

# ABORIGINAL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL

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**ABSTRACT.** This study, conducted in a secondary school in an isolated Australian town, focused on Aboriginal students' perceptions of their lives in schools and classrooms, and on their teachers and their aspirations. This allowed a consideration of aspects of cultural differences between school and non-traditional Aboriginal community culture. The data were gathered from interviews based upon a questionnaire, three "snapshots" being taken over a period of three to four years. Observational data were also collected. As a result of 130 interviews, students were seen to have a vocational orientation to life in school though they did not perceive that they had high self-esteem, especially the boys. Teachers' interpersonal characteristics were admired and their professional qualities identified, but their expectations were perceived to be somewhat different from students' peers. Students were seen to have unrealistic aspirations. While there was some evidence of culture shock, some students saw the school as being a haven. Specific methodological problems are identified.

**RÉSUMÉ.** Cette étude menée dans une école secondaire d'une petite ville isolée d'Australie se penche sur les perceptions que les élèves aborigènes ont de leur vie à l'école et en classe ainsi que de leurs professeurs et de leurs aspirations. Cela a permis d'étudier divers paramètres des différences culturelles entre la culture scolaire et la culture non traditionnelle de la communauté aborigène. Les données proviennent d'entrevues fondées sur un questionnaire, trois "clichés" ayant été pris sur une période de trois à quatre ans. On a également recueilli des données fondées sur l'observation. Après avoir analysé les résultats de 130 entrevues, on a pu constater que les élèves avaient une orientation professionnelle face à la vie à l'école, même s'ils n'étaient pas conscients d'avoir beaucoup d'amour-propre, surtout les garçons. Les élèves admiraient particulièrement les caractéristiques inter-personnelles des professeurs et leurs qualités professionnelles, même si leurs attentes sont perçues comme différentes de celles de leurs camarades. On a constaté que les élèves avaient des aspirations peu réalistes. Même s'il existe certaines preuves d'un choc culturel, certains élèves perçoivent l'école comme un havre de paix. Ils inventorient également quelques problèmes méthodologiques.

Most days his class teaches him bush language:  
the tracks of the goanna, the following of native bees,  
which bits of flying fox are best to barbecue -  
today, because it is hot they are letting him  
earn his keep teaching them English. The syllabus  
suggests verb forms, as if their mastery  
could give back something to these dispossessed.  
Patiently they listen, their dark eyes clouded  
by the complex mystery of the usurping tongue:  
"I sit; I am sitting," he says, and writes it up  
with a stub of rationed chalk for them to copy,  
"Now you write some." Their heads bow over the page.  
He watches them as their pencils slowly scratch:  
the ringer from Brunette Downs who twice a year  
drank his cheques in a whirlwind week of booze,  
but last year tried to unscrew a copper's head;  
the courteous elder who killed his promised bride  
by drowning her, for her taste for younger men;  
the burly youths from Groote and Gove for whom  
imprisonment is a rite of passage. Sometimes, as now,  
he feels nervous and alien, preparing to feign  
indifference to: "I rob, I am robbing; I lie, I am lying."  
But one black diffident hand goes up half-way  
to volunteer: "I dream, I am dreaming; I cry, I am crying."  
(Scanlon, 1996)

Scanlon suggests something of the major dilemma that Aboriginal students face and that is

[b]eing Aboriginal involves retaining an Aboriginal world view: doing, thinking and believing in Aboriginal ways. But being successful in the higher levels of white culture roles involves some very un-Aboriginal ways of doing things. (Harris, 1989, p. 3)

It is reasonable to assume that for minority populations school would be the most significant site for learning such un-Aboriginal ways of doing things. Pumpa (1992) put it this way: "The school is a pervasive agent which explicitly and implicitly transmits the values of its middle-class culture"(p. 38). But for people like Christie (1989), the school is the particular site of the destruction of traditional Aboriginal identity and traditional Aboriginal education. Beside this rather radical stance, Watts (1982) has reported "a most inadequate data base for informing of school policies and processes" in Aboriginal education. Even as recently as 1987, Eckermann echoed these comments and pointed out that educators were "very much at the learning/experimental stage" in developing strategies that are appropriate or successful with Aboriginal

students. Such observations are disconcerting and make the Christie stance credible. In fact the relations between indigenous Aboriginal people and federal and state governments in Australia have been problematic since white settlement (Kaplan & Eckermann, 1996, p. 7-10). They point to culture shock and its related stress and anxiety as major factors in Aboriginal early lives in schools (pp. 12-21).

The process of colonial control and settlement has led many to recognize the immense impact of western culture on Aboriginal people. The distinguished social scientist C.D. Rowley observed in 1986:

[A]s the second century of white settlement draws to a close ... the full weight of western capitalism has been felt in the large reserve areas in the far north and centre [of Australia]. As you go from any capital of any state towards the centre or the far north, the colonial relationship between settler and indigine becomes more visible. In the metropolis it is likely to be lost to the casual observer as the Aborigines once in the central slums have moved out to better housing. . . . The further you go beyond the city boundary the more obvious is the long-standing relation of town to fringe dwellers. In the final stages you go deep into areas marked by social relationships from the colonial past. (13-14)

Broadly, traditional Aboriginal people live in the remote and far north of Australia (tribal and mission Aboriginals) and generally they have schools with specially designed curricula. Non-traditional Aboriginals live on the fringes of or in the towns and are more markedly influenced by Western culture. School-aged non-traditional Aboriginal children attend schools where the curriculum is essentially mainstream. Urban Aboriginals may be characterized as those in the cities and the large towns essentially integrated into the white population. Here schooling is again mainstream.

