

ABORIGINES AND THEIR CENTRAL SCHOOLS

Part I

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INTRODUCTION

The Central Schools Project

Central Schools in New South Wales administratively combine primary and secondary schools on a single site. They are normally located in small, relatively isolated, rural communities. In the Western Region of the NSW Department of Education there are 19 Central Schools varying in size from 88 to 557 students. At the time of this study eight of the Central Schools catered for students from kindergarten to Year 12, the remaining eleven catered for kindergarten to Year 10.

In 1987/88 Mitchell CAE, in collaboration with the Department of Education in the Western Region, undertook a major research study into the perceptions of Central Schools held by those most closely involved (Sinclair 1988). Prior to the study much of the knowledge of how Central Schools were perceived was anecdotal and impressionistic. This study aimed at gathering comparative data from all Western Region Central Schools about how those who taught, studied, or sent their children there perceived the quality of education provided by Central Schools.

Details of the study have been published elsewhere and will not be repeated in this paper. In general, however, the study concluded that "Central Schools are not merely doing their job, but are doing a good job" (Sinclair 1988, 236). They were important community focal points characterised by warm and effective pupil/teacher/parent relationships. Within a co-operative 'family' atmosphere they managed to offer diverse curriculums through the flexible and innovative use of the talents of their teaching staffs.

This paper investigates the extent to which these positive findings might equally apply to relations between the Central Schools and their staffs and the Aboriginal communities served by some of the Central Schools. Part 1 of the paper discusses

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the perceptions of the 161 Aboriginal students from the Central Schools who responded to the questionnaire. Part 2 compares the perceptions of their Central Schools held by teachers in predominantly Aboriginal schools with those of teachers in schools where Aboriginal students form a more or less significant minority.

ABORIGINES AND WESTERN REGION CENTRAL SCHOOLS

Although many of the Central Schools had no or few Aboriginal students, some of the schools were located in towns with large Aboriginal communities. Three hundred Aboriginal secondary students and a larger number of infants and primary students attended the 19 schools. While in 11 of the Central Schools Aborigines comprised less than ten per cent of the secondary enrolment, in some, like Brewarrina (78.3%) and Wilcannia (77.0%) Aborigines formed the majority of secondary enrolments.

The 'Aboriginal' schools tended to be located in the most isolated towns which had fewest industries and the highest unemployment rates (Sinclair 1988, 68).

Though teachers were not asked to identify their ethnicity, the researchers are not aware of any Aboriginal teachers being employed in any of the Central Schools. All of the 'predominantly' or 'significantly' Aboriginal schools, however, had an Aboriginal educational assistant on their staff.

GENERAL EXPECTATIONS CONCERNING ABORIGINAL/SCHOOL RELATIONS

A review of the Aboriginal Education literature provided strong grounds for anticipating that attitudes of Aboriginal communities to the Central Schools would be less favourable than those of non-Aboriginal parents and students.

The history of Aboriginal Education in NSW since the European invasion has been one characterised variously by cultural imperialism, exclusion and, more recently, assimilation (Fletcher 1977, Harris, J. 1985). Past neglect or ill-treatment of Aboriginal people by educational authorities has found its way into Aboriginal oral, and more recently written history, e.g. Burger 1979. This would tend to give Aboriginal parents and students negative expectations of schooling and contribute to patterns of absenteeism, discipline problems and low academic achievement.

Research into the educational attainment of Aboriginal students, particularly in secondary schools, suggests high attrition and low academic attainment caused by low levels of motivation and perceptions of the irrelevance of curriculum (McConnochie 1982; Lovegrove 1986, 1).

In his ethnographic study of a traditional Aboriginal community in Arnhem Land, S. Harris (1982) identified a learning style among Aboriginal children which was, to a degree, in conflict with that of the traditional Anglo-Australian classroom. Fold's study of schools in Central Australian communities concluded that the Pitjantjatjara regarded schools as agents of cultural imperialism and devised effective tactics to resist their influence (Folds, 1978).

Kearins' research (1982) indicates that more acculturated Aboriginal students in rural NSW towns may also have different learning styles. If so, it seems reasonable to hypothesise that Aboriginal children might be more dissatisfied with the type of schooling provided by non-Aboriginal teachers in mainstream Anglo-Australian Central Schools. This seemed especially likely since few of the teachers had previously received either pre-service or in-service training in teaching Aboriginal children.

