

Making the Grade: The Impact of Policy on the HSC Aboriginal Studies Course

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This paper identifies the impact of key secondary school educational policies on the development of the NSW Higher School Certificate (HSC) Aboriginal Studies course. We present preliminary results of an investigation that examines the impact of the Aboriginal Studies HSC course on the self-concept of Aboriginal students and includes their perceptions of the strengths and limitations of the course. It has been over 15 years since the launch of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education policy which is an agreement between all states and territories to provide a policy that would cater to the educational needs of all Aboriginal peoples. This paper focuses mostly on the New South Wales context by firstly, identifying links between multiple and often conflicting policies pertaining to Aboriginal Education; secondly, by relating leading research in the field of Aboriginal Education and the development of Aboriginal Studies in NSW schools, and finally, by considering the relevance of research into self-concept of Aboriginal students in Aboriginal Studies classes. Our study shows that the implementation of the Higher School Certificate (HSC) Aboriginal Studies course, provides for Aboriginal students a course that can have a positive impact on self-concept, that is, how students view themselves in relation to other students, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

Introduction

In New South Wales, a legacy of discriminatory public policies relating to Aboriginal peoples, has resulted in widespread dispossession, oppression and racism (Parbury, 1999; Fletcher, 1989; Partington, 1998). Since the European invasion of Australia a sequence of colonially inspired education policies and curricula have been devised and thrust upon Aboriginal students. The majority of these western policies have impacted very negatively on many Aboriginal people, in particular, their lifestyles and their education. The generally accepted consequences of an inadequate, discriminatory and irrelevant education are poor academic performance, low self-esteem and an overall negative view of schooling and society, and what it has to offer.

This oppressive foundation continues to impact on Aboriginal education today through the repeated identification of poor performance in literacy and numeracy, and the low attendance and retention rates that can often lead to a total disassociation with schooling (DEST, 2003). Nevertheless, there are many Aboriginal people who continue to maintain the view that the school can assist in the acknowledgement of Aboriginality because, if schools provide a place where students feel accepted and affirmed, they will have a greater chance of developing a strong cultural identity, “a critical factor in Aboriginal students’ search for identity” (Fletcher, 1989, p.313). This in turn meets one of the long-term goals set by the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy (1989) in that equitable and appropriate educational outcomes would be achieved through Aboriginal students having an appreciation of their history, cultures and, most importantly, identity.

Policy Development and Direction

After the 1967 Referendum in Australia, which gave Aboriginal people citizenship rights, the Commonwealth assumed more responsibility for Aboriginal affairs. An incoming Labour Government in the 1970s, made a major contribution to Aboriginal Education through funding, considered to be the next step to reducing past disadvantage (Malin and Maidment, 2003, p.86). From this commitment by the government significant policies and programs were soon to be developed, with New South Wales taking the lead. Refer to Table 1 for a chronology of policies and programs developed and implemented since 1967 along with the intended goals attached to each.

An Aboriginal Education Policy, with support documents, was released into all New South Wales state schools in 1982. It became mandatory in 1987. Acknowledged as ‘The First of Its Kind in Australia’ (Dr Fenton Sharpe, 1990), this policy was without a doubt a high point in Aboriginal Education. It had two major strands. Firstly, identification of educational services designed to enhance Aboriginal students’ self-esteem and cultural identity and, secondly a focus on teaching *all* children about contemporary and traditional Aboriginal society. Designed to reduce negative attitudes, improve race relations and to recognise

and appreciate cultural differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities (Crawford, Hill, Bates, Meyenn, Parker and McKinnon, 1992, p. 12; Fletcher, 1989, p.331).

Within two years another significant step was taken with the development of the National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP) an outcome of the 1988 Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force, Chaired by Paul Hughes (DEST, 2003, pp.108-114). NATSIEP was developed to assist all State and Territory Governments in creating appropriate resources to meet the educational needs of Aboriginal students; it was endorsed in 1989 by all States and Territories and became effective from January, 1990. It encompassed four major themes highlighting that equity and reconciliation can be achieved if there is recognition that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the original inhabitants of Australia and, that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and values must be respected alongside that of non-Aboriginal Australians. While these key themes directed state and territory policy and programs it was a time for a major review of Aboriginal Education Policy to take place, particularly in NSW where it would have a significant impact on how schools implemented state policy.

