Moora: Aboriginal children in a wheatbelt town

Lois Tilbrook

*Mount Lawley College of Advanced Education*

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Aboriginal Children in a Wheatbelt Town
Lois Tilbrook

Aboriginal Teacher Education Program
Mount Lawley College of Advanced Education
Aboriginal residents in the Moora district today, although they come from a variety of local situations, have much in common. In the past, their predecessors experienced the initial impact of Bishop Salvado’s New Norcia mission, followed by intensive European settlement, which inevitably meant alienation of Aboriginal land and destruction of traditional ways of living. That traumatic series of events has left them impoverished in both Aboriginal and European terms. The shadow of the past has not been dispersed, and is manifested in a life-style that has emerged in response to it. They must of necessity cope with impinging pressures toward uniformity, and toward conformity with Australian-European norms. The differences and similarities between Aborigines and others are highlighted in Ms Tilbrook’s study of Aboriginal education in Moora. The situation parallels what we find in many other country towns within this state. Recognition that there are difficulties, that there are inherent incompatibilities, and the rapprochement between them is hard to achieve, is an essential step toward finding solutions to the problems which face Moora Aborigines.

Ms Tilbrook’s study, then, focusses on a significant element in this complex situation, which concerns adaptation and accommodation on the part of Aboriginal children and their parents. It is broadly reflective of two different panoramic views of the socio-cultural scene. On one hand there is the school; on the other hand, the reality of life as it is lived in the Moora township. The school itself is not separable from the total social system. In an ideal sense, it expresses and transmits much of what goes on (or, supposedly, ought to go on) in ordinary everyday living. From an Aboriginal standpoint, it tends to be remote. What is taught there, often has only superficial relevance to the imperatives as perceived by Aborigines. Nevertheless, the school is a crucial institution in our kind of society (in which the Aborigines themselves are involved). Potentially, it is a significant medium for translating knowledge into practical terms and equipping its subjects with information and skills so that they can take advantage, on an equal basis, of the diverse opportunities which are offered by the wider society.

The picture which emerges from Ms Tilbrook’s study is one of a disadvantaged Aboriginal group – less disadvantaged perhaps than in the immediate past, but still very obviously so. Educational progress in the school in so far as Aboriginal children are concerned is measured against the progress of non-Aboriginal children – and differences are most marked. An important issue here, in the real situation, is the varied expectations of each ethnic group – varied both in intent and in the likelihood of fulfilment. Ms Tilbrook takes up this issue, considering its social implications.

One implication relates to the question of housing. Although several types of house-structure are available, in general terms that question epitomizes the dilemma facing Aborigines today – because around it are clustered a series of problems of varying magnitude. For better or for worse, many Aborigines have acquired what are sometimes glibly called ‘middle class values’ relating to the concept of ‘house’ as the necessary setting for a ‘home’. But these values are often in conflict with what actually happens there. For a child, any child, to function adequately in a learning situation, presupposes congenial social surroundings, familial support, with opportunities for thinking. It is true that this ideal is not necessarily achieved, even generally, in the wider non-Aboriginal society. However, there are fewer opportunities for its achievement in most Abori-
ginal homes in urban and country-town environments, and Moora is a typical example. The family is, in a number of respects, a microcosm of society. In the Aboriginal case, in this sort of environment, overcrowding, discomfort, depressing surroundings, unsanitary conditions, marital quarrelling and dissension, enforced mobility, and, not least, pressures toward over-dependence on alcohol, are significant factors. In combination, they can impede a child’s study and, importantly, confuse his or her aims and aspirations. Even though they are certainly found in the wider society too, they contribute to the marking-off of Aborigines from others, and reinforce the likelihood, and actuality, of negative discrimination. Differences in housing among Aborigines themselves, and between them and non-Aborigines, are further aspects which exacerbate this situation and affect the performance of children in the school.

It is, therefore, not difficult to see that (as Ms Tilbrook has shown) pressures of this nature on Aboriginal school children are so pervasive as not only to lower their degree of receptivity within the school, but also to force them away from it so that they seek more congenial and less demanding contexts. Inevitably, these are found among their peers who are more or less in the same position as themselves. Resistance to schooling, therefore, has a self-perpetuating impetus which underlines the structure of an Aboriginal sub-culture.

The implications of this state of affairs are not always recognized by those caught up within it. But it reinforces what Ms Tilbrook calls the ‘common background of experience’ of Aborigines (both adults and children), which tends to mark them off from other members of the wider Australian population. It is expressed through a low degree of interaction with Moora residents as a whole, and is reflected in the playground as well as in the classroom. Among the symptoms are absenteeism on the part of children, and minimal contact between parents and teachers. These do not necessarily mirror negative attitudes by adult Aborigines toward education — and Ms Tilbrook notes that there is a positive value attached to this. At the same time, it is unlikely that education — or, rather, schooling — means much more to many of them than a device which serves the pragmatic purpose of acquiring specific skills in order to obtain a job on leaving school. While this limited view of education is not all that dissimilar to what obtains in some sections of the wider society, it is more obtrusive in the Aboriginal situation — it is more focussed, less diffused and is supported by the ‘common background of experience’. Moreover, even the pragmatic purpose is not always achieved, since job opportunities for Aborigines, skilled or otherwise, are limited. However, that ‘common background of experience’ makes for Aboriginal strength, not weakness. Although it inhibits social interaction in a general sense, as well as the interchange of ideas from both within and outside the school, it can be seen as a positive frame of reference and a significant element in sustaining social identity. It is not to be lightly set aside, since it constitutes, in effect, the primary ingredients of an Aboriginal heritage — in spite of temporal distance from a traditional Aboriginal context. That heritage is based on shared experiences of Aboriginal—European contact over the years, and a recognition that major socio-cultural discrepancies between themselves and others continue to be conspicuous. If this is so, as the evidence indicates, then the school must take those facts into account in its teaching programme.
Ms Tilbrook has pointed out some of the things which should be done in this respect, to improve communication between teachers and Aboriginal children and adults. It cannot be a one-way process. Aborigines themselves must make an effort to ensure that this takes place, and so must teachers and other members of the wider society. Prejudices will need to be broken down on both sides of the ethnic fence. But they must be broken down, not with the aim of producing 'sameness' or of achieving a greater 'likeness' between Aboriginal people and members of the dominant group. There must be a willingness to understand, acknowledging that differences exist, and to put what is learnt to advantage. In other words, the school must become more 'open', and more conscious of the pivotal part it must play in community living. It must encourage more flexibility in its teaching, and ensure that the varying life-styles of its pupils are taken into account. For Aborigines, this means that it must sustain a healthy pride in their Aboriginal background. These points underlie Ms Tilbrook's study and provide substance to her recommendations.

Ronald M. Berndt,
Department of Anthropology,
University of Western Australia.
Lois Tilbrook M.A. Dip. Ed. (W.A.) is Lecturer in Anthropology with the Aboriginal Teacher Education Program at Mount Lawley College of Advanced Education. She has conducted research into Aboriginal girls living in hostels in Perth and is presently engaged in research into Aboriginal housing problems. Ms Tilbrook is also director of a project aimed at gathering information and producing instructional and supplementary materials about Aboriginal people living in the South-West Region of Western Australia.

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Moora — regional centre for the North Midlands W.A.
Moora town was established in 1875, when the railway from Midland Junction to Walkaway was built. There had always been Aborigines in the surrounding districts, and as land was taken up for farming, a number of them were employed as farmhands and domestics.

The town is the regional centre for the North Midlands, a subdivision of the Northern Agricultural Statistical Division of Western Australia. As such, it was developed to service the agricultural hinterland. The Northern Agricultural Statistical Division has a total population of 42,804 people (23,044 males and 19,766 females) of whom 1,828 or 4.6% are Aboriginal (1,003 males and 825 females). Moora township has a total population of 1,409 people (735 males and 634 females) of whom 289 or 20.5% are Aboriginal (155 males and 134 females). Thus the Aboriginal population of Moora town is disproportionate for the region, and forms a sizeable minority within the town.

New Norcia Mission lies 56.4 kilometers south of Moora townsite, and was established in 1842 by the Benedictine Order to form a closed peasant farming community of Aborigines and Benedictine monks. Several cottages were built on the mission and occupied by Aboriginal families. An orphanage with a boys and a girls section was also founded for Aboriginal children. This was run by the Benedictine nuns, with the help of the monks for the bigger boys orphanage. In addition, a boarding school for youths from the surrounding farms of the district was started, and a small number of Aboriginal boys also attended this college over the years. Similarly, provision was made for the daughters of farmers in the district to board and attend the New Norcia convent.

In 1915 the Moore River Native Settlement was opened, 74 kilometers south of Moora and approximately 29 kilometers west of New Norcia Mission. This was a State Government enclosed reserve. In line with Government policy of the day, Aborigines were moved there from all over the state to await their fate, which was believed to be an inevitable ‘dying out’ of their race.

In 1922 a sister settlement at Carrolup, near Katanning 418.6 kilometers further south, was opened and run on similar lines to the Moore River Native Settlement.

In 1951 Moore River Native Settlement was finally closed as such, and the Methodist Overseas Mission took charge of the administration of the buildings and property. They operated an orphanage for Aboriginal children and an agricultural farm for Aboriginal youths. The orphanage came to be run on cottage lines, and some older Aboriginal girls were employed to help look after the children (a practice carried on from Moore River Native Settlement days). This in turn closed in 1974, and the property was subsumed by the Aboriginal Lands Trust of Western Australia. An Aboriginal Methodist pastor applied to the Aboriginal Lands Trust to run the property as a communal farm. Currently, the property houses a number of Aboriginal families in what were previously mission houses, and a communal farming project is under way.

Badjingara Farm lies 27.4 kilometers south of Moora. This is a farming property which belongs to the New Norcia Mission. It is currently being operated as a mission farm for Wards of State including Aboriginal children.

Traditionally there has been a high degree of contact and interchange between the Aborigines living at New Norcia, and other who were forcibly moved to Moore.
River Native Settlement from as far afield as the Kimberley and Pilbara regions of the state. Being a government concern, Moore River Native Settlement was non-denominational and church services were regularly held there, conducted by the brothers of New Norcia as well as by representatives of various protestant groups. More recently Aboriginal people in the district, compelled by circumstances to leave their children in an institution, have utilised both New Norcia and Mogumber with little regard to denomination, although certain families have built up a relationship with either one place or the other that has stood them in good stead over time.

