Alienation from school among Aboriginal students

Jan Gray
Quentin Beresford


Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are advised that this document may contain references to people who have died.

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Alienation from school among Aboriginal students

Jan Gray & Quentin Beresford

Edith Cowan University

August 2001

EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY
WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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FOREWORD

IN 2000 the Swan Education District Office with the support of its Aboriginal Advisory Council entered into a partnership arrangement with Edith Cowan University to research issues relating to the alienation of female Aboriginal students from school. This report is the result of that research partnership.

We acknowledge and applaud the work of the researchers, Dr Jan Gray and Dr Quentin Beresford and their research assistants Debra Bennell, Beverley Burns and Kathleen Pinkerton in bringing together the information contained in this report.

We note that the report contains many controversial and sensitive issues relating to Aboriginal female students in both an education and cultural context.

Given the sensitive nature of the information as provided in the report, direction was sought from the Aboriginal Advisory Council as to how it would like the report and its findings handled within both the district and in the wider community context.

The Council acknowledged the sensitive nature of the information as portrayed in the report. However, Council members were adamant that they wanted the report and its associated recommendations to be shared with school principals in the Swan Education District.

The research partners therefore request and charge school leaders and researchers who have access to this report to endeavour to ensure that the information that is contained within it is treated sensitively and appropriately. We have every belief that school leaders have a proven capacity to deal with the material in this report in a professional manner.

Our challenge is to develop appropriate school and district responses to the recommendations it contains.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A REPORT of this kind could only be developed with the interest and support of the Swan Education District Director, Steffan Silcox, and District personnel, and particularly the Chair of the Swan District Aboriginal Education Council, Donna Kickett. The project could not have been conducted without their active support at all levels of the data collection.

The authors would like to thank the principals and staff of the participating schools for welcoming us into their schools, sharing their thoughts with us and providing support and opportunities for our Aboriginal research assistants to talk to the Aboriginal students.

We are particularly grateful to the Aboriginal students who volunteered their time to join the focus groups arranged by our Aboriginal research assistants. We thank the students for adding their voice to the debate surrounding youth alienation from school. We respect the openness, dignity and humour evident in the data as they shared their stories.

We especially thank our three Aboriginal research assistants for conducting the focus groups for this project. Their enthusiasm during the data collection, their lengthy feedback on each draft of the report, and their active participation at all stages of the project were invaluable. We thank them for their full support, their rapport with the students, and their assistance in the cultural focussing of the research voice.

Aboriginal research assistants:

• Debra Bennell
• Beverley Burns
• Kathleen Pinkerton

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INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to overstate the depth of the educational disadvantage which continues to be experienced by Aboriginal young people in the Swan District. While encouraging signs can be found in the genuinely positive attitudes towards school among many of the Aboriginal students who are regular attenders, it is still the case that considerable differences in educational outcomes between Aborigines and non-Aborigines remain. For example:

- Only one of the students interviewed was found to be undertaking a full Tertiary Entrance Examination course in the district during the Year 2000.
- Few students (especially boys) remain at school to study Year 12.
- Absenteeism is a significant and complex problem.
- A significant number of students drop out altogether with no follow-up tracking.
- Involvement of Aboriginal parents in schools is low.

The purpose of this research was to examine the underlying causes of these poor outcomes. Schools are in a difficult position to address the extent of this educational disadvantage. Many of the issues which form barriers to Aboriginal participation and achievement lie outside the direct control of schools, forming part of the wider socio-economic and historic disadvantage experienced by Aborigines. Yet, there is considerable scope for schools to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal young people. However, realising the full potential of schools to improve educational outcomes for this group will require a greater focus on school planning and staff training and the development of stronger partnerships with a range of community agencies.

The cultural gulf that separates schools and most indigenous students has been identified through research for at least a decade, as has the transition from educational marginalisation to social deviance (Beresford & Omaji, 1996). The strong link between disadvantage, alienation, resistance to education, suspensions and exclusions has long been presented as research knowledge, with local versions of this knowledge dependent on the demographics of schools and their communities (Select Committee of Youth Affairs, 1991; Fitzgibbon, 1996; Beresford & Omaji, 1996, 1998; Gray, 2000; Gray & Hunter, 2000). A complex web of factors perpetuates this cycle of alienation for indigenous students, often linked to poor levels of literacy.

Aboriginal students make up 5 per cent of the total Australian school population, but are reported to provide 30 per cent of the total number of truanting students in all Australian government schools. In her study of 30,000 compulsory aged students, Gray (2000) found 17.8 per cent of Aboriginal high school students were described as chronic truants (including 27 per cent of Year 10 Aboriginal students). The quantitative and qualitative data showed a recent increase in Aboriginal girls’ alienation from school and antisocial behaviour (Gray, 2000).

The 1995 Monitoring Standards in Education sampling data showed that literacy levels of Aboriginal students are approximately 20 per cent lower than the Western Australian State mean in Years 3, 7
Students' results in 1998 benchmark testing for Year 3 literacy standards in Western Australia showed 65 per cent of Aboriginal children performing below standard in reading, compared to 20 per cent of all Year 3 students. In an attempt to address the cultural divide in student achievement, issues related to increased attendance and participation and improved literacy outcomes for Aboriginal students remain a priority for educational institutions.

