

## ABORIGINES AND THEIR CENTRAL SCHOOLS

### *Part II*

#### THE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS

Part I of this article outlined the findings of a 1987 study of attitudes of Aboriginal students in 19 New South Wales Central Schools. It showed that, despite higher attrition rates, Aboriginal children seemed to be as favourably disposed towards their schools as were their non-Aboriginal peers.

Part II, drawing from the same Central Schools study, compares the perceptions of teachers in these Central Schools according to whether the schools were 'predominantly Aboriginal', 'significantly Aboriginal' or 'non-Aboriginal'.

For purposes of comparison I have classified schools as 'predominantly Aboriginal', 'significantly Aboriginal', or 'non-Aboriginal' based on the percentage of Aboriginal students enrolled in the secondary section of the school. The two schools with a majority of secondary students who are Aboriginal will, throughout the paper, be referred to for convenience as 'predominantly Aboriginal' schools, those six where Aborigines comprise between 15 and 50% of secondary students as 'significantly Aboriginal' and, finally, those remainder with less than 10% of Aboriginal students as 'non-Aboriginal'.

This method of classification, while quite arbitrary, has been used in other research into public policy affecting Aborigines (Anti-Discrimination Board, 1982). It must, however, be repeated that in no school were all students Aboriginal, and that there was a small minority of Aboriginal students in some of the 'non-Aboriginal' schools. For some purposes the 'predominantly Aboriginal' and 'significantly Aboriginal' schools will be referred to collectively as 'Aboriginal'.

The 'Aboriginal' schools tended to be the most geographically isolated, with all five of the schools located further than 90 kilometres from the nearest high school. They also tended to be located in the most demanding physical climate. The majority of schools which the Department of Education zoned as eligible for a climatic allowance due to heat were 'Aboriginal' schools. Factors of isolation and climate could be expected to make the Aboriginal schools less attractive to prospective teachers.

## METHODOLOGY

Questionnaires were administered to all teachers, primary, secondary, casual and permanent, present at all 19 Central Schools in the Western Region. Allowing for absences, this resulted in a sample of 339, with a response rate probably in excess of 90% (Sinclair, 1988, 136).

Details of the questionnaire and the results on the full range of questions are available in the report of the project (Sinclair, 1988). For the purposes of this article, the responses of those teachers in 'predominantly Aboriginal' schools (33) and 'significantly Aboriginal' schools (111) were compared with those in the remaining non-Aboriginal Central Schools (195) on those questions related to teaching morale and community relations. The chi square test was used to ascertain whether or not any differences between observed and expected frequencies were statistically significant.

## RESULTS

Given the isolated and climatically unattractive nature of many of the 'Aboriginal' schools, the racial conflict latent and sometimes manifest in some of those towns and the perceptions of low educational and career aspirations of Aboriginal students held by teachers, it seems plausible to expect teachers in 'Aboriginal' schools to have a lower morale than those in 'non-Aboriginal' schools. A number of financial and industrial benefits, like longer holidays, subsidised accommodation and travel accrue to NSW teachers in isolated, western areas but these seem insufficient to make it easy for the Department to staff the 'predominantly Aboriginal' schools with both assistants and executive teachers.

Initial analysis of teacher responses suggests that this is not the case.

One question indirectly tapped staff morale and ethos by asking the teachers to rate their colleagues, executive and support staff on a 5 point scale from 'well below average' to 'well above average'. Teachers in all three categories of Central Schools rated their colleagues, executives and support staff in the same highly favourable fashion. Differences between the three types of schools were not statistically significant

