An investigation of some factors in the education of Indigenous Australians

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The paper argues that the history of the colonial education system in Australia has led to an intense distrust for the education system amongst Aboriginal people. The paper further argues that the education system still largely reproduces only the dominant culture in its curriculum, and a major factor in the high levels of Aboriginal students leaving school early can be linked to the cultural irrelevance of the curriculum. The paper also examines the links between the high poverty; unemployment and poor health conditions experienced in many Aboriginal communities and argues that these conditions also play a significant role in preventing Aboriginal students from completing school. The paper argues that the most successful programs implemented in schools to alleviate these problems are programs which involve the parents and Aboriginal communities. The most successful programs include, homework centres and curricula which incorporate Aboriginal perspectives in order to make learning relevant and enjoyable for students. The paper finally argues that the inclusion of Aboriginal communities and perspectives in Australian schools is not only vital to gaining educational equality for Aboriginal students; the inclusion can also play an invaluable role in the education of every Australian student.
Introduction

The ‘dropout’ rate for Aboriginal students in the Australian education system is alarmingly high, “In 1993 an estimated 33% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who began secondary school were still attending in year 12, compared to 76% of other Australian students.”¹ The NSW Review of Aboriginal Education (2005) indicates that the retention rate of Aboriginal students in Years 7-10 is 81% as opposed to 96% of non-Aboriginal students and for Years 11-12, 36.3% as apposed to 68.1%.² It is alarming to see only a 3.3% increase in twelve years. Education is one of the most important ways in which people gain access to employment and it also plays a vital role in allowing people, particularly people of an oppressed group, the opportunity to gain a political voice in society. Equality in education is a paramount concern for Aboriginal people who have not yet achieved equality in our society. This paper will focus firstly, on the reasons for many Aboriginal students leaving school before finishing year 12. Secondly, the paper will explore some examples from the literature of some of the programs in place which aim to improve the educational outcomes for students. Due to the growing awareness of the importance of incorporating Aboriginal issues and views in the curriculum, many schools across Australia have implemented policies to improve Aboriginal education; in fact the implementation of the Aboriginal Education Policy became compulsory in all New South Wales schools in 1986.³ Through an examination of programs implemented in four different Australian schools, as well as an analysis of the New South Wales history syllabus stages one through six, on the thirtieth anniversary of their release, this paper will examine the extent to which the recommendations of the Aboriginal Consultative Group have been fulfilled.

Historical Context

The extensive history of the relationship between institutions such as the educational system and the Aboriginal people must be taken into account when considering the contemporary issues surrounding education. Since contact in 1788, Aboriginal people have been subjected to numerous destructive policies linked with education. The policies in early colonial history centred on educating Aboriginal people for the service of the dominant culture, females were trained to become domestic servants, and males were trained as labourers. Reynolds argues that in the late nineteenth century “…many of those responsible for, or just interested in, Aboriginal education had come to accept the view that Aborigines should acquire no more than practical skills and rudimentary literacy.”⁴ In 1883 the Aborigines Protection Board was established, with the power to take children away from their families, and this they often did while the children were at school.

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Board also set up reserves and provided segregated schooling on these reserves. Mission schools were not completely abolished until the 1970s, Miller suggests “…segregation existed in New South Wales public schools until about 1970.” Assimilation policies also lasted until this time. Research conducted on Kormilda college in 1976 suggested that one of their ‘success stories’ was a boy who “…was orientated towards the future and believed that things would be better for him than for his parents and that people must forget about the old ways if they want to get ahead.” This reveals to us, not the current policies of the school, but how recently assimilation was considered to be a valuable policy in education. It has not been until very recently that the government has recognised that Aboriginal people not only have the right to equal education, they also have the right to have their own identities valued and respected.

This brief overview of the history of educational policies in Australia since contact, indicates why Aboriginal people may, and often do, have strong reservations about the education system. Miller suggests, “Some Koori parents, remembering the days of segregation, the poor education they received and the excessive canings which seemed to be a favoured form of discipline in mission schools, did not trust white teachers.” The significance of the history of education in relation to Aboriginal people cannot be overstated; the education system has played a large role in the subordination of Aboriginal people, and the attempted destruction of their identity. Many Aboriginal students would be aware of the negative experiences of their parents and grandparents in school and most likely have reservations themselves about the value of an education system which has never appeared to consider Aboriginal interests. While students may be more trusting of the education system than their parents, lack of support for them attending school is a factor in students leaving school early. Parents who distrust the school may encourage students to leave early, or not give them the support necessary to finish school, particularly important in years eleven and twelve. Parents need to be actively involved in the school, not only so they can understand how to support their children going through a system which may be difficult and unfamiliar, but more importantly, so they can contribute to the development of a curriculum that is familiar and relevant to Aboriginal students.