Such categories of people are convenient for descriptive purposes and although non-traditional Aboriginal people (the focus of our study) may appear to "live like whites, there is a wide general misunderstanding of the extent of their distinctively Aboriginal social organisation and culture" (Eades, 1984, 27). We need to explore the arguments of researchers like Eckermann (1987) more fully if we want to unravel the relationships between cultural backgrounds and schooling. Eckermann (1987) points to the importance of not only establishing whether valid differences between cultural groups exist, but also of considering at the same time the possibility that generalizations may mask differences within cultural groups. Her more recent work has centred around the

notion of cultural safety. "Cultural safety . . . is the need to be recognised within the [institution] and to be assured that [it] reflects something of you, . . . your language, your customs, attitudes, beliefs and preferred ways of doing things" (Eckermann et al., 1994, p. 215). Cultural safety is desirable in so far as acceptance of such cultural preferences by those in power will assist in the cognitive and other development of Aboriginal students.

The inadequacies referred to by such researchers as Watts (1982) and Eckermann (1987) are slowly being overcome. There is little doubt that the work of Fanshaw (1976), Jordan (1984), Folds (1987), and Gutmann (1992) does improve our level of understanding regarding the Aboriginal child in schools and classrooms. However, an examination of Australian educational literature indicates that many studies about teaching and teachers adopt what might be termed a generic cultural perspective. In a number of these studies, Aboriginal students probably were part of the samples used, but their data are summated with that from students of other cultural minorities and the majority culture.

As far as the Aboriginal minority is concerned, Fanshaw (1976) considered the "personal and professional characteristics" required for effective teaching of non-tradition-oriented adolescent Aboriginals. Personal characteristics hypothesized included "warmth and friendliness", "demanding", "stimulating", and "responsible and organised". He went on to argue that teachers should have "a positive attitude to Aboriginals" as well as a mastery of appropriate content and sound knowledge of Aboriginal students together with knowledge of appropriate teaching techniques. Teachers should be prepared to act as a role model. These kinds of characteristics are supported by Guider (1991) who quotes a number of studies in support of his contention that

a warm and demanding style is effective with Aboriginal students because it suits their cultural and personal needs. There is an emphasis on the building of positive relationships . . . which enhance an Aboriginal child's chances of affiliation with the school. Warm demanders are also better motivators. (Guider, 1991, p. 29)

In recognition of the cultural needs of Aboriginal students there has been a call for employment of Aboriginal people as trained teachers. For instance, the House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education (1985, p. 14) recommended a target of 1000 trained Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in Australian schools by 1990. According to Australian Bureau of Statistics data there were 541 primary and secondary teachers who described themselves as Aborigi-

nal or Torres Strait Islanders in the 1986 census and 877 in the 1991 census (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1997).

Despite the research pointed to above and the definite interest in education by Aboriginal people, particularly education which takes into account the Aboriginal perspective (Schools Commission 1975, in Fanshaw, 1976), there have been a number of reports since which indicate that schools have not been places where Aboriginal children find success. For example, the Senate Select Committee (1976, p. 139, in McChonnochie, 1982, p. 17) found "to date the school system has failed Aborigines very badly by its inappropriateness and inadequacy". However the House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education (1985, p. 3) observed ten years later that "there have been significant improvements . . . in the participation of Aboriginals in the development and delivery of Aboriginal education programs at all levels, though much remains to be done". Included in what needs to be done is the improvement of poor participation rates in secondary schooling of Aboriginal students (p. 8). More recently, while there has been a steady increase in the participation rate of Aboriginal people in the compulsory years of schooling (6 - 15 years in Australia) (DEET, 1994) there is still "an estimated 25% or more of those who start secondary school [who] leave before the end of Year 10" (DEET, 1994, p. 13). Furthermore in 1993, 33% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who began secondary school were still attending in Year 12, compared to 76% of other Australians (DEET, 1994, p. 14). These data and the issues raised above indicate problems of significance for Aboriginal students in secondary schools<sup>1</sup>.

It is important to see this case study of an Australian non-traditional Aboriginal school as part of the immense and diverse literature relating to the education of indigenous persons in many parts of the world. For example, recent Canadian studies have focussed on the negative self-concept of aboriginal students (Wright & Taylor, 1995; Bosacki, 1995), instructional preferences (McAlpine & Taylor, 1993), instructional materials (McAlpine & Weston, 1996), culturally inappropriate styles of teaching (Chisholm, 1994), the pedagogy of healing (Regnier, 1994), improving educational environments (Danziger, 1992), and study habits (Hurlburt, 1991). In New Zealand, studies have been completed on action research and Maori education (McPherson, 1994). In Micronesia a study has been completed on ways in which indigenous culture can transform formal Western schooling (Flinn, 1992). A South African study (Olen, 1992) has been undertaken that focussed on the use

of books and media for South African students. Inappropriate psychometric research has been the focus of an Australian based study that compared effects on Australian Aboriginal students and Navajo students (McInerney, 1992).

The authors of the current study contend that each of these studies adds to the emerging understanding of aboriginal or indigenous education. However, it is also likely that an individual study may have a greater meaning and potential impact for the specific site or subgroup of indigenous persons.

