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## Section B: Case Study

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### Educational Issues Facing Aboriginal Families in Rural Australia: A Case Study

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#### Introduction

##### **Aim**

This paper will provide a detailed plan of how the Aboriginal community of Geraldton could plausibly go about correcting its educational problems. Such a correction could foreseeably result in the easing of much poverty and the associated ramifications. The success of this plan is entirely based on the cooperation of not only the schools and the parents, but will require the support of students (both Aboriginal and non Aboriginal), the Education Department (National, State and local levels), Non Government Organisations in Geraldton, school staff and the wider community.

##### **Aboriginals and the education system: the present picture**

Australia's history does not magically begin in 1788. Thousands of years prior to invasion the complex culture of Australia's Indigenous people was developed. This fact has only recently been given recognition. White man's exclusionary strategies were severely established through education, as were the later assimilation policies (Choo, 1990:50). Education today continues to be affected by decisions made two hundred years ago (Urban Aboriginal Lives, 1995). Furthermore, it has only been in the last thirty years that Aboriginal people have been acknowledged as citizens, and therefore as potential students (Partington, 1998:4). As a

direct result of past policies Aboriginal people today are the most educationally disadvantaged group in Australia (Bourke, 1998:50; Heslop, 1998:45). The current education framework's lack of consideration of Aboriginal culture is largely to blame for this (Choo, 1990:48). The irrelevance of the current curriculum has resulted in students not only losing, but actually denying their Aboriginality leading to a loss of self esteem and respect, culminating in educational failure (Alan, 1994:101; Blackout, 1984; Bourke, 1998:46; Morgan, 1994:28; Partington, 1998:24). While education's current framework contributes to attendance problems, there exists a multitude of other causes. Absenteeism is a major problem with 19.3% of Aboriginal students not attending school regularly, compared with just 5.9% of non Aboriginal Students (Gaston, 1999:3). Non - attendance is not always the students' choice but may result from a lack of access. Despite negative past experiences and inappropriate curriculum Aboriginal people still see education as a long term solution to Aboriginal problems (Bourke, 1998:45; Choo, 1990:50; Urban Aboriginal Lives, 1995).

This paper will not only provide an educational plan but will also demonstrate education's place in the poverty cycle. I will present an outline of what is already being done and evaluate the success of these strategies. Prior to the presentation of the education plan I will consider what various groups in Geraldton society envisage as potential solutions and consider

how successful some of these strategies have been when implemented elsewhere. Finally, I will outline a plan to rectify one aspect of Geraldton's Aboriginal education problems.

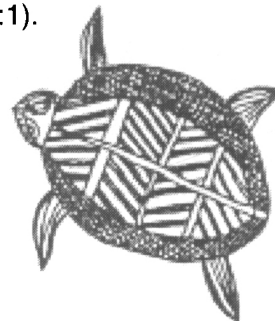
## Education and employment

A lack of formal education impacts greatly on employment outcomes (Bourke, 1998:45, Clarke, 1998:46). Thus basic education will play a crucial role in the social and economic integration of children into the Western society in which most Australians live (Partington, 1998:4, Wegelin and Borgman, 1995:145). Aboriginal people have much lower qualifications and greater unemployment nationally when compared with all other Australians (*Atlas of Australian People*, 1998:12). This is clearly demonstrated within the Education Department, the largest employer in Western Australia (Education Department of WA, 1998:1). Despite at least three percent of Western Australians and four percent of all students claiming Aboriginal descent only 1.6% of Education Department employees are Aboriginal (*Atlas of Australian People*, 1998:9; Education Department of WA, 1998:12). The lack of education and training common to Aboriginal people renders them unemployable and thus dependent on welfare or relegated to unskilled work attracting low incomes (Altman and Hunter, 1998:244; Blackout, 1984; Choo, 1990:48-53). However, all parents and students involved in a study completed by Day (1994:109) understood the necessity to do well at school as it directly influences future employment options. Geraldton students also demonstrated an understanding regarding the need to complete year twelve, as did their parents (Geraldton Secondary College [GSC], 2000; Yanay Yanma, 2000). Bundiyarra Aboriginal support network also recognised this employment problem in Geraldton suggesting more vocational experience was needed at school. Dodd (AIEO at GSC, 2000) responded similarly, 'Aboriginal kids can't even pick up a trade these days without finishing year twelve'. Employment statistics tell the same story, with 52% of Geraldton's Aboriginals unemployed in

1991 (Yamatji Regional Council, 1991:11). Thus the future prospects of Aboriginal children, like all children, lie in the area of education (Aboriginal Education and Training Council, 1997:1). If education and training is not made a focus, profitable employment will never be found and the cycle of poverty will continue (Lay, 1998:142).

## Employment, income and poverty

'Poor education outcomes result in poor employment outcomes which result in poor economic outcomes' (Bourke, 1998:45). The national average income for Aboriginal people is half that of their non-Indigenous neighbours (Choo, 1990:56). It is high unemployment rates which place Aboriginal people within these low-income brackets (Ross and Mikalauskas, 1996:15). It is not uncommon for a family to have no employed adults, thus rendering them entirely dependent on social security (Altman and Hunter, 1998:244). At a state level Western Australian Aboriginals are severely economically disadvantaged, with significantly lower income and employment levels (*Atlas of Australian People*, 1998:9). In Geraldton the average individual Aboriginal income is \$5,100 below the total average income. This is attributed to high levels of unemployment and a concentration of people in low paying occupations (Yamatji Regional Council, 1991:18). Despite the larger number of household residents typical to Aboriginal people, the average household income is still significantly lower than that of the total population. This larger household composition (5 or more people rather than the average 2.6) has resulted in underestimates of Aboriginal poverty in Geraldton (Yamatji Regional Council, 1991:18). Perhaps the most significant implication of this poverty is children's lack of access to education (Orr, 1995:1).