The community perceptions of the deviant Aboriginal youth outlined by Beresford and Omaji (1998) complements the dominant perception of endemic Aboriginal truancy and academic problems. Howard Groome (1995, as cited in Beresford and Omaji, 1998) points to the complexity of reasons for the high drop out rate (including high truancy rates) of Aboriginal students, rarely related to intelligence or ability. He identifies issues related to poor teacher/student relationships (often including racism) and no sense of belonging in a classroom as crucial to an Aboriginal student's perceptions of failure. He suggests Aboriginal students feel achievement at school implies pressure to relinquish their cultural identity and peer acceptance.

Context of the report

The purpose of this study was to provide the Aboriginal student perspective to the current research knowledge surrounding alienation from schools among Aboriginal students, a perspective which is too little heard. The study was undertaken in partnership with the Swan Education District, Western Australia, endorsed by the Swan District Aboriginal Education Council, and complements a previous study undertaken in the district by the authors which identified the service providers' perspectives of alienation factors related to Aboriginal youth (Gray & Beresford, 2000).

There are 75 Government primary schools within the Swan Education District, with a total primary school population of 28,830 students, including 1,571 Aboriginal students. The district also includes 14 senior high schools and one district high school, giving a total of 9,450 students in Years 8, 9 and 10 (compulsory school age) and 2,900 post compulsory school age students in the district, of whom 535 are Aboriginal students. In all, there are 41,300 students in the district, including 2,170 (5.3 percent) Aboriginal students. The diversity of school populations, staffing profiles and locations within the district makes any generalisation between schools almost impossible, given the nature of the data referred and collated. However, certain characteristics are evident within the district. Many families in the district are of lower socio-economic background. Some areas within the district are reported to reflect a relatively high (within Western Australia) juvenile crime rate.

Within the district, and particularly around Midland city centre, young Aboriginal people are very visible both within and outside school hours. It would be a simplistic reading of the presence of these young people as 'truants' without further investigation, given the area has traditionally been a gathering and meeting place for indigenous people. The transient nature of the indigenous culture often places such students in the position of technically 'truanting' (usually from schools outside this

1Aboriginal Education Operation Plan 1997-1999: EDWA
education district) whilst maintaining cultural and family priorities which clash with the expected student attendance patterns. Other lifestyle factors affecting attendance patterns of Aboriginal students must also be considered within an overall reading of the education district data. High youth unemployment in the area also produces a core of visible young people.

**Methodology**

In undertaking this review of Aboriginal education in the District, a wide range of people were consulted, including interviews with:

- Aboriginal high school students in Years 8-12
- Aboriginal primary school students in Years 1-7
- Aboriginal education workers
- Principals and Deputy Principals
- Representatives from non-government agencies

Aboriginal researchers were used to interview Aboriginal participants. The observations of these two researchers were invaluable in providing deeper explanations for the responses of Aboriginal students to school.

Five schools participated in the study – four Senior High Schools and a feeder primary school for one of these high schools. In all, 45 Aboriginal students, who were regularly attending the participating schools, were interviewed in focus groups of 5-6 students. Of this number 40 were girls, the number reflecting the high drop out rate of adolescent Aboriginal boys. Aboriginal research assistants conducted all the interviews with Aboriginal children and school-based employees. Other interviews with school and district based personnel were conducted by the authors. All the Aboriginal girls in each of the participating schools were invited to take part in the study. Focus group interviews were conducted with Aboriginal students from Year 1 through to Year 12. However, absentee rates impacted considerably on participation rates.

The district office made available all statistical data related to truancy, suspension, exclusion and referrals to student support personnel for 2000. The data was systematically analysed to provide a statistical context for the qualitative findings.

An Aboriginal reference group, including the Aboriginal interviewers, was established to oversee the research design. Every effort was made to obtain signed parental approval for all students interviewed for the project.
HISTORICAL CONTEXT

‘No one in our family has ever finished school.’ Primary school student, Swan District, November 2000.

As this school student’s comment illustrates, generations of Aboriginal students have suffered from poor school experiences. These historical experiences are the starting point for understanding the on-going struggles most Aboriginal students have with the education system. A deep understanding of this experience should be part of both the professional development of school staff and the basis for interaction between staff and members of the Aboriginal community. Such understanding is necessary because of the ways in which disadvantage in education has been transferred from one generation to the next. Many of today’s Aboriginal parents – and their grandparents before them – had very little schooling, and that which they did have exposure to was very frequently experienced as discriminatory. This background has direct consequences for today’s generation of Aboriginal students in one or more of the following ways:

- Some Aboriginal parents may not be able to assist their children with formal learning
- Some Aboriginal parents may not be able to assist children with the formal expectations of school
- Some Aboriginal parents may distrust schools as ‘white’ institutions
- Some Aboriginal parents may tolerate their own children’s conflicts with school.

Yet, it is important to avoid stereotyping all Aboriginal families. Some students interviewed reported that their parents’ own lack of education was a strong force in creating expectations for their children. As one Year 9 student reported:

‘My Dad says I have to do what he didn’t do.’ Year 9 Aboriginal student.

However, it is important for educators to realise that the gulf which commonly exists between Aboriginal families and schools arose out of specific government policies and community attitudes. The main policies related to segregation, forced removal of children and discrimination in schooling.

Segregation

Between 1905 and the mid 1970s, government policy forced most Aborigines in the settled parts of the State to live on reserves away from whites. Conditions on these reserves were extremely poor, trapping their inhabitants into a self-perpetuating cycle of poverty. Until the 1950s, few of the children on reserves went to school. In country towns, where most Aborigines lived, children were frequently barred by the local community from attending State schools. When segregation ended in the mid 1970s, reserve conditions were thought to be so bad that they had limited the chances of many adults and children to adjust to the wider community. The impact of such policies is still evident in the negative educational experiences of some of the older members of the Aboriginal families in the Swan District.
Forced removal of children

"We’ve raised generations with no parenting skills and it really impacts on the kids today." Aboriginal interviewer.