## THE STUDY

In many ways the current study of Aboriginal students from Years 7 to 12 complements the research of Gutmann (1992) who conducted an interview study with 71 Aboriginal students from three urban primary schools regarding their perceptions of schools and teachers. The major objective for the current study was the gathering of data about non-traditional Aboriginal secondary students' perceptions of schooling, especially as these elucidate differences between aspects of non-traditional Aboriginal community and school cultures. The three exploratory questions used to guide this study were as follows:

1. How do Aboriginal students describe their lives in schools and classrooms?
2. How do Aboriginal students describe their teachers and the process of teaching?
3. What aspirations do Aboriginal students have concerning life after schooling?

### *Design and methodology*

The initial approval to carry out this study was based on a methodology that included a survey questionnaire but, as explained earlier, these items were adapted to form the basis of an interview schedule. The questionnaire was an adaptation of one that had been successfully used in a series of case studies in New South Wales high schools (Baker & Proudford, 1989). It contained a number of Likert-type and open-ended items (see appendix A). These items focussed on the following four areas: plans following the completion of schooling, descriptions of teachers, the processes of teaching, and life in schools and classrooms. Data were also obtained about parental employment and educational

backgrounds. During the process of reviewing the questionnaire, senior teachers at the school strongly advised that in order to achieve full and accurate responses students' reading should not be relied on. We then decided to use the questionnaire as a structured interview schedule.

Two researchers went into the first interviews intending to monitor the interview process. What was found, not surprisingly, was that as they became familiar with the language of the students they were naturally "translating" the written wording of the questionnaires. Striving to achieve a language that the students used (Eades, 1984) and yet maintaining the integrity of the items was important. These translations were checked out at the first morning tea break, at lunch, and again after the first day. Agreement was arrived at and the wording was noted on a master questionnaire. These notes were used as the basis of training for interviewers at subsequent data collection periods.

The three interview series more accurately provide snapshots of this school over a period of time. The responses of students obtained during interviews were recorded on separate questionnaire sheets. This can be relatively simple with closed questions, but with open-ended questions, where verbatim responses are required, the interviewers' task was quite demanding. It was also quite difficult to use Likert-style items in an interview setting. There was a balance to be achieved between asking each item and repeating the five responses that were possible so that the process was intelligible but not boring or repetitive. Usually a place was found in breaks in responses that allowed the Likert responses to be repeated. The student could also see the item and the responses written on the page. This assisted many, most of whom were reasonable readers.

The rapport developed during the first data collection assisted in the subsequent periods. The senior author was present at all three interview periods of two days each, while Bennett and an assistant were present to collect data at two periods and the third researcher and another assistant collected data during one period. None of the interviewers were Aboriginal. Interviews tended to last from 10 to approximately 25 minutes and in some interviews with rather shy students limited data were collected. All student interview data were coded and entered into a computer data base. The data gathered by student interviews were augmented by observational data, key teacher interviews, and the collection of resources such as newspaper articles. Questions of a closed or Likert type were analysed by means of simple descriptive statistics, and open-ended responses and other data by means of content analysis.

Ethical judgment is required when reporting data as a result of collecting observational and associated data. The researchers obtained information as a consequence of working around the site and interacting with personnel outside the structures of formal data collection that was extremely useful. However, valuable data we judged that would breach reasonable standards of confidentiality and privacy have been excluded. Discussions in the staff room did shed light on aspects of school and classroom life. Specific incidents in the community were also related that adversely affected the working of the school and teaching in classrooms but if reported would potentially infringe upon confidentiality. Reporting such data may have enhanced this study; it also had the potential to embarrass and hurt individuals associated with the school, and to identify the school.

### *Sample*

The sample for interview was determined by the number of students attending school on the particular days. Since we interviewed over two days, on each occasion we were able to pick up absentees of the first day if they were present on the second. The interpretation of these data from the three snapshots included significant overlap of students from the first to the second and then from the second to the third interview periods. However the difficulty of tracking students was not resolved, largely because of the high absentee rate, especially of the boys. School administrators attributed the extent of absenteeism during the data collection to a series of disturbances in the local community, particularly in the third period. The secondary student population varied between 60 and 85 students over the four years of the study. In the secondary section of the school, just under 100% of the student population were Aboriginals. While it might appear that the present school in many ways represented the contention of Heitmeyer and O'Brien (1992) and Harris (1989) that Aboriginal students should have their own school, they were referring to contexts in which there are traditionally oriented groups.

Initially, a conscious decision was made not to use the senior school (ages 17 and 18) as part of the first data set because there were very few senior students. Also, the school teachers advised us that they would be too difficult to find to administer the questionnaire. But then in the second visit, there was an opportunity and greater numbers. The decision was taken to use the questionnaire as a questionnaire on the basis



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that these students could read sufficiently well. Only one student was not really able to provide data and this questionnaire was discarded.

TABLE 1. Sample by Gender and Year Level (numbers of students) and Students "Interviewed" (%) by Data Collection Period.

	Data Collection Period		
	1	2	3
Male	12	20	13
Female	26	33	26
Year 7	10	14	13
Year 8	15	12	8
Year 9	8	10	8
Year 10	4	9	6
Year 11	-	4	4
Year 12	-	4	-
Not given	1	-	-
Response rate	63%	62%	54%

A total of 130 interviews took place. In the first data collection the average age of students was 13.8 years, in the second collection 15 years, and in the third, 14 years. A breakdown of the year level and gender of the students is reported in Table 1. During our three visits to the school a convenience sample of from 50% to a little over 60% of all students was interviewed.