A number of Aboriginal people living in Moora today have had experience in New Norcia Mission, Moore River Native Settlement, Carrolup Native Settlement or Mogumber Mission, or have had parents or children who have been placed in these missions and settlements at some time or other.

Race relations in the town of Moora are in a delicate balance. Early in 1975 the town attracted a good deal of publicity because of fighting which broke out in the hotel frequented by Aborigines, between Aboriginal and white patrons. This had been precipitated by the publican, a person new to the town, closing the ‘Aboriginal’ section of the hotel and refusing to serve Aborigines in the other sections. However, despite the sensational press coverage, things quickly quietened again and Aborigines and whites went their respective ways. This overall calm with periodic outbreaks of tension between Aborigines and whites, expressed in mild terms such as brawling, has been the pattern of race relations within the town over several years.
Catholic Church and Street Scenes, Moora.
The Aboriginal school child population comprises 37.9% of Moora's Aboriginal population.
2.1 THE SCHOOLCHILDREN

The total Moora school child population is 627. Of these, 88 or 14% are Aboriginal. Table 1 shows a breakdown of these figures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Total School Population</th>
<th>Total Aboriginal (number)</th>
<th>Total Aboriginal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Convent</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>32.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Primary</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Schools</td>
<td>627</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows that the convent has proportionately more Aboriginal children attending it, than the state primary school or the high school, and overall a much smaller enrolment. Of the non-Aboriginal population, generally only Catholic parents choose to send their children to Catholic systemic schools because of sectarian belief and also the expectation that parents will pay some school fees, together with the fact that Catholics form a minority anyway. On the other hand, Aboriginal parents send their children to either school in roughly equal numbers. The fact that there are proportionately more Aboriginal to white children at the convent compared to the state primary school may be an incentive for Aboriginal parents to continue to enrol their children at the convent where they will not be quite so outnumbered, although this does not explain the disproportion in the first instance.

While the total schoolchild population of Moora constitutes 43.8% of the total town population (627 children out of 1,409 people), the Aboriginal school child population comprises 37.9% of the town's Aboriginal population (88 Aboriginal schoolchildren out of 289 Aboriginal people).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Town population</th>
<th>Total school child population</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Moora Town</td>
<td>1,409</td>
<td>627</td>
<td>44.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Moora Aboriginal</td>
<td>289</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>30.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Moora Primary School</td>
<td>1,409</td>
<td>351</td>
<td>24.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Aboriginal Primary School</td>
<td>289</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>17.99%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A current trend is a drift of Aboriginal children from the convent to the state primary school, and whereas in 1974 Aboriginal children had comprised over 50% of the convent enrolment, by August 1975 they had dropped from 32.5% at the beginning of 1975 to 22.3% as six children were transferred to the state primary school. However, these percentages should be interpreted with caution, as the actual number of children attending the convent in April 1975 was small (83 children) and was less than one third the number of children attending the state primary school for the
same period (267 children). Moreover, this is to all accounts a normal flux with the aboriginal school-child population, as one school temporarily gains in popularity and draws aboriginal children to it from the other school until the tendency is reversed, and the drift of children changes in the opposite direction for a period.

During 1975 the Moora convent was classified as a disadvantaged school. This has resulted in several improvements including carpeting in the classrooms and funds for a remedial teacher. This classification was possible because of the proportion of Aboriginal children attending the school, which is accepted as one criterion for special assistance by the Education Department of Western Australia.

The state primary school employs a remedial teacher on three fifths time, out of funds obtained through the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. In 1975 this teacher had 45 children in remedial classes, of whom 15 or 33% were aboriginal. This is one small example of how funds voted through the Department of Aboriginal Affairs do in fact directly benefit the wider community (in this case, two to one in the community’s favour). However, it is this type of item which receives virtually no publicity and which is overlooked by the critics of public spending on Aborigines. It is just the type of item which is totally ignored by the white residents of Moora town, including teachers and merchants who comment disapprovingly on the monetary assistance received by Aboriginal high school children and complain of the wastage that occurs with equipment, in order to illustrate their prejudices. The point being made here is not that only Aboriginal children should directly benefit from assistance made possible under Aboriginal Affairs budgetary items, but rather that some thought to this other side of the coin by critics might help them to relate their own children’s progress at school and elsewhere, to that of Aboriginal progress, in a more positive way.

Both the convent and the state primary school feed into the new North Midlands Senior High School. A hostel provides accommodation for children from outer districts. The hostel has a 56 student capacity, boys and girls being accommodated in separate wings of the modern building. In April 1975 there were 38 students in residence, of whom five, or 13.2% were Aboriginal. Later in the year this number dropped to three Aboriginal residents because two girls moved into new state housing in Moora town with their mother.

2.2 THE HOUSING

(a) Introduction

Moora town has many of the features in common with Norton, a wheatbelt town described by Professor Hill in her study of Aboriginal poverty in two towns in Western Australia for the Henderson enquiry into poverty in Australia.4 It is built on a claypan which in summer cracks into red dust and baked soil on which nothing grows, and in winter traps water so that yards, roads, footpaths and driveways are like miniature lakes. As a consequence, floors are continually marked with red clay, and gardens appear straggly unless given enormous amounts of attention, something few residents manage with much visible effect. Moora has two hotels, one club frequented only by white business people and government and banking employees and minor officials, two main streets and several shops as well as a district hospital, the senior district high school
and two primary schools.
The town has benefitted from work done under the Government Regional Employment Development Scheme which, while it lasted, provided federal money to local shires to create employment within their centres as one way of partially overcoming the chronic unemployment of the time in rural areas, and completing public works as well. A number of Aborigines were temporarily employed with money received under this scheme during 1973-75.

The housing occupied by the families of the 88 Moora Aboriginal schoolchildren covers a wide spectrum both in types of houses and the condition in which the dwellings are kept. At one end are those families living in dilapidated shacks on the Moora Native Reserve, and at the other end families residing in very neat and well kept conventional State Housing Commission rental houses, with gardens to be proud of.

The Department for Community Welfare employs a number of homemakers to assist with household management and settling into housing, for both Aboriginal and white families. Of these, only one is Aboriginal although there have previously been three Aboriginal homemakers in the town. It is not known how this system operates in practice for some Aboriginal women appear to regard the homemaker as a type of caretaker to whom they should report repairs that need to be done. Others refuse to have the homemaker service, stating that they will not have someone else telling them how to run their homes. Yet again, others accept the service for a period, and seem to feel it is of benefit to them.

The task of the homemaker is to assist with household budgeting and housekeeping in general, to give support and practical advice on liaising with agencies in the community such as the Fuel and Energy Commission (for payment of light and electricity bills, and any disputes over the amounts charged), the Infant Health Centre, enrolment of children at school, and so on, and in general to offer support to the woman householder until she feels competent to manage on her own.

Table 3: Number of Aboriginal School Children by School, and the Type of Housing Occupied.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Housing</th>
<th>No. of Families</th>
<th>No. of School Children In These Families</th>
<th>Convent School</th>
<th>State Primary School</th>
<th>High School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conventional Town House</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitional Housing</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reserve Housing</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm Housing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hostel</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Some families had some children enrolled in the state system and concurrently other children enrolled in the convent.
(b) The Moora Native Reserve

There are 10 accommodation structures on the Moora Native Reserve. These are two or three room shacks, all in very poor state of repair. The Department for Community Welfare has had the task of administering native reserves since the creation of the Federal Department of Aboriginal Affairs, and the assumption by existing state welfare agencies of the functions of the former Native Welfare Department of Western Australia. The policy of the Department for Community Welfare is to close the reserve and move all the residents into conventional housing. This policy emanates from old Native Welfare Department policy which adopted this as an aim during the 1960's. It is coupled with the brief given by the State Government to the State Housing Commission in 1972, to aim to house all Aborigines in conventional housing of the same standard as the European population. Several similar plans have been mooted over the years by the Department of Native Welfare, with little success. The ability to close reserves bears a direct relationship to the availability of alternative accommodation, which is simply not forthcoming in sufficient quantities for Aborigines. In 1973 the State Housing Commission undertook to build 14 houses in Moora during 1974 to replace reserve housing. However only three houses were built and promises were made for another 12 houses to be built in 1975. To date these houses have still not been built.

In the past the Moora Native Reserve population has been much larger. Now, a number of families have moved from there into the town as housing becomes available. In mid-1975, 32 people were living in four out of the 10 structures on the reserve. The other structures were unoccupied. This level of reserve occupation was an all time low, and since then the reserve population has again risen dramatically. Reasons for this rise are increasing unemployment in the city where some people had moved to find jobs, the unavailability of housing in the city where families had gone to obtain it, and a number of older people, originally from the Moora district, who have heard of empty housing on the Moora Native Reserve and travelled back there to occupy it, and who have opted to stay on even if there has proved to be no accommodation available for them there.

The Moora Native Reserve is an extremely depressing sight. It was built in the middle of the stock run, on land which understandably no one else wanted at the time. It is situated on a hillside, with no protection from the prevailing winter winds and few trees to provide shade in summer. The road leading into it is gravel and mud. The soil is typically red clay, which in winter turns to red slush. It is located 3.2 kilometers out of Moora town, with no public transport into the town site. The buildings are exceptionally dilapidated and create a run-down and depressing atmosphere. The overall impression of the reserve is dreary, barren, windswept, cold and drab in winter. In summer it is dusty, dry and hot. A communal amenities block comprising unheated showers and washing troughs, and toilets, stands on one side.

Two high school children, two state primary school children and one convent child live on the reserve in three family situations. However the impression given by teachers is that far more children live there, because one of the contrasts that teachers tend to draw is between reserve children and those living in houses in town. Much drinking and gambling is said to occur there, and a glance at the reserve surroundings is suffi-
cient explanation by itself for why people would turn to these activities when living in such conditions.

(c) Transitional Housing

Two families with children attending school are accommodated in transitional housing in Moora town. These two families account for two high school children, and three convent children. Another family with two high school children lives in transitional housing at a siding 37 kilometers from Moora.