Sociological and criminological research in a number of western communities indicates a high level of latent conflict between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal communities which occasionally manifests itself in high crime rates of Aborigines. Aborigines are disproportionately gaoled for behaviour towards white authority figures, especially police (Anti-Discrimination Board 1980; Cowlshaw 1988). It seems plausible that teachers, in their role as non-Aboriginal authority figures, might also be liable to be targets of Aboriginal resentment.

At National, State and Regional levels, educational authorities have taken action to address the 'degree of fit' between the needs of Aboriginal students and communities and the nature of schooling which they receive. In 1987 the Western Australian Aboriginal Education Resource Group published a research study into the causes of high attrition in that State (WA AECH 1987). In 1986 the South Australian Department of Education published an evaluation of various innovations designed to reduce absenteeism and attrition, improve academic performance of Aboriginal secondary students, and to reduce instances of inter-ethnic conflict (Lovegrove 1986). Since 1982 in NSW, the Department of Education has introduced a range of policy and support documents dealing

with Aboriginal Education, Aboriginal Studies and the teaching of Aboriginal children, in an effort to overcome the past failure of its schools to meet the needs of their Aboriginal students (Directorate of Special Programs: 1982).

These research findings compel the reader to anticipate a similar pattern of alienation from school among the Aboriginal students and parents at Western Region Central Schools. However, the opposite seems to be the case.

METHODOLOGY

In the wider study on which this paper is based, all students in Years 6, 8, 10, 11 and 12 completed a questionnaire in class. This questionnaire and the detailed results are published elsewhere (Sinclair 1988, 272-278). One question asked the students to identify themselves as Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal. In this paper the responses of the twelve per cent (161) Aboriginal students to questions of morale were compared with those of the non-Aboriginal students and chi square tests of significance were applied.

This questionnaire was supplemented by data dealing with curriculum and academic progress obtained from official departmental sources.

FINDINGS

Attrition

The major concern arising from the Principal's questionnaire, as set out in Table 1, is the high rate of students terminating their study in Years 10 and 11. Although absolute numbers are small, 61.2% of Aboriginal students terminated their studies in Year 10 as compared with only 44.8% of non-Aborigines. This attrition problem is exacerbated in Year 11, when 70% of Aboriginal students terminated their study compared with only 28.2% of non-Aboriginal students. By national standards these attrition rates of non-Aboriginal students are very high, so the even worse Aboriginal figures constitute a serious concern for educational authorities.

TABLE 1 - PERCENTAGES OF VARIOUS GROUPS TERMINATING 1986

Group	Year 10		Year 11	
	n	%	n	%
Total Year	175	46.9	53	30.6
Aboriginal girls	14	63.6	2	66.7
Aboriginal boys	16	59.3	5	71.4
Non-Aboriginal girls	68	40.1	22	24.4
Non-Aboriginal boys	77	49.3	24	32.9
Aborigines	30	61.2	7	70
Non-Aborigines	145	44.8	46	28.2
All girls	82	43.2	24	25.8
All boys	93	50.8	29	36.3

Many of the schools were acutely conscious of the problems of attrition. A number had experimented with various attempts to provide academic support specifically for Aboriginal students. At least two schools organised homework centres outside school hours for all pupils, but largely to enable Aboriginal pupils to have a suitable environment for, and assistance with, their study. Other schools had introduced optional lunchtime programs in areas of the curriculum of particular interest to their Aboriginal students, like botany and biology, so that students could build on their interests and strengths. Later data will indicate that these schemes seem to have had a greater impact upon the students' expressed attitudes towards school than upon their persistence at school.

The data on curriculum do not reveal a thrust to make curriculum relevant to Aboriginal students by introducing elective subjects in Aboriginal Studies. In general, the schools offered a wide range of elective choice in Years 7, 8, 9 and 10 ranging from 'rock music workshop' and film-making, to orienteering and Asian Studies, yet only one school offered Aboriginal Studies (Sinclair 1988, 85-102). However, interviews with principals, and videos produced by the Western Region's media section suggest that a number of schools offered Aboriginal perspectives across the curriculum rather than offering Aboriginal Studies as a separate subject.

