

The Impact of the Higher School Certificate Aboriginal Studies Course: Aboriginal Students' Perceptions

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The future for New South Wales Aboriginal secondary students and, their attainment of the Higher School Certificate (HSC), could be pivotal on their participation in and experience of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course. There are schools in which the Aboriginal Studies HSC Course: is highly valued; meets the cultural needs of Aboriginal students; promotes social justice and Reconciliation; and facilitates school community involvement in the curriculum. Via such courses Aboriginal students have an opportunity to see their people and community as the central positive focus of a school subject; and 'a place' where Aboriginal students are able to receive cultural affirmation. This paper presents the preliminary results of a large study examining the impact of the Aboriginal Studies HSC course on the self-concept of Aboriginal students; their perceptions of the strengths and limitations of the course; and the relation between 'belonging as an Aboriginal person' and 'achieving as an Aboriginal student'.

Background and Context

Aboriginal Studies In New South Wales

Introducing Aboriginal Studies to the New South Wales senior secondary curriculum has long been a discussion point for Aboriginal communities and state educational bodies. Through the collaboration of the NSW Department of Education, the NSW Board of Studies and the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG), these discussions became reality in 1991 when Aboriginal Studies became an elective in the NSW Higher School Certificate (HSC) course. The new Aboriginal Studies 2 Unit HSC course, was seen to be a major strategy in meeting Goal 15 of the National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP), in that it would, 'enable Aboriginal students to attain the successful completion of Year 12 ... at the same rates as for other Australian students' (NATSIEP, 1989; Cavanagh, 1991, p. 93; BOS NSW, 1998, p. 17). Not only was it anticipated to improve retention rates, but also achieve positive educational outcomes for Aboriginal students.

In 1998 the NSW HSC course was reviewed along with all syllabuses at that level. As a result Aboriginal Studies was revised and rewritten to fit into what is now known as, the New HSC. The aim of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course is to develop "students' knowledge and understanding about the historical and contemporary experiences of Aboriginal peoples and the concept of 'shared histories' with a view to enabling students to be active and informed citizens in promoting a just society for all Australians" (NSW BOS, 1999, p.8).

As reported in the HSC Aboriginal Studies syllabus evaluation, Aboriginal students who undertake the course are more likely to complete their secondary education compared with those Aboriginal students who do not (NSW BOS, 1998, pp.36-37) and their self-concept, how they feel about themselves, is assumed to be higher. However, this optimism has not been tested or researched for the course so it was considered timely to undertake a preliminary review of the impacts of the course on its students, especially in terms of their perspectives. Thus, this paper focuses on preliminary data collected through in-depth interviews with 7 Aboriginal students undertaking HSC Aboriginal Studies in a large regional high school. Key issues are identified including student perceptions of the course, and how they view themselves in relation to others in the Aboriginal Studies classroom environment. Whether they 'belong' as Aboriginal people and if they are 'achieving' as Aboriginal students.

Aboriginal Students and Perceptions of Self

A positive self-concept is an important educational goal in itself; it can enhance students' motivation, their achievement and attitude toward learning. Thus, a strong relationship exists between self-concept and achievement, if a student experiences academic success this in turn enhances self-concept (Bryce, Frigo, McKenzie and Withers, 2000). While it is acknowledged that self-concept research has been carried out

extensively cross-cultural self-concept research has only recently emerged particularly in research of Australian Aboriginal students.

A major strategy and one of the motivating factors behind the development of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course is that it would improve the retention rates of Aboriginal students to Year 12 (Cavenagh, 1991:93; NSW BOS, 1998, p.17).