## RESULTS

The background data regarding the site and the school community are presented first. These are followed by data under headings that correspond to the research questions stated earlier in this article.

### *Site*

The data for this study were collected from a New South Wales state central school (primary and secondary sections administered together) located in a rather isolated, though not remote, inland rural setting. The site could be described as unusual since the school students were almost exclusively non-traditional Aboriginals in contrast to the community which has only a majority of Aboriginal people. In terms of curriculum, staffing, and basic resource provision, the school was inte-

grated into the mainstream school system. Teachers were expected to modify the curriculum to a certain extent to cater to different student populations, especially in years 7 to 10. The school community is such that the school received assistance from a number of federal social justice programs. Aboriginal families in the community were clearly not traditionally oriented. The almost exclusive Aboriginal enrolment had not eventuated due to any school or departmental policy.

It is important to appreciate that the particular school was considered "not an easy one to teach at" and that the annual turn over of teachers was extremely high. The majority of the teaching staff was inexperienced and the researchers heard talk from some teachers of "moving to coastal areas" when they got the opportunity. Although the context is somewhat different to that of the current study, Folds (1987, p. 36) describes something similar in the situation of more traditional Pitjantjatjara schools as one in which "severe staff turnover problems are cyclic as batches of teachers serve their time in the settlement schools before moving into country or metropolitan ones." It is also important to note that there was a number of community disturbances in and around the town which had an effect upon the research as well as an impact upon the students' schooling. The local economy was dependent on agricultural activities, which in turn was reliant on climatic conditions. Given the nature of the small town, opportunities for part-time student work were restricted. Some part-time seasonal work was available on the large agricultural holdings. In fact, the availability of work for adults was extremely limited.

The secondary organization of the school was typical of most secondary schools in New South Wales in terms of its structure. The school timetable was based on centrally determined subjects and these were taught in 40-minute periods by teachers organized in subject departments. There was a principal and school executive (supervisory teachers) to manage the whole school, that is both primary and secondary. Classrooms have a traditional look about them though Aboriginal pictures and artifacts can be seen about the school. Although the teacher turnover has been high there was a concerted attempt by teachers to learn about cultural differences. This was expressed, not only in the artifacts that are found about the school, but also in the choice of materials and teaching practices. On entry to the school, whether in the earlier dilapidated buildings or the purpose built ones, it was evident that different conceptions of time and space operate.

While school bells ring students appeared to come and go almost at will. Teachers in the secondary section of the school were non-Aboriginal although there were Aboriginal support people in the school.

As just indicated, the school changed sites during the study. In the first data collection period, the school was housed in a rather dilapidated set of buildings. The second and third data collections occurred at a new, spacious and air-conditioned school, adjacent to but separate from the town's College of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) on the same campus. In developing this new site, the educational authorities hoped that the improvement in physical plant would help in the facilitation of increased educational opportunity for students, especially in the follow-through to TAFE from secondary school.

### *School community*

It is important to depict the students' family backgrounds and the setting in which they live. Family size for students in this study was larger than the national average, varying between five and six siblings. Students' knowledge of parents' schooling was sketchy. Where it was known, all parents had completed primary school but between ten and 20% of mothers and five and 10% of fathers had completed secondary school. A number of students indicated that they did not know the education levels completed by their parents. Generally speaking, the parents of these students worked in nearby towns or villages or they were at home. The villages were rather small and working parents depended on agricultural activities for their existence, however, twelve to 20% of mothers' and a 25 to 40% of fathers' work location was not known. There appeared to be a number of possible explanations for this lack of response. In some instances, the parents did not work, while in others it seemed that the students did not know if their parents worked. By far the most common response about the nature of mothers' work could be summed up as "home duties". Additionally, in 1991, 20% and, in 1994, 10% of mothers were doing TAFE courses. Other work mentioned included cleaner, community health worker, shop assistant, and Aboriginal educational assistant. The range of work carried out by fathers included farm hand, agricultural labourer, truck driver, council worker, fencer, and handy man. Of those that were employed, a significant number held positions with the Community Development Employment Project (CDEP), a national employment program for Aboriginal people. Nationally, approximately 26% of Aboriginal workers are employed in a CDEP. About one third of students were unable to

say how their father was employed. It is worth noting that in 1994, the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported (p. 49) that Aboriginal unemployment in the relevant ATSI region was approximately 50%, which compares unfavourably with the national unemployment rate of 38% for Aboriginal people and the national average of less than 10% for the population as a whole. With such high unemployment and dependence upon welfare it is not surprising that tensions were evident in the community. It is also not surprising that the school community was affected by these tensions. In particular, teachers were often placed in stressful classroom and playground situations, these increasing as the tensions in the small community rose. Teachers were constantly challenged to understand the context in which they found themselves.

In our study we were unable to talk to parents or observe parenting practices but our analyses of the following data are assisted by the knowledge of culturally accepted parenting practices of non-traditional Aboriginal parents identified in research by Kaplan and Eckermann (1996). In their study of non-traditional Aboriginal preschool children's behaviours which possessed a culturally safe environment, they found that non-traditional Aboriginal early childhood behaviour is characterized by:

- (1) boisterous physical activity,
- (2) boisterous, noisy use of Aboriginal rather than standard English,
- (3) physical touching, sharing, and cuddling,
- (4) teasing and mild physical aggression between the same sex peers and relatives,
- (5) expectations of touching and cuddling from the adults,
- (6) withdrawal from an interaction which has become boring or stressful by simply walking away, and
- (7) noncompliance with adult instructions unless the child wishes to comply.

