HSC Aboriginal Studies: Strengths, Limitations, and Impact upon Aboriginal Students’ Self-Concepts and Educational Outcomes

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July 2006

This thesis is dedicated to:

a strong, determined Aboriginal woman
my late mother

Elizabeth Pagett
(Née Brown/Mobbs)

This would never have happened without her love, support, and encouragement in my pursuit of further education.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I wish to acknowledge the traditional and current owners of the “countries” whose land this research was carried out on: Dharumba country, Wiradjuri country, and Minjungbal country.

There are many individuals who provided me with their moral support and advice, particularly at the end of this journey.

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I am finally coming home … for a short while anyway.

Thank you all for your understanding, encouragement and support.
STATEMENT OF AUTHENTICATION

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original, except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

..................................................
(Signature)
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### ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
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<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AEA</td>
<td>Aboriginal Education Assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APU</td>
<td>Aboriginal Programs Unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BFLPE</td>
<td>Big-Fish-Little-Pond Effect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BOS</td>
<td>NSW Board of Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DET</td>
<td>NSW Department of Education and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HSC</td>
<td>Higher School Certificate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW AECG Inc.</td>
<td>NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UAI</td>
<td>University Admissions Index</td>
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<td>UWS</td>
<td>University of Western Sydney</td>
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ABSTRACT

Two primary, interdependent goals of the NSW Higher School Certificate Aboriginal Studies course are enhancing Indigenous students’ self-concepts and educational outcome. It was considered that these would lead to increased Indigenous student participation and retention to Year 12. Yet recently there has been a decline in enrolments. Despite the introduction of Aboriginal Studies over a decade ago, no rigorous research has been undertaken to determine the impact of the course or the extent to which the aims of the course have been achieved.

Research in Aboriginal Education has identified that Indigenous students are still not achieving at the same level as their non-Indigenous counterparts. However, the majority of studies to date have been theoretical and descriptive in nature. To address this issue, researchers in Aboriginal Education have recently emphasised that there is a need for more and better research (e.g., Craven, 2006; Mellor & Corrigan, 2004). Furthermore, Craven et al. (2005) have emphasised that “it is unlikely that desirable educational outcomes for Indigenous students will be enhanced unless intervention is firmly founded upon theory and research that demonstrates that such intervention strategies are effective” (p. 22).

The primary purpose of the present investigation was to address some of the above issues by elucidating the (a) factors that influence Indigenous students’ decisions to participate in the HSC Aboriginal Studies course; (b) impact of the course on Indigenous students’ self-concepts and educational outcomes; and (c) strengths and limitations of the course. The research was undertaken in three NSW Department of Education and Training secondary schools, located in rural, north coast, and south coast areas. Participants undertaking an individual interview comprised 22 secondary students who were undertaking the HSC Aboriginal Studies course (18 Indigenous students and 4 non-Indigenous students); 2 Indigenous students not undertaking the HSC Aboriginal Studies course; Aboriginal Education Assistants ($n = 3$), teachers of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course ($n = 5$), and Principals ($n = 3$). A group of Aboriginal parents ($n = 3$) of students undertaking Aboriginal Studies were invited to participate in group interviews. In addition, a
comparison group of students from the same schools, comprising a random sample of Year 11 and Year 12 Indigenous and non-Indigenous students not undertaking the Aboriginal Studies course were invited to complete a survey.

Results indicated that Indigenous students choose Aboriginal Studies based on their need to understand more about their own culture. There were also clear educational benefits in that Aboriginal Studies was considered to be a motivational factor that encouraged attendance at school and enhanced their academic self-concept. Both staff and students suggested that the academic rigour of the Aboriginal Studies course contributed to declining enrolments. Overall the findings suggest that whilst the current course has some limitations, there are also many strengths; this implies there is a need to continue to refine the course to meet the needs of Indigenous students.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

This thesis is about Indigenous students in their senior secondary years of schooling, more specifically in the New South Wales context of the Higher School Certificate\(^1\) (HSC). In particular, the focus is on the curriculum area of Aboriginal Studies and the impact this course has had on Indigenous students’ educational outcomes and self-concept.

This investigation has come about through my role as a lecturer within a teacher education training program for Indigenous teachers of Aboriginal Studies, but more so as an active member of my community through participation in the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Incorporated \(^2\) (AECG). At the local AECG level, concerns had been raised by a number of teachers of Aboriginal Studies that low enrolments meant that the course was at risk of not being offered in their particular schools in the future. More importantly, the drop-out rate of Indigenous students in Aboriginal Studies was a major concern at a local level. Reports from schools indicated that teachers believed Indigenous students were not performing as well as their non-Indigenous peers in this, “their own” critical subject area. This in turn was perceived to be having a negative effect on Indigenous students’ self-concepts, more so their identity self-concepts. This research is a response to these persistent concerns.

The goals of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP, 1990) essentially state that Indigenous students have a right to an education that is equal to that of their non-Indigenous counterparts. Even so, in Australia today Indigenous students continue to experience disadvantage at all levels of education. In response to the educational disadvantage experienced by Indigenous students the introduction of the NSW HSC Aboriginal Studies course in 1991 was

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\(^1\) Higher School Certificate (HSC) is the matriculation-level course in New South Wales.

\(^2\) The Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc. was established in 1975. It is an Aboriginal community-based organisation made up of volunteer members who are involved in Local and Regional AECGs throughout NSW. The NSW AECG Inc. is recognised as the principal source of advice on behalf of Aboriginal communities on issues relating to education and training.
CHAPTER 2
ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN ABORIGINAL EDUCATION

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present the literature reviewed pertaining to the present investigation. Current issues and challenges in Aboriginal Education are presented in order to place into context the present research into the impact of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course on Indigenous students’ self-concepts and other educational outcomes. Firstly, a brief historical overview of Aboriginal Education, both pre and post invasion is presented. Secondly, an overview of Aboriginal Education policy and links between multiple and often conflicting policies pertaining to Aboriginal Education is outlined. Finally, the results of relevant studies in Aboriginal Education and their implications for the present study are presented.

Historical Overview of Aboriginal Education in NSW

There is a commonly held belief that Aboriginal Education did not exist prior to invasion but a very sophisticated education system was in place. It was an all-encompassing system wherein all were totally reliant on the passing on of knowledge.¹ This changed with the invasion of our land which brought with it the influence of another culture that neither recognised nor valued Indigenous society as it was. Governments throughout the years developed and implemented policies which were particularly harsh and which resulted in widespread dispossession, oppression, and racism (Fletcher, 1989; Parbury, 1999, 2005; Partington, 1989).

Just as devastating as the initial invasion was the “second invasion”, that of an introduced western education into Indigenous culture. The outcomes of this “clash of cultures” are still reflected in the achievements of Indigenous students today as measured by mainstream educational standards. For example, below average literacy

¹ The topic of Aboriginal society prior to invasion is too large a topic to be dealt with adequately in this thesis, although its relevance of traditional practice of education and other cultural matters cannot be escaped in reference to subsequent educational systems. For further reading in this area refer to Parbury (2005) and Broome (1982).
and numeracy skills continue to be attributed to low rates of school attendance; this in turn leads to low self-esteem and ultimately to total disassociation with school (NSW DET & NSW AECG, 2004).

Aboriginal Education Prior to Invasion

Indigenous society prior to the invasion was all encompassing; everybody belonged. All members of the group knew their relationship within their society as all grew up with what Parbury (2005, p. 23) identifies as “a mental map of their relationships.” Guided by these relationships from birth, each person shared Dreaming and was educated on Indigenous “values such as respect for old people, sharing of food, and duties to kin and the land” (Parbury, 2005, p. 24). The responsibilities held by Indigenous children reflected these values in their daily activities, which included looking after old people and younger children, and collecting firewood. Therefore, entrusting the children with these responsibilities was part of the education process, a necessary process as children represented the future (Parbury, 2005).

Learning about the land was also an integral part of the education process and it was common for girls to accompany the women while they were out gathering food, and the boys often attended hunting trips with the men. These normal day to day activities provided an inclusive education in which all the group participated (Parbury, 2005, p. 24; Partington, 1998, p. 29).

The time of a carefree lifestyle for Indigenous children came to an end with the arrival of the first Europeans. No longer would there be camps full of children’s laughter, nor the existence of a lifestyle of sharing, caring, and respect. All this would soon be replaced by the beginnings of “dispossession, alienation and genocide” (Partington, 1998, p. 31). Hence, the impact of European invasion was particularly severe on Indigenous society and on the education of Indigenous children.
Since the European invasion a series of colonially inspired education policies and curricula have been devised and thrust upon Indigenous peoples, limiting educational opportunities for Indigenous students (Wray, Craven & Munns, 2005). From the unsuccessful mission education introduced to Christianise and de-Aboriginalise, to an attempt at educating Indigenous children separately from their “white” counterparts, through to the establishment of a more formal but inferior education system, educational opportunities were more often negative experiences (Fletcher, 1989, p. 21).

Earlier experiences of formal schooling for Indigenous students came, in the first instance, with the establishment of the “Native Institution” in 1814, located at Parramatta. The major focus of the curriculum was literacy and vocational education; this was considered by non-Indigenous people to be successful, as Indigenous children attending this institution did learn to read and write. The Institution also had a covert purpose in that it attempted to convert the children to “civilised, Christianised black Europeans” although in this it failed (Fletcher, 1989, p. 23; Parbury, 1999, p. 66). By 1825 the Native Institution had been relocated to Blacktown, where its focus was on teaching Indigenous boys “how to successfully work the land” (Fletcher, 1989, p. 21). Even though these attempts at “converting” Indigenous children failed, this did not prevent experimentation with alternative strategies.

Mixed schooling was attempted numerous times, but due to complaints from parents of non-Indigenous children, segregation remained in place, not only in schools but in the community (Fletcher, 1989, p. 58). It was from this that Aboriginal Education moved to a new level where separating Indigenous students from non-Indigenous students was not enough. The removal of Indigenous children from their families, especially those with mixed parentage, became commonplace. Indigenous children were placed in homes where their education was aligned with domestic training and with the skills requisite to the renovation of buildings (Fletcher, 1989, p. 223; Malin & Maidment, 2003, p. 97; Parbury, 1988, p. 88; Partington, 1998, p. 39).
It was an attempt to eliminate those of “mixed race” by giving them the skills to work and be absorbed into mainstream society.

It was believed that integrating Indigenous children into mainstream schooling with non-Indigenous children would allow assimilation to occur easily and that they would perform equally as well. This was the expected outcome when education was formalised through the Public Education Act, 1880 and compulsory education was introduced to “all children” across New South Wales. But as Fletcher (1989, p. 8) notes, being educated in the same schools did not necessarily mean that Indigenous children would achieve academic outcomes at the same level as their non-Indigenous peers.

This perceived “equitable education system” did not continue for long. In 1937 the Minister for Education, D. H. Drummond, who was a strong advocate of segregated schooling, quickly put in place a policy of “exclusion on demand”. This ultimately gave non-Indigenous parents the power to have Indigenous students removed from schools based on the grounds of hygiene. This policy continued until the 1960s (Fletcher, 1989, p. 147).

These earlier racist experiences impacted negatively on Indigenous people and the education of their children, and would continue to impact for many years. Some Indigenous parents passed down their negative experiences to following generations and a cycle of distrust had begun. Although this negativity was felt by many Indigenous people, the end of the assimilation period brought some hope for the future. The 1967 Referendum came at a time when attitudes in the community were changing, leading to the promise of more equitable educational experiences for Indigenous students (Fletcher, 1989, p. 292).

Aboriginal Education 1967 to 1990

The attitudes of the wider Australian community were voiced in the majority “YES” vote of the 1967 Referendum. The Commonwealth would now assume more responsibility for Indigenous affairs, and for Indigenous people it meant citizenship rights (Fletcher 1989, p. 292). As a consequence, a change in the direction of
Aboriginal education did occur. As shown in Table 2.1, from 1967 until the early 1970s, three major initiatives in Aboriginal affairs and education took place. The Government of the time had made significant changes, with the development of a variety of specific policies and programs that would assist in addressing disadvantage (refer to Table 2.1 for a chronology of policies and programs developed and implemented since 1967). Major funding contributions to Aboriginal Education came as a step to reducing past disadvantage (Malin & Maidment, 2003, p. 86).

In 1969, to encourage participation of Indigenous people in higher education, the government introduced the Aboriginal Study Grants Scheme (ABSTUDY), providing financial assistance for study at this level. It was also identified that many Indigenous secondary students were not eligible for entry into tertiary education, and even more were not completing school. Therefore, another scheme was introduced to meet the needs of senior secondary students in their preparation to go on to further study. The Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme (ABSEG) was introduced in 1970 for these students and was extended in 1973 to assist all Indigenous secondary students (DEST, 2006). Also in the early 1970s came the establishment of AECGs across the country: another step toward educational equality for Indigenous students.

New South Wales took the lead, with the introduction of an Aboriginal Education Policy, with support documents, released into all NSW state schools in 1982.
Table 2.1 Overview of Significant Aboriginal Education Policies & Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Referendum takes place—Commonwealth takes up additional responsibilities for Aboriginal Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>ABSTUDY introduced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970s</td>
<td>Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (AECG) established across the nation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>NSW Aboriginal Education Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>National Aboriginal &amp; Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP) endorsed by all state and territory governments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Aboriginal Education Strategic Initiatives Program (AESIP) introduced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Results of National Review of the NATSIEP published</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Revised and launched: NSW Aboriginal Education Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Building Bridges Project, Croc Festival, What Works Program, Dare To Lead Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>National Indigenous English Literacy And Numeracy Strategy (NIELNS)</td>
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### POLICY- PROGRAMS PRIORITY AREAS—GOALS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Policy/Program</th>
<th>Priority Areas</th>
<th>Goals</th>
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<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>NSW Aboriginal Education Policy</td>
<td>1. All educational services affecting the education of Indigenous children; 2. Programs which will enhance self esteem and cultural identity for Indigenous children; 3. The education of all children in respect of contemporary and traditional Indigenous society.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>National Aboriginal &amp; Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP) endorsed by all state and territory governments</td>
<td>1. Involving Indigenous people in educational decision-making; 2. Equality of Access to Educational Services; 3. Equity of Educational Participation; and 4. Achieving Equitable &amp; Appropriate Education Outcomes.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Revised and launched: NSW Aboriginal Education Policy</td>
<td>Three focus areas: 1) Aboriginal students; 2) Aboriginal communities; 3) All staff – All students – All schools.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>National Statement of Principles and Standards for More Culturally Inclusive Schooling in the 21st Century</td>
<td>Schooling acknowledges the: 1. Capacity of all young Indigenous students to learn; 2. Role of Indigenous parents as the first educators of their children; and 3. Close relationship between low levels of Indigenous education outcomes and poverty, health, housing and access to government services and infrastructure.</td>
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### INDIGENOUS EDUCATION STRATEGIC INITIATIVES PROGRAM (IESIP)

<table>
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<th>Year</th>
<th>Program</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Deadly Vibe Magazine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Books In Homes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Indigenous Ambassadors Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Scaffolding Project</td>
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</table>
The NSW Aboriginal Education Policy 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 Indigenous students’ self-esteem and cultural identity, and secondly a focus on teaching all children about contemporary and traditional Indigenous society. This policy was designed to reduce negative attitudes, improve race relations, and to recognise and appreciate cultural differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities (Crawford, Hill, Bates, Meyenn, Parker, & McKinnon, 1992, p. 12; Fletcher, 1989, p. 331). Table 2.1 presents the three goals of the AEP.

Within two years another significant step was taken, with the development of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP), an outcome of the 1988 Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force, chaired by Paul Hughes (Department of Education, Science & Training, 2003, pp.108-114). NATSIEP was developed to assist all State and Territory Governments in creating appropriate resources to meet the educational needs of Indigenous 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 Indigenous peoples are the original inhabitants of Australia, and that Indigenous culture and values must be respected alongside those of non-Indigenous Australians. Table 2.1 presents the three major themes. While these key themes directed state and territory policy and programs it was a time for a major review of policy in relation to Aboriginal Education to take place, particularly in NSW, where it would have a significant impact on how schools implemented state policy.

Aboriginal Education in the 1990s: A Phase of Policy Review and Program Implementation

During the 1990s there were significant reviews of Aboriginal Education policies both at state and national levels, which then impacted on the further development of policy and strategic planning (see Table 2.2 for an overview of the major policy reviews). For example, a timely review of the NSW Aboriginal
Education Policy commenced 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 the policy was only being implemented in a minimal way the most prominent reason being lack of support from the then NSW Department of School Education. It was also acknowledged that there were still schools that considered it did not apply to them if they had few or no Indigenous 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 (as shown in Table 2.1 it was 14 years before a new policy was launched in NSW).

