

BETTER PRACTICE IN SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

***IMPROVING THE SCHOOL ATTENDANCE OF
INDIGENOUS STUDENTS***

A project funded by the Commonwealth Department of Education
Training and Youth Affairs

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Monash University

Professor Colin J. Bourke, MBE
Associate Professor Ken Rigby
Ms Jennifer Burden

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report is based on an analysis of available data, relevant literature and wide spread consultations and site visits. The attendance rates of Indigenous students at all levels of schooling, their variation over time, and, a range of variables together with a description of the contributing factors and reasons form the body of the report. A description of initiatives and programmes to improve attendance rates and suggestions for further research and analysis complete the report.

Despite initiatives which have been introduced by Commonwealth and State/Territory governments in the last 20 years to improve participation in, and outcomes from, education among Indigenous students, they continue to be the most educationally disadvantaged student group in Australia, with consistently lower levels of academic achievement and higher rates of absenteeism than among non-Indigenous students. The persistence of high rates of absenteeism is a major concern, as it is believed by educators that consistent school attendance is essential for educational success, with low standards of academic achievement, including low levels of English language and literacy skills, almost universally attributed by teaching staff to high levels of absenteeism among Indigenous students. This view, however, is challenged by some writers and researchers, who see it as a classic case of 'blaming the victim', and indicative of a reluctance on the part of school authorities to accept that the fault may lie within the education system itself. These authors, in pointing to the fact that the area of English language and literacy learning is a major stumbling block for Indigenous students, highlight the need for the nature of the cause/effect relationship between poor attendance and poor achievement in English language, literacy and other school skills to be established. This, it is believed, will assist in determining what strategies are most appropriate to overcome the problem of poor attendance.

The extent and nature of the day to day attendance of Indigenous Australian children at schools and pre-schools is unavoidably speculative. The database is limited to about 28% of Indigenous children in the government school sector. In non-government schools the information available generally did not include the number of students upon which the estimates of school attendances were based and the comprehensiveness of the coverage cannot be assessed.

Despite a lack of national school attendance data and a lack of consistency in the definition and measurement of non-attendance it is, nevertheless, clear from the literature that absenteeism among Indigenous students is markedly higher than among non-Indigenous students. Indigenous students also have higher rates of suspension and lower retention rates than non-Indigenous students. It is also apparent that there is considerable variation in the patterns of attendance within the Indigenous student population, with rates of absenteeism reported to be significantly higher in more isolated, traditionally oriented communities where family mobility is seen as a problem.

RECOMMENDATION 1

The problems of transient students and mobility-related irregular attendance associated with cultural and social obligations could, perhaps, be addressed through the introduction of computer assisted learning strategies and individual training programmes. For transient students such learning programmes and data in relation to student progress could be transferred electronically between schools. Irregular attenders would be able to engage in work appropriate to their level without disrupting the programmes of regular attenders.

During the consultations a large variation in attendance was noted between schools in similar geographic and socio-economic situations with similar level students. This suggested that practices at the school level could significantly improve Indigenous school attendance rates. There is also a significant variation in retention rates within and between states and territories.

The accuracy of the data available is difficult to assess because of differences in the way it is collected and described. There are also variations in the ways in which absences are defined and recorded. In some cases attendance rolls are marked once a day, in others twice, while some secondary schools mark rolls for each period. (Some systems use sampling procedures such as a whole year, a semester, a lesson or a week to derive their database). State educational systems also differ in the year at which students transfer from primary to secondary school; for example, Year 7 in New South Wales and Year 8 in Queensland. Different statistics are also used to describe attendance, such as median or mean to indicate a central tendency in a distribution;

percentage of possible days attended; high, middle and low levels of attendance and in some cases it is not clear how estimates were arrived at.

Because of these inconsistencies estimates of attendance were derived from a variety of different data sets. However, despite the variations in data collection described above, the results from each set followed a similar pattern. It was evident that Indigenous student retention, progression and attendance rates in schools are considerably lower than those of non-Indigenous students. The differences in attendance are greater in more rural and remote areas where schools cater for comparatively high proportions of Indigenous students. With increasing years of schooling, school attendance of Indigenous students generally lessens. Although, the SCRCSSP (Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision) Report on Government Services (1999:886) states “the proportion of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children attending pre-schools was broadly similar to their representation in the community” there is conflicting evidence with Herbert et al (1998:75) noting that “for ages 3-4 in the Northern Territory enrolment and participation rates are 34.5% as opposed to 56.8% for non-Indigenous children”. The gap in average attendance appears in primary school and widens in the early years of secondary school, where it is approximately 15%, then narrows slightly among students who undertake studies in the last two years of schooling. These findings apply equally to Indigenous children of either gender. It is important to recognise that some 25% of Indigenous children have excellent attendance patterns. The major difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous attendance rates is due to the much larger proportion of Indigenous students who are absent from school for a comparatively large number of days.

It was also evident that the absences of Indigenous students in all age groups were much more likely to be recorded as “unexplained” with no further information collected to explain why they were absent.

RECOMMENDATION 2

That a review be conducted of the collection of national data on school attendance. The quality and accessibility of attendance data, especially as it pertains to Indigenous students could be significantly improved if the following was done:

- 2.1 All schools in all education systems should record daily attendance data on all students. This information should be collected by State/Territory and Commonwealth Governments annually and then collated annually to provide an aggregated picture of attendance rates in Australian schools. From this process, an annual report on the attendance could be produced, and from it, data drawn on the attendance of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students;*
- 2.2 All schools should routinely record the attendance of all children in the morning and afternoon of each day;*
- 2.3 All schools should routinely identify students as being Indigenous or non-Indigenous when recording and reporting attendance;*
- 2.4 Agreement be made between educational authorities on the precise categories used in collecting information about attendance. In particular, a clear distinction should be made between ‘explained’ and ‘unexplained’ absences. These terms should be clearly defined so that teachers are sure as to which category the reason for the absence, eg ‘sickness’ applies;*
- 2.5 Attendance should be recorded by schools in a way which makes it possible to disaggregate data according to a number of variables, therefore allowing attendance rates to be calculated according to type and location of school, the age, gender and level of the student;*
- 2.6 Computing facilities should be made available in each school so that attendance for each child can be recorded and be made accessible to a centre (or centres) where further processing of the data can be undertaken; and*
- 2.7 A standardised method be used when analysing attendance data. It is suggested that results be tabulated according to type of school, location of school (urban, rural and remote), gender and age of the student, and the nature of the absences, eg whether explained or unexplained and according to further agreed sub-categories.*

During the consultations and site visits it became clear that a wide range of factors and influences affected the decisions of Indigenous young people regarding their school attendance. Personal factors, expectations, health and past performance were seen as crucial, as were the educational programmes, school environment and atmosphere, with the latter factors being heavily influenced by inadequate pre-service and in-service preparation of teachers. The level of available family finances and the influence of family, friends and community were also important.

Earlier writers and researchers, in addressing the reasons for non-attendance among Indigenous students, tended to ignore, or pay only scant attention to, school based factors and to invoke deficit explanations which attributed the blame for poor school attendance to individual, family or cultural factors. However, there is a growing body of opinion represented in the literature that school-based factors are of primary importance in relation to non attendance of Indigenous students. While mobility within the Indigenous community and student transience are widely recognised in the literature as significant 'out of school' factors influencing absenteeism, the most frequently identified 'school-based' factors relate to: inadequacies in and inappropriateness of, the schooling process itself; inadequate pre-and-in service training of teachers and their unpreparedness for teaching in a cross-cultural, bilingual situation; poor teacher/student relationships; teacher attitudes, expectations and a tendency to rely on deficit explanations of low levels of academic achievement and a significant lack of Indigenous parental/community involvement in the schooling process.

The various factors, issues and influences could be grouped under four broad headings – systemic factors, school/staff issues, student issues and parents/community factors.

Without doubt the most pressing factor was the poor pre-service and in-service training available for teachers to prepare them to educate young Indigenous Australians. Indigenous education or Indigenous studies, despite many past recommendations, is not yet compulsory for all Australian teacher trainees.

RECOMMENDATION 3

All teacher education students in Australia should undertake compulsory Indigenous education and Indigenous studies units in their pre-service training.

The programmes and strategies reported in the literature which are successful in dealing with the problems of poor school attendance and poor academic achievement are based on principles which address the school-based inadequacies identified above. This is achieved through the provision of professional development training for teachers, which results in: increased cross-cultural understanding and awareness of issues relating to (TESL) Teaching English as a Second Language/dialect; acknowledgment of the importance of tailoring teaching strategies to the individual needs of students; and recognition of the benefits of a warm, demanding teacher/student relationship. Other programmes are successful because of the use of teaching strategies which, through their compatibility with Indigenous students' preferred way of learning, result in increased motivation, improved school attendance and educational outcomes (for instance, computer usage); acknowledgment of the importance of a supporting and secure learning environment and of Indigenous parent/community involvement in all aspects of the learning process; and acknowledgment of the crucial role which early childhood education plays, as a bridge to formal school and in determining future attitudes to, and educational outcomes from, schooling.

In areas where English is obviously a second language, the teaching staff are not required to have any training in (TESL) Teaching English as a Second Language prior to their appointment. Many, however, were well aware of their own inadequacies, especially some who had been trained as secondary teachers and found themselves appointed to primary schools in non-English speaking communities.

RECOMMENDATION 4

That pre-service and in-service teacher education courses include units on Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) to better equip teachers to deal with teaching and children's learning in remote Indigenous communities.

In communities in rural and remote regions of Australia the school year and day were based on the patterns existing in southern areas and little account was taken of differences in climate, seasons and culture.

Schwab (1998:5) for instance, in presenting a picture of school attendance patterns at Maningrida, reports marked fluctuation in attendance which is related to seasonal factors. "Attendance typically rises in the hub [main] school during the wet season as people move from the homeland centre to Maningrida and then falls during the dry season as people disperse and become involved in hunting, gathering and ceremonial activity".

RECOMMENDATION 5

That schools in rural and remote regions of Australia should be encouraged to negotiate the annual school calendar and daily timetable with their communities to achieve greater fit between school needs and community wishes.

The advertising of school principals' positions in remote Indigenous communities internally within education departments was of major concern. Many people consulted felt the practice unnecessarily narrowed the field of potential applicants.

RECOMMENDATION 6

That School Principal positions in Indigenous communities be openly advertised on a national basis.

During site visits it became obvious to the field researchers that with the exception of Queensland, and especially the Torres Strait, that Indigenous staff members were generally a low percentage of the staff complement and usually in subordinate or supplementary positions. In urban and rural schools Indigenous teachers were rare.

RECOMMENDATION 7

That a concerted effort be made to train Indigenous teachers from urban and rural centres so that the number of Indigenous teachers in classrooms, at least equals the percentage of Indigenous people in the total population.

During the consultations the research team were often reminded that the school environment and teacher attitudes toward Indigenous students were vitally important if school attendance rates were to improve. Some schools and their staff did not provide a welcoming, caring and safe environment for Indigenous students. Teachers received minimal, if any, cross-cultural training and in many cases did not participate in community activities. The relationship between community members, students and the teaching staff was sometimes hostile and quite often fraught with misunderstanding and a lack of empathy. Some teachers appeared to be frightened, or at least, felt threatened by the Indigenous community in which they were teaching.

RECOMMENDATION 8

That intensive professional development programmes for teachers be developed to provide cross cultural training and an understanding of Indigenous education to promote community involvement and a better teaching climate.

Another theme mentioned frequently in the literature is the need to provide practically oriented and meaningful educational activities for adolescent Indigenous males, particularly in remote areas, where it is seen to be appropriate for such education to be provided in a situation removed or segregated from the normal school setting; 'school is only for kids' – being a typical response from traditionally oriented male students approaching or following initiation.

RECOMMENDATION 9

That learning options be made available in schools to Indigenous males in the post-primary years, in remote communities, that will allow them to pursue studies of a practical nature, and provide opportunities for structured workplace training.

The responses of schools to non-attendance and, in many cases, unacceptable behaviour, varied considerably. The best practices observed offered positive incentives to students and endeavoured to create welcoming and caring educational environments. Much of the difficulty that exists in some schools can be attributed, in large part, to the lack of success enjoyed by Indigenous students. The inability to read and participate fully in

academic activities, by a significant percentage of Indigenous students, is an inhibiting factor to Indigenous education participation, success and school attendance.

While there is frequent reference in the literature to the close link between school attendance and competence in English and literacy skills, there appears to be no definitive evidence in the research literature as to whether poor attendance is a cause of the problems experienced by Indigenous students in this area of school learning or whether it is an effect of these problems.

RECOMMENDATION 10

That research be undertaken to establish the nature of the cause/effect relationship between low levels of achievement in the area of English language and literacy learning and poor school attendance.

The level of Indigenous parents' involvement in the school was viewed as crucial by teachers and parents. The development of Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Association (ASSPA) committees was seen as encouraging but had yet to be translated into increased parental interest through meaningful involvement in schooling matters. Despite pupil attendance being a problem many ASSPA committees had not discussed the issue. As noted earlier some schools had developed behaviour management or incentive programmes, in conjunction with parents, and this had positively affected parental involvement and student school attendance.

RECOMMENDATION 11

That schools' curricula should be developed in conjunction with parents and community members with the local Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Association (ASSPA) committees having a meaningful role. The curricula should be focussed on developing literacy and numeracy and be relevant to the pupils by taking account of local environment and culture including Indigenous language.

The level of race relations and Indigenous acceptance within the general community and the school was seen as being an important factor in Indigenous perceptions of schools. Some communities still view school as being 'white fella' places and concerted efforts are required to overcome this image. The use of Indigenous elders to teach language and cultural matters and provide a link between community and school was very successful in several schools as was the employment of community members within the schools in ancillary positions.

RECOMMENDATION 12

That schools be encouraged to provide opportunities for Indigenous elders, past students, and other community members, to be involved in teaching programs, and the development of a supportive atmosphere for Indigenous students. Role models within the Indigenous community should be encouraged to become mentors to Indigenous students, especially to those who have attendance difficulties.

Students who reported that computers were accessible to them out of school were more likely to attend regularly. This suggests that working with computers may encourage students to take a greater interest in school activities.

RECOMMENDATION 13

That computer facilities should be made as accessible as possible to students, for example, through enabling access to computers in schools after hours, as well as in homework centres and libraries.

During the consultations many teachers saw poor school attendance by some Indigenous students as preventing the schools' educational program from proceeding as planned. In the worst case scenario no new lessons were taught in some classes on days when insufficient students attended. In one school when all students turned up it was claimed that there were insufficient desks and equipment for classes to proceed and consequently no new lessons were taught. Other schools had solved these logistical problems by reorganising the school into multi-age groups according to attendance patterns.

RECOMMENDATION 14

That schools with large Indigenous enrolments and student attendance problems consider organising the school on a multi-age grouping basis according to levels of attendances. The flexibility gained will allow those students who attend regularly to be not impeded by those whose attendance is less frequent.

This organisation would allow the latter group to have intensive teacher contact on the days they do attend.

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2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Many reports in the last 20-30 years have highlighted the continuing problems of poor school attendance among Indigenous students in Australia (Watts & Gallacher 1964; Binnion 1974; National Board of Employment, Education and Training (NBEET) 1992, WA Ministry of Education 1993; Department of Education, Employment and Training (DEET) 1995, Groome and Hamilton 1995; Kays & Romaszko 1995; NSW Department of School Education 1997, Ministerial Council on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) 1997; Herbert et al 1998; Battern et al 1998).

While initiatives introduced by Commonwealth and State/Territory governments in the last twenty years to improve Indigenous participation in, and outcomes from, education have brought about gains in some areas, Indigenous students are still not achieving equitable educational outcomes (DEET 1995; Groome and Hamilton 1995; Munns 1998). They continue to be the most educationally disadvantaged student group in Australia (DEET 1995; Adams 1998; Herbert et al 1998) and, overall few positive changes have been apparent in attendance rates. While some schools in urban/country areas have reported increases in attendance through the introduction of specific strategies to address locally identified problems, or through steps which brought about changes in the school's atmosphere or educational environment, schools in some remote regions have reported a decline in attendance rates in the last 10-20 years.

The persistence of high rates of absenteeism among Indigenous students is a major concern, as it is believed by teachers, and others concerned with the provision of education, that consistent school attendance is essential for educational success (Shimpo 1978; Neilson 1988; Howard 1994; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training (HRSCEET) 1996; Herbert et al 1998). Groome and Hamilton (1995:) go even further, pointing out that "teachers believe that there is a direct correlation between a lack of school skills (especially those of reading) among Aboriginal students and irregular attendance patterns".

Although the general assumption appears to be that irregular attendance is the cause of poor achievement in English language, literacy, and other school skills, there is evidence that points to an alternative explanation, with absenteeism seen as a protective mechanism which allows students to avoid those aspects of school they find undesirable, frustrating or a cause of shame (Petrie 1982; HRSCEET 1996). Support for this alternative view is also provided by Davies et al (1997) and Lowell and Garrutju (1997).

This research project has three distinct elements, the results of which have been synthesised to produce this report.

2.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of the literature review was to examine the characteristics and patterns of school attendance and reasons for poor attendance among Indigenous students. It also sought to identify programmes and strategies which are reported to lead to improved school attendance of Indigenous students or improved participation in, and successful outcomes from, schooling.

2.2 DATA ANALYSIS

In addressing the issue of school attendance among Indigenous students, it was considered desirable to access and analyse the most recent relevant data that could be made available. Information was therefore sought from Australian educational authorities, both government and non-government, as well as from recent publications in which relevant data was reported, and subsequently analysed.

2.3 CONSULTATIONS

The DETYA brief for this project suggested that some twenty urban, rural and remote sites around Australia should be visited for consultations with stakeholders, including students, teachers and parents, to obtain information and insights on attendance issues, including the clarification of factors which have been shown to affect the attendance of Indigenous students.