| TEACHING RATINGS<br>OF PERSONNEL | WELL<br>BELOW<br>AVERAGE |   | BELOW<br>AVERAGE |    | AVERAGE |    | ABOVE<br>AVERAGE |    | WELL<br>ABOVE<br>AVERAGE |    | TOTAL      |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------|---|------------------|----|---------|----|------------------|----|--------------------------|----|------------|
|                                  | n                        | % | n                | %  | n       | %  | n                | %  | n                        | %  |            |
| <hr/>                            |                          |   |                  |    |         |    |                  |    |                          |    |            |
| TEACHING COLLEAGUES              |                          |   |                  |    |         |    |                  |    |                          |    |            |
| Pred. Aboriginal                 | 0                        | 0 | 1                | 3  | 8       | 24 | 15               | 45 | 9                        | 27 | 33         |
| Signif. Aboriginal               | 0                        | 0 | 3                | 3  | 36      | 32 | 51               | 46 | 21                       | 19 | 111        |
| Non-Aboriginal                   | 1                        | 1 | 5                | 3  | 66      | 35 | 89               | 47 | 27                       | 14 | <u>118</u> |
|                                  |                          |   |                  |    |         |    |                  |    |                          |    | 332        |
| SCHOOL EXECUTIVE                 |                          |   |                  |    |         |    |                  |    |                          |    |            |
| Predom. Aboriginal               | 0                        | 0 | 3                | 9  | 8       | 25 | 15               | 47 | 6                        | 19 | 32         |
| Signif. Aboriginal               | 0                        | 0 | 11               | 10 | 35      | 32 | 49               | 44 | 16                       | 14 | 111        |
| Non-Aboriginal                   | 2                        | 1 | 21               | 11 | 75      | 39 | 69               | 36 | 22                       | 11 | <u>192</u> |
|                                  |                          |   |                  |    |         |    |                  |    |                          |    | 335        |
| SUPPORT STAFF                    |                          |   |                  |    |         |    |                  |    |                          |    |            |
| Predom. Aboriginal               | 0                        | 0 | 4                | 12 | 8       | 24 | 13               | 39 | 8                        | 24 | 33         |
| Signif. Aboriginal               | 0                        | 0 | 8                | 7  | 40      | 36 | 43               | 39 | 19                       | 17 | 110        |
| Non-Aboriginal                   | 4                        | 2 | 12               | 6  | 62      | 33 | 87               | 46 | 23                       | 12 | <u>188</u> |
|                                  |                          |   |                  |    |         |    |                  |    |                          |    | 331        |

Question 12 asked for degrees of agreement or disagreement with a number of statements concerning Central Schools and their happiness working there. Only a few statements elicited pronounced differences between teachers in 'predominantly Aboriginal', 'significantly Aboriginal' and 'non-Aboriginal' schools. The first of these was question 7, where teachers were asked whether, "generally speaking, parent-teacher relationships at this school are sound".

In all categories of schools the majority of respondents indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed that parent-teacher relationships were sound. There was a significant tendency for the strength of this agreement to decrease in those categories with the highest proportion of Aboriginal students.

Those working in 'non-Aboriginal' schools and in 'significantly Aboriginal' were also more likely to express satisfaction with the adequacy of their teacher training 'for this school' than were those in 'predominantly Aboriginal' schools. This result has implications for teacher training institutions preparing students who may unexpectedly find themselves on the staff of predominantly Aboriginal schools.

There were no significant differences on responses to other key statements including questions about being happy teaching at the school, feeling that the teaching was good for their professional development and being happy to be appointed to the school.