This type of housing offers a central room with one electric light point and a stove, adjoining which are three small bedrooms and the laundry. There is water laid on to the laundry area, but no separate bathroom facilities, so that tenants have to bathe in the washroom. These houses are small and unlined. The general trend by government departments is to move ‘promising’ families from the reserve into transitional housing before allocating them conventional town housing. One woman who had been moved from the reserve three months earlier commented that this type of accommodation was much better than anything available on the reserve, although the house was very cold. She is hoping to obtain a conventional house, ostensibly because then she would be ‘nearer to town’. This is one way of saying that she prefers conventional housing, as the transitional house she occupies is no further from the centre of town than some of the town’s conventional housing.

This transitional dwelling is hopelessly inadequate for the needs of this one household. At least fifteen people live there, ranging in age from infancy through to middle age, averaging five persons per sleeping unit and placing heavy demands on plumbing and sanitary facilities.

The concept of transitional housing has always been that Aboriginal families should first learn to live according to acceptable standards in reserve type dwellings. As an initial step from reserve to transitional housing, the definition of ‘acceptable standards’ revolves around general care of the reserve dwelling and hygiene, together with a persistent attempt at keeping the outside appearance of the shack neat and tidy. The definition of ‘acceptable standards’ is left mostly up to government authorities, such as welfare officers from the Department for Community Welfare and the State Housing Commission. These individuals are taken to be able to judge what is representative of community standards. However, the authorities that these people represent are subject to public pressure in that members of the public can complain to them. In this way, members of the public can initiate investigations which lead, at times, to action to evict Aboriginal families from State Housing Commission housing when neighbours have complained of noise or fighting. Unfortunately, this type of public pressure may be highly idiosyncratic to particular individuals representative of no-one but themselves.

Once a family has demonstrated their ability, and their ‘potential’, by maintaining a dwelling on the reserve, they can then have the chance of moving into slightly less inadequate transitional housing off the reserve if it is available. Nevertheless, the family remains on the outer edges of the town unless development has spread that far, because transitional housing has been built on edge-of-town blocks specially selected and gazetted for use by the former Native Welfare Department. If they then manage to maintain the required standards in
this type of accommodation, the family is considered to be suitable tenants for conventional town housing with white neighbours when it, in turn, becomes available.

Hence, the progression from reserve to transitional housing to town housing is very much a series of individual family tests. The odds against passing this test are made as high as possible by making the reserve type of housing the most difficult to cope with because of the lack of basic human facilities and the indignities of communal toilets and shower facilities. The transitional type housing is some improvement on this.

Far from being any encouragement to raise living standards, reserve and transitional housing militate against this by the depressing and inconvenient nature of the accommodation they afford. As well they encourage anti-government and anti-society reactions against the system which imposes this type of accommodation, and this sort of test. This is expressed in neglect and deliberate damage to structures, dedicated attempts to avoid paying any rent, and damage to houses occupied by kin and friends who have been able to obtain conventional housing of a higher standard. At times families are allowed conventional housing direct from the reserve, and so avoid the transitional housing step. This practice is becoming more common with recent efforts on the part of the Department for Community Welfare to put into effect their policy of housing all Aboriginal families in conventional housing. At least five families of schoolchildren had lived on the reserve and then moved into transitional housing before they were allocated conventional houses, although this is probably an underestimation because this information was not collected for everyone.

Some of the families have lived at one time or another in railway housing, rudimentary and basic housing provided by the State Government Railways for its employees. Others have lived in housing provided on farm properties, generally very basic indeed, and little better than reserve housing. Two families with four children attending school in Moora (two children in each family) live in farm housing. In one instance, this is accommodation on a property out of Moora. In the other case, it is a cottage at New Norcia Mission and the children bus to high school every day. Many families have lived in old car bodies, with relatives in a variety of housing types, and in fact wherever employment has been available and shelter has had to be found.

(d) Conventional Housing

Nineteen families live in conventional housing, accounting for 17 convent children, 27 state primary school children, and 25 high school adolescents. This type of accommodation covers a variety of situations, both in terms of the size of the dwelling (the number of bedrooms) and its desirability. Some houses are built on more desirable sites than others, on blocks that do not flood as readily in the wet, or are more recently constructed.

Similarly, the manner in which the houses are kept varies widely in the case of both Aboriginal tenants and others. Of the 19 families living in conventional housing, the vast majority tend to maintain their homes at a reasonable standard, at least from outside appearances. Most of the houses bear evidence of some attempt to cultivate a modest garden, often against incredible odds of poor soil and several children. Most have intact doors and windows although several bear tell-tale signs of heavy wear. Most have window treatments varying in
quality from makeshift curtains devised from sheets or table cloths and tied across windows, to floral drapes hung with the pattern facing into the street for all to admire. And most have a reasonably tidy out appearance, if a little barren at times. The picture presented by these houses occupied by Aboriginal tenants is not markedly at variance with other housing in Moora, with a few exceptions of obvious neglect and damage. Some of the houses occupied by whites are also obviously neglected, and it would be wrong to conclude that this feature distinguishes houses occupied by Aborigines alone.

Two of the conventional houses are prototypes of the stereotype of damage and neglect that is frequently held up as being ‘typical’ of Aboriginal tenants. There may well be other houses occupied by Aborigines in Moora, that are similarly badly neglected, because there may be others where no school children are living and hence which were not visited. Of these two houses, one is built on very low lying clay soil which floods badly, and there is no attempt to cultivate any lawn or garden or control weeds. The front door is broken and the house bears other tell-tale signs of obvious damage. The other house is on a more favourable site but is dirty and the yard is untidy and unkempt.

(e) Overcrowding

The overcrowding that occurs in Aboriginal households is one very pertinent reason for the wear that the dwellings suffer. Of the 11 town houses where interviews were held, the average number of residents at the time was 8.3. When the transitional house is taken into account, this rises to 8.8 residents at the time of interview. However, one of these houses is atypical in that it is occupied by only three people, and when this is taken out of the sample the average number of people per dwelling rises to 8.8 without counting the transitional house, and 9.4 when it is included.

These figures are well above the figure for the average number of Aborigines living in private houses according to the 1971 census, which is 6.1 persons per private dwelling. Private dwelling refers in the census to a house or semi-detached house, and can be owned or rented by the occupants. The average household size of the sample of Aboriginal households drawn by Gale for her report on poverty among Aboriginal families in Adelaide is 6.4 persons. The Hill report on poverty in two towns in Western Australia cites the average number of persons using washing and toilet facilities in each of the two towns as 7.8 persons and 7.0 persons respectively, and these figures include people living on native reserves. The Moora Native Reserve has a total of 4 toilets and showers, making an average of 8 persons using these facilities per facility. In the case of transitional and town housing, there is only one shower and toilet provided and so the average number of persons using them is somewhere around 8.8.

Overall, in Moora the average number of Aborigines sharing available dwellings and using facilities provided, is higher than the national average, the city of Adelaide, and the two towns of ‘Western’ and ‘Norton’ in Western Australia. However, as only those households with children attending school are included in this sample, it may be safe to assume that these are also the houses with the greatest number of residents in occupancy, because young couples with no or few children, and the aged with adult families, are excluded from the sample.
Nevertheless, three sets of grandparents care for at least 9 schoolchildren so that an adult family is no guarantee of a small household size. Of these three grandparental

Table 4: Average Number of Aboriginal Residents Per Dwelling, of Households Interviewed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of dwelling</th>
<th>No. of residents at time of interview</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transitional house</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conventional town house</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td></td>
<td>12</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

\[ A = 8.8 \text{ per dwelling} \]

homes, one accommodates a total of five people comprised of three school children and one set of grandparents although there has recently been four of the grandfather’s sister’s daughter’s children living there as well. One is a household of 10 including four grandchildren, one set of grandparents, one son and his wife and baby, and another son. The latter’s son’s wife and newborn baby were about to return there from hospital. The third dwelling accommodates two grandchildren and their set of grandparents.

This average household size of 8.8 persons is in fact a conservative estimate, because more people actually live in many of the houses from time to time than are generally admitted to by the registered occupants. Aborigines come under a lot of criticism from neighbours, the State Housing Commission and the Department for Community Welfare for overcrowding, and the State Housing Commission uses this as one reason for eviction of families from their houses. Hence, people have a very real interest in concealing the actual number of residents at any one time and pass occupants off as visitors even if their ‘stay’ is prolonged. As only a limited number of houses are available to both Aborigines and whites, and because virtually no private housing is obtainable by Aborigines (with the exception of farm housing provided for hired hands), Aborigines have to take what opportunities of shelter they can find. This is amply in evidence when Aboriginal women list the range of temporary and makeshift shelters they have lived in before moving into a conventional house.

Another factor, already mentioned, which contributes to the wear of houses occupied by Aboriginal families is the damage done by visitors. Whatever the specific motives for this, it sometimes happens that a family occupying a conventional house is visited on weekends by a group of relatives who cause damage to both the property and relations with neighbours. One woman recounted how an Aboriginal family in the street adjoining hers, had lived quietly in their new house for several months. Then one weekend relatives visited, and there were over 30 people in the house. Alcohol was consumed and fighting was the end result. A window was smashed and other damage done to the building.
Aboriginal Housing, Moora: (Clockwise from top left) Reserve Houses; Transitional House; Conventional Town House; Interior, Transitional House.
Aboriginal children are frequently cared for by relatives other than their parents.
Neighbours telephoned the police and they came around, exacerbating the already strained relations between the family and the street. Everything has again returned to normal following this incident, except that the house has a battered external appearance and all the neighbours are still talking about the couple and expecting the scene to be repeated at some stage in the future. Repairs have to be done to the house by the State Housing Commission, and the family is acquiring a reputation for being 'bad tenants' through no direct fault of their own.

2.3 THE CARE OF CHILDREN

One little girl was brought from the Port Hedland District to the Moore River Native Settlement 1,610 kilometers apart, by an officer of the Department of Native Affairs (which later changed its name and became the Department of Native Welfare) when she was four years old. She grew up in the settlement, and was then employed to help look after smaller children in the creche.

In this way, she was nursemaid to several Aboriginal adults who are now living in Moora town. She married and went woodchopping with her husband, and had 11 children. When her husband took to drinking heavily she placed five of her children in New Norcia Mission, keeping the remaining six with her. Nowadays she lives in a conventional house in Moora town and is currently looking after three of her many grandchildren, although she sporadically takes care of others and has recently had three of her niece's children also staying with her. She is related to just under half of all the Aboriginal school children in the town (42 out of the 88 school-children) although this proportion might well prove to be much greater if her exact family ties were traced. Some of these children attend the convent, some the state primary school, and others the high school.