## Poverty and education

A cycle of urban Indigenous poverty prevails across Australia (Altman and Hunter, 1998:238). Education, employment and income can be justified as both the cause and consequences of continuing Aboriginal poverty in the nineties (Choo, 1990:48). To become capable and educated involves costs. For this reason low literacy levels can be linked to high levels of unemployment and social disadvantage (Orr, 1995:4-6). Furthermore, it can be shown that disadvantaged schools can be found in low socio economic areas characterised by high rates of unemployment and welfare dependence (West, 1994:89). Fortunately such schools are now being acknowledged and targeted in the attempt to raise children's education levels despite their poverty. Regrettably, across Western Australia, some parents continue to neglect their children's education, choosing to gamble and drink what little money they have (Choo, 1990:63). Geraldton does not escape this consequence of poverty (Woods, 2000). However, many families in the Geraldton area are making a conscious effort to raise themselves out of poverty via their children's education (Amm, 2000; Yanay Yanma, 2000). If these people are given control over their children's education, they could work in partnership with non-Indigenous Australia to break the cycle of poverty in which they have been trapped (Education Department of WA, 1997:iii).

## Existing solutions and contextual evaluations

### National government plans and mid-west responses

**ASSPA:** The Aboriginal Student Support and Parental Awareness Program (ASSPA) aims to involve the parents of Indigenous students in their child's schooling to the benefit of the school, the parents and the students (Lay, 1998:144). All schools with Aboriginal students are expected to have an ASSPA committee (Commonwealth of Australia, 1999a:3). At the beginning of every year they can apply to DEETYA to undertake planned activities. The amount of funding available

is based on the number of Aboriginal students at the school (Commonwealth of Australia, 1999a:3). Each child outside the metropolitan area is allocated \$215 per year. Thus ASSPA committees can have control over a significant amount of money. This funding could be used in many ways. *Firstly*, it should encourage greater Indigenous parent involvement in schools (Commonwealth of Australia, 1999a:3). It is difficult to get parents involved in schooling regardless of race; however, at Rangeway their ASSPA committee receives more support than other parent committees, such as the PandC (Walkerden, 2000). Parent involvement can be and is achieved through special events during NAIDOC week, BBQs on sports day and at other significant times of the year (Dodd, 2000; Walkerden, 2000). As always, more people still need to become involved. *Secondly*, to encourage parents to participate in school decision-making to ensure the curriculum is relevant to Aboriginal children. Unfortunately this has not yet happened to a large extent; however, the inclusion of Aboriginal languages and history into the curriculum is a step in the right direction. With parent involvement, these could be valuable programs. *Thirdly*, to make schools welcoming to Aboriginal students and parents. The purchasing of Aboriginal literature and artefacts by Geraldton schools fulfils this goal as does ASSPA's funding of Aboriginal theme camps and theatre groups.

Finally, ASSPA ensures Aboriginal students are provided with the necessary equipment to participate fully (Commonwealth of Australia, 1999a:3). GSC ASSPA group has purchased calculators and computers to lend to needy students throughout the school day (Dodd, 2000). Clearly ASSPA's involvement of the Aboriginal community is having a positive effect within Geraldton; however, more can always be done.

**ATAS:** The Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ATAS) operates extensively in Geraldton. This scheme offers supplementary tuition at all education levels in the hope of achieving educational outcomes equal to all other Australians (Lay, 1998:144). ATAS not only

covers individual and group tutoring, but will also cover the costs of the establishment and running of a homework centre (Commonwealth of Australia, 1999b:4). The homework centre should be managed by ASSPA Commonwealth of Australia, 1999b:32). In Geraldton the homework centres are an immense success. At Geraldton's Rangeway Primary School 74 out of 150 students attend (Walkerden, 2000). One hundred percent of the GSC students surveyed found the homework classes useful and most enjoyed going (GSC students, 2000). Individual students at the school are also making use of the government-funded tutors available through ATAS. This program is also finding success. Unfortunately, attendance at the GSC homework classes is significantly lower than it should be, with only 10 to 15 students in regular attendance from a population of well over one hundred Aboriginal students. ATAS is successful with the students it currently reaches; however, this is a disappointing proportion of those who could be helped.

**VEGAS:** Vocational and educational guidance for Aboriginal students and parents (VEGAS) provides funding to sponsor organisations, which develop projects to help Aboriginal students and parents (and prisoners in lawful custody) make decisions about future education, training and employment (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997:1). VEGAS has four goals relevant to schools. Firstly, VEGAS projects should advise students and parents about further study options. This can be achieved through the use of role models (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997:1). The Aspirations program at GSC college aims to fulfil these goals (Dodd, 2000). However, an assessment of this programs success is impossible until the students involved leave the school environment. Secondly, VEGAS aims to assist participation in school based work experience programs (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997:1). Work experience does exist at GSC, but parents believe it needs tighter monitoring to ensure the students are actually experiencing the real work force and are not just involved in 'slave labour' (Yanay Yanma, 2000). Finally VEGAS funds projects aimed at smoothing

the transition between stages of education. To my knowledge little is being done to assist Aboriginal student's transition from primary to secondary schooling in Geraldton. The parents interviewed suggested this as an area future assistance should focus on. VEGAS has potential. In time this potential will be met in Geraldton Schools.

**ABSTUDY:** Abstudy provides financial assistance for Aboriginal people in secondary and tertiary education. Parents receive a yearly payment; students receive a small weekly benefit. Many subsidies (including book and uniform subsidies) are available (Lay, 1998:144). Just under half of the students surveyed claimed they would be unable to attend school if they did not receive Abstudy. Abstudy is obviously rectifying access problems for these Geraldton Aboriginal students. The greatest criticism of Abstudy was its liability to be spent by the parents on things other than their child's education. Fortunately this problem has been partially rectified though the option to have the yearly payment paid directly to the school to cover fees and books. Like AUSstudy, Abstudy is essential to ensure equal access to education for all.

