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Attendance: Cause or Effect?

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Introduction

Koorie High School is a Government school. It is not the school's real name but it is the name I will be using for this article.

Koorie High School is an inner city comprehensive high school from Years 7-12 in Sydney. It has a total population of 344 students, 186 at the Intensive English Unit on a different site and 158 in the mainstream high school campus. Fifty-five percent of the 158 students are Aboriginal. There are also 32 students in the Back-To-School Program, an annex of the main high school. All of these students are Aboriginal. I will mainly be referring to the main high school and no reference will be made to the Intensive English Unit as they are not part of this study.

Within Koorie High School the most visible challenge I feel that can be seen to be facing the Aboriginal students is attendance, or rather the lack of it. Attendance of Aboriginal students at Koorie High School has been a major concern of

mine since I first arrived at the school nine years ago. However, I feel that it is largely an issue that a lot of teachers at the school do not want to know about or acknowledge or understand, and an issue they feel powerless to do anything real and lasting about.

I have gone through the rolls for the last nine years (see Table 1) and divided the attendance into Aboriginal and non-Indigenous groups. This has not, I admit, been without problems — a few rolls (about three) were missing and I am aware that on some occasions the rolls may well have been incorrectly recorded. However, the rolls do highlight certain problems. In every term since 1986, the Aboriginal absenteeism is far higher than for the non-Indigenous group. The highest it has been was in Term 1 1993, when Aboriginal students averaged 33.9 days per student absent from school. The highest it has been in nine years for the non-Indigenous group was in Term 2 1993 when the average number of absences per student for the term was 20.9 days.

The Project

To try to find out why some Aboriginal students attend school regularly and others don't, I interviewed the ten 'best' Aboriginal attenders in the school and the ten 'worst' attenders from the list of Aboriginal students who still attend school

Table 1: Student Absences 1986 – 1994 (showing average No. of absences per student per term)

	Aboriginal – Whole School				Non-Indigenous – Whole School			
	Term 1	Term 2	Term 3	Term 4	Term 1	Term 2	Term 3	Term 4
1986	15.7	22.7	24.8	No 4th term	7.21	9.29	12.0	No 4th term
1987	13.3	20.86	17.6	13.68	5.35	8.25	7.23	7.88
1988	12.0	30.1	22.56	23.64	8.8	11.9	9.23	8.97
1989	10.41	16.07	22.3	15.46	6.05	7.8	9.49	6.88
1990	14.0	16.2	18.0	15.47	7.67	8.6	8.65	7.4
1991	11.83	16.68	15.26	14.6	5.22	8.31	8.92	8.4
1992	14.1	14.89	14.5	16.62	7.6	7.8	9.8	9.29
1993	33.9	30.57	14.17	18.3	14.37	20.9	11.54	16.7
1994	16.7				8.3			

with some regularity, and I tried to establish the reasons for the differences in the attendance patterns of the two groups. I used the school rolls to compile the lists. The 'best' attenders were students who had attended over 80% of the time. The 'worst' attenders were the poorest attenders from those who attended school with some regularity as the actual ten 'worst' attenders did not attend school at all, or hardly at all, and were virtually off the school rolls and impossible to find at school on any days I looked for them.

Of the ten 'worst' attenders, four were in Year 7, two in Year 8, two in Year 9 and two in Year 10. It is a concern to me that we are failing to 'hold' these students when they first come from the primary to secondary school. Of the ten 'best' attenders, 60% were boys, three were in Year 8, three in Year 9, three in Year 10 and one in Year 12. Even some of the 'best' attenders had considerable days off school also and a lot of

partial absences – 68 days partial absences in one case (Table 2).

When I looked at the pattern of attendance for the 20 students I selected, I found it quite disturbing that the ten 'poorest' attenders were all female, whereas females represented only 40% of the 'best' Aboriginal attenders at the school. Indeed some of the girls selected have attended less than 50% of the school time.

In my literature review I have not come across much on the additional barriers in education faced by girls except in O'Shane and Bickford (1991:48) where mention is made of family obligations, such as having to stay home and mind younger brothers and sisters, and pregnancy forcing an end to the education of girls. Within Koorie High School, I know that girls' family obligations are an important explanation of why some are absent.