The brief also requested six to ten "Better Practice" site visits, selected on the basis of recommendations by the Reference Group, Steering Committee and others. This covered a range of situations such as:

- school levels and areas;
- programmes; and
- initiatives designed to improve Indigenous students attendance.

Field researchers with appropriate experience and were recruited in each State and the Northern Territory. Victoria, Ms Samantha Blogg; Tasmania, Ms Caroline Spotswood; South Australia, Ms Leanne Smith; Western Australia, Ms Kay Richer; Queensland, Ms Danielle Brunette; New South Wales, Ms Dawn Blanch; Northern Territory, Ms Maria Stephens was selected and undertook the training program, but later withdrew. Ms Stephens was replaced by Aboriginal and Islander Education Workers, Ms Ingrid Clarke, Ms Margaret Anstess and Ms Jeanette Carroll. ACT and Torres Strait Island consultations were the responsibility of the Principal Researcher.

The field researchers and the Principal Researcher encountered numerous difficulties in carrying out the consultations. Dealing with authorities from the six States and two Territories as well as the Commonwealth, despite valuable support from the Reference Group members, was not easy as different protocols, policies and practices were encountered in different locations.

The time taken for the consultation phase was severely restricted by the complexity of following protocols, and, gaining clearances to visit schools was time consuming, as was gaining permission from principals, teachers, parents and students to be involved in the research.

Having less than a month before the mid-year break for the consultation period, in most States and Territories, applied great pressure to the process. School examination and excursions, community ceremonies and funerals, meant that some schools which were on the list to be visited either had to be left out of the process, or, only had limited involvement.

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3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to identify literature relevant to the topic, various data bases (Austrom/AEI; APAIS; Psychlit' ERIC and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) library catalogue were examined for the period 1990 – 1999, using key words and phrases (Aboriginal; Aborigines; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander; Indigenous students/school (non) attendance; truancy; absenteeism; drop-outs; suspensions and exclusions).

As this search produced relatively few references relevant to the topic, the search was extended back to the early 1980s and widened to include additional key words/phrases (such as mobility; participation; alienation and resistance).

In addition, contact was made with the Association of Independent Schools in each State/Territory and the Independent Schools Board of South Australia; with State/Territory Catholic School and Lutheran Education offices; State/Territory Education Departments (AEUs); the Australian Bureau of Statistics, and with various key personnel and/or institutions involved in Indigenous education in South Australia and interstate.

3.2 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The extent and nature of attendance of Indigenous children at schools and pre-schools in Australia was examined from existing sources of information or databases. This involved the procurement and analyses of data provided by educational authorities, both government and non-government, on school attendance. To a lesser extent it drew upon some already published sources of information on school attendance. Finally, data was collected for this study using a questionnaire that was completed anonymously by Indigenous students in schools and which yielded some quantitative results on school attendance which could be related statistically to a range of demographic, social and economic factors.

Information bearing upon school enrolment and/or school attendance was provided by each of the government educational bodies on a confidential basis, that is, on the understanding that the identity of the sets would not be evident in this report. Altogether from these sources data were provided on school attendance for approximately 24,000 Indigenous students, that is some 28% of all Indigenous students enrolled in government schools. For comparison, data were available for approximately 370,000 (16.5%) non-Indigenous students.

In addition, information on attendance was provided by Catholic and other non-government schools. However, for the most part it did not include numbers of students upon which estimates of school attendance were based and the comprehensiveness of the coverage cannot be assessed.

Information on attendance in 1996 to 1998 was supplied through the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program (IESIP). This is part of a data set provided through the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) on results supplied by a large number of providers (both government and non-government) using agreed performance indicators applied to Indigenous and non-Indigenous students from pre-school to Year 12. In some cases the data relates to clusters of schools; in some cases individual schools; and occasionally year level. Again, the data does not generally include information on the numbers of students on which attendance was estimated.

Finally, information on school attendance was derived from responses to questionnaires by 510 Indigenous students and from detailed records of attendance of those students at the schools they attended.

The rationale for the construction of the student questionnaire derived mainly from the Theory of Reasoned Action proposed by Azjen and Fishbein (1980) and further elaborated by Azjen (1998). This theory has been widely employed in seeking to determine the relative importance of factors that influence social behaviours.

According to the Theory of Reasoned Action, social actions – such as attending or not attending school – are generally intentional, although they may sometimes be affected by events that can prevent an action from being carried out, for example, being ill. Intentions are seen as being determined by two main factors: firstly, a

person's attitude towards performing a given action, and secondly, the relevant subjective norm deriving from the expectations of others.

The questionnaire was constructed to assess attitudes toward going to school; the subjective norm relating to going to school; and the perceived capability of regularly going to school. Statements relating to the consequences of attending school were balanced, with approximately half having socially desirable implications, for example, to get a better education, and half with less desirable implications, for example, feeling bored. To assess the strength of the social norm of attending school, students were asked to indicate how concerned the following were about their attending school, mother, father, teachers, friends, and members of the community.

A final section was designed to acquire qualitative data on attitudes to attendance and suggestions from students on how the attendance of Indigenous students could be improved. Students were asked to complete sentences, for example: "School makes me feel ..."; "My parents think that school ..."; and "Students would attend more if ...".

3.3 CONSULTATIONS

The local knowledge and credibility of the field researchers proved invaluable during the school and community consultation process. The strong support and assistance of Reference Group members greatly facilitated the field work which was completed within extremely short time lines due to school vacation periods, school exams and report writing in the period just prior to the vacation periods. Some school consultations were not completed until schools returned after the mid year break.

The research team visited some 40 schools, more than the tender required, but was thought necessary to meet all the situations the DETYA brief demanded. The list of schools visited was determined in the final instance by geographical and economic considerations, and, school and community wishes. Consequently, 4 schools in Victoria, 5 in South Australia, 5 in Western Australia, 9 in Queensland including 3 in the Torres Strait, 5 in Northern Territory, 5 in New South Wales, 5 in Tasmania and 1 in ACT were included in the consultation process.

Table 1

Types of School Visited

	Primary	Secondary		High Indigenous Student % of Enrolment	Low Indigenous Student % of Enrolment
State	19	10		16	13
Non-government	5	6		5	6

At each school focus group discussions were held with principals and staff, parents, community members and students, where the teachers considered that the student questionnaire may be too difficult. The student questionnaire aimed to ascertain student views on schooling and attendance and their importance to the students and other key people in their lives. The reasons for attendance or non-attendance and students views on whether certain individuals or aspects of education affected attendance were also sought. On a few occasions some students completed the questionnaire and also took part in a focus group discussion.

Table 2

Focus Group Numbers

	Students	Teachers	Parents	Community Members
Remote Schools	60	33	30	5
Rural Schools	193	38	64	6
Urban Schools	104	62	98	12

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4. PATTERNS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF ATTENDANCE

Despite a lack of national school attendance data and a lack of consistency in the definition and measurement of non-attendance, it is, nevertheless apparent from the literature that school attendance rates of Indigenous students are considerably lower than non-Indigenous students, with the number of days absent among Indigenous students reported to be up to three times greater than among non-Indigenous students (Kays and Romaszko 1995; Groome and Hamilton 1995; Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) 1997; HRSCEET 1996; MCEETYA 1997; NSW Department of School Education 1997; Department of Education, Training and Employment (SA) 1999).

There is also agreement in the literature that among Indigenous students the level of school attendance in remote areas is markedly lower than in urban areas, particularly at secondary level (Watts and Gallacher 1964; Parish 1990; Lasora 1990; Baarda 1994; Schwab 1998); with considerable variation in attendance reported between schools in remote areas, as well as dramatic variation in the level of attendance from one week or time period to another (Groome and Hamilton 1995; National Language and Literacy Institute of Australia (NLLIA) Vol 2 1996; Schwab 1998).

The nature of the problem of absenteeism in remote communities is highlighted in a study of Indigenous students in remote schools in the central desert region of Australia (Desert Schools Project, NLLIA 1996). This study reports that "in all communities but one, student attendance was low and irregular, with sometimes as many unexplained absences as attendances" (1996:286-287). The severity of the problems in these schools is confirmed by attendance data relating to Anangu schools in the same Central Australian region, which indicated that 47% or more students are absent from school at any given time (Adelaide Advertiser 16 June 1999).

While the evidence in the literature points to seriously high levels of absenteeism in schools in remote communities, anecdotal evidence, cited by Stanley and Hanson (1998:45), suggests "that large groups of (Indigenous) school aged students in some major centres ... (do) not attend school regularly with overall attendance in some places possibly being as low as 60-70%. In a similar vein, Groome and Hamilton (1995:5) cite anecdotal evidence which suggests that there are "significant numbers of school aged students, some as young as ten, who are permanent non-attenders ... [with] probably between one and three hundred in each capital city".

Other characteristics of Indigenous attendance identified in the literature relate to differences in attendance between primary and secondary schooling, with attendance rates in secondary school lower than in primary school, and the relationship between attendance and gender. While some reports indicate that, in urban areas, school attendance is lower among Indigenous girls than among boys, (Groome and Hamilton 1995; Mander-Ross 1995), the reverse is reported to be the case in remote areas, with many male students dropping out of school in upper primary years as they reach the age of initiation. This problem is identified in the Desert Schools Project, (NLLIA Vol 2 1996:286-287) which notes that while irregular attenders reportedly "included both sexes ... the records show a greater incidence of male absenteeism and partial attendance.

While it is apparent from the literature that some students attend schools on a regular basis and the majority maintain a consistent enrolment in one school, others show very irregular patterns of attendance and a significant group (over 15% in a South Australian survey) move frequently between schools (Groome and Hamilton 1995:5). Mobility is, in fact, reported to be a major cause of non-attendance and to have serious consequences in relation to educational outcomes. Indigenous students not only move from one school to another more frequently than non-Indigenous students but, in traditionally oriented remote communities, family mobility associated with social and cultural obligations, which often entails lengthy student absences from school, is reported frequently in the literature.

RECOMMENDATION 1

The problems of transient students and mobility-related irregular attendance associated with cultural and social obligations could, perhaps, be addressed through the introduction of computer assisted learning strategies and individual learning programmes. For transient students, such learning programmes and data in relation to student progress could be transferred electronically between schools. Irregular attenders would be able to engage in work appropriate to their level without disrupting the programmes of regular attenders.

Stanley and Hansen (1998:44) also draw attention to seasonally related mobility which leads to absenteeism, as families move “from settlements and towns with schools to outstations without schools”. Similarly, Schwab (1998:5) points to fluctuating school attendance at the main school in Maningrida, with attendance typically rising during the wet season, and falling “during the dry season as people disperse and become involved in hunting, gathering and ceremonial activity”.

4.1 PARTICIPATION, RETENTION, EXCLUSION AND SUSPENSION RATES

While participation rates of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students are reported to be comparable during primary school, a difference becomes apparent in high school, when Indigenous students begin to drop-out in increasing numbers, particularly in more remote regions of Australia (Herbert et al 1998; Partington 1998).

The generally low retention rate among Indigenous students in secondary school is highlighted by Stanley and Hansen (1998) who provide data which indicates that in 1996, the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous apparent retention rates for Years 10, 11 and 12 ranged from 20.9% in Year 10 to 42.1% in Year 12, with Year 12 apparent retention rates of Indigenous students standing at 29.2% compared with 71.3% for all Australian students. The authors of the report note with concern that the rise in Indigenous retention rates apparent in the mid 1990's, has given way to a subsequent decline which is of greater magnitude than that apparent among non-Indigenous students. The report also highlights a considerable variation in retention among Indigenous students, both between and within States and Territories, with the more remote regions in the mainland states, and in the Northern Territory, having significantly lower Year 10 retention rates than the urban regions.

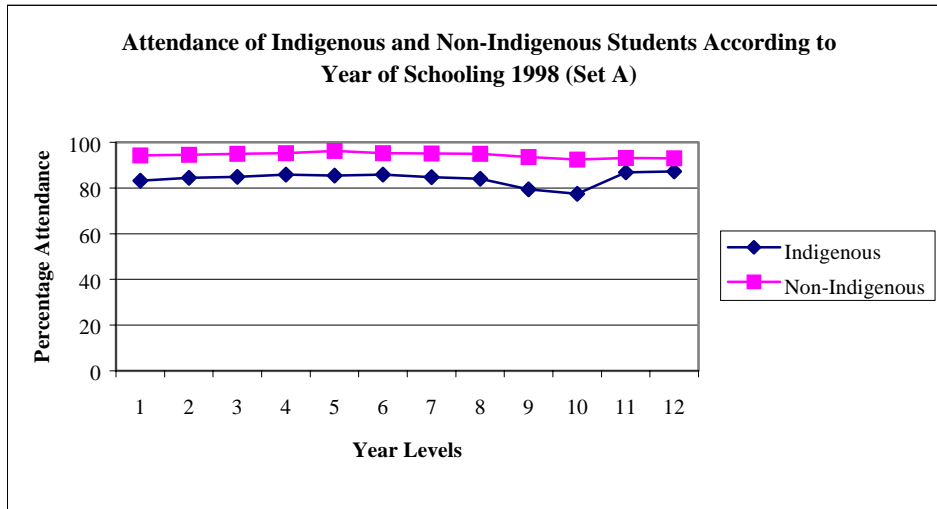
In relation to suspension and exclusion from school, Herbert et al (1998) report that the disproportionately high rate of suspension of Indigenous students in New South Wales is very similar to that found among Indigenous students in Western Australia, South Australia and Queensland. Gardiner et al (1995) for instance, report that in Western Australia, Indigenous Australian students are almost twice as likely to be suspended for twice the number of days and more than four times as likely to be excluded than other students, while 1993 data from South Australia indicated that Indigenous students were suspended, excluded or alternatively placed at a rate which was three times the average (Education Department of South Australia 1993; Gardiner et al 1995; Taylor 1995; Partington 1997).

4.2 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

An examination of data recently made available for this report (See Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs, (DETYA) 2000a. *School Attendance of Indigenous Student: Quantitative Analyses*) produced the following findings.

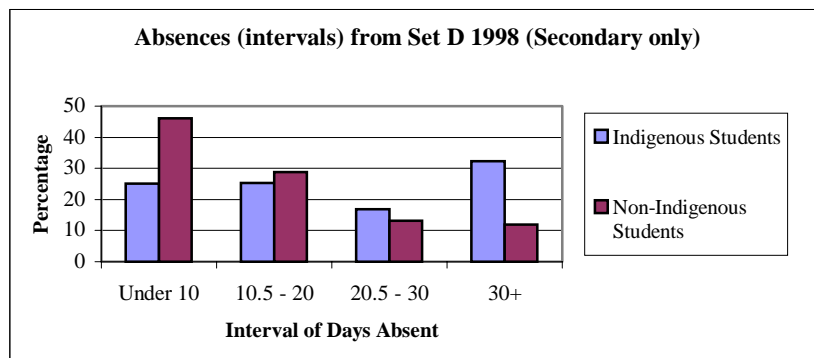
- On the basis of published information (Data Analysis, 1999) it was estimated that more than 10,000 Indigenous children in Australia attend pre-school. Among 4 and 5 year olds, the participation rate is approximately 40% and is higher in more remote areas. Overall, the representation of Indigenous students in pre-schools is similar to that of non-Indigenous students. On the question of whether attendance at pre-schools actually increases the likelihood that an Indigenous child will attend at subsequent levels of schooling there appears to be no available research evidence.
- Retention and progression rates are comparatively low for Indigenous school children, being about 30% up to Year 12, but with considerable variation between states. Progression rates are also lower for Indigenous secondary students at each stage of movement from one year to the next; for example, after completing Year 10 some 34.5 % of Indigenous students do not continue compared with 12.2% of non-Indigenous students.
- Available figures for “percentage attendance” suggest that Indigenous schoolchildren attend on average about 84% of the time and non-Indigenous students 93%. The gap between these groups widens at secondary level when Indigenous school attendance typically drops to around 75% at Year 10 compared with non-Indigenous attendance around 90%. Figure 1 below provides attendance figures according to year of schooling for the largest of the data sets provided by a State Education Department. It is based on attendance data collected from schools in Semester 2, 1998 for 12,032 Indigenous students and 189,236 non-Indigenous students.

Figure 1



- There are notable differences in the distribution of individual attendance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, with Indigenous attendance being much more widely distributed. Although similar attendance figures have been reported for categories of high or moderate attendance, strikingly much higher proportions of Indigenous students attend at low or very low levels. This is particularly evident among students attending secondary schools. The absentee rates given in Figure 2 for 6,415 Indigenous and 138,692 non-Indigenous students are based on information supplied by schools in a State Education system.

Figure 2



- Absences of Indigenous students are more likely to be recorded in schools as “unexplained”. Non-Indigenous students are more likely to provide notes indicating an absence due to illness. See Table 3 based on data from a State educational authority which supplied information for 3,295 Indigenous students and 106,534 for Term 2, 1997.

Table 3

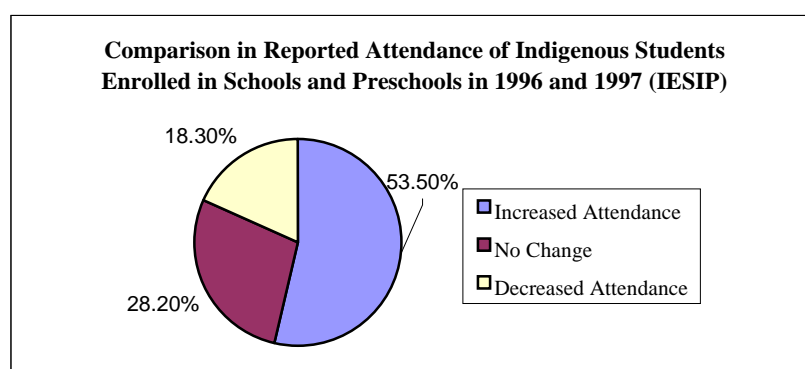
Percentages of Absences by Reason, Aboriginality and Sex, 1997

Reason	Non-Indigenous Students		Indigenous Students	
	Female %	Male %	Female %	Male %
Illness (Doctor)	2.3	1.8	1.0	0.7
Illness (Parent)	42.5	40.1	15.9	16.4
Family/Social	19.2	19.2	18.4	18.3
Unexplained	36.0	38.9	64.7	64.6

* Aboriginality is used as an inclusive term for Indigenous people

- Whilst the proportion of Indigenous students who were recorded as absent for disciplinary reasons is low (around 2% of all absences) it is notably higher than for non-Indigenous students.
- There is some limited evidence from a sample of schools and school clusters that overall attendance rates improved slightly between 1996 and 1997 with 54% of providers of the data reporting increased attendance (see Figure 3).