| OPINIONS ON ISSUES                                                    | STRONGLY<br>AGREE |    | AGREE |    | UNDECIDED |    | DISAGREE |    | STRONGLY<br>DISAGREE |    | TOTAL |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|----|-------|----|-----------|----|----------|----|----------------------|----|-------|
|                                                                       | n                 | %  | n     | %  | n         | %  | n        | %  | n                    | %  |       |
| <hr/>                                                                 |                   |    |       |    |           |    |          |    |                      |    |       |
| I was happy to be appointed to this school                            |                   |    |       |    |           |    |          |    |                      |    |       |
| Predom. Aboriginal                                                    | 16                | 48 | 6     | 18 | 5         | 15 | 3        | 9  | 3                    | 9  | 33    |
| Signif. Aboriginal                                                    | 51                | 46 | 49    | 44 | 5         | 5  | 4        | 4  | 2                    | 2  | 111   |
| Non-Aboriginal                                                        | 91                | 48 | 82    | 43 | 9         | 5  | 2        | 1  | 5                    | 3  | 189   |
|                                                                       |                   |    |       |    |           |    |          |    |                      |    | 333   |
| <hr/>                                                                 |                   |    |       |    |           |    |          |    |                      |    |       |
| Generally Speaking, parent/teacher relations at this school are sound |                   |    |       |    |           |    |          |    |                      |    |       |
| Predom. Aboriginal                                                    | 5                 | 15 | 16    | 48 | 3         | 9  | 6        | 18 | 3                    | 9  | 33    |
| Signif. Aboriginal                                                    | 20                | 18 | 65    | 59 | 10        | 9  | 12       | 11 | 3                    | 3  | 110   |
| Non-Aboriginal                                                        | 50                | 26 | 117   | 61 | 8         | 4  | 12       | 6  | 3                    | 2  | 190   |
|                                                                       |                   |    |       |    |           |    |          |    |                      |    | 333   |
| <hr/>                                                                 |                   |    |       |    |           |    |          |    |                      |    |       |
| My Teacher Training prepared me adequately for this school            |                   |    |       |    |           |    |          |    |                      |    |       |
| Predom. Aboriginal                                                    | 3                 | 9  | 5     | 15 | 4         | 12 | 15       | 45 | 6                    | 18 | 33    |
| Signif. Aboriginal                                                    | 5                 | 5  | 49    | 44 | 9         | 8  | 35       | 32 | 13                   | 12 | 111   |
| Non-Aboriginal                                                        | 23                | 12 | 74    | 39 | 13        | 7  | 54       | 29 | 25                   | 13 | 189   |
|                                                                       |                   |    |       |    |           |    |          |    |                      |    | 333   |
| <hr/>                                                                 |                   |    |       |    |           |    |          |    |                      |    |       |
| Currently I am happy teaching at this school                          |                   |    |       |    |           |    |          |    |                      |    |       |
| Predom. Aboriginal                                                    | 11                | 33 | 16    | 48 | 5         | 15 | 1        | 3  | 0                    | 0  | 33    |
| Signif. Aboriginal                                                    | 53                | 47 | 50    | 44 | 7         | 6  | 2        | 2  | 1                    | 1  | 113   |
| Non-Aboriginal                                                        | 76                | 40 | 96    | 51 | 9         | 5  | 7        | 4  | 1                    | 1  | 189   |
|                                                                       |                   |    |       |    |           |    |          |    |                      |    | 334   |
| <hr/>                                                                 |                   |    |       |    |           |    |          |    |                      |    |       |
| My experience here will be of value in my professional development    |                   |    |       |    |           |    |          |    |                      |    |       |
| Predom. Aboriginal                                                    | 24                | 73 | 7     | 21 | 0         | 0  | 2        | 6  | 0                    | 0  | 33    |
| Signif. Aboriginal                                                    | 66                | 58 | 42    | 37 | 4         | 4  | 0        | 0  | 1                    | 1  | 113   |
| Non-Aboriginal                                                        | 89                | 47 | 85    | 45 | 8         | 4  | 5        | 3  | 1                    | 1  | 188   |
|                                                                       |                   |    |       |    |           |    |          |    |                      |    | 334   |

In general the teachers at 'Aboriginal' schools seemed slightly more committed to teaching as a profession and slightly less committed to the communities in which they are teaching. For example, fewer teachers in Aboriginal schools saw themselves teaching in the same school in six years time or more than did teachers in non-Aboriginal schools. At the same time a slightly lower proportion wished for an immediate transfer out of their school.

Table 3

Ideally I would like to transfer from this school.

|                | PREDOM.<br>ABORIGINAL |    | SIGNIF.<br>ABORIGINAL |    | NON-<br>ABORIGINAL |    |
|----------------|-----------------------|----|-----------------------|----|--------------------|----|
|                | n                     | %  | n                     | %  | n                  | %  |
| Now            | 1                     | 3  | 5                     | 5  | 7                  | 4  |
| Next year      | 15                    | 46 | 17                    | 16 | 32                 | 17 |
| 1-3 years time | 12                    | 36 | 35                    | 32 | 49                 | 27 |
| 3-5 years time | 2                     | 6  | 18                    | 17 | 21                 | 11 |
| Not            | 3                     | 9  | 33                    | 31 | 75                 | 40 |
|                | 33                    |    | 108                   |    | 184                |    |

$$\chi^2 = p < .05$$

A higher proportion were living in the town in which the school was located and chose that residence because of the availability of Teacher Authority Housing. The data suggest that fewer teachers in Aboriginal schools were buying housing and settling into the community on a long term basis. This clearly reflects the isolation of the 'Aboriginal' schools.

