigenous students. This need pointed to the timeliness of the Quality Teaching pedagogical approaches which the department began rolling out in NSW in the latter stages of the final data collection period (2003-2004). It was evident too that a critical change in pedagogical approach was required to address teachers’ negative
stereotyping of Indigenous students and their propensity towards deficit theory. It was therefore vitally important for the Quality Teaching Framework (NSWDET, 2003a) to highlight in particular the need for increased understanding of the needs and expectations of Indigenous students and their families. This was to be enabled through heightened familiarity with critical elements of the Quality Teaching Framework around high expectations, inclusivity, cultural knowledge, knowledge integration and engagement. So far, however, this has proved to be a slow process (Gore, 2014).

**Student**

In the thesis the researcher draws on vignettes and extended quotation in an endeavour to present the rich lives and aspirations of Indigenous students both in and outside of their school environments. The study purposely positions these children’s lives and those of their families/carers front and centre, an exploration which sits at the heart of building constructive engagement between educators and Indigenous students, family and community.

This study identified in general the strength of support in Indigenous families for their children’s education and many stories of how this was enacted within the extended family over time. But this support could not guard against student disengagement.

Engagement in this study refers to the school’s capacity to involve students in classroom activities successfully. The study found that based on record card attendance figures 77% of the students in the study were engaged from day one of their schooling experience while 23.3% were not engaged. This latter group remained unengaged. Of those who were engaged, 13.3% remained engaged for the period of the study but 63.3% became disengaged. The study discussed each of these groups of engagement (engaged, disengaged, not engaged) but ultimately focused on those who became the dominant group, namely, those who became disengaged students.

Disengagement took place slowly and was dominated by degrees of failure which ultimately climaxed for most at around age 10 years or end of stage 2 in primary school. Sadly this disengagement-dragged on from this age to around 14-15 years of age when most of these kids drifted or were pushed away from school. Some moved onto TAFE to
continue their education others tried employment primarily in the local Indigenous community enterprises or lived off social security or families.

The rich cultural and extended family connections of the students shown in this study, the nurture, and parent and carer support for education are critically important in understanding their everyday lives (see also Luke et al., 2013, p.93). Their positivity about education proved to be in stark contrast to the negative and deficit perceptions that were held by the majority of teachers and leaders about Indigenous children and their families.

**Parent/Community**

It was established consistently in the study that Indigenous parents/carers and community (represented through educationists and ex-students) held high expectations of schooling. There was genuine commitment by most Indigenous parents and community members to get students to school regularly, often against all odds given the level of poverty in the community. Such support for school attendance has also been found by Luke et al. (2013).

Indigenous communities are vibrant, responsive, culturally unique and caring communities. This was clearly evident in the data, and should act as a clear reminder to all educationists of the richness of contemporary Indigenous families and their solid and long standing cultural structures. It provides further affirmation that Indigenous people come with near full cups to formal education/schooling, wishing only to be topped up by what they see western educational paradigms may have to offer to further enrich such a base. There is a significant disjunction here with the consistent and counteractive ‘deficit’ perceptions of Indigenous communities identified in the low expectations and negative views of teachers, principals and educational leaders – that teachers typically expect lack of interest in schooling from Indigenous communities (Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Luke et al., 2013; Spina, 2013).

In this study it was found that Schools engagement with the community was at best tokenistic. In the majority of situations schools did not demonstrate genuine partnerships with communities. Where engagement was happening in some schools this was limited to involvement in non-critical decision-making through ASSPA committees and there
was an overall lack of evidence available to indicate Indigenous communities were engaged in more active roles and responsibilities in respect of key pedagogical or epistemological input in decision-making. Communication with community by schools was universally poor in quality. Critical discussion and advice was neither sought nor encouraged by schools on matters dealing with culture, despite the presence of a strong Regional AECG. There was no sustained evidence of 'Partnerships' between schools and community despite direction from the centre that partnerships needed to be formed. The most innovative response to community from schools that was reported was the 'Pizza with the Principal' event held in one community, but even in this initiative there appeared to be little systemic follow up.

In the sections that follow the approach draws the findings together in a holistic way that was described in the previous two chapters.

**OVERARCHING THEMES**

The themes presented in this section clarify the presence of ill-founded and damaging assumptions and persistent stereotypes in relation to Indigenous student attendance and behaviour, racism and Aboriginal Missions and Reserves, that have found their way into the broader community, including the Indigenous community.

**Skewed perceptions of attendance and behaviour**

Based on student, parent, teacher and executive school staff interviews and student school records, attendance through primary school was an issue for 23% of students who were not engaged in schooling from their first day. This group captures attention and their behaviour shapes and skews the general perception of attendance that washes over to the rest of the Indigenous student population. The outcome is one of misperception that in general Indigenous students have significant absences recorded. Again these same students also dominate the behaviour problems and school suspension statistics, skewing the Indigenous figures overall. The majority of students in this group in this study were from dysfunctional family backgrounds and they required
much more support to the family than could be provided by any school. They required significant intervention and case management.

Indigenous attendance figures for most other Indigenous students was closer to the student norm (for all students Indigenous and Non-Indigenous) except at Years 8 and 9 when attendance drops away considerably for a majority of Indigenous students. As argued in the analysis in Chapter 9 this switching-off is more a response to lack of success in earlier engagement in school at around the end of Stage 2 or around 10yrs of age. It is also to be noted that the evidence that links attendance to outcomes is now being challenged (Barnes, 2004; Ladwig & Luke, 2013), with implications for the over-emphasis on attendance generally. The findings from this study show that what is missed, crucially, by this focus is the tragedy of those Indigenous students who attend school regularly, are invisible, yet in dire need of attention that would likely lead to productive outcomes because of their family supports that are in place.

Sublimated racism over the school fence

Schools managed to keep a lid on major racially discriminatory practices and were often far safer environments for children than the broader community. However, schools’ poor handling of child to child racial incidents proved to be a genuine concern of Indigenous parents and Indigenous informants in general in this study and a cause of tension. This finding was corroborated in both Lester and Hanlen (2004) and the Review (2004) (see chapter 2 for a discussion of these key reports). Such racial tensions have been highlighted in the more recent Luke et al.’s (2013) and Spina’s (2013) works, linking racism stemming from deficit discourses. There was very little if any note or acknowledgement of institutional racism within the education system, from school staff or Indigenous informants in the study. Lack of acknowledgement of inequitable outcomes from schooling was not perceived or readily identified as racism. This only served to highlight the schools deficit paradigm and to some degree the communities coercion and lived perceptions of dealing with racism in its most obvious form of overt actions.
Disabling Perceptions of the Mish

The study also highlighted the heightened stereotypical view of the three Mission communities which formed part of the drawing area of schools in the study. Informants, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, painted a very negative perception of two of the Missions, highlighting substance abuse, violence and family dysfunction leading to issues around child protection. These negative perceptions were found to overshadow the positive relationships that could and did exist in many families in these environments. Such perceptions are disabling, and perpetuate stereotypes that alongside deficit perceptions of the Indigenous community and flawed perceptions of Indigenous attendance patterns undermine meaningful and accurate understanding of the positives of family life that students draw on and which can be used positively to address the switch.

In the course of visiting mission communities during field-work, the researcher found a more diverse and positive outlook of life on the Missions than was suggested in the broader discourses. There were obvious instances of negative experiences and these are reported and available in Chapter 9, but interviews with Mission parents and often grandparents of the Indigenous students in the study were extremely positive and indicated the length that they went to in order to isolate and protect their children from the negative situations found in their immediate community. In many of these exchanges the informants provided colourful and positive accounts of their lives on the Mission, albeit with the caveat that these recollections were generally about past Mission life. As to the current time they expressed particular concerns about substance abuse issues occurring within a minority of the community.

RECOGNISING ‘INDIGENOUS ENGAGEMENT’ OF STUDENTS IS KEY

The clear identification of the various levels of Indigenous engagement (hereafter ‘ie’) provided some clear direction for policy during the study. It is through recognition of the three different engagement levels (unengaged, disengaged, engaged) a strategic intervention can be more appropriately targeted and provide the potential for increases in educational outcomes in a culturally inclusive school setting. The unengaged require extensive case management with the assistance of all key agencies working closely with
the school. The substantial disengaged group require improved pedagogy (defined in the Quality Teaching Framework) with particular focus on early years literacy and numeracy needs and sustained monitoring in early secondary school to head off the switch. The engaged group requires limited intervention beyond normal monitoring to ensure they maintain their engagement.

Influence on Aboriginal education policy directions

As indicated earlier, this particular study, by virtue of the position of the researcher had an atypically close connection with policy development.

Recommendations of the Lester and Hanlen (2004) Report on the NSW Aboriginal Education Policy Review and the NSW AECG and NSWDET (2004) Review (which the AEP fed into), and the subsequent development of a strategic plan to address the recommendations from these reviews, the NSW Aboriginal Education and Training Strategy 2006-2008 (NSWDET, 2006a), provided the basis of direction in Indigenous education in NSW over this period.

As indicated in the preceding and methodological chapter, the researcher had a significant leadership role in all three documents, firstly as the chief researcher to the AEP Review, secondly, as lead academic advisor to the Review and finally as Director of the Aboriginal Education and Training Directorate, in co-drafting of the Strategy as Director, Aboriginal Education and Training within NSWDET. This afforded the researcher the opportunity to not only guide and influence these major policy processes, but to bring into play early findings. In the role of Director the researcher had direct access and input into the major policy direction at the time at a national level with the release of the MCEETYA (2006a) Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005-2008. It is therefore appropriate to relate and trace the findings of the study's influence on the Indigenous educational policy development and practice outcomes at the time.

In the 2005-2008 strategic plan of the Department a change in policy focus was primarily brought about through a number of actions taken by the researcher in the roles described above:
Firstly the study provided the initial detail and experience to drive the larger evaluative AEP Review of Lester and Hanlen (2004), which provided substantive confirmation of the study's premises across the much larger case sample base.

Secondly, the study further informed the Academic Reference Group's work in their preparation and production of six collective Aboriginal Review Stimulus Discussion Papers (Heitmeyer & Craven, 2004; Willmont, 2004; Morgan & Howard, 2004; Lester, 2004a; Lester, 2004b; Lester, 2004c) which strengthened the stimulus for the most extensive funding increase in Indigenous education from the NSWDET through the Schools In Partnership (SiP) initiative. Further the Heitmeyer and Craven (2004) paper drove other key recommendations e.g. importance of respect, student identity and special fitness appointments of executive staff to schools with high Indigenous enrolments (NSWAECG and NSWDET, 2004, p.88).

Thirdly the study's findings provided the initial feedback with regard to a more detailed look at the statistical data particularly around attendance and suspension levels. This set of data helped push the agenda for bringing about improved data gathering on Indigenous students in this area.