Between the late 1930s and the mid 1970s, it was the policy of successive governments to remove so-called ‘half caste’ Aboriginal children from their families with the aim of assimilating Aboriginal people into white society. Many thousands of children were put into church-run missions or sent to Sister Kate’s Children’s Home in Perth. Acknowledging the racist motivation behind the policy of forced removal has been very difficult for many Australians today who are either unaware of its existence, or who accepted the views of earlier generations that the policy carried the best of intentions for Aboriginal people. It is especially important for educators to be acquainted with the impacts of this policy within the Aboriginal community. It is a pivotal issue for Aboriginal people trying to build closer relationships with white society. Its legacy has many direct impacts on education. Many children separated from their families under the policy have grown up with unaddressed emotional difficulties which are manifest in one or more of the following ways: problems with parenting; dysfunctional emotional and/or social lives; and distrust of white society.

Discrimination in schooling

"Aboriginal families are not comfortable negotiating with schools, even where their aspirations for education are strong." Juvenile Justice worker.

In the 1950s, the Education Department took control of the education of Aboriginal children from the Department of Native Welfare. Gradually, many more Aboriginal children entered State schools. While the Department professed a policy of non-discrimination, the reality at the school level was often very different. Not surprisingly, the attitude of teachers frequently reflected the views of the broader community which, during the 1960s and ‘70s, was discriminatory either directly or indirectly. One study of Aborigines in school from this period found that: ‘Many, if not most, teachers ... tend to play part-Aboriginal education ‘by ear’, develop stereotyped reasons for retardation, and, with few exceptions, eventually give up any real endeavour to help these children.’ As late as the mid 1980s, most Aboriginal high school students were placed in bridging courses which carried little vocational certification.

"Aboriginal parents feel alienated from schools; authority is something to stay away from. Aboriginal parents who you think would be beyond that attitude are still reluctant to become involved." Aboriginal community worker.

Thus, the experience of generations of Aboriginal students in the education system has been overwhelmingly negative. Very often these experiences can form part of the direct or indirect patterns of socialisation of young children.

"There is a need to start off with educating the mothers and the kids will follow as a natural progression." Aboriginal community worker.
STATISTICAL FINDINGS

The over-all student profile in the Swan District reflects a significant proportion of the student body with characteristics of students at educational risk. Factors such as low socio-economic background, low employment, single-parent and blended families, language other than English, student disabilities and student transience are well recognised as correlates of students at educational and social risk. These factors impact in a disproportionate way on Aboriginal children, placing them at extreme educational risk.

The nature and impact of these identified risk factors are, however, difficult to evidence in school and district data associated with Aboriginal students, as data used to create profiles of attendance, participation and retention are based on students who have engaged with educational institutions. Those Aboriginal students who have become totally alienated from education are not necessarily represented within this data. Participation rates do not necessarily reflect non-attendance issues.

Aboriginal students are a minority group in most Australian school districts. In this sense, the student profile in Swan Education District can be considered representative of other Education Districts in Western Australia. For example, of the 41,300 students in the Swan Education District in 2000, there were 2,170 Aboriginal students (5.3 per cent of the school population). However, as illustrated in the table below, there continues to be a disproportionate number of Aboriginal students represented in truancy, suspension and exclusion data.

Table 1: Referrals of Aboriginal students from schools in Swan Education District 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>No. Aboriginal Referrals</th>
<th>Proportion of Group (n=2170)</th>
<th>No. Non Aboriginal Referrals</th>
<th>Proportion of Group (n=39130)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Truancy</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>631</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspension</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>1446</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusion</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.03%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Psychologist</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Attendance Officer</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is now well documented recognition, both internationally and within Australia, of the risk factors for those leaving school before the legal age (Tyerman, 1968; Beresford & Omaji, 1996, 1998; Watson, 1992; Holden & Dwyer, 1992; Bethel, 1994; Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995; Batten & Russell, 1996; Fitzgibbon, 1996; Nicholls, 1998; Gray, 2000; Gray & Beresford, 2000).

In accordance with district policy, a student in the Swan District needs to have 10 or more days’ unexplained absence to be reported as ‘truant’ (and thus be represented in the table above). Student Services data collection parameters in the Swan District have become progressively more refined since 1998, allowing a more comprehensive and accurate picture to be developed of the number and nature of student referrals within the district. The refined parameters allowed a more comprehensive understanding of the disproportionate representation of Aboriginal students in each of the designated categories, as outlined below.

**Truancy**
The extent of the Aboriginal attendance problem faced by schools in the Swan District is clearly yet to be resolved. Aboriginal students represent 11 times the proportion of non-Aboriginal students defined as truant within the district (17.5 per cent Aboriginal students, compared to 1.6 per cent non-Aboriginal students, were referred as truant in 2000). Given that district policy defines a truant as a student who has 10 or more days’ unexplained absence, the data indicates the depth of educational disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal students within the district.

**Suspension**
The disproportionate number of Aboriginal students involved in school behaviour management policies is evident in the data above. Proportionately, twice as many Aboriginal students were suspended from school as were non-Aboriginal students (8.4 per cent compared to 3.7 per cent). For many of these students, the suspensions trigger total alienation from school (Gray, 2000).