### **State government plans and mid west responses**

**Our Story: The education of teachers:** All schools with Aboriginal students across Western Australia are expected to run the 'Our Story' teacher education program every year. 'Our Story' is an attempt to address the issue of Aboriginal alienation within schools. It aims to make teachers aware of Aboriginal culture and history thus making the learning experience more positive for Aboriginal students (Aboriginal Education and Training Council, 1997:1). The program aims to overcome the communication barrier between Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal teachers (Aboriginal Education and Training Council, 1997:110). This is achieved through a recognition that Aboriginals do not speak 'bad' English; they speak Aboriginal English, an education in Aboriginal history and acknowledgment that Aboriginal culture and

everyday ways of life are quite different to Western ways (Aboriginal Education and Training Council, 1997:59,186). In theory teachers should then be capable of acquiring the knowledge and skills to work in any situation involving Aboriginal students (Aboriginal Education and Training Council, 1997:133). An Aboriginal employee of the Education Department is implementing this program in all Geraldton schools. It has received mixed responses. Obviously for new teachers, fresh from university, with no previous experience of Aboriginal people, it is thoroughly educational and beneficial. However, teachers with a great deal of experience felt their experiences had given them more knowledge than the program provided. They found at times they could not agree with the programs suggestions (Amm, 2000). Parents who had knowledge of this program thought perhaps it dwelt too much on past problems and failed to focus sufficient attention on the problems Aboriginal kids face today (Yanay Yanma, 2000). 'Our Story' is a good idea, and with refinement from those experienced, such as parents and teachers, it could have more to offer.

**Aboriginal Educational Operational Plan:** The Aboriginal Educational Operational Plan has also been established by the Education Department of Western Australia to identify students at risk as early as possible, to take responsibility for educational outcomes of all Aboriginal students and ensure appropriate use is made of the resources allocated to Aboriginal students are the three aims of this plan (Education Department of WA, 1997:2). Other programs previously discussed are currently addressing five of the plan's six key focus areas. Increasing the number of Aboriginal people employed by the Education Department is the sixth area of focus. This is currently being addressed by the Aboriginal Employment and Career Action Plan (Education Department of Western Australia, 1998:2). In Geraldton, the Edith Cowan University (a Perth based University) is running an off-campus teaching degree through the local TAFE. Many of Geraldton's few Aboriginal teachers graduated from the program when it was last run six years ago (Dodd, 2000). Unfortunately many graduate

Aboriginal teachers are fed directly into Education Department office type jobs on the completion of their degree, thus inhibiting their contact with students (Yanay Yanma, 2000). While much is being done across Australia, particularly in Geraldton, many Aboriginal children continue to be educationally disadvantaged. This can be rectified.

## Method

Research in Geraldton initially involved simple observation. Organisations assisting Geraldton's Aboriginal population were identified and interviewed in the week beginning May 1st 2000. Results can be found in an earlier paper. The focus on education involved the identification of key people involved in the issue. Parents were interviewed informally, over a coffee. I had met them all before and a rapport was already established. A survey approach was not used to avoid problems and possible embarrassment due to illiteracy. A group of students was identified and surveyed. This method was used to cover a larger group and to avoid the problems of a lack of trust and rapport between the students and the interviewer. AIEOs and Deputy Principals at schools known to have a large Aboriginal population were formally interviewed; as were other key figures involved in the education of Aboriginal children in Geraldton. The suggestions of these groups are presented below, along with programs already attempted in other parts of Australia.



## Results

### Suggested solutions for Geraldton and examples from other contexts.

**Aboriginal school:** Schools attracting a purely Aboriginal clientele are a contentious proposal. New South Wales has progressed well beyond the proposal stage. Three Koorie Open Door Education (KODE) schools currently operate across the state. These schools review the mainstream curriculum content and school processes and restructure it according to Koorie needs. They aim to build up the lost knowledge of culture, thus developing the student's Aboriginality and pride ([www.vaedi.org.au/kode.html](http://www.vaedi.org.au/kode.html)). Everyone interviewed had similar goals in mind for Aboriginal students in Geraldton, however the idea of an Aboriginal school was not well received by most. Many believed Geraldton to be simply too racist and such a clear division in schooling would serve only to exacerbate the problem. Others, particularly parents, expressed their concerns, believing an Aboriginal school would segregate rather than reconcile (Walkerden, 2000, Yanay Yanma, 2000). Furthermore, Aboriginal children would not be prepared for the 'real world' upon completion of schooling (Yanay Yanma, 2000). The students simply said they would not like to go to a school just for Aboriginal kids, and probably would not turn up if they had to (GSC, 2000). Despite negative associations, the KODE schools are finding success, with higher employment rates and tertiary entrance rates than average (pers. com. Social Services Officer, 2000). Dodd (2000), AIEO at GSC, recognised this, suggesting such a school would streamline education, 'School would no longer be a social event, the kids would know they were there to learn'. Regardless of any possible successes, any social scientist could see an Aboriginal school is not an option in Geraldton, simply because the community it would represent does not want it.

**Withdrawal classes:** There is a lack of consensus regarding the benefits of placing students who are struggling into withdrawal classes. Trouw (1994:61) suggests students should be assisted in the mainstream wherever

possible so as not to become dependent on focused, specialised learning groups. Despite this criticism, withdrawal classes remain a beneficial and viable option for students who are struggling (Orr, 1995:29). Geraldton parents are very supportive of the idea of withdrawal classes, suggesting:

Sometimes our kids are a little bit slower and need some one-on-one help. So a withdrawal class would be good especially for subjects where the kids are having problems. So long as they can be slotted back into normal classes eventually (Yanay Yanma, 2000).