Fourthly, regular feedback to the Review Reference Group (Review, 2004) on the AEP Review (Lester & Hanlen, 2004) findings raised issues surrounding *ie* and the need for case management of the Indigenous students I have defined as the ‘disengaged’ who are invisible in classrooms and fall through the cracks. Their dwindling engagement is not picked up by busy teachers. The subsequent related importance of the Quality Teaching Framework (Ladwig & King, 2003) as the potential tool to deliver much needed breakthroughs in pedagogical approaches in classrooms that woul ‘re-engage’ Indigenous students was further reinforced to the Review Reference Group.

Fifthly, as the then newly appointed inaugural Director of Aboriginal Education and Training with the NSWDET the author had the direct responsibility for implementing the Review’s recommendations and was ultimately responsible for the development of the first three year plan, the *NSW Aboriginal Education and Training Strategy 2006-2008* (NSWDET, 2006a).
The Strategy which while drawing on the Review findings primarily, captured in addition the early findings of this study in areas of significant intervention initiatives. These included community empowerment; the SiP initiative (Davies, 2007); the development of PLPs to guard against the ‘invisible Indigenous student scenario’; the implementing and promoting appropriate pedagogical improvement to Indigenous students through the Quality Teaching Framework (NSWDET, 2003c) at three distinct strategic levels (early years, middle years and later years of schooling); and driving Indigenous literacy through the acceptance and piloting of the then most successful literacy program available in Australia, namely the Accelerated Literacy program. This latter was specifically designed to meet the needs of Indigenous students (Gray, 2007; Cowey, 2007).

Finally, in the role of director, I had direct input and leadership in the drafting of the *Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005-2008* (MCEETYA, 2006a) which provided a unique opportunity from knowledge gained from this thesis and subsequently from broader studies associated with the AEP Review, to influence key national strategic agendas in the specific areas of school and community educational partnerships and quality teaching and engagement. It is in the area of identification of engagement or *’ie’* that best captures the essence of the overall findings and provides a holistic framework to direct policy direction in Indigenous education.

*‘INDIGENOUS ENGAGEMENT’ EFFECT ON NSW 2005-2008 STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS*

Defining three levels of Indigenous student engagement provided the focus for strategic action by potentially achieving significantly increased outcomes for Indigenous students. No longer should Indigenous education be driven by deficit paradigms and pan-Aboriginal narrow delineations, and as the thesis additionally highlights, nor be driven by incorrect assumptions around the data on Indigenous education. Closer analysis of the detailed data in Indigenous education, as I have argued in this thesis, has lifted a veil on miscommunication, misguided effort and general responses to what in fact were extremely different needs of Indigenous educational focus. Rather than spending enormous effort on attendance and behavioural issues, the study’s findings have played a role in refining the focus from outside the school, to what goes on or in many instances what does not go on effectively in classrooms, to educate and engage the majority of Indigenous students who attend school regularly.
As clearly articulated in the literature review chapter, student engagement is perhaps the most fundamental requirement of education, put simply if you cannot capture the minds of the students, there is little scope to engage them in purposeful educational activities (Newmann, 1989, 1992; Finn 1989, 1993; Morrison et al, 2003; Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Sullivan et al., 2009.). In the previous chapter, the thesis points out that the school system was relatively effective at initial engagement of Indigenous students, but that catastrophically the vast majority of students disengaged with the process at around the end of Stage 2. The thesis then identifies the minority of students who were never engaged in the system the ‘unengaged’ and the other minority group of students the ‘engaged’ students who tended to maintain an ongoing productive relationship with the learning process in schooling. As has been argued earlier in this chapter, there needs to be the development of specific strategic approaches/interventions to target each group identified in the study. The thesis has already suggested or implied the courses of action required to achieve much needed change in particular for the ‘unengaged’ and ‘disengaged’ students and not professed any significant action with regard to the third identified group of students, the ‘engaged’. The following rationale provides the strategic decisions surrounding such action.

Development of a theoretical strategic approach to ‘ie’

The thesis has very specifically targeted the ‘disengaged’ students as the group of students with greatest potential to re-engage or switch back onto school. Success with this group might in turn provide the quantum leap in improvement necessary to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student outcomes and needs to be the subject of future research. This offers what might be called the beginnings of a theory of ‘quantum engagement transfer’ for Indigenous students. It works from the premise that the majority group can be re-engaged and links the explanation of this to a strategic approach based on timely recognition of diminishing engagement. It is also anticipated that the sheer momentum from such educational empowerment will bring a number of the ‘unengaged’ on board and drive the ‘engaged’ group to even greater achievement. In effect, this significant momentum would disrupt the deeply embedded perceptions amongst many teachers that Indigenous students cannot achieve, thus highlighting the importance of one of the essential elements of quality teaching - ‘high expectations’
Secondly, it would reinforce the important beliefs, which were strongly evidenced in the thesis, amongst Indigenous parents and carers that their faith in the emancipatory nature of education was justified and empowering.

The challenge then was to provide in simplest terms a capacity to draw the departmental officers, at all levels, into adopting the key conceptual frameworks which underpinned the Review’s (2004) 71 recommendations, and the following sections with regard to the elements of this thesis, which contributed to the formulation and implementation of some of these recommendations. This was a task made even more complex because the same message had not only needed to get ‘the buy in’ (commitment) of departmental staff at all levels, but also simultaneously the Indigenous community which was primarily the NSWAECG. Getting the correct messages across to various audiences was critical at this point in my role as the Director of Aboriginal Education and Training. This was an essential prerequisite to the acceptance of the action required across the department and in particular at a school level to implement the Review recommendations. The following sections provide some solutions to the critical elements of ‘ie’ as it relates to the key findings of the study and where relevant, a mapping of these findings against key policy directions or strategic actions undertaken by NSWDET or at a national level.

‘ie’ and the ‘unengaged’ Indigenous students

This group of students as we have seen represents only 23% of the students in this study. There is little need to further highlight the ‘unengaged’ students within schools as they unfortunately are the best known of our Indigenous students both in and out of school as the thesis has noted. Go into any staff room in especially a secondary school and any member of that staff can readily recall these students and in particular their poor behaviour which led to suspension after suspension and run-in after run-in with most teachers in the school, yet they are in the school for a very minimal amount of time due to their poor attendance and suspensions and most have left school or been expelled often before minimum leaving ages. These students on the whole generally came from dysfunctional families where parents were victims of alcohol and substance abuse that impeded significantly their capacity to care for these children, theorised as perhaps the intergenerational loss of parenting skills due to victims of the stolen generation. These
were the children whose grandparents unfortunately could not pick up the pieces or who were no longer present to do so. The intergenerational lack of parenting skills, has had profound effects on parenting skills across ongoing generations of stolen generation families.

These children were and had to be street smart and were overrepresented on missions in the study and in most instances had intergenerational incarceration in juvenile centres, or in later life followed their older siblings through these centres into adult detention centres. Their futures are generally ‘dye cast’ within the first weeks of schooling and their entry into the ‘vicious cycle’ of poor attendance, poor literacy levels (often due to poor attendance), poor behaviour that leading to suspensions, leading to poor literacy due to absence from school and so the pattern is set. These students command most of the resources and energies of staff in an attempt to rectify the situation which in reality is well beyond the reach of any schooling system alone.

The thesis has argued that due to their chronic non-attendance at school these ‘unengaged’ students in addition to specialised interdepartmental case management, require specialised literacy and numeracy skills’ development which they can quickly get results in and provides the quantum gains required to move more closely to their non-Indigenous cohorts’ outcomes in these critical learning areas. This must be achieved in a culturally supportive learning environment.

During the conduct of the study’s field work and later in conducting of the AEP Review (Lester & Hanlen, 2004), a major initiative in literacy known firstly as Scaffolding Literacy and later re-packaged as Accelerated Literacy (Rose, Gray & Cowey, 1999; Cowey 2005; Gray, 2007) was specifically designed with Indigenous students in mind. Early indications showed positive results in literacy for these students. Dr Wendy Hanlen, an Indigenous linguist colleague and co-author in the AEP Review (Lester & Hanlen, 2004) identified the support for this program, its culturally affirming approach and outcomes of which she gained first-hand knowledge during her gathering of data for the AEP Review:

*The Scaffolding Literacy program employs top down skills where students are encouraged to glean meaning from text first and then concentrate on the bottom up skills of phonemic awareness as they gather confidence. Both of these programs [also referring to Quality Teaching Program] use culturally appropriate approaches to teaching literacy to Indigenous students. There was some concern expressed that Indigenous students are often taken out of classes to withdrawal groups to improve their literacy and numeracy skills and these students run the risk*
of gaining literacy and numeracy skills but having poor achievements in other key learning areas (KLA) for example, Science. (Lester & Hanlen, 2004, p.14)

Dr Hanlen in her AEP Review fieldwork had found similar strong support for two mainstream numeracy programs known as Count Me In Too and Count Me In Too Indigenous which appeared to be getting good results and could assist these ‘unengaged’ students similarly in the numeracy area.

These ‘unengaged’ students are the most in need and at risk, and they deserve specialised and integrated action, but such action must be shared between all agencies involved and in particular community services, police, health, housing and education and training. While this group of students were well represented in the body of the Review (2004) no specific recommendations were made for them. Their specialised needs were marginalised to Recommendations 20, 33 and 54 of the Review (2004), which primarily addressed the needs to ensure these ‘unengaged’ students and more broadly Indigenous students in general had access to early childhood services and improved young parents’ skills. This was in spite of a full section on case management (Review, 2004, p.93) and its importance with regard to co-ordinated across agency management of services to overcome the extensive dysfunction in these families. While Recommendation 28 and subsequently Key Direction 3.1 provided the basis for PLPs for every Indigenous student, this could be helpful in the broad sense but was relatively ineffective in meeting the need to more closely monitor ‘unengaged’ students. PLPs alone could do little to support the complex needs of this particular group. These students, as the findings show, were already extremely well known and were generally being managed (unfortunately ‘out’ of school in most instances) by school executives. In most of these cases the schools alone, were left to pick up the complex pieces of these broken lives with little if any co-ordinated interagency interventions.

‘ie’ and the ‘engaged’

The ‘engaged’ group identified in the thesis was the smallest cohort of students in the study representing about 7% and this group of students appeared to be getting good support from the schools they were in. This group like the ‘unengaged’ group were very much on the ‘radar’ of school executive and the teachers. As indicated previously in the study, schools were very proud of these students and their efforts regarding success in
schooling and the potential to obviously complete their HSC. Interviews with school
Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff pointed out that school staff in many of these
instances went out of their way to support these engaged students and in some ways
protect them and nurtured them through their final years and at times turning a blind eye
to some behavioural problems of those who displayed promise.