**Exclusion**
Students are referred to District Exclusion Panels for extreme and/or continued alienating behaviour in the school environment. Even though the number of students who reach the stage of facing an exclusion panel is small, the contrast remains consistent, with 13 times as many Aboriginal students, proportionately, confronted with school exclusion (0.4 per cent Aboriginal students compared to 0.03 per cent non-Aboriginal students).

**School Psychologist**
The involvement of the School Psychologist is an accepted strategy for working with students who are defined by school staff as at risk of alienation. In this sense, the higher proportion of Aboriginal students referred to the School Psychologist (1.9 per cent Aboriginal students compared to 0.3 per cent non-Aboriginal students) is consistent with the disproportionate number of Aboriginal students involved in truancy and all forms of behaviour management policy. Aboriginal students represent six times the proportion of non-Aboriginal students referred to the School Psychologist.

**School Attendance Officer**
Only students defined as chronic truants are referred to the School Attendance officer. It is not unusual for chronic truants to have 30 or more days’ unexplained absence in a semester. Consistent with the disproportionate number of Aboriginal students defined as truant in this data, the proportion
of Aboriginal students referred to the School Attendance Officer was 18 times greater than non-Aboriginal students (3.5 per cent Aboriginal students compared to 0.2 per cent non-Aboriginal students).

Clearly, establishing any realistic information about the proportion of Aboriginal students within the district who are regularly attending school is dependent on both the student’s engagement with the education system, and the education system’s definition of regular attendance and its data collection methods. Whatever the definitions, the data indicates the continued alienation of Aboriginal students from educational opportunities in the Swan District. The complexity of the circumstances surrounding Aboriginal students’ engagement with the education system in Swan District emerged through the qualitative data collected during this review of Aboriginal education in the district and is explored in the following sections of the report.
BARRIERS TO ACHIEVEMENT

Cultural issues
A significant issue to emerge from the interviews of Aboriginal students is their dislike of the way they are often treated at school. Aboriginal students identify with a greater level of maturity which, in turn, reflects cultural differences in the ways in which most are raised. Aboriginal children are given significant responsibility at home from an early age.

'The average high school teacher has no idea of the maturity and responsibility of 12 and 13 year old Aboriginal children.' Aboriginal interviewer.

'The fourteen year old is in charge of the house in the morning. They get up and make the younger kids' breakfast; dress them and take them to school.' Aboriginal Education Worker.

The level of responsibility and respect accorded to Aboriginal children is in stark contrast to student role expectations in many schools. For example, many 12 and 13-year-old Aboriginal children are also given responsibility for looking after older relatives.

'We are more respected at home.' Aboriginal student.

As a consequence of their greater responsibility and maturity, Aboriginal children dislike being treated 'like kids' and 'talked down' to at school.

As one Deputy Principal reflected: ‘There is a need to harness this sense of autonomy and responsibility in a positive way.’

Part of the greater autonomy accorded Aboriginal students is the later hours most keep, especially those in high school. Many of those interviewed did not go to bed until after midnight, some not until after 2.00am. Consequently, they arise late, arrive at school late, and get into trouble. Most thought that if school had later starting hours they could avoid this difficulty.

It is common for Aboriginal students to be away from school attending funerals in the country. Absences for this reason can last up to 10 days. Some students felt teachers either did not understand or did not appreciate the cultural issues surrounding these absences.

Problems with the spillover effects of family fights coming into the school were mentioned by a number of Aboriginal students. Some students felt ‘shame’ for being Aboriginal when these fights occurred, while others felt the problems distracted them from learning.

School practices
Teacher attitudes
A number of Principals, Deputies and Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEOs) commented on the need to change teacher attitudes towards Aboriginal students. While no examples emerged of overt discrimination or prejudice – in fact most teachers were valued by Aboriginal students interviewed – it was the lack of depth in most teachers’ awareness of the social and cultural contexts of Aboriginal students’ lives that attracted critical comment.
‘Teachers are broadly aware that Aboriginal students are different and that they have different backgrounds and needs. But they are in a mindset that Aboriginal students should not be treated any differently to other students. Teachers think they are doing the right thing in not treating them differently.’ Deputy Principal, High School.

‘Teachers have had very little contact with Aboriginal people. Ways are needed to make teachers aware of Aboriginal students’ backgrounds and needs. Presently, an educational gulf separates the two groups – teachers remain unaware and kids won’t open up of their own accord.’ Deputy Principal, High School.

‘Teachers do not understand the degree of abuse and drinking and the everyday life many students go home to.’ Aboriginal Education Officer.

‘Staff have little understanding of the context of modern, urban Aboriginal life; the experience of belonging to a frequently discriminated group; and an understanding of the dynamics of dysfunctional family life.’ Deputy Principal, Primary School.

Few examples of teachers actually failing to support students came up in the interviews. Yet, as the following comment shows, failure to show support to students over racist gibes is keenly felt:

‘When I was in Year 5, this kid teased me and called me a nigger and the teacher never even gave him a detention.’ Primary school student.

While it was not possible to determine the level of racism faced by Aboriginal students in school in the course of this study, evidence suggests that it may occur at a greater level than is generally recognised.

For example, information from non-government agencies (see Table Two page 22) suggests that racism is a factor behind the alienation of some Aboriginal youth from school and interviews in some high schools showed that racist violence between some Aboriginal and Asian students was reported to be a significant problem:

‘Kids drop out because they are suspended continually over fighting. Aboriginal students claim they are the victims rather than the perpetrators of the fights and complain about the use of knives in these fights.’ Aboriginal interviewers.

