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HOW EFFECTIVE IS TUTORIAL ASSISTANCE FOR ABORIGINAL STUDENTS?

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ABSTRACT

This report is a limited evaluation of the Tutorial Assistance program within the Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme.

Achievement of Aboriginal secondary students receiving tuition was analysed according to several criteria, including sex and the type of school attended. The major findings were:

- . Tutored Aboriginal students had significantly higher achievement than untutored students, in both English and Mathematics.
- . Aboriginal students in boarding schools had significantly higher achievement than those in state schools, regardless of tutoring.
- . There were no significant differences between male and female students.

It could not be concluded that tutorial assistance *caused* the superior performance of tutored students. Student motivation was a highly possible intervening factor, and there are probably many others.

In addition, various solutions to the problem of underachievement by Aboriginal students were ranked according to their effectiveness as perceived by people in the tutorial program. Three solutions were judged equally preferable and viable:

- . Employing more Aboriginal teachers, aides and counsellors.
- . Providing tutorial assistance to Aboriginal students.
- . Sensitising non-Aboriginal teachers to the problems faced by Aboriginal students.

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INTRODUCTION

The Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme "typifies one of the Commonwealth Government's first major ventures into 'minority' or 'compensatory' education programs to provide support to students on the basis of *need*... (rather than) on the basis of *merit*." (Meade, 1979, p.4)

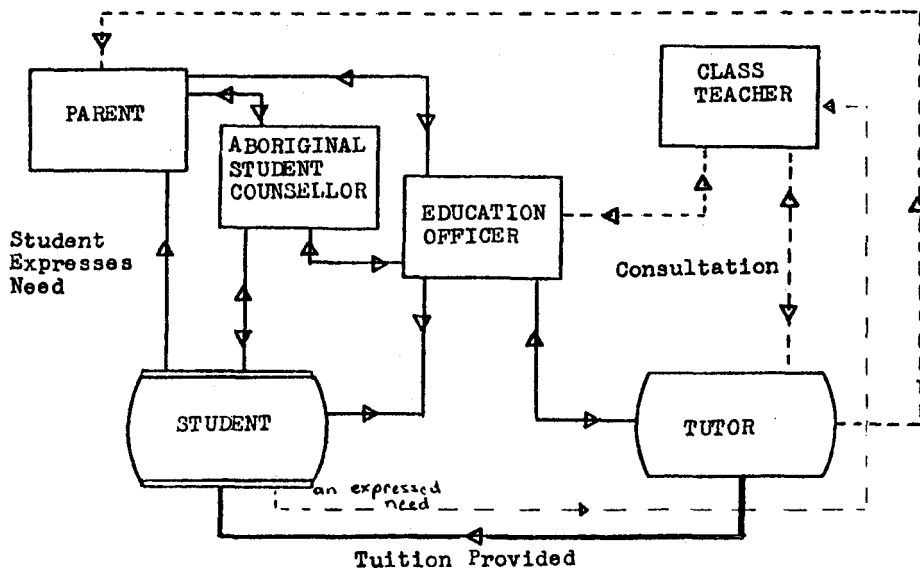
One provision of the above Scheme is the Tutorial Assistance Program (hereinafter *the program*), which is the supplementary tuition provided to a student in addition to the regular program offered by the school which the student attends.

This tuition may be used for:

- . remedial tuition in any subject
- . tuition in subjects of particular interest to the student
- . enrichment activities for students who are outstanding in particular fields of study.

Tutorial Assistance is a unique program, and since it is one component of a Commonwealth scheme, operates in essentially the same manner across all Australian states. The interrelationships among the people involved in the scheme are as follows:

Figure 1. People Involved in the Program



Broken and solid lines indicate the degree of contact. All of the people shown are not necessarily involved in each student's program.

This program is but one attempt to meet an educational need of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island students. (This is, of course, a widely diverse group; but for the purpose of this discussion the term 'Aborigine' will be limited to mainland Australian Aborigines).

A statement from the National Aboriginal Education Committee (1980, p.4) points to the underachievement of Aboriginal children:

All research studies show that Aboriginal students are, under the present system of schooling, achieving very low standards in literacy and numeracy skills.

(NAEC 1980, p.4)

There is indeed considerable research evidence supporting this statement. However, Watts (1981, p.262) cautions that "no wide scale evaluations of Aboriginal student progress have been conducted since 1976". Thus, presently available data will not reliably represent the current situation.