Strategically this group of students might have been, the researcher believes, wrongly in
most cases, deemed gifted and talented students. In three of the four cases the
‘engaged’ students were products of very stable tertiary educated family backgrounds
and not endowed with any special gifts or talents. The other student in the group came
from a mission environment and did not have the same educated family background.
She was possibly quite gifted. However, interestingly enough the only other student
interviewed who the researcher perceived as ‘very bright’ was one of the ‘unengaged’
students who had a long history of serious problems with the juvenile justice system and
fitted the Munns’ (1998) model of Indigenous students who consistently resisted school.

Additional effort with engaged students within schools could lead to increased success
in their final stages of schooling, but would have limited effect on the overall performance
of Indigenous students generally i.e. it would not turn around or close the gaps in
performance compared to their non-Indigenous peers. However, these engaged
students did play a significant role in challenging stereotypical beliefs amongst some
teachers showing that Indigenous students given the right set of opportunities could
perform at the highest levels of education This was also the case with in one of the
earliest recorded colonial testing programs, when Indigenous student Maria Lock, topped
one of the earliest known tests in the colony, as a student of the Native Institute at
Blacktown in 1819. This was an outstanding result given her studies were obviously
based around alien non-Indigenous knowledges and she was competing against her
non-Indigenous rivals of the day (Parry, 2005, pp.236-237). While the continued
reminder of Indigenous capability in education has been with us for a long time, the fact
remains that these examples of success have not been the norm and certainly while
playing a significant role in dispelling doubt in Indigenous intellectual capacity, the
numbers of students who are engaged in the educational process in schools in this study
and state-wide (Review, 2004, pp.20-24) is small. Many more Indigenous students are
disengaged and it is here where achieving the quantum shift in closing the gap is
potentially more promising and strategically viable.
‘ie’ and the ‘disengaged’ Indigenous students

In an attempt to capture the minds, actions and commitment of both senior staff and school leadership within the department and also simultaneously the Indigenous community (primarily the NSWAECG) in as simple way as possible, as Director I introduced the ‘80/20’ rule in my presentations to these groups. The 80/20 rule provided a clear picture of the fact that the bulk of our educational effort (80%) should be directed at the bulk of our students who were disengaged and so reversing the current trend of only concentrating effort into the 23% of unengaged students. More importantly it aimed at proportionately directing effort to the critical years prior to disengagement i.e. stages including and below stage 2 in school.

The 80/20 rule was openly very well received at all levels of the educational and community forums where it was raised as a critical strategy by the author in presentations to these groups. The Department’s Aboriginal Education and Training Strategy 2006-2008 (NSWDET, 2006AA) recognised this effort in several ways. Firstly, through very purposely targeting classroom pedagogical approaches this would make a difference to the majority of Indigenous students who were spread broadly across school classrooms (as indicated in this study and supported in the Review [2004, pp.18-20]). The guiding principles of the strategy were:

- Targeting Classroom Engagement and Key Directions 3 and 4;
- Making a difference where it counts; and
- Quality Teaching = Quality results for all.

26 At the time of my use of the 80/20 rule I had estimated in my research at that point in time the mixture of the three engagement groups was roughly 80% disengaged, 5% engaged and 15% unengaged when my final analysis proved these figures to be 70%, 7% and 23% respectively. For ease of reference the 80/20 rule was maintained in a macro sense to continue to instil the concept of the ‘disengaged’ as the primary target group.

27 The use of the 80/20 rule or commonly known as the Pareto Principle/Law in the business world was a simple ‘catch cry’ as sales pitch to focus attention to the importance of engaging this critical group of students and the importance of a just proportionate effort to maximise results. See following link for more on the Principle: [http://www.pinnicle.com/Articles/Pareto_Principle/pareto_principle.html](http://www.pinnicle.com/Articles/Pareto_Principle/pareto_principle.html)

28 This analysis was a value judgement based on responses to the strategy with nodding head agreement by in particular principals and the Aboriginal community and subsequent personal responses made after the presentation by individuals from both these groups.
Secondly, through breaking the strategy into four ‘Quality Learning’ target areas including specific direction in the critical years prior to school and the early years.

Thirdly, through specific program development and funding through the ‘Schools in Partnership (SiP)’ initiative. The aims of SiP were to provide:

- increased access to ‘years prior to school’;
- special targeted strategies in both the state literacy and numeracy plans; and
- PLPs for all Indigenous students to ensure they did not slip through the net.

These PLPs became mandated for all Indigenous students in NSW by 2012.

Many of these fundamental responses also permeated the ‘Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005-2008’ MCEETYA (2006a) policy document. Of all of the above strategic approaches the PLPs have proven to be perhaps the most popular strategy for the majority of Indigenous students, their parents/carers and the classroom teachers (Davies, 2007).

The researcher was convinced from his experience in his roles and in the research that looking after the individuals will lead to improvement for the group. A catch phrase he used that picked this up was ‘Look after the pennies and the pounds will look after themselves’. PLPs became the way by which it was possible to monitor individual levels of engagement and to pinpoint the critical juncture for students when experiencing their first perceived failures in school. Early reports of the PLPs (Davies, 2007) were resoundingly supported by teachers and Indigenous parents/carers. One school told the story where an Indigenous parent after going through a PLP collaboration meeting, had left the school so happy that she ran up the street telling her Indigenous friends and relatives to ‘get up to the school, the teachers are talking positive about our Aboriginal kids’. The researcher believes that the PLPs to that point, were arguably the most positive strategy embarked on systemically across the NSW education system for Indigenous students.

The ‘buy in’ by all stakeholders was a significant first step to ensuring Indigenous students’ educational needs were identified and collaboratively managed but there is a caveat. Unless significant shifts in teaching pedagogy can be harnessed, these same students will go into classrooms where their unique local Indigenous needs will not be realised. Classroom practices need to be inclusive and culturally relevant to local Indigenous communities’ lived experiences.
At the time of the later stages of data gathering for this study, it was fortuitous that the *Quality teaching in New South Wales public schools: Discussion paper* (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2003) had emerged as the leading pedagogical approach to teaching across NSW. On personal examination of the Quality Teaching Framework and being selected and trained as an academic mentor to schools on the Framework, it quickly became obvious that the Framework suited long established best practice pedagogy in Indigenous education (McRae et al., 2000a; Beresford & Partington [Eds.], 2003). The Framework became not only the mandate to action, but supported, particularly through the ‘significance dimension’ reference to the cultural elements needed to give legitimacy to vitally important local Indigenous knowledges and cultural perspectives in mainstream classroom practice. It also provided the elements of high expectations, social support, inclusivity, connectedness, narrative all of which are very relevant to the emphasis on ‘*ie*’. The Quality Teaching Framework now meant that my call to action within the department had a sound mainstream basis to focus Indigenous pedagogical direction and most importantly, in selling the Framework to principals and teachers in particular. Indigenous education wanted and demanded well founded pedagogical approaches which were inclusive, challenging and engaging for our Indigenous students while supporting their culture and knowledges. I could demand the same level of education for all students, which was generally well received as part of my ‘sales pitch’ to all stakeholders. The Quality Teaching Framework became the vehicle to drive the Indigenous agenda and seek the required changes systemically across classroom practice in all public schools in the state. This along with PLPs provided the focus on all Indigenous students, but in particular met the specific needs of those 77% of identified initially engaged students who were at greatest risk of ‘switching off’ schooling at or about the end of stage 2.

While the above responses to the three levels of engagement of Indigenous students provides both the rationale and important strategic approaches to improve outcomes of Indigenous students, there remained one area within this strategic approach that was still very poorly serviced by mainstream provision — improving literacy and numeracy levels. Poor literacy and numeracy set in train the failures that lead to disengagement.
In a quality teaching environment, with PLPs in place, the remaining challenge was to identify appropriate literacy and numeracy programs/syllabus which would specifically engage Indigenous students and in particular focus the effort before stage 3 commencement, where the study found the critical disengagement of students was taking place. As discussed briefly earlier in this chapter, there remained a need to identify programs which would accelerate both literacy and numeracy development specifically for Indigenous students, where past attempts and current mainstream offerings were not succeeding. Without adequate skills in these two important areas Indigenous students cannot actively engage with the increasing complexity of content and syllabus demands as they move through school, and subsequently they cannot keep pace with their non-Indigenous peers.

Indigenous needs in literacy and numeracy required clear and successful programs which would engage the students. In particular, the disengaged students required recognition of their Aboriginal English in NSW as their first language and subsequent programs that would build on this language base. In the numeracy area there had existed for some years, successful programs in *Count Me In Too* and *Count Me in Too Indigenous* (Perry and Howard, 2003 & 2008) which pleasingly were mandated where schools in NSW have poor numeracy outcomes. The ‘literacy factor’ has been identified as a major contributing factor for students with literacy problems (Newman, 1997).

Both the general literacy needs and the more specific literacy needs in numeracy have been identified as significant hurdles to overcome. Brian Gray (2007) and Wendy Cowley’s (2007) work in *Accelerated Literacy* at the time of the author’s role as Director offered the most promising program with regard to literacy acquisition by Indigenous students and had the scope to be incorporated in the *Quality Teaching Framework* as well as simultaneously having the scope for attending to literacy needs in numeracy. A colleague of Gray, David Rose, who worked with Gray and Wendy Cowley on the forerunner to *Accelerated Literacy, Scaffolding Literacy* (Gray, Rose & Cowey, 1998), had further developed a program based on this pioneering work called *Learning to Read: Reading to Learn*, which also proved fruitful with Indigenous students and other disadvantaged groups in accelerating their reading and writing skills (Culican, 2005).
Getting these programs supported in mainstream delivery was important because specific resources for Indigenous students available through the directorate’s budgets, were insufficient to implement these programs across the state and secondly, if Indigenous needs were to be met in mainstream classrooms then these programs needed mainstream literacy and numeracy credibility and backing in state literacy and numeracy plans. Getting this acceptance proved incredibly difficult and required careful political balancing as those with curriculum leadership roles within the DET did not want to move from major financial decisions to implement ‘Reading Recovery’. Reading Recovery was a program that withdrew students from classrooms, and involved one-on-one specific personal tutoring. Serious concerns were flagged by Wendy Hanlen, during the AEP Review (2004, pp.51-52) about the effectiveness of this program with Indigenous students. This program was the opposite in effect of the ‘whole of class’ implementation of Accelerated Literacy. In contrast it should be noted that the successful numeracy programs that were identified at the time, e.g. Count Me In Too Indigenous were readily accepted by mainstream systems and became mandatory in schools with poor numeracy results.