This woman has an intimate knowledge of a large number of the Aboriginal people living in the Moora district, through her experience in Moore River Native Settlement, her contact with New Norcia Mission, and her marriage to a man from the Moora district which related her to several other families. Her own children have married into other families, thereby extending her relations through marriage. She keeps active contact with all of these people, and is given to expositions on the importance of the woman for the home and children. This grandmother exemplifies the central role of grandmother as the pivot of her kinship network, and of playing a vital part in the care of children related to her either by direct descent or through marriage. However, a grand total of 24 Aboriginal school children live with relatives other than their own parents, not counting the hostel residents. This amounts to 27.3% of the Aboriginal school children of Moora, and includes the total of six children living with their grandparents in addition to the above mentioned three. The remaining 15 children live with sisters, brother's sister-in-law, sister's brother-in-law, sister's sister-in-law, brother's brother-in-law, and others who are more indirectly related at ascending generation levels.

In addition to the fact that the Aboriginal school-children are frequently cared for by relatives, their residential patterns tend also to be mobile. For example, four children have lived with three separate households over the year, and may well move again because of certain tensions between relatives over them. Another three children are being cared for by two different households because their mother died earlier in the year.
and no one single family can take care of all three. A similar situation exists for four other children who are being looked after by relatives of their father, since his death. In another instance of parental death the child is being cared for by the dead mother’s brother, who is also caring for a child belonging to another relative of his. Yet again, other children who are wards of State are in institutionalised care at Badjingara Farm or in Perth.

It would be a very fruitful exercise to trace the movements of the 88 Aboriginal schoolchildren of Moora over a period of time, say, one year. This would yield insights into family patterns and obligations, child socialisation practices, and how Aboriginal families cope with crises such as deaths, imprisonments and marital breakdowns. This in turn would go a long way towards increasing the classroom teacher’s understanding of his or her Aboriginal pupils, their anxieties and their behaviour.

As it is, the movements of these children are made all the more difficult for teachers to comprehend because of a good deal of confusion over their names. Children are usually registered at birth in their father’s surname, but where the parents are not married they may be registered in their mother’s name. This does not imply that their father is unrecognised, any more than registration in the father’s name implies that their mother is unrecognised. However, in the case of Aborigines, when they are being cared for by relatives it is sometimes difficult for outsiders to see how they are all related as the surnames do not necessarily follow the general patterns of society. This is because the names of the children do not always provide the same clues about their relationship to the household members, as they would if they did follow these general patterns.

For example, three children are known by their mother’s name, but are living with their deceased father’s sister. This aunt has assumed her husband’s name. If these three children followed the usual pattern of naming found in society, they would be registered in their father’s name, which was the same as that of his sister with whom they are now staying. This would then have made immediate sense to any teacher who bothered to enquire. But as it is, without going into the marital status of their mother and dead father, which could be untactful in the circumstances, it appears at first glance as though they are not related to anyone at all with whom they are living. To add to the apparent confusion in this particular household, the aunt has school age children of her own and her school age sister is also living with her. Thus there are school children with three different surnames between them, all related, and all residing in the one household.

The reverse of this pattern also occurs, such as when children are registered in their father’s name and then live with their mother’s brother’s family and so bear neither their uncle’s name nor his wife’s maiden name. However, this is within the expected patterns of society, and is likely to present less of a mystery to teachers then the former example.

The reasons why Aboriginal school children are cared for by relatives to such a large extent are manifold. Tragic situations involving parental deaths concern a total of eight school children, as well as several pre-schoolers and adult brothers and sisters.

Aside from death, another reason for Aboriginal children living with other families is when they are declared Wards of the State, generally on grounds of parental neglect. Whereas in the past the tendency on
the part of the Courts and the welfare departments has been to place these children in institutionalised care, the more modern approach is to board them with foster parents. In the case of Aboriginal children, there has been an even more recent acceptance of certain Aboriginal families as suitable foster families for Aboriginal children by the Department for Community Welfare. At least four children living with their maternal grandmother are in foster placement with her. Another child is a foster placement with another household of the father’s relatives.

A third reason is that sometimes private arrangements are made between parents and other adults for the care of Aboriginal children. At least five families are looking after the children of relatives because of this type of arrangement, although it is likely that this is an under-estimation because not all households where Aboriginal schoolchildren live, were able to be contacted.

It is important to realise that private child care arrangements can contribute significantly to overcrowding in State Housing Commission housing. In this situation, responsibilities to the children and their parents take precedence over any other consideration, and they are helped out even if helping means running the risk of eviction.

One woman recounted how she had been looking after four children belonging to another woman as well as three others related to her. She found that this was too much of a burden financially as she felt obliged to spend equally on all children so as to avoid discrimination between them, because this would be considered wrong. She also found that her own children were jealous about the other children calling her “Mum” and sharing her affection. Eventually she complained to their mother, who became offended and removed them from her care. This woman feels strongly that the mother of these children is wrong, because it is really her task to make a home for her own children and not farm them out on others when it is in her power to avoid it. However, in this particular instance these children had other relatives in the town with whom they could be placed, so they were in no sense being abandoned nor their mother being turned away with no-one else to turn to.

The events leading up to the situation where children are cared for by others are another matter. The reasons why parents find it necessary to leave their children with relatives, or children are made Wards of the State, have to be explained in terms of the opportunities that are available to Aboriginal people in vital areas of life such as employment, housing and status, as well as what choices and options are open (and closed) to them. It is not sufficient to say by way of explanation that these are preferred cultural patterns, although cultural preferences and values are certainly important. The assertion that Aborigines prefer to behave in this way because it is their culture, may simply be a rationalisation of forced choices. When no other options exist, in order to tolerate an otherwise intolerable situation it is essential to attach some positive value to it. It is possible that fewer children would be cared for by others and that more nuclear family units would be able to sustain themselves as families, if housing was not so difficult to obtain; if the scarcity of housing did not ensure that overcrowding occurs; if reserve conditions were not so demoralising; and if relatives were not virtually the only source of real help available to the household.
This is not to say that the nuclear family arrangement
of a mother and father plus their children, is necessarily
the most desirable pattern of family life, or would be
for Aborigines should it ever be possible for them to
really have this choice. Close family ties between a
large range of relatives, with the ability to call upon
each other in times of stress to offer support and
practical help, is one of the most rewarding aspects of
membership of Aboriginal kin groups. In addition to
this, one of the important practical effects for Abori-
gines of a supportive network of relatives is that it acts
as a buffer against contact with whites, and provides a
valuable pool of resources in dealing with society
either through individuals or institutions. Individuals
can call on kin for advice, information on how to go
about things, accounts of how others fared in similar
situations, and moral and financial support without
suffering any loss of prestige no: revealing ignorance
or personal fears to outsiders.

2.4 ABORIGINAL FAMILY STRUCTURE
As has already been indicated, there is a high degree of
interrelatedness between the families of the Aboriginal
school children in Moora. In addition to the 42 children
connected through ties of blood and marriage to the one
grandmother, a further five are included in one cluster
of relatives, and 20 more children are part of a third
kinship network. These account for 67 children out of
the total of 88, and it is highly likely that these kinship
networks would be shown to be even more extensive
if they were gone into in detail.

This division of Aboriginal people into groups of kin
becomes apparent at times of stress, and is expressed
in factionalism between members of the various groups.
The school children may be instrumental in this. For
example, during 1975 a group of Aboriginal adolescents
wrote unflattering things in the town’s public toilets
about a rival group of peers. The individuals named
in the grafitti all formed one cluster of relatives, and
the ones doing the writing made up another. This
incident is alleged to have caused tension and bad
feelings between the senior grandmothers belonging
to each group, although it is highly probable that the
feelings existed already and the incident allowed them
to be expressed openly. Both of these women
mentioned this incident and are obviously still unsettled
by it, saying that they have known each other all their
lives, and criticising each other for the way they have
handled it.

Another incident occurred when several relatives of an
Aboriginal school child threatened to ‘deal with’ other
Aboriginal schoolchildren with whom the victim had
been fighting at school. Here again, while the incident
was over childish behaviour on the part of juveniles, it
was taken up by older members of the kin networks
and blown into larger proportions. This type of friction
serves to highlight family lines and emphasise distance
between members of the various family groupings,
as well as causing teachers a degree of anxiety because
they see playground fights being taken outside of school
grounds.

The basis for the enmity felt by members of one kin
group against another is not clear, and would be an
extremely interesting socio-historical study in its own
right, which would go a long way towards arriving at
an understanding of the interaction between Aboriginal
people. The schools are intimately involved in factiona-
lism between groups of related Aboriginal kin, because
the school grounds are places where they come into
constant contact and where the opportunity for fights to erupt between them is ever present. However, these kinship lines and divisions also become obvious and are reaffirmed at other times as well, such as during weddings, funerals and birthday parties, and are not always expressed in trouble and fighting.

A wide range of ties are recognised within the various kin networks. While on the one hand when a family breaks up the children are said to generally go with the mother, this does not deny the role of the paternal grandparents, especially the grandmother, nor of other paternal kin. The overall importance of the mother’s kin compared to the father’s is not clear, but judging from the residence patterns of the schoolchildren both sides of the family seem to be equally important. Which side comes to be stressed more than the other seems to be a matter of circumstances and resources. In order to substantiate a kinship tie, Aboriginal people refer back at least two generation levels, and reference is made to higher generation levels than that, as well.

2.5 COMMON BACKGROUND EXPERIENCE

It has often been pointed out that Aboriginal people generally share a range of background experiences that are largely of a negative nature and which contribute to their sense of being a group apart. As young children, even up to the present they are often placed in homes and settlements where they are looked after by strangers, without the warmth of their own parents. As adolescents they are frequently ill equipped to obtain any employment other than repetitive manual labour in unpopular industries such as boot-making and dry-cleaning, and are given little opportunity by potential employers to work in other areas. They frequently come into contact with the police, although this process may start at a much younger age. As young adults commencing families of their own, they spend periods living in extremely poor accommodation while coping with the hassels of young children and restricted employment opportunities.