Table 1: Overview of Aboriginal Education Policies & Programs in Australia & NSW

Year	POLICY - PROGRAMS/PRIORITY AREAS – GOALS	
1967	Referendum Took Place – Gave Commonwealth additional responsibilities for Aboriginal Affairs.	
1969	ABSTUDY introduced	
1970s	Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (AECG) established across the nation All educational services affecting the education of Aboriginal children;	
1982	NSW Aboriginal Education Policy	Programs which will enhance self esteem and cultural identity for Aboriginal children; The education of all children in respect of contemporary and traditional Aboriginal society
1989	National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP) endorsed by all state and territory governments	Involving Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people in educational decision-making; Equality Of Access To Educational Services; Equity Of Educational Participation; and Achieving <u>Equitable & Appropriate Education Outcomes.</u>
	Indigenous Education (Supplementary Assistance) ACT 1989 passed	Increasing Aboriginal involvement in educational decisions; Equal access to education by Aboriginals; Equity of participation by Aboriginals in education; and Equitable & appropriate educational outcomes for Aboriginals
1990	Aboriginal Education Strategic Initiatives Program (AESIP) introduced	
1995	Results of National Review of the NATSIEP published	
1996	Revised and launched: NSW Aboriginal Education Policy	
1997	Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program (IESIP) <i>Building Bridges Project</i> <i>Croc Festival,</i> <i>What Works Program,</i> <i>Dare To Lead Program</i>	Improving literacy; Improving numeracy; Improving education outcomes for Indigenous students; Increasing Indigenous enrolments; Increasing Indigenous presence, involvement and influence in education Schooling acknowledges the: Capacity of all young Indigenous students to learn;
1999	National Statement of Principles and Standards for More Culturally Inclusive Schooling in the 21st Century	Role of Indigenous parents as the first educators of their children; and Close relationship between low levels of Indigenous education outcomes and poverty, health, housing and access to government services and infrastructure by developing cross-portfolio mechanisms to address these issues (Mellor & Corrigan, 2004, p. 10).
2000	National Indigenous English Literacy And Numeracy Strategy(NIELNS)	Deadly Vibe Magazine Books In Homes Indigenous Ambassadors Programme Scaffolding Project

The 1990s: A Phase of Policy Review and Program implementation

During the 1990s significant reviews were carried out on Aboriginal Education policies, both state and national, which then impacted on further development of policy and strategic planning. Refer to Table 2 for an overview of the major policy reviews and the findings of each. For example, a timely review of the NSW Aboriginal Education Policy was undertaken in 1991 with the final report, “The First of its Kind” being released in 1992 (Crawford, et al., 1992). This report identified a number of factors as to why full implementation of the policy was at a minimum, the most prominent reason being lack of support from the then NSW Department of School Education. However, it was also acknowledged that there were still those schools that considered that it did not apply to them if they had few or no Aboriginal students enrolled. Overall, very few positive outcomes were identified in the review and despite the recommendation that the policy be redeveloped (Crawford, et al. (1992, p.7); a new state policy did not come quickly.

In 1993 another important review was undertaken. It had been three years since NATSIEP came into effect and it was timely that a review took place. The final report was released in 1995 with outcomes of this review indicating that the policy was serving its purpose and Australian governments should reaffirm their commitment to it. A new cycle of commitment began with the development of the “National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples 1996-2002” (MCEETYA, 1995). This strategy was based on the 21 long term goals of the NATSIEP and the recommendations that came from the National Review of the NATSIEP (MCEETYA, 1995, p.ii). Major developments were now taking place in Aboriginal Education.

Table 2: Overview of Reviews of Aboriginal Education Policies & Programs in Australia & NSW

1991	First of Its Kind: An evaluation of the 1982 NSW Aboriginal Education Policy undertaken. lower level of achievement in comparison to non-Aboriginal students.
1993	National Review of the NATSIEP Improve literacy achievement; Improve numeracy achievement; Increase indigenous employment in education & training; Improve educational outcomes; Increase indigenous enrolments; Increase involvement of Indigenous parents & community members in educational decision-making; Increase professional development of staff involved in Indigenous education; and Expand culturally-inclusive curricula

The following year saw the launch of a revised NSW Aboriginal Education Policy, with major support from the NSW Department of Education and Training. This policy addressed the need for all staff, all students and all schools to be a part of its implementation. All staff was required to undertake in-servicing on the policy and monitoring of the implementation would take place across the state. Again, the policy restated that Aboriginal students should be provided culturally appropriate curriculum and that Aboriginal Studies should be a priority in schools for all students (DET, 1999, p15).