STUDENTS

Aboriginal pupils did not differ significantly from non-Aboriginal pupils in their enjoyment of school - ("On the whole do you like school?"). Their perception of their involvement in special school activities ("Are you involved in anything special, or different, or of particular interest to you at your school?") was not significantly different from non-Aboriginal students. Nor did they differ in their judgments of how their community rated their school.

Two questions on which the answers were significantly different may be interpreted as indicating that Aboriginal students had *higher* satisfaction with their Central School than non-Aboriginal students. Aboriginal students were less likely to prefer to go to a different school (Table 2) and they were less likely to think that their parents had ever seriously considered sending them to another school (Table 3). These responses may reflect differences in educational expectations or geographical or social mobility but, whatever the reason, it also indicates a low level of dissatisfaction among the Aboriginal pupils with their school.

Table 2 - Qn 6 - student preference for another school

	Yes		No		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Aboriginal	26	16.1	135	83.9	161	11.7
Non- Aboriginal	284	23.4	932	76.6	1216	88.3
	310	22.5	1067	77.5	1377	100

χ^2 DF Significance *The obtained chi square is primarily accounted for by the fact that Aboriginals responded 'YES' in disproportionately low numbers.*

4.23 1 0.0397

Table 3 - Qn 11. Parents seriously considered sending you to another school

	Yes		No		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Aboriginal	32	20.4	125	79.6	157	11.5
Non- Aboriginal	334	27.6	874	72.4	1208	88.5
	366	26.8	999	73.2	1365	100.0

χ^2 DF Significance

3.74 1 0.0532

Aboriginal pupils were also less likely to be dissatisfied with the available subjects offerings at their school. Whereas 52% of non-Aboriginal pupils felt they would have liked to study a subject not on offer at their school, only 42.9% of Aboriginal students felt restricted in this way.

Table 4 Qn 9 - Is there any subject that you would like to do at your school?

	Yes		No		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Aboriginal	67	42.9	89	57.1	156	11.5
Non-Aboriginal	624	52.0	576	48.0	1200	88.5
	691	51.0	665	49.0	1356	100.0

χ^2 DF Significance
4.52 1 0.03

There was also a significant difference in the way Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students rated their own academic performance. Here the Aboriginal students' responses were more broadly distributed with slightly more considering themselves 'below average' and slightly more considering themselves 'well above average'. Unfortunately there was no way of determining how realistic their self-appraisals were.

Table 5 Qn 8 - How would you rate your performance in your school subjects this year?

	Well Below Average		Below Average		Average		Above Average		Well Above Average		TOTAL	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
	Aboriginal	4	2.5	16	9.9	89	55.3	33	20.5	19	11.8	161
Non-Aboriginal	24	2.0	72	5.9	647	53.2	388	31.9	86	7.1	1217	88.3
TOTAL	28	(2.0)	88	(6.4)	736	(53.4)	421	(30.6)	105	(7.6)	1378	100.0

χ^2 DF Significance
14.12 4 0.0069

In the light of the data above on student attrition levels, the questions dealing with aspirations to continue at school reveal interesting comparisons. The pupils were asked both whether they 'would like to' stay on to Years 11 and 12 and also asked when they 'intended' to leave.

The Aboriginal students were both less interested in staying at school till Years 11 and 12 than the non-Aboriginal, and more keen to stay than attrition rates of earlier cohorts of Aboriginal students suggest.

Table 6 - Qn 10 - Would you like to go on to Years 11 and 12?

	Yes		No		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Aboriginal	100	63.3	58	36.7	158	11.8
Non-Aboriginal	908	76.6	278	23.4	1186	88.2
	1008	75.0	336	25.0	1344	100.0
χ^2	DF	Significance				
13.09	1	0.0003				

Table 7 - Qn 12 - When do you intend to leave school?

	15 Years		Yr 10		Yr 12		Don't know and other		TOTAL	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Aboriginal	10	6.3	41	25.9	67	(42.4)	40	(25.3)	158	11.5
Non-Aboriginal	23	1.9	238	19.5	702	(57.6)	255	(20.9)	1218	88.5
	33	2.4	279	20.3	769	(55.9)	295	(21.4)	1376	(100)
χ^2	DF	Significance								
21.41	4	0.0003								

This may suggest either that their preference and intentions are unrealistic and/or that the educational aspirations of Aboriginal pupils at Central Schools are steadily increasing.