**Curriculum Factors**

The relevance of the school curriculum is another key factor in Aboriginal students leaving school early. The school curriculum and structure is based on a predominantly white Eurocentric model, and while recent attempts have been made to include Aboriginal studies, and Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum, the majority of schooling is still based around the dominant culture. An examination of the K-6 HSIE Syllabus revealed a very uneven situation. The HSIE Syllabus is focussed on four themes: Change and Continuity, Cultures, Environments and Social Systems and

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7 J. Miller, *op. cit.*, p.201.
Structures. Each of these themes has two parts as indicated in Table 1. To determine to what extent the Syllabus has incorporated aspects of Aboriginal studies a simple count was made of the total number of outcomes for each sub-strand, the number of outcomes that are devoted entirely or virtually entirely to Aboriginal cultures, the number in which Aboriginal cultures could be related (indirect) and the position of the full outcomes in the list of outcomes. These results are given in Table 1. These data indicate that in fifteen of Table 1: Frequency of Direct, Indirect and Position of Outcomes on Aboriginal Culture in Early Stage 1-3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>Early Stage 1</th>
<th>Stage 1</th>
<th>Stage 2</th>
<th>Stage 3</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Change and Continuity</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant events &amp; people</td>
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<tr>
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<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position in list (direct)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6,7</td>
<td>6,12,15</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time and Change</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total no. Outcomes</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. Direct</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>No Indirect</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Position in list</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9, 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Identities</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. Direct</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Indirect</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>4,11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
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<td>No Indirect</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Environments</td>
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<tr>
<td>Patterns, Place and Locations</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>No Indirect</td>
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<td>6,1,13,</td>
<td>7</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships with Places</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total no. Outcomes</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. Direct</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>No Indirect</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position in list</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Systems and structures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource Systems</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total no. Outcomes</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>No Indirect</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position in list</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roles, Rights and Responsibilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total no. Outcomes</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. Direct</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the possible sub-strands (n=32) there are no direct outcomes for Aboriginal cultures and 23 sub-strands that have no links to Aboriginal cultures. This is not to claim that the remaining sub-strands could not be linked to Aboriginal culture by a teacher who saw the syllabus in a less Eurocentric way. The position of the direct outcomes is also interesting. In five sub-strands, the direct outcome is the last on the list. In a further five sub-strands, the direct outcome is listed second last and of the remainder that listed direct outcomes, there is only one sub-strands that list the direct Aboriginal outcome in the first half of the list.

The History Syllabus for Stages 4 and 5 also presents an uneven picture. The data concerning these Stages are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Aboriginal Outcomes in History Syllabus in Stages 4 and 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 4</th>
<th>Stage 5</th>
<th>Stages 4, 5</th>
<th>Life Skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total No of Objectives</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total No. of Outcomes</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10 (S4), 10(S5)</td>
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<tr>
<td>No. of Relevant Outcomes</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Topics</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position of Topic in List of Topics</td>
<td>Topic 3</td>
<td>Topic 6</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table 2 it can be seen that the mandatory course in both stages includes a full topic on Aboriginal cultures. These are relevant for three outcomes out of a total of 20 listed outcomes. There is also an History elective, though this does have no specific content on Aboriginality. The Life Skills program reveals a much more inclusive proportion of outcomes. Offset against these data is the availability of a course in Aboriginal Studies.

It is evident from the above data, that although some effort has been made to include Aboriginal perspectives in the NSW History and HSIE Syllabuses, the majority of content is still largely Eurocentric.

It is important for the motivation of all students that the curriculum is relevant to them; in fact if they can relate knowledge to aspects of their lives they are more likely to retain that knowledge. The dominance of white culture in schooling makes it difficult for Aboriginal students to relate to the knowledge transmitted in school. Some parents suggested that “…children often complained work was too difficult for them. These
students felt they did not belong in school and there was no longer any point attending.”