While the implementation of the NSW Aboriginal Education Policy become more practical, a range of national programs were developed in line with the recommendations that had emerged from the Review of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (1995). Refer to Table 3 for an outline of the programs and initiatives develop nationally and with the identified aims and goals of each program. These new and innovative programs were intended to meet the educational needs of Aboriginal students while allowing for major changes, for Aboriginal communities and within teacher education programs. To address attendance, retention and career pathways specifically focussed programs have been introduced into schools, communities and through Vocational Education & Training (VET) providers. Many of these programs are used to promote Aboriginal culture leading to positive Aboriginal identity while others focus primarily on the further development and achievement of English literacy and numeracy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students so that they achieve levels comparable to those of other young Australians.

Table 3: Overview of National Aboriginal Education Programs and Initiatives

Federal Programs and Initiatives		
What Works? The Works Program	1997	Increasing attendance and retention, based on the themes of: becoming aware of the issues; forming partnerships; and working systematically.
Croc Festival	1998	An event that brings people together, not divide them. An occasion when the politics of racism and bigotry are replaced by understanding, respect, and pride.
Dare to Lead and Dare to Lead: Taking It On	2000	Support for Australian school principals to improve Indigenous education outcomes and to work for reconciliation in their schools.
National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (NIELNS)	2000	To achieve English literacy and numeracy for Indigenous students at levels comparable to those achieved by other young Australians. The six key elements 1. Achieving Attendance 2. Overcoming Hearing, Health & Nutrition Problems 3. Pre-schooling Experiences 4. Getting Good Teachers using the Best Teaching Methods 5. Measuring Success, 6. Achieving Accountability
Deadly Vibe magazine	2000	A dynamic Aboriginal management agency which implements produces and disseminates targeted, culturally sensitive communication products and services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
Books in Homes, Indigenous Ambassadors Programme		To about encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school children to read more. To promote the importance of education, literacy and numeracy to Indigenous students and their parents. Ambassadors selected for their high profile roles in the areas of education, community leadership, sporting endeavours, health and entertainment.
Scaffolding Project	2000	To identify and improve the literacy outcomes of educationally disadvantaged students to achieve acceptable literacy standards.
Building Bridges Project	2002	In a step towards reconciliation for Australia's youngest citizens, the project has set the pace for better educational learning outcomes for young Indigenous children.

Little Impact of Research

Although policy direction has been promising, there are still indicators that Aboriginal students are not achieving at the same level as their non-Aboriginal peers. The many policies, reviews, reports and strategies that give direction to Aboriginal education continually identify this (DEST 2003; Bourke, et al. 2000; MCEETYA, 1995; NREATSIP, 1994; NATSIEP, 1990). Repeatedly these same policies, reviews, and reports are sought out for their guidance in developing new and innovative programs that will assist Aboriginal students to achieve the positive educational outcomes that are essential to attaining success in schools.

What is truly alarming is that the findings and recommendations made by policy and reviews to date indicate that most have not had the expected impact on enhancing educational outcomes for Aboriginal students. Recommendations continue to identify the same issues, even after 10 years of research. Programs are in place to address the educational needs of Aboriginal students, and still only marginal improvement has been made by some Aboriginal students. On the whole Aboriginal students continue to be significantly educationally disadvantaged and participate less in education compared to the rest of the student population. Table 4 shows Aboriginal student enrolment statistics, across NSW, for 2003 and indicates a major percentage drop to Year 12 and as Mellor and Corrigan (2004) note now could be the time to ask ourselves, where does future progress lie?

Much of the research literature in Aboriginal education is situated in various areas of education and can be categorised into several themes, for example, attendance and retention, literacy and numeracy, health and education, identity and school success. These themes have been identified and further expanded by wider research in Aboriginal education (Craven and Parente, 2003; Purdie, et al., 2000; Bourke, Rigby, & Burden, 2000; McInerney, 2000; McFadden, Munns & Simpson, 1999; Partington, et al., 1997; Groome & Hamilton, 1995).