Figure 3



- Because of differences in the ways in which “localities” are identified and the different categories used by education authorities to describe localities, precise comparisons between attendance levels in different areas are difficult to make. However, the available evidence strongly suggests that the attendance of Indigenous students is lower in more remote areas.

In one set of data a distinction was made between Indigenous attendance in ‘metropolitan’ as opposed to ‘country schools’, with attendance approximately 4% higher on the metropolitan area. A similar difference was reported for another data set in which a distinction was made between ‘urban’ and ‘rural’. (The direction of these differences was unique to Indigenous students. Among non-Indigenous students attendance was higher in the ‘rural’ than in the ‘urban’ areas). For another data set, it was possible to correlate level of attendance of Indigenous students with the proportion of Indigenous students attending schools across the 16 regions of one State. On the reasonable assumption that higher proportions of Indigenous students were located in more remote areas, the moderately high negative correlation may be taken as indicating lower Indigenous attendance in more remote regions. Finally data from the survey of 510 school students indicate that where distinctions are made between remote, rural and urban locations, Indigenous attendance rates differ significantly, with attendance in remote areas being lowest.

It must be emphasised that although the generalisation that Indigenous attendance rates are lower in remote areas is well supported by data, there are, nevertheless, notable exceptions, which indicate that the connection between locality and school attendance is not inevitable.

- Although gender differences in attendance have been suggested on the basis of some of the available data, with boys attending slightly more often than girls especially in the later years of schooling, this generalisation was not supported in the data collected for this study, in either the data provided by educational authorities or in the survey research. Nor was there any significant interaction of gender with location that could suggest that gender differences in attendance were affected by geographical location.
- There is some evidence from the survey questionnaire study that economic factors may be related to school attendance. This is suggested in results that show that school attendance of Indigenous students is lower among children whose parents are unemployed, and also among students who have no access to computing resources outside school.
- There was no evidence to suggest that attendance levels of students at government and non-government schools differed significantly. However, some differences in attendance were found from the questionnaire analysis among schools catering for similar age groups in similar localities.
- Higher levels of attendance for individual Indigenous students were found at schools where the proportion of Indigenous students of the school population was relatively low. (This association may be because high concentrations of Indigenous students are generally found in more remote areas and social, cultural and economic factors associated with such localities may be decisive).
- Based on significant results obtained in the survey questionnaire analysis, higher attendance was found among Indigenous students who:
 - were more likely to think that significant others, especially parents and teachers, strongly wanted them to attend;
 - believed that positive consequences flowed from them attending school, especially that they would succeed in their school subjects and get a better job;
 - reported that their teachers were prone to keep in touch with their parents;
 - claimed that their attendance at school was more rarely affected by them providing help for their families and through their involvement in Indigenous cultural business.

Conclusion from Data Analysis and Literature Review

Although the combined sets of data used in the analyses were substantial in size, drawing upon attendance data for approximately 28% of Indigenous students attending schools in Australia, it should be noted that not only were there some variations in definitions of attendance and in data collection procedures employed to obtain the different sets, but, more importantly, data from some educational authorities were either sparse, derived from one section of the school population only or, in several cases, entirely lacking. Hence the data available for analysis lacked geographical representativeness. On the positive side, however, generalisations based on the different data sets were in broad agreement and provide support for the validity of the findings.

For the most part the main findings were consistent with views that had been frequently expressed in relevant research literature. In particular, it was found that (i) attendance rates of Indigenous students were appreciably lower than those of non-Indigenous students; (ii) retention, progression and attendance rates of Indigenous students at the secondary level of schooling was especially low; and (iii) attendance of Indigenous students in more remote areas also tended to be relatively low. However, no consistent pattern emerged from analyses with respect to possible gender differences in school attendance of Indigenous students generally or in relation to whether the student attended school in a remote, rural or urban area.

It should be emphasised that the differences described above are average differences. There are considerable differences between individual Indigenous children in their pattern of school attendance and there are substantial differences between schools in the extent to which Indigenous students attend. Some of the findings throw light upon the reasons for such differences.

It is clear that Indigenous students differ far more in their levels of attendance than non-Indigenous students. There are substantial proportions of Indigenous students who, like non-Indigenous students, attend school regularly with few if any days of absence during the year. In one data set, for instance, over the period of a term 23.5% of Indigenous students and 24.8% of non-Indigenous students did not miss a single day of school. The difference between the two groups lies largely at the other extreme, for example, in one set of data based on the attendance of secondary students over a year, more than twice as many Indigenous students than non-Indigenous

students were absent for more than 30 days. The question that should be asked is why there should be such a marked contrast between the attendance rates of different groups of Indigenous students.

Data obtained on school attendance from educational authorities and results from the responses of more than 500 Indigenous students to questionnaires suggest some answers as to why a minority of Indigenous students attend school relatively infrequently. There are some factors that appear to be related to location. Indigenous people who live in remote or relatively remote areas are in some ways socially and culturally different from those who live in urban areas. These differences may account in part for a lower level of school attendance in non-urban areas. Results from the questionnaire data suggest that felt obligations among some children to attend to matters of cultural business and, on occasions, to put family commitments before going to school may contribute generally to difficulties some Indigenous children may have in attending school regularly. Although the data gathered in this study did not address differences in linguistic background, it seems likely that children raised in communities in which English is at best a second language (which is often the case in remote areas) may be disadvantaged if they are expected to become fluent and literate in English at school without adequately trained Teaching English as a Second Language/Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TESL/TEFL) teachers. Difficulties in achieving “success” at school may deter some children from attending school frequently.

A further relevant difference between Indigenous groups lies in their economic circumstances. Children in families where both parents were unemployed were less likely to go to school. In such circumstances children are brought up in situations in which there is less structure to family life and this may well affect whether a child goes to school regularly. To some extent the higher absence rates of many Indigenous students may be a result of economic disadvantage.

The finding that there is strong association between level of school attendance of individual Indigenous students and the proportion of Indigenous students attending a school is open to different interpretations. One is that the association is due to the fact that high concentrations of Indigenous students in communities and schools are to be found in more remote areas where cultural and economic factors may be primarily responsible for low attendance rates. A social psychological explanation is also possible. Where children have many peers with similar culturally determined values that are not congruent with the nature of the education being offered, a child may feel more justified in staying away. However, it must be noted that some schools with high proportions of Indigenous students reported high attendance rates.

Because of insufficient data, no systematic analysis of differences in attendance of Indigenous students between schools situated in similar locations could be made. However, it was clear that there were considerable variations in attendance between schools - and these were difficult to account for in terms of cultural and economic factors. Differences were more likely to be due to school factors and the availability of educational resources outside the school. Student responses to questionnaire items suggested that (i) better attendance was more likely when teachers made contact with the children’s parents; (ii) the school positively encouraged the attendance of Indigenous students; and, (iii) educational resources, in particular computers, were accessible to students outside the school. It seems likely that being able to access computers is, for many children, a stimulus to learning and serves to encourage school attendance.

The results suggest that there may be individual differences between children and between families that may account for some variation in attendance. For many Indigenous children, schools appear as attractive places to attend, especially for those who believe that positive outcomes are likely and that regular attendance will lead to success in learning and better employment prospects. This seems likely to occur when families as well as teachers strongly encourage attendance. Given the diversity of needs and interests evident in children’s responses to questionnaire items, with some children enthusiastic about school and others plainly bored, improvements in school attendance would appear to require a greater recognition of differences between individual Indigenous school children and a readiness to respond to the differences.

Finally, any understanding of the scope and nature of the problem of relatively low school attendance on the part of a substantial minority of Indigenous students is currently hampered by inadequate attention to the provision of comprehensive and, in some areas, reliable data bearing on this issue. As demonstrated, there is lack of uniformity in methods of data collection undertaken by educational authorities. Whilst some educational authorities are providing useful data for analysis that can assist in developing national policy, others appear to be collecting little or no data specifically on Indigenous and non-Indigenous school attendance. Further, there is an evident failure to obtain adequate information on the reasons why individual Indigenous students are absent from school. As indicated, the category of “unexplained” absence utilised by one State educational authority contains a much greater percentage of Indigenous students (65%) than non-Indigenous students (37%). Further, absences

recorded as due to “illness” are more than twice as numerous among non-Indigenous children. Given what is known about the lower levels of health among Indigenous people, these results are clearly highly misleading. The implications are clear. To address the problem of getting better school attendance of Indigenous students, more comprehensive and reliable data collection methods are needed. To understand reasons for the absences of individual Indigenous school children, better means of gathering information from children and families must be developed.

RECOMMENDATION 2

That a review be conducted of the collection of national data on school attendance. The quality and accessibility of attendance data, especially as it pertains to Indigenous students could be significantly improved if the following was done:

- 2.1 All schools in all education systems should record daily attendance data on all students. This information should be collected by State/Territory and Commonwealth Governments annually and then collated annually to provide an aggregated picture of attendance rates in Australian schools. From this process, an annual report on attendance could be produced, and from it, data drawn on the attendance of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students;*
- 2.2 All schools should routinely record the attendance of all children in the morning and afternoon of each day;*
- 2.3 All schools should routinely identify students as being Indigenous or non- Indigenous when recording and reporting attendance;*
- 2.4 Agreement be made between educational authorities on the precise categories used in collecting information about attendance. In particular, a clear distinction should be made between ‘explained’ and ‘unexplained’ absences. These terms should be clearly defined so that teachers are sure as to which category the reason for the absence, eg ‘sickness’ applies;*
- 2.5 Attendance should be recorded by schools in a way which makes it possible to disaggregate data according to a number of variables, therefore allowing attendance rates to be calculated according to type and location of school, the age, gender and level of the student;*
- 2.6 Computing facilities should be made available in each school so that attendance for each child can be recorded and be made accessible to a centre (or centres) where further processing of the data can be undertaken; and*
- 2.7 A standardised method be used when reporting attendance data. It is suggested that results be tabulated according to type of school, location of school (urban, rural and remote), gender and age of the student, and the nature of the absences, eg whether explained or unexplained and according to further agreed sub-categories*

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5. POSSIBLE CAUSES OF NON-ATTENDANCE

At this point it is probably germane to note that while Indigenous students on average have lower attendance rates than their non-Indigenous counterparts, some 25% of Indigenous students go to school everyday.

During the consultations and site visits, it became clear that a wide range of factors and influences affected the decisions of young Indigenous people regarding their school attendance. Personal factors, expectations, health, and past performance were seen as crucial, as were teacher training, the educational programmes, school environment and atmosphere. The level of available family finance and the influence of the family, friends and community were also important. The various factors, issues and influences can be grouped under four broad headings – systemic factors, school/staff issues, student issues and parent/community factors.

Many of these are also recurrent themes in the literature. However, while earlier writers and researchers tended to ignore, or pay scant attention to ‘school-based’ factors and invoke deficit explanations which attributed poor school attendance to individual, family or community/cultural factors, there is a growing body of opinion in the more recent literature which argues that it is in fact, ‘school-based’ factors which are of primary importance in relation to non-attendance at school. Many of these more recent writers acknowledge that out of school factors, such as mobility, family stability and support for the student and peer pressure, play an important role in relation to attendance. However, at the same time they contend that earlier explanations failed to address crucial ‘school-based’ factors which influence Indigenous attitudes towards, and attendance at, school (Wald 1994; McKnight 1998; Herbert et al 1998). The most frequently identified factors in this regard relate to inadequacies in, and inappropriateness of the schooling process itself, including the nature of the curriculum, school rules and regulations and to societal aspects ... [which] attempt to link school non-participation with broader issues within Australian society such as youth unemployment and the irrelevance of some forms of schooling for young people” (Herbert et al 1998:3); to inadequate pre-service and in-service training of teachers, and their unpreparedness for teaching in a cross-cultural, bi-lingual situation; poor teacher/student relationships; teacher attitudes and expectations; and a significant lack of Indigenous parent/community involvement in the schooling process.

While in the past there has been a tendency in the literature for the

cause of truancy and unacceptable behaviour in the school ... [to be] attributed to individual failure and family malfunction ... [the] experience of many Indigenous people is of an education system which has failed to provide the educational outcomes which they desire and expect ... [and] ... many ... see this failure as a failure of the system, not the failure of Indigenous people (Herbert et al 1998:2-3).

Many authors, in fact, contend that the high non-attendance rate of Indigenous students, the disproportionately high rates of school suspension and exclusion and low retention rates among Indigenous students are a reflection of the education system’s failure to address the needs of Indigenous people (Gardiner et al 1995; Taylor 1995; Beresford and Omaji 1996; NSW Department of School Education 1996; Partington 1997; Herbert et al 1998).

If the education system is to overcome the present problems and meet the needs of Indigenous people, it is essential that the “structural components are changed to promote a more responsive environment for them” (Partington 1997:2). Without such changes, Indigenous people will continue, actively, to resist the schooling process, with absenteeism a prominent manifestation of such resistance (Folds 1987; Keefe 1988).

5.1 SYSTEMIC FACTORS AFFECTING ATTENDANCE

School Environment

Most of the schools visited appeared to have reasonable to very good physical facilities. No one suggested that the building or grounds were inadequate, although the field researchers reports stated that some were more appealing than others. The resources available were generally seen as adequate by focus groups although additional staff, especially Indigenous staff, were required as were additional computers in some schools.

Educational Environment

In examining the issue of Indigenous attendance and practical strategies which can help to address the circumstances which have led to Indigenous students' non-attendance, the Western Australian Ministry of Education report (1993:1) points out that:

(O)ne consideration particularly pertinent to teachers of Indigenous students is that the onus is on them, far more than otherwise, to motivate the students to want to come to school....Often children feel alienated in a school environment which is culturally different from their homes. Therefore, teachers must make more of an effort than they otherwise would, to provide a stimulating, interesting and relevant educational environment that motivates their students to attend. Teachers should also recognise the importance of teaching strategies that are appropriate for Aboriginal students, and of catering for difficulties arising from health and language issues.

Educational Relevance

The need for educational relevance is a theme which receives considerable attention in the literature and directs attention to the changes needed in the provision of education for Indigenous students. For too long, the assumption of many teachers and administrators has been that Indigenous students should be made to fit the existing system, rather than the system changing to accommodate the needs of Indigenous students (Christie 1985; McDonough et al 1994; Lawrence 1994; Whelen 1995; Herbert et al. 1995; Dodson 1994; NLLIA Vol 2 1996; Adams 1998). As argued by Partington (1997) and Wooltorton (1997), however, such assimilationist thinking has no place in a late twentieth century multi-cultural democracy such as Australia. Apart from anything else, it is a waste of time and effort to persist with an approach to education for Indigenous students which not only flies in the face of considerable research evidence from Australia and overseas, but which has proven unsuccessful in relation to the education of Indigenous students in Australia and which, in addition, is said to be out of step with the needs of all Australians (Hargreaves 1994; Adams 1998).

The problem of providing a relevant educational environment that motivates Indigenous students lies in the considerable diversity found among Indigenous Australians, which extends from traditionally oriented people living in remote communities, to those living in urban areas. While this diversity precludes the identification of a 'typical' Indigenous people and therefore a simple solution to the problem, there are also significant commonalities among Indigenous peoples throughout mainland Australia (Partington 1997; Davies et al 1997) with "research ... (demonstrating) that there are definite cultural continuities between remote and urban Indigenous peoples ... (which) are evident in terms of values, ways of relating and ways of using language" (Davies et al. 1997:35). There is also a sense of unity born out of a common history of oppression and marginalisation (Matiasz 1989; Budby 1994; Day 1994; Hughes and Moore 1997; Partington 1997).

The implication of this for schools and educators is that individual differences among Indigenous students must be taken into account, in addition to their cultural differences from mainstream students. Teachers need to identify the learning needs and strengths of individual Indigenous students and adopt culturally appropriate teaching strategies to meet these needs (Gutman-Black 1992). (See also Matiasz 1989; Budby 1994; Day 1994; Hughes and Moore 1997, Partington 1997).

Teacher Preparation/Teacher Training

The literature makes frequent reference to the fact that if improvements are to occur in Indigenous school attendance and engagement with learning, it is crucial that pre-service training provide teachers with knowledge and understanding of the culture and history of Indigenous peoples and their contemporary lifestyles; knowledge and skills necessary for teaching in a cross-cultural, bilingual situation; and a greater awareness and understanding of Indigenous students' linguistic background and the cognitive and linguistic versatility they display in switching between Standard Australian English (SAE), Aboriginal English and other Indigenous languages in response to the demands of the situation (Andrews 1993; Bourke et al 1993; Woods 1994; Partington 1996; Australian Curriculum Studies Association 1997; Davies et al 1997; Ryan 1997; Heitmeyer 1998).

The lack of preparation of teachers for their role in educating Indigenous Australian students was also an issue that was constantly raised in many of the discussions by principals, teachers and parents.

Very few of the teachers consulted had undertaken Indigenous studies or Indigenous education in their pre-service training. This was despite the recommendation of the Aboriginal Consultative Group to the Schools Commission in 1975 that:

All teacher trainees in Australia, should study courses relating to Aboriginal social organisation, traditional and contemporary culture, and where possible, trainee teachers should be able to gain experience in teaching Aboriginal children.