Some empirical studies, (Tannock & Punch, 1975; de Lemos, 1979; Prior, 1978; de Lacey, 1970; McElwain & Kearney, 1973) indicate that Aboriginal students are lower achievers in all subject areas, even on 'culture-fair' tests.

The majority of Aboriginal pupils...perform at least below average and in many cases, well below average in all academic subject areas. (Tannock & Punch, 1975 *in* Watts, 1981, p.262)

Naturally, a good deal of the research (de Lemos, 1979; Bourke & Keeves, 1977; Watts, 1976) is empirically based on fundamental literacy and numeracy skills.

Many Aboriginal students are not achieving adequate levels of basic literacy and numeracy necessary for a normal life in this country. (Bourke & Keeves, 1977, *in* Watts, 1981, p.262)

If performance is poor in these two basic areas, de Lemos (1979) has shown that performance is usually poorer on numerical tests. It is not surprising that the same holds true across all subjects, especially scientific areas where numerical sophistication is essential.

Performance has been positively correlated with the Aboriginal student's degree of European contact (Kearney *et al.*, 1973; de Lacey, 1973). However, Prior (1978, p.1) points out that "even high contact students still perform below average".

The depressed performance of Aboriginal students has also been qualitatively established. Watts (1976) surveyed approximately 1700 secondary teachers regarding their opinion on achievement levels of Aboriginal students. She found that only 10% of the teachers thought that these students were achieving satisfactorily.

In a similar survey of various government departments, both state and federal, Watts (1976, p.143) found that government officers judged Aboriginal students' standards of achievement to be poor, (especially in) basic subjects such as reading and mathematics.

As a consequence of their depressed academic performance, only a small proportion of these students progress to senior secondary levels (Australian Information Service, 1980). There is a rapid dwindling of Aboriginal student numbers from about Year 10 onwards, when the statutory school leaving age is reached (Figure 2). In 1980, Aboriginal Secondary Grant students in Australian schools totalled 15,592; only 325 (2%) of these were in Year 12 (Commonwealth Education Department, 1980).

Figure 2: Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme Grant Holders at 30 June 1980

		Year of School								
		7	8	9	10	11	12	Primary	Ungraded	Total
Boys		898	2426	1950	1475	440	146	2	229	7566
Girls		899	2554	2081	1536	572	179	1	204	8026
		1797	4980	4031	3011	1012	325	3	433	15592

THE TUTORS

Tutors participating in the program are drawn from various closely related educational fields. These tutors are usually:

- . Full time teachers at secondary or primary schools (government or private).
- . Part-time and casual teachers as above.
- . Student teachers.

The characteristics required of the tutors are:

- . Expertise in one or more subject areas.
- . Ability to effectively relate to, and communicate with Aboriginal students.
- . A genuine desire to assist the students.

Potential tutors are interviewed by an education officer to determine the tutor's suitability and to establish his/her academic credentials. No particular language abilities are required (other than English) unless, of course, the student requires tuition in a specific language subject.

The Commonwealth Education Department does not conduct any formal induction or in-service training program for tutors. In Townsville, however, there is a 'Tutor's Meeting' approximately three times each year involving tutors, education officers and Aboriginal student counsellors. These meetings provide an opportunity for discussion of the problems being experienced by tutors; demonstrations of innovative remedial methods and materials; and interchange of ideas.

Lack of suitably qualified tutors is the program's main limitation, especially in small, remote towns. Often the only professional educators in these areas are the few teachers at the local school. Frequently these teachers have been newly appointed and the demands of their regular teaching load leave little or no time for casual employment as tutors. Also, there are very few tutors "who have had special training in remedial teaching". (Watts, 1976, p.264)

DESCRIPTION OF THE EVALUATION

This report was primarily intended as a summative evaluation, in that it attempted to measure quantitatively the effect of the tutorial program by focussing on student achievement. A secondary purpose was to measure qualitatively the perceived effectiveness of alternative solutions to the problem of poor achievement among Aboriginal secondary students.

Sampling Procedure

A stratified sample of Aboriginal students from Year 10 was selected for 15 schools in north Queensland. Stratification was based on school type and student sex.