In a review of research on literacy and Aboriginal students, Munns, Lawson & Mootz (2002) identify three main areas of research as; culture and the ‘theory of cultural differences and ways of learning’ and how these have impacted on classroom practice; language and the importance of Aboriginal English and its place in the education of Aboriginal students, and the third theme, curriculum which has focussed mainly on the development and provision of culturally appropriate curriculum. Similar themes are identified in both government and private sector research, with recommendations stating the need to: train more Aboriginal teachers; develop appropriate pedagogical practice; improve literacy and numeracy skills of Aboriginal students; develop and provide culturally appropriate curriculum; increase parent and community involvement in schools; and to provide a supportive learning environment through the employment of more Aboriginal workers within schools. Unsupportive teachers, low teacher expectations, lack of careers advice, stereotyping, and ignoring actual values are commonly reported (Craven and Parente, 2003; Malin & Maidment, 2003, p. 89; Purdie, et al., 2000; Bourke, et al., 2000; McInerney, 2000; McFadden, et al., 1999; Partington, 1997, p. 23; Partington, et al., 1997; Groome & Hamilton, 1995).

Table 4: Indigenous students as a percentage of state-wide enrolments for NSW (McLisky & Day, 2004, Table 2.1, p. 12)

Level	2003 Statistics					
	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11	Year 12
Indigenous students	4.8%	4.7%	4.4%	3.6%	2.4%	1.6%

Major areas of Aboriginal education reform have been targeted by policy makers in endeavours to provide solutions to the ever-present situation of educational disadvantage for Aboriginal students. With more awareness of the injustices imposed on Aboriginal people, there comes more understanding across society, consequently impacting on the education of Aboriginal students. To explain the situation of Aboriginal education, Malin and Maidment (2003) offer an overview of various theoretical debates, while stating, “...each of these theories has made a constructive contribution to current thinking in Aboriginal education at particular levels in particular contexts but each only offers a partial explanation of an immensely complex situation” (Malin and Maidment, 2003, p.88).

Given that positive educational outcomes predicate success in life opportunities, this is of immediate national concern (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002, p. 26; Crawford, et al., 1992, p.75). Despite a strong commitment by the Commonwealth “there is no consistent forward trend in improving the well-being of Aboriginal peoples, and particularly no forward trend towards a reduction in the disparity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians” (Jonas, 2003, p. 17). Because of this prediction of enduring disadvantage, coupled with persistent low retention rates for Aboriginal students to Year 12, there is a dire need to develop new solutions to underpin effective intervention.

One such solution could be the implementation of Aboriginal Studies at senior secondary level. Continuing research has identified the need for Aboriginal Studies, and national reports, both past and present, (Groome & Hamilton, 1995; Purdie et al., 2000; Bourke, et al., 2000; NATSIEP, 1989) have made recommendations in support of it. A number of reports note that the inclusion of Aboriginal Studies, particularly in the senior secondary curriculum, will be beneficial to Aboriginal students. They would be encouraged to stay on at school; therefore it would have a positive affect on their cultural identity and their self-esteem (Groome & Hamilton, 1995; Purdie et al., 2000; Bourke, et al., 2000; NATSIEP, 1989; NSW DET, 1996).

HSC Aboriginal Studies, Aboriginal Students and Self-concept

Many schools have taken up the challenge of developing Aboriginal Studies courses, and to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives into most subjects, providing opportunities for non-Aboriginal students to broaden their understandings, and for Aboriginal students to study subjects that are ‘grounded in their experience and culture’ (DEST, 2002, p. 26). This in turn provides an incentive for Aboriginal students to continue on to the senior secondary years to completion of Year 12.

As a means of addressing this, the provision of Aboriginal cultural programs in schools has been advocated by various Aboriginal Education groups, and was a recommendation of the Review of the National Aboriginal Education Policy (DEET, 1995). Aboriginal cultural programs are seen to be crucial to the educational development of Aboriginal children through strengthening their “pride and identity” (Bourke, et. al., 2000, p. 29) and although Aboriginal Studies is not a cultural program, so to speak, it can be an

incentive to attend school. As shown by Groome & Hamilton (1985) in their study on 'Meeting the Needs of Aboriginal Students', interviews with Aboriginal secondary students revealed that they valued having an Aboriginal Studies course within their schools and that this would be an incentive to continue on to complete secondary school.