It is probable that the students found the work difficult because it was not culturally relevant to them. The impact on their desire to attend school when it seems too difficult is evident. In one classroom in a primary school for Aboriginal children in rural Australia students were asked to copy sentences about freight trains and bicycles, rather than more relevant sentences about their everyday lives and culture. The same school had children colour in Christmas trees, yet the authors of the paper who witnessed this suggested that the children may not have understood the significance of doing so. It is not surprising in light of this example that absenteeism is high in primary school. This often results in low literacy and numeracy levels, which eventually adds to the students’ desire to leave early as the material is not relevant and often as a result becomes difficult.

Another criticism of the current school curriculum is that material presented on Aboriginality often presents it as culturally homogeneous. A respondent in Sykes’ survey on Aboriginal perspectives on education suggested, “Teachers tend to grab a hold of the Coolamon and the Woomera and the spear and say ‘this is Aboriginal society’ because it’s a very easy thing to do.” Identity is a crucial issue for Aboriginal teenagers and indeed all teenagers, they need to feel that the school recognises their identity; if they do not feel their identity is recognised and valued they will not want to stay at school. Appleyard suggests that this loss of identity can lead to “…a loss of self esteem and respect, culminating in educational failure.” Such narrow views of Aboriginality do not take into account the great variation which exists between different Aboriginal ways of life, for example between rural and urban Aboriginals. Sykes suggests that the curriculum should reflect the local histories and cultures as well as broader issues in Aboriginal studies.

In order for Aboriginal students’ identity to be valued in the school, and in order for the curriculum to be relevant to Aboriginal students, it is vital that Aboriginal people have greater agency in their children’s schooling, both at the community level and at higher decision making levels. In her study on the success of Aboriginal students in secondary schools, Russell convincingly argues, “…the most significant school factor in the student’s identity, retention and attainment was the appointment of Aboriginal Education workers…”. These staff members affirm to the students that their identity is valued, and they also have a member of staff, to whom they can relate, and from whom they can seek assistance. The Aboriginal education workers can also implement policies and make

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11 S. Appleyard, op. cit., p. 25.
12 R. Sykes, op. cit., p. 85.
recommendations on adjustments to the curriculum which would make schooling more relevant and accessible to Aboriginal students. A major factor in students leaving the school is the perception that the school does not care enough about Aboriginal culture and perspectives to incorporate them in teaching. The appointment of these workers helps to reassure students that their perspectives are valued and that school is a valuable activity. An Aboriginal teacher from Pintupi articulated the desire among Aboriginal people for the education of their children:

We wish to teach our children yanangu [Aboriginal] and walypala [white] ways. If they do only walypala ways they will lose their understanding and will do things like petrol sniffing and fighting. They will not listen to old people talking to them. To avoid this we have to do yanangu and walypala ways.\textsuperscript{14}

Aboriginal teachers, support workers, such as the Aboriginal education workers, and the broader Aboriginal community play an important role in establishing how schooling can be made relevant to Aboriginal students. In fact, including Aboriginal literature, history and perspectives can also be beneficial for non-Aboriginal students. Another major factor in Aboriginal students’ desire to leave school early is the racism they are faced with at school. One study reported that a student at one high school when asked what he thought about Aboriginal people stated, “[Aboriginal people]… are low life, and are all complainers, if Aborigines went out and got jobs instead of complaining about land rights Australia would be a better place.”\textsuperscript{15} This is probably the most extreme example of racism at that school; however comments such as these would impact greatly on the Aboriginal students and would certainly affect their desire to go to school. Unfortunately many racist attitudes still exist in our schools; though much of this can be attributed to ignorance. If Aboriginal perspectives were included more equally in the school curriculum, students such as the one above may understand issues such as land rights and be less likely to make the schooling environment uncomfortable for Aboriginal students, by voicing these racist attitudes. It is also important for Aboriginal history to be included in the curriculum as without this inclusion our students only gain an understanding of the most recent events in the extensive history of an ancient continent. The history of white settlement in Australia covers little more than two hundred years. Incorporating Aboriginal myths and legends into the curriculum allows all students to think about Australian history as being much more extensive than what has been documented and studied since contact. The history of this country did not begin when white men first documented it. Howard has also argued the importance of teachers’ interest in the students, suggesting that this also plays an important role in student’s desire to attend school. Howard suggests that if students perceive teachers as not being interested in Aboriginal students they are less likely to be motivated to attend. One student interviewed by Howard suggested that “Teachers never wanted to teach black kids

\textsuperscript{14} K. Keefe, \textit{From the Centre to the City: Aboriginal Education, Culture and power}. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1992, p.32.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{The first of its Kind, op. cit.}, p.35.
because they couldn’t be bothered. Great isn’t it! Teachers didn’t bother with you, so white kids had right of way.”

