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THE IMPACT OF ABORIGINAL EDUCATION ASSISTANTS (AEAS) IN NEW SOUTH WALES PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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INTRODUCTION

A considerable amount of research attests to the difficulties experienced by Aboriginal students in the school system of New South Wales. Coker (1981) states that Aboriginal students more than any other identifiable group in Australia score consistently lower in basic skills tests involving reading, writing and mathematics. McConnochie (1973) suggests that the failure of Aboriginal students at school is primarily the fault of the school system and not the student. Institutions tend to debase the student's self-concept and the group with whom they identify. This process contributed to the students' low self-esteem and further contributed to low vocational aspirations and academic achievement.

Tatz (1969), Watts (1980), Lingard (1980) and Honeyman (1986) agree that Aboriginal students are disadvantaged in the formal school situation due to the curriculum being tailored to meet the needs of non-Aboriginal students. They argue that the major cause of the failure of schools to cater for Aboriginal students has been a basic lack of recognition of the cultural differences of these students. Kok (1972) further argued that possible reasons for high failure rates of Aboriginal students stem from not only the irrelevance of the school curricula but the inability of the Aboriginal student to identify with what is being taught. Clark (1972) and Moeckel (1985), on the other hand, emphasised the psycho-social pressures that could develop from being torn between two diverse societies and maintain that this process does little to establish a stable identity and may lead to identity confusion and alienation.

One method for improving the quality of school life for Aboriginal students has been to employ Aboriginal people to work in the schools as assistants to the teaching staff. This approach

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has provided the Aboriginal student with a link between a Western style curriculum and the Aboriginal culture as well as the provision of ideal role models. The concept of Aboriginal education assistants (AEAs) was slowly phased into schools with high Aboriginal enromments in the early seventies. In 1971 two Aboriginal education assistants (formerly known as Aboriginal teachers' aides) were appointed to Weilmoringle and Enngonia schools in the far north-west of New South Wales. Miller (1985) argued that, at the time, although their roles were ill-defined, it provided an opportunity for Aboriginals to enter schools and be trained on the job.

From this small beginning the concept of Aboriginal education assistants has developed into an integral support facility for Aboriginal students in schools throughout New South Wales. Schools with high Aboriginal student enrolments have allocated to them an AEA. Their role statements, although vaguely defined initially, have become more specific and include : Aboriginal student welfare, a liaison role between school and the community, and assisting non-Aboriginal school staff to understand the needs of Aboriginal students.

No research has ever been carried out on the effectiveness of AEAs in schools and it is hoped that this article will overcome this short-fall and attest to their effectiveness for improving the quality of school life of Aboriginal students.

METHOD

The procedure was to administer a battery of psychological tests (Piers-Harris Children's Self Concept Scale, ACER Quality of School Life, and the Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale) for the purpose of ascertaining the influence of AEAs on the beliefs and attitudes held by Aboriginal students towards their quality of school life and their concept of self. These instruments were intended to assess the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student's self-concept, locus of control orientation and the quality of school life of students in grade 4 (year 4) through to grade 11 (year 11) in government schools of New South Wales.

For the purpose of this research the following hypothesis was tested. It is hypothesised that, in schools where Aboriginal education assistants are employed, Aboriginal students experience a higher quality of school life, a resulting higher

self-concept, and a greater internal locus of control orientation than Aboriginal students in schools that do not have Aboriginal education assistants.

Twelve schools participated in the study. The sample included 320 subjects who were drawn from twelve schools (5 Primary and 7 High Schools) and comprised 160 Aboriginal students and 160 non-Aboriginal students (control group) ranging from grade 4 to grade 11. The target group comprised Aboriginal students from the North Western and Hunter Regions of New South Wales. All subjects were administered three psychological tests - the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, ACER Quality of School Life and the Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale.

The Aboriginal sample size was determined by the availability of the students at the time of the data collection. The schools targeted for testing were selected on the basis of their high Aboriginal school populations as well as their demographic and socio-economic status. The extent of special programs which had been implemented and which were aimed at promoting the quality of Aboriginal school life in the respective schools was also noted.

Students involved in the study were selected by their school teachers and/or Aboriginal education assistants (AEAs). Aboriginal students were identified as being of Aboriginal extraction if they claimed their Aboriginality on their school enrolment form and/or if they were receiving the Aboriginal Scholarship. This latter criterion is a scheme to assist/encourage Aboriginal students to attend school and entails financial assistance from the government to students who can prove their Aboriginality. The same staff members selected the non-Aboriginal students (control group) to be similar in general academic ability and socio-economic background.