While such issues continue to be identified, and recommendations made as to how these can be addressed, there still remains a gap that the present study intends to address; that of achievement of Aboriginal students in a subject area that they elect to undertake, in this instance HSC Aboriginal Studies, the impact of this choice on retention to Year 12 and most importantly whether the impact on Aboriginal students' self-concept is a positive one.

An area of research interest that has recently emerged examines Aboriginal students' perception of 'self' and how this impacts on attaining positive educational outcomes in relation to students' aspirations and their identity as an Aboriginal person and student (Purdie, et al., 2000; Craven and Parente, 2003).

Poor or negative self-concept is very relevant to the development of significant individual and social problems, such as educational disadvantage and unemployment, crime, poor health, and high economic and cultural costs to the society. A positive self-concept for an individual is valued as an important factor in creating desirable emotional and social flow on outcomes. There are both individual and collective benefits of positive self-concept and so this theory is most applicable to educational questions such as the retainment of Aboriginal students in secondary school. According to the OECD, self-concept, or how one feels about oneself in relation to others, is "closely tied to students' economic success and long-term health and wellbeing and as such deserves to be treated alongside academic achievement as an important schooling outcome" (OECD, 2003, p. 9). Similarly in their 2002 "Stepping Forward: Improving Pathways For All Young People" MCEETYA emphasised the importance of self-concept and self-confidence in fostering "a society where all young people can realise their full potential" despite emotional, physical, cultural and learning barriers. Historically, researchers have considered self-concept to be a uni-dimensional construct, however new research and research reviews show that self-concept can be indeed multifaceted (Marsh and Craven, 1997; Marsh, Craven and Burnett, 2003). This evolution of self-concept theory and research diversity gives greater explanatory power to how an individual views her or himself in relation to the external influencers in the environment.

Self-concept plays a critical part in students' interest in and satisfaction at school, underpins their academic achievement, and constitutes a very influential platform for young people's pathways beyond school as recently shown by Marsh & Hau, (2003). For example, Marsh, Byrne and Yeung (1999) reviewed educational research demonstrating that prior academic self-concept had a positive effect of subsequent academic achievement (school grades and standardized test scores) beyond what could be explained by prior levels of academic achievement. In addition, Judge and Bono (2001) presented a meta-analysis showing that components of a positive self-concept construct were among the best predictors of job performance and job satisfaction. This crucial role of self-concept has also long been recognised by Aboriginal organisations. For example, Charles Davison, President of NSW AECG has emphasised that:

NSW AECG cannot think of a single problem plaguing Aboriginal children – from alienation from school, high rates of absenteeism, enjoyment of school, significant under-achievement, reduced educational and career aspirations, youth depression and suicide, conceptions about employment prospects and ability to secure rewarding, productive careers – that is not traceable, at least in part – to the failure of education systems to maximize our children's identity self-concepts as Aboriginal people, proactively enhance our children's academic self-concepts, and ensure our children in general feel good about themselves. We feel that maximizing Aboriginal children's self-concepts is absolutely fundamental to enhancing and ensuring as individuals they reach their full potential (Davison, quoted in Craven & Parente, 2003).

Similarly, the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs has stated that: "The key reason for Aboriginal children being disadvantaged educationally, is that the current education system fails to acknowledge the vital importance of maximising Aboriginal children's self-concept as the critical link between schooling and successful outcomes" (Burney, 2001), conclusions supported by the National Board of Employment, Education and Training study (1995, p. xi) and the Australian Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (Johnston, 1991).

Although government reports, AECGs, and Aboriginal Education policy emphasise the need to maximise Aboriginal students' self-concepts as fundamental to ensuring Aboriginal students achieve outcomes commensurate with their non-Aboriginal peers, little has happened to measure this. As well, a key

goal of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course is to enhance Aboriginal students' self-concepts, yet with the considerable advances in self-concept theory, research, and practice with non-Aboriginal students, limited studies have been undertaken with Aboriginal students in Australia.