We assume, as do Kaplan and Eckermann (1996, pp. 12-13), that such behaviours are evident precisely because they are encouraged by their parents while other behaviours are discouraged. Dissonance between elements of culture which underpin the above behaviour and the corresponding elements of culture of the school can cause culture shock for non-traditional Aboriginal students, they argue (p. 15ff), especially in non-Aboriginal middle class schools, including secondary schools such as the one in the present study, where teachers are likely to have problems with boisterousness, withdrawal, and noncompliance in particular. On the other hand, a culturally safe school is likely to be one in which the teachers understand the cultural up-bringing patterns of non-traditional Aboriginal parents.

The township is within 20 minutes driving time from a reasonably larger town whose prosperity was based upon agriculture (though there had been extended periods of drought during the study), and in this town there have been episodes of serious race-related incidents contemporaneous to the students' childhood and adolescence. There were also racist incidents within the township and incidents within the Aboriginal community. Some were reported in the local newspaper. The incidents were inevitably the subject of discussion in the teachers' staff room.

*Life in school and classrooms*

Not surprisingly there was a range of views that students expressed about their life at school.

1. **Describing life in school.** The students were read a number of statements about life in schools and asked to indicate which best describe their life in schools. Over the three data collections a fairly consistent pattern of responses was obtained. Three descriptive statements were highly rated at each data collection period: "teachers help me do my best", "learning is a lot of fun", and the work done in school "is a good preparation for my future." The next most highly rated description related to a perception that the things learnt in school "will help me in my adult life". Thus three of these statements have a strong future-vocational sense to them. There is also an implied cultural sensitivity on the part of teachers.

Another three descriptive statements were consistently given a lower ranking in students' views about life in schools: "feeling important" and others "looking up to you" or "thinking a lot of you". Despite the appreciated interpersonal qualities of teachers (see below) it is apparent that the students interviewed generally did not rank statements about themselves relatively highly, though this may well be a general feeling (shared by teenagers?) rather than one that can be limited, or attributed, to the school context. The move from the older buildings to the modern integrated site did not attract any significant comment from students, nor was there any apparent change in opinions from the first to the second and third series of interviews in this regard.

2. **What outcomes are important in school?** The students were shown a list of outcome statements from schooling and asked to identify the most important and least important of these statements. Based on a frequency count, the rank of these items for the first and third data

**TABLE 2.** Perceived importance of educational purposes  
(Rankings: 1st and 3rd periods)

Statement	1st	3rd
• Getting the marks needed for a job	1	1
• Learning about jobs and career opportunities	2	2
• Learning basic skills for life	3	3
• Obtaining personal satisfaction from my work	4	5
• Working at things until I get problems solved	4	3
• Learning how to work and get on with others	6	6
• Understanding the general principles and ideas behind what I study	7	6
• Developing an understanding of other people	8	9
• Developing my interests and personal qualities	8	6
• Learning new and challenging things	10	9
• Being able to work independently	11	11
• Learning to accept people who think and act differently	12	12

collection periods indicated a high level of consistency across the time of the study (Table 2).

An interpretation based upon the curriculum orientations of Kemmis, Cole, and Suggett (1983) indicates that the higher ranked statements are congruent with the vocational and neo-classical orientation to the curriculum. For example, the first two statements are clearly vocational in purpose. This is supportive of the future-looking, job-seeking student thinking mentioned above. They may also reflect the emphases of the teachers in the school and may be less congruent with non-traditional Aboriginal cultural customs and practices in this community. A number of the lower ranked statements are consistent with the liberal-progressive orientation (Kemmis, Cole, & Suggett, 1983) such as “developing my interests and personal qualities”. These may again reflect in-school emphases rather than being culturally determined.

**3. Subjects liked by students.** Student answers to “which subjects do you like most?” produced an array of possibilities. Perhaps it is not surprising that virtually every subject taught at the school received some support as a “liked” subject. In the first data collection, the three most “liked” subjects were English, science, and art. Art, English, and physical education (PE) topped the list in the second data collection and art, music, and physical education in the third data collection. As art appeared in each of the three most “liked” subjects lists there is consistency here and to some extent for English and physical education. However, it is difficult to assess how the students interpreted “liked”

and in the opinion of the researchers this judgement was most likely linked to teacher popularity (cf. Fanshaw, 1976; Guider, 1991). This assessment is based on the fact that during this phase of the interview, a particular subject would be identified and then to this was added a comment about "the teacher being terrific", or something similar, and hints at the importance of the teacher as role model. It is also possible that the nature of these subjects, i.e., movement and/or creativity, lend themselves to the learning styles of the students and reduce the influence of ethnocentricity of teachers from non-Aboriginal cultures (Ministry of Education, Victoria, 1986, p. 34). They also lend themselves to alternative forms of assessment (Ministry of Education, Victoria, 1986, p. 22). It is noticeable that the higher status subjects of science and maths were not evident in their choices.

**4. Advice to a new student.** The students were asked what advice they would give a new pupil who wanted to be happy and successful at the school. In seeking students' views of this kind it was the researchers' intentions to gauge what the students thought was important to get in the life of the school, derived from their own experience and using their own language, that is, to get student descriptions of aspects of the culture of the school. There was a range of suggestions put forward, the most common of which included: "go to school every day", "do all the work teachers give you", "be friendly", "help others", "obey teachers and rules", "no swearing", "get to school on time", and "work hard and you will get what you are working for". Some other advice also often given included "play football", "don't show off", "get in with the bigger kids", "get along with others", and "ignore bad people". Perhaps the former set of advice could be interpreted as students advising students about "the system" (the assumptions of schooling). The latter set of responses relate more to the assumptions concerning students' relationships. Taken together there is evidence here of advice about cultural practices within the school, ones that students chose to highlight to new entrants.