RESULTS

An unpaired t-test was chosen to assess the influence of Aboriginal education assistants (AEAs) on Aboriginal student scores for the psychological tests of self-concept, quality of school life and locus of control. For analysis purposes all student scores for each test were categorised into Aboriginal student responses and non-Aboriginal student responses, and the former Aboriginal responses into Aboriginal student responses in schools with AEAs, and Aboriginal student responses in schools without AEAs. All raw scores were expressed as a percentile.

The means for each of these categories are summarised in Table 1, and the unpaired t-test analysis for Aboriginal scores is shown in Table 2.

TABLE 1. The influence of AEAs on Self-concept, Quality of School Life and Locus of Control

	Self- concept	Quality of School Life	Locus of Control
Total Aboriginal students	52.6	65.40	29.66
Total non-Aboriginal students	54.19	63.98	33.11
Aboriginal students in schools with AEAs	54.19	71.89	34.00
Aboriginal students in schools without AEAs	51.39	59.19	26.78

TABLE 2. T-Test analysis of the influence of AEAs on Aboriginal Self-concept, Quality of School Life and Locus of Control

Test	Aboriginal students w/out AEAs			Aboriginal students with AEAs			Unpaired df.	Prob- ability	
	N	Mean	sd.	N.	Mean	sd.			
S-C	83	51.398	17.556	77	54.195	17.233	158	-1.016	.3112*
QSL	83	59.193	21.638	77	71.896	23.13	158	-3.589	.4000E-4/**
LOC	83	26.036	15.673	77	34.00	21.769	158	-1.016	.0084**

*.05 **.01 ***.001

A significant difference was observed between Aboriginal students with AEAs in their school and Aboriginal students without, in regard to the quality of their school life. The difference was significant at the $p = \leq .001$ level (two-tailed t-test; $t = 3.589$, $df = 158$, Aboriginal students with AEAs having a higher quality of school life than Aboriginal students without AEAs). For the Aboriginal students' locus of control the difference obtained was significant at the $p = .01$ level (two-tailed t-test; $t = -2.67$, $df = 158$, Aboriginal students with AEAs having a higher internal orientation than Aboriginal students without AEAs). No significant difference (two-tailed t-test; $t = -1.016$, $df = 158$) was found between the Aboriginal scores for self-concept.

The mean scores for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal student self-concept, quality of school life and locus of control are compared graphically in Figure 1. The mean scores for Aboriginal students with and without AEA support are depicted graphically in Figure 2.

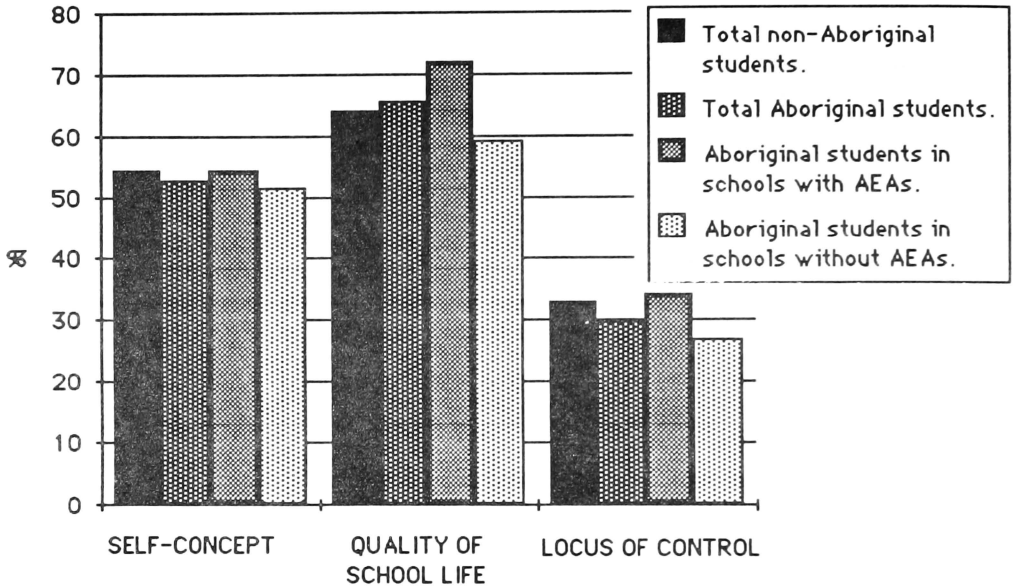


Figure 1. Comparison of the influence of AEAs on Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal self-concept, quality of school life and locus of control

When comparing the reported self-concept, quality of school life and locus of control orientation of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students the findings suggest that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in general report similar self-concepts, little differences in their quality of school life and little change in their locus of control orientation (the higher the raw score the more internally orientated is the reported locus of control orientation.).