To overcome these literacy management hurdles, my adopted strategy with the dedicated support of the then directorate’s specialist literacy staff, began with a strategic process of gradually implementing Gray and Cowley’s Accelerated Literacy Program. At the same time the Board of Studies NSW began to roll out David Rose’s Learning to Read: Reading to Learn program in selected schools throughout rural NSW in areas with significant numbers of Aboriginal school children. The plan was to build a level of favourable responses and outcomes and then convince the relevant literacy personnel in the Department to accept and mainstream these programs. The momentum began to build to the point where there became a groundswell amongst teachers trained in Accelerated Literacy who began flocking to our professional training programs. I arranged for the Director-General of DET, Michael Coutts-Trotter, to be invited to one of the advanced training programs to witness first-hand the sessions for teachers who had begun the delivery of the program in their schools and the enthusiasm was palpable I witnessed about 40 mainstream teachers all singing the praises of the program. The program proved so successful, supported by my advocacy in an exit interview with the Director General and subsequent lobbying within the department (after my resignation from the Director’s role, and ongoing support from my successor), that in 2009 Accelerated Literacy was acknowledged for the first time as a mainstream program in
the DET’s Office of Schools Plan 2009-2011 (NSWDET, 2008, p.8). This outcome represents the best possible strategic approach demanded in Indigenous education, namely that of ‘building in, not bolting on’ Indigenous programs into mainstream acceptance and more importantly ensuring the bulk of Indigenous kids needs particularly in single or small numbers in classrooms are being met in a culturally inclusive way. Accelerated literacy enjoyed continued implementation based on ongoing positive evaluation of the program (NSWDEC, 2012b).

IF IT’S GOOD FOR KOORI KIDS, IT’S GOOD FOR ALL KIDS – BUILD IT IN, DON’T BOLT IT ON

One of the clear benefits of Accelerated Literacy is that it addresses the needs of all students simultaneously and does not require special attention for those students who in the past have had difficulty with reading. Integrating literacy in normal classroom practice means that Indigenous students are not marginalised and they are not seen as ‘different’ from other students in the class. Indigenous students like all students are brought into the program together to acquire and hone their reading and writing skills in an inclusive process. Too many Indigenous education initiatives are not systemic. They take the form of a ‘magic panacea’ to be added onto existing programs in a one off single strategy that is not part of the mainstream offering for all students. This approach reinforces Said’s (1979) ‘other’ in isolating Indigenous students from normal classroom activities with their peers.

Indigenous students as clearly indicated in the NSW school demographics (Review, 2004, pp.19-20) are more commonly found in small numbers in classrooms, often as single or only a few students in each class especially outside the more densely populated rural townships. Strategic intervention for these isolated Indigenous students in classrooms across schools must involve inclusive practices which will not further marginalise them, but build on their self-esteem and cultural attributes through mainstream inclusive pedagogy and successful programs. Programs such as Quality Teaching, Accelerated Literacy, and Count me in Too are programs that are proven to work with all students and are therefore inclusive. Interestingly, if PLPs, which were originally designed specifically for Indigenous students proved so popular, that non-Indigenous parents, begin demanding systemic implementation of them for their children,
this acceptance will cement such initiatives. Good pedagogy for Indigenous students translates into good pedagogy generally for all children.

Originally the PLPs were to be initially implemented into newly classified SiP schools that were identified to become innovative pilot schools based on their high density Indigenous student enrolments. These specially selected and funded SiP schools’ primary strategy was the empowerment of their Indigenous community through genuine partnership in the management of these schools, which the following section picks up on.

**INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT – SCHOOLS IN PARTNERSHIP – THE FULL CIRCLE?**

The collaborative educational triad developed as part of personalised learning plans (PLPs) between the teacher, the parent/carer and the student will provide a powerful framework for improving individual performance if the school has a genuine relationship with the community. SiP offered the mortar to bind the two entities in a collective partnership. The program was the most significant of the financial incentives provided by the NSWDET ($30m) in direct response to the Review’s (2004) cries for greater and more purposeful working relationships (Review Recommendations 46 & 47, p.206).

Given the importance of much localised, culture and histories of Indigenous experience and the diversity of community settings schools must engage on a one-to-one genuine partnership with the diverse Indigenous communities they service. More often than not, schools servicing Indigenous communities will have the support in NSW of a local and/or regional AECG to assist in development of this genuine school/Indigenous community partnership.

SiP in many ways became the focus of creating genuine partnership between schools and community. It was also used to pilot programs such as PLPs, Quality Teaching Framework29 and Accelerated Literacy in the State. These programs became the forerunner of the general thrust for Aboriginal education in NSW that was to provide the inclusive teaching of Indigenous students.

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29 This was certainly well in train as a mainstream provision by the release of the Review but is here mentioned as its first significant push in the Indigenous domain in schools as the primary vehicle to improve
blueprint for school/Aboriginal community relationships, and provide the role models for others to emulate.

The SiP response is one which brings full circle the integrated importance of working genuinely with the Aboriginal community, which in reality provided the stimulus for this thesis along with what at the time was, a genuine partnership with the School District in an endeavour to seek an answer to Why Aboriginal kids switch off school? The study affirmed the commitment of Indigenous parents/carers/workers/community members to equity through education. The study articulates that the community are doing their part in getting the vast majority of their children to school and subsequently the solution now rests with the schools and teachers. They need to work with what this study has highlighted about the importance and focus on engagement of individual students, and effective partnerships with community.

Where to next?

This thesis evolved over a long period of time - primarily due to the researcher’s multiple roles in senior Indigenous education leadership demands on his time and through ongoing personal and health related factors throughout this research journey. The emergent findings of the study to a great degree continually guided and informed policy and decision-making along the way as outlined above. In trying to establish the next phase of the journey from this point it is a sad reality that in spite of these major new thrusts and directions in Indigenous education, Indigenous students’ results have demonstrated little if any significant improvement over the thesis timeframe (Hughes & Hughes, 2012, Commonwealth of Australia, 2014 & 2015, Luke et al., 2013; Dreise & Thomson, 2014). Luke et al. (2013, pp.84-104) highlights that today as was the case at the time of my study, deficit perceptions of Indigenous students continue to be a dominant theme in his research along with the lack of effective communication and engagement/empowerment of the Indigenous parents/community with the school. Luke et al. (2013) highlight similar findings as this thesis around lack of any significant implementation of pedagogical reform. Luke et al.’s (2013) findings recommended further that there was a need to assess the effectiveness of initial teacher training and professional development in the area.
The findings of this thesis direct the questions away from the victims (i.e. the Indigenous community and students) and toward school systems. School systems have consistently produced learning environments which disengage Indigenous students. Our ongoing research agenda must be dominated by attempts to understand how better we can encourage and train our current and future teachers and leaders to take up the issues surrounding engagement effectively.

A final thought on where to next. One of the real issues emanating from this thesis and to a considerable degree supported in Luke et al.’s (2013) findings is that there are extremely rare and often fleeting examples (where often critical staff turnover often erodes the continued positive outcomes) of best practice examples for schools to call on for direction. Ongoing action research which would put into practice the many lessons emanating from this thesis and more recent findings similarly supported in the comprehensive much broader Luke et al. (2013) Evaluation, to a targeted collaborative (with cluster schools and their Indigenous communities) intervention on creating best practice school exemplars in higher populated Indigenous schools. These schools could be supported through action research to provide these missing positive examples for others to emulate and learn from. Such schools can demonstrate in particular the major lessons to be learnt about engagement of Indigenous students and building strong links with their Indigenous communities. Similar studies should be undertaken with regard to the apparent pedagogical success of TAFE college programs which attract many Indigenous students, including several in this study.

**FINAL COMMENT**

This thesis has drawn attention to what was a palpable belief in the benefit of education as reflected in the actions of most families in the study – an endorsement. The system’s default position was to focus largely on the wrong things; the schools were not dealing effectively with disengagement, parents did not receive adequate communication, a few individuals dominated the policy discussion, while conversely the good conduct of individuals who were struggling to engage masked their lack of learning. In all of this there were a few examples of those who, with support from alert and understanding teachers, achieved excellent outcomes, thus emphasising the importance of the fundamental principles underlying quality teaching pedagogy.
In the preceding chapter, Ken’s story paints a picture of what can take place for Indigenous students, who with strong family and cultural foundations and with the fortunate exposure to a culturally attuned, professional teacher’s nurturing, can turn around young Indigenous lives. The real challenge in Ken’s case is how can educators make his outcomes, experiences and success the norm for the vast majority of Indigenous students. Ken’s capacity to readily relate with the relevant levels of engagement through ‘ie’ groups identified in this thesis and clearly maps his own life through such sets of descriptors as he outlined in his HSC paper. This journey itself provides a tremendous stimulus to continue the search for the answers. For it is the real lives of Indigenous children who against all odds, in the vast number of examples seen in this thesis, come from loving, caring and culturally nurturing Indigenous families and on masse strive for the benefit an education provides. It is here where the hope lies in the future for Indigenous education. Hope lies with a comprehensive understanding and respect of the students’ families and the capacity of teachers to engage with them more effectively. What we must hold dear as educators is the base cover of the ‘rarrk’ pigmentation that all detail and thatching is built upon - every window created focuses on this base, a base which lies at the heart of the genuine respect Indigenous students’ and their families required. It is only when such a foundation is understood that the non-Indigenous educational journey can be successfully undertaken. As Wandjuk Marika’s painting below perhaps brings hope emerging from a new day rising.
FIGURE 11.1: IA50 Djan’kawu story 1959 (The sun rising)
Wandjuk Marika
Natural pigments on bark
Gift of Dr Stuart Scougall 1959
Art Gallery of New South Wales
Approved for use by Gallery’s Cara Pinchbeck (Aboriginal Curator)
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APPENDICES
## APPENDIX 1.1

**Timeline Depicting Overlapping Relevant Senior Responsibilities of Researcher**

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*APPENDIX 1.1*
The University of Newcastle  
HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Certificate of Approval  
for a research project involving humans

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</tbody>
</table>

In approving this project, the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) is of the opinion that the project complies with the provisions contained in the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans, 1999*, and the requirements within this University relating to human research.

**Details of Approval**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HREC Approval No: H 864 0300</th>
<th>Date of Approval: 8 March 2000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Approval valid for: 3 years</td>
<td>Progress reports due: Annually</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comments or conditions:

Approved with comments,

[a] Please provide the Committee with the interview and focus group themes or questions, when available.

[b] The survey in its present form might be difficult for children with low literacy levels.

[c] The Committee commented on the complexity of the Participant’s Information Sheet, however it acknowledged the attention given to detail and the extent of the information which needs to be communicated to parents and children. A suggestion for your consideration is that it might be preferable to distribute a shorter description of the research in the first instance, announcing the public meetings, and then distributing the full information sheet at the meeting.