Since Aboriginal student backgrounds are extremely diverse, schools as geographically widespread as possible were selected. Thus the sample included students from cities, towns, reserves (+ fringe dwellers) and isolated areas. In this way, some account was taken of the variation in student lifestyles.

The Aboriginal students' achievements in English and Mathematics were measured on the basis of their Junior Certificate (Yr 10) ratings (1 - 7) in these subjects. As well, biographical data for each student was recorded:- type of school attended (State High School or Private Boarding), sex, and total tutorial time.

As well, various people involved in the program (tutors, education officers, counsellors) were required to rank five different possible solutions for the problem of low achievement levels among Aboriginal students.

Results

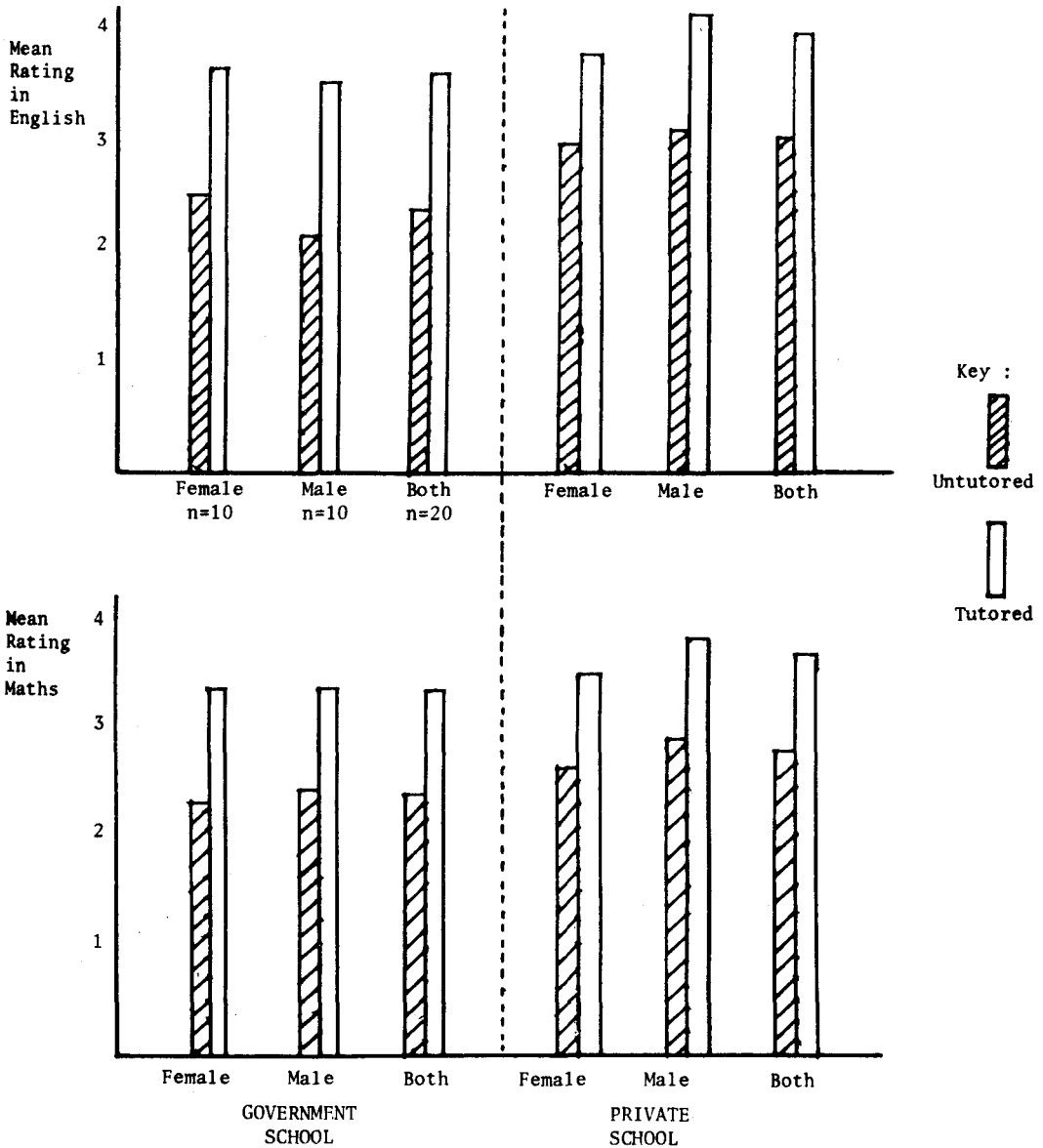
The achievement levels of tutored and untutored students in English and Mathematics achievement are shown in Fig.3.