Several women tell a similar story of how they spent many years of their childhood in missions or children’s homes and then worked there until, on growing up, they were forced to leave. These women recount how they eventually married, generally after working for awhile as domestics, and then how they moved around the countryside with their husbands in search of work. The next step after this, when the difficulties of coping in makeshift accommodation with several small children become too much, is to settle on a native reserve. Given the background of these women it is surprising how well they manage to cope with a house in town, and to do as well as they do.

2.6 COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

The Aboriginal people of Moora tend strongly to keep to themselves, and to stay outside the affairs of the town as much as possible, although some are actively involved in working to improve the conditions of Aborigines through the local Aboriginal Progress Association. It is mostly the men who are employed, but many are in receipt of Social Security benefits such as invalid pensions and unemployment benefits. Only one Aboriginal woman is employed in a full-time job, although many of the women have worked before coming to the town, or have had jobs in the town in the past.

With their high degree of mutual interaction and their
common past experiences, the Aboriginal people identify as being from the Moora district, and tend to form a closed community. One Aboriginal woman whose own family lived on a farm out of Moora until recent years, says that she has always felt something of an outsider in the town. This feeling was strongly reinforced when her family first moved into the town and the local Aboriginal people took to calling out insults as they passed her house, clearly indicating that they considered the family to be 'stuck up' or proud. Since this woman's own children have been going to school and mixing with the other Aboriginal children, the woman feels that much of the initial resentment directed against her and her family has decreased. However, her sense of being something of an outsider continues.

The point has already been made that there are many ties of blood and marriage within groups of Aboriginal families in Moora. Moreover, these groupings tend to be headed by people who have been interned in the Moore River Native Settlement or resident in the New Norcia Mission. Given this background, it is not surprising that these families share a tradition of a sense of comradeship which they do not readily extend to others who do not have the same accumulated experiences over time, or whose circumstances have changed over time even if they have also been in the district for equally as long.

Another woman from Moora district who has lived away for several years, stated flatly that she does not like the people of Moora, neither Aboriginal nor white. This woman's two oldest children had been placed in New Norcia Mission as State Wards, and this had been her motivation in coming to the town some years earlier. Now that the children have grown up and left the mission there is no reason for her to stay on. Both young people have been unable to find work in Moora town and this woman feels, with some justification, that there is nothing for the family here.

One other woman made the point that her husband and his family had not been classified as Aboriginal until 1968 when the current governmental definition of an Aborigine as anyone descended from an Aborigine was adopted. This woman is white, and speaks with a sense of distance about Aborigines. It is also sometimes pointed out by other white sources that this woman's children are 'not really Aboriginal', although there are a number of children in Moora whose mothers are Aboriginal and their fathers are white, who are classified as Aboriginal. This strengthens the argument that the definition of aboriginality is largely a cultural matter, based on the observed social interaction of the individual concerned together with that person's own identification as Aboriginal or not.

The Aboriginal homemaker is very active in the town, organising some Aboriginal mothers onto a school lunch roster and initiating a mother's club for young Aboriginal women. Support is hard to rouse for these activities, despite the fact that the Department for Community Welfare and the Department of Infant Health actively encourage these projects. Aborigines do participate to greater degrees in other areas of the life of Moora town, such as involvement with the police, local hospital and health services. However, here the participation is not voluntary and they have little real choice.
Aboriginal people refer back to at least two generations in order to establish kinship ties.
Interaction between Aboriginal families and the schools is minimal.
3.1 INTRODUCTION

The overriding feature which emerges in looking at the interaction between Aboriginal families and the schools, is that contact is minimal and tends to occur only when there is 'trouble'. For the remainder of the time, Aboriginal parents stay away from the schools. One exception to this is a woman who attends Parents and Citizens meetings. In one sense, the women who work on the school lunches are also exceptions, although in this activity they have little actual contact with the schools because the lunches are served at the Homemaker Centre, a model house for homemaker activities provided by the Department for Community Welfare. This activity is more of an extension of their roles as mothers than assisting the children directly at school with school activities.

This situation may well be typical of the vast majority of parents in Moora. The number of white parents who attend Parents and Citizens meetings, and who go to the school on observation days, by no means represents the total white parent population. While participation by white parents is certainly higher than that of Aboriginal parents in these activities, all the schools are critical of the attendance of parents at Parents and Citizens meetings even though they do not regard it as 'poor'.

3.2 WHAT IS 'TROUBLE'?

Where primary school children are concerned, 'trouble' usually means an unwillingness to attend school, and 'wagging it' or missing school without their parent's knowledge or consent. Occasionally an Aboriginal mother will go to the school to inform the teacher of why the children are not present that day. This appears to be more of an attempt to remove any blame for the non-attendance from the mother herself, and shift it clearly into the realm of interaction between the school and the child, than an act of cooperation with the teacher. Children are seen by their mothers as being capable of acting in a self-directing way, something which is amply illustrated when they in fact take affairs into their own hands and play truant.

One mother put this quite succinctly when she described how she had seen her children hiding under a bridge near school one morning. Her reaction was to take them up to the school so that the teacher could 'see for herself' why they were late. The alternative to this course of action for the mother, ignoring the would-be truants, would have resulted in a note home from the teacher asking her to make an extra effort to have the children at school on time. By visiting the school, she has shown that it was not her fault that the children had not turned up.

One mother reported that she had informed the Department for Community Welfare of her child's truancy. Persistent truancy is sufficient grounds for Truant Officers employed by the Education Department to take a child to Court and have him or her declared a Ward of the State, although this provision has rarely been invoked over the past five years. This particular mother's actions in going to the Department for Community Welfare should be seen in the context of dealing with bureaucracy and attempting to show concern for her child in terms that the bureaucracy will understand. If she is successful in this, she will then perhaps be able to keep her child with her, for this child is already a Ward of the State.

This is the reverse of the situation where the motiva-
tion of a parent in approaching the Department for Community Welfare is to ‘turn him over’ to the authorities because discipline measures at home have failed and the family has reached its limit of tolerance.

Women are almost unanimous in their view that ‘some’ Aboriginal parents do not care enough about their children’s attendance at school, and that they tolerate absenteeism against their children’s better interests. As far as they themselves are concerned, these women say that they tell the children that they have to go to school, rouse them when they do not want to go, and only permit them to remain at home when they are ill. In fact, this may amount to considerable absenteeism in instances of poor health, quite apart from the definition of illness acceptable to a parent for the child to be permitted to remain at home for the day.

However, another theme which emerges is that children can only be ‘told’ especially as they grow older; and that having minds of their own there is only so much that parents can do. Mothers see their main area of responsibility to be getting their younger children to school, so that the teachers can take over from there. This is by no means peculiar to Aboriginal parents alone and doubtless many mothers feel the same delineation of responsibilities. Another type of ‘trouble’ for primary school children results directly from incidents that occur at school, and which may or may not be related to their aboriginality. One mother had been to the school to see the principal because other children had been calling her own child upsetting names. This child has a physical handicap, which other children sometimes single out for comment. While the mother acknowledges this, she still thinks that the name-calling has more to do with the child being Aboriginal, and feels upset and aggrieved by these incidents. Her visit to the school was successful in that the name-calling subsequently ceased, and the mother feels that she has had a victory on this issue.

Incidents of children being called names at school are reported from time to time. Women link this closely with their aboriginality, and feel that being Aboriginal makes their children targets for discriminatory treatment by white children.

Misunderstandings in communication between Aboriginal children and teachers is another area of ‘trouble’. One woman reported that her child had been accused of not answering when the teacher asked if certain school work had been completed. This had been interpreted by the teacher as a deliberate attempt to get away with doing less work. However, the child insists that he did answer, and that the teacher did not hear him. The woman explained that her child has a soft voice, which probably the teacher did not hear. She also makes that point that Aboriginal children are often shy and that teachers fail to understand this when they call for responses from the class.

While parental bias is a strong possibility here, it nevertheless points to an area of difficulty in communication and interaction that is felt to exist, perceived to highlight differences between Aborigines and whites, and that with more awareness could readily be avoided by teachers.

Corporal punishment too, is problematical at times. One incident of this resulted in a move of some children from one school to another, and visits to the school and threatened legal action by the Aboriginal mother.
concerned. However there is no suggestion whatsoever that this is any more of a problem for Aboriginal parents than any others when it does occur, nor that it occurs with any frequency.

For the high school children, ‘trouble’ is much more clearly defined and articulated. One type of incident which constitutes ‘trouble’ is fighting, particularly when white and Aboriginal children fight each other. This ranges from teasing in the playground, to actual fisticuffs. It is possible that high school children and teachers are particularly sensitive to this type of friction because of the reflection of it in the wider community, and the open hostility which occurs between Aborigines and whites in the town from time to time.

Stealing is another source of ‘trouble’ for older children, usually petty theft from lockers or bags. Again, this is not a form of behaviour indulged in by Aboriginal children alone. Graffiti writing is yet another, such as when the town’s lavatory walls were written on. In this latter instance, all those named were clearly identified as Aboriginal. All of these incidents stimulate teachers at the high school to make attempts to contact the children’s parents in order to inform them of their offsprings misdemeanours. As a consequence, several parents do visit the high school at times of crisis.

Difficulties also arise because of parental misunderstanding of what actually occurs at high school, and what the children are meant to be doing there. Word reached one Aboriginal parent that her child and a few others were consistently missing a particular period at high school each week. After speaking to the children concerned, this parent came to the conclusion that they had been slipping off to a small room somewhere in the school building, instead of attending their regular class. Her reaction was to go to the school to inform the teacher about these doings, and to suggest that teachers take a much firmer hand with the children. In fact, the children had been required to attend a remedial class and in the school bureaucracy their regular teacher had not been informed of this change. As a consequence, she had been marking them absent, not realising that they were legitimately in another class for that period.

The perception that the teachers at the high school keep too close a watch on Aboriginal children and are forever ready to suspect them of being up to mischief, also gives rise to ill feeling among some Aboriginal parents. One result of this is a certain defiance towards teachers, and a highly outraged sense of self-righteousness on the part of adolescents when they are accused of mischief and they are innocent, for example if they are accused of smoking in the lavatories and they have not been guilty of committing this misdemeanour.