Table 4

Place of Residence of Teachers

|                    | PREDOM.<br>ABORIGINAL |    | SIGNIF.<br>ABORIGINAL |    | NON-<br>ABORIGINAL |    |
|--------------------|-----------------------|----|-----------------------|----|--------------------|----|
|                    | n                     | %  | n                     | %  | n                  | %  |
| School Community   |                       |    |                       |    |                    |    |
| - In Town          | 31                    | 94 | 80                    | 71 | 82                 | 43 |
| - Farm/Out of Town | 2                     | 6  | 19                    | 17 | 56                 | 29 |
| Other Community    |                       |    |                       |    |                    |    |
| - In Town          | -                     | -  | 7                     | 6  | 29                 | 15 |
| - Farm/Out of Town | -                     | -  | 6                     | 5  | 20                 | 10 |
| Other              | -                     | -  | 1                     | 1  | 3                  | 2  |
|                    | 33                    |    | 113                   |    | 190                |    |

$$\chi^2 = p < .05$$

TABLE 5

Reasons for Residence

|                   | PREDOM.<br>ABORIGINAL |    | SIGNIF.<br>ABORIGINAL |    | NON-<br>ABORIGINAL |    |
|-------------------|-----------------------|----|-----------------------|----|--------------------|----|
|                   | n                     | %  | n                     | %  | n                  | %  |
| Only Available    | 2                     | 6  | 9                     | 8  | 14                 | 7  |
| Preferred         | 3                     | 9  | 35                    | 31 | 83                 | 44 |
| Dependent Related | -                     | -  | 26                    | 23 | 58                 | 31 |
| Teacher Housing   | 28                    | 85 | 39                    | 34 | 28                 | 15 |
| Other             | -                     | -  | 4                     | 4  | 5                  | 3  |
|                   | 33                    |    | 113                   |    | 188                |    |

$$\chi^2 = P < .05$$

For a much higher proportion of teachers in Aboriginal schools this appointment was their first.

TABLE 6

First Appointment to the Teaching Service?

|     | PREDOM.<br>ABORIGINAL |    | SIGNIF.<br>ABORIGINAL |    | NON-<br>ABORIGINAL |    |
|-----|-----------------------|----|-----------------------|----|--------------------|----|
|     | n                     | %  | n                     | %  | n                  | %  |
| Yes | 22                    | 66 | 50                    | 45 | 54                 | 29 |
| No  | 11                    | 33 | 61                    | 55 | 134                | 71 |
|     | 33                    |    | 111                   |    | 188                |    |

$$\chi^2 = P < .05$$

Perhaps for this reason they were less likely to have seriously considered abandoning teaching as a career than were teachers in 'non-Aboriginal' schools, 17% of whom claimed "often" to have considered leaving teaching as against the 8% of teachers in 'Aboriginal' schools.

TABLE 7

Since leaving College I have considered leaving teaching.

|           | PREDOM.<br>ABORIGINAL |    | SIGNIF.<br>ABORIGINAL |    | NON-<br>ABORIGINAL |    |
|-----------|-----------------------|----|-----------------------|----|--------------------|----|
|           | n                     | %  | n                     | %  | n                  | %  |
| Never     | 10                    | 33 | 43                    | 41 | 56                 | 32 |
| Sometimes | 16                    | 53 | 55                    | 52 | 86                 | 49 |
| Often     | 4                     | 13 | 8                     | 8  | 32                 | 18 |
|           | 30                    |    | 106                   |    | 174                |    |

While these data require further statistical analysis, the picture of the staffs of 'Aboriginal' Central Schools that emerges is one of youthful enthusiasm for the challenges of the profession in a teaching environment where, though they do not intend to stay long, they are enjoying the challenge and the support of colleagues, executives and support staff all of whom they regard highly. They see a need to further improve relations between parents and the school and they feel a little let down by their teacher training but their morale, as measured indirectly by a number of indicators, is high.

On a number of questions there was a difference between staff at 'predominantly Aboriginal' and at 'significantly Aboriginal' schools, with those at 'significantly Aboriginal' schools recording responses close to those at 'non-Aboriginal' schools.