Generally speaking,

- . Tutored students achieved significantly better results in English than students who were not tutored.
- . Tutored students achieved significantly better results in Mathematics than untutored students.
- . Students in boarding schools achieved significantly better results in English than those in State High Schools, regardless of tutoring.
- . The sex of the student had no significant effect on achievement.

When the people involved in the program ranked five different possible ways of ameliorating low achievement in English and Mathematics, it was agreed that the following three solutions would be most preferred:-

Figure 3: Achievement levels of tutored and untutored students by sex and type of school.



Firstly, sensitize non-Aboriginal teachers to the problems faced by Aboriginal students.

Secondly, provide tutorial assistance for Aboriginal students.

Thirdly, employ more Aboriginal teachers, aides and counsellors.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this study, tutored students performed significantly better than untutored students in both English and Mathematics. However, the lack of correlation between student/tutor contact hours and student ratings suggests that no simple causal relationship exists.

It could reasonably be assumed that student achievement would improve as tutor contact increased. (Within certain limits). The data did not support such an assumption, indicating that in this instance some variable/s other than tuition produced the differential in achievement.

An obvious possibility is student motivation. As previously noted, assignment of students to treatment groups was not random; this study only observed the achievement of students who, for various reasons, had elected to receive tuition. Highly motivated students are more likely to seek and take advantage of tutorial programs. As indicated in the program description, tuition is initiated if the student expresses a need for assistance. It is not an obligatory program. Such students would tend to achieve well despite the effectiveness or otherwise of their tutor. If this reasoning is valid, the extent of tutor contact would be largely irrelevant.

At the other extreme, poorly motivated, low achieving students are less likely to seek assistance and would tend to be present in the untutored groups as sampled in the present case.

The adverse effect on validity created by lack of randomisation was compounded by the absence of a pretest, so that the observed effects could not definitely be attributed to tuition. However, given the diverse sample it is unreasonable to assert that the superior performance of the tutored groups was due solely to student motivation.

It appears that the tutorial program assisted the students in some way, but probably not in the strictly academic, teacher/student sense.

At least two areas deserve further investigation:

1. The Precise Function of the Tutor

A tutor may influence students in the manner of a guide and mentor; providing encouragement and support, and facilitating the learning process in various subtle ways.

2. Program Implementation

Student achievement rather than program implementation was evaluated in the present study, but the two processes should not be viewed separately; the implementation of the program profoundly affects its outcome. Some aspects to consider include:

2.1 Time of commencement of tuition, and its duration

No account was taken of the distribution of student/tutor contact during the academic year. Since increased student/tutor contact did not necessarily increase student achievement, it may be that short periods of tuition, early in the year so as to establish basic principles, are just as effective as sustained periods throughout the year.

2.2 Use of Supplementary Allowance

Is it effectively utilised at present? Watts (1976) considers that this funding would be more effectively employed in developing remedial kits for use by tutors.

2.3 Training and qualification of tutors

In an earlier section it was observed that a major program limitation was the availability of tutors trained in remedial work. The majority of tutors were classroom teachers, *not* remedial teachers. The effectiveness of the tutorial program would certainly be enhanced by the employment of more remedial teachers as tutors.

2.4 Minor program objectives

The attainment of minor objectives, such as increased parent awareness and participation, probably increases the overall program effectiveness.

It was significant that the performance of boarding school students was superior to those in state schools, whether tutored or not. Perhaps the boarding school provides a more supportive, structured learning environment. Such a positive influence should be

emulated in non-boarding students' homes. To this end, a larger proportion of program resources should be directed toward projects such as parent education.

An extension of the final point above is the development of alternative programs to tutorial assistance. The present study has indicated that at least two proposals may be viable and acceptable.

It is unreasonable to expect the tutorial program, in its present or some other form, to substantially alleviate the problem of underachievement by Aboriginal secondary students. Several other major social problems: health, housing and unemployment impinge on the education of these students.

It is not sufficient to remedy the educational disadvantages alone.

(Mr Rendall has other statistical data which he would be prepared to make available to interested readers)

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