An investigation that compared the motivational goals of Aboriginal students with non-Aboriginal students, (McInerney, 2000) used self-concept instruments to measure English, Maths and General self-concepts as well as incorporating self scales to measure self-esteem, self-reliance and sense of purpose. Results from this study found that there were no significant differences between the groups however; there was a clear indication that the impact on personal school success was particularly important for Aboriginal students. While a similar instrument was used by Purdie and McCrindle (2004), in their study that measured self-concepts of Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students, in relation to Family, Self-Acceptance, General school, Academic Achievement, Peer and Career, their findings replicate those of McInerney (2000) in that there were no significant differences between the groups.

It is interesting to note that although some of the findings of McInerney (2000) and Purdie and McCrindle (2004) illustrate that self-concept of Aboriginal students does not reflect a significantly lower self-concept, other studies indicate that results can be quite different given the particular facets of self-concept being measured. In a study undertaken in relation to the aspirations held by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students the facets of art and physical self-concept were scored higher for Aboriginal students whereas parent self-concept no significant differences were present. This study measured 11 facets of self-concept and found that Aboriginal students had lower self-concepts in 7 of them, with statistically significant lower academic (school, maths, verbal) self-concepts (Craven, Tucker, Munns, Hinkley, Marsh & Simpson, 2003).

In a qualitative study undertaken to ascertain how Aboriginal community members viewed the importance of self-concept research with Aboriginal students, it was found that self-concept research in Aboriginal education has the potential to make a difference in the educational and economic disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal people. Focus group and individual interviews identified themes that indicated that self-concept, particularly for Aboriginal students, is a vital goal of schooling (Craven & Parente, 2003, p.103). More recently, Purdie, Tripcony, Boulton-Lewis, Fanshawe, & Gunstone, (2000, p.40) noted that for Aboriginal students "belief in one's own ability as a student is related to school success and enhanced opportunities for success on completing school." McInerney (2003) also suggests that Aboriginal students can achieve the same as other students, given the right school environment.

Rarely have qualitative studies been undertaken to examine self-concept. Therefore the following research uses an in-depth interview approach, seeking explanation and assessment appropriate to Aboriginal students in NSW secondary schools, undertaking the HSC Aboriginal Studies course.

The Present Investigation

Aims

This research takes its inspiration from the above issues, especially the critical but little researched problem of poor retention of Indigenous students. . We wanted to ascertain students' interest in and benefit from the HSC Aboriginal Studies course, through the examination of senior school student's response to a seminal Aboriginal Studies course. The investigation utilised a qualitative methodological approach in order to:

- 1.Elucidate Aboriginal students' rationales for selecting or choosing not to participate in the HSC Aboriginal Studies course;
- 2.Identify Aboriginal students' perceptions of the strengths and limitations of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course in order to identify potential new directions for educational policy;
- 3.Critically analyse the impact of undertaking the HSC Aboriginal Studies course on Aboriginal students' self-concepts, schooling participation, aspirations, and other desirable outcomes in order to identify the impact of undertaking such a course for Aboriginal students; and
- 4.Elucidate whether Aboriginal students' self-concepts in relation to their achievements in HSC Aboriginal Studies course are influenced by downward or upward or other social comparison processes in relation to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peers undertaking the course, in order to test and extend self-concept theory and research to Aboriginal students and further elucidate processes impacting on Aboriginal students' participation in HSC Aboriginal Studies.

Research Design

A qualitative approach was chosen for data collection and analysis, as it emphasises processes and meanings, which stress “how social experience is created and given meanings” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 8) and we have chosen the school situation as, “the goal is to gain some insight into the perceptions of a particular person or persons” (Powney & Watt, 1987, p.18).

As the first author is an Aboriginal researcher, an ethnographic methodology has been employed as it is a useful and culturally appropriate way of representing the ‘diversities of truth’ within which the story teller (the interviewees) rather than the researcher retains control’ (Tuhiwai Smith, 2001, p. 161). Using in-depth interviews, a methodological approach considered ideal as it replicates the narrative and story-telling traditions of Aboriginal communities in Australia, allowed for ‘multiple interpretations of reality and alternative interpretations of data throughout the study’ (Fetterman, 1998, p. 2). It also provides an opportunity to examine the reality of Aboriginal students and their school teaching environment in relation to their responses to curriculum. This approach has allowed the first author the opportunity to experience unique situations and unique individuals within the school culture (Gomm, Hammersley and Foster, 2002, p. 61).