This recommendation was endorsed by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC) in 1991 through Recommendation 295 and in the Department of Employment Education and Training sponsored report on Teacher Education Pre-service by Bourke et al (1993).

The need for adequate preparation for teachers towards an understanding of Indigenous culture was put forcibly by an Indigenous student in a written response to the question of how Indigenous school attendance could be improved:

White teachers should learn about us mob before they teach us.

Despite this the 1998 teacher graduates interviewed stated they had not undertaken any training in their courses specifically aimed at preparing them to teach Indigenous Australian children, or, about Indigenous Australians. In those communities where English is obviously a second language, there did not appear to be any requirement for teachers to have had any training in teaching English as a second language prior to their appointment.

This issue of pre-service teacher training was also highlighted in 'Desert Schools' (NLLIA, Volume 2 1996:17)

It is clearly apparent from our search for relevant teacher training elements, that within the more generalist teacher training there is only very marginal attention on ESL and on Aboriginal students and their needs and hardly any focus at all on the non urban contexts appropriate to equip new teacher graduates to deal with the issues of teaching and children's learning in communities ...

The situation with respect to school staff was found in some areas to be similar to that reported in the executive overview of the report 'Desert Schools' (NLLIA Volume 1 1996:14) which stated:

Most teachers and some principals had been in the location only a short time and had no qualifications in English as a Second or Foreign language, no qualifications in literacy education and no qualifications in remote schools ... Many new staff members brought a high degree of commitment and ingenuity to the job but some were overwhelmed by the complexity of the situation.

RECOMMENDATION 3

All teacher education students in Australia should undertake compulsory Indigenous education and Indigenous studies units in their pre-service training.

RECOMMENDATION 4

That pre-service and in-service teacher education courses include units on Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) to better equip teachers to deal with teaching and children's learning in remote Indigenous communities.

School Staffing

The placement of young, inexperienced teachers in schools in more remote locations and the problems they face in such settings, are issues which attract considerable attention in the literature. Some writers point to the need for a mentor system to provide guidance and assistance for such teachers, as well as the need for an incentive system to induce teachers to remain longer in remote schools, without detriment to their promotion prospects, in order to avoid the discontinuity which results from rapid teacher turnover (Western Australian Ministerial Review 1994; NLLIA Vol 2 1996).

The appointment of first year teachers, who have had no specialised training to teach in Indigenous schools, on a take it or leave it basis, was also of great concern to parents and school principals. Some first year teachers in primary schools teaching literacy and numeracy were actually trained secondary science teachers. They were totally unprepared for their present responsibilities. Relief teachers were also identified as having no preparation for the situation in which they were placed. One school in an Aboriginal community had eight relief teachers.

As no accommodation was available they had to billet with the permanent staff thus increasing tension between staff.

Parents were well aware that their schools were largely staffed by inexperienced and under prepared teachers who, despite their best efforts, were finding their current positions extremely difficult. One parent from a remote community was less understanding:

The teachers do not have any association with the Aboriginal people in the communities. ... They only stay in the community for a year or two then they are gone. ... The teachers don't really care about what happens to our kids, all they want to do is make their money and get the – hell out of here. Most of the teachers that do come here come from Victoria, Melbourne, they most probably never even seen a black fella or spoke to one before until they come here. Our kids need teachers who are better trained and are sensitive towards Aboriginal culture.

While another parent said:

If you ask a young teacher a question they think you are challenging their authority.

Community Needs

In the communities visited in Northern Australia the organisation of the school year followed the same pattern and was almost identical to schools in the major southern cities. The communities' cultural calendars were not reflected in the organisation of the school year and neither was the fact that northern climatic zones also have different seasons to southern Australia. The school daily routines were almost identical to southern schools and disregarded local community activities and cultural obligations. One experienced principal interviewed recounted how efforts by one of his former schools to reorganise the school year by opening the school during January received stiff opposition from the Education Department in question.

The failure of schools to acknowledge the value of community cultural education of young people was seen by parents, in some communities, as insensitive and counter productive to improving school attendance and understanding between the community and the teachers.

RECOMMENDATION 5

That schools in rural and remote regions of Australia should be encouraged to negotiate the annual school calendar and daily time-table with their communities to achieve greater fit between school needs and community wishes.

Appointment of Principals

The need for careful selection of principals in schools with a sizeable proportion of Indigenous students is highlighted in the literature (Andrews 1993; NLLIA Vols 2 and 3 1996; Thomson 1998).

The practice of school principal positions in remote Indigenous communities being advertised internally within that particular education system was seen as an issue by several focus groups. Some principals believed that open advertisement at a national level may well provide opportunities for Indigenous teachers and experienced teachers in other systems to apply for appointment.

According to Lionel Parrott, an executive education search consultant with Slade and Partners, who specialise in finding staff for top Australian private schools, the principal's position in a school is crucial.

It's the key appointment in a school and school councils can't afford to get it wrong. Parents get very nervous when a school council is contemplating a change of principal. It can change the whole culture of a school (Melbourne Age 5/8/99 p15).

If that is the case in Australia's top private schools where parents are educated and empowered, it must be even more so in schools with total, or at least significant, Indigenous enrolments.

RECOMMENDATION 6

That School Principal positions in Indigenous communities be openly advertised on a national basis.

Indigenous Staffing

The need for a continued emphasis on the training of Indigenous teachers and other Indigenous education workers, is mentioned frequently in the literature, in addition to the need for continued Aboriginalisation of teaching positions (Western Australian Ministerial Review 1994; Woods 1994; Buckley 1996a; NLLIA Vols 2 and 3 1996; Batten et al 1998).

The low percentage of Indigenous teachers on school staff was of importance to most parents and some principals who took part in the discussions, because many schools still have the image of being non-Indigenous places. With the exception of the Torres Strait, and some specialist schools, the schools were dominated by non-Indigenous teachers. This finding supports a 1994 ATSIC national survey in which only 145 students reported being taught by Indigenous teachers, and only 22% being taught by an Indigenous education worker. According to 'Desert Schools' (NLLIA Volume 3 1996):

The bulk of current educators involved in working with Aboriginal children are therefore non-Aboriginal and inevitably products of Western cultural perspectives. In particular, most are the product of education in cultural deficit theories about Indigenous people ... Much of the teaching literature and teacher training materials emphasise the cultural and source disadvantages which face Aboriginal people and emphasise the need to redress these; often however without defining how teachers might do this most appropriately, apart from turning away from what they do already as inappropriate and inadequate, or continuing to work more assiduously within the deficit constructs (1996:14).

In some Indigenous community schools the non-Indigenous teachers have the assistance of an Indigenous teaching assistant, but Indigenous teachers have to take their class on their own, presumably because they don't need assistance with the local language.

The Torres Strait outer island schools, with one exception, had Indigenous Principals while **Thursday Island Primary School** had an Indigenous Deputy Principal. The District Director of Education for that area is also an Indigenous person. This situation contrasted strongly with other areas where most of the Indigenous staff were in positions of little authority.

RECOMMENDATION 7

That a concerted effort be made to train Indigenous teachers from urban and rural centres so that the number of Indigenous teachers in classrooms, at least equals the percentage of Indigenous people in the total population.

Community Values

The above systemic factors encourage the perception expressed by Indigenous parents that both the education system and their school are based upon non-Indigenous values to which they were expected to conform. Some parents saw the schools as 'white fella' places which their children were sometimes reluctant to attend, and as this often confirmed their own experience of schooling made them reluctant to force their children to attend.

Official Attitudes/Support

Teachers at one school observed that when they officially reported chronic absenteeism, such as an example of one child had only attended for five days in two years, there was no government or department response. Comments similar to this were provided in several different school systems and were generally seen by staff as a lack of support.

5.2 SCHOOL/STAFF ISSUES AFFECTING ATTENDANCE

There is a growing body of opinion in more recent literature which picks up on a theme that has been present in the literature for at least 20 years, and which argues that it is, in fact, 'school-based' factors which are of primary importance in relation to alienation from and non-attendance at school.

This theme is taken up in a Western Australian report (Western Australian Ministry of Education 1993), which, while providing details of both 'school-based' and 'out of school' factors which influence Indigenous school attendance, highlights the importance of 'school-based' factors. The rationale for this is the

overwhelming consensus of opinion from many authors in different countries ... that changing the atmosphere or management of the school classroom would be the most appropriate way to correct the problem (1993:22).

In making a case for the importance of school factors, one may assert that schools differ widely in their attendance levels independently of the age groups they cater for, and that these differences are related to the quality and relevance of the schooling they provide.

Schools and staff may affect attendance of Indigenous children by:

- Failing to be sufficiently concerned about the absence of an Indigenous student. Whereas “unexplained” absences accounted for approximately 37% of non-Indigenous absences in one State, for Indigenous students the percentage was 65%. Results from the Survey show that Indigenous attendance is significantly higher among children who report that their teachers get in touch with their parents to talk about how they are going at school.
- Although most Indigenous students are positive in their attitudes to school (DETYA 2000a) a substantial proportion of Indigenous students have specific complaints (possibly shared with other students), which suggest that aspects of school life may deter them from attending. These include:
 - lessons are frequently boring;
 - teachers are unpleasant;
 - interpersonal relations with other students are distressing.

It should be emphasised that some students in the Survey reported that they enjoyed lessons, that some teachers were very nice to them and that they liked school because they could meet their friends there. Nevertheless, it may be concluded that the negative aspects of school life for some children probably account for some absenteeism.

Cross-cultural training for staff, both pre-service and in-service, was often discussed at length during the consultations. As indicated earlier, few teachers seem to be receiving cross-cultural training or preparation for teaching Indigenous students during their university courses. Education Departments are providing some cross-cultural training upon appointment, quite often only one day, but teachers and parents believed that this was insufficient. One Indigenous teacher in an urban school said:

As an Aboriginal teacher I'm constantly explaining sorry business

The lack of cross-cultural training for teachers was highlighted in ‘Desert Schools’ (NLLIA Volume 2 1996)

It may be more appropriate for the focus in teacher education for teachers ... in the remote regions to be within in-service rather than pre-service training, although greater focus at the pre-service level would certainly enhance understanding and create awareness for all contexts in working with Aboriginal students (1996:17).

The need for professional development training to be provided for non-Indigenous teachers already working in the field is also highlighted in other literature (Western Australian Ministerial Review 1994; NLLIA Vol 2 1996).

RECOMMENDATION 8

That intensive professional development programmes for teachers be developed to provide cross-cultural training and an understanding of Indigenous education to promote community involvement and a better teaching climate.

Staff Attitudes and Expectations

The issue of teacher attitudes, stereotypes and expectations receives considerable attention in the literature, with emphasis on the need for teachers to be aware of racism in the school/classroom setting and to avoid hasty judgements about students’ abilities and other qualities based on superficial characteristics (Lee 1993; Andrews

1993; Peacock 1993; Barry 1994; Day 1994; Lawrence 1994; Dent and Hatton 1996; Osborne 1996; Partington 1996; NLLIA Vols 2 and 3 1996).

For many children and parents the attitude of school office staff was particularly alienating and did not assist school/community relations. Only one school visited had involved office staff in cross-cultural training.

The perceived attitudes of teachers towards pupils and community was a big issue for parents/community members and some principals. The low level of teacher involvement in community activities was seen as a drawback to promoting good relationships with parents, especially fathers, and was seen as contributing to a lack of community ownership of the school.

Staff expectations of Indigenous students was raised by some principals who felt that in some cases teachers were too easily prepared to believe that Indigenous students were not capable of higher scholastic achievement. Consequently students performed at the level expected and this resulted in disenchantment with the education process and the pupils' inclinations to attend were dampened.

Teacher/Student Relationships

The crucial importance of the teacher/students relationship is mentioned frequently in the literature, with emphasis on the need for a relationship which is characterised by personal warmth, good humour, friendly supportiveness and an expectation of realistically high academic standards (Fanshawe 1989; Malin 1989, 1990a; Hudsmith [sic] 1992; Gutman-Black 1992; Lee 1993; Hudspith 1994; Hatton et al 1994; Woods 1994; Ulstrup 1994; Ogilvie 1994; Hewitt 1995; NLLIA 1996; Osborne 1996; Gilbey 1998; Malin 1998; Richter et al 1998; Thomson 1998).

Pupils and parents who took part in the focus groups were keen to discuss the level of staff empathy and understanding of Indigenous pupils. Both groups felt that students do much better if they like their teachers and have realistic demands placed upon them.

This view is strongly supported by research into the characteristics of good teachers.

The personal characteristics of a good teacher have been described by Ryans (1960). He used factor analysis to arrive at three dimensions of fundamental teacher characteristics.

Pattern X - warm, understanding, friendly versus aloof, egocentric, restricted teacher behaviour

Pattern Y - responsible, business like, systematic versus evading, unplanned, slipshod teacher behaviour.

Pattern Z - stimulating, imaginative, original versus dull, routine teacher behaviour

Judith Klienfeld (1972) found that two fundamental dimensions separate effective teachers from ineffective teachers of Indian and Inuit (Eskimo) students. One is the degree of warmth shown by the teacher towards the students. The other is related to the teacher's level of active demandingness through making realistic demands on students. A warm teacher is one who welcomes personal friendships from students, and makes use of non-verbal communications such as high frequency of smiling, close body distance and physical contact to convey acceptance and encouragement to pupils.

Fanshawe (1989) argued that the personal characteristics of effective teachers of adolescent Aborigines are likely to include:

- being warm and supportive;
- making realistic demands of students;
- acting in a responsible, business like and systematic manner;
- being stimulating, imaginative and original.

He believed that his research showed that Aboriginal students felt that the warmth exhibited by the teacher was the most important factor in assessing their effectiveness.

Students would go to school more if teachers could put smiles on their faces and not look at us like we were dogs.

Staff/Parent Relationship

The relationship between staff and parents was seen as vitally important by parents and principals. They expressed the view that these relationships could either enhance or inhibit the education of Indigenous students. Inadequate communication and a lack of understanding often lead to each blaming the other when difficult situations arose. The student survey results indicated that attendance levels were significantly higher among students when teachers got in touch with their parents to talk about how they were going at school.

School Discipline Policies

School discipline policies and their interpretation by teachers were seen by many parents as affecting the attitude of students towards school. Some pupils were in a constant round of time out, suspensions and under constant threat of expulsion. One child attending an urban secondary school stated that he had been suspended for 20 days in the first semester of 1999. This was seen as contributing toward developing a negative attitude towards teachers and school attendance. As noted earlier well developed behaviour management programmes were in place but the constant emphasis on discipline with its associated time demands was not always viewed favourably by students and parents. In some cases, suspension for truancy was seen as a strange response by both parents and students as it merely legitimised another absence from school by the student.

Staff responses to students being late was constantly raised. Students indicated they felt harassed when family demands or responsibilities make them late for school and even though they have made a big effort to be on time, teachers show little or no understanding. One primary school girl reported that she had to get 3 younger siblings ready for pre-school and primary school because of family problems, before she went to school. However, when she arrived late at school, she was met by unsympathetic teacher reactions. Consequently it was easier to miss school than be late.

Curriculum

A recurring theme in the literature is the need to ensure that the education which is provided is interesting and relevant; that the world of the classroom is related to the world outside the school and to "young people's immediate practical interests" (NLLIA Vol 2 1996:77).

The curriculum offered by schools to Indigenous students was also a major talking point in parents/community focus groups and was also raised by staff and students. The inclusion of Indigenous studies including language and cultures was seen as having particular relevance. Schools varied in their approach from offering only mainstream curricula through to modified mainstream to take account of the local environment and culture through to having Indigenous culture and language taught by Indigenous elders.

During focus group discussions, the need for clear goals at the school and community level, was identified as being essential to give the schools a sense of direction and shared understanding between staff, students and parents. Meaningful consultation in negotiating a school program and agreed outcomes, action strategies and performance indicators would result in greater community commitment to the school.

Generally school principals and staff were well aware that Indigenous student attendance was an important issue for their school. In schools where Indigenous students were a small minority, however, statistical evidence was often not collected or available.

5.3 STUDENT ISSUES AFFECTING ATTENDANCE

School Atmosphere

The school atmosphere was important to students, staff and parents. Parents and students highlighted the need for the school to be a safe, caring place which valued Indigenous students and made them feel welcome. Staff attitudes to parents and pupils were seen as vitally important. Many students identified with the school through their teachers. If they liked their teachers they liked the school.

When students wrote about their feelings when they were at school, they frequently referred to teachers as a cause of their happiness or unhappiness. For example:

School makes me feel happy because my classes and friends and teachers are fun to be with

But also,

Unhappy and angry because I have a lot of trouble with teachers

And

Sick when teachers pick on you.

Indigenous Cultural Characteristics and Themes

There is repeated reference in the literature to cultural characteristics and themes which influence Indigenous students' interaction with western education (Christie 1985; Malin 1990a and b; Hudsmith (sic), 1992; Hughes and Moore 1993; West 1994). These include affiliation, social equality; independence and autonomy; an emphasis on cooperation rather than competition; and, attitudes to risk taking and shame.

According to Schwab (1998), some of these cultural themes provide useful insights into the dynamics of school attendance, with shame or shyness, for instance, having a “powerful impact on children's willingness to attend school” (1998:10).

Personal autonomy, which is a defining characteristic of much Indigenous social action, also has a direct effect on school attendance; for while many Indigenous parents value school and the acquisition of English language, literacy and numeracy skills, they are powerless to force their young to attend school if they choose, for whatever reason, not to attend; “You're not boss for me” being a typical response of children who are being pressured by their parents to attend school (Schwab 1998). A similar observation is made by Nadarajah (1997), who notes that “Aboriginal parents [in the Northern Territory] are very tolerant of absenteeism ... [and] are reluctant to force their children, who operate with a high degree of independence, into a course against their will” (1997:38).

These two cultural themes, shame and autonomy, are also reported in the literature to be important factors influencing the school attendance of Indigenous students in urban and rural areas (Munns and Connelly 1996; Munns 1998).