Table 2: Aboriginal Students Attendance at Koorie High School (covering the 134 school days from 1.2.94 to 30.8.94)

'Best' Attenders				'Worst' Attenders			
Year	Sex	No. of Whole Days Absent	No. of Partial Absences	Year	Sex	No. of Whole Days Absent	No. of Partial Absences
8	M	15	6	7	F	39	49
8	M	4	26	7	F	63	55
8	F	4	26	7	F	65	31
9	F	10	23	7	F	48	53
9	M	14	68	8	F	48	58
9	M	15	27	8	F	50	47
10	F	13	39	9	F	28	41
10	F	11	7	9	F	74	50
10	M	19	50	10	F	43	29
12	M	10	1	10	F	30	8

Raethel (*Telegraph Mirror* 1994) makes mention of a recent Australian survey that found that almost one girl in three feels social pressure to under-achieve in their school work. Girls in this survey talked about social pressure from boys and girls to under-achieve in order to be accepted by their peers and also a lack of support from parents. I have noted occasions where girls have felt 'intimidated' by the boys, and also girls' reluctance to go 'up a class' so that they could stay with their friends in a lower class.

The Interviews

I asked each student I interviewed the same questions and I recorded their answers as they told me. I was honestly amazed by the self-reflecting skills they had, their honesty and

frankness and the seriousness and maturity with which they approached the interview, and analysed their own responses.

Of the 20 students I interviewed in depth, 13 felt positive about school, two had a mixed response such as 'I used to like it but I don't like coming any more' and five only had a negative feeling towards school. Reasons for this negative feeling were given as:

- It's boring – no one does work and they all muck up.
- It's got something to do with some of the teachers – I don't get on with them very well!
- When I come to school I don't want to be here because it's too boring. They don't learn you.

The students who felt positive gave such comments as:

- because I'm coming and getting an education, and
- because I know the teachers and get along with my friends.

Of the five with negative feelings, most said they had always had this feeling about school but said their attitudes towards school had changed to a more negative belief on coming to high school but they could not really explain why.

Five of the 20 students expressed concern with their attendance and when asked why their attendance was 'poor' could give very sensible reasons for it including

- most probably because I'm bored
- to • because it's hard to get up in the morning and sometimes it's family problems.

I asked the 20 students why they thought the school was concerned that some Aboriginal students did not come to school regularly and why they thought they might not be attending school. Nine out of the 20 felt the school was concerned because it wanted them to get an education.

Reasons for not attending were that they were too lazy and just didn't want to get an education and that something might be wrong at home. The students identified that failure to attend school would mean they won't get a good education and won't get a job.

In O'Shane and Bickford's study (1991: 35) it was concluded that the incidence of absenteeism is apparently closely tied to both personal and cultural traits and that personal relationships also play a key role, and friends' absenteeism, or

personal difficulties with particular teachers, featured as the two most likely reasons for not attending. Indeed, O'Shane and Bickford (1991) summarised that absenteeism must be seen as a real likelihood for students when circumstances at home and school interact to create a situation where the odds are against motivating their attendance.

My final question in each interview was also the same:

If you were the Principal of Koorie High School, what would you do to try to improve the attendance of the Aboriginal students at the school?

Eight out of the 20 students believed there was nothing they could do, or else they had no idea of what they could do, to change the situation if they were the Principal. The other 12 respondents had very definite ideas about what to do.

From the 12 respondents there was a total of 14 references relating to what was being taught in the school. They wanted more practical subjects, more excursions, more sport and activities and a more diversified curricula in younger years. They talked of:

- ... mak[ing] the school more exciting – more activities and all that so they could come to school – like excursions, more sport, more football
- ... make subjects more interesting – more practical and more relevant to jobs – more TAFE courses, more excursions, and
- I'd have technics, woodwork, metalwork – I used to like coming when that was on.

Other comments referred to the style of learning they felt was desirable or the type of teacher who would be best. One student said:

- I'd educate them with oral reports – have people come in and talk to them. I've always felt I learn better if I'm being told something ...
- and • have more Aboriginal people in the school to work with them
- and • get more teachers who are friendly, understanding, practical and you can talk to.

Several of the Year 7 students interviewed felt they would like the one teacher all the time and even a Year 9 girl said she would prefer to have one teacher to work with 'Then you know you would learn!'