The extent to which this suspicion of the motives of teachers is justified, is unclear. The fact that the high school deals with adolescents who are facing job and career choices and difficulties, and are learning to cope with maturation and adult life, makes it very difficult to draw any firm conclusions about this type of incident. Teachers at the high school are certainly conscious that the Aboriginal students and their families are different in some ways from the white students and their families. However, there is no suggestion that any parent visits the school because of teachers being unduly suspicious of the Aboriginal students.

It is possible that the reporting of this type of incident increases the sense of distance that parents feel between themselves and the school, and reinforces their resolve to approach the school only when there is ‘trouble’
which they cannot avoid. Moreover, Aboriginal parents are conscious of the approaching adulthood of high school children and may regard sensitivity to this type of treatment as an inevitability of growing up Aboriginal. Again, being aware of their status in the town, Aboriginal adolescents may become oversensitive and at times tend to interpret any expression of interest in them, as being suspicion of them.

3.3 THE VALUE OF EDUCATION
Aboriginal parents tend to regard what goes on at school, as ‘school business’. One woman related how she had explained to her child, after he had left the school grounds and returned home following an incident with his teacher, that when he was at school he was in the custody of the teachers and there was nothing she could do about it. While this may be one way of divorcing herself from any sense of guilt in the mind of the child for his felt maltreatment at school, it nevertheless also indicates a certain sense of powerlessness. This is very realistic when it is recognised that attendance at school is compulsory and so inevitably children will be subjected to the will of the school. This parental sense of inability to influence events at school does not extend to what goes on in the playground between children, as previous examples have illustrated.

Moreover, Aboriginal parents attach a positive value to education as a good thing in itself, and think that their children should get as much of it as possible. Some women qualify this by commenting on the unavailability of job opportunities for young people when they leave school. However, while there is broad agreement on the desirability of education, no woman expressed specific ideas about what the children should do on leaving, other than take up an apprenticeship or simply ‘get a job’.

This is not surprising in view of the limited number of jobs available and the Aboriginal parents’ own constricted experience in the work force. All parents working are employed as labourers, except for one skilled tradesman; some parents are pensioners; all except two of the women have only worked as domestics and unskilled labourers, one worked as a shop assistant and another is employed as a homemaker. One woman did cite two Aboriginal adolescents engaged in apprenticeships, as examples of where a ‘good education’ could get a young person, and commented that in the past such apprenticeships had not been available.

One woman observed caustically that a number of other Aboriginal parents did not realise that things had changed over the past twenty years since they were young themselves, and that many parents did not feel that their children had any chance in life because they themselves had not had a chance. She feels that these parents have very limited aspirations for their children and are convinced that they are really beaten before they begin. Hence, the incentive to try for a good education and a reasonable job is lost.

Women repeatedly comment on the wilfulness of young people and the fact that they often refuse to be told what to do. This sense of inability to direct adolescents may also be a reason for why parents are unspecific in their ambitions for their children, other than to ‘get an education’. Choice of a career is seen by parents to be entirely up to the children themselves, and one high school pupil has ambitions of becoming a teacher. The others have apparently not told anyone what ambitions they harbour. One mother made the point that high school children already think that they
know more than their parents, because they have more schooling than them. Hence they will not listen to well intended advice from their elders. Other women expressed the view that young people will go their own way regardless, and it is no use trying to force them to study.

In short, this adds up to a parental failure to direct their adolescent children in study, whether because of a sense of inability, futility or unwillingness; coupled with a scepticism that the children will be able to do anything with their learning once they have gained it. This sober outlook is well founded in reality.

Opinion about what other Aboriginal parents do to ensure that their children attend school range from 'they don't care' to 'some parents belt their children'. Neither extreme method of handling the problem (or failing to handle it) is ever cited with a sense of approval. Interestingly, the two people most vehement in advocating corporal punishment had themselves been raised in the Moore River Native Settlement under a punitive regime. ‘Rousing’ or verbal chastisement is the method most women say they use to persuade their children to go to school.

3.4 PARENTS AND CITIZENS MEETINGS

Generally no Aboriginal women attend Parents and Citizens Meetings at the schools, and the reasons advanced for this range from not being able to sit still for long periods of time while others talk, to not knowing when the Parents and Citizens meetings are held because no-one from the schools tells Aboriginal parents about them. One Aboriginal parent expressed the opinion that a lot of Aboriginal people would feel a sense of shame at attending a meeting such as the Parents and Citizens, because they would be conspicuous and they would not know how to act or what to say. Hence, these people would prefer to stay away from these meetings because of their sense of inferiority and guilt at ‘not knowing’.

It is highly likely that several households genuinely do not know when Parents and Citizens meetings are held, because notes are sent out from the schools and are easily lost, or disregarded by parents who have difficulty in reading. However, this is not sufficient explanation of why more (or at least some) Aboriginal parents do not go to them. A sense of awkwardness may be a very real disincentive to attend public meetings, and one that may be shared by many white parents too. The impersonality of notes, as opposed to personal contact, is another factor. One woman suggested that the schools should employ Aboriginal people to go to the homes of Aboriginal school children, and explain to the parents about the school. She further added that if this person was Aboriginal he or she would be accepted, whereas if a white person was employed his or her actions would be interpreted as interfering.

The feeling that the schools are virtually separate worlds that parents keep away from except when they can’t help it, or when there is a school concert and their children are among the performers, is probably as important a reason as any for the lack of Aboriginal involvement in parents and citizens meetings. It is also quite likely why white attendance is not better.

3.5 OTHER ABORIGINAL PARENTS

While several women make reference to ‘other’ parents, most indicate a strong preference for talking about their own situations. One woman said simply that she did not mind other people’s business and only looked to her own home and family.
Some opinions expressed by Aboriginal women about other Aboriginal parents have already been cited, particularly accusations that certain women do not care sufficiently about their children’s education. Some women feel that Aboriginal parents do not punish their children and think that they should, even when punishment that they themselves have administered to their own children has failed to produce the desired results. Others criticise parents for beating their children regularly, and for spending all their time drinking or gambling.

Some Aborigines feel that things are made too easy nowadays for Aboriginal people in general. Typically, these are individuals who have maintained a house and job over the years and who feel that they have earned a certain approval and status with the town’s white population. The most vocal advocate of this point of view was a person who had been awarded a Certificate of Citizenship prior to 1968, and who felt that others should have to earn their privileges today, just as they had to in the past. This attitude is often expressed in quite a punitive way, and drink is commonly cited as the basic cause for failure of those who do not manage to live up to the desired standards. These people feel that the others bring disrepute to the Aborigines of Moora, and while they may understand the situation they bear them very little sympathy and have no constructive suggestions about what may be done for them.¹³

In support of the statement that drink is a problem with a number of Aboriginal families in Moora, fathers are singled out as spending all day in the hotel, and mothers named for drinking in the hotel or at home. Drinking by juveniles is also mentioned, and one woman maintains that on pay day there are more juveniles in the bar than there are adults. None of the women delve into why parents drink, although implicit in what they say is the notion that drink is something to turn to when times and circumstances are very hard. No woman sees this as a ‘way out’, even if it is a perfectly understandable reaction.

Gambling at cards is also an activity women engage in, but this does not draw the condemnation that heavy drinking does. This is one way of circulating money within the group, and of providing ‘jackpot days’ to relieve the economically dreary lives of women on low incomes. It also gives the winner an opportunity to be generous with her relatives and to treat her children. The position of the Aboriginal father in the household is closely related to the problem of drink, because if he is working it is his income which either maintains the wife and children, or is used to buy alcohol which contributes to their neglect. If he is a pensioner, it is his pension that they have to do without if he drinks it. Fathers may perceive a more central role for themselves, but in the matter of bringing up children the women see themselves as the ones most involved, with the fathers there to administer punishment on occasion. Aboriginal husbands have quite a degree of discretion about what they do with their pay, and while a husband may usually give a proportion of his pay to his wife, if he feels like going on a ‘binge’ and spending it all on alcohol, he just keeps his money for this purpose. This in turn renders women with children more reliant on their kin to tide them over ‘difficult’ weeks when the usual money does not come into the home. It also places enormous strains on the wife, particularly if the situation is repeated frequently. Husbands discipline
their wives, and wife beating is frequently mentioned. As a consequence, Aboriginal women are doubly worse off with reference to their men.

A range of senior women provide a focus point for their respective clusters of kin in the town, and in this way reaffirm the central importance of women in the Aboriginal family structure. Considering their influential position, it is highly likely that this view has wide currency among Moora Aborigines, including the menfolk.
Aboriginal parents attach a positive value to education as a good thing in itself.
4.1 KNOWLEDGE OF THE ABORIGINAL PUPILS

Teachers consistently display very little knowledge of the Aboriginal children attending their schools, especially in areas which are basic to these children, except for their immediate performance in the classroom. The most prominent lack of knowledge concerns kin relationships between Aboriginal children. Teachers often have a notion that certain children are related, but they rarely know the nature of this relationship and they certainly do not know the interrelatedness of all the children in their schools or classrooms.

This is an area of immense importance to children, especially for younger children because of the more formative stage of their self-concept. A definition of a child's relatives is important in telling the child 'who' he or she is in relation to other members of society. This is especially so where kin relationships are considered important by the child’s group, and hence are given sanction outside of the immediate family. In the case of Aborigines, kin relationships are heavily stressed. In addition to determining who the child can look to for support, they also play a role in determining which cliques and groups he or she will belong to.

There is a general recognition by teachers of the importance of kin ties to Aboriginal children. Yet there is no real attempt to understand these ties as they affect the children in their classrooms. In classrooms where there is a sizeable proportion of Aboriginal children this is a severe lack because, apart from siblings, it is also possible to have aunts and uncles in the class as well as cousins. In common sense terms an awareness of these relationships is basic to understanding the interaction of the Aboriginal children with each other, with non-Aboriginal children, and the teacher. This type of kin relationship may well explain apparent misbehaviour and defiance on the part of a child, when it is understood that his or her reaction to the teacher or to other children is largely due to an emotional attachment to others who are kin and are also interacting in that situation.14

Teachers also exhibit mystification about the living arrangements of Aboriginal school children. They clearly think it odd that so many children are living with people who are not their own parents, and that they seem to change their place of residence frequently by comparison with others. It is generally assumed that the people with whom Aboriginal schoolchildren are living, when these are not their parents, are 'some sort of relative'. This is in itself an accurate assumption, but the nature of the relationship is rarely known or understood. Neither are the reasons for this apparently anomalous situation understood by teachers as a general rule, except in obvious instances of parental death or State Wardship, and there is little evidence to suggest that they think about it very much. Even when teachers know which relatives a child is staying with, the finer details of the arrangements are only sketchily known and understood.