The differences observed become more pronounced when the means are further viewed in terms of Aboriginal students with AEAs and Aboriginal students without AEAs as depicted in Fig.2.

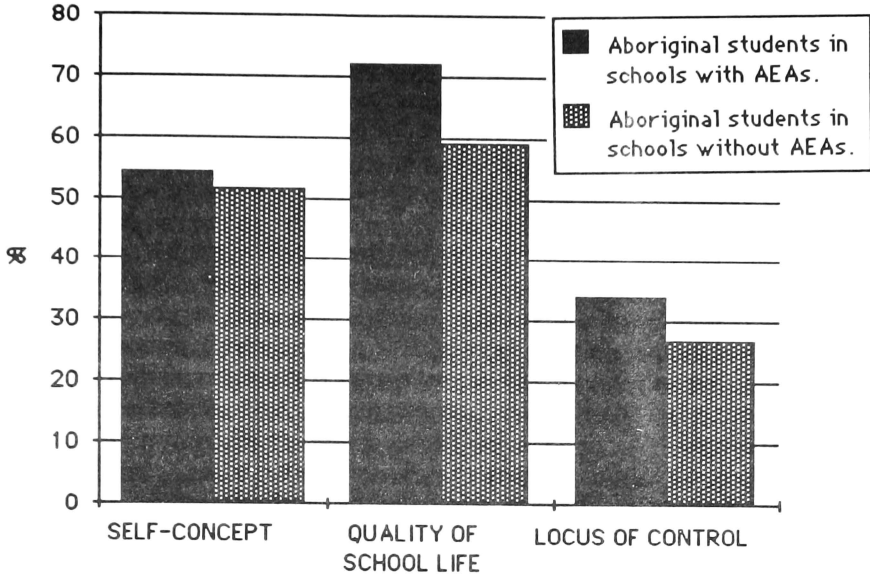


Figure 2. Comparison of the influence of AEs on Aboriginal self-concept, quality of school life and locus of control.

It is concluded that the employment of Aboriginal education assistants in schools contributes to the Aboriginal student's quality of school life, and their employment contributes also to the development of a more internal locus of control orientation.

DISCUSSION

In schools where Aboriginal education assistants are employed Aboriginal students experience a higher quality of school life, a resulting higher self-concept and a greater external locus of control orientation than Aboriginal students in schools that do not have Aboriginal education assistants.

The influence of AEs in schools casts a different light on the accepted generalisation that Aboriginal students do have poorer self-concepts, poorer quality of school life and a more external orientation locus of control. As one would expect, if we believed everything we read about the difficulties that Aboriginal students experience in the home and school environments, Aboriginal students should have lower scores on the three constructs. However, this is not the case in this study. When

all student scores were categorised into total Aboriginal student responses in schools with AEAs and Aboriginal students without AEAs, and compared with non-Aboriginal students in terms of the three constructs, in all constructs the influence of the AEAs had raised the levels of self-concept and quality of school life, and influenced the locus of control orientation from being external to becoming more internally orientated.

Though the differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal self-concepts were not significant there was still an increase for Aboriginal students with AEAs when compared with those Aboriginal students without. This level of self-concept was raised to the same level as held by non-Aboriginal students, whereas, Aboriginal students without AEAs experienced the lowest self-concept of all groups.

A high significant difference was observed between all categories of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students with regard to the quality of school life. Aboriginal students with AEAs experienced an extremely higher quality of school life than any other group of students, while Aboriginal students without AEAs experienced the lowest quality of school life.

A significant difference was also observed between all categories of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students with regard to locus of control orientation. Aboriginal students with AEAs experienced an extremely higher internal locus of control orientation than any other group of students, while Aboriginal students without AEAs experienced the highest external locus of control orientation.