## INTERPRETATION

The overwhelming picture from the study is that teachers from 'predominantly' and 'significantly' Aboriginal schools share a high level of morale with their colleagues in 'non-Aboriginal' schools.

It is important to qualify any discussion of the interpretation of these data by recognising that they are influenced by a number of factors other than the Aboriginality of the particular schools or the towns in which they are located. Isolation, climate and individual personnel within the school and community will have a major bearing on data taken from small communities, and there is good reason to anticipate that changes in any of those variables could enable similar studies, if conducted in the future, to obtain quite different findings.

With that important proviso, it appears that teacher-employing authorities should be able with confidence to assure potential staff at such 'Aboriginal' schools that their experience will be a stimulating and worthwhile one.

They should be able to promote those schools publicly with more confidence.

Realistically, the study demonstrates to educational authorities the crucial role of teacher housing in attracting teachers to 'Aboriginal' communities and retaining them there. Teachers in these towns tend not to buy or rent houses or hobby farms in those communities through the private market, nor are they prepared to seek long term accommodation arrangements. Much of their social life tends to involve other teachers and is home based. Adequate, comfortable accommodation is for these reasons essential.

There are clear implications for teacher education institutions. Those teachers who were most critical of the adequacy of their teacher education were those in 'predominantly' Aboriginal schools. It was in these schools that the teachers rated parent-school relationships significantly lowest. Clearly there is a need for teacher training institutions to better prepare teachers for 'Aboriginal schools'. Perhaps this might only require extending elective courses for those students who wish to specialise in this area. However, few of the teachers sent to the 'predominantly Aboriginal' schools had elected to specialise in this area, and the employing authority did not provide incentives for such specialisation. In such circumstances teacher education providers could do well to prepare all teachers for the experience of teaching in geographically remote Aboriginal communities. This preparation ought to include the opportunity to undertake teaching practice in such communities. Educational funding bodies would need to be prepared to fund such programs.

Unstructured interviews with principals suggest that part of the preparation of young teachers for such schools requires attention to the cultural experience of living in isolated rural communities and some of the role expectations of teachers there. Much of this need for special sensitising to the needs of isolated and Aboriginal communities, however, would not exist if teacher training institutions were more successful in attracting representatives of these communities into their teacher education courses.

Further research specifically designed to assess the attitudes of Aboriginal communities to the curriculum and decision



making process employed in their children's schools is needed. Hopefully much of that research will be designed by Aboriginal researchers and draw upon the insights of those Aboriginal education workers already employed in the schools.

Until that time, the findings revealed in both parts of this article endorse Lovegrove's impressions. In summarising his analysis of the effectiveness of innovations in post-primary education for Aboriginal students in South Australia he concluded:

There is a sense in which a minority group of Aboriginal students in a large secondary school acts as a litmus test on the general health of the school. If at the end of the year, the Aboriginal students are still there and have had a hassle free, enjoyable time and have made marked gains in learning then the school is most likely a good school for all of its students. On the other hand, if the Aboriginal students did not go well, then the school is most likely lacking in important ways for all of its students. A good school is a good school is a good school.

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## BOOKS

- Minjungbal - The Aborigines and Islanders of the Tweed Valley*. Jolanda Nayutah and Gail Finlay. General information on the traditional, transitional and contemporary societies of the Aboriginal and Islanders of the Tweed Valley. Black and white and coloured photographs, well illustrated. Soft beautifully illustrated covers, 76 pages....\$16.95.
- Our Land Our Spirit*. Jolanda Nayutah and Gail Finlay. A comprehensive text referring to Aboriginal society, beliefs and customs of the far north coast of New South Wales. Includes general information referring to Aboriginal tribes, languages and history from European contact. Excellent illustrations in colour and black and white. Hard cover, 81 pages.....\$19.95
- The Keeping Place*. L. Reed and E. Parr. This bibliography lists items referring to any aspect of the Aboriginal cultures within the geographic area defined, roughly, by Taree on the mid-north coast of New South Wales, the Logan River in south-east Queensland and inland to the Great Dividing Range. A list of tribes considered to have inhabited this area at the time of European contact is also included. Soft cover, 158 pages.....\$35.00

The above and other supplementary materials are available from The North Coast Institute for Aboriginal Community Education, P O Box 149, Lismore NSW 2480. Ph.(066) 218277 or (066) 230600.