Lay (1998:43) suggests Aboriginal students do not have the same concepts of time as non-Aboriginal students. A withdrawal class could more easily compensate for this and perhaps educate the students about the importance of time and deadlines in the Western culture. West's Mean Machine (1994) and Driver High's special maths classes (Knight, Hurley and Flavel, 1994) are both successful examples of withdrawal classes. Both have maintained mainstream learning outcomes but altered the teaching methodologies. They have also educated the students in the school's subculture (Trouw, 1994:21) and involved the parents as much as possible. Follow-up assistance in mainstream classes is essential. Withdrawal classes are a viable option for Geraldton schools as parents and AIEO's support them.



**Assistance within mainstream classes:** The alternative to withdrawal classes is extra assistance within mainstream classes. This would require an intense re-education of all teachers to ensure they are aware of the specific teaching strategies needing to be adopted when teaching Aboriginal students (Day, 1994:116; Jarred, 1994:3; Trouw, 1994:52). While 'Our Story' is a commendable attempt to achieve this, the two days devoted to it yearly is nowhere near sufficient to fully educate teachers. The intense education of a smaller number of teachers, who could then be involved in withdrawal teaching, would appear more plausible. The 'Our Story' education should continue, as not all Aboriginal students will need to be involved in withdrawal classes. Extra assistance in mainstream classes is usually associated with the continued presence of an AIEO working with the child during class time. Students, particularly high school students, find this type of assistance 'shame' and would rather not be involved (Knight, Hurley and Flavel, 1994:52). While parents and AIEOs see any kind of assistance as useful, a consideration of the students' feelings reveals the inadequacies of extra assistance within mainstream classes.

**Aboriginal curriculum, language and identity classes:** Everyone interviewed agreed changes needed to be made to the curriculum. This has already begun. Geraldton schools run both Aboriginal studies and Aboriginal languages as compulsory parts of their curriculum. Parents, and AIEOs are appreciative of these programs as they see them enhancing Aboriginal self-esteem and pride (Dodd, 2000; Harris and Malin, 1994:34; Yanay Yanma, 2000). The students also enjoyed the classes not only because they were learning their history but also they enjoyed the 'non-Aboriginal kids learning their ways' (GSC, 2000). Withdrawal classes could run such programs in a more intensive manner. Increased employment of Aboriginal teachers is another way of addressing this and is supported by the Geraldton community. However, it is not only Aboriginal culture that parents want integrated into the curriculum. They would also like to see schools become more hands on, more sport, camps, work experience, arts and crafts and

manual arts. Parents believe 'kids get so bored in classrooms' and if they were not bored they might just start coming to school more often (Yanay Yanma, 2000). Parents mentioned their children often complained work was too difficult for them. These students felt they did not belong in school and there was no longer any point attending. However, positive changes are being made already to school curriculums and, in time, the results will begin to show.

**Increased parent involvement:** Parents, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, want their children to gain a good education. What parents fail to realise is they need to be seriously involved in their child's education if it is to be a success. While some Aboriginal parents do become involved, others continue to believe it is solely the school's job to educate their children. Previous negative experiences with the education system make parents wary of becoming involved (Buzzacot, 1994:71). These problems must be combatted. ASSPA groups are an excellent starting point and are working reasonably well in Geraldton, as are NAIDOC week celebrations. However, further changes need to be made. Education of teachers and administration staff in how to communicate with Aboriginal parents using Aboriginal cultural customs is essential (Ngarritjan-Kessar, 1994:118-122). Parents would like to see an area in the school set up for parents' discussion, where they can relax and talk naturally and not have to sit in plastic school chairs (Yanay Yanma, 2000). Dodd (2000) suggested a revival of successful strategies used in the past. He would like to see more informal meetings of the parents, teachers and administrative staff such as BBQs with guest speakers. This method is currently practised successfully at Rangeway (Amm, 2000; Walkerden, 2000). The Kuranda (near Cairns in QLD) KEEP program is an excellent example of six years of collaboration between teachers, parents and students to establish a successful early childhood withdrawal program. With parental assistance it effectively teaches young children the skills needed to survive in school. If children attend school they can be taught. The active involvement of parents is integral to student attendance.



## Discussion

### Assisting the community to take specific action to address the education problem

Acting as the external facilitator, I have found the Geraldton Secondary College lacks withdrawal programs aimed specifically at Aboriginal students who are falling behind in English and maths. It has been established that parents and AIEOs would support such a class. I have also identified a need for greater parent involvement in the school. Parents have suggested possible ways of increasing this involvement, as have members of the school community. The withdrawal classes proposed will be based on both these suggestions and relevant examples from other contexts. Thus an autonomous model of partnership between schools and the Aboriginal community will be established. It is believed Aboriginal students' academic performance will improve, along with their appreciation and enjoyment of school. As West (1994) suggests mainstream outcomes will be the goal, it will only be the methodologies that will change.

**Getting started:** A need (withdrawal classes) has been identified but without the action of the external facilitator it is likely to remain exactly that. The alternative possibility is the co-option of the idea by the Education Department and top-down, culturally biased solutions implemented. However, with the assistance of the external facilitator, it will be possible to assist the community to take actions to create withdrawal classes and hopefully address the Aboriginal education problem in Geraldton. The following suggestions relating to conditions of participation, parent meeting structure, course content, teacher behaviour and teaching environment, classroom behaviour and the return to the mainstream are exactly that, suggestions. The external facilitator would make use of them in meetings. Obviously as the plan was followed through these suggestions would change. They are presented simply as a guide for the Aboriginal working group. At all times it is the Aboriginal people who make the final decisions, as they are in control of the project.