It is interesting to note that the New HSC 1999 Aboriginal Studies Syllabus does not make reference to outcomes specifically relating to Aboriginal students and the enhancement of self-concept; the major focus is on the education of all students. Although there is limited literature directly related to the Aboriginal Studies course and what it has achieved over the past twelve years, reference has been made as to the specific reasons for the development of the course. In the NSW Board of Studies syllabus review it was noted that, "Aboriginal Studies is a course in high demand by Aboriginal students...as it provides cultural affirmation and...empowers students to articulate their rights, make positive contributions to society and take up opportunities previously denied them" (NSW BOS, 1998, p.11). It has also been noted that, including Aboriginal Studies in the school curriculum would have particular relevance (Bourke, C.J., Rigby, K. & Burden, J., 2000, p. 26), and would be a major incentive for Aboriginal students to attend school. Groome & Hamilton (1995, p. 61) stated that Aboriginal secondary students have supported the need for Aboriginal Studies as a discrete subject in schools, and this is acknowledged by the outstanding results achieved by some Aboriginal students undertaking the course.

Many schools take the approach of offering Aboriginal Studies as a perspective across subjects, while others offer Aboriginal culture through the assistance of Aboriginal Elders and community members. It seems that whatever a school chooses to do, Aboriginal parents and community members view any Aboriginal cultural programmes as strengthening the pride and identity of their children; vital in any Aboriginal student's educational development (Bourke, et al., 2000, p. 29). Although Aboriginal Studies is not a specific cultural program, it is a course which intends to provide a place within the school curriculum where Aboriginal students can feel comfortable in their identity as Aboriginal people, where students are able to discuss their culture and background; and a place that could provide cultural affirmation, something previously denied Aboriginal students (NSW BOS, 1998, p. 10; Ngarritjan-Kessararis in Harris & Malin, 1994, p. 6).

Enhancing Aboriginal students' self-concept and educational outcomes were originally envisaged as dual interdependent primary goals of the HSC course. These were seen to facilitate increased Aboriginal student participation and retention to Year 12. With non-Aboriginal students', enhancing self-concept has also been identified as an important goal of schooling, a causal variable that impacts upon important educational outcomes for all students such as course selection and academic achievement (Craven, Marsh & Burnett, 2003). The pervasive importance of self-concept has also been identified by Aboriginal education organizations (see Craven & Parente, 2003).

Although government reviews, Australian Aboriginal Education policy and Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (AECGs), 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. Yet the considerable advances in self-concept theory with non-Aboriginal students have not been applied to benefit Aboriginal students in Australia.

The federal government in the "Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage Key Indicators 2003" report, shows that in 2001 Indigenous teachers and education workers comprised a much smaller proportion of school staff than Indigenous students comprised of all students. Such a finding does not bode well for delivery of Indigenous study courses in Australian schools (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2003). Recent research by McLisky and Day (2004) confirms poor Indigenous representation in Years 11 and 12 in NSW Secondary schools, especially in science and technology, and also later at university. Their research on tertiary studies shows that factors at school such as relevance of curriculum, lack of role models, perceived difficulty, limited perception of job outcomes, youth culture, and racism as factors contributing to Aboriginal students not pursuing science at University. Their work also refers to the 'cultural border crossing' model (Ezeife, 2003) which suggests that the level of difficulties Aboriginal students experience at school might range from smooth, to manageable, to hazardous, or to impossible, depending on life-world cultural influences of congruency to non-congruency with western culture. While this study focused on science, an outsider to Aboriginal Studies, the experience of alienation may be similar.

The Purdie, Tripcony, Boulton-Lewis, Fanshawe, & Gunstone, (2000) study focussed mainly on participation, retention and success rates and the Craven & Parente (2003) study on the aspirations of Aboriginal students, both look to measuring self-concept in relation to schooling outcomes. It was found that although a positive self-concept is seen to be a vital goal and outcome of schooling and while Aboriginal

students are aware of the benefits of education it is often the school that fails to acknowledge their aspirations. There may be a clear lack of comprehension and willingness to respond to fulfilling the expectations the students have for their futures (Partington, Harrison, Godfrey & Wyatt, 1997). In particular it was found that a positive self-identity was sometimes influenced by other Aboriginal students being in the class. This may ultimately lead to the effect that if students feel positive about themselves as Aboriginal people and as Aboriginal students they are more likely to be successful at school, viewing education as having some value. It has been noted (Purdie, et al., 2000) that there is the possibility that Aboriginal students', although having a positive self-identity as an Aboriginal person, could have a negative self-identity when in a class with a majority of non-Aboriginal students. Therefore this study aims to determine if this is in fact the case.