### *Teachers and teaching*

The Aboriginal students at this school expressed quite interesting views about teachers and teaching.

**1. What makes a good teacher?** All students were asked to think of a person they thought was a good teacher and then identify the things (attributes) that made this person a good teacher. Firstly, many students spoke about what might be termed the supportive aspects of a good

teacher. These students used such terms as “friendly”, “helpful”, and “understanding” to describe their good teacher. These findings support Guider’s (1991) and Fanshaw’s (1976) characteristics of favoured teacher characteristics which included warmth and building positive relationships. Compared to primary schools, in secondary these attributes are harder to develop when class movement based upon set times is the norm and where each student can have up to eight different teachers on any day. Additionally, the reality in this school setting was that very few teachers remain very long to get to know students, though there were notable exceptions. The next most frequently cited attribute of the good teacher could be described as eschewing the “growliness factor”. Students described good teachers as ones who “don’t yell”, “don’t growl at you”, and “are not grouchy”. It appears that these interpersonal qualities were highly appreciated by these Aboriginal students in teachers and it was these interpersonal qualities that Aboriginal students thought of first in describing a “good teacher”. They are consistent with the regime of up-bringing that Kaplan and Eckermann identified. Other attributes identified were “joking around”, “listens to you”, “explains well”, and “knows a lot of things”. There were of course descriptors that could be considered as rather different. These included “pretty”, “being a footballer”, “tall”, “lets us read books”, “lets us do homework in class”, and “talks about things at the weekend”, all of which could be considered typical of any children of this age. These attributes contrast to the qualities that were identified from a list from which students were asked to rate teacher professional qualities.

**2. Teacher professional qualities.** The students were shown ten statements regarding the professional qualities of teachers and asked to indicate on a rating scale how important each statement was. In each of the three data collections the same five statements, although in somewhat different order, were identified as being the most important qualities of teachers. These five statements were:

- Good control in classrooms.
- Explains slowly and carefully.
- Good knowledge of subject.
- Well organized course.
- Makes you work hard.

These qualities can be interpreted as being consistent with the Guider (1991) and Fanshaw (1976) findings that Aboriginal students appreciate a demanding style of their teacher. Qualities that were relatively less important, though still appreciated, included teachers having “a real



interest in you as a student" and "an interesting way of presenting things".

**3. What do teachers want students to do in classrooms?** When asked to indicate what teachers considered important aspects of classroom life, two responses stood out from each data collection. The students thought that teachers want them to be quiet most of the time, and to answer questions. These appear to be at variance with the Eckermann and Kaplan (1996) description of parenting practices of many non-traditional Aboriginal people. Children are given a relatively much greater range of freedom and control by parents than could be expected of students by classroom teachers. "Students showing enjoyment for the subject" was also a fairly common response. The students also believed that teachers were very concerned about "achievement levels", but by way of contrast, the students thought that their friends were more concerned about whether they were happy at school and "treating other students well". There was thus a dichotomy of expectations; those of their teachers and the Aboriginal students' adolescent peers.

#### *Student aspirations*

Generally speaking, getting a job or continuing their education was a high priority of the majority of Aboriginal students'. Staying on at school till Year 12 was also an aspiration expressed by more than 33% of students interviewed. In reality a small number of students actually stayed on till Year 12.

**1. Leaving School.** Some consistent patterns were evident when the researchers asked students to indicate when they planned to leave school, when they thought their parents and their teachers would like them to leave school, and when they thought the majority of friends would leave school. From 50 to 66% of students thought that they would stay at school until Year 12. These students also indicated that it was their belief that 66% of their teachers and over 75% of parents would prefer them to stay on at school until they had completed Year 12, though approximately 10% of the sample did suggest their parents would not be concerned if they did not complete secondary school. By way of contrast, in the first data collection, 66% of students thought that their friends would leave by the end of Year 10 with none staying on till Year 12. By the third data collection time 25% believed that their friends would stay till Year 12 and 33% would leave by Year 10. While the trend was positive, there is, nevertheless, a disparity between students' assessment of their own future and that of their friends. It is

likely that the students were expressing a hope in staying on and that it would be good for them if they did. The more realistic position appears to be closer to Aboriginal students' perceptions of their friends' behaviour.

**2. Activity after school.** For approximately 50% of the students, getting a full-time job was important after leaving school. A further 20% would like to get a full-time job, but one that enabled them to do some part time study. A further 30% indicated a preference to study full time. However, there were trends in the data. While around 50% wanted a job, the trend was for students to look less for a job full time over the three data collection periods (60%, 53%, 44%) and more toward full-time education (13%, 23%, 33%), presumably TAFE. Note that after the transfer to the new school, the TAFE was adjacent and between eight (first collection period) and four (third collection) mothers were TAFE students. At the second period of data collection there were mature age students enrolled in the secondary section of the school. From the students' responses, it was also clear that they were aware that the obtaining of "good marks" really determined what you could do after school. In terms of the type of work these students would like to do, teaching (consistently about one-fifth of students), and shop assistant were the most popular. Being a mechanic, a nurse, or a hair dresser were also popular choices. Taxi driving, panel beating, veterinarian assistant, musician, bank assistant, and a sportsman were also mentioned. Student job aspirations were, to some degree, different from the jobs that their parents were employed in (see above) and were also markedly different from the kinds of occupations that might be expected from students brought up in middle-class Australia.