TEACHERS

Question 15 asked teachers to comment upon the career aspirations of their pupils according to gender and Aboriginality. Central School teachers generally rated their students as being average or below average in academic calibre and career aspirations. However, Aboriginal girls and boys were seen to have dramatically lower career aspirations than non-Aboriginals. For example, 70.6% of teachers rated Aboriginal girls and 76.5% rated Aboriginal boys as having career aspirations that were either 'below average' or 'very low'.

Table 8 - Qn 15 - Teachers' Perceptions of Students

Criterion	Rating										Total	
	Very High/Strong		Above Average		About Average		Below Average		Very Poor Low		TOTAL	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
1. Academic calibre	2	0.6	11	3.3	217	66.0	87	26.4	12	3.7*	329	100.0
2. Social adjustment	26	7.9	92	28.0	146	44.4	57	17.3	8	2.4	329	100.0
3. Career aspirations:												
i) Aboriginal Girls	1	0.5	3	1.4	58	27.5	94	44.5	55	26.1	211	100.0
ii) Non-Aboriginal Girls	2	0.6	28	8.9	173	54.8*	105	33.2	8	2.5	316	100.0
iii) Aboriginal Boys	0	0.0	1	0.4	52	23.1	108	48.0	64	28.5*	225	100.0
iv) Non-Aboriginal Boys	1	0.3	16	5.1	190	60.1	97	30.7	12	3.8	316	100.0

Non-respondents: 1: 10 (2.9% of all questionnaires processed)
 2: 10 (2.9%)
 3 i): 128 (37.8%)
 ii): 23 (6.8%)
 iii): 114 (33.6%)
 iv): 23 (6.8%)

This rating may reflect the teachers' perceptions of the reality of Aboriginal employment within those communities and may be an accurate reflection of what Aboriginal students themselves feel. It is, however, interesting to compare these results with the educational aspirations of the students themselves as indicated in Tables 6 and 7, 63.3% of the Aboriginal sample would "like to go on to Years 11 and 12" and more than 42.4% do not "intend" to leave school before Year 12. Perhaps the aspirations of Aboriginal children are a little higher than teachers realise!

DISCUSSION: Surprised by the Positive!

A number of these findings are of concern. The attrition rate of Aboriginal students is extremely high. If teachers are correct about the low career aspirations of Aboriginal students, this represents a barrier to motivation. Overall, however, the research indicates that Aboriginal children in Western Region Central Schools are as satisfied with their schools as are non-Aboriginal students, if not more so. How can we explain these positive findings?

It is possible that the results are an artefact of the methodology. Aboriginal students' answers to the questionnaire may not reflect their true feelings. Less formal and more reflective methodologies might reveal a far more complex picture. Perhaps absenteeism among Aboriginal students and the relatively higher non-response rate among Aboriginal parents may have resulted in samples of Aboriginal pupils and parents that were not representative of their communities. Yet the sample of Aboriginal students was large and results in the different tables seemed consistent. Not a single question revealed significantly higher dissatisfaction among Aboriginal students than among non-Aboriginal.

Perhaps the high level of satisfaction held by the Aboriginal students is indirectly a consequence of the unfortunate history of Aboriginal education previously referred to. Aboriginal communities may have lower expectations of schooling that are more easy to satisfy than the expectations of non-Aboriginal students. Special initiatives and recognition given to Aboriginal students may be cherished the more for being unexpected.

The small size of Central Schools and the K-10 structure enable the development of an extended family atmosphere in Central Schools in which Aboriginal students feel comfortable. Opportunities exist for Aboriginal students to provide support for kin in different age groups. The smallness of the communities in which Central Schools are located enable new teachers to be quickly incorporated into the community and provides incentives for staff to be involved with parents and pupils in extra-curricula activities. The small size of the school facilitates a more flexible curriculum response to the needs of Aboriginal children than in larger secondary schools.

It is important to recognise the role of the Aboriginal education assistants in the 'Aboriginal' schools. In many cases these assistants were highly regarded in both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. Where teaching staff turnover is high, often the Aboriginal education assistant has more teaching experience than the new teaching graduates, and this experience is acknowledged and utilised to improve staff-student relations.

The second part of this paper presents data on the high morale identified among those teaching staff in schools that were 'predominantly' or 'significantly' Aboriginal. In a complex way the high level of school satisfaction found among Aboriginal students may be both a result and a cause of the high morale of their teaching staff.