The Present Investigation

Aims

The aims of this study were to elucidate the factors that impact on Aboriginal students' self-concepts while undertaking the HSC Aboriginal Studies course and their perceptions of the course.

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 within this school situation "... the goal is to gain some insight into the perceptions of a particular person (or persons)" (Powney & Watt, 198, p. 18).

As an Aboriginal researcher an ethnographic methodology was 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, this methodological approach is considered ideal as it replicates the narrative and story-telling traditions of Aboriginal communities in Australia and allow for 'multiple interpretations of reality and alternative interpretations of data throughout the study' (Fetterman, 1998, p. 2). It also allowed for examining the reality of Aboriginal students and their school teaching environment in relation to the responses to curriculum. This approach has allowed me the opportunity to experience unique situations and unique individuals within the school culture (Gomm, Hammersley & Foster, 2002, p. 61).

Participants

This sample (part of a larger study) consisted of 7 students (4 female, 3 males) from a large secondary school in regional New South Wales, who volunteered to participate in individual in-depth interviews. In this particular school all students undertaking the HSC Aboriginal Studies course are Aboriginal aged 16 to 18, a unique situation in that across the state non-Aboriginal students are the majority in Aboriginal Studies classes.

Through a process of my own identification as an Aboriginal person and links to my 'mob' (family) within the community rapport was easily established. Another important aspect related to this is the use of Aboriginal English for as Diana Eades (1993) states,

"The accent, vocabulary and grammatical patterns of Aboriginal English enable Aboriginal people from all over the country to recognise other Aboriginal people, even in contexts where visible markers of identity are not present. Moreover, distinctively Aboriginal ways of using English give Aboriginal people a feeling of being comfortable with each other ..."

With all the students being Aboriginal in this sample the link to Aboriginality has played a major role in providing an acceptable situation for the students to feel comfortable in sharing their perceptions with me as the researcher.

Instrument

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed and included questions and probes relating to the aims of the project. The interview schedule was designed to identify:

- Factors that influence Aboriginal students' decisions to enrol and continue to participate in the HSC Aboriginal Studies course;
- The extent to which the HSC Aboriginal Studies course impacts positively or negatively on self-concept and other desirable educational outcomes; and
- The perceptions of Aboriginal students as to why non-Aboriginal students don't choose the course.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was undertaken on the 7 transcripts, they were reviewed and significant statements or themes were identified. These major themes and issues were more closely examined as to their relationship to the research aims. From the content analysis, three key questions and responses were further analysed: 1) Why students chose the course; 2) How students felt about the course, and 3) Aboriginal students' perceptions of why non-Aboriginal students don't choose Aboriginal Studies. The responses to these key questions demonstrate that Aboriginal students' perceptions of the course are ultimately positive and that Aboriginal Studies is a course favoured by Aboriginal students in their identity as Aboriginal people and students.

Results and Discussion

Why the Students Chose Aboriginal Studies

In seeking out why the students chose Aboriginal Studies it was clear that their cultural background was a major factor in their choice. There was an indication that it was a way of learning more about their culture but also gaining knowledge so that it could be passed onto future generations, particularly when there were no elder/s in the family who could pass this knowledge on. Three recurrent reasons assessed from the data were: 1) to keep the knowledge going by passing it on; 2) to learn more about Aboriginal culture and; 3) being prepared to undertake the course by doing other relevant Aboriginal Studies courses

Keeping The Knowledge – Passing It On

Students interviewed discussed how the transference of knowledge was a major influencing factor in their choosing Aboriginal Studies. This seemed to be based on their view that Aboriginal culture is an oral culture, and that they believed that passing down knowledge to other Aboriginal people was important. Some of the students spoke about their responsibilities as future parents:-

...when you have kids and stuff and they come home with questions about you know...where do Aboriginals come from and stuff. At least we know then, we got the knowledge to be able to answer their questions. Keep it going...