**Table 2.2 Overview of Aboriginal Education Policy Reviews**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>First of Its Kind: An evaluation of the 1982 NSW Aboriginal Education Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>National Review of the NATSIEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. Improve literacy achievement;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Improve numeracy achievement;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Increase indigenous employment in education &amp; training;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Improve educational outcomes;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Increase indigenous enrolments;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Increase involvement of Indigenous parents &amp; community members in educational decision-making;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Increase professional development of staff involved in Indigenous education; and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. Expand culturally-inclusive curricula.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>NSW Review of Aboriginal Education including the review of the Aboriginal Education Policy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 1993 another important review was undertaken. It had been three years since NATSIEP came into effect and a timely review took place, with the final report being released in 1995. The Report indicated that the NATSIEP was serving its purpose and Australian governments should reaffirm their commitment to it. Therefore 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”. 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). Major developments would now take place in relation to this strategy.
In response to this a development came through the collaborative effort of the NSW AECG and the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET): launching a revised NSW Aboriginal Education Policy (1996), a major outcome of the NATSIEP. Through the commitment of the NSW DET, support materials were developed that were distributed to all DET staff when they undertook staff development in the implementation of the AEP.

Staff development introduced participants to the three focus areas of the policy:

1) **Aboriginal students**: Curriculum, teaching, and assessment programs will be challenging and culturally appropriate;

2) **Aboriginal communities**: Aboriginal communities and the Department of Education and Training will become active partners in the whole educational process; and

3) **All staff–All students–All schools**: All DET staff will have knowledge and understanding of and respect for Aboriginal Australia.

It was planned that across NSW, monitoring of the implementation of the policy would take place across five years, to establish the effectiveness of the policy (DET, 1999, p. 15). While the implementation of the NSW Aboriginal Education Policy become more practical, a range of national programs were developed, consistent with the recommendations that had emerged from the Review of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (1995). As can be seen in Table 2.3 these initiatives were a direct result of funding through the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program (IESIP). These new and innovative programs were intended to meet the educational needs of Indigenous students through the development of culturally appropriate resources and activities. Not only do these programs address the needs of the students but they also allow for major changes to take place in Indigenous communities and within teacher education programs.
Table 2.3 Overview of National Aboriginal Education Initiatives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROGRAM INITIATIVE</th>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>OUTCOMES AND/OR GOALS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What Works? The Works Program</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>To increase school attendance and retention, based on the themes of: becoming aware of the issues; forming partnerships; and working systematically.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croc Festival</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>An event that brings people together, not dividing them. An occasion when the politics of racism and bigotry are replaced by understanding, respect, and pride.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dare to Lead Dare to Lead: Taking It On</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Support for Australian school principals to improve Indigenous education outcomes and to work for reconciliation in their schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (NIELNS) 2000</td>
<td></td>
<td>To achieve English literacy and numeracy for Indigenous students at levels comparable to those achieved by other young Australians. The strategy has six key elements:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|                                            |      | 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 magazine for Indigenous students that aims to enhance their academic and social schooling outcomes, including literacy and numeracy learning, self-esteem and self-concept, regular school attendance and retention, career and employment opportunities and healthy lifestyles (ACER, 2004, p.iii). |
| Books in Homes                              |      | To encourage Indigenous school children to read more.                                                                                               |
| Indigenous Ambassadors Programme            |      | To promote the importance of education, literacy and numeracy to Indigenous students and their parents.                                                   |
| Scaffolding Project                         | 2000 | To identify and improve the literacy outcomes of educationally disadvantaged students to achieve acceptable literacy standards.                        |
| Building Bridges Project                    | 2002 | A step towards reconciliation for Australia’s youngest citizens, the project promotes better educational learning outcomes for young (pre-school) Indigenous children. |

Addressing Indigenous Educational Disadvantage

National reports and all Australian governments have acknowledged that Aboriginal people are significantly educationally disadvantaged and participate less in education compared to the rest of the population (e.g. Hughes, 1988; Commonwealth of Australia, 2002; Kemp, 1999). Given that educational outcomes predicate success in life opportunities, this is of dire national concern (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997, p. 26). Retention rates for Indigenous students to Year 12 are of particular concern, given that in 2001 the rate for Indigenous student retention was 36.4%—less than half of rates for non-Indigenous students, at 73.3% (Department of Education, Science & Training, 2002, p. 1). Table 2.4 provides an overview of enrolment percentages of Indigenous students across NSW in 2003.
Indigenous students are, on average, also missing out on more than a year of secondary school and hence are not fully participating in education (Department of Education, Science & Training, 2002, p. 1). Thus even Indigenous students who stay at school to Year 12 are less likely than their non-Indigenous peers to attain commensurate outcomes (Commonwealth of Australia, 2000). Despite a strong commitment by the Commonwealth “there is no consistent forward trend in improving the wellbeing of Indigenous peoples, and particularly no forward trend towards a reduction in the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians” (Jonas, 2003; p. 17). Because of this prediction of enduring disadvantage coupled with enduring low retention rates for Aboriginal students in Year 12, there is a dire need to develop strategic directions for identifying new solutions to underpin effective intervention.

Table 2.4 Indigenous Students as a Percentage of State-Wide Enrolments for NSW

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Year 7</th>
<th>Year 8</th>
<th>Year 9</th>
<th>Year 10</th>
<th>Year 11</th>
<th>Year 12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous students</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In an attempt to address the low retention rates and educational disadvantage experienced by Indigenous students, many NSW schools took up the challenge of developing Aboriginal Studies courses, incorporating Aboriginal perspectives into most subjects, and providing opportunities for non-Indigenous students to broaden their understanding. For Indigenous students this has allowed them to study subjects that are “grounded in their experience and culture” (DEST, 2003, p. 26), in turn providing an incentive for Indigenous students to continue to the senior secondary years and completion of Year 12.

Indigenous communities continue to maintain the view that the school can assist in the acknowledgement of Aboriginality, as Indigenous students will have a greater chance of developing a strong cultural identity. This is considered to be “a critical factor in Indigenous students’ search for identity” and schools can provide a place where students feel accepted and affirmed (Fletcher, 1989, p.313; Bourke et al.
This in turn meets one of the long-term goals set by the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy (1989) in that achieving equitable and appropriate educational outcomes would be achieved through Indigenous students having an appreciation of their history, cultures, and most importantly identity.

As one means of addressing this, the provision of Indigenous 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 (Department of Education, Employment & Training, 1995). Indigenous cultural programs are seen to be crucial to the educational development of Indigenous children through strengthening their “pride and identity” (Bourke, et. al., 2000, p. 29) and although Aboriginal Studies is not a cultural program it can be an incentive to attend school. Indigenous secondary students interviewed in the Groome and Hamilton (1995) study, revealed that they valued having an Aboriginal Studies course within their schools and that this would be an incentive to complete secondary school.

*Introducing the NSW HSC Aboriginal Studies Course*

In an effort to achieving equitable and appropriate educational outcomes discussions between the NSW Department of Education, the NSW Board of Studies and the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc., culminated in a vision of educating both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students about Aboriginal culture and history in Australia. It was for this reason that the HSC Aboriginal Studies course had been launched in 1991.

Three approaches were considered for the implementation of HSC Aboriginal Studies: (1) separately as a discrete course or subject, (2) in combination, as units within other subjects, and (3) across the curriculum in each of the Key Learning Areas (KLAs). The approach favoured was that of a discrete course for senior secondary students as it would allow for:

(a) a detailed and coherent study while enabling teachers to focus on a wide range of social, political and cultural themes relevant to the Australian community today;
opportunities for the development and enhancement of skills specific to this area of studies; and

(c) opportunities for teachers to develop a range of innovative programs (Commonwealth of Australia, 1994, p. 5).

As such, Aboriginal Studies was designed to allow for issues specific to the subject to be investigated and also to incorporate aspects of other learning areas. When studied in context Aboriginal Studies provides a sound background to Indigenous societies as living cultures, central and particularly relevant to the total Australian community (NSW Board of Studies, 1998), while presenting a more accurate history of Australia—a history that is culturally inclusive of Indigenous people while acknowledging that Indigenous kinship and social structures are very complex. Aboriginal Studies also promotes respect for the integrity of all people, and emphasises understanding of spiritual, political, economic and environmental issues, while affirming that within Indigenous societies there is a diversity of cultures (Commonwealth of Australia, 1994, p. 5). Therefore, the aim of the Aboriginal Studies course is to provide all students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, with an understanding of and pride in this cultural heritage since the beginning of the Dreaming, that is an extremely important part of Australian heritage and history. At the same time it reaffirms identity, and raises self-esteem for Indigenous students (NSW Board of Studies, 1999, p. 6).

When first implemented, in 1991 the Aboriginal Studies course was offered in one hundred schools across New South Wales and attracted a candidature of eighty-six Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Of that number 47% were Indigenous. In 2003, 249 students across NSW undertook the Aboriginal Studies course, of whom 21% were Indigenous. Figure 2.1 displays the breakdown of candidates of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course and the percentage of Indigenous students undertaking the course across a period of 12 years (NSW DET & NSW AECG, 2004, p. 146): this works out to be an average 23% of all candidates.
During 1997 the NSW Board of Studies undertook a major evaluation of all HSC syllabuses, including Aboriginal Studies, as an outcome of the Government’s White Paper, *Securing their Future* (McGaw, 1996). It was during this evaluation that it was discovered that completion rates of secondary education were higher with Indigenous students who undertook Aboriginal Studies compared with those Indigenous students who did not (NSW Board of Studies, 1998, p. ii). These results suggested that the course could be a factor in encouraging Indigenous students to remain at school to complete their High School Certificate. Although this is a positive sign, Figure 2 shows that enrolment patterns in Aboriginal Studies since it was first implemented have not been steady and have fallen at an alarming rate. This data makes the future of Aboriginal Studies even more critical (AECG, 2004, p. 3).

Research in the area of HSC Aboriginal Studies is limited to the above mentioned syllabus evaluation report (NSW BOS, 1998) and a project undertaken by the NSW AECG Inc., relating to the declining enrolment in Aboriginal Studies (NSW AECG Inc., 2004). It was found that if schools had small numbers of students electing Aboriginal Studies then it was not offered, and with the small candidature a textbook was not available to teachers or students. Indigenous communities and educators are most concerned as to the future of Aboriginal Studies; therefore, the present investigation is linked to the dire need to undertake Aboriginal Education.
research in the secondary schooling sector, particularly in relation to ascertaining the impact of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course.

Figure 2.2 Aboriginal Studies candidature 1992-2003 (NSWDET & NSWAECG, 2004, p. 145).

Summary

In the previous section I have provided a brief historical overview of Aboriginal Education, both before and after invasion. I have outlined the impact the invasion had on Indigenous people and their education, and the subsequent development and implementation of earlier racist policies. Links have been made to multiple and often conflicting policies, and the outcomes of these policies on Indigenous students. The next section moves into an introduction to research that has been undertaken in Aboriginal Education and the outcomes of that research. This informs the current research in asking the question; “Will the history of Aboriginal education show us what we should do about Aboriginal education in the future?” (Fletcher, 1989, p.9).
Aboriginal Education Research

Overview

Research undertaken thus far in relation to Aboriginal Education has had little or no impact on the educational outcomes of Indigenous students. Time after time we see recommendations as to what should be done but there is nothing to move us into a phase of getting things done. Craven (2005, p. 2) notes that “Indigenous education research is not underpinned by a scholarly body of research findings”. This was also uncovered by Bin-Sallik, Blomeley, Flowers, and Hughes (1994) in their decisive review of Indigenous Education research wherein they noted that much of the literature reviewed was descriptive (1994a, p. 36); in general “there is almost no empirical research” (p. 7); and there is “a noticeable absence in the current literature, of analysis of how ‘to get things done’” (1994b; p. 19). The authors also found a very small number of references to the schooling sector. Craven (2005) contends “This absence of quality research has contributed to impeding progress in developing theory, research, and classroom practice to improve Indigenous Education” (p.x). The latter has also been emphasised as of concern to Aboriginal community members. For example, Craven and Tucker (2003) found that AECG members from 18 regions of NSW reported being concerned that no research was currently being conducted in their regions, yet, as recently emphasised by a leading Aboriginal educator:

Scholarly research can make an important difference and identify much needed fresh insights on how to address critical educational issues of our time … there is indeed a dire need to establish a concerted national programme of Indigenous Education research to develop a body of scholarly literature that can really put to the test presumed successful strategies, identify causal mechanisms that make a difference, and generate new solutions that are demonstrated by research to result in tangible outcomes (Bin-Sallik, 2005, p. iv).

Mellor and Corrigan (2004) contend that for research to impact on policy formation and development, data and findings need to be produced from large-scale studies, as much of the research that has been carried out is flawed in design and small in sample size (Mellor & Corrigan, 2004, p. 46). Although in saying this they
support research in Indigenous education that is qualitative as it “… can provide richer and more personalised data than other methodologies, thus leading to a more complex understanding of the many ways in which the factors impact and interconnect in the real lives of Indigenous people” (Mellor & Corrigan, 2004, p. 47).

The research literature in Aboriginal Education to date has addressed various areas and can be categorised into several themes, for example: attendance and retention (Bourke, Rigby, & Burden, 2000; Partington et al., 1997; Groome & Hamilton, 1995), literacy and numeracy (McFadden, Munns, & Simpson, 1999; Frigo, 1999) health and education (Malin, 2002), identity and school success (Craven & Parente, 2003; Purdie, Tripcony, Boulton-Lewis, Fanshawe, & Gunstone, 2000; McInerney, 2000). This last area of research will be dealt with in more detail in the next chapter (Chapter 3). The following section deals with each of these themes in turn.

**Attendance and Retention**

Attendance and retention at school has become one of the most researched topics in relation to the education of Indigenous students. Studies undertaken at both state and national levels have found that, although there has been improvement, there still exist numerous problems for Indigenous students in these areas. Poor schooling participation has resulted in branding Indigenous students as “deficient, uninterested and obstructive in the classroom” (Partington, Harrison, Godfrey, & Wyatt, 1997). On the other hand Indigenous students often perceive school to be an alien place fraught with many obstacles, among these peer pressure to leave early; overt and covert racism; and linguistic and cultural differences, as well as the experience of being “pushed out” of school. Indigenous students are, on average, missing out on more than a year of secondary school and hence are not fully participating in education. This is not a new issue; Fletcher (1989) outlined that during the early 1960s Indigenous students were leaving school part way through their secondary education, meaning that they could only expect to obtain poor paying employment where skills were not required. It was believed that a number of factors were at work to produce this situation, with the main reason being lack of motivation due to the absence of employment opportunities. Other important factors included lack of
adequate study facilities at home and a lack of parental encouragement (Fletcher, 1989, p. 287; Mellor & Corrigan, 2004, p. 21), while many Indigenous parents are unable to provide the academic support which many non-Indigenous parents provide.

**Literacy and Numeracy**

In a review of research on literacy and Indigenous students, Munns, Lawson, and Mootz (2001) identified three main areas of research: (1) culture and the “theory of cultural differences and ways of learning” and how these have impacted on classroom practice; (2) language and the importance of Aboriginal English and its place in the education of Indigenous students, and (3) curriculum which has focused mainly on the development and provision of a culturally appropriate curriculum. Similar themes are identified in both government and private sector research, with recommendations stating the need to train more Indigenous teachers; develop appropriate pedagogical practice; improve literacy and numeracy skills of Indigenous students; develop and provide culturally appropriate curriculum; increase parent and community involvement in schools; and provide a supportive learning environment through the employment of more Indigenous workers within schools. Unsupportive teachers, low teacher expectations, lack of careers advice, stereotyping, and ignoring actual values are commonly reported (Craven & Parente, 2003; Malin & Maidment, 2003, p. 89; Purdie et al., 2000; Bourke et al., 2000; McInerney, 2000; McFadden et al., 1999; Partington, 1998, p. 23; Partington et al., 1997; Groome & Hamilton, 1995).

Frigo (1999) undertook a literature review on research into the numeracy development of Indigenous students. Her findings show that there is a role that teachers can play in the support and development of numeracy skills for Indigenous students. She identified having understanding teachers, a supportive learning environment, teaching strategies that are effective, appropriate language usage and the valuing of Aboriginal English in the classroom, and support for parents and communities as valuable strategies. Many of these have also arisen in other research. Similarly, the review of Aboriginal Education in NSW concluded that Aboriginal communities emphasised that Indigenous students would benefit more from quality teaching and learning strategies (DET & AECG, 2004, p. 189) However, the review
also emphasised that “Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people alike suggested strategies to bring about improvements in the attendance, retention and academic performance of Indigenous students are doomed to failure if they don’t understand and do something about identity and belonging” (DET AECG, 2004, p. 195).

**Identity and School Success**

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 Indigenous students. With more awareness of the injustices imposed on Indigenous people, there comes more understanding across society, consequently impacting on the education of Indigenous 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 & Maidment, 2003, p. 88).

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; Commonwealth of Australia, 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 Indigenous students in that they will be encouraged to stay on at school, and that it will have a positive effect on their cultural identity and their self-esteem (Groome & Hamilton, 1995; Purdie et al., 2000; Bourke, et al., 2000; NATSIEP, 1989; NSW DET, 1996). This new field of research in Aboriginal Education is discussed further in the following chapter.