There was evidence of a gender split in the responses regarding the future. A review of our summary notes about students' attitudes as they were interviewed indicated that many boys said they didn't know what they wanted to do, and they more often than not said it with an air of hopelessness. In contrast the girls tended to have an air of liveliness in their choices, and in their voices, when they talked of their job aspirations.

The contrast between earlier findings about the vocational nature of schooling and the realities of leaving school could be put down to the former being some kind of fantasy. But this interpretation would be a misunderstanding if Eades' (1984) view on non-traditional Aboriginal people's attitude about the future is correct. Eades advises that the expression of a future intention can be taken to mean that it is intended

at the time of speaking but that what happens in the meantime may well change this. In other words the future is "always conditional" (30). There is not a strong sense of commitment that might be expected when a non-Aboriginal makes the same statement. It is likely that the interpretation of hopes about getting jobs and the kinds of jobs desired could be interpreted in much the same way.

## DISCUSSION

The results on family background indicate that the families of Aboriginal students in this study were located in the lower socio-economic status (SES) grouping of workers. While this tells us quite a lot in general terms, it is also clear that the families in this setting were in difficult circumstances, many receiving financial support of some kind and many suffering from the recent downturn in the economy and the effects of the drought. This was confirmed through the relatively high level of federal assistance given the school. Consistent with the low SES grouping, we found that parents' levels of education were low and family size was relatively large. The impact of these variables on schooling is well documented. Some students were unable to say what job their father did and it was evident that some did not know where their father was. Again, this is common in some Aboriginal families. In addition, the community suffered from infrequent but sometimes quite disturbing events that precipitated rivalries among Aboriginal people and between Aboriginal people and others. There is evidence that these incidents impacted significantly on students' school life.

In relation to the Aboriginal students' views about life in schools and classrooms, there is a probable dilemma: students said that they valued what was available but did not themselves feel valued. It may be that the latter is a not a cultural phenomenon but a developmental one. Learning was fun and teachers were helping them. In their terms, or perhaps in the terms of their teachers, they were doing things that were important; being in school gave them credentials ("marks") to get work when they left school. Yet if you look at the kind of subjects the students liked (art, English, and physical education), they were not the kinds of subjects that would likely lead to work in this particular setting. In contrast, if you look at what student aspirations were, some of the jobs (teacher, mechanic, hairdresser, sportsperson) were those that required reasonable marks in relatively academic subjects. But there was also a range of jobs mentioned (e.g., cotton chipper [cutting out weeds between cotton plants], social security) that required little or no

academic qualifications, and often these were the kinds of jobs mentioned, especially by the boys. Students, particularly girls, tended to aspire to work that was different from their parents. The choice of these occupations indicates the impact of Western culture upon Aboriginal teenagers.

Within their experience and culture, job choice for non-traditional Aboriginal teenagers in this community is quite small. The reality was that very few Aboriginal adults in this drought ravaged town had work. Few Aboriginal students would remain till Year 12. There was a relative hopelessness here that seemed to have been reflected in some of the students' own responses, especially the male students. Also the students didn't feel important. However, when you look at the advice given to new students at the school a different picture emerges, one of school as a place that you need, and can "get on". Students rated relations among peers more highly than to getting on in school the way their teachers preferred. It is highly likely that these militate against future success in areas that the students themselves identify that they desire success (gaining a job). At the same time, school is a place where some students are happy or at least comfortable, especially in opportunities for relationships and to achieve. For many, school had become a place where consequences are predictable.

In the students' own terms, teachers' interpersonal skills were seen to be important. Many Aboriginal students in this study did not like teachers who were growly or grouchy. They liked teachers who were friendly and helpful. It might be thought that these selected attributes are no different from those of adolescents from other cultural groups. But it was the intensity and consistency of the comments and the indications of the ways in which the lack of favoured attributes got in the way of the students' relations with these teachers, and presumably of learning, that was quite striking. It has to be remembered that many students identified strong professional qualities such as good control, knowledge of the subject, and making them work hard as high in their ratings for teachers. They also rated their own teachers as, by and large, having these qualities when they pointed out their teachers not only wanted them to be quiet and to enjoy the subject but also to achieve highly. But these professional qualities were not amongst those freely nominated by students as teacher attributes that they liked. Instead they nominated qualities associated with warmth in relationships, and this is not surprising given their upbringing and what they were dealing with outside the school.

Getting on in school often meant getting good marks and most of the students saw themselves, but not their peers, as going on to Year 12. The reality of this school was, however, that few would remain until they were 18, though by the second and third visit to the school there were more students in Year 12, some of whom had returned to school, even as adults. Another reality was that we were advised to interview rather than administer a questionnaire, in part based upon students' overall relatively poor reading abilities. Yet "good marks" were important it seems. The majority had high aspirations. Perhaps these inconsistencies can be explained by a private desire overwhelmed by a public reality. There is certainly scope for more research here.