Some Aboriginal boys have difficulty relating to female authority figures and are resistant to female teachers, and find it especially difficult to take authority from them. The difficulty stems from the cultural expectation for young adolescent Aboriginal boys to take the authoritarian male role in a single parent household. The contrast between taking such a role in the household (even with their mother) to the expected subservient role in a female teacher’s classroom is not always handled well by Aboriginal boys.

This problem is reflected in the disproportionate number of Aboriginal boys with extended records of suspension and exclusion stemming from incidents reported by female teachers of Aboriginal students’ inappropriate and/or violent and abusive patterns of behaviour.
Tutors

Few high school students interviewed were aware of the assistance available under Abstudy and particularly access to tutors and the ways in which tutors can help. Many parents are also unaware of this assistance. It appears that schools are not adequately providing students/parents with appropriate information about this scheme. As one student explained in interview:

'You're not told services [tutors] are available when you come to high school; you have to ask for it or hear about it.' Year 11 Aboriginal student.

The few students who had accessed the tutorship scheme believed they had improved their grades because of the additional help provided. Others believed they would tackle Year 12 subjects if they knew they had a tutor.

TAFE was seen to be a viable and more productive educational opportunity amongst younger high school students, especially boys. There was a clear perception that coping with compulsory schooling was a less attractive long-term goal than attending TAFE at age 16. Despite the short-term appeal of alienation behaviours because of their social and socialization potential, the long-term goals of linking into educational opportunities and getting a good job persisted.

'I don't want to get up and go to school for nothing. I can just wait and go to TAFE at 16.' Aboriginal boy.

Learning styles

A common complaint from students was that learning lacked interest for them; it was too often boring. An Aboriginal education worker explained:

'What the kids need is more active rather than passive learning styles. This fits in with Aboriginal learning by experience. So when they come here [school] they are not experiencing, they are getting talked to.'

Students indicated their preference for working with teachers who offered collaborative learning environments with group discussions and team assignments.

'It helps to work together, specially if you're not too good at reading and writing.' Year 9 Aboriginal girl.

Greater recognition of Aboriginal culture was important to most Aboriginal students. It was particularly keenly felt among primary school students who, among other things, expressed a strong desire to learn Noongar language.

A number of students expressed disappointment that some schools do not adequately recognise national Aboriginal celebrations and especially at the refusal to allow students to attend National Aboriginal and Islander Day Of Commemoration events during school time. Many students expressed disappointment that their culture is not being acknowledged by schools.

From age 13/14, those Aboriginal young people demonstrating negative attitudes to school may benefit from gaining access to vocational programs where a wider variety of intelligences can be
demonstrated and developed. Currently, there are difficulties accessing vocational programs before Years 11/12 (age 16/17). Some problems emerged with the structure and approach of current vocational programs. Some Aboriginal students report feeling exploited by lack of payment for the work undertaken and some have difficulty getting to places of work.

**Lack of encouragement/support**

'Some teachers told me I was too dumb to do TEE. They didn’t think I’d finish it and get in. It made me feel really dumb.' Year 11 Aboriginal girl.

It was common for children in Years 11 and 12 to perceive that teachers did not encourage them to take on TEE subjects. Many are being told it is too difficult for them. Whether or not this was the best available advice in individual cases is impossible to tell. However, it is important to note that students felt they were being stereotyped and that they might actually benefit from positive encouragement.

Most students in Years 11 and 12 believed that they received little careers advice or support to make the transition to upper school.

'I wish I’d looked at what I could do – my strengths and skills – and not just what my friends were doing.' Year 11 Aboriginal girl.

'You need to know where you're going right from day one.' Year 12 Aboriginal girl.

**Social/Environmental Issues**

All the interviews confirmed that those students staying on in school to Years 11 and 12 have two common characteristics: they receive strong encouragement from their parents and they have a positive view of themselves and their future. Those who drop out early are unlikely to have a supportive background or positive self-image.

However, even where parents are keen for their children to go to school, there are not a lot of concessions made in the home for such children in terms of correct clothing, equipment and their own space.

For many children, the extended and supportive family environment implied extended periods of time being looked after by family members in different locations. The changes in home locations and key responsible adults can therefore impact on the continuity of location of an Aboriginal child’s school experience. Each change in school implies a change in school uniform, school expectations and socialisation. For many students, the cost of new uniforms, the shame of being different and the fear of consequences at the school level of wearing the ‘wrong’ uniform and having the ‘wrong’ equipment is the trigger for non-attendance, and subsequent total withdrawal from the schooling experience.

'The teachers don't understand about having no money in the home to support the kids, get the school things.' Aboriginal high school student.

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Those Aboriginal students from dysfunctional homes have trouble adjusting their behaviour from the norms of home where bad language, arguing and fighting can be common, to appropriate school behaviour. They can have problems with the boundaries of their behaviour.

The manner in which schools respond to these students' behaviour is a critically determining factor in whether many remain at school or drop out. Many of those who drop out have negative attitudes about the value of school which, combined with the difficult behaviour described above, results in frequent conflict with teachers. Among the group of those Aboriginal students who are committed to school was the perception that the school discipline policy lacked fairness. It was felt that students should have more than three chances before they are suspended. However, these students acknowledged a certain reality about the ways in which these students leave school. As one high school student explained:

'These kids don't want to be at school. Teachers pick on them and the situation spirals.'

Lack of income remains a barrier to participation for some Aboriginal children.

As one primary school student explained when talking about one of her friends:

'She wasn't really coming to school. She wants to but her Mum is not like ours. She has no money for lunch or to catch the bus home.'