Gender Issues

Gender issues which influence the willingness of teenage Indigenous students to attend school are addressed by several writers (Gilbert 1995; Herbert 1995; Hughes 1995; Woods 1995; NLLIA Vol 2 1996). Indigenous female students are reported to experience both sexual and racial harassment at school, while many Indigenous male students are reported to experience conflict relating to their ambiguous child/adult status. Typically they are treated as ‘children’ in the school setting and as responsible young adults in the home/community setting. In traditionally oriented remote communities, Indigenous males approaching or following initiation are reported to find school unacceptable, believing that school is only for ‘kids’.

RECOMMENDATION 9

That learning options be made available in schools to Indigenous males in remote areas, in the post-primary years, that will allow them to pursue studies of a practical nature, and provide opportunities for structured workplace learning.

Problems Associated with English Language and Literacy Learning

It is apparent from the literature that the low levels of achievement in the area of English language and literacy learning among Indigenous students is of considerable significance in relation to their willingness and ability to participate fully in the education process, as a “lack of proficiency in Standard English ... [is] considered by many to be a fundamental barrier to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' participation in education” (DEET 1994:33). Failure to learn to read and write in Standard Australian English (SAE), it is believed, “leads to cumulative lack of academic success, avoidance of school and then dropping out” (Nadarajah 1997:30).

There are many other reports in the literature which indicate that the greatest teaching difficulty, and the greatest opposition from Indigenous students is in this area of school learning. According to some writers, the reason for such opposition to this area of schooling lies in the fact that literacy is more than simply learning particular skills, “literacy is a social and cultural practice ... which involves the transmission of values” (Munns and Connelly 1996:3), in this instance Anglo-Celtic values, not Indigenous values. In similar vein, Sheppard (1996)

points out that for students in remote communities, “English expresses a culture that is foreign to children ... who still live, to some greater or lesser extent, in an Aboriginal cultural heritage ... [yet] they are being asked to talk in a language that expresses a different culture” (quoted in NLLIA 1996:116).

Repeated reference is made in the literature to the alienation experienced by Indigenous students in traditionally oriented communities when the language of instruction is foreign to them and when their home language is not understood or not valued in the classroom setting (Folds 1987; DEET 1994; McKay 1997; Davies et al 1997). Such alienation from school is frequently seen as a correlate of regular non-attendance, with Howell (1996) commenting that “by and large, most children [in remote desert schools] find the instruction and literacy solely in English a very great barrier to hurdle. Eventually, by the age of nine or so they seem to 'fade-out' and cease the constant struggle to understand or be understood” (quoted in NLLIA Vol 2 1996:63).

Problems of alienation also arise for Indigenous students when non-Indigenous teachers “unversed in the Aboriginal ways of using English, incorrectly label their student's way of speaking as ‘bad English’” (Batten et al 1998:11-12), and attribute this linguistic ‘incompetence’ to a lack of ability in the students themselves. Such deficit notions simply reinforce teachers' low academic expectations of their Indigenous students. This frequently leads to misunderstandings which can impact not only on student's learning, but also influence the teacher's attitudes towards, and interactions with, students causing them to misinterpret the student's actions as being “ignorant, insolent [or] indifferent [which in turn can] lead to students' developing a deep resentment or frustration” (Hanlen 1998:23). The significance of this problem lies in the fact that poor literacy acquisition and alienation from the process of schooling is reported in the literature to be a frequent consequence of such misunderstanding (see Phillips 1992; Andrews 1993; Malin 1994; Davies et al 1997).

While low standards of academic achievement, including low levels of English language and literacy skills, are almost universally attributed by teaching staff to high levels of absenteeism among Indigenous students, this view is challenged by some writers and researchers. As noted earlier it can be seen as a classic case of “simply ‘blaming the victim’ and is evidence of a lack of willingness on the part of educators and authorities to look for alternative causes within the education system itself, rather than in the supposed ‘deficits’ in the Aboriginal learner and Aboriginal communities” (Davies et al 1997:31).

The nature of the relationship between school attendance and school success, particularly competence in English language and literacy skills, is of some importance, as it is not only a recurrent theme in the literature but it is also obvious that consistent attendance is critical to the learning process (Mander-Ross 1995; Nadarajah 1997). It is therefore of primary importance that the nature of the cause-effect relationship between these two variables be established, as this will assist in determining what strategies are most appropriate to overcome the problem of poor attendance. If, as reported in the literature (DEET 1994; Nadarajah 1997), the area of English language and literacy learning is a major stumbling block for Indigenous students – it being the most feared of all school activities and attracting the greatest opposition from Indigenous students (Munns and Connelly 1996) – then a major thrust should be towards overcoming the difficulties that Indigenous students experience in this area of schooling.

RECOMMENDATION 10

That research be undertaken to establish the nature of the cause/effect relationship between low levels of achievement in the area of English language and literacy learning and poor school attendance.

The role which ‘success’ plays in relation to school attendance also became apparent during the focus group discussions and in student responses to survey questions.

- The level of success at school, whether it be academic, sport or social, appeared to have important consequences on the level of attendance according to teachers. Questionnaire results indicate that children who attended school more often were significantly more likely to believe that by attending school whenever they could they would “get better marks in school subjects” and “be able to get a better job when they left school”.

However, this did not always prove to be the case. One child in year 8 could not write his own name on the questionnaire but had a good attendance record and was not particularly popular or good at sport. Despite this teachers maintained that most children who had less than satisfactory attendance did not perform well academically. They saw it as cause and effect.

- Conversely the low level of reading attainment of many Indigenous students was put forward by the staff at several schools as a factor which inhibited the progress of Indigenous children at school and often resulted in students removing themselves from the classroom.
- The low level of English usage in some remote communities was reported by some principals, teachers and parents as an inhibiting factor in communication with parents. It was seen as a factor in the success of children at school and consequently their level of attendance. According to one principal:

the children in this community only speak English in school. At home before school, after school, at weekends and during the holidays they speak their parents' language which would be a traditional language or a Creole.

This view was supported strongly by a student in her suggestion on how Indigenous attendance rates could be improved:

They would attend more if their English was good. Some feel that since they're not good at English (not their first language) there is no way they'll achieve at school. Therefore teachers and heads of departments need to take this into consideration by conducting classes to improve the individual's English.

- In rural communities, the use of non-standard English was also seen by teachers as affecting the success of Indigenous students.

Indigenous Cultural Programs

Many parents and students claimed that Indigenous studies was not part of their schools' curriculum except on special occasions such as National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) week. The provision of Indigenous cultural programmes in schools has been recommended by the Aboriginal Consultative Group to the Schools Commission (1975), the National Aboriginal Education Committee (1988), the Hughes Report (1988), and was a recommendation of the Review of the National Aboriginal Education Policy (DEET 1995). All see cultural programmes as crucial to the educational development of Indigenous children through strengthening their pride and identity.

Transition Periods

The transition periods during the students' school life: home to pre-school or primary, pre-school to primary, primary to secondary, and compulsory to non-compulsory were seen by teachers and parents as important points in a child's life which affected attendance patterns. No one who was consulted saw these transitions as having positive attendance outcomes. The transition from compulsory to non-compulsory schooling was seen as one point where attendance and participation rates dropped appreciably.

The amount and quality of pre-schooling was seen by some parents and teachers as vitally important in preparing children for primary school. Despite this, it was common for pre-schools to report spasmodic attendance by Indigenous children.

The importance of early childhood education as a bridge between home and school is a recurrent theme in the literature. Many writers express the view that an Indigenous child's first encounter with western education is critical in shaping his/her future attitude towards schooling and in establishing attitudes towards self, as an individual and as a learner (Adams 1998). As the National Aboriginal Education Committee (1989) has made clear, what happens in these early encounters not only affects the Indigenous students' attitudes towards western education, but can also have a profound effect on later educational outcomes.

Other Issues Raised During the Consultations

- The relevance of schooling to Indigenous children was widely discussed. Discussions usually involved other factors such as levels of employment in the community, the school's curriculum content, community expectations and levels of expectation and motivation of the Indigenous students. The lack of economic development in rural and isolated communities was highlighted by school staff, many of whom saw a direct link between lack of relevance and non-attendance. Howard Groome, in Bourke et al 1994, however sees schools (p140)

as places where the power of non-Aboriginal authority has been reinforced.

and later:

In the first months at school, ... many Aboriginal children have to confront another world. This is a world in which their own values are denied, their language and communication strategies are challenged and their identity and self-confidence are threatened

- Family and community experiences of schooling in the past were seen as strongly affecting current students. The non-participation of some parents was seen as being a result of their own negative experiences as students. Many Indigenous families do not have successful educational role models to inspire and coach the current students. As 'Desert Schools' (NLLIA Volume 3 1996:14) states

the situation inherited by Aboriginal people is built upon generations of predominantly negative educational outcome.

- Transport to home from school was a big factor in some areas where students travel considerable distances between the school and home over often less than satisfactory roads.
- Students, parents and teachers saw the social aspects of schooling as being of great importance to attendance. Social activities and friendships were generally seen as positive. However, peer pressure was seen as having the capability of being positive or negative. Bullying and teasing of Indigenous students by both non-Indigenous and other Indigenous students in some cases discouraged attendance, as statements by students showed when completing the statement:

Students would go to school more if ... "Students stopped mocking, teasing" ... "if nobody would pick or tease as they often do" ... "if there were no bullies".

However, good role models in older siblings or cousins encouraged children to attend.

- Some parents, especially of secondary students, raised the need for specific programmes to meet individual needs. They thought that many children were finding their class work too difficult, which often led to behaviour problems and/or breakdown in school discipline. These often led to suspension or expulsion, but, quite often the child just avoided going to school.
- The level of family obligations, which led children to help look after and care for younger siblings, was seen by parents and home/school liaison officers as having a detrimental effect on attendance.

In fact, in the analysis of questionnaire data, those students who reported that their family often needed their help were significantly more likely to miss school. Quite often such obligations would lead to a child being late for school and rather than face the harassing ritual present in some schools for being late, it is easier for the child to stay home. Some mothers or grandmothers welcome the child's company and are pleased if the child decides to stay home with them.

- The number of non-attendances due to poor health was not well known within the schools. Some Indigenous children have a large number of unexplained absences. This could be because of the parents' level of literacy resulting in a low percentage of explanatory notes and therefore statistics on absences through illness are not available. However, it was generally believed that many Indigenous students suffered from poor health.
- Parents' attitudes towards schooling and teachers were seen by many teachers as being negative or at best apathetic. School principals stated that getting a good attendance of Indigenous parents at school functions was difficult. The fathers, in particular, being rarely in attendance.
- Behaviour management programmes have been developed in several schools in an endeavour to promote socially responsible behaviour in the school. Such programmes are seen as improving the school environment for all students by making the school a safer and more caring place. These programmes usually consists of up to seven steps with all students entering at step 4 and either going up toward step 1 for good behaviour or down to step 7 for unsuitable behaviour. The students on the top steps are rewarded while those on the bottom levels are counselled, and in some cases, denied access to excursions, sports days and other activities. At step 7 suspension or expulsion are possible.

- The clash that occurs between urban Indigenous children preferring to work in a group, and the demands by some teachers that children must work individually, was raised by teacher and student groups in urban secondary schools. Some pupils claimed that they had often been accused of cheating or being lazy when they chose to work together in class.

5.4 PARENT/COMMUNITY FACTORS

- Isolation of communities from the major cities and consequent lack of employment opportunities were seen as being negative factors. Results from the student questionnaire analysis indicated that school attendance was particularly low where both parents were unemployed and consequently there was comparatively little structure in family life. Where unemployment was high, it was felt that this could make school less relevant and consequently attendance less important. The level of community aspirations was also seen as an important factor by teachers.
- In most communities visited, the budgeting and financial management skills of some Indigenous parents was seen as a critical factor in school attendance. 'Pension day' was given as the reason for a considerable number of absences because the children in some families recognised that this was the only day in the week when their family had funds and if they weren't with their parents they might miss out. Financial difficulties also caused students problems with school books, uniforms and lunches. Any one of which can be an excuse for non-attendance at school.
- The level of education of the children's parents, especially the mother/guardian, was advanced by teachers and parents as contributing to school attendance rates; parents with little formal education being identified as less likely to meet school requirements and thus increase family/school tension with subsequent effects on the children. These parents were often identified as having low aspirations for their children and providing low level of student support.
- Traditional Indigenous child rearing practices, which generally left young children to be free and undisciplined compared to western child rearing traditions, were seen by some school principals as contributing to the level of attendance. Parents were seen as not making their children go to school. One mother said of her children:

If they are asleep I let them sleep until they wake up

- The level of Indigenous parents involvement in the school was viewed as crucial by teachers and parents. The development of Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Association (ASSPA) committees was seen as encouraging but had yet to be translated into increased parental interest through meaningful involvement in schooling matters. Despite pupil attendance being a problem many ASSPA committees had not discussed the issue. As noted earlier some schools had developed behaviour management or incentive programmes, in conjunction with parents, and this had positively affected parental involvement and student school attendance.

RECOMMENDATION 11

That schools' curricula should be developed in conjunction with parents and community members with the local Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Association (ASSPA) committees having a meaningful role. The curricula should be focussed on developing literacy and numeracy and be relevant to the pupils by taking account of local environment and culture including Indigenous language.

- The language spoken in the community was not, in many communities, the language of instruction at the school, nor was it even taught at the school, which could well be offering a foreign language in the curriculum. Parents and pupils often viewed such a situation negatively as they saw it as a rejection of their own language and consequently of them.
- The level of race relations and Indigenous acceptance within the general community was raised during some consultations especially in larger schools with a minority of Indigenous students. Both teachers and parents claimed it was a factor in how the school was viewed and attended by Indigenous students where they were an identifiable minority group.

Some communities still view schools as being ‘white fella’ places and concerted efforts are required to overcome this image. The use of Indigenous elders to teach language and cultural matters and provide a link between community and school was very successful in several schools as was the employment of community members within the schools in ancillary positions.

RECOMMENDATION 12

That schools be encouraged to provide opportunities for Indigenous elders, past students, and other community members, to be involved in teaching programs, and in the development of a supportive atmosphere for Indigenous students. Role models within the Indigenous community should be encouraged to become mentors to Indigenous students, especially to those who have attendance difficulties.

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6. STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE ATTENDANCE

Reasons for student non-attendance identified during the consultations and the literature include some which schools and teachers can do little about. However, it is important to gain an understanding of the problem. If the theory of reasoned action, as espoused by Azjen and Fishbein (1980) is accepted, then it would appear reasonable to assume that when a student is deciding to attend school s/he will consider both the positive and negative aspects of their decision. In addition, social or normative pressures from significant others such as parents, friends, teachers and community members could be expected to play an important part. The final decision will depend on how the student evaluated the relative importance of the positive and negative factors.

When young people decide not to attend school there are probably four alternatives open to the school:

- do nothing and accept the situation;
- apply additional negative actions or punishments to overcome the initial negatives;
- negate or eliminate the negative factors;
- provide or increase the positive factors to encourage attendance which may involve changing factors within the school environment.

The last three courses of action require at the very least that the causes of student non-attendance be identified.

During the consultations focus groups of principals, teachers, parents, community members and students offered their views on why Indigenous students do or do not come to school. During these discussions many practices were identified as being successful in improving school attendance. However, there was no one factor identified as being the key to high attendance rates. Rather, attendance was seen as a complex issue requiring particular inputs from all involved in the provision of education for Indigenous children.

Many of these practices can be replicated in other situations although they may of course require some modification to suit the local environment.

6.1 SYSTEMIC STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE ATTENDANCE

Attendance Data

In schools where Indigenous students were in the minority their attendance records were often not disaggregated so actual attendance rates were not known by the schools. The Student Information Management System (SIMS) in the Torres Strait schools showed promise of providing quality data regarding student attendance. This computer-based system collates individual class attendance records on a weekly basis.

In some areas the attendance of transient Indigenous pupils was of great concern to the schools. In Western Australia a student tracking system involving a database is being trialed in the Goldfields and Mid-West education districts during 1999. This project involving government and non-government schools, identifies and monitors transient and truant students across both sectors. Transient students are identified and patterns of transience are noted so that educational programmes can be provided at the point of need. The 1997 Western Australian Child Health Survey, Education, Health and Competence revealed that some 3%, or 10,775 students could be regarded as 'at risk' due to poor attendance rates. Transients and truants are generally included within this group, a large proportion of whom are Indigenous students.

This student tracking system will involve a set of processes, procedures and systems which will identify and monitor the location of students across all educational sectors thus enabling strategies to be implemented to improve student attendance. Transient students educational needs are more likely to be met when appropriate information is transferred to enable them to have continuity of education.

This project faces some risk in relation to possible bad publicity and adverse public reaction on the grounds of invasion of privacy but the project team has several strategies in place to overcome negative reactions.

Transition from Pre-School/Home to Primary School

Thursday Island Primary School provides special enrichment programmes for first year students who have had little or no pre-school experience. This program offers a great deal of “hands on” concrete activity to assist children make this transition smoothly.

The **Ludmilla Pre-School** in Darwin has developed a pre-school awareness and familiarisation program. The pre-school encourages Indigenous parents and their pre pre-school children to visit the pre-school and for the parents and children to be involved in activities with a group of children already enrolled who act as role models.

Some parents and teachers saw a major problem at the start of primary school was due to mothers taking their children with them when they went shopping on pension day because they realised they may be late and not at home when their young children arrived. To overcome this, some schools such as **Cherbourg State Primary School** had established a program of constantly emphasising the benefits of attending school to parents and students. The Cherbourg Community Council had agreed to employ a truancy officer to assist in getting the message out to parents and the Community.

Warruwi School pre-school on Goulburn Island allows children to join the junior primary class for the last 45 minutes of the school day for various activities such as using Lego and play dough. They then help the older children clean up, pack away materials and so on. This enables them to be better prepared for transition as they become familiar with the primary school activities and routine.