**Recent Developments in Aboriginal Education**

The most recent and major development in Aboriginal Education has been the review of Aboriginal Education in NSW. Undertaken in 2003, the *Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education: Yaniigrurra Muy: Ganggurrinyama Yaari Guurulaw Yirringin gumray Freeing the Spirit: Dreaming an Equal Future* was released in
2004. The review made 71 recommendations based on nine identified recurring themes:

1. Strengthening policy, planning, and implementation;
2. Extending quality teaching and learning;
3. Fortifying identities of Aboriginal students;
4. Engaging Aboriginal students;
5. Applying Aboriginal cultural knowledge;
6. Collaborating in partnerships;
7. Building community capacity;
8. Challenging racism; and
9. Advancing leadership and accountability.

The outcome of this review identifies the same issues that have been identified in previous reviews and research over the past 20 years: Indigenous students are still not achieving academically at the same level as their non-Indigenous peers. There continues to be high absenteeism and suspension with Indigenous students, in turn impacting on their literacy and numeracy skills. The outcome of this is their eventual and total disengagement with school (NSW DET and NSW AECG, p. 29). It is clearly evident in a statement made by the Minister for Education and Training and Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Dr Andrew Refshauge, that educational disadvantage for Indigenous students continues to be an ongoing concern.

I want Aboriginal student outcomes to match or better outcomes of the broader population...despite the many education initiatives implemented by the Commonwealth and NSW Governments over the past 20 years, Aboriginal students continue to be the most educationally disadvantaged student group in Australia (NSW Department of Education and Training and NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc [AECG], 2004, p. 11).

On the whole Indigenous students continue to be significantly educationally disadvantaged and participate less in education compared to the rest of the student population. Policies, reviews, reports, and strategies continue to identify educational inequities (DEST 2003; Bourke, et al. 2000; MCEETYA, 1995; Commonwealth of Australia, 1994; Commonwealth of Australia, 1990) that prevent Indigenous students from achieving positive educational outcomes. Whilst a range of programs are
currently in place to address the educational needs of Indigenous students, only marginal improvements have been made. As such, Indigenous students are not achieving at the same level as their non-Indigenous peers and continue to be significantly educationally disadvantaged and participate less in education compared to the rest of the student population (Brennan, 1998, p.152).

The majority of early western policies have impacted negatively on many Indigenous people, in particular, their lifestyles, and their education. As presented previously, Australia has its foundations based on racist ideologies which have led to Australian society being built on the notion of Terra Nullius (Brennan, 1998, p.151). It would seem likely that racism would be a major contributing factor in perpetuating those issues previously outlined; the low achievement of Indigenous students, their attendance and retention at school, and their academic performance in some subjects. Racism continually changes and with this new formations of racism are devised, most often in media, textbooks, policies, and in schools (Rivzi, 1993, p. 15; Brennan, 1998, p.151). As a result of racism within the wider community the actions and attitudes that teachers bring into the classroom can be often misconstrued leading students to feel that schools are not the most desirable places to be (Partington, Harrison, Godfrey, & Wyatt, 1997).

The NSW Aboriginal Education Policy (1996) states,

Aboriginal students have a right to an education free from all forms of prejudice and racism that gives them the skills for full participation in Australian society. At the same time, they have an inherent right to an education that reinforces [their] unique cultural identity.

(NSW AEP, 1996, p.3)

Given this statement all students should be able to access education in a system which is free of racism and prejudice (NSW AEP, 1996, p. 6) including Indigenous students. Whilst this policy supports the notion of an environment free of racism there are still indications that it continues to impact on the education of Indigenous students (Brennan, 1998, p.156). Hence, the generally accepted consequences of an inadequate and discriminatory education are poor academic performance, low self-
esteem for many, and an overall negative view of schooling and society and what it has to offer (Wray, Craven & Munns, 2005).

Whilst racism in schools continues to be an issue and it is not unusual that, “Aboriginal [students] are, as a whole, not performing as well in our schools as would be statistically expected” (Fletcher, 1989, p. 10). This is continually echoed in current research and reports (NSW Department of Education and Training [DET] and NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group [AECG], 2004, p. 11) identifying poor performance in literacy and numeracy and low attendance and retention rates that can often lead to a total disassociation with schooling, most often a direct result of racism (NSW DET & NSW AECG, 2004; DEST, 2003). The introduction of policies and programs to deal with racism in schools is yet to have an impact on the quality of education for Indigenous students. However, schools should endeavour to embrace culturally appropriate curriculum, implement Aboriginal perspectives and where possible include Aboriginal Studies as a means of reducing racism in the school. This in turn will offer opportunities for all students and teachers to acknowledge and value Indigenous culture whilst providing an environment where Indigenous students feel they belong, breaking down the barriers that prevent them from engaging in quality education (NSW DET & NSW AECG, 2004, p. 111), and achieving educational success.

**Implications for the Present Investigation**

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 Indigenous students. While this is the case we can but hope that changes will take place, but as Lester and Hanlon (2004) state,

… there is a lot going on in Indigenous education at both a state and national level. Indigenous education is a busy place but appears to be going nowhere. Project activity is high, best practice encouraged and resource levels that have never been as high; but in reality, there is neither fundamental systemic acceptance nor change, taking place, that will improve significantly our (Indigenous) educational luck (p. 109).
We need now to ask ourselves the very question that Mellor and Corrigan (2004) pose: where does future progress lie? Research to date has identified the problems that exist for Indigenous students and continues to identify the disadvantages faced by them. The current research positions itself within the Aboriginal Studies classroom, an area of neglect in Aboriginal education research, to ascertain if outcomes Indigenous students are achieving are positive ones.

Summary

In this chapter I have presented the literature reviewed in relation to current issues and challenges in Aboriginal Education in order to place the present research into context. An overview of historical events highlights the impact on the current situation of Aboriginal Education and the significant negative educational outcomes still being experienced by many Indigenous students.

Policies pertaining to Aboriginal Education have been introduced with links between recommendations and research in the field identifying the major issues of attendance and retention, literacy and numeracy and, health and racism concerns in education. An obvious gap and an area that is continually neglected relates to Indigenous senior secondary school students, with very little or no research being carried out particularly into the implementation of specific curriculum areas and the performance of Indigenous students at this level. In addressing this gap the present study has sought answers as to how the HSC Aboriginal Studies course impacts on senior secondary Indigenous students, their participation and success through to Year 12 and ultimately the impact on their self-concept. Hence, the following chapter investigates self-concept theory and its relevance to the exploration of whether the HSC Aboriginal Studies course has a positive or negative impact on Indigenous senior secondary school students’ self-concepts.
CHAPTER 3
SELF-CONCEPT AND SOCIAL COMPARISON:
THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF THE PRESENT INVESTIGATION

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to contextualise the present research into the impact of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course in relation to advances in self-concept theory and research. The intent of this chapter is to present the significance of self-concept as an important educational outcome in itself and a construct of considerable significance in Aboriginal Education. This chapter also aims to identify how the present investigation can capitalise on and extend the application of recent advances in self-concept theory and research to issues of importance to Aboriginal Education. The theoretical and empirical basis for the present investigation will be examined by providing a historical overview of the emergence of contemporary approaches to self-concept theory and research. The state of current self-concept research with Indigenous students, and its implications, is evaluated in relation to the present investigation.

The Significance of the Self-concept Construct

Self-concept is defined as “a person’s perceptions of him or herself … formed through experience with and interpretations of one’s environment” (Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976). According to the OECD, self-concept 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” Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (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. 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 self-concept theory is most applicable to educational questions such as the retention of Indigenous students in secondary school.

For young people the pathways beyond school are influenced by students’ interest in and satisfaction at school, and within this, self-concept plays a critical role (Marsh & Hau, 2003). This is further demonstrated by a review of educational research that demonstrated that prior positive academic self-concept had a positive effect on subsequent academic achievement (school grades and standardized test scores), something that could not be explained by prior levels of academic achievement (Marsh, Byrne, & Yeung, 1999). 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. More recently, Marsh and Craven (2005; 2006) have demonstrated that academic achievement and self-concept share a reciprocal causal relation. This is a finding with significant implications for intervention as “improved academic self-concepts will lead to better achievement AND improved achievement will lead to better academic self-concepts” (Marsh & Craven, 2005, p. 3).

This crucial role of self-concept has also long been recognised by Indigenous organisations. For example, Charles Davison, President of the 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 maximise 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 Indigenous children being disadvantaged educationally, is that the current education system fails to acknowledge the vital importance of maximising Indigenous 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). The HSC Aboriginal Studies course has the dual broad aims of: enhancing Indigenous students’ educational outcomes and self-concepts but to date no rigorous research has been undertaken to determine whether these aims have been achieved.

Theoretical Perspectives of the Self-concept Construct

The Multidimensionality of the Self-Concept Construct

Historically, researchers have considered self-concept to be a uni-dimensional construct; however, new research has demonstrated that self-concept is a multidimensional construct (Byrne, 1996a, 1996b; Hattie, 1992; Marsh, Byrne, & Shavelson, 1988; Marsh & Craven, 1997; Marsh, Craven, & Burnett, 2003.. Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton (1976) proposed a model in which general self-concept is at the top of the hierarchy and is divided into academic and non-academic self-concept. These two factors are further subdivided; academic self-concept becomes more subject-specific (e.g. reading and mathematics) and non-academic self-concept is divided into social, emotional, and physical self-concepts. According to this model, academic self-concept, or one’s knowledge and perceptions about one’s academic ability (Bong & Shaalvik, 2003), can be considered as one of the principal components of self-concept, and as such the promotion of a positive academic self-concept can be viewed as an important educational goal in itself.
The Nature of and Importance of Social Comparison Theory

Social comparison theory is used as a basis of the present investigation as it informs how people develop their own self-concepts through comparison with others. It attaches to our quest to know ourselves and about how people gain self-knowledge and discovers reality about themselves. Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) is one approach to studying frame of reference effects and often serves as the most potent source of information for self-concept (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003). It has a long history in social psychology and provides the theoretical underpinning for one of the aims of the present investigation: examining the impact of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course on Indigenous students’ self-concepts. Marsh and Craven have proposed a frame of reference model called the big-fish-little-pond effect (BFLPE) to encapsulate frame of reference effects posited in social comparison theory specifically for use in an educational context (see Marsh & Craven, 2002); this is discussed further in the following section.

Frame of Reference Effects: The Big-Fish-Little-Pond Effect (BFLPE)

In the BFLPE, contrast occurs when higher school-average achievement levels (the context) lead to lower individual student academic self-concepts (target judgement), whereas assimilation occurs when higher school-average achievement leads to higher academic self-concepts (Marsh & Craven, 2002). Marsh and Craven emphasise that academic self-concepts depend not only on one’s academic accomplishments but also on the accomplishments of others, of those in the school that a student attends. Thus, social comparison processes can result in either contrast (e.g. negative social comparison or negative BFLPE) or assimilation (referred to in terms such as reflected glory, labelling, and identification). Replication of the big-fish-little-pond effect in different countries provides strong support for its cross-cultural generalisability (see Marsh & Craven, 2002 for an overview).

In relation to the HSC Aboriginal Studies course, both comparison processes have been postulated to occur. The HSC course was designed to enhance Indigenous students’ pride in their culture (i.e. a reflected glory effect whereby Indigenous students’ identity self-concept as an Indigenous person is enhanced due to participation in the course). On the other hand, contrast effects have also been
postulated whereby Indigenous students compare their abilities in the course to those of educationally advantaged non-Indigenous peers, resulting in a negative social comparison. However, to what extent these processes are impacting on Indigenous students’ participation and achievement in the HSC Aboriginal Studies Course remains to be determined.

In the BFLPE, Marsh and Craven hypothesise that students compare their own academic achievements with the academic achievements of their peers and use this social comparison impression as one basis for forming their own academic self-concept. They argue that the same objective characteristics and accomplishments can lead to disparate self-concepts depending on the frame of reference or standards of comparison that individuals use to evaluate themselves. They suggest that a negative BFLPE occurs when equally able students have lower academic self-concepts when they compare themselves to more able students and higher academic self-concepts when they compare themselves with less able students. For example, the big-fish-little-pond-effect proposes that when forming one’s self-concept, individuals compare themselves with those around them.

In the case of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course, Indigenous students undertaking Aboriginal Studies may compare themselves with non-Indigenous peers. If non-Indigenous students are performing better academically, then the self-evaluations of Indigenous students will impact negatively on their self-concept. It would be reasonable for Indigenous students in Aboriginal Studies classes to have improved self-concepts by virtue of selecting to participate in a program that was designed to enhance pride in their culture (whereby identity self-concept as an Indigenous person is enhanced due to participation in the course) - an assimilation, reflected glory, or labelling effect. Alternatively, if Indigenous students use non-Indigenous students in their Aboriginal Studies class as a basis of comparison, then participation in Aboriginal Studies classes should result in lowered self-concept - a contrast or negative BFLPE, because as anecdotal evidence by Aboriginal community members suggests, the HSC Aboriginal Studies course may be having an unanticipated adverse impact on Indigenous students’ self-concepts, in that Indigenous students’ self-concepts may be falling as a result of participation in the course due to their comparing their achievement in the course to the achievement of
non-Indigenous students. Similarly, academically disadvantaged children in Aboriginal Studies classes may have lower academic self-concept than they would if they were in other elective classes because they know that they are in a special class (labelling or assimilation effect). Hence, the BFLPE may be helpful in determining if Indigenous students compare their performance in the Aboriginal Studies with their non-Indigenous peers, but also to ascertain if these comparison processes impact on Indigenous students’ self-concepts and in what particular contexts this occurs.

**Recent Self-concept Research with Indigenous Students**

Although government reports, AECGs principles and Aboriginal Education policy emphasise the need to maximise Indigenous students’ self-concepts as fundamental to ensuring that Indigenous students achieve outcomes commensurate with their non-Indigenous peers, few studies have attempted to examine Indigenous students’ self-concepts. Some aspects of cultural identity, self-esteem, self-concept, and motivation have been studied through making comparisons with Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups (Craven et al., 2005; Day, 1994; Purdie & McCrindle, 2004; McInerney, 2000; McInerney, Hinkley, Dowson, & Van Etten, 1998). In the following section, results from recent research studies are summarised.

**The McInerney (2000) Study**

One of the few studies undertaken on the self-concept of Indigenous students in Australia (McInerney, 2000) used a large-scale psychometric study to focus on the impact of psychological motivation and self-concept variables to examine the school achievement goals held by Indigenous students in comparison with other students. A Likert-type scale (strongly agree =5 to strongly disagree =1) was administered to investigate the self-concepts of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in 6 high schools (three urban – three rural) across NSW. With an average age of 13 years, 939 high school students from Years 7, 8, and 9, (484 males + 433 females) and 129 Indigenous students at four of the schools (67 males + 62 females) were involved in the study. Instruments included the Inventory of School Motivation (ISM) with an expanding a range of goals to reflect a multiple goal approach and the SDQ. Questions relating to motivational goals and sense of self-value influencing learning
included: Task-effort, Praise, Extrinsic, Competitive, Social Status, Mastery General, Performance General, Affiliation (a), Affiliation (b), Social Concern, and Social General. In addition, three self-concept scales from SDQ were included: English self-concept, Maths self-concept, and General self-concept whilst three sense of self-scales were also included self-esteem, self-reliance, and sense of purpose.

McInerney hypothesised that, a) Indigenous students would be significantly stronger on the social scales (Affiliation (a); Affiliation (b); Social Concern & Social General); b) Indigenous students would be significantly weaker on the individual goals (Task-effort; Praise; Extrinsic; Competitive; Social Status; Mastery General; Performance General); c) There would be no differences between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous students on the academic self-concept scales (self-esteem, self-reliance, and sense of purpose); and d) Indigenous students would be significantly weaker on affect to school, valuing school, and intending to complete further education.

Results from this study found that there were no significant differences between the groups on academic self-concept scales. What was found was that: a) Indigenous students are more or less motivated by the same types of influences as non-Indigenous students; b) the academic self-concept of Indigenous students is equal to that of other students; and c) in the sense of self variables, the similarities were strong, although the Indigenous students were weaker on each scale. Across the broad range of scales used in this study, the similarities between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups far outweigh the differences (p.73) where significant differences did occur it was by degree rather than kind. McInerney notes that these results challenge that of previous studies wherein it has been found that despite poorer school performance, self-concepts of Indigenous students were higher compared to the non-Indigenous students above you say Indigenous students were weaker on each scale. He also contends that Indigenous students do well if they are provided with the right motivational school environment. It was recommended that further research was necessary in the area of academic performance and retention to ascertain the causes of poor performance and retention of Indigenous students.
The Purdie and McCrindle (2004) Study

Purdie and McCrindle (2004) measured the self-concepts of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, in relation to Family, Self-Acceptance, General school, Academic Achievement, Peer, and Career self-concept, to determine if these dimensions were equivalent across the groups. Whilst their findings replicate those of McInerney (2000) in that there were no significant differences between the groups, an interesting finding emerged in relation to Family and Peer self-concept. Indigenous students were higher on these scales and this was attributed to the “importance of social relationships within Indigenous and other collectivist societies” (p. 58). Purdie & McCrindle also identified a limitation to the study in that the Academic achievement subscale did not identify specific areas of achievement; perhaps these may be considered to be more valuable to Indigenous students and their families.