Aboriginal students can feel acute embarrassment about the inability of their families to meet the costs of school. As one high school student explained:

'I know what it feels like to come to school without any equipment and the shame about it.'

The daily struggle against low income faced by some Aboriginal families acts to weaken a family's commitment to education. As an Aboriginal social worker working in Midland explained:

'A number of Aboriginal families are in a poverty trap. Some are on the outer within their own communities and these lack family support. Others get into debt with Homeswest which makes it difficult for them to access housing options. In other cases parents are semi-literate themselves. In all these situations families are battling just to survive and facing a range of crises. Education just doesn't rate as a high priority'.

For those students staying on in school, cost can be a factor in the subjects to which they gain access. It was common for students interviewed to report their families could not afford some curriculum options.

While at school, many Aboriginal students become aware of the negative stereotypes communicated by both school and wider society:

'People still think of Aboriginal kids in the same way and kids still think of themselves in the same way. Aboriginal kids are not expected to achieve, so they don't. This is a cumulative attitude within many families, reinforced by wider society. The way people just look at Aborigines in a negative and inferior way impacts on kids. It starts when they are in early adolescence as they develop hooks into societal attitudes. They pick up the body language of other students and teachers. The enthusiasm for school
dissipates after Year 8 and disillusion sets in when their expectations of school are not being met. As Noongar kids, they stick together. They get teased if they have white friends. When they are together there is cohesion and group attitudes are reinforced. Only the strong get through. Schools are not addressing the underlying issues and problems they face. TAFE is valued because that is the best they believe they as blacks can expect. The transition from high school to university doesn’t happen very often so there are few role models. They don’t see uni. as an option’. Aboriginal interviewers.

**Non-attendance**

Non-attendance is the most common problem associated with Aboriginal students. The following types of non-attendance were identified in the course of the study:

- Chronic non-attenders; that is, those enrolled in school but who are absent for more than 20 per cent of the time.
- Chronic fractional non-attenders; that is those who attend school but who are persistently absent for part of many days.
- Non-enrolled students; these are children whose parents are transient and who condone their children dropping out of school altogether, usually at the age of 11 or 12.
- Those suspended and excluded from school; these students constituted up to 17 per cent in schools in the Swan district.
- Those unable to integrate back into school after a period in detention and who drop out altogether.

A significant proportion of the non-attendance begins over relatively trivial matters:

> ‘If you wake up and the only shirt you’ve got is a blue one and you know you’re going to get busted at school for having the wrong coloured shirt – what choice have you got? You don’t go to school’. Aboriginal interviewers.

However, non-attendance becomes a pattern that is hard to break. Schools often do not recognise the legitimacy of the reasons given for students’ absences.

**Exclusion**

> ‘Guys leave because they muck up. Sometimes the teachers just pick on them. They don’t handle it and then there’s just hassles and they end up getting expelled.’ Aboriginal high school student.

For many Aboriginal boys, the path from continued suspension to chronic truancy and exclusion is almost inevitable. Most boys have an in-school record of suspensions and behaviour management reports. A disproportionate number of Aboriginal students are recommended for exclusion for repeated suspension and/or violent behaviour, resulting in expulsion from school for post compulsory students or re-location to a different school environment for compulsory school aged students.
The long-term consequences of patterns of repeated school suspensions for perceived violent and abusive behaviour are rarely considered by these young Aboriginal people. Their often violent reactions to racial taunts, their overt reactions to behaviour expectations in class, and the lack of any real desire to remain at school, make successful re-integration into a new school environment almost impossible.

Most Aboriginal students who are faced with exclusion panel recommendations for re-location to a different school environment become chronic truants and totally alienated from schools, despite efforts of school and district staff to ease their socialisation into the new learning environment.

**School drop-out**

‘All my cousins dropped out in Year 9 or 10.’ Aboriginal Year 11 student.

The rate at which Aboriginal students in the Swan District drop out of school is one of the most alarming issues to have emerged from this study. It is particularly disturbing that the actual numbers – or even informed estimates – remain unknown apart from a general acknowledgement that the figure remains high relative to the total number of Aboriginal children and youth. One of the other stark findings about this group is the early age at which children begin dropping out of school; a significant group exits school at age 11/12.

The circumstances surrounding early school leaving are complex. Some of the major issues identified in the school-based interviews included:

**Transience**

Many Aboriginal families move between houses/suburbs and locality on a regular basis. Most families do not fill out school clearance forms. Consequently they cannot be easily traced to their new address, and no agencies make it their business to do so. After several moves, many of these children simply never return to school. This drifting away from school flows from the difficulties students have in continual adjustment to new school environments both socially and in lack of correct uniforms.

**Absenteeism**

Prior patterns of irregular attendance result in students falling behind and feeling ‘shame’ at their poor performance.

**Peer group**

Some students mix with ‘the wrong crowd’ after school; that is, with young Aboriginal school drop outs who engage in substance abuse. Involvement in both crime and substance abuse was widely reported to be high among Aboriginal youth in the Swan District.

**Parental influence**

Parents were reported to condone frequently their sons leaving school whereas they were more likely to insist upon their daughters’ continuing attendance. This gender difference appeared to reflect the difficulty experienced among parents in controlling boys’ behaviour.
Early pregnancy

Consultations with non-government agencies in the district confirmed that pregnancy was common among Aboriginal teenage girls, some as young as 13. High school girls interviewed all knew of girls who had fallen pregnant and left school. Pregnancy does appear to be one way in which some Aboriginal girls attempt to make meaning in their lives and secure welfare support.