The literature also draws attention to the important role which early childhood education plays as a bridge to formal schooling. In addressing the issue of early childhood education, many writers emphasise the need for parental involvement and a family focus; a welcoming and accepting environment; a holistic approach such as that adopted by **Yipirinya School** in Alice Springs, which focuses on the needs of the whole child and addresses the health, nutritional, social, emotional as well as the academic needs of the child; and a bilingual approach in pre-school and the early years of formal schooling (Smith 1993; Glover 1994; Australian Parliament Senate Employment, Education and Training Reference Committee 1996; Hanlen 1998; Williams Kennedy undated).

Early childhood programs which are reported to have shown positive outcomes among Indigenous pre-school children include a Literacy Nest Program in Armidale (Watson and Roberts 1996); an early childhood enrichment program at the **Kuranda Pre-school** in North Queensland (Buzacott 1994); and the Ashmont English Enrichment Program introduced into the **Ashmont School** in Wagga Wagga, NSW (Elliott 1994).

Transition from Primary to Secondary

Many parents, teachers and students expressed concern that the move to secondary school led to students feeling insecure and uncertain about their schooling. Some secondary schools are seen as large impersonal places in which students are no longer valued as individuals.

Students reported that they missed the relationship they had with the classroom teacher and their former classmates. The students were often confused by the larger number of subjects, delivered in different rooms with different teachers. They also had difficulty in coping with the move from being the senior pupils at primary level to becoming juniors at high school.

At **Port Augusta Secondary College** sub-schools have been established. Students are placed in small groups and work with a much smaller number of teachers.

Students from remote communities also had to face additional difficulties resulting from their having to leave home and board in a distant town or city. As a result, they often moved from a situation where they were part of the majority group to a minority group situation where English was the only language.

Kormilda College, a boarding school, invites the parents of commencing students to visit the school to smooth the transition of students from their primary school and community to the college in Darwin. **Kormilda College**, which has Indigenous students as boarders, has its Community Liaison Education Officer visit communities to meet with, talk and listen to parents and show them videos of life at school and of their own children. A library of videos is being developed of life on communities so students may view these while they are at school.

Two parent programmes are also undertaken at **Kormilda College**. Early in the year short visits are arranged for parents of new, young students to allow them to improve their understanding of residential life and educational programmes being offered. These parents also meet with teaching and residential staff to enable them to raise

and discuss issues. Later in the year, visits are arranged for parents of students in Years 10 and 11. The focus of these visits is subject selection for the following year but other education and residential issues are also discussed.

The Carlton project in Port Augusta involves adding on at least one year of secondary schooling to primary schooling, as was recommended in the Hughes Report (1988). This project was established because significant numbers of **Carlton Primary School** Indigenous students never proceeded on to high school. This project provides an extended transition to **Port Augusta Secondary College** for some students with some subjects at High School and some at **Carlton Primary School**. For some students Years 8 and 9 are solely taken at Carlton.

Badu Island State Primary School is planning to add a secondary year to its primary program in 2000 because of the many fourteen year olds who no longer attend school. After completing primary school, they are sent to secondary school on Thursday Island or the mainland but are reluctant to return to school after the first term vacation. With no prospect of employment they fill in time until they are old enough to gain employment on Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) funding.

Means testing of Abstudy assistance was raised in the context of expenses incurred in sending children to boarding school from the outer Torres Strait Islands where secondary education facilities are not available. Indigenous cultural values, such as sharing, result in Torres Strait Islanders, apparently on good incomes not having the resources to send their children to boarding school because their personal income is distributed among their extended family according to their cultural mores. Consequently their actual income is the family average and this means that these people really do need to be able to access Abstudy if their children are to go to boarding school until Year 12.

Compulsory Schooling to Post Compulsory Schooling Transition

Attendance data shows a dramatic fall in participation rates once students have attained the legal leaving age. Some schools have endeavoured to combat this trend by providing a range of 'hands on' or work experience activities to make school more attractive.

Sanderson High School in Darwin has endeavoured to meet the changing needs of students by introducing Vocational Education and Training (VET) courses. The school has private provider status and offers students opportunities to study courses in Hospitality, Tourism, Engineering and Automotive, Construction and Communications. Student focus groups agreed that they found these courses practical, worthwhile and interesting. **Nightcliff High School** offers foundation studies specifically developed for Indigenous students together with work experience programmes to meet student needs.

Sanderson High School also organises visits to government and Indigenous organisations to see the resources and work opportunities available as part of an overall program of developing career aspirations for Indigenous youth. Role models of successful Indigenous people who come to the school as speakers and motivators also form part of the program.

A 'Pathways Program' for **Thursday Island State High School** Year 11 and 12 students has been developed between the school and local community. In this program students spend one day each week working in an industry where they feel they might like to seek employment.

This high school also offers Pregnancy/Parenting programmes for those of its students who have to support dependent children. Modified classroom requirements enable the young people in this situation, especially young mothers, to meet family and schooling responsibilities.

The **Gumala Mirnuwarri** (coming together to learn) in the West Pilbara in Western Australian is a pilot project designed to improve educational outcomes of Indigenous secondary school students. This project involves a partnership between industry through Rio Tinto, government, schools and community. The key values of the project are family involvement and support as well as traditional knowledge and culture.

The vision statement for the project states:

The Project will improve the educational outcomes to Aboriginal students in the Roeburne area to a level commensurate with the broader population, so that they are able to compete effectively for

apprenticeships and commercial cadetships or to pursue further education and employment opportunities.

To achieve this, the project will be family focused with long and short-term goals. It will reinforce traditional Aboriginal culture, values and knowledge and will involve collaboration between organisations bringing together available resources and facilities.

The success of this project will point the way to more effective use of educational and community resources to achieve improved educational outcomes for Aboriginal students generally.

A Steering Committee to manage the project meets eight times a year. Its membership includes sponsors, families and project staff. This group is largely responsible for policy and major financial decisions. There is also a Steering Group of project staff, school and industry representatives, which manage the day to day operations.

The project is based on a number of strategies including the establishment of Enrichment or Homework Centres, the provision of school-based mentors, the provision of tutors, the organisation of camps and visits to industry and tertiary institutions. It also involves helping families to assist their children to succeed. Schools, too, have been assisted with professional development programmes for staff.

This project specifically targets those students wanting to succeed, and having the potential, family interest and support to do so. Students and parents have to sign an agreement that places certain obligations upon them before they can become involved.

Students regularly attend the Enrichment Centre each day between 3.00 p.m. and 5.00 p.m. where they do their homework or receive individual tuition. Any student can attend providing they obey rules and non-project students at Roeburne and Karratha do so each day.

The project reports improved school attendance rates and outcomes for project students. After two years of operation three **Karratha High School** students gained University entrance in 1999 compared to only one in the previous ten years. School reports have improved significantly and some fifteen students are now in Years 11 or 12 which indicates an increasing retention rate.

Another pleasing feature of the project has been the increased family involvement in the students' education. There has also been greatly increased Indigenous attendance and participation in meetings about the project.

Project staff have noticed significant positive influence and an increase in expectations of students, teachers and families in relation to education outcomes. Standardised testing results also show improved achievement levels.

For students, highlights of the project have been self-esteem workshops with the Perth based Sport Challenge Group; a Speed Reading-Learning to Learn Group, visits to industry, and a trip to New Zealand to visit a Maori school courtesy of the Rio Tinto Foundation. DETYA funds were also used to visit Perth tertiary institutions and Indigenous organisations.

At **Northlands Secondary College** in Melbourne the school believes that the factors which contribute to children attending school are:

- inclusive curriculum (challenging);
- strong Koorie presence;
- security within the school;
- cultural activities.

The school has constant contact with the student's homes. This involves the parents in the schooling of their children, helping to develop their strengths, and, designing programmes to utilise these strengths. This includes flexibility of school days and timetabling. This flexibility ensures that students are free to undertake their classes as well as fulfil family responsibilities. The school believes this is important in breaking down barriers that may normally exist within a school.

The **Northlands Secondary College** has recognised that at times there is a need for teaching methods to take into account Indigenous learning styles, and teaching staff are also conscious of keeping classes interesting. This

is achieved through group work, practical workshops such as dance, and activities that require individual initiative and thought. It is not uncommon to have a whole lesson taught without the use of books or pens.

6.2 SCHOOL/STAFF STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE ATTENDANCE

6.2.1 Program and Strategies identified in the Literature which Improve Attendance

- **Programmes for Students at Risk (STAR)**

Batten and Russell (1995) identify several programmes which have been successful in reducing the level of non-attendance among Indigenous students and "improving the quality of their school lives" (1995:72).

A program introduced in the late 1980s at the **Yalata Anangu School** in South Australia, raised attendance from 48% in 1989 to 73% in 1991. This was achieved by making the school a safer place; introducing a breakfast program; employing a school/community health worker; providing a bus for isolated children; 'Ananguising' the school through greater involvement of parents and community members in school activities and at all levels of the decision making process; and fitting hearing impaired students with a 'walkman' and head phones.

In another successful program at the **Port Augusta High School**, teachers and students worked together to lower levels of tension which had arisen because of racist attitudes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

Batten and Russell (1995) also provide details of a successful Northern Territory STAR program which involved support and advice to students and parents; a staff development program designed to increase teacher awareness of, and ability to manage, 'at risk students'; and a direct service element designed to develop student self-esteem and improve interpersonal skills as well as decreasing unexplained absences and the number of suspension orders. The direct servicing element has been evaluated positively by teachers, students and parents.

- **Whole School Approach**

The **Crossways Lutheran School** at Ceduna (South Australia) has pursued a range of initiatives which have increased attendance among Indigenous students from less than 60% in 1992 to 85% in 1998 (Thomson, 1998).

The major thrust of these initiatives was to increase cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity among staff members; and recognition of and respect for student home languages; to increase Indigenous parent/community involvement in all aspects of schooling, including classroom activities; provision of a non-threatening school environment and the employment of Aboriginal Education Workers; careful selection of staff and commitment of such staff to the Christian ethic on which the school is founded.

- **Strategic Results Project**

An IESIP funded Strategic Results Project, undertaken by the Independent Schools Board (ISB) of South Australia, resulted in increased student attendance, increased commitment to academic success and improved participation and completion rates (ISB of SA, 1999).

The project, which ran from March 1998 to March 1999 and targeted students in Years 9-12 in ten schools affiliated with the ISB, involved the identification of 'focus teachers' in each school. These teachers assumed a 'mentoring role' for Indigenous students in the school, met regularly as a teacher network and attended professional development courses, workshops and seminars. Another aspect of the project was the establishment of a student network, the aim of which was to address the problem of isolation experienced by many Indigenous students in the various independent schools.

- **Use of Computer Technology**

Eckermann (1994) has reported that strategies found to be most successful in improving literacy performance of Indigenous students included personal praise and support, use of learning contracts and computer work.

Several studies have provided evidence which support this finding with respect to the use of computers. The evidence presented by the Northern Territory Department of Education (1983); Lovegrove (1985); Darvell (1986); Fryer (1987); Flear (1987); Scott (1990); Dench (1991); O'Donoghue (1992); Hughes (1993); and

Steen (1997), make it evident that the use of computers can have a significant motivating effect on Indigenous students which results in a marked improvement in literacy and other school learning, and, as reported by Lovegrove (1985) and O'Donoghue (1992), a marked increase in school attendance.

The general conclusion from these studies is that there are many aspects of computer-based learning which are compatible with Indigenous students' preferred ways of learning.

RECOMMENDATION 13

That computer facilities should be made as accessible as possible to students, for example, through enabling access to computers in schools after hours, as well as in homework centres and libraries.

- **Other Strategies**

Other strategies noted in the literature which are said to improve school attendance, are the provision of breakfast and lunch programmes as a part of a schools' pastoral care program, particularly for pre-school and primary school students, and the provision of a school bus to pick up students who might otherwise be tempted to miss school, because of the long distance they would have to walk to get there (Glover 1994; Australian Parliament Senate Employment, Education and Training Reference Committee 1996; NLLIA Vol 2 1996; McKnight 1998; Schwab 1998).

A recent Western Australian report (Western Australian Ministry of Education 1993) provides an extensive list of both 'school-based' and 'out of school' factors which are believed to influence school attendance among Indigenous students. The explicit aim of the authors of the report is to draw attention to individual differences among Indigenous students and to alert teachers and other school personnel to the need to use the 'check list' as a means of identifying students who are 'at risk' (for whatever reason), particularly students who are in the last two years of primary and the first two years of secondary school. The report notes that teachers have an obligation to identify such students and to formulate strategies to address non-attendance.

6.2.2 Strategies which Improve English Language and Literacy Outcomes

It is apparent from the literature and the consultations that Indigenous communities want their young people to attain a level of proficiency in English language and literacy which enables them to communicate effectively in the wider community for purposes related to employment, business or dealings with government. Many teachers, Indigenous community members, parents, students and researchers have expressed the view that improved learning outcomes, particularly in the area of English language and literacy learning, could make the process of schooling less alienating for Indigenous students and provide a greater incentive to attend school.

Bilingual education programmes and two way schooling

The provision of bilingual education programmes is one approach which has been adopted in order to assist Indigenous students acquire English language and literacy skills by "attempting to change schools so that they match the language and culture of Indigenous students" (Louden 1994:25). However, there has been considerable debate in the literature surrounding the issue of bilingual education, with the controversy still unresolved (Bourke 1980; Gale 1990; Nicholls 1994a; Devlin 1995; Davies et al 1997; Devlin 1997).

While evidence from countries such as Canada, Switzerland, Hong Kong and Belgium, "which operate quite comfortably and effectively on bilingual and multilingual models" (NLLIA Vol 3 1996:28), suggests that a bilingual approach should provide positive outcomes for Australian Indigenous students, mixed outcomes are reported in the literature in the Australian context.

Some authors claim that bilingual programmes result in positive changes in student self-respect, recognition of and pride in Indigenous languages (Baarda 1994) and improved English literacy skills with positive transfer to other areas of school learning (NLLIA Vol 3 1996). Nicholls (1994b), for instance, argues that with careful attention to curriculum and selection of culturally relevant texts, bilingual programmes can have a positive impact on Indigenous education.

Other writers, however, point to the "diminished time allowed for acquisition of English literacy skills" (Batten et al 1998:113), as well as evidence which suggests little positive transfer of literacy skills from the first language to the second.

The conflicting evidence regarding the outcomes of bilingual education suggests a need for a more thorough evaluation of such programmes to establish "whether ... [it is] the model or its implementation ... [that] is at fault" (NLLIA Vol 3 1996:28).

One major positive outcome of bilingual education has been the development of a "two-way or bi-cultural education, which grew out of and adopted the principles of bilingual education" (Batten et al 1998:14).

While bilingual programmes have been one approach adopted in schools to improve the achievement of Indigenous students in the area of English language and literacy learning, other approaches have been adopted which attempt "to make the teaching of English more explicit" (Louden 1994:25).

First Steps

First Steps, a program which was introduced in Western Australia in 1988 to make the teaching of English more explicit, and which aims to assist students in the development in language and literacy skills, is now offered to teachers in all Western Australian government schools from Years K-5. This program, which incorporates curriculum development, school development and professional development also provides support for teachers in the classroom "from an experienced collaborative teacher and ... written support materials ... [which] are centred on a set of 'developmental continua' that map children's progress in reading, writing, spelling and oral language" (Louden 1994:26-29). These development continua are one of the central features of the program that "make teaching more explicit, providing a starting point for planning and teaching ... for inexperienced teachers" (Louden 1994:32-33).

One of the underlying principles of First Steps is to focus on what children can do, not on what they can't; to focus on the individual and to avoid making comparisons with what other students of similar age can do. This is achieved by allowing students to work at their own pace and through the provision of activities and use of strategies which are appropriate, not only to the student's present level of development, but also to their cultural and experiential backgrounds.

The evaluation of First Steps in a remote Indigenous community in Western Australia has provided evidence that "careful school planning, explicit teaching of selected writing frameworks, team work and close monitoring of student performance" (Louden 1994:35) can have positive results in term of student outcomes in the area of language and literacy learning.

English Language and Numeracy Program

A similar program, the English Language and Numeracy (ELAN) program for Indigenous students, which is based on the First Steps program, was introduced into Western Australian primary schools in 1991, specifically to address the literacy and numeracy needs of Indigenous students (Jarred 1994). A designated ELAN teacher in the school undertakes professional development in the First Steps, in Indigenous learning styles and in teaching English as a second language and becomes a resource person for other teachers in the school; they provide support in the implementation of the First Steps materials and strategies for Indigenous students and in the development of materials and resources appropriate to the needs of Indigenous students. As with First Steps, the developmental continua allow student progress to be monitored and provide "teachers with a 'common language' to describe their students' literacy behaviours which ... (facilitates) networking amongst teachers and ... (gives) consistency from year to year" (Batten et al 1998:32).

In schools where ELAN has been operating since 1991, it has been claimed to be successful, with Indigenous students showing significant improvement with respect to levels of literacy.

Fostering English language in Kimberley Schools (FELIKS)

The FELIKS program, which is an initiative of the Catholic Education Office, "has as its main goal the teaching of Standard Australian English (SAE) while reinforcing the students' home language" (Davies et al 1997:38). The program aims to make teachers more aware of the problems with communication that can occur in a classroom setting between students from a Kriol (Creole) or Aboriginal English language background and teachers who speak SAE.

Language and Communication Enhancement For Two-Way Education

Another program operating in Western Australia which has shown positive outcomes, is the Language and Communication Enhancement Model for Two-Way Education project. This program provides training for

teachers and assists them in developing linguistically and socio-linguistically appropriate teaching strategies for use with Indigenous students in schools using the Two-Way model of education (Davies et al 1997).