The Craven, Tucker, Munns, Hinkley, Marsh, and Simpson (2005) Study

Craven et al., in a study of the aspirations held by Indigenous and non-Indigenous students found that the facets of art and physical self-concept were statistically significantly higher for Indigenous students, whereas for parent self-concept no significant differences were present. This study measured 11 facets of self-concept and found that Indigenous students had lower self-concepts in 7 of them, with statistically significant lower academic (school, maths, verbal) self-concepts. Given the significance of the self-concept construct and these findings the authors concluded that Indigenous students had lower academic self-concepts; this is of particular concern given that self-concept has a powerful causal influence on academic achievement and other desirable educational outcomes (see Marsh & Craven, 2006).

The Craven and Parente (2003) Study

In a qualitative study undertaken to ascertain how Indigenous community members viewed the importance of self-concept research with Indigenous 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 Indigenous students” (Craven & Parente, 2003, p. 104). Focus group and individual
interviews with members of the NSW AECG identified themes that indicated that self-concept, particularly for Indigenous students, is a vital goal of schooling (Craven & Parente, 2003, p. 103). This research is important in that it is a rare study probing Indigenous community members’ opinions of future research directions in Aboriginal Education research. Participants in this research identified that no research was being undertaken in their communities but it was noted that many were excited about the prospect of research being undertaken, focused on self-concept research. It was considered by Indigenous participants that this type of research would provide much-sought-after hard data that could provide recommendations for improving the self-concept of Indigenous students. Based on the findings, Craven and Parente’s (2003) recommendations included the need to explore further the connection between self-concept and its impact on educational outcomes that are considered desirable by Aboriginal community members.

*Implications for the Present Investigation*

Self-concept is a critical determinant of young people’s capacity to realise their potential, to experience success, and foster greater engagement (OECD, 2003). As such, enhancing self-concept is considered by Aboriginal organisations to be of major educational and social significance. Given that a key goal of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course is to enhance Indigenous students’ self-concepts it is unfortunate that the considerable advances in self-concept theory, research, and practice with non-Indigenous students have not been applied to Indigenous students. A key aim of the present investigation is to explore the impact of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course on Indigenous students’ self-concepts (see chapter 2). This research also addresses the critical need to undertake Aboriginal Education research in the schooling sector in the context of the best available theory and research (see chapter 2).

Rarely have qualitative studies been undertaken to examine self-concept. This research proposes a new, in-depth interview approach, seeking explanation and assessment appropriate to Indigenous students in secondary schools undertaking the HSC Aboriginal Studies course, to tease out the nature and extent of social comparison processes underlying the BFLPE. This research also addresses the
pressing need for research evidence and theory building concerning the resolution of complex and contradictory responses of Indigenous secondary school students to the HSC Aboriginal Studies course. As such, self-concept theory and social comparison theory research underpin this study. in order to address the conundrum observed in participation in and educational outcomes for Indigenous students in relation to undertaking the HSC Aboriginal Studies course.

Summary

This chapter has presented an overview of the significance, nature, and relevance of the self-concept construct for Indigenous students undertaking the HSC Aboriginal Studies course. The chapter has also outlined that the present investigation was designed to contribute to and advance Aboriginal Education research in the schooling sector by implementing a study which capitalises upon “cutting-edge” advances in self-concept theory and research to elucidate the impact of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course on Indigenous students’ self-concepts. In the next chapter are presented the aims of the current investigation, the nature of the problem, the research questions to be addressed, and a rationale for the research questions based on previous theory and research in the areas of Aboriginal Education and self-concept.
CHAPTER 4
RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND THEIR RATIONALE

Introduction

The overarching goal of the proposed study is to clarify the impact of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course on Indigenous students’ self-concepts and educational outcomes, and to elucidate the strengths and limitations of the course. Therefore the purpose of this chapter is to present (a) the aims of the current investigation, (b) the nature of the problem, (c) the research questions to be addressed, and (d) a rationale for the research questions based on previous theory and research in the fields of Aboriginal Education and self-concept research. Research questions were formulated rather than hypotheses, due to the dearth of Aboriginal Education research, particularly in relation to undertaking the HSC Aboriginal Studies course.

The Problem

Why do Indigenous students choose to select or not select to participate in the Higher School Certificate (HSC) Aboriginal Studies Course? To what extent do Indigenous students benefit from undertaking the HSC Aboriginal Studies course? What is the impact of undertaking the HSC Aboriginal Studies course on Indigenous students’ self-concepts, motivation, attendance, enjoyment of school, aspirations, achievement in Aboriginal Studies and other desirable educational outcomes? Are Indigenous students’ self-concepts in relation to the HSC Aboriginal Studies course influenced by parallel, upward, or downward social comparison processes in relation to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peers? What do Indigenous students perceive as the strengths and limitations of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course?

Aims

This research aims to capitalise on advances in theory, research and practice in Aboriginal Education and self-concept in order to:
1. Elucidate Indigenous students’ rationales for selecting or choosing not to participate in the HSC Aboriginal Studies course, in order to identify factors that influence Indigenous students’ decisions in regard to participation in this course;

2. Identify Indigenous students’ perceptions of the strengths and limitations of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course, in order to identify potential new directions for educational policy and strengthening curriculum;

3. Critically analyse the impact of undertaking the HSC Aboriginal Studies Course on Indigenous students’ self-concepts and other desirable educational outcomes (achievement in Aboriginal Studies, motivation, attendance, enjoyment of school, aspirations); and

4. Elucidate whether Indigenous students’ self-concepts in relation to their achievements in the HSC Aboriginal Studies course are influenced by downward or upward or other social comparison processes in relation to Indigenous and non-Indigenous peers undertaking the course, in order to test and extend self-concept theory and research to include Indigenous students.

Statement of the Research Questions

Research Question 1.1: Indigenous students’ rationale for participation in Aboriginal Studies HSC course

What factors influence Indigenous students’ decisions to enrol and continue to participate in the HSC Aboriginal Studies course? Are the factors identified by Indigenous students, different to the factors that influence non-Indigenous students to enrol and participate in the course?
Research Question 1.2: Rationale for not selecting to enrol in the Aboriginal Studies HSC course

Why do some Indigenous students choose not to take HSC Aboriginal Studies as a HSC subject, and are these rationales similar or different to the reasons that non-Indigenous students choose not to undertake this course?

Research Question 2.1: Strengths and limitations

What do Indigenous students, non-Indigenous students, teachers, Principals, and Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEAs) perceive as the strengths and limitations of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course?

Research Question 3.1: Impact on self-concept

To what extent does the HSC Aboriginal Studies course impact positively or negatively upon Indigenous students’ self-concepts?

Research Question 3.2: Impact on other desirable educational outcomes

To what extent do Indigenous students, non-Indigenous students; teachers, Principals, AEAs and the Aboriginal community consider that the HSC Aboriginal Studies course impacts positively or negatively on other desirable outcomes?

Research Question 4.1: Types of social comparison processes

To what extent do Aboriginal students compare their abilities in the HSC Aboriginal Studies course with other Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, and are these comparisons parallel, upward, or downward in nature?

Rationale for the Research Questions

Research Question 1.1: Indigenous students’ rationale for participation in the HSC Aboriginal Studies course

Given the dearth of Aboriginal Education research in general and more particularly in relation to schooling, little is known about Indigenous students’ rationales for choosing to enrol in and continuing to participate in the HSC Aboriginal Studies course. This is unfortunate as such information could serve to
inform intervention to arrest declining enrolment rates. Given the paucity of research available, a research question was posed to identify what factors influence Indigenous students’ decisions to enrol and continue in the HSC Aboriginal Studies course. Furthermore, a research question was posed to ascertain whether these factors are similar or different to the factors identified by non-Indigenous students, in order to elucidate unique perspectives of Indigenous students in regard to their reasons for participating in the HSC Aboriginal Studies course. Anecdotal evidence put forward by members of Aboriginal communities offers potentially plausible reasons as to why both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students often do not choose to participate in the HSC Aboriginal Studies course. For example, Aboriginal community members have suggested that many Indigenous students do not select Aboriginal Studies as a HSC option because the content is “too academically rigorous”. Yet the latter is one of the key benefits of participation identified in the NSW BOS Aboriginal Studies Syllabus Evaluation Report (NSW Board of Studies, 1998) where it was noted,

Aboriginal Studies has been identified as one of the more difficult subjects offered in the HSC, because it is one of the most rigorous, with learning outcomes set at an appropriate standard for a 2 unit course (p. vi).

In addition, Aboriginal community members have also suggested that a number of students seem to erroneously believe that their University Admission Index (UAI) will be scaled down as a result of undertaking Aboriginal Studies. There is also a common misconception among students that Aboriginal Studies is only for Indigenous students. Hence even if non-Indigenous students have an interest in this area, they may not choose it as a subject. Furthermore, for at least some Indigenous students there is the belief that as Indigenous people they do not need to know anything more about their own culture—a misconception that Aboriginal Studies is cultural studies. Hence, whilst anecdotal evidence suggests that there are a number of potential reasons as to why Indigenous students do not choose to participate in the HSC Aboriginal Studies course, to date there is no research evidence the author is aware of that examines actual student perceptions. Given this lack of research a research question was posed to ascertain both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students’ reasons for electing not to participate in the HSC Aboriginal Studies course.
Research Question 2.1: Strengths and limitations

A number of strengths and weaknesses of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course were identified in the NSW BOS Aboriginal Studies Syllabus Evaluation Report (BOS, 1998). Key identified strengths of the course included: a) it expands students’ understanding of Aboriginal culture; b) it contributes to Reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples; c) it strengthens Aboriginal community involvement in schools; d) it is a rigorous two unit course; e) it fosters a diverse range of skills which readily transfer to the tertiary sector; and f) it provides Indigenous students with the opportunity to discuss issues from their own perspective. Limitations identified in the BOS (1998) report include: a) teachers lack knowledge and therefore are reluctant to teach the course; b) the difficulty of resourcing the subject, given there was no set textbook; c) some schools are unable to offer a broad range of courses; and d) the Aboriginal Studies HSC examination is believed by some to be a literacy test and “inaccessible to the very students whose ‘history’, ‘culture’ and ‘interests’ it purports to promote” (BOS, 1998, p. 20). The identification of strengths and limitations of the HSC Aboriginal Studies Course has important implications for curriculum development and implementation. Given that BOS (1998) is the only study the author is aware of that has examined the strengths and limitations of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course, a research question was posed to further explore this issue. In addition, the present investigation expands upon this earlier study by also comparing and contrasting the views of multiple stakeholders at the school level, to identify what they perceive to be the strengths and limitations of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course.

Research Question 3.1: Impact on self-concept

Whilst it has been noted that:

Some Aboriginal children feel good about particular aspects of themselves at home, their negative experiences in other contexts (e.g., school) result in them feeling less positive about those dimensions of self. (Purdie et al., 2000, p. 27)
How Indigenous students feel about themselves, in relation to their educational decisions, persistence and accomplishments, is influenced by a positive self-concept, which determines subsequent life directions (Marsh, 2002). The Aboriginal Studies course is postulated to result in Indigenous students experiencing a subject where they feel comfortable about expressing their identity and interests and learning about their heritage, which in turn raises their self-esteem and pride in their Aboriginal culture. It is also important to note that social comparison theory predicts that Indigenous students may be comparing their abilities to the abilities of non-Indigenous students, which could result in upward comparisons, which would have a detrimental impact on self-concept. Given that no research has been undertaken to test the predicted impact of the course upon self-concept, a research question was posed to test whether participation in the course impacts positively or negatively on multiple self-concept facets.

*Research Question 3.2: Impact on other desirable educational outcomes*

Fullarton and Ainley (2000) acknowledge that in Australia, Year 12 students are diverse not only in their social and economic backgrounds but in their previous achievements, interests, and aspirations. It is important that students experience a curriculum that provides them with the knowledge and skills to lead them to fulfilling personal lives, successful labour market outcomes, and opportunities to contribute to the wellbeing of the society in which they live. Fullarton & Ainley (2000, p. 1) state:

> The subjects chosen and studied in the senior secondary years have a major influence upon the educational and career options available to young people when they leave school.

Thus the Aboriginal Studies course was devised to provide opportunities for developing full and active participation as citizens, allowing students to make positive contributions to society and take up opportunities previously denied them, empowering students to articulate their rights (BOS, 1998). In addition, Aboriginal Studies has been considered to be a major motivating factor for some Indigenous students to continue on to complete Year 12, and as such a key to addressing the need to improve the retention rates of Indigenous students. Furthermore, while
undertaking the course, students are expected to acquire a diverse range of skills (e.g. research, analysis, evaluation, and communication skills), which readily transfer to the tertiary sector. Given the paucity of studies examining the impact of the HSC Aboriginal Studies Course on desirable educational outcomes for Indigenous students, a research question was posed to explore this issue.

**Research Question 4.1: Types of social comparison processes**

Brickman and Bulman (1977) note that social comparison with others who are thought to be doing better, although informative, can also be threatening (Buunk & Gibbons, 1997, p. 9). For Indigenous students, anecdotal evidence suggests that social comparison processes whereby Indigenous students compare their abilities in the course to the abilities of their non-Indigenous peers in the HSC Aboriginal Studies course may result in an adverse impact on Indigenous students’ self-concepts. Hence, social comparison processes can result in either contrast (negative social comparison effects) or assimilation (positive social comparison, reflected glory). Replication of the BFLPE in different countries provides strong support for its cross-cultural generalizability (see Marsh & Craven, 2002 for an overview, & chapter 3).

In relation to the HSC Aboriginal Studies course, both assimilation and contrast comparison processes have been postulated as occurring. The HSC course was designed to enhance Indigenous students’ pride in their culture (i.e. a reflected glory effect whereby Indigenous students’ identity self-concept as an Aboriginal person is enhanced due to participation in the course). Contrast effects have also been postulated whereby Indigenous students compare their abilities in the course to those of educationally advantaged non-Aboriginal peers, resulting in a negative social comparison. To what extent these processes are either operating or impacting upon Indigenous students’ participation and achievement in the HSC Aboriginal Studies Course remains to be determined. Hence a research question was posed to ascertain the extent to which Indigenous and non-Indigenous students compare their abilities in the HSC Aboriginal Studies course with other Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and the nature of these comparisons (parallel, upward or downward in nature).
Summary

This chapter has outlined the problem, aims, research questions and rationale for the present investigation. It has also shown that evaluation of these aims will contribute to strengthening curriculum and extending self-concept theory to Aboriginal secondary students. The next chapter describes the research methodology employed to address the above research questions.
CHAPTER 5
METHODOLOGY

Introduction

There are two main purposes of this investigation. The first is to determine the impact of the NSW HSC Aboriginal Studies course on Indigenous students’ self-concept and educational outcomes. The second is to identify the strengths and limitations of the course (see Chapter 4). The purpose of this chapter is to describe in detail the methodology used in this research. Firstly, the research context is discussed. Secondly, the schools and the participants are introduced. Thirdly, the methods employed for data collection are outlined, and finally the data analysis techniques are discussed.

Research Context

All Indigenous communities are diverse in nature, something that has often been disregarded when all Indigenous people of Australia are assumed to be the same. The term “Aborigines” means the original inhabitants of the country and was the name given to the first Australians by the Europeans. It was not the name used by first Australians to describe themselves. Various research principles and guidelines assert that “diversity of Indigenous cultures should be acknowledged and encouraged” (ABC Online). Parbury (2005), clarifies this further when he states:

White Australians living in different parts of Australia have different characteristics; naturally such differences [apply] even more to Aboriginal society, which [is] more localised and in tune with the land. (p. 13)

The diversity of Indigenous peoples can be seen through the different language or territory groups to which they belong: for example, Wiradjuri, Pitjantjatjara, Kamilaroi, Gurnai, and Aranda, while more general terms such as Murri, Koori, Nunga, Nyoongah, or Yolgnu are used to establish where people are situated in Australia (Forrest, 1998, p. 100). This is very much the case with communities in
New South Wales where the majority of Indigenous peoples identify as Koori, whilst acknowledging language group connections. It was anticipated that a range of schools could be identified because of this diversity.

In identifying schools implementing the HSC Aboriginal Studies course, I sought assistance from the Aboriginal Programs Unit (APU) of the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) and the NSW Board of Studies (BOS). Overall, approximately sixty-five schools were identified as offering HSC Aboriginal Studies in 2005. Due to this number, and to provide a strong representation of the Aboriginal Studies student population across the state, four specific criteria were established to target schools. These were:

(a) A significant Indigenous student population;

(b) The HSC Aboriginal Studies course being implemented;

(c) At least three Indigenous students participating in the Year 11 Aboriginal Studies preliminary course; and

(d) At least three Indigenous students participating in Year 12 Aboriginal Studies.

Three schools were identified as meeting the established criteria. Therefore justification for the above criteria was based on identifying Indigenous communities where Aboriginal Studies is being implemented, ensuring that the small percentage of Indigenous students who undertake Aboriginal Studies, an average of 23% since the course was first introduced (NSW AECG Inc., 2004, p. 4), would be represented within the sample.