The gender difference in school retention was marked:

'The common attitude among parents is: the boys can leave school; they’re running amok, you can’t control them but they can go to TAFE when they’ve sorted themselves out. Girls have to be educated to stop them getting pregnant and having babies early. Boys also see themselves as men by around 14 and don’t want to be treated like little kids. Many of them are being raised by women because their fathers are in prison and, consequently, they lack role models. Many of these boys see themselves as the man of the house and act in this role’. Aboriginal interviewers.

However, there are specific pressures on girls:

When girls have boyfriends who have left school, these boys often don’t want to be seen going out with ‘a school girl’, so the girls rationalise they are better off leaving. Aboriginal interviewer.
SERVICE PROVIDERS’ PERSPECTIVES OF ALIENATION FACTORS

A previous study in the district involved 14 representatives of government and non-government agencies with service links to the target group. These agencies were to complete a separate questionnaire on non-attendance (Gray & Beresford, 2000). Opportunities for open-ended responses were provided on the questionnaire. The questionnaire data highlighted a range of issues, many of which overlap the data from the interviews conducted in the second study.

As this table indicates, an extremely complex dynamic operates to produce alienation from school. However, it is not entirely clear how these factors operate in combination to erode interest in education. The wide range of ‘outside’ school factors suggests the need for much stronger partnerships to be developed with the non-government community agencies.

Specific issues deserve closer attention. The high rate of response to ‘family problems’ covers a wide range of difficulties. The impact of low income and family violence, for example, have documented correlation to low self-esteem. A youth worker working with Aboriginal ‘at risk’ young women explained that ‘low self-esteem is a very important issue which impacts on how they see themselves, how they let others treat them and how they view their future.’

Table 2: Issues seen by service providers as impacting upon the alienation of Aboriginal adolescents from school (n = 14)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues</th>
<th>Male Adolescents</th>
<th>Female Adolescents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Literacy skills</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family problems</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irregular school attendance</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substance abuse</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School suspension</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transience</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health issues</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour management</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juvenile justice</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School curriculum</td>
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<td>Disabilities</td>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnancy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Gray & Beresford (2000).
The open-ended interviews with the representatives from government and non-government agencies revealed some noteworthy gender differences in family situation. Significant numbers of Aboriginal girls, and especially those in large, single parent families, come under pressure not to attend school regularly because of child-care responsibilities in the family. More seriously, a wide range of service providers, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, expressed concern about the extent of the sexual abuse of Aboriginal girls, often in the home. This was felt to be very much a hidden problem which lacked adequate recognition both within mainstream agencies and within the Aboriginal community. Limited anecdotal evidence indicated that the criminal involvement of some Aboriginal girls may in part be motivated by a willingness to be locked up in detention to obtain some breathing space from sexual abuse. This evidence was given by several Aboriginal women with experience with the justice system. The deeply disturbing nature of this evidence warrants further investigation which was beyond the capabilities of the project.

A high rate of teenage pregnancy was also reported to be occurring among Aboriginal teenage girls. Anecdotal estimates gathered from Aboriginal police officers suggested that 10 per cent of girls below the age of 15 became pregnant while the figure rose to more than 20 per cent for those in the 16-18 year-old age group. Most of those who became pregnant left school and did not return. While this study was not able to collect statistical data on the issues of sexual abuse and teenage pregnancy, it is disturbing that there is a lack of data in government agencies on this issue. The response from one service provider, for example, suggesting that numbers of Aboriginal girls seek to be 'pregnant and on welfare' as a rational response to their situation, is clearly deserving of more systematic research. Another respondent claimed that Aboriginal girls with poor school attendance records have difficulty escaping the cycle of poverty, violence and abuse.

The relationship between crime and school drop out is extensive in relationship to Aboriginal students. The following general points can be made:

The majority of young people coming through the courts continue to be Aboriginal. This represents a wide net of young people; not just repeat offenders.

Typically, those coming before the court have not been at school for months and, in some cases, many months.

Some of this group belong to 'a culture of crime' in which older brothers/cousins are involved and in which parents may condone crime or fail to take it seriously.

Consequently, there are many Aboriginal young people on court orders to return to school. The lack of success in reintegrating Aboriginal students who have been before the court system into school was identified by juvenile justice workers as an issue of major concern.

'If they are put on a court order to go back to school, they are typically disruptive until teachers tell them to leave. Mostly teachers are not informed that these young people may be in breach of a court order'. Juvenile Justice Worker.

The Departments of Education, Juvenile Justice and Community and Family Services have an agreement covering cooperation over students coming out of detention. However, according to juvenile justice workers, such partnership agreements are not effective in practice.
BEST PRACTICE

While there were strong indications of concern to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal students, there were few examples of outstanding or highly successful programs which directly meet the needs of these young people. Among the processes that are operating successfully for Aboriginal students:

The role of Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers

Most, although not all schools, valued and supported the role performed by the Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEOs). Overwhelmingly, students interviewed found AIEOs to be a much needed resource in the school. They represented someone students can relate to; someone they have got something in common with; someone with whom to discuss difficulties at home; and someone who can undertake home visits about school issues. However, a number of problems also emerged in the way AIEOs operate. Some of the community workers interviewed suggested that they were under-resourced to deal with the family issues with which they were confronted. Some AIEOs interviewed believed that school principals tended to view the role very narrowly and use the resource for their own purposes: ‘a person to sort out the fights’. There is a perception that the AIEOs are not able to be utilised fully as a resource because of the attitude in schools that Aboriginal students should not be treated differently to other students.