Signed: Ms S J O’Conner  
Secretary to the Committee

A2
Professor John Lester  
Ummiliko Centre  
University of Newcastle  
University Drive  
CALLAGHAN NSW 2308

Dear Professor Lester

I refer to your application to conduct a research project in NSW government schools entitled Why do Aboriginal kids switch off school? When do they switch off school? How can we entice them back? - A longitudinal action research case study of a rural district in NSW I am pleased to inform you that your application has been approved. You may now contact the Principals of the nominated schools to seek their participation.

This approval will remain valid until 10/8/2001.

You should include a copy of this letter with the documents you send to schools. I draw your attention to the following requirements for all researchers in NSW government schools:

- School Principals have the right to withdraw the school from the study at any time. The approval of the principal for the specific method of gathering information for the school must also be sought.
- The privacy of the school and the students is to be protected.
- The participation of teachers and students must be voluntary and must be at the school's convenience.
- Any proposal to publish the outcomes of the study should be discussed with the Research Approvals Officer before publication proceeds.

The Department has recently introduced new guidelines for approving research applications which require that researchers declare their suitability to conduct research with school students. A copy of these has been included for your information. As your application was assessed and approved under the previous guidelines, which did not require such a declaration, I ask that you sign the enclosed declaration form (Form B) and present it to the Principals of the schools in which you are conducting your research.

When your study is completed please forward your report marked to Strategic Research Directorate, Department of Education and Training, Level 6, 35 Bridge Street, Sydney, NSW 2000.

Yours sincerely

Dr Paul Brook  
Director of Strategic Research  
August, 2000
LOCAL
ABORIGINAL LAND COUNCIL

John Letter
Professor, Aboriginal Studies
Director, Ummuliko Centre
University Drive,
CALLAGHAN NSW 2308

29 February 2000

President, Region ABCG

Dear John

Res Consent to Conduct Research

I fully support the research process that you spoke of at a recent ABCG meeting on Aboriginal attendance in schools in the District. My support is based on the same research principles that you indicated to the Career Aspiration Steering Committee meeting on the 24 November 1999.

Yours Sincerely,

ABCG President
Secretary, Local Aboriginal Land Council
To Whom It May Concern:

Late in 1997 staff from District Office approached The University of Newcastle to ascertain the possibility of research being conducted in relation to the District Supporting Aboriginal Students Project.

The project has two major focus areas:
1. Retention and attendance patterns for Aboriginal students
2. Literacy levels of Aboriginal students

There have been several meetings to date between the University staff and District Office staff. The District has a project management committee consisting of DET and ABCG representatives who meet regularly and would oversee the research project.

The district office and the university have agreed that the research to be undertaken will be action research so that it can inform future action in schools. The research project will focus on four high schools and their feeder primary schools. The research will track two cohorts of students over a four year period.

Cohort one will be students in Year 5 in 2000 and they will be tracked until they complete Year 8. Cohort two will track students in Year 7 in 2000 and will track them until they complete Year 10.

I look forward to your support in this project and its approval by the DET formal ethics committee.

Yours sincerely,

District Superintendent,
28 February 2000
Professor John Lester  
Department of Aboriginal Studies  
Faculty of Arts and Social Science  
University of Newcastle  
University Drive, Callaghan  
Newcastle 2308  

Dear John  

Re: Research Project: Why do Aboriginal kids switch off school? When do they switch off school? How can we entice them back? – A Longitudinal Action Research Case Study of a Rural School District in NSW.

Thank you for your advice and the information supplied with regard to seeking approval for the said project. I am very happy to support and approve the program. Obviously, all responsibilities for meeting the Department’s requirements with regard to research need to be observed.

Please note that under the Child Protection (Prohibited Employment) Act 1998, you may also be required to consent to screening processes known as the Working with Children Check, and to the completion of the Prohibited Employment Declaration (copies enclosed for your perusal).

I know that you will work with minimum disruption to the school environment and recommend that you deal with Head Teacher (History), and Aboriginal Education Aide.

Yours faithfully  

Principal  
7 November 2000
### Student Semi-Structured Interview Schedule Primary/Secondary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial Interview All Students</th>
<th>Follow Up Secondary Interview All Students</th>
<th>Transition Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What do you do with your time outside of school? Sports, Hobbies etc.</td>
<td>How would you describe your school experience?</td>
<td><strong>Primary Experience:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What's the best thing you like doing outside school?</td>
<td>How would you compare your primary school experience to your high school experience? Which did you prefer and why?</td>
<td>What were the three best things about Primary School?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who lives in your house with you and how are they related to you? E.g. Dad, sister, Aunty, cousin, friend?</td>
<td>How would you describe what it has been like being Aboriginal? Are you treated any differently than Non-Indigenous students?</td>
<td>What were the three worst things?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe/tell me about the place where you live?</td>
<td>Have you ever been given a hard time/hassled about the way you speak?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What would you like to do when you leave school?</td>
<td>What are you going to do now – after year 10? Immediately and into the future?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who are your best friends at school and do you play with them after school?</td>
<td>Who has given you the most support about going to school?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you like best about school?</td>
<td>What are the best things about school?</td>
<td>How well did you think you went at school work in Primary? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What don't you like about school?</td>
<td>What are the not so good things about school?</td>
<td>How often did you attend school? Couple of days off/some days off/lots of days/hardly ever? Why was this so?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you could change a couple of things about school what would they be?</td>
<td>If you could change three things about school what would they be?</td>
<td>Who were your best friends in primary school? Why were they? Were they Koori?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are your favourite subjects at school and why are they your favourite?</td>
<td>What have been your favourite subjects and why?</td>
<td>How would you rate primary school for you out of 10 (ten being the top)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the subjects at school you don't like and why?</td>
<td>What have been your least favourite subjects and why?</td>
<td>Think back to year 6 and what were your feelings about going to high school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you do Aboriginal studies at the school? If so what do you think about it? Who teaches it?</td>
<td>Have you done Aboriginal Studies at school? If so what did you think of it? In what subjects did you do it in?</td>
<td><strong>Secondary Experience</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you think you are going at school in class work? Are you doing as well as you can or is something stopping you and if so what is it?</td>
<td>What are your feelings about Aboriginal culture and languages? Where do you get your Information about these sorts of things?</td>
<td>What did you think about high school in the first couple of weeks?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who is the most helpful person in the school for you and why?</td>
<td>Who do you look up to, who are your heroes/heroines?</td>
<td>Have your thoughts changed after one year?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think about the teachers you like best at school and tell me why you like them? (Think back to year 6)</td>
<td>Who are the good teachers at school? Why are they?</td>
<td>What are the three best things about Secondary School?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now think about the teachers you don't like at school and tell me why you don't like them?</td>
<td>Who are the bad teachers? Why do you think they are bad?</td>
<td>What are the three worst things?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you know who runs the school? What are they like?</td>
<td>How would you describe your attendance? Behaviour?</td>
<td>What is your favourite subject(s)? Why is it/are they?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When do you think you will leave school and why will you leave then?</td>
<td>When do you think you will leave school and why will you leave then?</td>
<td>Who is your favourite teacher/is? Why is/she/he/they?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does your mum/dad/person who looks after you, think about the school?</td>
<td>What do your parents/caregivers think about the school?</td>
<td>Who is your worst teacher/is? Why is/she/he/they?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often would the person who looks after you come up to the school and why would they come up?</td>
<td>How often would the person who looks after you come up to the school and why would they come up?</td>
<td>How well do you think you are going at high school work? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have any of your relations been students at the school? What are they doing now? Do you know what they think about the school?</td>
<td>Have any of your relations been students at the school? What are they doing now? Do you know what they think about the school?</td>
<td>How often did you attend school? Couple of days off/some days off/lots of days/hardly ever? Why is this so?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you don't come to school what are the reasons?</td>
<td>Do you know who runs the school? What are they like?</td>
<td>When do you think you will leave school? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who gives you the best advice on really important things that matter most to you? At school and at home?</td>
<td>Who would you go to first if you wanted to get advice on something that matters a lot to you? At school and at home? Why would you go to them?</td>
<td>Who are your best friends in secondary school? Why are they? Are they Koori?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you could change something about the school to make it better for you, what would you change?</td>
<td>If you could change something about the school to make it better for you, what would you change?</td>
<td>How would you rate high school out of 10 (ten being the top)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there any questions or things you wish to talk about school and in particular yourself and your school experiences?</td>
<td>To date which do you prefer High School or Primary School? Why?</td>
<td>What would you tell year 6 kids about high school? How would you describe it to them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>If you could change three things about high school what would you change?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Do you have anything you would like to add about what we have talked about or about the project or me as a researcher?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Community Semi-Structured Interview/Focus Group Schedule

Themes to be explored:
- Background of community
- Levels of communication with the school - formal and informal
- School response to Indigenous students
- Relevance of school curriculum, student literacy.
- Discussion on student school attendance patterns and reasons
- Community expectations of the school/education system
- Discussion on school policies and practices
- Response to three research focus questions.
- Suggested improvements

Educationalists Semi-Structured Interview/Focus Group Schedule

Themes to be explored:
- Background of community and school
  - School interventions/support programs
  - Student outcomes
  - Socio-economic indicators
  - Demographic factors
- Levels of communication with the community - formal and informal
- School response to Indigenous students
- Relevance of school curriculum
- Student literacy/numeracy levels v's district, state and national
- Discussion on student school attendance patterns and reasons
- Community expectations of the school/education system
- Discussion on school policies and practices
- Response to three research focus questions.
- Suggested improvements
Detailed Educationalists Semi-Structured Interview/Focus Group Schedule

Establish Date/Time of Interview – Name of Informant – Position

Themes to be explored:

- Background of community and school
  - School interventions/support programs
  - Student outcomes
  - Socio-economic indicators
  - Demographic factors
- Levels of communication with the community - formal and informal
- School response to Indigenous students
- Relevance of school and Department curriculum to Aboriginal students
- Student literacy/numeracy levels v's district, state and national
- Discussion on student school attendance patterns and reasons
- Community expectations of the school/education system
- Discussion on school policies and practices
- Responses to research focus questions.
  - In your opinion do Aboriginal kids appear to switch off school?
  - When do you think this begins to happen?
  - Why do you think it happens?
  - How can we get them back to education?
- Suggested improvements

Attendance
What are the attendance patterns of Aboriginal V's Non-Aboriginal students?
Do you perceive any link between attendance patterns and;
  - Behaviour
  - Academic outcomes