The English Language Acquisition Framework

In South Australia, the English Language Acquisition (ELA) program for Aboriginal students provides a framework for teaching English to Indigenous students for whom English is a second language. A major aim of the project has been to investigate teaching strategies and methodologies for Indigenous students which, even in the face of high staff turnover, provide a continuity of teaching methodology and process. A significant feature of the program has been the training and support provided for staff in schools in which the ELA framework has been introduced (Slattery 1994).

The framework, which provides a contextual approach to the teaching and learning of English, enables Indigenous students to perceive purpose and meaning in what they are learning, while, at the same time, developing competence in the use of SAE. Negotiation between students and teachers with respect to the choice of topic, and active participation of both students and teachers in the learning process and selection of activities, ensures that the learning process and the social context in which they are operating are relevant to the students.

Evidence of the success of the ELA framework is provided by Bishop (1993), who reports that the most consistent response from teachers who trialed the ELA in the early 1990s, was that the use of the framework dramatically raised their expectations about the capability of Indigenous students; provided unexpected evidence of student enthusiasm, commitment and independence and evidence of a positive approach to learning, when students were given the opportunity to "share power with the teachers" (Bishop 1993:9).

The English Language Arts Program

Cunnington (1994) provides details of a successful literacy program for Indigenous students attending State schools in remote far north Queensland. The English Language Arts program was developed for use among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who, in most instances, do not speak SAE as their first language. The aim of the program is to help students to communicate well in SAE without suffering any loss to the facility with which they speak their 'home' language. The role of the teacher is to devise real life or life-like social contexts that relate to the students' current interests, experiences and needs and which allow them to become personally involved in a meaningful task that genuinely arises out of the social context. In this situation, students have the opportunity to experience the types of communication appropriate to their particular social situation. The success of the program is attributed to the fact that it takes account of the students' cultural background and the community's first language or dialect.

The Koorie English Literacy Project

The Koorie English Literacy Project (KELP) was initiated by the Goulburn Valley Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (GVAECG), in response to the recognised need to improve the literacy skills of their young people (McKenry 1994). A major priority of the project and its first task, was to increase awareness among mainstream teachers that many Aboriginal students are, in fact, bilingual, with Koorie English their first/home language and SAE their second language. A professional development course for teachers is a part of the project, as is the publication of stories written by local Indigenous students for use as part of the reading materials in the school. The project's success is attributed to the fact that the project was not only initiated by the GVAECG, but it is also owned and supported by this group and is administered by the Koorie Education Action Network.

ESL Program - Northern Territory

Trouw (1994) provides details of a program designed to teach English as a second language to Year 1 students in an urban primary school in Darwin. Cultural factors which could act as constraints for Aboriginal students learning in a western school setting were identified and appropriate teaching strategies devised to overcome these constraints. The program, which incorporates teaching strategies which introduce students to the sub-culture of western schooling, was implemented in 1990. It initially provided 4 hours tuition a week for students in a withdrawal class "but has now been extended to team teaching within mainstream classrooms" (Davies et al 1997:41).

Scaffolding Literacy Project

In order to improve literacy among its Indigenous students, **Yipirinya School**, in Alice Springs, has embarked on a one year, whole school, Scaffolding Literacy Project, in conjunction with staff members from the Schools and Community Centre of the University of Canberra. The project, which targets all years from pre-school to

the new Post Primary class, has been designed specifically to address the needs of Indigenous students whose mother tongue is not English, who come from low socio-economic backgrounds and amongst whom many have a hearing impairment, and/or social/emotional problems which impact on their ability to acquire literacy skills.

The aim of the project, which uses a teaching methodology that is different from mainstream methodology, is to raise Indigenous students' levels of literacy to the national benchmark levels.

This Scaffolding approach, which was originally pioneered in the **Traeger Park School** in Alice Springs in the early 1980s, had considerable success at that school prior to its closure in the early 1990s. The approach "has, since that time, been developed and refined extensively at the Schools and Community Centre, ... in Canberra with both non-Indigenous and Indigenous learners who have experienced long term literacy failure" (Gray no date c.1998:2). In recent years, it has also proven highly successful with Indigenous students at Amata in South Australia and with students in the Wiltja program at **Woodville High School** in South Australia.

Promoting Literacy among speakers of Aboriginal English and Australian Creole (Kriol)

McRae (1994) presents ideas and strategies aimed at helping teachers to assist Indigenous students in becoming proficient in SAE. Three steps are suggested to help students in this regard. The need for teachers to be aware of linguistic issues when confronted by students who speak Aboriginal English or Australian Creole, as well as the need to acknowledge the validity of such dialects, and to ensure that teaching strategies match the needs of the students.

Strategies to assist hearing impaired students

Howard (1994) has proposed that culturally responsive pedagogy, while likely to benefit all Indigenous students, will be of greatest assistance to those students who have a hearing impairment. Culturally responsive pedagogy, he claims, makes use of Indigenous teaching and learning styles and thus teaches in ways that are most conducive to Indigenous student learning. Such teaching is less reliant on verbal instruction or "teacher talk", encourages observation of, and additional aural input from, peers and makes greater use of non-verbal instruction. In addition, it consciously teaches "how to learn from western schooling so as to enhance students' access to the educational opportunities available in western schooling" (Howard 1994:41).

Yipirinya School in Alice Springs, in its early childhood literacy program, has adopted various strategies to assist children with hearing loss. These include the "use of basic hand-signing signs, and, staff use and understanding of non-verbal cues and body language as an everyday form of communication" (Williams-Kennedy undated:3).

Other strategies suggested in the literature to assist hearing impaired Indigenous students include classroom management practices, such as reducing classroom noise levels, careful placement of the child in the classroom and encouragement of lip reading (Nienhuys and Burnip 1988); the use of 'walkmans' and head phones (Hayhurst 1991; Batten and Russell 1995); the use of visual information and support for students who use amplification; and careful introduction of new words (Clarke 1992); use of simple language; maintenance of 'best listening distance'; willingness to summarise and repeat information; use of a small group teaching format; and attention to the development of oral communication and auditory processing skills (Lowell et al 1995).

Whole School Approach

Hatton et al (1994) provide details of a range of successful initiatives which have raised literacy and numeracy levels of Indigenous students in Years K-3 in a small school in a rural town in Northern New South Wales, which has a sizeable Indigenous population. The School's success in relation to improved outcomes in literacy and numeracy is attributed to a combination of factors, including an early intervention strategy; a concentration of teaching staff in Years K-3 which allows staff to focus on each student's language development; the contributions made by three Indigenous staff members; culturally appropriate teaching practice; a Reading Recovery Program; teacher expectations with respect to successful academic outcomes; an effective discipline procedure; a home work program; and, close links with the Indigenous community.

School Environment

Craig (1993) addresses the issue of supportive school environments for Indigenous school students. In so doing, he points to the importance of anti-racist education, culturally appropriate teaching methodology, parent participation and the role of Aboriginal Education Workers as important factors of a supportive school environment which not only improves attendance and retention of Aboriginal students, but also enhances their engagement with learning and improves their educational outcomes.

6.2.3 Program and Strategies Identified, During the Consultations, which Improve Attendance

One of the more successful schools with Indigenous student attendance at some 95% was **Badu Island State Primary School**. This school prides itself on providing an acceptable, safe, caring and welcoming environment for students. “Our school is your school too” is the school motto and displayed prominently around the school.

Many of the **Badu Island State Primary School** practices reinforced the slogan. When children are ill, they rest in the administrative area next to the principal’s office so that he is fully aware of their situation. Under the verandah of the building forming the school’s quadrangle are a number of murals or storyboards that tell the traditional stories of Badu. These murals developed under the guidance of an Island elder, Mr Walter Nona, are used to foster pride within the pupils and give them an understanding of their heritage.

The **Koorie Open Door Education (KODE)** school at Morwell, Victoria has attendance rates of some 90%. This school promotes community involvement and a family atmosphere which values all children and their parents.

At another school an experienced principal summed up how important school environment is when she said

children will go to where they are happy and school is the best place to be.

This view was echoed by many Indigenous students who attended schools where they felt happy. Comments made by children to open-ended questions in the questionnaires administered in schools included:

School makes me feel ...

“happy because I’m busy”; “good, I feel like coming every day”; “happy because my classes and friends and teacher are fun to be with”; “happy because I have friends here”.

Among the minority of children who felt negatively about school these comments were made. School makes me feel

...” tired and bored”; “sad because I want to stay home with my family”; unhappy because my friend (sic) pick on me”; “like it’s not going to be interesting”.

When children were asked what could be done to improve attendance, a variety of responses were made. (DETYA 2000b) The most frequent response concerned the need to make schools more interesting and less boring for them. For example: Children would attend more if ...

“the classes were more interesting, creative and fun”; “if it was not so boring”.

Schools with high attendance rates usually had an ‘open door’ policy, and were endeavouring to gain meaningful community involvement, and offer programmes tailored to the needs of the pupils. **Badu Island State Primary School** meets the expenses of parents if they accompany their children on excursions. **Ludmilla Primary School** through its Principal, Aboriginal and Islander Education Worker (AIEW) and Home Liaison Officer (HLO) has encouraged parents and community members to come to the school for informal discussions. Children, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, at Ludmilla are offered a school nutrition program for those in need, with breakfast, and fruit and sandwiches for lunch. For school excursions, the school has a pool of uniforms and shoes so that no child need feel deprived.

The school environment according to experienced principals interviewed is crucial to the attendance of Indigenous students. Is it interesting, welcoming or exciting? The overwhelming concerns of many authors in different countries according to a 1993 Ministry of Education document from Western Australia “Aboriginal Attendance: Some Practical Strategies” strongly supports the importance of school environment.

Changes in the atmosphere or management of the school and classroom is probably the most effective way of improving school attendance rates p.22.

Parents and students also voiced similar ideas. One parent said:

The school should try and make the kids feel as if they are wanted here

Despite many students reporting they have a positive attitude towards going to school, a significant number felt that school was boring.

However as one principal noted, changing the atmosphere of schools, requires action on various fronts including:

- preparing teachers to teach in the Indigenous education field
- having more flexible system requirements,
- gaining community involvement in, and,
- ownership of the school programmes.

Cultural activities at all schools visited were very prominent during National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) week when students and staff developed a total program of activity in conjunction with the community. Some schools such as **Badu Island State Primary School** and those on Thursday Island continued these throughout the year. The **Murri School** at Acacia Ridge in Queensland has endeavoured to promote community awareness by offering training programmes for parents in literacy and numeracy. The involvement of parents in such programmes has had a positive impact on their children's attitude to school, and subsequently, their attendance.

Home School Liaison Officers

Without exception, all schools saw the role of the Home School Liaison Officer (HLO) position, or its equivalent, as being vitally important. As well as undertaking a liaison role in the school, these Indigenous staff members were used, in most schools consulted, to follow up on non-attendeers. They visited their homes, if necessary, and talked to parents, family and students. There was uniform acceptance that this was successful practice which greatly aided the attendance of Indigenous students.

At **Melba High School**, in the ACT, the appointment of an Aboriginal Islander Education Worker to undertake, among other things, the home school liaison role was instrumental in improving school attendance. The AIEW also contributed to a much better relationship between the Indigenous students and the school staff. The students felt they could talk openly to the AIEW who they saw as being on their side even though he was a school staff member.

Behaviour Management Programmes

Several schools have implemented very sophisticated behaviour management programmes in an endeavour to develop more responsible behaviour from students. Principals, staff and involved parents were of the view that these programmes were quite successful in reducing disruptive student behaviour in the classroom and in the school grounds. Unsatisfactory behaviour patterns has often led to a breakdown in school community relations in the past.

Carnarvon Primary School in Western Australia had developed a Positive Incentive Program (P.I.P). The PIP program was conceived by the school and is based on previous experiences the 1997 Acting Deputy Principal had in implementing token economies with alienated students. The concept was presented to staff during a Professional Development Day when staff reviewed the draft outline, provided general feedback and suggested additions and deletions to the incentive lists.

A PIP team was formed to write the PIP policy, plan its implementation and design the positive incentives and record keeping procedures.

The PIP program aims to create a positive school environment. It links all the school's incentive strategies in a comprehensive manner so as to encourage academic excellence and appropriate behaviour.

This program is based on a system whereby students gain points for good behaviour, academic achievement, and community or citizenship involvement. Points can be gained for picking up litter, attendance at school, and even being happy. Parents and staff see the program as being successful with an 80% drop in school behaviour problems, and a large jump in parent attendance at school functions. Lunchtime clubs with a large range of activities are an integral part of the program which has seen an increase in student self-esteem and attendance at school. The clubs have positive consequences in that they allow students and teachers to see one another in a different light.

According to one staff member:

three years ago the previous principal and teachers used to use 'walkie talkies' out in the yard when they were on duty so that they could call for back up when there was a problem. Today this is no longer the case. The walkie talkies now sit in the storeroom not being used. The PIP program is a friendly kids program and provides teachers and kids with skills to deal with conflict resolution.

The Principal stated:

all programmes are focused on positive rather than negative aspects. The idea is to develop pride in the school. Teachers all wear a school uniform and all the kids are in school uniforms. If kids have to wear uniforms so should teachers... its part of school marketing promoting a positive image. In 1996 and 1997 the school had vandalism damages which totalled \$40,000 annually, in 1998 it was \$500, and this year 1999 it is nil.

The Principal also noted:

staff attitudes have changed, in particular our office staff had very negative attitudes, but in the past three years we have seen significant changes in the attitudes of our office staff toward students. They have gone from negative to positive. Office staff now even participate in the lunchtime clubs by umpiring and organising netball.

The Positive Incentive Program has been implemented throughout the school and involves office staff, gardeners, cleaners and the community (who can nominate students for points), as well as all students and staff.

The **Thursday Island State Primary School** Step Behaviour Management System is another comprehensive programme. It is designed to involve parents and provide rewards for acceptable behaviour. School attendance and student behaviour are seen as having a strong connection and this program is seen as reducing undesirable behaviour including teasing and bullying which deter pupils from attending school. Success appears to be heavily dependent upon parental involvement.

Schools reward good student behaviours with certificates, badges, parent letters and notification in newsletters and even the local paper. Good student behaviour at **Thursday Island Primary School** is a pre-requisite for participation in dance excursions, music, maths and writing camps, sport and various competition. The school also involves community police through "Adopt a Cop" which brings police into the school on a voluntary basis to develop good relationships with students. On Goulburn Island the **Warruwi School** rewards senior pupils with good attendance by arranging swimming classes on Friday afternoon.

Sporting opportunities were vitally important for some Indigenous students because this and physical education were two areas of school activity where they were successful and said they felt good about themselves. Exclusion from these activities caused some students to express resentment at the school's decision. Such actions should be applied with great care less they prove to be counter productive.

One Indigenous teacher made the following comment about a school's discipline policy:

School rules are designed and enforced in such a way that they can be considered excellent examples of institutional racism.

School Facilities

Focus group discussions with teachers and students revealed that some students come to school because they find the physical environment more comfortable than any alternative. Air conditioning was seen as a bonus in the tropics. While access to computer facilities was seen as being very attractive to Indigenous students at all schools, the analysis of questionnaire data indicated the those students who claimed that computers were accessible to them outside of school were significantly more likely to attend school than others.

The lunchtime clubs of **Carnarvon Primary School** in Western Australia are also seen as providing a positive approach to making school attractive. These clubs offer a wide range of activities which the students find interesting. The school staff reported that since the clubs have been in operation, conflict between students has been greatly reduced.

Curriculum Modifications

Many schools mainly offered a mainstream curriculum although the inclusion of local history, language and cultural teaching was reasonably common in schools with a majority of Indigenous students. Students rated such activities as the highlights of the school year.

In schools with a minority of Indigenous students there were few curriculum offerings specifically for Indigenous students. Aboriginal Studies was included in some social science programmes but were not usually localised or offering Indigenous input.

Ludmilla Primary School offers an inclusive curriculum. The AIEW has an important role in assisting teachers with planning their teaching activities. While the curriculum is based on the Northern Territory curriculum, it is localised to be 'interest-based' with children interacting with and interpreting local materials and events.

Woolum Bellum, the **KODE School** at Morwell, Victoria is a K-12 State Government school specifically, but not solely for Koorie children. It aims to deliver educational services to Koories by building on culturally preferred learning models and to develop a supportive and culturally relevant learning environment. By linking community and workplace issues with school curriculum the school integrates the content and the processes of educational provision with the educational needs of Koorie communities.

Curriculum planning is a major aspect of this school and it involves a significant partnership between members of the school community. The concept of the 'Full Circle' indicates that every member is a contributor and learner in the circle, sharing knowledge, skill and trust.

Input from the Koorie community is highly valued and has guided the school's method of identifying what is important in respect to curriculum. Areas of need identified among the students and what parents value in schools are key curriculum foundations.

Woolum Bellum resulted from a successful submission to the State Government by a Steering Committee formed from two Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups and community people. This Steering Committee worked to build partnerships with the foundation staff members by providing cultural support and knowledge.

The partnership was further strengthened by the development of a 'School Charter' by agreement between parents, community, staff and students. The charter identified specific school goals and priorities with due attention paid to local needs and Education Department requirements. As a State government school, **Woolum Bellum** has responsibilities to meet department guidelines, but the school community has controlling management of the school.

The school program prioritises Culture Communication and Technology as inter-related components of curriculum planning and implementation. Communication is interpreted broadly to include Ganai language, Koorie English and standard English, numeracy, art and the use of Koorie technology for information storage and retrieval. These three priorities have shaped the curriculum and school operations.

The School Charter includes two curriculum goals:-

- to ensure staff, parents and community participation in curriculum development and provision;
- to provide all students with a culturally relevant program in the eight key learning areas.

The Charter also identifies three priorities:

- a Koorie inclusive curriculum;
- a comprehensive curriculum integrating Koorie culture, technology and communication including literacy and numeracy;
- enhanced literacy skills for all students.