Others saw that this was about the maintenance of Aboriginal culture: "... you get the knowledge...and you're able to pass it on to...future generations". It was clear across all interviewees that Aboriginal Studies contained content that set it apart from other subjects. As Aboriginal students this content was significant for them in their current and future lives.

More About My Culture

In relation to the students wanting to gain more knowledge there was a clear sense of wanting to learn more about their own culture: "...I chose Aboriginal Studies because I just wanted to learn more about my culture..." and the acknowledgement of loss: "...a lot of cultures been lost, and I want to learn about mine."

In addition for many Aboriginal families knowledge is not easily passed on, especially if it is not known, and students felt that Aboriginal culture was not available to them at home:

... you're not really taught about it...at home we don't live...like in an Aboriginal culture

This was generally seen to be a source of pride, something that has been missing in historic western

education and indicated that the majority of students were seeking a cultural studies program, much more than Aboriginal Studies, an area that needs further investigation.

How Students Felt Doing Aboriginal Studies

Students related that they felt that they had “a sense of knowledge” about the content, something that they instinctively knew and that could be remembered. This is an important finding as, for the students, this acknowledgement of their own knowledge made them feel proud. The data yielded four key reasons as to how Aboriginal students felt about undertaking Aboriginal Studies. These were 1) pride in culture, 2) feeling safe, 3) knowledge that is known and, 4) enjoying the course.

Pride In Culture

Cultural pride is a key issue for Aboriginal youth and recreating pride is vital over the years. Aboriginal Studies clearly provides the students with a place where they can assert themselves as Aboriginal people, where they felt that the survival of Aboriginal culture, in relation to past events, was a reason to feel proud about being Aboriginal: “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”

There were also those who acknowledged that tradition is still alive in the community and that undertaking Aboriginal Studies supports this: “It makes me kind of feel proud of...how the old people always...keep their traditions in their community, so yeah, it makes me feel proud...to be an Aboriginal.”

These responses indicate the importance of Aboriginal Studies as a curriculum area where Aboriginality and identity is important to being an Aboriginal person.

Knowledge That You Know

For many of the students there was a feeling of already knowing the content and that participating in the class was further developing that knowledge. In some ways students felt kinship with, and intuitive understanding of, the course material: “...its stuff that you learn in this class...just sort of sticks into your head and you sort of keep remembering it”

This strong relationship to learn culture and tradition shows a connection to what is passed down in family situations: “...probably because you feel like you already have sort of a sense of knowledge when you go in there...”

This is significant in that the students did not seem to be aware of holding this knowledge until asked about how they felt undertaking the Aboriginal Studies course.

Feeling Safe

The Aboriginal Studies environment for these students was a place where they felt they could be themselves as Aboriginal people and express this with other Aboriginal students:

Oh, you can just talk around your people and that, without having to prove yourself all the time...you can make friends easier and stuff...cause it’s your own kind...

There was also the view that there was an accepted way to act within this class without being judged: “...there’s a way that white people go, and there’s a way the black people go on.” This was made clearer in that students felt that they could voice their opinions more openly in a class with just Aboriginal students:

Yeah, and you can address your opinion more. Like you can say what you mean, what I feel, rather than in another class where you’d be getting into this big debate.

While some students compared it to belonging to a club or family after coming from a school environment where Aboriginal students were the minority:

Sort of feels good, like in the club kind of thing...not many Aboriginals out there really. If I think about it...where I was...there was like 2 of us in the whole school and...I felt a bit left out.

Students 'sense of belonging' in the Aboriginal Studies class environment was clearly shown in the responses made. It is interesting to note that this feeling of being with ones own was more evident in relation to Aboriginal Studies classes and was not felt in the classes where non-Aboriginal students were present.

Enjoying The Course

It was obvious throughout the interviews that the students enjoyed the Aboriginal Studies with some responses identifying the teacher as the main reason they enjoyed the classes: "...he just make the lessons more fun I guess, and he explains it"

There was also an indication that Aboriginal Studies was a much more serious subject and that it offered more than other subjects:

...we all concentrate and all learning and stuff, so there's no-one being stupid and mucking up, and we just learn more... Yeah, it's more exciting than most of my other classes as well, cause we're doing more like research and that, it's a better class.