It is concluded that the findings of the study do support the hypothesis stated. Aboriginal education assistants do contribute to raising the Aboriginal student's self-concept, improving their quality of school life and influencing/changing their locus of control from being externally orientated to being more internally orientated.

The results obtained in the study with regard to AEAs warrants further explanation. The majority of schools with high Aboriginal populations have the services of either a part-time or full-time AEA. It is becoming extremely difficult to find schools with Aboriginal students with no AEAs, due to the NSW Department of School Education's policy of allowing schools to employ AEAs where the Aboriginal school population exceeds the specified number of Aboriginal student enrolments. Therefore,

Aboriginal students would have poorer self-concepts, experience a worse quality of school life and be more externally orientated with regard to their LOC orientation if it were not for the impact that AEAs have had over the past 20 years.

When searching for strategies for improving the psycho-social development of the Aboriginal student, for the purpose of targeting these aspects for improving their life circumstances, this study demonstrates that dramatic positive gains can be made at the school level. It is contended that AEAs do provide a powerful catalyst for positive change. When one considers the adverse background circumstances of the sample used in the study (mainly from public housing estates, a high rate of families receiving social benefits, etc.) and the impact of AEAs at the school level who do contribute to measurable improvements in the three constructs, then it is contended that this is one area that should be further developed with regard to improving the psycho-social well-being of the Aboriginal student. Further, the majority of students who went on to senior schooling were enrolled in schools with AEAs and it is this aspect that warrants further research in light of the huge amount of money that is spent by the government in other areas to encourage Aboriginal students to go on to complete their Higher School Certificate.

EPILOGUE

Training courses for AEAs should also be established in the Northern or Western regions of New South Wales. A current practice of training school counsellors is to train them at Charles Sturt University at Bathurst, and students are mainly drawn from the isolated regions where they have established roots. A condition of their employment is that upon the completion of their training they return to the Western Region. This will ensure that there will exist a growing number of trained counsellors for these isolated regions. As things stand at present, Aboriginals who are trained in the professions of medicine and teaching rarely return to the communities from which they come, especially after they have experienced the benefits of living in the larger towns and cities. This idea is worth developing as it considers the Aboriginals need to be close to their town of origin. This proposal provides an incentive for Aboriginal people.

The impact of Aboriginal assistants on Aboriginal self-concept, quality of school life and locus of control orientation

has been demonstrated in this study. Unfortunately, many AEAs fail to complete their course of training and as such many have reduced effectiveness. Candidates for the AEA course should be thoroughly screened, deemed suitable for the position, of a younger age and, most importantly, given a specified time in which to complete the course. If they do not complete the course in the required time then they should not be recognised as AEAs or hold the position in the school. Further, if AEAs make such a big difference to the self-esteem level of students then the logical extension is to put Aboriginal teachers in front of children. There is a need to speed up the process and this can be achieved by providing suitable Aboriginals with the basic skills for teaching by 'on the job training', and permitting them to do external studies in order to increase their status.

The concept of AEAs could also be extended to the area of Aboriginal welfare teachers. It is suggested that suitably selected AEAs be further trained in the area of student welfare and, once trained, posted on a full-time basis to schools with high Aboriginal school populations. Their main role would be to devise and conduct student welfare programs, liaise with school staff about the needs of students, counsel students in need and act as an adjunct to the normal counselling service which is provided to schools. AEAs who achieve well in this area could then be considered for extension training as Aboriginal district school counsellors. This would provide Aboriginal school personnel with more career options as well as allowing them opportunities for continuing their education in an area that would truly benefit Aboriginal students.

Finally, it is contended that the impact of AEAs on the quality of school life of Aboriginal students that has occurred over the past years has been improved due to the perceptive nature of many school principals who realise what a valuable resource they have. To exemplify, at Brewarrina Central School and Bourke High School the principals meet on a regular basis with the AEAs, ancillary staff, home school liaison officer, Aboriginal youth worker, etc., for the purpose of devising ways of helping Aboriginal students who are experiencing difficulties. This process allows AEAs to actively contribute to the effective running of the school. Further, though not stated on the AEAs role statement, many AEAs are actively employed in the classroom as assistants to the teaching staff. This has helped to improve, as well as generate, a greater understanding of the needs of students by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal members of the school staff. For these schools many exciting events are occurring for the betterment of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal

students and this, it is argued, has been due to the positive attitude principals hold towards AEAs and the realisation of the valuable support facility they have.

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