## The time line

- May 2000 – AIEOs, Heads of Maths and English approached by external facilitator.
- June 2000 – Primary schools asked to identify possible year seven students.
  - Parents of students informally approached by AIEO.
  - Other appropriate community members are approached.
- July 2000 – Parents and community members meet with both AIEO and external facilitator (informal, individual meetings).
  - Parents provided with list of other parents to be involved.
  - Time is given for community discussion and decision making.
- August 2000 – Informal meeting of all parents and interested community members (including ASSPA groups from GSC and major primary feeder schools, Beachlands, Waggrakine, Rangeway etc) with AIEO and external facilitator.
  - Working group is established (includes AIEO and external facilitator). Group may include students to be involved or older students.
  - Time is given for working group to consolidate ideas.
  - Heads of Department and interested teachers undergo training and education in Aboriginal communication and culture.
- Sept. 2000 – Working group meets with Heads of Department and interested teachers.
  - Provisional course content, classroom behaviour, teaching environment and teacher behaviours and conditions of participation are established.
  - Time is given for working group to discuss ideas with community.
- Oct. 2000 – Working group meet with the school and present consolidated plan.
  - Plan is revised and re presented to the community for approval Nov. 2000
  - Course content and curriculum are finalised.
- Dec. 2000 – Funding plans written to appropriate bodies by working group assisted by external facilitator.
  - Funding plans approved by community and school.
- Jan. 2001 – Applications for funding submitted.
- Feb. 2001 – School starts.
  - Withdrawal classes begin.
- March 2001 – Classes continue, parent meetings take place.

- April 2001 – Term one ends
- Program is evaluated.
  - Appropriate changes are made with community consultation.
  - Appropriate children return to mainstream.
  - Appropriate children are added to the program.

## Meeting structure: Year One

### May

Initial meeting between Department Heads, Principle, AIEO and External facilitator should be used to gain support for the proposal (Heslop, 1998:280). At this time these people should be made aware of their essential role in the program. It should be clearly stated that a genuine partnership is going to be built between the community and the school. This partnership will give the community autonomy over the process of development. This does not mean the community necessarily carries out all of the responsibilities with regard withdrawal class development; rather it creates an umbrella of control where all employees work according to the notion that power is delegated to them for a period from the Aboriginal Working Group (Heslop, 1998:275). When support and understanding are gained from the school it will be possible to continue to the next stage. Of course, if support is not forthcoming, it is possible to continue in the hope that with community pressure the school will relent.

### June

The AIEO should then enter the community, (where s/he should already have a well established rapport), on behalf of the external facilitator. At this time other appropriate community groups should be approached informally by the AIEO. These would include ASSPA groups, Geraldton Streetwork, Mid West Education Department, Yamatji Regional Council, Aboriginal Affairs Department, ATSIC and Yamaji Language Centre. The external facilitator must then wait patiently for the community to discuss the idea. During this time the external facilitator should try to become known in the community and informally meet the locals.



### July

The external facilitator should now approach the parents and community groups with the AIEO. At all times Aboriginal culture should be respected. Particular points to remember:

1. Do not use pointed questions, use 'what do you think' questions.
2. Make initial contact in a common area.
3. Respect gender roles.
4. Never have an agenda, always make the meeting an informal discussion.
5. Employ highly ethical methods of communication. (Heslop, 1998:280).

Parents should be provided with a list of the names of other parents involved. (Permission will need to be gained from all parents.)

Again time should be given for community discussion.

### August

Informal meeting should now take place between the community, parents, AIEO and external facilitator. This meeting should follow Randell's (1990:1-10, cited in Partington, 1998) guidelines:

1. Meetings should be held in a common place, where everyone feels comfortable.
2. There should be an emphasis on informal small group activities, giving everyone the opportunity to speak.
3. The AIEO should conduct the meeting with assistance from the external facilitator.
4. Information should be critically analysed by local Aboriginal people, with alternative ideas welcomed.

5. Aboriginal English should be used to aid open and effective oral communication.
6. Records should be made in a variety of forms such as sand drawings, blackboard notes and the use of butchers paper.
7. Time should be given for later feedback.
8. Emphasis should be placed on the creation of a strategic action to meet the goal.

At this time, a working group should be established to act on behalf of the community. This group may include students. Student consultations should be carried out continually throughout the process.

At the same time, Heads of Department and interested teachers should be undergoing intensive training in Aboriginal culture, effective ways to communicate with Aboriginal people and effective methods for teaching Aboriginal students (see section, to follow, entitled Teaching Behaviours and Environment).

The meetings that follow should continue along the above guidelines, always remembering it is the Aboriginal community who are in control.

### Meeting structure: Year Two

Guardians are expected to participate in three out of the six term meetings. These will always be informal and should be attended by the teacher, AIEO and parents. A presence of the Principle and Heads of Department would be beneficial.

**Meeting One:** Attendance at any of the meetings held in 2000 in preparation of the withdrawal class program.

**Meeting Two:** Should be a social event with an Aboriginal guest speaker. (funded by ASSPA)

**Meeting Three:** Mid-term meeting between teacher, AIEO and parent. Used to report on students' progress. This meeting should follow the guidelines outlined by Ngarritjan-Kessariss (1994:117-122).

**Meeting Four:** Social Event with a guest speaker. Possibly to talk about the future for educated children. ie job prospects, further training, education. (funded by VEGAS.)