Few teachers have ever visited the homes of any of the Aboriginal children, although doubtless they have seen many of these dwellings from the outside at least. One exception is a teacher who occasionally calls on Aboriginal families to discuss problems their children are having at school. Among colleagues this person is regarded as having 'a lot' of contact with Aboriginal parents, although the parents do not feel that this person has very much contact with them at all. This
highlights the subjectivity of such assessments as ‘a lot’ when made by individuals or in-groups about themselves. Any contact at all, outside of the confines of the school, is more than usual for the teachers of the town.

All of the schools make the distinction between Aboriginal children and others, and see the Aboriginal children as a group apart with special needs. Having defined them as ‘a problem’ generally, the question of what to do with them is understandably found to be baffling.

Teachers at one school felt the need for a separate curriculum for Aboriginal children, in which they could be taught basic skills such as hygiene. At another school, the view was expressed that Aboriginal people are perfectly acceptable, the only problem with them is that they lack hygiene. The stereotype of Aborigines as unhygienic has both wide currency and historical precedence, and these generalisations about the Aborigines of Moora reflect this. It is difficult to know how much these generalisations are reinforced by instances when individual Aboriginal children come to school grubby, but low incomes and inadequate housing certainly work against a fastidiously tidy appearance.

While the vast majority of dwellings where Aborigines live are swept and appear to be kept in a reasonable condition, the transitional houses lack facilities which cater for privacy. In one transitional house the youths wash in the nearby creek because a teenage girl lives in the house and they do not want to be seen washing in the laundry, something which could not be avoided because the door leading into it from the kitchen will not close. The lack of amenities such as hot water, combined with the communal ablution blocks on the native reserve and their distance from the huts, can only mitigate against stringent personal hygiene. As has been pointed out above, overcrowding in conventional housing also places strains on amenities.

Teachers are aware that a number of children come from homes where heavy drinking occurs and where they are not cared for as well as they might otherwise be. However, teachers also see this to be a problem with a number of white children, too.

The schools are very conscious of the Aboriginal-white dichotomy in the town, as well as factions among Aborigines themselves. All deny any segregation in the classrooms, and Aboriginal and white children mingle and work together. Occasionally there are outbursts of tension between Aboriginal and white school children that take on racial overtones, and they tend to play separately in the playground.

Aboriginal and white parents bring to the attention of the school also a sense of difference between them. Aboriginal parents occasionally visit the school, when there is trouble in the playgrounds or classroom. White parents complain that Aboriginal children retard their own children’s progress. This charge is made more frequently at the convent, where there are proportionately more Aboriginal children than at either of the other two schools. This problem may well be one of general standards, because those Aboriginal parents who have moved their children to the state primary school are firmly of the opinion that they are now doing far better than they had been at the convent. On the other hand, this may be no more than an attempt to justify their decision to change schools.
4.2 WHAT THE SCHOOLS DO

As far as the Aboriginal children’s special needs are concerned, apart from worry to a certain extent and employ the services of remedial teachers for a limited number of periods, the schools do very little to improve the work performance of their Aboriginal pupils.

In fact, the schools tend to form a separate world within the township of Moora. More correctly, they form two separate worlds, that of the convent of nuns, and the other a community of teachers who share interests and who are often in the mutual position of being posted temporarily to the town. The distance between Moora and Perth makes it possible to commute to the city at least every weekend. Several teachers do this, having applied to teach in Moora as part of their quest for country and administrative experience, both of which are criteria for promotion within the Western Australian Department of Education. The nuns at the convent are moved from school to school similarly to the State Education Department teachers, and in 1975 all three nuns were newly appointed to that school at the beginning of the year.

The schools do make certain avenues available for parents to come to them, such as Parents and Citizens meetings, open days and observation days. Once having done this, they tend to leave it up to the parents to take advantage of these offers, and feel that their responsibility for involving parents ends at this point.

For Aboriginal parents and probably for a number of white parents too, this is simply not enough to give the feeling of confidence that they can handle contact with the schools. Exceptions are when the roles that the parents are expected to play are very clearly defined, such as when they are requested by the teachers to come to the school to discuss ‘trouble’. On these occasions they are clearly expected to appear concerned and to listen attentively to the teacher’s account, and then give an assurance that they will discipline the offending child in some way. For Aboriginal parents in particular, written notice of events or meetings are often useless because they cannot read. Notes home may also be interpreted as ‘trouble’ and for this reason no attempt may be made to read them even supposing that the parents are literate.

The schools recognise that the lack of homework facilities and incentives in some Aboriginal homes may contribute substantially to the poor school performance of these Aboriginal children. They are also acutely aware of the racial tensions within the town and individual teachers may even reflect these themselves. However, moving outside of the confines of the traditional school parameters of classroom activity is another matter, although individual teachers may put a great deal of effort into conducting evening homework classes and tuition groups for Aboriginal children.

Yet to move outside of accustomed classroom activity is necessary if there is to be improved liaison between Aboriginal parents and teachers, and greater understanding on the part of teachers of their Aboriginal pupils’ particular difficulties. Aboriginal children do not sit in the classroom in isolation and insulation from the world around them, any more than do other children. In fact, awareness of this world is likely to be highlighted by just about everything the classroom teacher says and does, from curriculum material, to courtesies and manners, to the unconscious expression and reflection of the town’s attitudes towards Aborigines.
Aboriginal parents have to reconcile their personal hopes for their children with the empirical realities of limited job availability.
The point that stands in starkest relief is that there is an urgent need for the schools to know more about the Aboriginal children attending them, and their home environments. One reason for this is so that curriculum material and activities can be made relevant and meaningful to the life styles and opportunities of these children. These children exist in a world where they will face employment restrictions and discrimination on the basis of their aboriginality, and where their past experiences and those of their families set them apart from society in many ways.

Another reason is so that the children can have a sense of worth in the knowledge that teachers look at their actual life situations, and do not assume a norm of behaviour that is inappropriate to their way of life. For teachers to treat Aboriginal children 'just like everyone else' and to fail to recognise differences in their life styles and credit these with rationality and coherence, is to imply that this way of life is somehow less worthy. If teachers either disregard, or do not bother to inform themselves about, the things that are important to whole sections of their class, they are in effect denigrating those children and what they stand for.

Secondly, the schools need to appreciate the positive value that Aboriginal parents place on education, and take this into account in dealing with the children and their parents. It is all too readily assumed by teachers and others that Aboriginal parents do not have any interest in their children's education, and hold no aspirations for their futures. This is far from the truth, but Aboriginal parents are handicapped in expressing this interest in ways readily comprehensible to teachers because of the gulf between the schools and town on the one hand, and the Aborigines on the other hand. Moreover, Aboriginal parents have to reconcile their personal hopes for their children with the empirical realities of limited job availability and active discrimination against them socially and in the work force. Aboriginal parents are likely to have had very limited education themselves, and the horizons held out for them in their own school days are certain to have been very restricted. For the graduates of Moore River Native Settlement and New Norcia Mission the aspirations were, at the highest, to become farm hands and domestics. Their experiences at school were in all probability negative, and this must affect their feelings about their own children attending school and their expectations and fears about what might happen to them there.

Thirdly, the only way the schools are ever to gain an understanding and knowledge of their Aboriginal school child populations is by going to the homes of these children. Invitations, and 'telling' Aboriginal parents that they are welcome to the school, will have little effect. Aboriginal parents are reluctant to approach the schools and the context in which interaction with schools occurs is overwhelmingly when their children are in difficulties, or when they require charity such as a new school uniform. Aboriginal parents are likely to have much less appreciation of the reasons for closer contact with the schools, than in theory the teachers have. This is because such school/community relations are clearly outside of their experience, nor are they equipped with the body of theory and literature relating to this type of interaction. Teachers, however, have less excuse for being unaware in this area. Moreover, teachers represent society which is largely in opposition...
to Aborigines, and it takes extra courage and resolution on the part of Aboriginal parents to initiate closer contact on this front.

Fourthly, home visits, contacting and seeking out Aboriginal parents, and programs to educate parents about how they can assist their children in attaining a useful education, must of necessity be time consuming and demand great effort on the part of teachers. Teachers are mostly ill-equipped to handle this type of program, because their own experiences are often relatively narrow and exclude any real knowledge of Aborigines. Where they have had any interaction with Aborigines, it is mostly of a restricted nature. Their teacher training is highly unlikely to have included material on Aborigines, and only superficial, if any, treatment of minority groups. It is even less probable that it included material on techniques for developing community dynamics, making parental contact, and encouraging wider involvement in the school particularly in inter-ethnic situations.

In the past, schools have demonstrably failed to turn out successful Aboriginal graduates,16 and Aboriginal education remains one of the most difficult areas while at the same time most promising, in the spectrum of Aboriginal affairs. If there is to be an improvement in the performance of Aboriginal children at school, dialogue must be opened up with the parents so that the schools can know the children they are dealing with, and the parents can appreciate what the schools are trying to do. If this were achieved, it would be extremely valuable to both sides. It would remove doubts and suspicions from the minds of many parents; it would also open up a whole range of criticisms of techniques, methods and content for schools which would be of direct benefit to other pupils as well as Aboriginal children; and it may well turn schools into more sensitive institutions.
In gathering information on the Aboriginal school children of Moora, their family situations and the schools they attend, I held interviews with the woman householder in 12 homes, the houseparents of the high school hostel, and teachers in all three schools, as well as the local priest and the Community Welfare Officer. All in all, the 88 Aboriginal schoolchildren live in a total of 27 different households, and the high school hostel. I called on 25 of these homes several times, even as many as six and seven separate occasions. I missed two homes because I inadvertently failed to record the address of one child attending the state primary school, and in the other the family with two children at the state primary school was living on a property several miles out of Moora and time prevented me from going there. Of the 13 homes where I did not manage to obtain interviews, the occupants declined to answer the door in one case, and in all of the others no-one was at home on the times I called.