This was a response that many of the students had and if they were enjoying Aboriginal Studies it impacted on their decision to attend school.

Aboriginal Students' Perceptions of Why Non-Aboriginal Students Do Not Choose Aboriginal Studies As A HSC Subject

The third key question is that of the Aboriginal student's perceptions as to why they thought non-Aboriginal students didn't choose Aboriginal Studies. It is interesting to note that the majority of the Aboriginal students said, in the first instance, that it was because they were not Aboriginal. There was also an indication that Aboriginal Studies did not offer what non-Aboriginal students wanted from a HSC course.

They Are Not Aboriginal

There is a very common misconception among students that Aboriginal Studies is only for Aboriginal students, and therefore they do not consider or choose it as a HSC subject, even if they are interested. While this is a belief held by many non-Aboriginal students the Aboriginal students in this study also felt that at times this was a valid reason for not choosing Aboriginal Studies: "...because if I was white I don't think I would choose it."

Students also indicated that these were the kind of things they were told by their non-Aboriginal friends: "That's what they tell me...I'm not going in there, I'm not Aboriginal" and that there could be the perception that they did not belong: "...they're not Aboriginal, they might think they might not fit in, with all the other Koori kids"

Not Interested

Another major theme was that non-Aboriginal students did know what the course was about but that they were not interested in it: "Obviously if they didn't choose, they're not real interested in it. I mean they know what it's about."

Something that could be linked to this is the relevance to career path as it was said that only those who could see that it would help them in their future endeavours would take it: "...they only pick it up, like they only take the subject if they like need it for a certain course...some qualifications."

There also arose the issue of students having no choice as to whether they took Aboriginal Studies or not, it became a choice made by the school. Students explained that if class sizes were too big then students were not given a choice: "...some people...just get put into Aboriginal Studies, they don't actually know if they want to do it." This was also the case, but in different circumstances, for those coming from smaller schools:

Oh, you don't get a choice what you want to pick out there, cause it's so small. I only had three kids in my class, three girls...everyone at the school was Aboriginal and we just do Aboriginal Studies.

Although there was a clear indication by the students that Aboriginal Studies is important for all students it was evident through their responses that interest in the course was not a priority for non-Aboriginal students. Other indicators show that Aboriginal students in this school were quite happy in an Aboriginal Studies class that had only Aboriginal students.

Further emerging themes

Other themes arose out of this preliminary data and will be further investigated. For example, students' having to move to a new school in the senior years has a major impact on student retainment and course success including the completion of the Major Project. The Major Project was a focus, in that it is the main assessment task, whereas changes would have to be made in the middle of an already established project.

Certainly, the teacher is also a major influencing factor on the student's enjoyment and continued participation in the course. If the teacher was knowledgeable on the topics and considered to be a good teacher, it was seen to be a way of succeeding in the class. But in saying this there were also those students who identified that having an Aboriginal teacher would be the ideal situation, regardless of good teaching skills.

In identifying some of the more positive aspects of the Aboriginal Studies course students spoke of the importance of and wish for community guest speakers and the significance of field trips. They believed that more of these activities would encourage more to enrol and to undertake tertiary study later on.

Summary

Initial data gathered at this site is somewhat unique in that the majority of schools offering Aboriginal Studies very rarely have a class made up of just Aboriginal students. However, this case study of a rural school has been a very good opportunity to investigate the views of Aboriginal students in a situation that they feel is their own. For Aboriginal students the opportunity to undertake Aboriginal Studies in their schools is seen to be a positive aspect to the final years of their schooling education, as well as preparing them for further study or the workforce.

There is a feeling amongst these Aboriginal students that Aboriginal Studies makes them feel much more comfortable in class, where they feel they will not be judged, and as a consequence they are more motivated to come to school. There is pride in their identity and a strong sense of success, in Aboriginal Studies they experience a place of belonging as an Aboriginal person and achieving as an Aboriginal student.

About the Authors

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