**Meeting Five:** Final report discussions. Should follow guidelines of meeting three.

**Meeting Six:** Used to evaluate the successes of the program and make appropriate changes.

**Course content and structure:** The withdrawal class would be for students entering Year Eight (but could be extended to other years). The program not only addresses learning problems, but will also aid students' transition from primary school to high school. Years Eights are divided into two groups with half attending maths and half English; after a period (usually fifty minutes) they should switch classes. The withdrawal class will be run for both groups in both maths and English. The classes will remain small, offering only twenty places. Thus forty children will receive extra assistance in maths and forty in English. Students do not have to participate in both withdrawal classes unless it is necessary. Both withdrawal classes for maths will have the same teacher as the English classes. However, new teachers will participate each term in the hope of educating more teachers and teaching the children how to cope with mainstream education. One teacher who would be supported by an AIEO would teach the class. This AIEO would not change across the entire year. Thus assisting the students through the creation of a personal relationship with a teacher (in this case an AIEO).

As stated, the outcomes of the course should be identical to the mainstream. It is only the delivery that is altered. It is envisaged that the English program would not only use effective methods for teaching Aboriginal students, but would also use cases relating to Aboriginal culture.



An example of a four-term English program is given below.

**Term One:**

- Outcome – communication through the media  
 Method – design an Aboriginal newspaper.  
 – guest speaker from Yamaji news.  
 – coverage of Aboriginal news issues.  
 – television and radio representation of Aborigines

**Term Two:**

- Outcome – familiarisation with a variety of texts and genres.  
 Method – make use of Aboriginal texts written by Aborigines about Aborigines.

**Term Three:**

- Outcome – Creative writing and the use of symbols.  
 Method – look at Dreamtime stories, poems, art.  
 – produce their own stories and poems

**Term Four:**

- Outcome – written and oral life skills  
 Methods – job applications  
 – communicating with non-Aborigines

The maths program would simply deliver the usual course in a manner more appropriate to Aboriginal students. Where relevant, examples and scenarios should be related to the student life experiences.

A presence of the Heads of Department and the principle occasionally in the class would assist the students to see these authority figures in a different light. Students may come to understand these people are genuinely interested in their education.

The parents would contribute greatly to the construction of the course.

Students would return to the mainstream when they, the teacher and their parents felt it was

appropriate. When this transition is made, extra assistance and support should be made available to the child. This support should continue indefinitely and the student should be encouraged to continue attendance at the homework classes.

**Classroom behaviour:** Guidelines for expected classroom behaviour should be established through collaboration between the teacher and the students. The teacher should make suggestions for the students to consider. These suggestions may come from the parents, AIEOs or the guidelines of other withdrawal classes in Australia. The teacher should be willing to consider students behaviour suggestions. It is a good idea to have behaviours both typical to Aboriginal culture and Western culture. This way the students are learning how to survive in Australia at the same time as respecting their heritage and bringing their home lives into the classroom.

An example of possible guidelines: (from 'I've Dreamed of Being Here' West, 1994)

*Philosophy of the Mean Machine:*

1. Always try to help others who need it. (Aboriginal)
2. Always be kind to others. (non-Aboriginal)
3. Be polite when spoken to. (non-Aboriginal)
4. Think before you speak. (Aboriginal)
5. Be co operative. (non-Aboriginal)

There are a multitude of possibilities. Giving the students the option to establish their own rules will help them to respect the rules.

**Suggested conditions of participation**

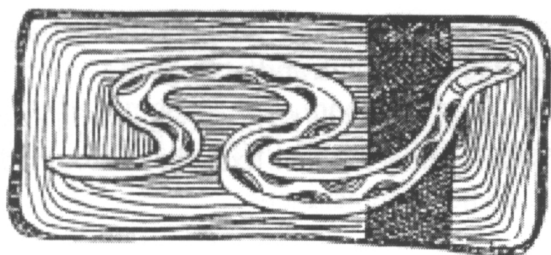
1. The student should not have a diagnosed severe mental disability. The GSC already has a program catering for such students (VIP).
2. The student should be performing below average for maths and/or English.
3. The student should be of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent. Exception will be made in some circumstances.

4. The student should be either in regular attendance at homework classes or able to prove that homework is being completed to an acceptable standard independently.
5. The student must have regular school attendance. Exceptions will be made for specific cultural events including funerals. In which case the school must be informed via the AIEO and the student provided with a homework package.
6. The student must desire to be involved.
7. The student behaves appropriately in the class. Behaviour will be measured against guidelines established through student/teacher collaboration.
8. Parents/guardians must be involved in the program. This involvement will be assessed through the attendance of an appropriate guardian at three of the six meetings and social events during the semester. In exceptional circumstances, alternative participation will be arranged.

If these conditions are not met, the student will be asked to return to normal classes and will be replaced with another student needing the assistance of the withdrawal class.

**Teaching behaviours and environment**

There is so much teachers need to learn. A good starting point would be participating in a revised and intensified version of 'Our Story'. From this the teachers involved could actually produce suggested course outlines for the Working Group to consider and revise. The actual strategies are beyond the scope of this paper however some suggestions are provided in the endnotes. The Working Group will need to ensure the teachers are properly trained to deliver the course material effectively.



**Funding**

Costs above and beyond the norm	Funding Body
Extra paid time for the teacher of the withdrawal class	VEGAS
External facilitator costs	Education Dept.
Resources (Books, art, CDrom).	ASSPA
Resources (for meetings)	ASSPA and Education Dept.
Guest speaker costs	VEGAS and ASSPA
Delivery of 'Our Story'	Education Dept.

The program would not be costly as it is run within normal class times. The major costs would be extra paid time for the teacher and the cost of the external facilitator. VEGAS would cover much of the funding because the program helps bridge the gap between primary and secondary school. ASSPA would also provide funds for resources and meetings because not only is the program enhancing educational opportunities for students it is enhancing parent awareness. Presumably the external facilitator would be an employee of the Education Department thus their salary would already be covered.