The house where no-one would answer the door is situated next door to that occupied by the local Department for Community Welfare Officer-In-Charge. This family had been under pressure from both the Community Welfare Department and State Housing Commission, because they were not looking after the house nor paying the rent. As I had just called on the Community Welfare Officer, it is highly likely that the family associated me with troubles concerning their house and chose on that occasion to be unavailable.

Working with Aboriginal people, it is not unusual to experience difficulty in contacting people, and other researchers have commented on this. I had limited time in the town, and made an effort on each of my visits to call on homes where I had not found anyone in, at different times of the day. However, I did not try to contact people at other houses where there were no schoolage children living, although had I done so I might have been able to interview more women.

As it is, this research is inherently biased in that the women I did interview represent only half of the Aboriginal women who are looking after children who attend school in Moora, and those who were out on all the occasions I called may have features in common which set them apart from the others. These women include the three reserve households and one transitional house.

I used open ended interviews, because I find generally that this is a far more productive approach than rigidly designed schedules. Aboriginal people tend to become very reticent when faced with forms, and the whole point of the interview is lost. One disadvantage in asking open ended questions is that it is very time consuming. I found the women willing to talk, and often very friendly after initial contact had been made and a degree of rapport established. Some women remained suspicious throughout the interview, although the vast majority relaxed and spoke freely provided I did not attempt to quiz them. Interviews took between 15 and 45 minutes. The initial establishment of rapport is very important, because a number of Aboriginal people are not highly articulate but given time and a sense of confidence, they are able to express their ideas and opinions with comparative ease.

I elected to contact the women of the household for a number of reasons. The women are the ones who have most to do with the upbringing of children, particularly their schooling. The Aboriginal menfolk tend to be away from the house during the day, working or otherwise occupied. Hence the task of getting the children off
to school, and preparing the evening meal for them when they return, falls on the women. Partly too, this is an expectation built into society, and schools frequently direct their attention to the mother by sending notes home addressed to her, contacting her through the children when the need arises, and seeking her assistance for fund raising activities, tuck shops and the like.

On two occasions husbands were at home during interviews. I gained the feeling that the women would have been more at ease had these men been elsewhere. The men were obviously curious about the interview, although they just as obviously regarded it as women's business appropriate for their wives to handle. Hence, they tended to try to listen in, while appearing as though they weren't.

An additional reason for making contact with the women is that I am female, and it is easier for me to establish rapport with Aboriginal women than it is with Aboriginal men. This is because of the fairly high degree of sex role specialisation of Aboriginal women and men which makes it easier for the women to accept me and also which defines child care as primarily the concern of the women.

One woman told me that some Aboriginal people in Moora might say to me that the questions I was asking were none of my business, although she was just letting me know this so that I would be warned. I was left wondering whether she meant this as helpful advice, or as a rebuff. However, as she had already talked quite freely to me and continued doing so, I concluded that the comment was volunteered as friendly advice to someone who might not know that Aboriginal people could be rude and uncooperative.

On a number of occasions during interview, women said that they wished they could do more to help me in what I wanted to know. A number of the women felt that they did not know, or had not thought much about, such things as why Aborigines did not have more contact with the schools or why children did not do better at school. As a general rule the women felt much more comfortable talking about their own situation, and did so freely, but they became uncomfortable when asked to speak generally, or in the third person. One woman said simply that she did not 'mind other people's business'.

The initial purpose of this research was to gain an overview of school-Aboriginal household relations. Apart from the skewed sample (half of the Aboriginal households with children at school, and then, only that half who were home during the day time on the days that I called), there are several other features of this research that contribute to the biases contained in it. The interviewing was brief, particularly as no follow up work was done. This would normally be the second stage of a project such as this. Moreover, no white households were contacted, the closest was a white woman married to an Aboriginal man whom no-one was quite sure was really Aboriginal or white. Contrasts and comparisons between white families and Aboriginal families are fundamental to an understanding of the differences in their relationships and interactions with the school. In fact, it is not possible to imagine a complete picture of Aboriginal involvement in education without taking into account white involvement. Teachers continually compare Aboriginal children and families with white models, which may or may not correspond to the white situation in Moora. Aboriginal/white interaction is basic to Aboriginal involvement in the educational
processes, these being staffed and monopolised by, and geared to, the white sector of society.

A further point is that the Aboriginal households with children attending any of the three schools in Moora, are by no means all the Aboriginal families living in the town or its near precincts. There are households where all the children are of pre-school age, or have grown up; where there are no children; and where children are away in institutions or with relatives in other towns.

All teachers I met at the three schools were cooperative, and all expressed the desire that some of the benefits of such projects as this could be made available to the schools and community. Moora is apparently often in receipt of such attention because of its Aboriginal population, proximity to Perth, and the fact that it is the centre of a District. On the occasions I visited the schools, I was able to make general observations as well as talk with staff. The local Officer-in-Charge of the Moora office of the Department for Community Welfare was also cooperative and helpful. In all, I made a total of six trips to Moora, including an overnight stay in order to observe the activities of the town on ‘payday’.

The findings of this piece of research are general and the sample on which they are based is inherently biased. Nevertheless, Moora shares many features with other wheatbelt towns and the Aborigines of Moora have much in common with other Aborigines of the southwest of Western Australia. These findings provide a basis for more detailed research into the field of education for Aboriginal children in this area of the State.

This material is written in the ethnographic present although the research was conducted during 1975. Since that time the major change has been an increase in the population of the Moora native reserve — a trend indicated within the text.
Two years later, as this report is going to print, the situation in Moora remains very much the same although there are certain signs within the schools of greater awareness of the need to have more direct contact with Aboriginal parents. In the convent, one nun has one afternoon free from class duties to enable her to visit parents and discuss their children's progress with them. In the limited time available to her, as many parents as possible are visited. While some parents reject this type of assistance, others welcome it particularly as emphasis is given to the needs of lower primary school pupils and they find they are able to cope themselves with the materials.

The proportion of children in the convent has again risen to 50% while that in the state school has correspondingly decreased. Efforts have been put into starting an after-school arts and craft class on one afternoon a week, concentrating on cooking and craft skills. However, support is hard to muster for this type of project as Aboriginal parents are reluctant to attend.

The situation with housing in Moora remains depressingly the same. Rumour has it that the Moora Native Reserve is to be demolished by the end of 1977, and the families there moved into transportable houses brought up from Perth by the Department for Community Welfare. There are said to be between eight and 10 houses due to materialise in the near future, although there are 11 families currently living on the reserve. The uncertainty about the future of the reserve is causing unease amongst its occupants, particularly as rumour also has it that the land on which the reserve is located has been acquired by the Local Shire for the purpose of erecting recreation facilities to complement the nearby speedway track. Further uncertainty with the
1. These figures are obtained from a census of the Aboriginal population of Moora town, taken by the local office of the Department for Community Welfare in 1975; and from the Western Australian Yearbook 1976.


3. Although it is an offence to refuse to serve an Aborigine in a hotel, the publican holds discretionary powers and can refuse to serve anyone who is 'under the influence of alcohol'; and while hotels are not segregated by law, custom permits publicans to restrict Aborigines to certain bars which are not frequented by whites.


5. L.C. Furnell, 1974:221

6. The Australian Census 1972, Bulletin 9 Table 15:5

7. Fay Gale, 1975:16


9. Three factors which set Aborigines as a group apart from society are the history of contact between settlers and Aborigines and the resultant discriminatory, protective legislation which denied them basic civil rights; physical visibility; and their low position in the social scale and contact with punitive forces of law and order. For more detailed discussion see R.M. Berndt, 1970; J. Wilson, 1970; C.D. Rowley, 1972; L.J. Tilbrook, 1972.

10. Aboriginal Progress Associations are local voluntary organisations which adopt as their aim the general improvement of Aboriginal conditions in the area. Membership is generally made up of interested whites, together with several more vocal and literate Aborigines. Activities tend to be limited to such aims as obtaining funds and land to build community centres, starting play groups and sewing classes, and nominating Aborigines for various scholarships and awards such as educational scholarships and sporting awards. The emphasis is heavily assimilationist, the underlying idea being to enable Aborigines to 'come up to' white standards.


12. Prior to 1967 the various states of Australia had States Acts which variously defined 'an Aborigine', employing a range of criteria differing from state to state. In Western Australia the Native Welfare Act of 1963 defined an Aborigine as a person of one quarter or more Aboriginal descent, and extended the provisions of the Act to people thus defined. There was a clause which permitted individuals of less than one quarter Aboriginal descent to be considered Aboriginal on application, for specific purposes such as obtaining Native Welfare Department housing. The Commonwealth Government assumed responsibility for Aboriginal welfare by popular referendum in 1967, and unified the definition of Aborigine to anyone claiming to be of Aboriginal descent who could, if necessary, substantiate that claim. Given the low status of Aborigines in Australian society, and the fierce ethnic identification of other groups who, by physical appearance alone, could possibly get away with such a claim, there has been little abuse of this provision. Few people claiming to be Aboriginal have been called upon to justify their claim.

13. A Certificate of Citizenship gave the holder full citizenship status including the right to vote, be counted in the census, and drink in hotels. Particular Aboriginal individuals applied for Citizenship, on the recommendation of the Native Welfare Department, although Citizenship was accorded automatically to those who had served in the armed forces. Full Citizenship rights were extended to Aborigines after the 1967 Commonwealth Referendum, although existing states laws continued to restrict Aboriginal rights. J. Wilson, 1970, illustrates the hard line taken by those who had obtained Certificates of Citizenship, against those who had not. Citizenship holders tended strongly to blame individuals for not trying hard enough, and to assert that citizenship aught to be earned, not automatically given, because this would teach Aborigines to appreciate citizenship. Wilson relates these attitudes to the theory of relative deprivation, where citizenship certificates gave the holders a status over others, which would have been devalued if citizenship were to be automatic.

14. I am referring here to an emotional attachment and dependence between members of the same extended kin group, rather than specific kin roles. This should not be confused with
the traditional Aboriginal situation where tribal life is a viable force, nor parallels drawn between the two. The importance of kinship ties in traditional Aboriginal culture has frequently been cited as explanation of behaviour in the classroom situation. This refers to specific roles associated with particular kinship status in the traditional context, such as mother-in-law tabus and superordination/deference between sets of kin (who happen to be age peers).


17. For example, see P. Beasley, 1970.
Bibliography