We also interpret some of these data as indicative of culture shock (when "well established habits no longer have expected consequences" [Bochner, 1982, in Kaplan & Eckermann, 1996, p. 16]). Indeed the absenteeism, the withdrawal and aggression, especially the advice of students to new students to conform to the assumptions of schooling, are sufficient evidence for future work to explore Kaplan and Eckermann's notion of *prolonged* culture shock, that is, a culture shock that remains through primary into secondary school. A positive line would be to problematize the assumption about non-traditional Aboriginal parenting and explore its relation with the culture of the school. Having said that however, it is likely to be too simplistic to ascribe difficulties to culture shock as there is evidence from this study to indicate that some non-traditional Aboriginal students at this school were, or at least had become, culturally safe and for these students it is likely that school acts as a form of haven from the dissonance outside the school grounds. Students were at least aware of what was needed to succeed inside and outside the classroom and expressed appreciation of the work that the teachers were doing, including especially the interpersonal skills of some of the teachers.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this study of a non-traditional Aboriginal secondary student population taught by well thought of non-Aboriginal teachers in a country township, there is a range of issues that have been identified, including methodological ones. We have been able to report about aspects of culture clash that writers such as Pumpa (1992) have identified. For example, we have been able to identify the cultural advice that older students would give to new students. We also noted a form of cultural safety for some students in the school, expressed in terms of relations

that they had with peers and some teachers, and we noted as well the vocational orientation of the students and the school. As Eckermann (1987) has indicated, we also found that students did vary in their attitudes to such things as the ways that they described their lives in school, their aspirations, and the ways that they perceived their teachers. We found for example that boys' views about the future job alternatives were relatively less optimistic than girls and that the boys appeared to be at least more resigned to their situation.

Student views about school had a vocational orientation that was in stark contrast to the realities of their daily existence. They, especially some girls, expressed hope in terms of their ideas about the outcomes of schooling and the ways that their teachers were attending to their needs. They had advice that was relevant to new students in the school. The students perceived that parents and teachers were on the whole supportive of them staying on till Year 12 though it is probable that the students knew that this was unlikely. We were able to interview more than 50% of the student population over two days on three different occasions but those that we did not interview were absent on both days and this high absenteeism confirms other findings (House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education, 1985, p. 8).

Although the kinds of aspirations that these students expressed contrast to the realities that these students know, it is evident that teachers seemed important to the students. The kinds of qualities that they freely admire appear to be those associated with interpersonal skills rather than teachers' professional skills. Students readily recognized the teachers' demands for involvement in the learning process. Taken together, these data confirm the work of Guider (1991) and support Fanshaw's (1976) work.

Despite the skills of the teachers in attempting to engage these students in the life of the school, too few found it exciting and interesting. To many it was a tolerable place to be, with some subjects, teachers, and friends making it so. Many secondary Aboriginal students in this school perceived the purpose of the school as largely vocational or neo-classical and this is somewhat consistent with their own orientation and that of many secondary school teachers. This perspective is evident in rating exam marks, activities that would help them in adult life, and learning about job opportunities. It is possible that the data may reflect students' desire to tell us what they thought we wanted to hear. Finally we were also surprised that, especially in the second data collection, there was

no mention of the impact of the move to the new school buildings only months before.

The extent to which the current study of non-traditional education has meaning for other countries involved in Aboriginal or indigenous education is difficult to assess. Each country and possibly educational site has its own set of social, cultural, and political problems and these are, in part, determinants of what occurs in the educational process. Some countries would not have the type of non-traditional Aboriginal school reported in this study, and in Australia such schools are not common. The researchers have reported data based on a series of snapshots from a particular site. Undoubtedly, some aspects of the reported data are unique to the particular site.

There are several methodological matters of interest associated with this study. It is common wisdom, for example, to rely upon the knowledge of those at the research site for advice. In seeking such advice we were both helped and hindered. The move to interview was, in retrospect, essential. We did, however, do some quick footwork as we developed interview techniques to obtain quality data based on the questionnaire. This was especially the case in the development of appropriate language and in the subsequent training of researchers. These events underline the importance of piloting techniques, something that our research budget would not allow. We traded upon our experience and intuition to modify the language used in the questionnaire. The process was considerably assisted by allowing the students to see the questionnaire on which we were writing and on which we recorded responses. Generally speaking we would not employ this strategy again unless it was necessary because of the large number of questions that must be asked in using this technique. The researchers were aware that the move from the questionnaire to an interview schedule and the inability to more fully try out the process does not reflect an optimum methodological stance. However, the obtaining of permission to access such a site and the difficulties associated with the site do impact on the reality of field research. There are of course other methodological questions that could be raised. For example, the fact that the researchers were not of Aboriginal origin and the possibility of response bias arising from the nature of some items could be explored further.

The context of the study was also crucial. Teachers were on edge and community relations were at a low point, particularly during the last data gathering period. Such methodological and contextual difficulties

almost certainly preclude the inclusion of parents' views given the time and scope of the present study, something that a future study of this kind could gainfully consider. The data were gathered, under somewhat trying circumstances, and this was precisely the circumstances that led us to this site. But through it all the students were cooperative and noticeably positive about aspects of their school. The difficult community situation that the students and the teachers faced provided a reason for some students to be absent but we would say that for others it provided an impetus for others to be at school. Exploration of the notion of a cultural haven would be productive in settings such as the one that we have described. Research into the nature of prolonged culture shock in settings like these and others, where non-traditional (and urban) secondary students are enculturated, will assist in unravelling the dilemma cited in the beginning of this paper. Educators in Australia need to know more about Aboriginals' dreaming and the sources of their crying.

#### NOTE

1. Formal pre-tertiary education in New South Wales is organized into primary (approximately age 5 to 12) and secondary sectors (13 to 18).

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