**Conclusion**

This paper has considered the problem of poverty. It has placed poverty into the context of Geraldton, a small city 460km north of Perth, in Western Australia. It is Geraldton's Aboriginal community upon which the research was based. This community was previously shown to be living in poverty for a variety of reasons. Education, and the lack of it, was identified as one of the major causes and ramifications of poverty within this community, and the wider Aboriginal community across Australia. While Geraldton's local government are doing nothing to alleviate this poverty, the State and National government branches situated in Geraldton are implementing many important strategies. Through interviewing

the community possible goals and current needs of students were established. An assessment of strategies used outside Geraldton has been combined with interview results to produce a plan aimed at lifting poverty in the Geraldton Aboriginal community. A transitional class was suggested and the steps required to establish such a class presented. It is surprising Geraldton Secondary College does not already offer such a simple alternative to educational failure and the associated prolonged poverty found in the Aboriginal community.

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### Interviews

- |                  |      |                                   |
|------------------|------|-----------------------------------|
| Marcus Harold    | 2000 | Truancy Officer Primary Schools   |
| Annie Pepper     | 2000 | AIEO Waggrakine Primary           |
| Gay Amm          | 2000 | Deputy Principal Rangeway Primary |
| Leslie Henderson | 2000 | Department of Education           |

- |                                    |      |                          |
|------------------------------------|------|--------------------------|
| Terry Cottrell                     | 2000 | Alternative School       |
| Pat Walkerden                      | 2000 | AIEO Rangeway            |
| Yanay Yanma                        | 2000 | Parents Group            |
| Students GSC                       | 2000 |                          |
| Grant Dodd                         | 2000 | AIEO GSC                 |
| Carole Minney                      | 2000 | DEETYA                   |
| Leeanne Taylor and<br>Ronnie Ronan | 2000 | Streetwork               |
| Nikki Patterson                    | 2000 | Education Department     |
| Debbie Woods                       | 2000 | Aboriginal Affairs Dept. |
| Kath Haythorhwaite                 | 2000 | Deputy Principal GSC     |
| Helen McNeair                      | 2000 | Bundiyyarra              |

## APPENDIX I

### Interview Schedules

**Basic Interview Guide:** for AIEOs, principals, teachers and officials.

**Abstudy** provides financial assistance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in secondary and tertiary education. It is not necessarily means tested. Students are given a school term allowance along with access to other allowances. Obviously Abstudy, like AUSstudy, is necessary to facilitate the continued studies of low income people.

1. Do you think Abstudy makes high school a more realistic option for kids?
2. Do you think it helps keep kids in school?
3. Do you think it is used directly to assist education (ie the purchase of books, uniforms, lunches etc) or is it spent on other things (computer games, videos, drugs, alcohol)?
4. The fact that it is not means tested implies that even A not living in poverty need extra financial assistance to remain in the education system. Do you think this is really the case?
5. Do you think kids receiving Abstudy understand the link between Abstudy and the eventual elimination of their poverty? or do they simply see school attendance as an avenue to 'free' money?

**ASSPA** brings people together to help children at schools and pre-schools. Parents form committees who then apply for funds. They determine how the funds should be spent based on education department guidelines.

1. *Please tell me more about how ASSPA functions in your school.*
2. *Are many parents involved? Should more parents be involved? Do you have ideas on how to get more parents involved in the program?*
3. *The success of the KODE (Koorie Open Door Education) schools (Schools for Koorie children) lies largely in the participation of the community in the creation and running of the school. ASSPA groups are as close as WA schools appear to come to this, however the local aboriginal community does not appear to be involved extensively in the schools. How can this be rectified? It should be possible in Geraldton given the small size of the town and the large number of Aboriginal people.*
4. *Do you think adult literacy classes held at the school perhaps in the evenings would make the people more comfortable in the school environment and therefore more willing to participate in their children's education?*

**VEGAS** assistance in finding further study options

*Can you tell me more about VEGAS and is it currently running in your school?*

**ATAS** supplementary tutorial assistance for students at all levels of education in the hope of achieving educational outcomes equal to other Australians.

1. *Is this scheme simply about providing tutors to those who can not afford them? or is it also used to address an absence of academic assistance available from parents due to other problems at home (adults lack education, parents work therefore are away from the home, alcoholism)?*

2. *Do you think taking on roles of the parent is the correct way to address children's education problems?*
3. *Can you suggest alternative solutions to the lack of educational assistance Aboriginal kids are given at home, i.e. homework classes, encouraging parent involvement?*

### **'Our Story'**

1. *Have your teachers attended an 'Our Story' conference? Which teachers? Is it possible to talk to them? Which Aboriginal people played a key role in this conference? Can you tell me about the outcomes of it, i.e.*
2. *How are you going about making students feel less alienated in the school environment?*
3. *Clearly Aboriginal people have had very negative experiences with the education system in the past. What if anything are you doing to remedying this situation? Do you believe parents prejudices are being passed down to the kids?*
4. *Do you believe teachers in this school are appreciative of the fact that Aboriginal students have a very different cultural background and make changes to suit these differences? How could they go about being more responsive to students needs as Aborigines?*
5. *Do teachers respect the fact that Aboriginal students speak Aboriginal English and not simply poor English? Is this compensated for in the evaluation of work and do you believe it should be?*
6. *How can Aboriginal people be made to see that schools are made of individuals and are not simply representatives of the government?*
7. *Clearly a lot is being done in schools to assist aboriginal people can you suggest any other ways school could be made more user friendly for Aboriginal students and parents?*



**The Education department** is working to even up the number of Aborigines employed in the education system with the number of Aboriginal students. This has the goals of creating positive role models for the kids. It should also make the education system more relevant and approachable for Aboriginal people.