High School Transfer
What do you perceive and/or are your experiences of Aboriginal students transfer between primary and secondary school and how does this relate to all students?
Do you have any transition programs running? Are any of these specifically designed for Indigenous students?
Strategies/Programs/Policy
Does your school have any specific strategies, programs or initiatives specifically targeted at Aboriginal students? Could you briefly describe them?
Are there any specific policy development being implemented to address attendance patterns of Aboriginal students at your school?
Level of Support for Aboriginal Programs
What level of support do you receive to address Aboriginal Education Policy from outside of the school from:
- The Aboriginal community? AECG? ASSPA committee? Community Expectations of school?
- District?
- At a State level?
How would you describe the level of family support students overall at the school?
Welfare Outcomes
Do you have a student welfare policy and if so how effective is it overall and specifically how does it relate to Aboriginal students?
What is the reflection of Aboriginal students in your suspension/expulsion figures? What do you think is the cause of such results?
Magic Wand
If you had a magic wand what would you do to improve Aboriginal attendances in your school?
Why Aboriginal Kids Switch Off School Research
Personal Details/Aboriginal Education Policy Matrix Evaluation

Please tick the box which relates to you and your involvement:

1. Your input is through:  Focus Group □1.1 Interview □1.2 Matrix...□1.3
   At: ...........................................(1.4) Date (dd/mm/yy):....../...../(1.5)

2. You represent:  Community □2.1 Executive Staff □2.2 Teaching Staff □2.3
   Administrative Staff □2.4 Students □2.5

3. The location which best you represent is:
   State □3.1 District □3.2 School □3.3 Other □3.4

4. Are you:
   Aboriginal □4.1 Non-Aboriginal □4.2

5. Sex:  Male □5.1 Female □5.2

6. Age Range         Student 13-16 □5.1
   20-25 □6.2 26-30 □6.3 31-35 □6.4
   36-40 □6.5 41-45 □6.6 45-50 □6.7
   51-55 □6.8 56-60 □6.9 61 or more □6.10

Have you undertaken Aboriginal Education Policy Training  Yes □9.3 No □9.4

Unless you are a teacher, please end your survey at this point.
Thank you for your assistance.

IF YOU ARE A TEACHER COULD YOU PLEASE CONTINUE THE SURVEY FOLLOWING

7. Number of Years of Teaching Service:
   1-5 □7.1 6-10 □7.2 11-15 □7.3 16-20 □7.4 21-30 □7.5

8. College/University where initially Teacher trained:...........................................

9. Preservice training in Aboriginal Studies  Yes □9.1 No □9.2
   Post-service Formal Aboriginal Studies Qualifications  Yes □9.5 No □9.6

Thank you and please complete AEP Matrix on back of this sheet.

The University of Newcastle

Professor John Lester
### AEP PLANNING MATRIX

Please tick the description which best indicates your state of implementation of the policy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Area</th>
<th>School programs, practices and structures support Aboriginal education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level 7</strong></td>
<td>The whole school community sustains the ongoing quality and effectiveness of Aboriginal education and Aboriginal studies strategies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Policy, curriculum and management planning reflect school community commitment to maintaining an Integrated approach to Aboriginal education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The whole school community establishes and participates in the strategies promoted by a representative Aboriginal education committee.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students, teachers, school staff and community undertake specific tasks that improve their skills in developing Aboriginal education strategies and Aboriginal studies programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aboriginal education committees broaden the range of Aboriginal studies/education programs and practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Joint problem solving is the basis for creativity involving staff, students and Aboriginal community members in Aboriginal studies/education strategies; a plan is being developed for doing so.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Members of the school staff and executive form an Aboriginal education committee to examine selected classroom and administrative programs and practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School plans are produced with no dialogue with staff, students and Aboriginal community members. Overt and covert negative attitudes exist with no mechanisms to deal effectively with them.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Level 6** | Data collection is the principle used for developing Aboriginal Education programs. |
|            | Strategic and management planning integrates data collection on Aboriginal students and Aboriginal education programs to maintain high quality programs in a supportive learning environment. |
|            | The school’s methods of collecting and using qualitative and quantitative data are reviewed to maintain ongoing effectiveness. |
|            | Planning for Aboriginal studies/education programs draws on the experiences of Aboriginal community members and individuals from across the school community. |
|            | Aboriginal education committees broaden the range of Aboriginal studies/education programs and practices. |
|            | Members of the school community draw on local and state data to develop strategies for Aboriginal studies/education programs. |
|            | Data on Aboriginal students and/or Aboriginal studies/education programs in collected locally. Analysis of the information collected challenges the perceptions of the school community. |

| **Level 5** | Schools and communities collaborate to develop quality Aboriginal education programs. |
|            | School staff, student and community member participation in school activities enhance student outcomes and maintain quality Aboriginal education programs for all students. |
|            | Long-term partnerships are established between school staff and Aboriginal community members. |
|            | Whole school community demonstrates that quality Aboriginal studies/education programs can be achieved by working together. |
|            | School community perceptions of Aboriginal education and Aboriginal studies are sought and known. This knowledge is acted upon to support change. |

| **Level 4** | Quality Aboriginal education programs are defined in whole school plans. |
|            | The whole school community endorses the school as a whole where Aboriginal studies programs are valued. The outcomes of Aboriginal students are comparable to those of the rest of the school’s student population. |
|            | The school readily adopts to change to meet the needs of Aboriginal students as a discrete student group as well as respond to the diverse needs of all students in their learning about Aboriginal Australia. |
|            | Students are the reasons for the school’s existence; the school community works together to overcome barriers to quality Aboriginal education programs for all students. |

| **Level 3** | Personal commitment to Aboriginal education. |
|            | I find that my personal goals for Aboriginal education match those of our school. Our school community works collaboratively to develop Aboriginal education/curriculum programs for our students. |
|            | I contribute to sustainable change through my personal commitment to Aboriginal education and contact with Aboriginal community members and their respective agencies. |
|            | I work with others in creating an environment supportive of Aboriginal education programs and achieve increased learning experiences and outcomes for all students. |
|            | I incorporate Aboriginal content in my teaching programs. I promote the processes to achieve this to support the commitment of others to Aboriginal education. |

| **Level 2** | I examine the implications of developing Aboriginal education programs for my students and the rest of the school community. |
|            | I see the need to recognise Aboriginal Australia in my teaching programs and create opportunities to apply this information to my work. |

| **Level 1** | The need to develop programs specifically targeting Aboriginal students and incorporating Aboriginal content in curriculum programs is given high priority. |

| **Level 0** | The school talks about involving Aboriginal communities but action does not match this. Aboriginal education is not specifically designed in whole school plans. Up-service is paid to avoid confrontation. |

|            | I have no personal commitment to Aboriginal education. |
Summary Information about the Research

A research study into: Why do Aboriginal kids switch off school? When do they switch off school?
How can we entice them back? - A Longitudinal Action Research Case Study of a Rural School District in NSW.

Finding out how to keep Aboriginal kids in education.

Hi,

I'm John Lester a Koori at the University of Newcastle (and an ex-teacher and principal) who is doing some research that hopes to find out why Aboriginal/Koori kids don't stay on at school in the same numbers as other Australians. The following pages tell you about the research but here are the key points they cover and you should know:

- You decide if you want to be involved. If you do, you fill in the form and put it in the envelop and return it to the school. I will then contact you in the near future and work out a good time for us to talk about the research.
- No one other than the researcher and the assistant who types up the tapes (who will not be allowed to talk to anyone about the tapes) will know what you said, not even the School staff. Your information is confidential.
- If you are a parent and you agree to being involved with the research as well as talking to you and/or your son/daughter, you agree to me checking their school results and attendance details. Again this will be done so that no one else knows your child's personal details but me.
- You can stop at any time your talk with us and nothing will happen to you or services provided to you or your child by the School if you do this.
- You can ask us any questions about the research you want and I will answer them honestly.
- I as a researcher in your school must strictly follow child protection policy like all other teachers and school workers.
- If you don't like the research or how it has been done, you can complain to the University and the phone number is 4921 6333.

Thanks for reading the above and more detailed information about the points above follow. Remember if you and/or your child would like to be involved in the research then please sign the form on the last page and put it in the envelope attached and send it back to the school.

John Lester
Director, Umulliko Indigenous Research Centre
16th March 2001

Dear <Title> <Name>,

Re: Research Project

Why do Aboriginal kids switch off school? When do they switch off school? How can we entice them back? - A Longitudinal Action Research Case Study of a Rural School District in NSW.

Late last year I had the pleasure of addressing you at a Principal’s conference in October. I handed out at this conference a letter outlining the research process. As a result of the talk and letter I received several responses indicating support in principle for the research. I would now like to follow up those responses and encourage those who perhaps had more pressing matters on their plates with the end of school rush, to reactivate the research and seek an opportunity to speak further with yourselves, staff and community.

I am enclosing a copy of the consent form that needs to be signed by you, staff involved and parents of students involved in the research. I suggest I first meet with those directly involved in the research prior to despatch of these consent forms. To remind you of the research I will be looking at following through a Year 5 or Year 7 cohort of Aboriginal children in your school for a four-year period using an Action Research method which will provide you and your school with annual outcomes for consideration. This will however involve two questionnaires involving all students in the cohort, Indigenous and Non-Indigenous, for comparative purposes.

I would love an opportunity to meet with you and would welcome contact to set a convenient time. Obviously it would be opportune for me to co-ordinate my travel across the district to achieve optimum economy of time and resources. Below I have set aside some days in which I could arrange a visit and would appreciate you contacting me about a suitable time to meet.

Wednesday 4th April All day
Friday 6th April All day
Tuesday 10th April From 12pm

I also enclose a copy of the DET and University Ethics Approval of the research for your information.

Hoping to hear from you soon.

Prof. John Lester
PhD Student

The UNIVERSITY of NEWCASTLE
AUSTRALIA
APPENDIX 3.8

Student Profile
Interview Date:......./.../.... School:.........................

Name:...........................................Age...... DOB:......./.../....
Name of person who looks after you:.....................Mum/Dad/Nan/Pop/Other:.....
Address:.........................................................................Postcode:.....
How many in family:.........brothers ..............sisters..............others. Place in family:........
Who lives in your house:.................................................................
Do any people who live in your house work:.................................
Highest level of education in family:..............................................
Pet/name?..........................Favourite Colour:..........................Favourite Food:........................
What do you want to do when you leave school?:......................
When do you think you will leave school?.........................Why?:........................
Who would you go to for advice about something that really means a lot to you?:.............

Notes:..................................................................................
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A16
SECONDARY SCHOOL LIFE QUESTIONNAIRE

This questionnaire is about life in secondary school. There are no right or wrong answers—we are just trying to find out what students of different ages feel about school life. All the answers are confidential.

First of all, could you provide the following information? (Please print)

Name: .................................................................