Several students said that the structure of the Back-To-School Unit appealed to them and that they thought it should be extended to the mainstream high school. Comments included:

Back-To-School is good. More people off the block are starting to come to school. The work is easier and it's different. They have everything there for them. They don't have to go from class to class.

And this comment:

I'd build a bigger Back-To-School for young and old. I'd offer the program as it is – one period each of Maths, English, Science, Art and PE because most of the 'blackfellas' like Art and PE and I'd take notes around to their mothers and fathers asking if they would be allowed to come to our Back-To-School Program.

Other responses included having more role models come into the school:

Get some special people in, Aboriginal and non-Indigenous, to teach them what they are famous for, sporting and musical.

One interesting comment that came up on several occasions was that they would ask the people why they weren't coming and what they would like in the school. I really felt this made a lot of sense and yet it is a process that I feel is often ignored as we go ahead teaching what we feel should be taught without adequate consultation with the very people we are trying to teach!

Comments here included:

- I'd ask them what we need in the school, and
- I'd ask the people what they would like to see in the school and then compromise,
- and • I'd make the school interesting – give them what they like and want but in agreement they'd do what they have to!

Several students said that the Principal and the Aboriginal Education Assistant or Liaison Officer should visit the homes of people who are not attending and ask why. One student even said 'I'd pick them up every morning in the bus and bring them to school.'

Perhaps the comments that gave the greatest insight were:

I'd give the school a name for itself, I'd put different sports on, tennis, bike-riding, designing and making kites and enter more competitions like the Shell Mileage Marathon and Art competitions and get the teachers to help you and get to know the teachers better

as they help you. If you made things that aren't in other schools you'd get more people;

and this comment that I think summed up what all the students were telling me, 'The students need something to come for'. People need a reason for coming to school. They need to see value and relevance in what they do there. Boredom with schoolwork was given by most of the 'poorer' attenders as the main reason for them not attending:

... now when I come [to school] it is boring and I get nothing to do. I don't feel it is worth coming if I'm bored. I just get myself in trouble.

Boredom is an all-pervasive issue which is undoubtedly both a cause and effect in the vicious circle of absenteeism. It's hard to maintain interest in what's going on if you don't understand, and it's hard to understand and keep up with what's going on if you're frequently absent' (O'Shane and Bickford 1991:36).

Why are some Aboriginal students 'good' attenders and some 'poor' attenders?

There's obviously not one answer to this question but from interviewing the students I believe that the students who are 'good' attenders are so because schooling has value to them. They like school because:

- ... you learn, your friends and everything come here
- It teaches you how to read and write and spend your money properly from maths
- ... without education and without school you'd be nothing. It's a place you can broaden your horizons to know what you want
- ... I know the teachers and get along with

my friends and I like most of the subjects I have

- ... it teaches me stuff
- I've learnt more ever since I started coming, and
- ... it is there for you and it's there to help you
- ... of my Mum and Dad, they want me to have a good life because my Mum never had the opportunities she should have had.

So what did the students I interviewed feel would happen to the children who did not come to school?

Apart from the fact that they would not get a 'good' education nor a job they felt they could get into trouble with the law or just end up on the streets and:

- their children will turn out just like them ... difficulties in the home ... unstable home life
- In Redfern a lot of the girls get pregnant young and they won't have money [if they don't get a job] to support their needs or their children's.

Other reasons given for non-attendance were:

- ... they probably just don't feel like it
- They probably go places and just stay home and sleep
- Their parents don't wake them
- They just think they've got better things to do and it's early for them
- There's always too much work for them at school
- ... because they get teased

It is hard to see whether attendance is a cause of students not doing well at school or whether in fact non-attendance is merely a symptom of the general problems within schools that either cause or influence Aboriginal students 'to vote with their feet' and stay away from a school that holds little for them in their eyes.

Either way I believe 'poor' attendance at school inhibits performance at school and the acquisition of basic skills needed and as such is a major barrier to Aboriginal children achieving at school. It is no good as educators, pretending attendance is something beyond our control. Perhaps in part it is but perhaps as I have discovered in my study, it is a statement about what the school is offering, or not offering the Aboriginal students it is designed to serve.

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National Aboriginal Education Committee.
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