In the school identification process, enrolment information was sought from the BOS and DET in relation to the number of Indigenous students enrolled in each school across NSW. Records of student enrolments in Year 11 and Year 12 Aboriginal Studies were also accessed, to identify those schools offering Aboriginal Studies in schools with high numbers of Indigenous students. An overview of the research design is shown in Figure 5.1.
The Schools

Wiradjuri High School

The first school, which we will call Wiradjuri High School, is located in a large inland rural centre and is part of a college structure existing on four separate sites. These sites are divided into three secondary schools that have combined to form one College; the fourth site is an Administration Centre. Aboriginal Studies at the HSC level has been offered here for a number of years prior to the introduction of the BOS Aboriginal Studies Syllabus. It is interesting to note that of the 790 students enrolled at the senior campus in 2005, Indigenous students numbered only 181. Of these, 90 Indigenous students were enrolled in Years 11 and 12, with only 23 students undertaking HSC Aboriginal Studies.

Dharumba High School

The second school, which we will call Dharumba High School, is located in a large tourist centre on the South Coast of New South Wales and is one of five large secondary schools in the area. The school enrolment is over 1,000 students. A significantly high percentage of Indigenous people reside in the area and many are very active in education, due to their involvement in schools as Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEAs), teachers, or as volunteer support people. This also includes membership in a very active and vocal local AECG. Strong links exist between the school and the many Indigenous organisations operating in the area, in that local organisations are called upon regularly to present information to school students undertaking Aboriginal Studies.

Minjungbal High School

The third school, which we will refer to as Minjungbal High School, is also located in a coastal tourist centre but on the North Coast of NSW and again a high percentage of Indigenous people reside in the area. Although these latter two schools are both located in coastal areas, the communities are very different. Because of its location close to the Queensland border, Minjungbal High School also draws students from the Torres Strait Islander community.
Access

Due to my connections with the schools and the teachers, as the Professional Experiences (Practicum) coordinator in my workplace, I was able to enlist the assistance of teachers and Aboriginal Education Assistants to gain access to each school. The teachers however exhibited a wide range of experience teaching Aboriginal Studies.

Figure 5.1 Research Design
Participants

In total there were 38 participants involved in this study. Table 5.1 provides a summary of the participant sample and how they were distributed across the schools. This includes the number of surveys collected and analysed. The number of students interviewed who were undertaking the HSC Aboriginal Studies course was 22 (18 Indigenous students and 4 non-Indigenous students between the ages of 15-19 years). These students undertaking Aboriginal Studies were identified by the teacher of Aboriginal Studies and the Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEAs) in each school, based on their active participation in the course. In addition, 2 Indigenous students not undertaking Aboriginal Studies were interviewed, to ascertain the factors that impacted on their choice not to elect Aboriginal Studies.

A comparison group from the same schools, comprising a random sample of Year 11 and Year 12 Indigenous and non-Indigenous students not undertaking the HSC Aboriginal Studies course was invited to complete a 4-item survey (see Appendix 19) that asked them why they did not elect Aboriginal Studies as a HSC option and what changes would need to take place for them to consider it as a choice.

School staff \((n = 11)\) were also invited to participate: Aboriginal Education Assistants, teachers of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course, and the Principal in each school. Aboriginal parents \((n = 3)\) of students undertaking the Aboriginal Studies course were also identified by schools and invited to participate in an interview.

Table 5.1 Summary of Sample Size

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Wiradjuri High</th>
<th>Dharumba High</th>
<th>Minjungbal High</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous students</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous students not doing Aboriginal Studies</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Indigenous students</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AEAs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principals</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separate surveys administered at each school</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5.2 introduces the participants in each school through the usual convention of employing pseudonyms for all names of schools, students, teachers, and community members.

**Table 5.2 Introducing the Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STUDENTS</th>
<th>Wiradjuri</th>
<th>Dharumba</th>
<th>Minjungbal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>NAME</strong></td>
<td><strong>YR</strong></td>
<td><strong>NAME</strong></td>
<td><strong>YR</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denise</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Larissa *</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Meg</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Tony *</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharmaine</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Taryn</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Nicholas</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marilyn</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine*</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STAFF</th>
<th>Wiradjuri</th>
<th>Dharumba</th>
<th>Minjungbal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AEA — Jasmine</td>
<td>AEA — Stella</td>
<td>AEA — Aunty Coral</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher — Colin</td>
<td>Teacher — Richard</td>
<td>Teacher — Jennifer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher — Brian</td>
<td>Principal — Warren</td>
<td>Principal — Natalie</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal — Shayne</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARENTS</th>
<th>Wiradjuri</th>
<th>Dharumba</th>
<th>Minjungbal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent — Marion</td>
<td>Parent — Robyn</td>
<td>Parent — Peter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Non-Indigenous
** Not doing Aboriginal Studies

**Data Collection Methods**

**In-depth Interviews**

Four semi-structured in-depth interview schedules were developed that address the aims and research questions of the study, one each for:
(a) students undertaking the HSC Aboriginal Studies Course (see Appendix 15); 
(b) Indigenous students not undertaking the course (see Appendix 16); 
(c) teachers/principals/AEAs (see Appendix 17); and 
(d) parents of students undertaking Aboriginal Studies (see Appendix 18).

The majority of the interviews were carried out on an individual basis on school premises in an allocated interview room or classroom that was not in use at the time. One exception was a parent interviewed in her home. All student interviews were timetabled during Aboriginal Studies class time. Whenever possible I endeavoured to introduce myself to the students and to other Indigenous people, prior to the interviews. This enabled me to provide some background as to who I was and where I fitted in, in relation to “our mob”. This procedure was also intended to establish a rapport with the students fairly quickly. Many were interested in my relatives, and based on the names given, the area that I came from. This resulted in bonding, the usual process for Indigenous people.

After making the students feel comfortable through an informal “yarn” about themselves and their family connections, interviews would begin with students describing what school was like for them, and particularly if it was different in the senior years. This led into their choice to undertake Aboriginal Studies and what they were gaining from this subject. In an effort to examine self-concept through the interviews, questions were incorporated that required the students to compare themselves and their progress with other students in Aboriginal Studies. Staff interviews were directed more specifically in relation to their role within the school and their experiences and knowledge of HSC Aboriginal Studies and its history at that particular school.

**Survey**

In addition to the interviews a four-item survey (see Appendix 19) was developed to be administered to a random sample of students in Year 11 and Year 12 who did not elect Aboriginal Studies as one of their HSC options. The survey consisted of four open-ended questions specifically designed to elicit information
about what students knew about Aboriginal Studies, why they did not choose it as a HSC option, and what could be done in the future for them to consider it as an option. This was considered to be valuable data in addressing Research Question 1.2: Rationale for not selecting to enrol in the Aboriginal Studies HSC course (see chapter 4).

One of the advantages of using the survey was that they would be administered to a representative sample of participants. One of the disadvantages attached to the use of surveys includes “not being in a position to check first hand the understandings of the participants to the questions asked, thereby raising issues of truthfulness and accuracy” (Blaxter, Hughes, & Tight, 2001, p. 79). Hence, the quality of the responses is affected by how different participants interpret the questions (Kumar, 1996, p. 114). This was evident in some of the responses, where it was clear that there was a misunderstanding of what was being asked.

Surveys were sent or delivered to each school and administered through the assistance of the AEA and/or the teacher of Aboriginal Studies. In one school the Deputy Principal assisted in administering the surveys with the support of teachers throughout the school. Surveys were collected by the Aboriginal Studies teacher or the AEA and held for collection by the researcher.

**Ethics**

Permission to undertake the study was sought from the University of Western Sydney’s (UWS) Human Ethics Committee and DET’s Strategic Research Directorate. Once permission was obtained from both organisations, a letter of request was sent to school Principals to seek their participation in an in-depth interview and provide access to potential participants (Appendix 17). Principals were also contacted by telephone to ensure the letter was received and to answer any questions. Principals advised of their participation by returning a consent form. Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEAs) and teachers were contacted by letter to gain informed consent to participate in an indepth interview and collaborate on identifying potential student participants. AEAs and teachers were also contacted by telephone to ensure the letter was received and to answer any questions. Parents were
identified by the AEA and teacher in respects to how active they were in the school and their child’s participation in Aboriginal Studies. An invitation to parents to participate in the research was extended through the school. The school also sought their written permission, and their child’s written consent to participate in the study based on informed consent.

All participants were given the opportunity to discuss the study with the researcher before the interview and were informed that participation was voluntary and their decision whether or not to participate would not affect their relationship with the school. Participants were informed that the interview would be recorded on a tape recorder, with their permission, and that they were free to stop the interview or to ask for the tape recorder to be turned off at any time and could request any or all sections of the tape to be erased.

This study made use of qualitative research methodologies that emphasise processes stressing “how social experience is created and given meanings” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 8). Hence, there is a search to uncover thoughts, perceptions, and feelings experienced by those participating in the research, how they attach meaning to and organise their lives, and in turn, how this influences their actions. In this context, the key focus of the research design was why students choose to undertake Aboriginal Studies and how this choice impacted on their self-concept and educational outcomes.

The methodological approach of the ethnographic interview is considered culturally appropriate for examining the reality of Indigenous students and their school learning environment, especially in response to curriculum and pedagogy. Interviews have assisted in understanding the perceptions held by those students participating in the Aboriginal Studies course while allowing access to the motives, meanings, actions, and reactions of students in the context of their daily school lives. As an Indigenous interviewer I considered myself to be an active participant in the interview, whereby “questions and responses are contextually grounded and jointly constructed” (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 663). This methodology was also a means of replicating the narrative and story-telling traditions of Aboriginal communities in Australia, to incorporate dialogue and conversations amongst Aboriginal peoples, to
Aboriginal peoples and for Aboriginal peoples (Tuhiwai Smith, 2001, p. 161). The intention was to work within the oral traditions that still exist for many Indigenous people in society today.

As an Indigenous person I understand the protocols of entering an “Indigenous space”, in this context the student space, and felt that this would enable me to converse with the students at their level; the goal being to gain some insight into their perceptions as students within the environment of the Aboriginal Studies classroom (Powney & Watt, 198, p. 18). The choice to undertake interviews was considered to be more culturally appropriate as it would allow for what Tuhiwai Smith (2001, p. 145) refers to as the “diversities of truth”. This is when the story teller, in this case the students, retains control rather than the researcher, whilst also recognising that like conversations, interviews can include humour, gossip, and creativity. Interviews have also allowed me the opportunity to establish and maintain a healthy rapport with the unique individuals undertaking the course, whilst also experiencing the unique school culture where Aboriginal Studies is being implemented (Gomm, Hammersley, & Foster, 2002, p. 61). This in turn has allowed for “multiple interpretations of reality and alternative interpretations of data throughout the study” (Fetterman, 1998, p. 2). The use of ethnographic interviews that incorporated Indigenous ways of communication allowed for opportunities to discover what the interviewees thought and how one person’s perceptions compared to another’s; hence, the inclusion of non-Indigenous participants (Fetterman, 1998, p. 38; Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1995, p. 73).

It is important to acknowledge that interviews, like story telling, “are a feature of ordinary conversation and used to parallel the social interaction of an ordinary conversation” (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1995, p. 86). Therefore, Aboriginal English was particularly important as one means of establishing a relationship with Indigenous students, staff, and community members. Aboriginal English has been identified as “an independent conceptual system in which English words carry distinctive meanings and are used to form patterns of discourse which are interpreted by Aboriginal people according to shared rules which are not accessible to people outside their culture” (Malcolm, Kessaris, & Hunter, 2003, p. 107). Therefore, it is possible for Indigenous people from all over the country to
identify other Indigenous people through Aboriginal English, allowing for a comfortable feeling when with each other (Eades, 1993). This was evident when I approached an Indigenous parent and was told that she was ready to say “No” because she thought I was a non-Indigenous researcher. But when she discovered my Aboriginality, through acknowledging my Aboriginal English and ties to kin through identification of family names and location of family (Forrest, 1998, pp. 101-102), she was keen to be involved in the research.

**Data Analysis**

*Interviews and the Survey*

All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions were grouped by participants and content analysis was undertaken to identify themes and recurring patterns within the interviews clustering like themes identified by participants, firstly in the identified groups, for example, Indigenous students, non-Indigenous students, school staff, and parents. For example, what did Indigenous students say? What did non-Indigenous students say? Throughout this process I kept in mind the importance of “studying the whole text, not only in the context of what was said but also in terms of what was not said” (Minichiello et al., 1995, p. 254). Emerging themes and issues were then more closely examined as to their relationship to the research aims. The survey responses were also typed, clustered by question and then analysed into similar themes and patterns with links made to themes uncovered in interviews.

*Obligation to Community*

In establishing links to community and kin outside my own Indigenous community there comes the responsibilities of sharing the research, technically the dissemination of results: “for Indigenous researchers sharing is about demystifying knowledge and information and speaking in plain terms to the community” (Tuhiwai Smith, 2001, p. 161). As an Indigenous person I understand and respect the values of the many cultures that exist in Aboriginal communities. Obligation was a big part of the commitment associated with carrying out ethical research with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants, and respect and acceptance were extended to all groups. Ownership and rights of access to intellectual and cultural property will
remain with the rightful owners, and publication of findings in this thesis will follow from meaningful consultation with participants. In addition I have distributed to all participants a summary of the findings in plain English, and have met with each School’s Parent School Partnership Initiative (PSPI) Committee to convey the results.

Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

Although criteria were set for identifying appropriate schools, there were limitations in that the records kept by BOS and DET were often not accurate, due to the timing of collecting enrolment figures. This was clear when I found that only one Indigenous student was undertaking the Aboriginal Studies course in Dharumba High School. In this case, the practical issues of administering interviews and surveys in diverse environments were considered. As well, the type of research depended on communicating with a broad range of people in a short time. Justification for working with a range of students has been shown through the work of others whose research has focussed on children’s constructions of politics (Connell, 1985) and students’ perceptions of their education in relation to ethnic identity (Aroni, 1985), both studies aiming to understand a broad range of school students. In these cases it was considered that participant observation would be too time consuming therefore not a useful option, particularly when activities such as playground discussion were inaccessible (also see Minichiello et al., 1995, pp. 73-74).

An ongoing concern not only for myself but for other researchers is catching up with those Indigenous students who are absent from school the day the interviews are taking place (Purdie et. al., 2003). One particular school site chosen for its location and supportive Aboriginal Education programs, had to be withdrawn from the study as the student numbers on any given day were so low that getting even two students to interview was very difficult.

Many parents were also unwilling to participate in interviews, which was something that I was not expecting. This could be because I did not approach the
right people in the community and therefore missed those who would have provided
good data in relation to this topic.

Summary

In this chapter I have described and justified the methods used, in relation to
the research context and along with a description of the participants and schools. The
methods employed for data collection and analysis were presented and the rationale
for employing these methods was discussed.
CHAPTER 6
RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine the reasons why students elect or choose not to elect Aboriginal Studies as one of their HSC options, the strengths and weaknesses of the course, and the impact the HSC Aboriginal Studies course has on Indigenous students’ self-concepts and educational outcomes. This chapter presents the findings as they relate to each of the aims and research questions outlined in Chapter 4. Analysis of data collected from three NSW State secondary schools, pertaining to each research question, revealed a number of key themes. The findings of this research indicate that Indigenous students are seeking a course that values and reinforces their identity as Indigenous people. Also emerging from the data was how important Aboriginal Studies is seen to be for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, teachers and parents.

Firstly, analysis of Indigenous students’ responses is presented, followed by comparison with responses of non-Indigenous students. Secondly, a critical analysis of staff interviews is presented, before results from parent interviews are discussed. Finally, where relevant, links are made to survey responses with a summary of the findings.

Results Research Question 1.1: Indigenous Students’ Rationale for Choosing HSC Aboriginal Studies Course (Aim 1)

Overview

Research Question 1.1 sought to identify the factors that impact on the choices students make in regard to selecting Aboriginal Studies as one of their HSC options. The data collected from the three schools identified two recurrent significant themes as motivating factors to select the HSC Aboriginal Studies course: (1) to learn more about Aboriginal culture and (2) to build upon prior knowledge learned through undertaking previous Aboriginal Studies courses (see Table 6.1). A number of minor themes were also identified, including whether students were Aboriginal or not, the
impact of significant others on subject choice, student interest in the area, no options for choosing the subject and the impact of taking the subject on career aspirations (see Table 6.1). The themes identified are discussed separately for each group of participants (Indigenous students, non-Indigenous students, school staff and parents) in the following sections.

As presented in Chapter 4 parents and community members identified that the Aboriginal Studies course was too academically rigorous for Indigenous students, this was not a theme identified in interviews. This is an area where further investigations might prove to be more fruitful particularly if those students who discontinue Aboriginal Studies and school identify this as a major influence on their choice to “drop out of” Aboriginal Studies and/or school.