Other Factors

Cultural exclusion is not the only factor in the high rates of attrition among Aboriginal students. The socio-economic status of many Aboriginal people also has a significant effect. A recent statistic suggests that “On average Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s income is about 65% of the income of other Australians.” As a result, many Aboriginal students suffer the effects of poverty which often affects their ability to participate in school. Students who live in poverty often do not have money for uniforms, books or extra-curricula activities such as excursions; many have not eaten breakfast before school. These circumstances obviously have detrimental effects on their ability to concentrate and learn in school. Many students who live under these conditions are forced to leave in order to find employment or because they can no longer afford to attend school.

A related factor to the low socio-economic status of many Aboriginal people is the high levels of unemployment faced by Aboriginal people. In the 2001 census the unemployment rate for those people who identified as Indigenous was 20%. While the unemployment rate for Non Indigenous persons was 7.2%. This high rate of unemployment can cause negative effects on the motivation of Aboriginal students, particularly those living in rural areas in which employment is even more difficult to attain. In 2002 the unemployment rate of young people in Australia who had not completed secondary school was 6.2% whereas the rate for those with a bachelor’s degree was 2.4%. The link between education and employment prospects has been made very strongly.

Another significant factor in students leaving school early, also relating to poverty, is the health of Aboriginal students. A report in *The Australian* in 1995 indicated that “Aborigines living in remote areas have “Fourth World” life expectancies and health

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17 *National review of education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people*, op. cit., p. 17.


patterns." The conditions that some Aboriginal people are faced with, are not only not conducive to homework, often they may cause students to become sick and miss a large amount of school or suffer the trauma of a number of family members dying during their schooling. The 2005 Report on the Health and Welfare of Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicates that education is a key factor in improving the health of Indigenous Australians. This interaction between education and health highlights a critical factor. Other problems, often associated with displaced communities, include alcoholism and abuse within families. This can have an extremely detrimental affect on the mental and physical health of students, and would also prevent them from attending or actively participating in school. One student, interviewed by Howard articulates the difficulties faced by students in this situation, “The things that made it hard for me at school were I had personal problems at home like my mother and her de facto fighting always and arguing. I copped a few beatings myself which brought my feelings down about even going to school at all.”

**Policy Developments**

It is evident that many interrelated factors contribute to the comparatively higher levels of Aboriginal students leaving school early. In recent years, however, the Australian government has attempted to improve the educational situation for Aboriginal people. The most successful programs and policies have been those that have taken Aboriginal viewpoints into consideration, and given Aboriginal people power in their implementation.

The recommendations for the ‘Educations of Aborigines’ document are extensive. However, it is interesting to note a few of their recommendations in order to examine the extent to which they have been implemented in the thirty years following the publication of the document. One of the most obvious ways in which the document appears to have been implemented is by the development of the Aboriginal Education Policy, the implementation of which has been compulsory since 1986. The policy appears to address many of the recommendations made by the committee. Some of the major recommendations of the committee included, the representation of Aboriginal people at all levels of administration, including state and federal decision making levels, encouragement of the involvement of parents in the school, appointment of Aboriginal liaison officers and teacher aides, the teaching of Aboriginal studies and the implementation of special entry schemes for Aboriginal people to gain teaching qualifications. The Aboriginal Education Policy appears to take into consideration

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23 D. Howard, op. cit., p. 9.
25 The First of it’s Kind, op. cit., p.32.
26 Aboriginal Consultative group, op. cit.
these recommendations, the policy states for example, “Aboriginal studies perspectives must be mandatory in all school curricula.” It also recognises the importance of professional training in the policy “demands that professional career development programs be instigated by the DET to promote the career options for Aboriginal staff.” The policy also makes another important assertion regarding the significance of respecting Aboriginal languages, including Aboriginal English, and respecting Aboriginal celebrations such as National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Week. This is fully supported by the NSW Department of Education and Training whose Aboriginal Education Policy highlights the ‘importance of literacy skills for Aboriginal students and encourage the integration of Aboriginal Australian studies into all school curricula’

Effective School-based solutions: Examples from the literature.