Participants

Three secondary schools offering HSC Aboriginal Studies, and located in regional and coastal areas of New South Wales, were invited to participate in this research. Participants in each school were students, teachers, Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEAs), principals and parents. Students selected in the study were from Year 11 (aged 15-16) and Year 12 (aged 16-19) who were undertaking the HSC Aboriginal Studies course. Students (11 Aboriginal and 2 non-Aboriginal, 4 males and 7 females) were identified, to participate in in-depth interviews, by the teachers of Aboriginal Studies and the AEAs in each school. A comparison group, from the same schools, comprising a random sample of Year 11 and Year 12 Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students not undertaking the HSC Aboriginal Studies course were invited to complete a simple survey.

Outlined below are the sample sizes for each school:

6 Aboriginal students, in Year 11 and Year 12, undertaking the HSC Aboriginal Studies Course;
3 non-Aboriginal students, in Year 11 and Year 12, undertaking the HSC Aboriginal Studies Course;
6 Aboriginal students in Year 11 and Year 12 *not* undertaking HSC Aboriginal Studies Course;
1 teacher of the HSC Aboriginal Studies Course;
Aboriginal Education Assistant;
The Principal;
4-6 parents of Aboriginal students undertaking HSC Aboriginal Studies Course and;
4-6 parents of non-Aboriginal students HSC Aboriginal Studies Course;
Random sample of students, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, in Year 11 and Year 12 not undertaking the Stage 6 HSC Aboriginal Studies Course to complete a simple survey.

Procedures

Ethics approval was sought from the University Human Ethics Committee and the NSW Department of Education and Training (NSW DET) Strategic Research Directorate. Once permission was obtained a letter of request was sent to school Principals seeking their participation in an in-depth interview and access to other potential participants. Following on from such permissions, Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEAs) and teachers were contacted by letter to gain informed consent to participate in an in-depth interview and to collaborate in identifying potential student and parent participants. Permission to interview Year 11 and Year 12 students was sought from their parents by a letter posted by the school to their home address. Such students were identified by the AEA and teacher. The students consent was also sought and parents were also invited to participate in a group interview based on informed consent. Participating schools were identified through the assistance of the Aboriginal Programs Unit (APU) of the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) and the NSW Board of Studies (BOS). Schools were selected based on specific criteria as follows: - (a) a large Aboriginal student population; (b) HSC Aboriginal Studies was being taught; (c) at least three Aboriginal students were participating in the Year 11 Aboriginal Studies Preliminary course; and (d) at least three Aboriginal students were undertaking Year 12 Aboriginal Studies. Interviews were carried out on

an individual basis on school premises in an allocated interview room or a classroom that was not in use at the time, most often during Aboriginal Studies class time. This was not the ideal situation as the students felt that they were missing out on valuable information and there were those who felt that they could have been withdrawn from other subjects.

A simple survey, containing open-ended response questions, was developed for Year 11 and 12 students not undertaking the Aboriginal Studies course, to ascertain their reasons for not selecting the course. The survey was intended to support data gathered through the interviews and consisted of four open-ended questions, specifically designed to elicit information about what students knew about Aboriginal Studies and why they did not choose it as a HSC option. This was considered to be valuable data in ascertaining what factors influence students' choice not to do the course.

Data Collection Methods

In an effort to gather as much relevant data as possible within a short space of time, this research incorporated two methods of data collection; interviews (in-depth and group interviews) and a simple survey.

Three versions of semi-structured in-depth interview schedules that address the aims and research questions of the study were developed for: a) Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students undertaking the HSC Aboriginal Studies course, b) Aboriginal students not undertaking the course, c) teachers/principals/Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEAs). Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal parents from the 3 nominated schools were also invited to participate in group interviews. Semi-structured interview questions were used to initiate discussion to reveal parents' perceptions of the benefit and value of the Aboriginal Studies course. Group interviews are a culturally appropriate methodology, particularly for Aboriginal parents and such interviews also allow- participants the opportunity to openly express their views and perspectives. Interviews were carried out in no particular order and were based on the availability of the participants at the time the researcher was on site.

In addition surveys were sent or delivered to each school and administered through the assistance of the AEA and the teacher of Aboriginal Studies. At each of the sample schools teachers gave their support to the project and agreed to administer the survey during the roll call period at the beginning of the day. Surveys were collected by the Aboriginal Studies teacher and held for collection by the researcher.