Table 6.1 Summary of Data Drawn From Interviews with Students in Three NSW State Secondary Schools as to What Influenced Their Choice to Elect Aboriginal Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Wiradjuri</th>
<th>Dharumba</th>
<th>Minjungbal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 To learn more about Aboriginal culture</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Aboriginality</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Impact of others</td>
<td>✓ ✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Teacher</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Interest</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 No options</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Career aspirations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * Non-Indigenous – All other numbers refer to Indigenous students
**Indigenous Students’ Voices**

*Theme 1: Learning more about Aboriginal culture.*

The experienced loss of culture and the perceived limited knowledge some Indigenous students have about their own culture have led to many seeking out HSC Aboriginal Studies as a means of enhancing their cultural knowledge. Although the syllabus does not directly encompass cultural studies it has been identified that one of the major aims for the development of Aboriginal Studies was to “reaffirm identity and self-esteem in Indigenous students” (Board of Studies, 1998). Whilst the course is not promoted to address this specifically it was clear that of those Indigenous students interviewed, 60% undertaking the Aboriginal Studies course identified that learning about their culture was the major contributing factor to their choice. An example of this lack in understanding Aboriginal culture was revealed in a response given by Marilyn (Indigenous student) from Wiradjuri High, who felt that Aboriginal culture was not part of her family lifestyle therefore Aboriginal Studies could fill this void in her cultural knowledge.

> Well, you’re not really taught about it at home we don’t live in an Aboriginal culture. I mostly chose it because I thought I would probably relate to it and never being taught it … so that’s why I wanted to do it, I wanted to learn more about Aboriginal culture.

This sense of not knowing was significant for Tara (Indigenous student), from Minjungbal High, when the teacher of Aboriginal Studies introduced her to some aspects of the course in an Aboriginal Studies class. This class revealed to Tara just how little she did know when she was presented with how knowledgeable a non-Indigenous teacher and non-Indigenous students were about Aboriginal culture, much more than she knew. Hence, choosing Aboriginal Studies would provide her with the opportunity to learn more about her own cultural background and herself as an Indigenous person.

> Well, I chose it because I don't know much about my culture and my heritage. Just sitting in one of her (teacher) classes and just hearing everything that they knew about Aboriginal Studies. I was just amazed because I don't know anything about that; nothing about my own culture and it was important for me to learn about myself.
Although this was common response from many of the Indigenous students there were those who acknowledged the importance of oral history and the significant role Elders and family members play in passing down cultural knowledge’s. Shay, an Indigenous student from Wiradjuri High, has a strong sense of identity as an Indigenous person. According to her mother Shay’s strength in her Aboriginality has lead her to recognising that cultural knowledge in the family is limited and those who could pass on certain knowledge’s were no longer here to do so. Therefore, her choice to undertake HSC Aboriginal Studies was specifically based on learning more about Aboriginal culture and heritage.

I chose Aboriginal Studies because I just wanted to learn more about my culture, because I haven’t got my grandma to tell me what our culture, heritage was about. So I thought I’d choose Aboriginal Studies and see how it would go.

Summary of Theme 1: Learning more about Aboriginal culture

It is interesting to note that Indigenous students’ first perceptions of Aboriginal Studies were that the course is about their cultural background. This theme suggests that many Indigenous students, in this study ten of the sixteen Indigenous students interviewed, are seeking a cultural studies course due largely to a lack of knowledge and access to Indigenous Elders, who can pass on oral histories and cultural knowledge. An underlying aim of the Aboriginal Studies syllabus is to affirm Aboriginal identity and raise the self-esteem of Indigenous students, it would then seem reasonable that Indigenous students would seek out a course called Aboriginal Studies. Given that the content of the course does not focus on Aboriginality and the importance of cultural knowledge and has been designed to educate and provide all students undertaking the course with an understanding of Aboriginal cultural heritage and its importance in the history and heritage of Australia.

This lack of knowledge of HSC Aboriginal Studies course content was also evident in results of a survey designed to identify reasons as to why students do not select Aboriginal Studies as a HSC option. The results suggest that very few students actually know what the content of Aboriginal Studies involves as shown in the survey question that asked, “What do you know about the Aboriginal Studies
Course?” Elicited responses indicate many thought Aboriginal Studies was “about Aboriginal culture and history” or that they knew “nothing” or “not much” (see Table: 6.2 for an overview of answers to this survey question). Consequently, this has implications for future curriculum development in addressing the need for Indigenous students to learn more about their culture whilst providing relevant, accurate information about the course to non-Indigenous students.

**Theme 2: Aboriginality**

As an Indigenous person I was under the assumption that Aboriginality would be a contributing factor to Indigenous students electing HSC Aboriginal Studies. Surprisingly, only 18% of Indigenous students directly identified that their Aboriginality influenced their choice. However, student responses indicate that Aboriginal Studies provided a place to be with Indigenous peers and make family connections and friendships. Martin (Indigenous student), a Year 11 student at Wiradjuri High, spoke about not having to choose Aboriginal Studies when he enrolled in a new school but he saw being with “your own kind” as a ‘safe place’ in a new school environment.

I didn’t have to pick it when I came here and I picked it for a few reasons. One was because you can make friends easier ‘cause it’s your own kind. And you can say you know this guy, yeah that’s my cousin.

Michael (Indigenous student) also from Wiradjuri High had the same view and selected Aboriginal Studies so that he could be with his Indigenous peers, a place where all Indigenous students would be.

All the other Aboriginal students are there and cause I’m Aboriginal and I want to know a bit about it.

Again this reflects the importance of being in a class where Indigenous students feel comfortable and can learn about their own culture with that of others seeking answers in regards to their identity and cultural background. The basis for Megan’s (Indigenous student, Dharumba High) choice to undertake Aboriginal Studies was linked to her Aboriginality and limited cultural knowledge.
Just the fact that I’m Aboriginal and my mum’s Aboriginal and I’ve never been taught a lot about Aboriginal culture and I’ve sort of wanted to know, sort of like an identity thing, being Aboriginal, finding out more about it and the people.

**Table 6.2 Summary of Survey Responses to Question 1: What do you know about the Aboriginal Studies Course?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEMES</th>
<th>Wiradjuri</th>
<th>Dharumba</th>
<th>Minjungbal</th>
<th>Wiradjuri</th>
<th>Dharumba</th>
<th>Minjungbal</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nothing</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>81</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal culture/issue</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>57</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not much</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>54</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Summary of Theme 2: Aboriginality**

It is a generally held belief that Indigenous students will select the HSC Aboriginal Studies course as one of their senior subjects. Although this is a strong perception, the importance of Aboriginality in the Aboriginal Studies classroom suggests that Indigenous students are seeking an environment where they can experience a “sense of belonging”, where Aboriginal culture is valued and allows Indigenous students to identify with other Indigenous students, as both family and friends, and where all students’ opinions are respected. Whilst this would be the ideal situation it is interesting to note that this feeling of being with one’s own and where respect is a requirement was more evident in relation to Aboriginal Studies classes and was not felt in classes where non-Indigenous students were the majority.

The following themes proved to be a minor influence in students choice of HSC Aboriginal Studies course.

**Theme 3: The impact of others**

For some Indigenous students, their choice to undertake Aboriginal Studies was based on their friends, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, taking it or the
recommendations made by others. There was also an indication that those students enrolled in the Year 12 component of the course could influence the choice of those students coming into the senior years through their own experiences of the Aboriginal Studies course. A Minjungbal High student, Tammin (Indigenous student), was one such student who spoke about talking to others in Year 12. She based her decision to elect HSC Aboriginal Studies on what they had to say about the course.

My friends are in Year 12 and some of them do it and they told me that it was a really good subject and I was just interested to see what it was like. I wanted to go on the (community) excursion and see what that was like too.

For another student, Denise (Indigenous student), from Wiradjuri High, electing Aboriginal Studies was an easy choice because her friends had taken it. “Probably because we did (laughing) ... we were all friends”. She went on to explain that this was more in relation to being in a small school and that it was a means for them all to be together.

*Summary of Theme 3: The impact of others*

The findings from this theme indicate two main reasons given for the importance and influence of others on the choice to undertake Aboriginal Studies. These were the recommendation of those who have completed the course, and those who are undertaking it. This finding is important and has implications for promoting the Aboriginal Studies course.

*Theme 4: The teacher*

One Indigenous student identified the teacher as a contributing factor to his choice to elect Aboriginal Studies. Jacob (Indigenous student), a Year 11 student at Wiradjuri High talked about his positive experience with the teacher of Aboriginal Studies in other subjects and that this was one of the major reasons for his choice. He spoke about the enjoyment he gets from his Aboriginal Studies classes when he knows what the teacher is like and appreciates the way he teaches.
We were told that he was going to be the teacher actually and he was my teacher last year in History. I enjoy him as a teacher as well, so that’s why I picked Ab. Studies up.

When asked if he would still take Aboriginal Studies if he did not know the teacher Jacob had this to say:

I guess I would have taken it but I don’t think I would have enjoyed it as much as I do.

Although Jacob talked about knowing the teacher it is interesting that he felt that ‘enjoying the teacher’ was important to his learning.

**Summary of Theme 4: The Teacher**

The findings from this theme indicate that the Aboriginal Studies teacher can have an impact on the choices of Indigenous students to undertake Aboriginal Studies. This theme emerged under Research Question 2.1: *strengths and limitations of Aboriginal Studies*; and is explored further in that section.

**Theme 5: No options**

One response was made on the impact of their being no option to undertake Aboriginal Studies within a particular school. Cody (Indigenous student, Minjungbal High), a Year 12 student returning to school to complete his HSC, was put in a situation where his choice to elect Aboriginal Studies was taken away from him.

I went over there and was getting interviewed and then Miss J goes; well, you're Aboriginal, so you can do Aboriginal Studies so she wrote it down. So I really had no choice in Aboriginal Studies.

Although he spoke about the choice not being his, Cody was quite clear that if it had been his choice he would have chosen Aboriginal Studies anyway.

In some smaller schools the students do not have a choice, and this was clear in a response from Martin (Indigenous student) of Wiradjuri High spoke about the
previous school he was at and the decision the school had made in relation to all Indigenous students undertaking Aboriginal Studies.

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

Summary of Theme 5: No options

The findings from this theme indicate that some schools and teachers control of who does and who does not elect HSC Aboriginal Studies. In Cody’s interview he appeared uncomfortable with the fact that his decision to elect Aboriginal Studies had been taken away from him, even though his choice would still have been to elect it.

Theme 6: Career aspirations

Whilst it is a concern that Indigenous students can have restricted subject choice options, there are also students who consider Aboriginal Studies as a path to their chosen career. Ben (Indigenous student) is in Year 11 at Minjungbal High and his response indicates a carefully thought out plan to enter university and on to a career in medicine.

I chose Ab.Studies because I wanted to help me get into medicine through that way—It's like a bridging thing for the university I want to go to. You could do Aboriginal Studies and it gives you more credit and as well as being Aboriginal. So in that way I should get into university more easily.

For this student it was clear that he had done some “homework” on what was going to help him to gain entry into university. He believed that taking Aboriginal Studies was going to help him achieve this goal.

Summary of Theme 6: Career Aspirations

Although only one response related to career aspirations, it is important that students can see relationships between Aboriginal Studies content and their future
career aspirations, as Ben has done. Clearly Ben considered Aboriginal Studies as a useful subject for helping him gain entry to university. This theme is further explored under Research Question 1.2 as a factor influencing students’ choice not to undertake Aboriginal Studies.

**Results Non-Indigenous Students’ Voices**

Some of the identified themes (see Table 6.1) did not emerge from non-Indigenous student interviews. These students did not mention Theme 2: Aboriginality, Theme 6: no options and Theme 7: career aspirations. Therefore, these themes are not covered in this section of the results.

**Theme 1: Learning more about Aboriginal culture**

As with Indigenous students, some non-Indigenous students also identified learning more about Aboriginal culture as a contributing factor to their choice to undertake Aboriginal Studies. Janet (Wiradjuri High) spoke about choosing Aboriginal Studies to help her learn more about Indigenous friends’ background.

Because a lot of my friends are Aboriginal; their culture and background has been interesting to learn about.

Having Indigenous friends was also an incentive for Tony to undertake Aboriginal Studies, but in a different way. His interactions with Indigenous Elders and young people have provided Tony (non-Indigenous student, Dharumba High) with opportunities to expand his knowledge. This was one of the reasons he had for continuing to further his knowledge through the HSC Aboriginal Studies course.

I just really wanted to learn about the Aboriginal culture and stuff. Just learn the basics about Aboriginals, their culture, yeah. I’ve been with Elders and stuff, when I was younger, and they used to tell me all stories and it was fun, I really liked it.

Learning more about the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and the history of Australia, was the basis for Amanda’s (non-Indigenous student, Minjungbal High) decision to undertake the HSC Aboriginal Studies course.
I want to learn the history of this country, of Aboriginals and the white people here.

*Summary of Theme 1: Learning more about Aboriginal culture*

The findings from this theme indicate that many students felt that learning about Aboriginal culture was important in learning about the history of Australia. There was also an indication that having positive relationships with Indigenous people can be a motivator for electing Aboriginal Studies.

*Theme 3: The impact of others*

Some participants spoke of the influence others had on their choice to undertake Aboriginal Studies. These included a sibling who had undertaken the course, and friends. Others followed suggestions from parents, and teachers. Recommendations made by family members were an indication that those who enjoy the course “spread the word”. This was the case for Larissa, (non-Indigenous student, Dharumba High) who did not have the opportunity to undertake an Aboriginal Studies course in the junior years of her schooling but felt that her brother’s recommendation and her interest in the course were enough for her to choose Aboriginal Studies at the HSC level:

I chose it [Aboriginal Studies] because when my brother was at school he did it and he really enjoyed it. I didn’t do it in Year 9 or 10 so I thought it would be something different to do, it seemed pretty interesting so I chose it.

*Summary of Theme 3: The impact of others*

The findings from this theme indicate that others who are currently undertaking or have completed Aboriginal Studies can influence the choices other Indigenous students make in electing Aboriginal Studies. If students enjoy the course, they are more likely to commend it to others as an option.

*Theme 4: The teacher*
The teacher can have a major impact on the choices made by students to undertake Aboriginal Studies. For many students interviewed, previous positive experiences with particular teachers led to students making the choice to undertake Aboriginal Studies, based on which teacher would be teaching the course. Tony (non-Indigenous student, Dharumba High) was influenced by the Aboriginal Studies teacher he had in the junior years of his secondary schooling, with whom he had a good relationship and he considered “to be a good mate”.

Firstly, I chose it because I like the teacher that we had in Year 9 and I just really wanted to learn about the Aboriginal culture and stuff.

Other students at Dharumba High had talked to Larissa (non-Indigenous student) about the Aboriginal Studies teacher and told her that he was “a good teacher”. For Larissa (non-Indigenous student) this was particularly important for a subject like Aboriginal Studies, making her feel confident that the required content of the course would be learned. In the first instance Larissa thought she was choosing Aboriginal Studies with a particular teacher.

I thought it was going to be another teacher, and that teacher was said to be really good so, it’s good to have a good teacher in a subject like Ab Studies. So that sort of made me make the decision but I thought that it would be a good subject so I didn’t really mind who the teacher was, just as long we get to do what we’re supposed to do.

Summary of Theme 4: The teacher

The findings from this theme indicate that a respected teacher of Aboriginal Studies can impact on the choice a student makes to elect Aboriginal Studies. As demonstrated by these responses the teacher can be considered to be a friend but also a “good teacher of Aboriginal Studies”. The opinions of others about the teacher were also shown to be an important factor in selecting Aboriginal Studies.

Theme 5: Interest in Aboriginal Studies

Interest in Aboriginal Studies is what led Janet (Non-Indigenous student, Wiradjuri High), a Year 11 student at Wiradjuri High, to elect Aboriginal Studies.
Her Indigenous friends were also an influencing factor in that it allowed her to learn more about them, their background and culture.

I have been interested in Aboriginal Studies since choosing subjects for Year 11 and a lot of my friends are Aboriginal. Their culture and background has been interesting to learn about.

**Summary of Theme 5: Interest in Aboriginal Studies**

The findings from this theme indicate that students who have an interest in Aboriginal history and culture will more likely elect the Aboriginal Studies course. Learning about a friend’s background can be another reason to elect the course. Most often, interest in Aboriginal Studies is secondary and not a major motivator for choosing the course. Even so, interest does play a role in student enjoyment of the course.

**Results School Staff Voices**

The data reveals that a strong sense of identity is strongly correlated with Indigenous students feeling comfortable with themselves. The theme of Aboriginality arose in six of the 11 staff responses, in which they believed Aboriginality was the major reason for Indigenous students choosing to undertake the HSC Aboriginal Studies course, as shown in Table 6.3. Some staff indicated that some Indigenous students saw Aboriginal Studies as a connection to their identity.

**Theme 1: Aboriginality**

In their responses staff spoke of how Indigenous students see a connection with Aboriginal Studies through their identity as Aboriginal people. Paul is the Principal at Wiradjuri High and he spoke about Indigenous students seeing Aboriginal Studies as a subject that is relevant to them.