The school follows a realistic approach to technology and learning. It sees itself as a "Community of Learners" achieving common goals by developing an effective curriculum which among other things promotes the

relevance of Koorie cultures, two way communication, meaningful and relevant learning experiences, self esteem and respect, a safe learning environment, and, team work and collaboration.

The connection between fields of learning, skills and knowledge is recognised by developing whole school themes which broaden learning approaches and outcomes.

The curriculum is based on local sites, community language and history through the Bataluk Cultural Trail. Using significant sites on the trail the school develops teaching programmes in the eight key learning areas. Community members are involved in site visits and classroom activities. This together with ongoing community support and direction ensure that the teaching is culturally appropriate.

Cultural activities within the **Northlands Secondary College** include the community as a whole. Outside guests are regularly asked to become involved, both inside and outside of the curriculum boundaries. All Indigenous days and weeks during the year are recognised, with some activities planned for all students and some exclusively to Koorie students. The school believes strongly in use of cultural activities as a resource to educate its students. Staff do not hesitate in taking students out of normal school day classes, in order for them to be involved in outside activities.

The **Murri School** at Acacia Ridge in Queensland doesn't teach social science as a subject but cultural studies takes its place. This program has been developed by staff, parents and the School Board, with input from the community.

Indigenous language programmes and excursions by city and town based Indigenous pupils to Indigenous communities to undertake traditional activities including, story telling, dancing, painting and food gathering were highlights in the school year for children in schools such as **Sanderson High School** in Darwin. Staff felt the attendance of some children improved to ensure they would not be excluded from such visits. Language teaching using elders was also welcomed by students on Thursday Island as was an Indigenous artist in residence program.

Thursday Island State Primary School has implemented a move from a traditional lock-step teaching arrangement to a much more flexible model. The Flexible Schooling Project was based on Statewide Benchmarking and the School Monitoring Data collected over the previous four years. The school staff and parents believed that the data indicated that some students require greater extension, while others would benefit from more developmental time and some would be more interested if involved in a wider range of life skills and alternate programmes. Consequently the school was organised into multi-age groups. As noted earlier, this enabled a particular group of children with attendance and other problems to be placed together in the 'Alternative' group. The program which is based on art also uses activities such as cooking to attract pupils to school.

Multi-age grouping enables children with similar attendance patterns to be placed together and offers continuity of instruction to good attendees and more teacher attention for those who attend less frequently when they do attend. **Yirrkala**, a school not visited during this research, is also reportedly finding multi-age grouping on the basis of attendance successful. Children with good attendance patterns can receive continuity of instruction while children with less satisfactory attendance can receive more intensive teaching when they do attend.

Multi-age grouping is also the method of organisation at **Humpty Doo Primary School** but for different reasons. This school believes that multi-level teaching is an educationally sound method of dividing the children into classes. It provides greater flexibility in the utilisation of local expertise and curriculum content and positively aids the development of cooperative teaching and learning.

RECOMMENDATION 14

That schools with large Indigenous enrolments and student attendance problems consider organising the school on a multi-age grouping basis according to levels of attendances. The flexibility gained will allow those students who attend regularly to be not impeded by those whose attendance is less frequent. This organisation would allow the latter group to have intensive teacher contact on the days they do attend.

A community based reading scheme at **Badu Island State Primary School** was very popular with students and parents. The children wrote their own stories using computer technology and did illustrations to produce their own readers which they were eager to read to teachers, visitors and community members.

Cherbourg State School has also implemented a one to one tutoring program which involves children receiving tutorial assistance each day in the basic mechanics of literacy.

6.3 STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Indigenous Involvement in Schools

The innovative use of non-education fund sources to promote Indigenous employment within the school was a feature of the **Badu Island State Primary School**. Three administrative staff were gainfully employed in the office, a community elder was employed to teach local cultural content and liaise with families where children missed school, while a groundsman maintained a delightful physical environment. The gardens at **Badu Island State School** contained plants which had been planted by former pupils who still maintained an interest in the school and its garden.

The Principal at **Badu Island State Primary School** also used community members to assist with the school's reading programmes. They listened to children read and provided great encouragement and understanding. At one school a student focus group agreed when discussing Indigenous teachers:

It's better having an Indigenous teacher because they understand you better

At **Maningrida** the school's Indigenous staff constitute an Action Group to advise the Principal on student and parent issues.

Some schools provided productive roles for community elders by having them teach some cultural aspects within the school – language, stories, art and singing were some areas of expertise used.

School students, principals, staff and parents thoroughly appreciate the excellent contributions being made by elders from their community. **Badu Island State School** was again an excellent model with Island Elder, Mr Walter Nona, adopting a grandfather role for the whole school as well as teaching cultural aspects. He visits classes, hears children read and checks absence daily which he follows up with the family in question. **Thursday Island Primary School** is also receiving good support from elders in handling children with behaviour problems.

At **Cherbourg State School** in Queensland its Indigenous Principal has set aside one room in the school as 'The Elders' Room'. This room, complete with tea and coffee making facilities and appropriate furniture, is for the sole use of community elders. In addition the elders were presented with a symbolic message stick with a key attached in a ceremony which gave them the right to enter the school whenever they wish together with the right to enter any classroom at any time.

The Maningrida Community Education Centre uses a group of elders to remind the children of their obligations under tradition how to respect their elders and that includes teaching staff.

Northlands Secondary College After School Programmes were designed as a means of getting the students to learn in an environment that is friendly and safe. These include homework centres, monitoring programmes and practical cultural activities.

The school has a great desire to involve the wider Indigenous community, therefore parents and community members run all these programmes. To accommodate for the needs of the community itself, the school has established a literacy programme for adults. This offers parents an opportunity they may not have had in the past, and does it in an environment that is friendly and free from discrimination. The school believes programmes like this ultimately benefit both the students and the parents themselves.

Whilst increasing Indigenous and community involvement in schools is highly desirable it is important that schools recognise that they should be realistic in their demands for the involvement of parents and community members. Education being only one of the many competing demands that Indigenous people face.

Public Awareness Programmes

The use of community radio, including talkback segments, school and community papers to keep the community informed regarding school activities, were extremely effective on Thursday Island. Both the High and Primary schools were regularly featured in the local media.

This public awareness was supported by opinion surveys of parents and students to provide non-teachers views on school programmes and activities.

Several schools including **Carnarvon Primary, Woolum Bellum, Badu Island State Primary School and Humpty Doo Primary School** have very intensive public awareness programmes to inform their communities of school activities and achievements. The gaining of parental and community involvement and support was a key outcome of such endeavours.

Community Strengths

The use of community strengths as a focus for school activities was a feature at **Thursday Island Primary School**. The Principal and the Deputy Principal, who is an Indigenous Australian, have led the school to fully develop the community's love of art, dance and music and also its passion for sport. This provides a range of activities which parents and children whole-heartedly support.

One particular group of students at this school which had a poor attendance and performance history were combined into a multi-age group and their total curriculum was based around art. All maths, reading and writing activities in the "Arternative" group emanated from the artwork of the students. The children's attendance rates have improved.

The **Thursday Island State Primary School** dance program which involved camping and excursions to compete in festivals is an after school activity which is well supported by students and parents. It is a focus for community pride and the development of confidence and self-esteem in its students. The dance program sets standards in school attendance rates and academic achievement for participation.

6.4 COMMON PRINCIPLES UNDERLYING STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE ATTENDANCE

The success of the programmes and strategies discussed above appear to be based on several underlying principles which include:

- the provision of professional development training for staff, raising their awareness of and sensitivity to the history, culture, contemporary lifestyle and enduring characteristics of their Indigenous students;
- recognition of the fact that Standard Australian English is not the mother tongue of most Indigenous students;
- respect for Aboriginal languages, and recognition of the validity of, and respect for, Aboriginal English and Kriol (Creole), which many Indigenous students bring with them into the classroom;
- recognition of the benefits of an explicit teaching/learning approach and early intervention strategies to ensure the adequate acquisition of literacy skills in the early years of schooling;
- recognition of Indigenous patterns of discourse, minimising misunderstandings between teacher and student in the classroom;
- recognition of the importance of focussing on the learning needs of the individual student, and the use of teaching strategies which match these needs, particularly for the hearing impaired;
- recognition of the need to value the students' cultural background and the skills and knowledge which they bring with them into the classroom;
- use of computers which allows students to feel in control of their learning situation by working at their own pace and level;
- a whole school approach based on a commitment to providing successful learning experiences and outcomes for all students;
- involvement of Indigenous teaching personnel, parents and community members in all aspects of the schooling process from initial planning to implementation and delivery of programmes to develop Indigenous ownership of educational programmes;
- provision of a safe, secure school environment, characterised by good teacher/student relationships, which is free from racism and welcoming to Indigenous students (particularly in early childhood years), and to parents and community members;
- empowerment of students by allowing them to be involved in making real decisions with respect to the learning process through planning of the learning context in collaboration with teaching staff;

- collaborative planning and choice of appropriate teaching material which helps to ensure that learning activities are relevant to students' experiences and to their current needs and interests, providing meaning and purpose to what they are learning.

Most of the strategies outlined earlier are transferable to other situations although some modification may be required to fit particular needs.

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7. FUTURE RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

Research could usefully be conducted at two levels: at the level of individual schools; and, at a more systemic level.

- At the school level, it is suggested that schools recognising the problem of relatively low levels of attendance among Indigenous students undertake action research designed to evaluate the impact of school procedures and practices formulated through sustained consultations with members of the school community – teachers, students and parents – on actual school attendance. This would require a careful monitoring of attendance levels and precise documenting of agreed steps to influence attendance rates. To this end, it is suggested that an instructional package be developed for schools to describe how action research of this kind can be undertaken effectively.
- At the systemic level, it is suggested that projects be funded through DETYA to undertake methodologically sophisticated investigations to address key issues relating to Indigenous school attendance rates. These would typically be longitudinal in design and, where appropriate, make use of ‘control schools’, pre and post-test assessments of relevant variables and multivariate statistical techniques to establish cause/effect relationships. In addition, to widen the research basis, it is proposed that complementary qualitative approaches be used, for example using direct observational methods. These questions are suggested for consideration:
 - (i) Whether specific instructional methods employed to raise levels of English language and literacy skills among Indigenous students could also result in improved levels of school attendance?
 - (ii) What school-based factors differentiate between schools in comparable geographical locations with widely differing Indigenous attendance rates?
 - (iii) Whether well-designed behaviour management policies can have positive effects on school attendance?
 - (iv) What effects on Indigenous attendance rates can be produced by the in-servicing of teachers in culturally sensitive and appropriate approaches to teaching and relating to Indigenous students in schools?
 - (v) How does prior attendance at pre-schools affect attendance levels of Indigenous students at school?

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8. CONCLUSION

The major conclusions to be drawn from this research project are that absenteeism among Indigenous students is markedly higher than among non-Indigenous students, particularly in secondary school. Indigenous students also have higher rates of suspension and lower retention rates than non-Indigenous students.

Within the Indigenous student population there is considerable variation in the patterns of attendance, with rates of absenteeism reported to be markedly higher in more isolated, traditionally oriented communities than in urban areas. There is also significant variation in retention rates within and between States and Territories.

While earlier writers and researchers tended to ignore or pay only scant attention to school-based factors affecting the non-attendance of Indigenous students and to attribute the blame for poor school attendance to individual family, community or cultural factors, it is apparent that there is a growing body of opinion that 'in school' or school-based factors are of primary importance. Even though recent writers and researchers point to the primacy of these school-based factors, they nevertheless acknowledge that 'out of school' factors do play a part in the high rates of absenteeism among Indigenous students, with some factors assuming a particular significance.

There is, for instance, consensus in the literature that among the 'out of school' factors, mobility and frequent movement between schools play a significant role in Indigenous absenteeism, particularly in more remote, traditionally oriented communities, where long periods of absence between attendance at one school and the next, are a common occurrence.

While mobility associated with social and cultural obligations and seasonal factors, appear to present a problem that schools can do little about, seasonally related mobility could, perhaps, be addressed through a more flexible approach to the timing of school teaching periods, with teaching terms timed to coincide with the period when there is least mobility among community members. In the northern parts of Australia, this is usually during the 'wet' season; the dry season being typically the time when community members disperse to take part in hunting and ceremonial activity (Schwab 1998). In addition, problems related to mobility associated with cultural and social obligations could, perhaps, be addressed through the introduction of computer assisted learning strategies and individual learning programmes (transferable between schools). The use of teaching strategies such as these could well lessen the impact that such student mobility, and other causes of irregular attendance, has on classroom teaching, as it would allow the educational needs of irregular attenders to be catered for, without disturbing the teaching programmes of those students who are more regular attenders.

In relation to poverty, poor nutrition and other health issues which impact on a student's ability to participate effectively in schooling and commitment to the process of schooling, an holistic approach such as that adopted by the **Yipirinya School** in Alice Springs and the **Anangu School** at Yalata in South Australia, would appear to offer some positive outcomes.

In both of these cases, the schools have attempted to become health promoting centres through the provision of breakfast and lunch programmes, a bus pick up for isolated students, the appointment of school/community health workers, actions to alleviate the problems associated with hearing impairment, and a range of other health related activities and "curriculum initiatives which take health into account" (Batten and Russell 1995:72).

Student pursuit of alternative activities which are more attractive and interesting than school and student dislike of, and resistance to, schooling, are also reported to play a major role in relation to absenteeism in both urban and remote areas. The suggestion in the literature is that these problems need to be addressed at the school level, through the provision of a more stimulating, interesting, relevant and responsive educational environment.

There are many factors influencing Indigenous students decisions regarding attendance at school. The examples of better practice previously described have been implemented by some schools to improve attendance rates. During focus group discussions with school staff it has become apparent that there is a lack of consistency as to what constitutes attendance. For example, some schools mark students present when they are attending ceremonies and some don't. Likewise, at some schools students on excursions or work experience are marked absent while at other schools such students are marked present.

The research indicates that one of the most important issues to be resolved, if Indigenous school attendance rates are to increase nationally, is the provision of positive welcoming school environments in which Indigenous children feel welcome, safe, valued and happy.

As other researchers have found:

The education system in Australia is dominated by the majority non-Aboriginal culture at pre-school, primary and secondary level. This dominance includes staffing, curriculum, pedagogy, values, beliefs, and socialisation.

The early years of schooling presume that children have already learned a range of pre-requisite behaviours and knowledge and that they have shared common experiences. Mainstream experiences. Teaching methods are usually based on the belief that all children are fluent English speaking and have appropriate behaviour patterns (Partington and McCudden 1992:21).

In addition to the provision of a more responsive environment, a most important issue relates to the need for more adequate pre-service and in-service training of non-Indigenous teaching staff, with particular attention to issues encountered in cross-cultural teaching situations and in teaching English and literacy to students whose home language is other than Standard Australian English. Evidence from Davies et al (1997) and other writers and researchers identified earlier, indicate the need to establish the nature of the cause/effect relationship between poor academic achievement, low levels of English language and literacy skills and absenteeism.

Teachers, parents and students agreed that Indigenous students need to have positive relationships with their teachers. Staffing of schools with inexperienced and inadequately trained teachers on a short-term basis prevents the establishment of productive relationships with students and parents.

The Principal of **Carnarvon Primary School** in Western Australia who has been at the school 3 years while the two deputy principals have served a total of 13 years at the school noted:

When I first came here I had parents say to me "What do you know about our kids? You are only here for a year or so then you are gone". That parental attitude has now changed toward us because they have got to know us in and out of school which I think makes a difference.

Other important issues in addition to the crucial importance of the teacher/student relationship; include teacher attitudes and expectations; identifying individual learning needs of students and use of appropriate teaching strategies to meet these needs; curriculum content that relates the world of the classroom to the world outside the school, the immediate practical interests of the student and a reassessment of the methods and processes of western education.

The appointment of principals to Indigenous community schools requires great care. Several principals stated that the education authorities should establish national selection and recruitment procedures to attract the best possible candidates.

Curriculum initiatives need to be encouraged so that schools offer an educational diet which Indigenous students find meaningful and useful. The process of negotiation of course content with students, parents and community has met with limited success. The better practice activities undertaken in some schools visited had improved attendance. However, as Christie (1994) points out, it is not the content of western education which is the stumbling block for Indigenous students, but rather the methods and processes of western education:

"The unbending structure of the timetable, the relentless forward planning of the curriculum, the learning always taken out of its context, the teachers who do not belong to the group, all these things (and many others) are actually speaking much louder to the learners than the content is ... much of the white content on education will help Aboriginal people ... but only if the process of education is one that helps them build their Aboriginal identity" (Christie, 1994:86, 93-94).

Another theme mentioned is the need to provide practically oriented and meaningful educational activities/training for adolescent Indigenous males, particularly in remote areas, where it is seen to be appropriate for such education to be provided in a situation removed or segregated from the normal school setting. TAFE type training in practical skills which would be of benefit to residents of remote communities, would be one

possible approach. At present, many remote communities are dependent on outside contractors when problems arise with windmills, bores, etc as residents do not have the expertise to fix the problems themselves.

School organisational frameworks should be modified to fit local situations. Modifying the school year or daily activities in co-operative arrangements with the community is seen by many parents and some principals as an important step to give the community the message that the school is theirs.

The crucial importance of community involvement in all aspects and at all levels of the schooling process was also highlighted, with the continued training, professional development and employment of Indigenous staff advocated as a means for furthering the Aboriginalisation of the schooling provided for Indigenous students.

Indigenous employment within the schools visited was, with the exception of Queensland, generally at lower levels of responsibility among teaching staff. The largest proportion of Indigenous people was in ancillary positions for which most had not received training.

The employment of relief teachers created great difficulties in schools. In urban and rural schools many displayed an unsatisfactory attitude toward Indigenous students, while in communities generally, the lack of teacher continuity negatively affected attendance. Relief teachers billeting with other school staff produced additional tensions within the schools.

While there are many children attending school regularly, a significant number of Indigenous students are unhappy with their school and its teachers, and, are avoiding attending whenever possible.

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