‘The kids know the AIEOs have got no authority and they resent it.’ Aboriginal interviewers.

Considerable scope exists for the AIEOs to be used more proactively to form closer partnerships between the school managers, staff, and community agencies.

Provision of role models

Some students felt a positive impact of having access in the school to Aboriginal role models. Although such people had only paid short visits, students felt this contact was helpful. As one high school student explained:

‘It’s encouraging to see someone do what you want to do.’

Role models who visit the school affirm Aboriginal students’ ambitions to ‘finish school and get a good job.’

Homework classes

Strong support was given by students for the value of homework classes as providing constructive assistance with completing set tasks. For high school students, the homework classes were the only feasible place for them to complete set work. Some upper school students also wanted access to a classroom during recess or lunchtime to complete set work.

‘I like to study at lunchtime and recess, so I can finish my work. I don’t have time in class, and I can’t do it at home.’ Year 11 Aboriginal girl.
**Inter-agency support structures**

The potential for inter-agency support and referral within a school environment was recognised by staff as necessary to address the complex nature of Aboriginal students’ needs. However, it was quite clear that such inter-agency networking could only work effectively if Aboriginal staff from the range of agencies were given equal status within the team. One of the AIEOs described the potential for inter-agency support mechanisms to work for Aboriginal students in the following way:

'**The students want to do good in their lives. They listen and communicate with me and with other people in the school - the School Based Police officer, the Chaplain and the School Psych. Sometimes the Aboriginal parents are the support mechanism, too.**'

Aboriginal Education Officer.
CONCLUSIONS

Based on the 45 interviews conducted for this research project, the on-going depth of educational problems for Aboriginal young people in this district – and the lack of demonstrable progress in achieving equitable outcomes – means that there is considerable scope for schools to improve their performance in delivering education to Aboriginal students. It was a significant finding of the research that some senior staff expressed the view that Commonwealth and State policy documents were not helpful to schools. The perceived lack of usefulness of these documents is a point of entry for professional development being instigated from Central or District Office level to assist senior school management in devising local planning processes that do embody the goals and directions of national and state policy.

Although the school experiences outlined by the Aboriginal students who were attending school on a regular basis and who participated in the project were predominantly positive, the depth of the educational disadvantage experienced by most Aboriginal young people in the Swan District cannot be overstated. The statistical data highlighted the continued disproportionate number of Aboriginal students who reject school or interact with the behaviour management policies. An Aboriginal Educational Support Service operated by indigenous people, and supported by funding arranged by the District Office, could address Aboriginal parents’ participation in the school process and facilitate an enhanced partnership between school and families from the earliest years of enrolment.

The complexity of the barriers to achievement for these young people, however, is evident. For many children, the nature of their extended family environment can compound the school level misunderstanding of the cultural, social and environmental factors complicating regular patterns of school attendance and achievement. The more sensitive issues relating to abuse of girls, teenage pregnancy and family responsibilities expected of Aboriginal girls emphasises the extremely complex dynamic currently operating to produce alienation from school.

Proactive policies to improve the cultural awareness of service providers are needed to intervene in the cycle of alienation. A wide range of participants identified the lack of depth in most teachers’ awareness of the social and cultural contexts of their Aboriginal students’ lives as a key issue to be addressed. This could be achieved through professional development in Aboriginal education and related issues for teaching staff, with such a program and mode of delivery being developed by the District Office in conjunction with a major teaching university.

Further school-based measures could include:

- Schools devising and submitting to District Office on a regular basis their individual Aboriginal education plans, incorporating strategies being taken to conform with the Department of Education’s anti-racist policies and their means of ensuring that all Aboriginals have easy access to information regarding support services.

- Schools, with District Office assistance, developing ways for Aboriginal students to assume leadership roles in schools, consistent with affirmative action principles.
• Schools, with District Office assistance, establishing an Aboriginal mentor scheme to provide appropriate role models for students.

The wide range of ‘outside’ school factors impacting on Aboriginal alienation from school suggests the need for much stronger partnerships to be developed between service providers, to provide a safety net for early intervention. The District Office is best placed to facilitate the establishment of a district-wide coordinating mechanism of major service providers (including Aboriginal organizations) to address underlying social issues inhibiting Aboriginal participation and achievement at school.

The impact of the whole school community’s respect for the role of Aboriginal school-based staff on Aboriginal student alienation from school was reflected in school truancy and suspension data, and the attitudes of Aboriginal adolescents to school in general. In light of these findings, there is clearly a need to initiate at District level a review of the position of Aboriginal and Islander Education Officer and other Aboriginal school-based staff. Such a review would focus on clarifying the roles of Aboriginal school-based staff, considering their professional development needs and establishing a more effective integration of these positions into school decision-making processes. The review panel would be thus able to articulate to the Department of Education the critical need to establish a means of tracking Aboriginal students who move between schools and school districts and who frequently become lost to the education system.

The students have openly voiced their educational goals, concerns and pedagogical preferences. School practices have been identified which act as barriers to achievement for most Aboriginal students, along with the complex circumstances surrounding early school leaving. The students who remain in school despite these factors were mature, articulate and focused on long term educational goals and career prospects. To achieve such an equitable outcome for most Aboriginal students will take considerable rethinking of support mechanisms, school based practice and coordination of existing services. Although there has been an enormous improvement in equitable access to and participation in education and training for Aboriginal students in the last decade (Robinson & Bablett, 2000), such opportunities are still not within the experience of most Aboriginal students.
REFERENCES