The interview schedules and the simple survey were designed to identify:

1. Factors that influence Aboriginal students' decisions to enrol and continue to participate in the HSC Aboriginal Studies course or to not enrol in the course and to elucidate whether factors identified by Aboriginal students are different to the factors that influence non-Aboriginal students' decisions;
2. The strengths and limitations of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course;
3. The extent to which the HSC Aboriginal Studies course impacts positively or negatively on multiple domains of self-concept and other desirable educational outcomes; and
4. The extent to which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students compare their abilities in the HSC Aboriginal Studies course with other Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and elucidate whether any of these comparisons are parallel, upward or downward in nature.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was undertaken on transcripts to identify significant statements and/or themes. Major themes and issues were more closely examined in their relationship to the research aims. From the content analysis, key questions and responses were analysed to compare and contrast the pattern of findings pertaining to Aboriginal students in comparison to non-Aboriginal students. This was based on triangulating the responses from different participants to ascertain areas of congruence and dissonance. The survey responses will also be content analysed for similar and recurring themes.

Preliminary Results of research into Aboriginal students self-concept in the Aboriginal Studies classroom

Themes from our preliminary results show that a major factor in the choice by Aboriginal students to undertake HSC Aboriginal Studies is their cultural background. Students felt that learning more about their culture would assist them in gaining knowledge that could be passed onto future generations, particularly when there were no elder/s in the family who could pass this knowledge on.

“...you get the knowledge and you’re able to pass it on to future generations”

(Aboriginal female student, Year 11)

Aboriginal Studies was also seen to enhance cultural pride. This is a key issue for Aboriginal youth, as recreating pride is vital. It provides the students with a place where they can assert themselves as Aboriginal people, where they feel that the survival of Aboriginal culture, in relation to past events, was a reason to feel proud about being Aboriginal. Many responses underscored the importance of Aboriginal Studies as a curriculum which is reinforcing Aboriginality and identity. This benefit is very important to being an Aboriginal person.

“I suppose it makes you kind of proud...to know your background and know what’s happened in the past and ...how far we’ve come”

(Aboriginal male student, Year 11)

Respect in Aboriginal Studies classes is considered to be an important part of being a member of the class. Here is a place where everyone’s opinion is respected, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, something that was seen to be missing from other classes where there were non-indigenous students.

“...I think it’s like a different world, walking into the Ab. Studies classroom than it is being out in the playground. Cause in the playground or other subjects I don’t think I respect people as much as I respect [the Aboriginal Studies teacher] and the people in my Ab. Studies class. Because they’ll sit down and listen to what you have to say, they don’t tell you oh yeah, whatever, shut up. I don’t want to hear what you’ve got to say, and I just think it’s like a different kind of area”

(Aboriginal female student, Year 12)

Reasons found why students did not to choose Aboriginal Studies fell into three themes. These were:
- the subjects Aboriginal Studies was timetabled against; career options in that Aboriginal Studies was not perceived to have any value for the career choices being made and, limited knowledge of what the course had to offer.

“Just there are other subjects on the same line as Aboriginal Studies ... they also wanted to do [subjects] more important to them or that might help them in their careers, so they would rather do these subjects than Aboriginal Studies”

(Aboriginal male student, Year 12)

Summary

The goals of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (1990) included the feature that Aboriginal students have a right to an education that is equal to that of their non-Aboriginal counterparts. If Aboriginal students are to attain positive educational outcomes they need to feel that they belong and are valued in schools. One curriculum that can foster this is the HSC Aboriginal Studies course. Further analysis of the interview data and our survey material will shed further light on the impacts of the NSW Aboriginal studies course on both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and their communities.

This paper illustrates a range of public policies that have impacted on Aboriginal education since the early 1970s. These have led to the development of specific programs to assist Aboriginal students to succeed in the education system. The development of senior Aboriginal Studies in NSW schools has been found to be a stimulus for Aboriginal students to achieve and continue on to the senior years of secondary school. For some the course is an incentive to complete school and provides Aboriginal students with a positive self-concept in relation to their identity as an Aboriginal person, and as an Aboriginal student. Our preliminary findings show that this course could be a significant offering as a HSC option at all NSW secondary schools. (DEST 2003; MCEETYA, 2000; Board of Studies, 1997; NSWDET, 1996; MCEETYA, 1995; NREATSIP, 1994).

About the Authors

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