1. *Has this school followed a plan to increase the long term employment of Aboriginal people?*
2. *Do you think this change is making a difference to students performance, self esteem and attendance?*
3. *Do you think such a strategy helps kids make the link between education and future employment?*

#### **Aboriginal Education Operational Plan**

1. *Parents obviously want their kids to achieve in education. Do you believe Aboriginal kids receive enough support at home to achieve academically?*
2. *Despite funding and programs plans and policies, retention, attendance, and achievement continue to be a problem. Is this the case here? Are the programs ineffective or do they just need more time to be successful?*
3. *Would you consider this school inhospitable to Aboriginal students and parents?*
4. *Do you identify students at academic risk? How? If so, what do you do for them?*
5. *Do you have programs to deal with the following issues?*
  - *Transient students*
  - *Getting Aboriginal children into pre primary?*
  - *Tracking Aboriginal students achievements across the years?*
  - *Truancy?*
  - *Open learning strategies?*
  - *Broader more accessible curriculum?*

6. *Do you have:*
  - *language policy and program*
  - *Aboriginal studies curriculum*
  - *Cross cultural training program for teachers*
7. *Do you know about the parents as effective partners package? What is it?*
8. *Do you include ASSPA's plans in your school development plan?*

**KODE school:** *Could it be a viable reality for Geraldton?*

#### **APPENDIX II**

#### **Student Consent Form**

I am a university student writing a paper on Aboriginal contact with the education system. The aim of my research is to find ways of improving education for Aboriginal people living in Geraldton. I believe Aboriginal people know what their needs are better than anyone other group. For this reason, I am requesting your permission to involve you in a survey. Your name will not be mentioned in the paper, but you will be thanked as a group.

Thank you for your assistance.

Susan Appleyard.

Student's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Student's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

**Survey: Experiences of Aboriginal students with the education system.**

**Education and Employment:**

- 1. Do you enjoy coming to school? Yes   
No
- 2. Do you think school is important? Yes   
No
- 3. What year of school do you need to go to to get a job?  
none   
Yr 7   
Yr 10   
Yr 12
- 4. Do you learn things at school to help you get jobs when you leave? Yes   
No
- 5. Do you want a job when you leave school? Yes   
No

**Kode School:**

- 6. Would you like to go to a school especially for Aboriginal students? Yes   
No

**Learning at School:**

- 7. Do you like learning about Aboriginal culture and history? Yes   
No
- 8. Would you like to learn more about Aboriginal culture and history at school? Yes   
No
- 9. Do you like learning Aboriginal languages at school? Yes   
No
- 10. Does learning about Aboriginal culture make you feel proud to be Aboriginal? Yes   
No

**Peer Group:**

- 11. Do non Aboriginal kids make you feel welcome at school? Yes   
No
- 12. Do you like it that non Aboriginal kids are learning about your culture? Yes   
No

13. What is your favourite activity or time at school?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Parent Involvement:**

- 14. Do your parents encourage you to come to school? Yes   
No
- 15. Would you like your parents to be more involved in your education? Yes   
No
- 16. If you could not get Abstudy would still be able to come to school? (only those receiving Abstudy) Yes   
No

**Teachers:**

- 17. Do your teachers make you feel welcome in the classroom? Yes   
No
- 18. Do teachers treat you differently Positively   
to non Aboriginal kids? Negatively   
No different
- 19. Do you have any Aboriginal teachers? Yes   
No
- 20. Do you enjoy being taught by Aboriginal people rather than non Aboriginal people? Yes   
No
- 21. Would you like there to be more Aboriginal teachers at the school? Yes   
No

**Behaviour and Attendance:**

- 22. Have you ever been part of a behaviour contract? Yes   
No
- 23. If you do not come to school where do you like to go for the day?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- 24. Have you ever been to the Streetwork corporation? Yes   
No

25. Do you like going there? Yes   
 No

**School Programs:**

26. Are homework classes helpful? Yes   
 No
27. Do you like the Earlybird breakfasts? Yes   
 No   
 never been
28. Do you like work experience? Yes   
 No
29. Do you enjoy vocation classes? Yes   
 metal work, home economics. No

**Thankyou!!**

**APPENDIX III**

**Interview Guide for Aboriginal Parents**

**Education and Employment:**

1. Do you see school attendance as being essential for your kids if they want to find work?
2. Do they learn things to help them get jobs at school? Should this be focused on more?
3. Do you think work experience is a good way to help kids into the work force?
4. What else do you think the school could do to help the kids prepare kids for the workforce?

**Aboriginal Schools:**

1. Would you send your child to an Aboriginal school?

**Learning at School:**

1. Do you think teaching the kids about Aboriginal culture and history is important?
2. Do you think teaching kids Aboriginal languages is important?
3. What would you like to see changed in regards to what kids are taught at school?

**Parent Involvement:**

1. Are you a member of your school's ASSPA committee? If not why not?
2. Do you think ASSPA is a good way for you to have a say in what your child is taught?
3. Are you aware of when ASSPA's meetings are and invited to come along?
4. Does being involved in ASSPA make you feel more comfortable about going to school?
5. Do you participate in NAIDOC week? Does this involvement make you feel more welcome in the school at other times?
6. Would you like more events like this, where you are invited to the school in a relaxed setting, rather than for formal meetings?
7. Do you feel you are made welcome at your child's school by teachers, principles, administration, non-Aboriginal parents?
8. What would you change about schools to make you feel more welcome and comfortable at them?
9. Do you appreciate AEO home visits? Would you like this happen more often? If so when? (Beginning of year, after reports are sent home, when a child is doing well or poorly?).
10. Would you like to have more involvement in your child's school? In what areas?
11. Do you feel the school takes over the role of the parent too much?
12. What aspects of education need to be changed to get parents to become more involved?
13. What aspects of education need to be changed to increase students' attendance and their subsequent academic performance?

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