For the Aboriginal students, they choose the HSC course because they think it will be relevant to them.
Table 6.3 Staff Responses as to what Influenced Students’ Choice to Elect Aboriginal Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEMES</th>
<th>Wiradjuri</th>
<th>Dharumba</th>
<th>Minjungbal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T1</td>
<td>T2</td>
<td>T3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginality</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn more about Aboriginal culture</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career aspirations</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other programs</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Indigenous students</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy Option</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note:
T = Teacher. P = Principal. A = AEA

This was backed up by two teachers, Colin and Brian, (Wiradjuri High) who suggested that Indigenous students would be inclined to look at the list of subjects, see Aboriginal Studies and decide, based on the name, that it would be a course for them. Colin said:

They would have looked down that list, Aboriginal, I’m Aboriginal, that’ll do me, you know.

Brian agreed:

The title is one component—Aboriginal Studies must only be for Aboriginal students.

Thus, in the opinion of their teachers, Indigenous students are seeing a connection between their Aboriginality and the name of the course. Richard, the teacher at Dharumba High expressed a view that, for Indigenous students, Aboriginal Studies offered both a “connection” to the subject and a feeling of “comfort”, leading to deeper understandings of culture and identity.
Well, a lot of the Aboriginal kids choose it because they connect. I think some of the main reasons is it's a comfortable thing for them to study. And then I think, on a deeper level, there is a need to understand their culture more. It's an interesting thing to learn and then deeper into it, they're starting to realise: Oh, this is a part of my identity.

Another teacher, Shayne (Teacher, Wiradjuri High), also saw a “connection” for Indigenous students between HSC Aboriginal Studies and a link to identity; hence their reason for electing Aboriginal Studies.

I would like to think it’s a factor of perhaps themselves seeking identity. I think students are choosing Aboriginal Studies because it’s interesting, they want to connect with a form of identity.

A strong sense of identity in being proud Indigenous people was what Stella, an AEA (Dharumba High) thought encouraged Indigenous students to undertake Aboriginal Studies. For many Indigenous students, she believed they might hold perceptions that they would already have the knowledge that would enable them to be successful in the course.

I hope to think that it’s because they’re proud of who they are and because they want to learn. I think it’s because being Koori students they might think ok, I should know this, I should know what the teacher’s talking about, but sometimes they don’t.

Summary of Theme 1: Aboriginality

The findings from this theme indicate that Aboriginality and identity are arguably important aspects of a young Indigenous person’s “sense of belonging”. Responses made by school staff indicate that Indigenous students seem to be making links to identity in the course name.

Theme 2: Learning more about Aboriginal culture

Some school staff believed that there were Indigenous students motivated to learn more about their own culture; hence they elect HSC Aboriginal Studies to do that. Colin’s (Teacher, Wiradjuri High) response suggests that Indigenous students may be looking for much more than this.
There are a number of kids who choose it because they think they want to know about their culture, and we don’t do a course about culture.

Stella, the AEA at Dharumba High, spoke about Indigenous students’ lack of knowledge in areas of traditional aspects of culture and therefore they were choosing Aboriginal Studies to learn more.

I think it’s the fact that some of them are curious because they don’t know a lot about, maybe the traditional stuff, how other areas are coping with the politics of it all. I think they’re interested simply because they want to know more.

Summary of Theme 2: Learning more about Aboriginal culture

The findings from this theme indicate that there was a view that some Indigenous students had a lack of cultural knowledge and therefore they were seeking to elect HSC Aboriginal Studies to fill the void. However, it is important to keep in mind that Aboriginal Studies has not been designed as a cultural course. Rather, Aboriginal Studies is about educating all students about the shared history of Australia (Stage 6 Aboriginal Studies Syllabus, p. 8). This highlights a tension between curriculum design and student experiences in school subjects.

Theme 3: Interest

Interest in the HSC Aboriginal Studies course indicates that there are those who do not need any other reason to elect the course other than their interest in Aboriginal issues and affairs. Warren (Principal, Dharumba High) talked about those students who have a genuine “interest and commitment”, who are looking to the future and Reconciliation.

Then there's another group of students that are genuinely interested in Aboriginal Studies, and when I talked to the Aboriginal students, that link is quite easy to make. But then there's another group of students, White European students that are selecting Aboriginal Studies for just that reason. They've got a real interest and commitment to understanding the issues associated with Aboriginality and how, I suppose they're looking at the broader picture of reconciliation and
how we can make this country work better, and they make that commitment at a young age to study Aboriginal Studies in Year 11 and 12.

Jennifer, a teacher at Minjungbal High, spoke of those students who have always wanted to undertake Aboriginal Studies, suggesting that the students have made decisions about their future options with further education or employment.

I think with some of the students you have the ones that definitely always wanted to do Indigenous or Aboriginal Studies and they have a reason behind it because that's one of the interviews when they go to university.

**Summary of Theme 3: Interest**

The findings from this theme indicate that having an interest in Aboriginal Studies proves to be a strong incentive for many students to undertake the course. It would appear from the responses that many students can see the “big picture” of achieving Reconciliation through undertaking Aboriginal Studies and therefore make a commitment to it as a course of study.

**Theme 4: The Teacher**

There were staff members who considered that the teacher can impact on the choice made to undertake Aboriginal Studies, and this offers further support for the validity of student responses in relation to this theme. Richard (Teacher, Dharumba High) considered in the first instance that his appearance was a factor in the choices students made but then he also acknowledged that if the teacher is popular then the students are more likely to elect that subject.

Our Aboriginal Studies classes have doubled over the last couple of years. Students’ taking it has doubled. Superficially I have earrings and long hair. Students tend to be very superficial and I believe I’m relatively popular with the students in the school. I don't want to take the credit for it but kids are going to sort of think: I want someone fun. I hope I don't sound like a big head here, but I think if the teacher is talking about the subject, superficially looks interesting to the students, he's going to get more students in his class. So I think that's got a big thing to do with it. If the teacher is popular amongst the students and he is describing what that subject is, then they will pick it
as well. My boss keeps blowing out at how many Koori students want
to pick the class.

Coral, the AEA at Minjungbal, spoke about students feeling comfortable with
the teacher and that they can be the driving force behind Aboriginal Studies.

Particularly the teacher drives it, like they identify with Jan and a lot
of our kids like that, to be able to talk about issues and feeling
comfortable in the school and in the classroom to deal with the
subject.

Summary of Theme 4: The teacher

The findings from this theme indicate there is a common belief that students
often look for the “popular” teacher. As well, there are indications that the teacher
who makes students feel comfortable can also be the one to attract students to the
course.

Theme 5: Career Aspirations

Linking Aboriginal Studies to a career is something that appears not to be
carefully thought through across students and staff (see previous section). Staff
responses suggest that they felt students will only consider Aboriginal Studies as an
option if it connects somehow to the career aspirations they have. Brian (teacher,
Wiradjuri) spoke about how some students elect Aboriginal Studies based on a
particular employment area, and the relevance that Aboriginal Studies has to that
area.

I’ve had one or two students who’ve said that they were particularly
interested in working in certain areas, so they saw Aboriginal Studies
as being a direct ride to that subject. There are Aboriginal students
who again, just like any student has picked Aboriginal Studies
because they see it as connecting to some sort of job.

Summary of Theme 5: Career Aspirations

The findings from this theme indicate that there are Indigenous students who
do consider Aboriginal Studies as connecting to their career aspirations. However, as
the teacher’s response illustrates, not all Indigenous students will see this. Only a small number will, when they are considering the type of work they want to do.

**Results Parents’ Voices**

Parent support in an Indigenous student choice to elect Aboriginal Studies at the HSC level is paramount. It was clearly shown that parents in this study were very supportive of their children undertaking Aboriginal Studies. Robyn (Indigenous Parent, Minjungbal) spoke about the reasons her son, Ben, elected Aboriginal Studies and that he had always had it in his mind. Furthermore, she mentioned elsewhere in the interview that the impact of his brother undertaking the course could have influenced his choice.

He had decided he was going to do it on Day 1 coming to High school. His brother did it. He left last year; he didn't finish Year 12 but he did it, he always planned on going into it—just waiting to do it ...

Marion (Indigenous Parent, Wiradjuri) spoke about the knowledge that her daughter, Shay already had and that undertaking Aboriginal Studies would build on that knowledge. She recognised that Shay was also in a position to pass that knowledge on to others.

Shay’s a kid who’s passionate about her culture. Information has always been passed down in our family, and she is one of the Aboriginal kids in this town who really knows her roots and knows where she belongs. She’s also on about reconciliation so she sees the opportunity to learn more about her culture at school, and also pass that on to her peers.

Marion continued to talk about the positive aspects of Shay’s learning journey in Aboriginal Studies. Sharing became a major focus, and learning about cultures outside her own.

I was over the moon that she had chosen Aboriginal Studies. I know that there are things that I can pass onto her but I think if she is exposed to a whole lot of different things … She actually shared stuff with me from her Aboriginal Studies course, she’s read stories about people, other people outside of our area, she knows the stories of the people from here, but reading about other Aboriginal people who have
achieved stuff … I think that’s what’s driven her into actually making a real commitment to learning more.

Summary Parent Voices

The findings from the responses made by these parents are that they are pleased that their children have chosen to undertake Aboriginal Studies. Two parents spoke about feeling disadvantaged that they did not have the opportunity to undertake the course. The fact that Aboriginal Studies was not offered when they were at school was an indication that it is a course that is attractive to many Indigenous people. Other responses show that Aboriginal Studies can further enhance the knowledge that Indigenous students already have about Aboriginal culture, leading them to be learners as well as teachers with family and friends.

Results and Discussion Research Question 1.2: Indigenous Students’ Perceptions as to why Other Students do not choose the HSC Aboriginal Studies Course (Aim 1)

Overview

Research Question 1.2 sought to ascertain the perceptions of students undertaking the Aboriginal Studies course as to why they thought other students did not select Aboriginal Studies as one of their HSC options. The data collected from the three schools and the survey responses identified four significant findings as to why students do not select the HSC Aboriginal Studies course. These are shown in Table 6.4 and survey responses Table 6.5: 1) Disinterest; 2) Not being Aboriginal, 3) Interference with career aspirations, and 4) timetable issues. Each theme is now discussed in turn.

Results Indigenous Students’ Voices

Theme 1: Disinterested

The major finding as to why Indigenous students thought other students did not choose Aboriginal Studies was that they were not interested in the course. There was also the response that other students “did not really want to learn about it” and
that, for non-Indigenous students, there was no interest in learning about “our culture”. Consider the following comments:

   Obviously if they didn’t choose, they’re not real interested in it. I mean they know what it’s about (Denise, Indigenous student, Wiradjuri High).

   Jacob (Indigenous student, Wiradjuri High), talked about other subjects that were seen to be more interesting; this was a reason many students would not elect Aboriginal Studies. He also felt that Aboriginal culture was considered to be uninteresting for students.

   I don’t think they really want to learn about it. They just don’t find it as interesting as other subjects and cause they’re probably not interested in our culture.

   There was much surprise among interviewees for the reasons that had been given by Indigenous students as to why they did not elect the Aboriginal Studies course. Barbara (Indigenous student, Wiradjuri High) was surprised to hear from another Indigenous student that “he never thought about it”.

   There was this boy from the hostel and I asked him why he didn’t choose Aboriginal Studies and he said that he knew everything about Aboriginal Studies, he thinks he knows everything. There’s another Year 10 boy that I asked why he didn’t choose Aboriginal Studies and he goes he didn’t think about it, like he never even thought about it!

Summary of Theme 1: Disinterested

   The findings from this theme indicate that students quite often have other subjects that they are interested in. Also from these responses it was clear that the students felt that “their culture” was seen to be uninteresting; therefore students would not elect Aboriginal Studies.
Table 6.4 Student Responses as to what Influences the Choice of Others not to Elect Aboriginal Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEMES</th>
<th>Wiradjuri</th>
<th>Dharumba</th>
<th>Minjungbal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disinterested</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not being Aboriginal</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interference with career aspirations</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too many Indigenous students</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timetabling Issues</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No benefits</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Already have knowledge</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too easy</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had too much</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends/others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: NI = Non-Indigenous. All other numbers refer to Indigenous students

Theme 2: Not being Aboriginal

While Aboriginal Studies was developed for all students, there is still the very common misconception among students that Aboriginal Studies is only for Aboriginal students. Therefore, many non-Indigenous students do not consider or choose it as a HSC subject, even if they are interested.

While this is a belief held by many non-Indigenous students, the Indigenous students in this study also identified that it could be a valid reason for not choosing Aboriginal Studies. Marilyn (Indigenous student, Wiradjuri High) believed that many non-Indigenous students did not elect Aboriginal Studies because they thought the course was only for Indigenous students.

Just because they think you have to be Aboriginal to choose Aboriginal Studies. That’s not what they told me but I haven’t really sat down and said, why didn’t you choose it?

She backed this belief up by stating:
… because if I was white I don’t think I would choose it.

Another student, Martin (Indigenous student, Wiradjuri High) also believed that Aboriginal Studies was for Indigenous students but that non-Indigenous students might not elect it because the Aboriginal Studies classes could be “pretty wild”.

Well that’s what it’s for … because every town’s different and sometimes the non-Aboriginal kids don’t pick it because sometimes it can be pretty wild.

Students also indicated that these were the kind of things they were told by their non-Aboriginal friends. As pointed out by Martin (Indigenous student, Wiradjuri High):

A lot of kids think too that you can’t go into it cause you’re not Aboriginal. That’s what they tell me, I’m not going in there, I’m not Aboriginal.

Tammin (Indigenous student, Minjungbal High) was also surprised that some Indigenous students did not elect Aboriginal Studies.

There's some Aboriginal students and Torres Strait Islanders who didn't even choose it as well.

**Summary of Theme 2: Not being Aboriginal**

The findings from this theme indicate that some Indigenous students believe that non-Indigenous student do not elect Aboriginal Studies because they are not Indigenous. There was also a perception held by many Indigenous students that all Indigenous students should elect it, regardless of other factors with regard to subject choices.

**Theme 3: Interference with career aspirations**

Career aspirations can have a major impact on the subjects chosen in the HSC. Aboriginal Studies is no exception. Indigenous students’ responses indicate that there is quite often a connection between students not electing Aboriginal Studies and the career they hope to follow. Also in relation to career options timetabling
contribute to students reconsidering their choice to undertake Aboriginal Studies. Subjects are put up against each other on subject elective lines and quite often those that are considered to be university entry courses are put up against Aboriginal Studies. Megan (Indigenous student, Dharumba High) thought that the “smarter people” would be seeking subjects that would place them in a position where they could further their career.

I just think some of the smarter people think that possibly it couldn’t further their career, probably not interested in Aboriginal career.

Tammin (Indigenous student, Minjungbal High) spoke about non-Indigenous students not being interested but there was also an indication that if Aboriginal Studies was not going to help with their career then they would chose another subject.

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

Shay (Indigenous student, Wiradjuri High) also spoke about links between career and the choice to elect Aboriginal Studies; she went further to explain that the issue of making up units for the HSC was also a contributing factor.

With some Koori kids it mightn’t be within their career, they mightn’t have to study that. Cause you have to make up 12 units and you can only do certain subjects and if you want a UAI you have to work around that to make up 12 units. So Aboriginal Studies mightn’t mean anything to students for their career.

Summary of Theme 3: Interference with career aspirations

The findings from this theme indicate that only those who could see connections to their future career would consider electing Aboriginal Studies. It was clear across all responses that those seeking academic qualifications would be considering their options with regard to the subjects they take so that they would have the required 12 units to gain their HSC.
Theme 4: Too many Indigenous students

There was also the perception that non-Indigenous students would have a feeling of not belonging and that more Indigenous students in the classroom might make them feel uncomfortable. Therefore, if an Aboriginal Studies class has a majority of Indigenous students then quite often it is considered to be a class only for Indigenous students. This is shown in Theresa’s (Indigenous student, Minjungbal High) response:

Some do think that it's a course just for Aboriginal students. I think because the majority of the class here is Indigenous they would think that it is mainly just for Indigenous students.

Michael (Indigenous student, Wiradjuri High) identified that being non-Indigenous in a class with majority Indigenous students might lead to students not fitting in:

They’re not Aboriginal, they might think they might not fit in, with all the other Koori kids.

Shay made the same observation that it could be because the majority of enrolments in the Aboriginal Studies class could be Indigenous.

There might be more black kids than white … most Koori kids that I know that are in year 11 take it (Shay Indigenous student, Wiradjuri High).

Summary of Theme 4: Too many Indigenous students

The findings from this theme indicate that if there are more Indigenous students in the class then the perception is that Aboriginal Studies is only for Indigenous students. There was also an indication that if there were more Indigenous students than non-Indigenous students, the latter might feel uncomfortable.

Results Non-Indigenous students’ voices

There are a range of reasons surrounding the choice non-Indigenous students make in relation to not elect Aboriginal Studies as one of their HSC options. The
The perception that the history of Indigenous Australia does not relate to Australian history is just one. The four non-Indigenous students who were interviewed for this study all identified disinterest as the major reason other students did not elect Aboriginal Studies (see Table 6.4). What follows are the thoughts of these students sharing why they think other students do not consider Aboriginal Studies as one of their HSC options, and what they believe motivates that choice.