School: ...............................................................

Year level: ...........................................................

Sex (M or F): ........................................................

Each item on the page says that My School is a Place where some particular things happen to you or you feel a particular way. We want you to say whether you Definitely Agree, Mostly Agree, Mostly Disagree, or Definitely Disagree with the items.

Please read each item carefully and tick the answer which best describes how you feel.

Don’t forget that you have to put ‘My School is a Place Where’ before each item for it makes sense, eg ‘My School is a Place Where I feel important’.

Example 1.

MY SCHOOL IS A PLACE WHERE...

(Tick one box in each line below)

- The school canteen has good lunches. □ □ □ □

By ticking the Agree Box above they are saying that canteen lunches at their school are good.

Example 2

MY SCHOOL IS A PLACE WHERE...

(Tick one box in each line below)

- The school canteen has good lunches. □ □ □ □

By ticking the Mostly Disagree box above you are saying that canteen lunches most of the time are not very nice.

Please ask the teacher to explain it further if you don’t understand.

When your teacher tells you, please turn this sheet over and tick the boxes which best suit the way you feel.

Thanks

Prof. John Lester

*Questionnaire ‘Student’s Perception of the Quality of Their School Life’ used with the approval of ACER
Don’t forget that you have to put ‘My School is a Place Where’ before each item for it to make sense e.g. ‘My School is a Place Where... I feel important’

MY SCHOOL IS A PLACE WHERE...

1. teachers treat me fairly in class.
2. I feel proud to be a student.
3. the things I learn are important to me.
4. people look up to me.
5. I feel depressed.
6. I feel it easy to get to know other people.
7. I really get involved in my schoolwork.
8. I like learning.
9. I get enjoyment from being there.
10. other students are very friendly.
11. I feel restless.
12. teachers give me the marks I deserve.
13. I have acquired skills that will be of use to me when I leave school.
14. I always achieve a satisfactory standard in my work.
15. I am treated with respect by other students.
16. mixing with other people helps me to understand myself.
17. I feel lonely.
18. the things I learn will help me in my adult life.
19. I know people think a lot of me.
20. I know how to cope with the work.
21. teachers help me to do my best.
22. I get upset.
23. I am given the chance to do work that really interests me.
24. I know I can do well enough to be successful.
25. the things I am taught are worthwhile learning.
26. I feel important.
27. teachers are fair and just.

(Tick on box in each line below)

Agree Mostly Agree Mostly Disagree Disagree

MY SCHOOL IS A PLACE WHERE...

28. I am a success as a student.
29. I really like to go each day.
30. I learn to get along with other people.
31. I feel worried.
32. the work I do is good preparation for my future.
33. I feel proud of myself.
34. other students accept me as I am.
35. I have learnt to work hard.
36. I get on well with other students in my class.
37. I find that learning is a lot of fun.
38. teachers listen to what I say.

Please use the following lines to write down any other things that make a difference to the way you feel when you are at school.

__________________________________________________________________________

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Thank you for filling out this questionnaire.

*Questionnaire 'Student's Perception of the Quality of Their School Life' used with the approval of ACER*
Why do Aboriginal kids switch off school? A longitudinal action research case study of a rural school district in NSW.

(Researcher: Professor John Lester, University of Newcastle)

Approval for use of your data to present a brief exemplar story (narrative) of your life to contribute to the above research.

Hi ... (student name) ..............

As you are aware, I conducted research for my doctoral studies on the above project during 2001-2004 and with your parent's written consent; you and your parents were interviewed for this study. I know a long time has passed but I wish to include a brief story (narrative) of your life (attached and name changed to protect your anonymity or privacy, as set out in the original ethics approval from the University and is highlighted in this letter below) as part of several student stories which will help explain in the study the rich and diverse lives of Indigenous children involved. As this was not highlighted as a potential outcome in the original consent, I now seek your personal approval to use your narrative in the final drafting of my actual thesis. You also have the option of changing or correcting any information in the narrative if you wish.

As indicated above a copy of the original ethics application covering confidentiality follows:

'All data gathered and informant's privacy, anonymity and school location will be protected through non-disclosure of such details and a coding of all personal and school/district data guaranteed as soon after its collection that is possible. Coding processes will only be available to the researcher and the supervisor and kept under locked cabinet in either the researcher's home or supervisor's office.'

If you approve of the use of this narrative could you please indicate so via the attached return email to john.lester@newcastle.edu.au

The research has the approval of the Department of Education and the University of Newcastle.

Further Information

Please do not hesitate to contact me for additional information and/or clarification about any aspects of this research.

Yours sincerely

Professor John Lester
University of Newcastle
Chief Investigator
(02) 4921 5388 or 0417 698 654

This project has been approved by the University's Human Research Ethics Committee, Approval No. H-864-0590 and NSWDEET, SERAP number 00.62.

Should you have concerns about your rights as a participant in this research, or you have a complaint about the manner in which the research is conducted, it may be given to the researcher, or, if an independent person is preferred, to the Human Research Ethics Officer, Research Office, The Chancellery, The University of Newcastle, University Drive, Callaghan NSW 2308, telephone (02) 49216333, email Human-Ethics@newcastle.edu.au.
Ken: ‘School has always seemed a long way from the life on the ‘Mish’.

Ken was shy and reserved in the first interview but while he did not have a lot to say, he seemed quietly self-confident. He lived on the Mission or ‘Mish’, as he and the other students who lived there referred to it, yet seemed much more settled than the others. Ken was the eldest of three children and felt his two younger brothers looked up to him. He nominated Cathy Freeman the Olympic gold medallist as one of his own role models. Family life was stable. When asked who he would go to for important advice he readily indicated that his mother was his strongest confidant. Both his parents had an education to year 10 and were working. His mum, who was non-Aboriginal, was employed in education and his Aboriginal father was in the building industry. His fondest reflections about ‘Mish’ life were all connected to family, specifically having his cousins available to play with and living close by to his ‘Nan’ who was especially dear to him and clearly a pivotal person in his life. Nan was a respected elder in the community and supported adult Indigenous students locally. She played a key role in providing the cultural knowledge that was deeply important to him and strongly encouraged him to get an education.

Ken had a number of friends. His best friend was non-Aboriginal and he particularly liked sleeping over at his place. He had fun as a child and couldn’t recall ever getting angry at school. He thought highly of his primary teachers and lessons, and applied himself. He found maths enjoyable but his worst subject was English, not least ‘...because you have to keep your book neat!’ His attendance was excellent around 94%. School records for year 5 show him as ‘a co-operative student’ ‘who worked very hard’:

He enjoys most activities and has improved considerably in the literacy area. Well done Ken! Keep up the great effort in Year 6.

(End Year 5 Comment on Ken’s Record Card)

Ken’s primary school performance was strong showing satisfactory through good to excellent progress in all his subjects and he was above average in his literacy and numeracy results on state wide testing. Ken anticipated at this early stage that he would go on to Year 10 and move into a career in building like his father.

Then the situation changed. His good results did not continue into secondary school, and on state wide testing in years 7 and 8 his results in literacy and numeracy showed a return to
elementary levels. His commitment waned. Toward the end of Year 10 he began to receive ‘Unsatisfactory Course Progress’ remarks on incomplete assessment tasks even while his attendance was good. At this critical time one particular teacher took a personal and active interest in his education. She went out of her way to help him. In a further twist of fate opportunities opened up for other positive experiences with some of his other secondary teachers. This input clearly had an impact and his results from school improved dramatically. He persisted and stayed on to commence his senior secondary years, his horizons changed, and he was on his way to becoming the first Indigenous male and only the second person from his ‘Mish’ to complete the HSC.

The Personal Interest Project (PIP) in the subject Society and Culture brought Ken and I back into contact. He rang me independently and explained that for the project he wanted to work through his own identity issues and investigate the role that the ‘Aboriginal Education Policy 1996’ had played in the formation of his own personal identity. He indicated further that he wanted to explore his role as a participant in my thesis, specifically what role he had played in affecting any policy change I had been able to make in the area of Aboriginal Education. This was perhaps the most rewarding outcome I could have ever realised. In his final project he wrote:

My PIP ... journey had begun with the realisation that I would become the first [male] Aboriginal student from the Mission to sit for the HSC. I started to question my own sense of identity and the impact that this level of education has had on me. Being labelled a coconut, brown on the outside and white on the inside, felt pretty uncomfortable. Achieving the HSC threatened my acceptance in my Indigenous community. School has always seemed a long way from the life on the ‘Mish’.

Then, I remembered that I was once the subject of a research project myself, from the ages of eleven to fourteen. The data from that research assisted creating the NSW Department of Education and Trainings in their implementing of the mandatory NSW Aboriginal Education Policy.

Suddenly I came to the question that started to make sense to me. I wanted to find out the impact that this document has had on my identity and socialisation as an Aboriginal student in a mostly non-Aboriginal environment. A question started to form in my mind, ‘How has the NSW Aboriginal Education Policy influenced the life of Aboriginal students? – A Personal Case Study’.

(Ken, 2006:2)
The assignment provided him with a great opportunity to reflect on his and other Indigenous students outcomes from education:

My micro world experiences in Junior School had not seemed that important in my life, but John pointed out to me that he had classified me as a ‘disengaged’ student. I attended school every day and just did what I got told to do...

His growing success in education provided him with the inner resolve to counter often negative tags around achieving in education and being branded by some of his peers as a ‘coconut’ or ‘tall poppy’. His internal reflections during his project provided important cultural affirmation and inner strength reinforced by his strong family cultural ties, not least those provided by his Nan. Ken’s conclusion clearly spells out the potential capacity to empower Indigenous students through effective engagement with culturally inclusive schooling:

Conclusion
My PIP journey has come to an end, after being in my life for the last nine months. The whole adventure has given me more knowledge about my own identity and my culture. Prior to my research, both secondary and primary, I had very little idea about the history of education in NSW for Aboriginal people.

I have been motivated by important issues in my micro world, the achievement of my HSC. This was the goal that leads me through the investigations into the impacts of the NSW Aboriginal Education Policy on my own life and the lives of other Indigenous students in this state. The magnitude of the issue is beyond the confines of this project, but for the chance to learn what I have, I am very grateful.

The NSW Aboriginal Education Policy has gone through significant changes over time to meet the needs of the Aboriginal students and to get those students through to the HSC. The HSC isn’t perceived to be important to a life on the ‘Mish’, but I have been touched by the fingers of this policy and the staff that had been influenced by this document.

This project has taught me to be aware of my personal bias in regards to issues involving Aboriginality. It has taught me courage in the face of ‘shame’ situations, especially when interviewing and surveying staff including the principal. The PIP has given me insight into non-Aboriginal perspective on education. This Cross-Cultural perspective allowed me a chance to develop my social literacy skills.