This section of the paper will examine a number of significant research studies undertaken by a number of researchers interested in improving the educational outcomes of Aboriginal students. All of the articles are thought provoking calls to action which suggest that, while government funding and policies are important in supporting the achievement of Aboriginal students, the role and commitment of schools and teachers to true equity in education is equally as vital.

In 1990 Mooney published an important article, which although published fifteen years ago remains relevant in many respects today. Mooney wrote of an important program which he argued appeared to work extremely well for Aboriginal students and their communities. This program involved the use of learning and homework centres. These centres, run after school, allowed students to do homework, which their home environment may not have been conducive to, or receive extra tuition for those who were having difficulty with school. The particular learning centre reported on by Mooney was the Koori Primary Study Centre, which is run at a South Coast primary school. The need for this centre was recognised when the homework centre at the local high school highlighted that many students coming from year six did not have basic literacy and numeracy skills. Parents were actively informed and involved in the setting up of the centre. This is a vital factor in the success of any program involving Aboriginal education, and the involvement of the parents indicates that the program would work well for the students and community. The centre also related the learning to fun, practical activities, such as visits to the supermarket for numeracy skills, as well as the reading of Aboriginal stories and legends to the students. Mooney also reported that the Centre involved the students in excursions to the local library in order for them to become familiar with the system, as well as excursions relating to bush tucker and medicine. The

29 Ibid, p.11.
32 Ibid, p.2
Centre also facilitated mainstream educational psychology theories such as peer scaffolding, by having the students from the homework centre tutor the younger students. The Centre, Mooney argued, made learning fun, relevant and accessible to Aboriginal students.

Another New South Wales high school, reported on in the document *The First of Its Kind* which examined the implementation of the Aboriginal Education policy. This school, it is reported, implemented a homework centre, and was commended as being “trailblazing” as it implemented its policy eighteen months before it was compulsory. The policy at this high school “…identifies niches in almost every subject area where an Aboriginal perspective is possible and incorporates a 5 page resource list.” It appears from the policy adopted by the school, that like the Koori study centre, it has taken note of the emphasis in the policy about the importance of making the curricula culturally relevant. The school has a number of Aboriginal art displays, including one on the water tank painted by the students and their parents. The school also celebrated National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Week, as well as running an Aboriginal studies course, which the school’s Aboriginal Education Assistant suggested had “…broken down the barriers.”

The fact that the school has an Aboriginal Education Assistant, a homework centre, and actively tried to incorporate an Aboriginal perspective into the curriculum suggests that it was reasonably welcoming environment for Aboriginal students. As opposed to the Koori Primary study centre, however, parental and wider community involvement did not appear to be high at this school. In fact one of the criticisms of the school is that “Even those subject areas (Art, history, English) which had consistently attempted to incorporate an Aboriginal perspective had not involved the Aboriginal community in curriculum planning.” Unlike the Koori Primary study centre the school did not appear to invite Aboriginal guest speakers or performers, except during National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander week. The head mathematics teacher claimed that the “…material presented to students during National Aborigines week was excessive.” It is evident then, that even to some teachers the importance of recognising Aboriginal culture and identity is not apparent. The same teacher suggested that rather than examining ways to understand and implement the policy “…our staff just want to get on with their teaching.” It is quite distressing to read a report where teachers consider even a week of a focus on Aboriginal cultures to be an impediment to teaching, rather than seeing the cultures of all the students in a class to be a resource to be valued. Such statements reveal the extent of the hegemony of Eurocentric culture in the classroom, where including cultures other than the ‘norm’ is seen as an irritating detour from teaching, not a part of it. It is evident from this case that while policy making has come some way forward in

33 The First of its Kind, op. cit., p.32.
34 Ibid., p.32.
37 Ibid, p. 36.
38 Ibid, p 32.
addressing the concerns of the Aboriginal community, if the teachers are not made aware of the importance of implementing the policy, it will not be effective.

Hickling Hudson and Ahlquist (2003) give an insightful comparative analysis of the state of Indigenous education in Australian and the U.S. The picture they paint of the Australian situation is not an appealing one, but sadly it is, no doubt, all too accurate. Statistics given by the authors suggest that completion rates for Native American high school students are 70 per cent, 16 per cent below the national average, while the Indigenous Australian completion rate is 6.6 per cent, 63.4 per cent lower than the national average. The statistics suggest that this is a crisis that needs to be addressed. In their study Hickling Hudson and Ahlquist give some interesting examples of schools which are successful in retaining their Aboriginal students and keeping absenteeism to a minimum. The authors also give examples of some schools where absenteeism is high and students do not seem to enjoy school. The difference between these schools appears to be, from the authors’ analysis the presence of parents and community members in the school, the incorporation of Aboriginal cultures and literature into the curriculum, and addressing outside factors such as health and adult literacy issues. A number of features can be identified as important in the success of the independent Indigenous school visited by the authors. These features could perhaps be taken into consideration as useful for other schools wishing to create a more equitable and enjoyable school environment. From our interpretation of the Hickling Hudson and Ahlquist article we would suggest these features for success:

- Strong community involvement and a sense of ownership over the school.
- Addressing adult literacy issues through night classes.
- Meal programs such as breakfast programs which take into account the fact that some students from a low socio-economic background may not get breakfast at home.
- Provision of health services.
- An inclusive environment which celebrates individual students’ achievements and diversity.

The article demonstrates not just the grave inequities faced by Aboriginal students in the education system, but also that these inequities are not inevitable, they can and have been successfully challenged and defeated in Australian schools. The authors suggest that “Educational equity is talked about rhetorically but is fat from being achieved in practice.”\(^\text{40}\) We suggest that all educators need to take up this challenge and put the rhetoric into practice.

As well as school programs such as those outlined in the literature there are a number of other programs which aim to improve the educational outcomes of Aboriginal students, including financial programs such as ABSTUDY, and the Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Programme.

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Scheme, as well as programs such as Our Story which is a teacher education program. Some other significant programs exist in the higher education system, designed to encourage Aboriginal participation in higher education. This is important not just so younger students will have role models; but also in the hope that some of the students in the higher education system may wish to become teachers themselves and use their own valuable histories and experiences to enrich the education of future students of all cultural backgrounds.

A Possible Classroom Application in History 7-10.  
One of the aims of this paper is to get all educators thinking about how to foster equitable learning environments for all of their students. The literature suggests that one of the most important ways to do this is by assuring all students, including Aboriginal students, that their identities are valued. We have seen ways in which schools have supported their Aboriginal students in achieving positive educational outcomes, but it is also important that individual teachers consider ways in which they can allow students to express their individual identities in the classroom. We propose that a focus on local and family histories incorporating oral history could be a valuable way to engage students in history in years 7-10. There are, we believe, other significant reasons for such a focus, these include:

- Allowing students to conduct and then share their own personal research into an area of local or family history will give the students and the teacher of the class the chance to hear many different histories and voices from the past that would not normally be heard. 
- This makes history not only more equitable, as perspectives other than the dominant ones are heard, but also unpredictable and exciting as history often is. History in the classroom thus becomes about more than facts, figures and ‘watershed’ events, but stories on a fine-grained level that may not have been shared before.
- The New South Wales History Years 7-10 syllabus, rightly, refers to Aboriginal peoples, indicating an awareness of the diversity of Aboriginal peoples lives, that while having Aboriginality in common people of Aboriginal descent are not a homogenous group. However, studying topics thematically may lead to unintentional grouping of people by their shared experience. Giving students the chance to research specific histories from their local area may reveal the complexity of people’s lives.

We have suggested earlier in this paper that the there are few outcomes relating directly to Aboriginal history in the New South Wales History and HSIE syllabuses. However, the outcomes based model, being broad, can fairly easily allow for stronger community involvement and student research. For example, in topic 3 stage four the requirement for students to learn about “Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspectives of the relationship to land and country” could effectively be covered, where the opportunity is available, if Aboriginal elders were invited to come in and speak about the particular

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41 S. Appleyard, op. cit.
43 New South Wales Board of Studies: History 7-10 Syllabus, p27.
relationship to the land the ancestors in their area had, thus giving students new perspectives on their local area, covering outcome 4.744. This would show any Aboriginal students in the class that perspectives on history other than Eurocentric perspectives are valued.