The Focus Group allowed me to understand the commonalities that all Aboriginal students share, but, in particular, those issues regarding their identity. This gave me the opportunity to examine what I had been doing all my school life – walking between these two worlds.
Studying the historical background of this policy has shown me that the world has changed and is changing still. Australia has gone from not recognising Aboriginal people as citizens, to appointing the first principal of a TAFE college. Becoming the first male kid on the ‘Mish’ to get their HSC has seemed so much more achievable because of what I’ve learned from my PIP.

I have now got a clearer understanding of my own identity, especially my Aboriginality.

My PIP has forced me to confront my own prejudice and to develop tolerance towards the prejudice of others. It has forced me to confront my fears of being labelled a tall poppy and a 'coconut'.

On a final note, my PIP journey has allowed me to learn many important lessons that will help me enter the big wide world after the HSC. I will take with me with a very clear sense of the importance of John Lester's famous 3R's, 'Respect. Respect. Respect.'

(Ken, 2006: 31-32)

Ken went on to University and now has an appointment as a Primary teacher.

So many Indigenous students are like Ken, waiting for that engaging teacher or set of circumstances to reignite their initial natural interest in, and engagement with education they had in primary school. Ken's story is a fabulous one at an individual level but a clear indication that with the right level of engagement Indigenous kids can achieve at the highest levels in school and beyond.

I have read the above narrative of my life produced by and for Professor Lester’s doctoral research ‘Why do Aboriginal kids switch off school?’ I understand the issues surrounding anonymity as explained by Prof. Lester and the potential risks involved with identification of me which I accept. I am over the age of 18 years and:-

☐ Approve it for use in his doctoral thesis as it stands, or;

☐ Approve it for use with amendments as outlined on the above document.

☐ Do not approve it for use in his doctoral thesis.

Signed ______________________ Date: ______________

Or please accept my emailed approval or non-approval of this.
Participant's Information Sheet

A research study into: Why do Aboriginal kids switch off school? When do they switch off school? How can we entice them back? - A Longitudinal Action Research Case Study of a Rural School District in NSW.

Research being conducted by John Lester for the award of a Doctor of Philosophy under the supervision of Professor Sid Bourke at the University of Newcastle.

Hello,

Please let me explain a few very important points about the research which I wish to conduct to try to find cut why rural Aboriginal students appear to be reluctant to attend school at similar levels to non-Aboriginal students and how this affects the students outcomes from school.

About the Researcher and the Research

I am John Lester and I have been asked to research why Aboriginals lose interest in school, which is demonstrated by poor attendance and other indicators like suspension and exclusion rates. I am an Aboriginal researcher who is the Director of the Urmiilko Indigenous Higher Education Research Centre at the University of Newcastle. The Centre has been specifically set up to assist Aboriginal communities with research they wish done and to increase the number of Aboriginal trained researchers. This research is for my doctoral studies at the University of Newcastle and I will be producing a large report (thesis) at the conclusion of the research, which I will submit for my doctorate. During my research Professor Sid Bourke, from the University will be my supervisor. You can contact Sid on 02 4921 5901 if you would like to know any further detail or have concerns with regard to the actual research.

The research is a direct result of the District superintendent, his staff involved in Aboriginal Education and the Regional Aboriginal Education Consultative Group seeking support from the University of Newcastle to help find answers to these attendance patterns of Aboriginal Students. The three parties have now formed a Management Advisory Committee for the research to guide its development, implementation and findings so that strategies can be developed to improve Aboriginal education outcomes. The researcher will be working closely with schools, District staff and the Aboriginal community to work out what is going wrong and suggest ways of fixing any problems that come up.

The research will take 4 years to complete as it involves working directly with year 5 and year 7 students who attend four high schools in the District and the primary schools which feed them.

The District Superintendent and Regional AECG have given their full support to this research and attached to this Information Sheet is a copy of their support.

Participants Information Sheet

A research study into: Why do Aboriginal kids switch off school? When do they switch off school? How can we entice them back? - A Longitudinal Action Research Case Study of a Rural School District in NSW.
If I agree to participate, what will I need to do?
You have been identified as someone who has had an interest, an involvement or potential involvement in the area of the research and therefore you may wish to have input into the research. The research hopes to get contributions from year 5 and 7 Aboriginal students and their parents/guardians, teachers, school management, District staff and management, Aboriginal educators, and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community education groups (AECG, ASSPA and P&C) and the broader Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community. Your input may be in a number of ways. It could involve one or more of the following ways of gaining information about the Aboriginal attendance patterns in schools:

- A personal interview with myself which will take between 20 to 30 mins.
- Participation in a group interview or focus group where you will join others of similar background to yourself and contribute your thoughts collectively. Such a group meeting should take no more than 1 hr.
- Filling out a questionnaire (which will take about 45 - 60 mins)
- If you are a student it may involve you and/or your parents/guardian agreeing for me as the researcher having access to your personal school student files, results of your Basic Skills and Ella Tests, and to interview you at various stages of the research including an exit interview, if you leave school, which may be conducted by a local Aboriginal educator. The strictest confidentiality will exist in the collection of all information but especially so in regard to access to such files.

Confidentiality
Your personal comments gained through any of the above means will remain confidential to the researcher/assistant and the researcher’s supervisor only (the researcher/assistant and supervisor are the only persons who will know who said what and they cannot tell anyone else this information). Your input/comments will be recorded on a tape so they can be easily copied down correctly. When they are typed up (in confidence by a professional operator who does not know any informants) from the tape they will be edited and coded so that you cannot be identified. You will be given an opportunity to edit your personal interview and make any corrections you wish. Once you have edited your transcript the taped recordings will be destroyed in the presence of a nominated member of the Management Advisory Committee. You will be given the opportunity to make any public comment but this will be clearly identified and approved by yourself at time of your editing. Security of the information and in particular the original information on tapes, will be of utmost consideration throughout the research and will be kept in locked cabinets at the researchers home and office during the research process. Any written copies will be kept in a similar fashion and any computer files will have password protection for the researcher only. Should you feel uncomfortable about having your input recorded then alternatively the researcher can take notes that will be treated in a similar fashion with regard to confidentiality as indicated for the tapes.

What if I don't want to participate, wish to pull out or want to change what I said?
Your participation is completely voluntary and you can pull out of the research at any time and there will be no bad feelings about this nor will you be disadvantaged/penalised/or have adverse consequences for not being involved or pulling out of the research at any stage. You will be given the opportunity to edit any individual interviews recorded in whatever way you wish. If at any stage prior to the research report being finished you wish to change any detail you supplied then I can be contacted and willingly do this.

Need more information or questions answered?
I will be conducting information sessions specifically for students and their parents/guardians and will advise you of these dates and venues.
I would be only too happy to answer any questions you have about the study and provide further information if it is needed. Please contact me on the phone or fax numbers or email address below and I will assist in this process.

Reporting on the Outcomes of Study
As agreed with the Management Advisory Committee the final summary report will be the property of this Committee and the major report (thesis) will be submitted for marking by the University of Newcastle for the award of a doctoral degree. General meetings will also be held throughout the research period to update community and participants of outcomes and at the conclusion of the research in 2004 to provide advice on the key outcomes of the research.

Complaints
The University requires that all participants are informed that if they have any complaint concerning the manner in which a research project is conducted it may be given to the researcher, John Lester (02 4921 5388 or Fax: 02 4921 6368, email: jlester@mall.newcastle.edu.au), or the supervisor Professor Sid Bourke (02 4921 5901, email: edsbk@cc.newcastle.edu.au), or if an independent person is preferred to the:

- University’s Human Research Ethics Officer
  Research Branch, The Chancellery
  University of Newcastle
  Callaghan NSW 2308
  Telephone (02) 4921 6333.

John Lester
Director
Umullilko Indigenous Higher Education Research Centre

CONSENT
I agree to participate in the Study of: Why do Aboriginal kids switch off school? When do they switch off school? How can we entice them back? - A Longitudinal Action Research Case Study of a Rural School District in NSW.
I give my consent freely and understand that the project/study will be carried out as described in the Information statement a copy of which I have retained. I realise that whether or not I decide to participate my decision will not affect my/my child’s studies, work or community involvement. I also realise that I can withdraw from the study at any time and do not have to give any reasons for withdrawing. I have had all questions answered to my satisfaction.

Signature: _______________________________ Date: _______________________________

Parent/Guardian Signature: _______________________________ Date: _______________________________

In the case of students and parents/guardians of school students approval is further given to access your student’s school records and results from the Basic Skills and Ella Tests obtained for the sole purpose in the conduct of this research project, should such access be approved by the NSW Department of Education and Training. Such access to records should be in the strictest confidence and only made available to the researcher Professor John Lester for his sole use.

Signature: _______________________________ Date: _______________________________

Parent/Guardian Signature: _______________________________ Date: _______________________________
STUDENT INTERVIEW SURVEY

1. Who is your best friend/s? .........................................................

2. Why are they your best friend/s? .........................................................

3. Who is/are your favourite person/s in the whole world? .........................

4. What is/are the favourite thing/s you like to do outside of school? .............

5. What is your favourite subject/s? .........................................................Why is/are it/they? .........................................................

6. What is the subject/s you do best at? .........................................................Why? .........................................................

7. What is the subject/s you do worst at? .........................................................Why? .........................................................

8. What are the best things you like about school? .........................................................

9. What are the worst things about school? .........................................................

10. Do you ever get really angry at school?...Yes No

10(b) What makes you angry? .........................................................

11. When are you the happiest at school and what makes you happy? ..............
What do you feel about:

12. The playgrounds

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13. The School

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14. The teachers

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15. The classrooms

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16. The teachers who run the school

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17. What you are being taught

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<td>School Interventions/support programs</td>
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<td>Levels of communication with the school - formal and informal</td>
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<td>Student outcomes</td>
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<td>School response to Indigenous students</td>
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<td>Community expectations of the school/education system</td>
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<td>Discussion on school policies and practices</td>
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<td>Response to three research focus questions</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Student literacy/numeracy levels v/s district, state and national</td>
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<td>What are your thoughts on the school executive?</td>
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<td>Discussion on student school attendance patterns and reasons</td>
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<td>What are your thoughts on support for Aboriginal students at the school e.g., AEA</td>
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<td>Suggested improvements/general comments</td>
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<td>Suggested improvements/Magic wand?</td>
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<td>Response to three research focus questions</td>
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<td>Questions to add?</td>
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<td>Mission/Reserve differences?</td>
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<td>Biggest issue facing Indigenous students?</td>
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<td>What makes a good teacher of Aboriginal kids?</td>
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<td>Suggested improvements/Magic wand?</td>
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