Another important historical source mentioned specifically in the syllabus outcomes 4.10 and 5.10 is the use of oral sources. 45 The use of oral sources is perhaps not emphasised enough in the syllabus document. Oral history is the lifeblood of Aboriginal histories. It is how so many Aboriginal histories have survived despite the undeniable cultural deprivation that has occurred since contact. Yet history in schools still largely privileges written documents as sources. Rhetoric about including Aboriginal histories must be backed up by respecting and valuing the important methodology used to preserve them. If written sources are used exclusively or almost exclusively, we implicitly value this form of historical record keeping over oral histories. The problem for teachers may be access to oral accounts of history, yet this need not be a problem. We propose that students could, taking advantage of the option already available in the syllabus in stages 4 and 5 history elective “Constructing history” 46 conduct their own research into local or family history, collecting their own oral histories. This, we propose would fulfil outcome E5.7: “explains different contexts, perspectives and interpretations of the past” as students would quickly see the differences in the perspectives and interpretations of the histories they research. As suggested in the syllabus students may also use ICT, pictorial and other sources to support their research. The learning theory which we propose to underpin this program is a biologically based theory of learning which is known as Generative learning. Generative theories of learning suggest that learning takes place as a heuristic of: “first, generating variants, second, testing them, and third, regenerating and hence propagating those variants that have survived the tests, that is those that have been selected.” 47 Thus, students would, first generate their own ideas about an aspect of local or family history, test these based on their value in light of their research and thirdly regenerate those ideas that survive the test. We propose all students are likely to be more engaged in, and learn more about the processes of, historical inquiry if they conduct their own research to answer questions they have themselves generated.

It is important to note here, that our suggestions for harnessing the opportunities of the broad syllabus outcomes and the elective “Constructing history” are intentionally vague. This is because, as the literature has highlighted, successful programs are those which involve students, parents and the community in programming. Imposing a ‘curriculum from above’ even a well intentioned one, is not likely to engage students as much as research topics of personal significance. We have not tried this particular approach in a classroom setting, although we believe many teachers have no doubt harnessed the opportunities of the syllabus and implemented similar programs. What we aim to do is

44 New South Wales Board of Studies: History 7-10 Syllabus, p26.

45 New South Wales Board of Studies, History 7-10 Syllabus, p26 and p40.

46 New South Wales Board of Studies: History 7-10 Syllabus, p48.

think about how the recommendations of the literature, of creating a more culturally inclusive environment, might be applied in a history classroom. We do this in the hope that teachers may think more about how to link the recommendations of the literature in their everyday classrooms. If all that comes of the readers analysis of our approach is the conclusion that it is not appropriate, we hope that the reader themselves will then be provoked to think about an approach that is.

Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that many interrelated factors are responsible for the significant number of Aboriginal students leaving school early. We have briefly examined the history of education in relation to Aboriginal people in Australia and argued that this history has caused some understandable feelings of distrust amongst the Aboriginal community. We have highlighted that the dominant culture is overrepresented in the curriculum and we have also examined how this often leads to Aboriginal students feeling school is irrelevant as the curriculum is not culturally relevant. We have explored the effects of poverty and high rates of unemployment in the Aboriginal community and discussed how this affects student desires to attend school. The literature we have explored has given insight into some of the programs that have been in place and worked well for Aboriginal students and the Aboriginal community. It appears, from the literature, that the most effective programs are those that involve the parents and community in the designing and implementation of a culturally relevant curriculum. The literature has also shown that programs which aim to combat the effects of unemployment and poverty are also very significant and successful. We have also briefly proposed a possible history program, underpinned by a generative theory of learning, which it is hoped will provoke educators into thinking about how to make their own curriculums more culturally inclusive. Aboriginal people have been fighting for equality in education and equality in their own country since contact. They have the right to not only have equal access to education but have an equal contribution in the structuring and implementation of that education. Combining Aboriginal perspectives in the education system will not only improve the completion rates for Aboriginal students and give them the equal opportunities they deserve, it will improve education for all Australian students as, Aboriginal history, perspectives and culture are an invaluable aspect of Australian history, perspectives and culture.
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