**Theme 1: Disinterested**

Non-Indigenous students also identified that not being interested in Aboriginal Studies, and not wanting to learn about Aboriginal culture were seen to be major reasons as to why students might not elect the course. As Tony (non-Indigenous student, Dharumba High) stated:

> If they’re not interested in it, they don’t really want to learn about it.

Janet’s (non-Indigenous student, Wiradjuri High) own interest in Aboriginal Studies left her unsure as to why others would not elect the course.

> I am unsure as there is only myself and one other non-Aboriginal person in the class. I guess it’s a subject that doesn’t interest them or they have their own belief.

Larissa (non-Indigenous student, Dharumba High) spoke about other students not “looking into it” if they had no interest in the Aboriginal Studies course. She also spoke about the lack of good information about the course so that students could make informed choices.

> I don’t know. Oh I thought that most people knew, but obviously if they’re not interested in the subject then they wouldn’t look into it. Because they don’t know what’s in it I think, if it was more advertised, if people said what was actually in it then I think a lot more people would choose it.

A friend of Amanda’s (non-Indigenous student, Minjunghal High) made the choice to move onto another course after she visited an Aboriginal Studies class and
“found it boring”. Amanda also thought that students may not be interested in the history that is presented in the Aboriginal Studies course.

They might think it’s boring and they don't want to know about the history. They just think like, we own this land and all that—my friend came in but she found it boring so then she picked Geography instead.

Background and limited knowledge of their culture is the reason Larissa (non-Indigenous student, Dharumba High) had for Indigenous students not electing Aboriginal Studies.

Aboriginal people don’t choose it because some might not want to know about their culture, cause some are half or quarter and it’s sort of, they’ve been brought up in more of a white society, to their traditional, and they don’t really want to know about, in a way

*Summary of Theme: Disinterested*

The findings from this theme indicate that there are many forms of disinterest. In this situation it can be disinterest in learning about Aboriginal culture; disinterest in actual subject content; disinterest in learning Aboriginal history. In any case, non-Indigenous students have identified that these are the areas that could offer reasons as to why students do not elect HSC Aboriginal Studies.

**Table 6.5** Q3.Why didn’t you choose Aboriginal Studies?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEMES</th>
<th>Non-Indigenous</th>
<th>Indigenous</th>
<th>TOTALS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No interest</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No link to career</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t want to</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Aboriginal</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Line clash</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course content unknown</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too much</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scaling</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>63</strong></td>
<td><strong>26</strong></td>
<td><strong>101</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Results school staff voices**

*Theme 1: Not being Aboriginal*

School staff also identified that many non-Indigenous students may not elect Aboriginal Studies based on a belief that Aboriginal Studies is only for Indigenous students. Shayne (Teacher Wiradjuri High) saw it as students looking at the name of the course and then basing their decision on that.

The title is one component, Aboriginal Studies, must only be for Aboriginal students.

Jasmine’s (AEA Wiradjuri High) experiences with non-Indigenous students making course selections were based on their “bad attitude” about who Aboriginal Studies is for.

I’ve had a few non-Aboriginal kids that have said “I’m not taking that class, I’m not a black fella”. That attitude is the wrong attitude because if you’re going to co-exist within the school environment you have to actually see where they’re coming from.

For Jennifer (Teacher Minjungbal High) this was just one reason as she also outlined other factors connected to the choice not to elect Aboriginal Studies, from parents to the misconceptions held about the scaling of the course.

I think, one, is Aboriginal Studies is for Aboriginal students. Two, I don't think that a lot of parents are aware of the importance of the subject because it wasn't there when they went through. I think, three, the misinformation and this has come out a lot through different people as to you cannot get a High rate which is totally wrong if you do Aboriginal Studies. And I think well, it's not for me because they don't see how it can enhance. I think that's all the reasons. No, two of my girls, because of the line choice, unfortunately for the line choice they didn't select it.

**Summary of Theme 1: Not Aboriginal**

The findings from this theme indicate that staff members were aware of the misconception that is held by non-Indigenous students that Aboriginal Studies was only for Indigenous students. This indicates that the Aboriginal Studies course may
need to be promoted to non-Indigenous students in a way that a clear message is sent that the course is for ALL students.

Table 6.6 Staff responses as to what influenced student’s choice not to elect Aboriginal Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEMES</th>
<th>Wiradjuri</th>
<th>Dharumba</th>
<th>Minjungbal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T1</td>
<td>T2</td>
<td>T3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Aboriginal</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Interested</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Path</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No options—the line offered on/Other Options</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had too much—overkill</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too Easy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UAI</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Already have the knowledge</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not worthwhile/no benefits</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Question 2.1: Summary of Indigenous Students’ Perceptions of the Strengths and Limitations of the HSC Aboriginal Studies Course (Aim 2)

Overview

Research Question 2.1 sought to identify the strengths and limitations of the Aboriginal Studies course. The data collected from the three schools identified one significant connecting theme (see Table 6.5) in relation to the strength of the Aboriginal Studies course. Across all participants’ responses the importance of connections with the community and the benefits that could be derived by all was clear. For Indigenous students, a second strength was related to the importance of the teacher of Aboriginal Studies. Students indicated that their relationship with their teacher could almost certainly impact on their learning in Aboriginal Studies. The majority of students had positive things to say about their teachers and the support given in their senior years of school.
In relation to the limitations of the Aboriginal Studies course, a number of themes came from the data. All participants spoke of the lack of resources, the lack of promotion of the Aboriginal Studies course and a call for the course to be made compulsory.

**Results Indigenous Students’ Voices—Strengths of HSC Aboriginal Studies**

**Theme 1: Community Involvement in Aboriginal Studies**

There was common agreement among interviewees of the importance of excursions and the knowledge that can be gained from these types of experiences. Some students felt that they were not able to fully understand what they were reading in class until connections could be made through community visits and interaction with Indigenous people. Having the opportunity to go into a community outside the local one was seen to be very beneficial as it provided hands-on experiences. These experiences helped understanding for those who viewed themselves as “hands-on people”. Consider, for example, Ben’s (Minjungbal High) response:

*I like the hands-on stuff, which is really good. We have someone that tells you what it's like and to experience it in (this community). That helps a lot because I like to see things; I understand things when I see them more than reading about it.*

**Table 6.7** Student responses as to what they see as the strengths and limitations of the Aboriginal Studies Course.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEMES</th>
<th>Wiradjuri High</th>
<th>Dharumba High</th>
<th>Minjungbal High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5  6  7</td>
<td>1  NI</td>
<td>2  3 NI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Connections</td>
<td>✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓</td>
<td>✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓</td>
<td>✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓</td>
<td>✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓</td>
<td>✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compulsory/mandatory</td>
<td>✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓</td>
<td>✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓</td>
<td>✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotion</td>
<td>✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓</td>
<td>✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓</td>
<td>✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓</td>
<td>✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓</td>
<td>✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓  ✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:*

NI = Non-Indigenous
Theresa, also from Minjungbal High, felt she was gaining a better understanding through making links between in-class texts, the community environment and experiences that Indigenous community members shared.

We can read about situations but you just had to go into (this community) and see it for yourself what it's like there. Meet some of the people, some of the community and you really got a better understanding of it all.

Another student, Taryn (Indigenous student, Dharumba High), positioned visits into the community as another learning environment, whereas learning from Indigenous community members was both “interesting and fun”.

Usually when we go on excursions we go to see Koori people, Aboriginal people and they always make us laugh. Like it's not one of them excursions where you sit there and take notes and you're just bored out of your mind. With our excursions, and what we do, we're always laughing and everyone’s paying attention, cause it’s interesting what we’re learning.

Not only were visits into the community seen to be positive learning experiences, Indigenous guest speakers were also considered to hold much knowledge about past events, something which textbooks could not provide. Michael (Indigenous student Wiradjuri High) spoke about Indigenous people putting local history into perspective.

People come and talk to us about stuff that happened around this region, people that were round for that point in time, coming in and talk to us about it. Like the Freedom Rides or something. We had someone come in about that, just talk.

Taryn (Indigenous student, Dharumba High) expanded on this by talking about the experiences and knowledge that Elders shared in the classroom. For many students, community members visiting Aboriginal Studies classes’ assists in the understanding of specific topics covered in texts.

Most of the stuff we read out of text books you can’t really get an understanding of until you actually experience it. Having people coming and talk to us about their experience, like Elders, helps.
Summary of Theme 1: Community Involvement in Aboriginal Studies

All Indigenous student responses in relation to community connections identified that educationally and culturally they could learn so much more than what was presented only in books. The visits to communities, including outside the local one, provided the chance for all students to experience and learn in a culturally rich environment. By contrast, the local community allowed highly respected Indigenous Elders the opportunity to come into classrooms to share their knowledge. Across all interviews, the students were keen for more of these types of activities to be included into the Aboriginal Studies curriculum.

Theme 2: The Teacher of Aboriginal Studies

As identified under Research Question 1.1, a motivating factor for choosing Aboriginal Studies in some cases was the teacher of Aboriginal Studies. When this happened it was also considered to be a strength of the course. Indigenous students saw their relationship with the teacher as very important and students were keen to talk about what made their teacher unique. Responses revealed a number of positive aspects of a “good” Aboriginal Studies teacher, including being “fair and encouraging”.

One student spoke about her teacher as having these “fair and encouraging” qualities while also having a friendly and approachable personality. Tammin (Indigenous student, Minjungbal High) thought this was especially important in that it made the teacher more approachable, particularly when something was not clearly understood.

Miss J is really good, I suppose we like her because of her nature and her personality. She's really nice and easy to talk to and she's a fair teacher. She listens to you and encourages you to approach her if you don't understand anything.

Another student, Ben (Indigenous student Minjungbal High), spoke about the same teacher and how she was prepared to be open to new learning. He also made a
point that it was desirable to have a teacher who was enthusiastic about teaching Aboriginal Studies, as this would benefit all students.

Because every time she lectures a class she learns something new herself and there’s nothing's wrong with that. If you have a teacher that's enthusiastic about teaching, it's going to be good for the class.

The importance of teachers being learners came through in responses where teachers had trained in the area of Aboriginal Studies. These “qualifications” were viewed by some students as “a ticket to teaching” Aboriginal Studies. In addition to this, these qualified teachers were positive role models to some students.

Michael (Indigenous student, Wiradjuri High) acknowledged that his teacher had the appropriate qualifications to teach Aboriginal Studies. This in turn encouraged Michael to realise his own potential.

Oh, well he learned it and he’s not even Aboriginal, so if he can do it, I reckon I can do it.

These “trained teachers” were considered good teachers who could establish positive relationships with the students. Shay (Indigenous student, Wiradjuri High) believed that the training the teacher had done made him a better qualified teacher of Aboriginal Studies in that he was more aware and understanding of Indigenous student needs.

Well, my relationship with the teacher is really good; I think he’s a positive teacher. I don’t know what some of the other students think, but I think he’s a real great teacher. He understands cause he’s done the training and stuff. I just find him a really good teacher and I’m glad to have him as a teacher.

Cause I know what cause I’m understanding it more, and he explains it in a way that we can understand it. Like in some other subjects teachers just give you the work and a text book and say do it. They don’t explain it, the work properly.
Summary of Theme 2: The Teacher of Aboriginal Studies

The data showed that the strength of Aboriginal Studies depends on having a quality teacher who is enthusiastic, understanding, and supportive, whilst also being a learner as well as a teacher. Across responses, Indigenous students identified that the teachers currently teaching Aboriginal Studies have a background to the subject but are also aware of the needs of Indigenous students. This supports the contention that Aboriginal Studies teachers can play a major role in the support of Indigenous students by being an understanding, supportive teacher (Frigo, 1999).

Results Non-Indigenous Students’ Voices—Strengths of HSC Aboriginal Studies

Theme 1: Community Involvement in Aboriginal Studies

Non-Indigenous students also acknowledged the benefits of community contact. They felt it was a means of learning much more than what the text books could offer.

Probably hands on type thing, it’s easier to pick up when you’re actually doing something or when someone’s showing you something, not just like writing stuff out of a book. We’ve been on one excursion, we went to the TAFE, and we were speaking to, can’t remember his name, but it was to an Aboriginal perspective on justice and education. It was sort of like a little seminar thing during lunchtime and one period so it was pretty short, but it was pretty good, we learnt a bit from that. Just hearing it from someone that actually went through it so it’s more of a personal perspective than just a text book one (Larissa Non-Indigenous Student Dharumba High)

This student clearly enjoyed the “personal” touch of being in the community, where real experiences were shared with students but learning was still in place.

Summary of Theme 1: Community involvement in Aboriginal Studies

By contrast, and not surprisingly, Indigenous students felt more strongly about the connections made with the community, seeing it was a means of them strengthening their cultural ties with the Indigenous people in their community. For both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students there was an opportunity to reinforce the learning that had taken place in the classroom with those Elders or other
Indigenous community members who they came into contact with. It became, for the majority of the students, “better learning” as it was “real” and “hands-on”. Both groups could see the importance of authentic cultural experiences.

**Theme 1: The Teacher**

Responses in this theme indicate that who the teacher is can be critical to the success of the subject. Some students chose Aboriginal Studies because they thought a particular teacher was teaching it, only to find, to their disappointment, that they had someone else. Even though it was felt by the students that this did not impact on their choice or their learning, there were clear indications that this was not the case.

**Results Indigenous Students’ Voices—Limitations of HSC Aboriginal Studies**

**Theme 1: Lack of Resources**

In relation to the limitations of the Aboriginal Studies course, as a group, the Indigenous students saw the lack of resources as a major disadvantage in the course. The importance of a textbook came up in most responses but there was an indication that it could be utilised with support from the community. Todd (Indigenous student, Minjungbal High) felt that “You could do both—community and a textbook” so that the two could complement each other.

Another student, Tara (Indigenous student, Minjungbal High), spoke about the use of the syllabus as a resource in the Aboriginal Studies classroom and how it did support their learning, but the need for a textbook was still important as it would have content that the syllabus could not.

It goes back to we use the syllabus a lot. That doesn't have very much in it but a textbook that has so much more. I definitely think we need the textbook.

A textbook was also considered to be more desirable over teacher made workbooks. Cody (Indigenous student, Minjungbal High) spoke about having a “proper” book that had “lots of information” and if they had textbooks in other subjects then why not have one for Aboriginal Studies.
Yes, it would be great to have a textbook. You only get the one book, they're good little workbooks, but it would be better if you had like a proper one that you can actually grab and look through and there's lots of information in detail. We have an actual textbook for lots of other subjects but not a proper one for Aboriginal Studies.

Indigenous students spoke of the importance of a textbook in Aboriginal Studies, and identified that these “proper” resources were available in other subject areas. The indication was that a textbook would hold much more information then what was available in “little workbooks” and demonstrate that educators also value Aboriginal Studies as an important subject.

Theme 2: Promotion of the HSC Aboriginal Studies Course

Indigenous students felt that there could be more interest in the Aboriginal Studies course if it was promoted in way that targeted a wider audience, including the non-Indigenous student population. Denise (Indigenous student, Wiradjuri High) felt that there was no promotion:

No, there was no promoting of it…

No guidance in the choices to make at the HSC level was what Marilyn (Indigenous student, Wiradjuri High) talked about. She referred to the numbers needed for a course to be viable and how, if enough students did not elect a course, then it did not run.

Well, no-one really talks about it, you’re just given your selections and then you just choose whatever’s there and if there’s enough then they make the class. You are given a booklet, but they don’t say oh this is good and this is good. They just give it to you and then you choose what you want to do.

This student suggested that explanation to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students might break down some barriers in allowing non-Indigenous students to see that the Aboriginal Studies course is for all students.

Maybe to try and focus on explaining to students that it isn't just for Aboriginal and Indigenous students because I think a lot of non-
Indigenous students will think it was just for them (Indigenous students), to try to promote more that it's for everyone, to help everyone (Indigenous Student Minjungbal High).

**Summary of Theme 2: Promotion of the HSC Aboriginal Studies Course**

The findings from this theme indicate that promotion of the Aboriginal Studies course is at a minimum. Students, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, are not appearing to get the information they need to make the choice as to whether Aboriginal Studies is a course that they should undertake. It was clear that the issue of numbers was of major concern, and this was something also raised by staff. The indications are that there could be more students electing the course if they had the right information and schools were in a position to deal with the “numbers game” of having enough students to make courses viable.

**Theme: The Ethnicity of the Teacher of Aboriginal Studies**

Some students strongly questioned having a teacher who was non-Indigenous and believed they were not the most appropriate person to be teaching this significant cultural content.

I don’t know you just sort of feel a bit uncomfortable, you just think why aren’t there so many Aboriginal people doing that sort of thing. Mr S he’s a nice man an everything, but sometimes I feel like how can he teach me this, not being nasty to him or anything, cause I think he’s a really good teacher, but, I just think that an Aboriginal teacher should be teaching Aboriginal Studies (Indigenous Student, Wiradjuri High).

Responses from non-Indigenous students did not indicate a particular opinion about the ethnicity of the teacher, although one student, Larissa (Indigenous student, Dharumba High), had very strong opinions about her teacher almost to the point of her taking up the Aboriginal Studies course by correspondence. Her feeling was that if certain approaches to the content were being put across this could lead to students coming out of the class with racist, rather than tolerant views.

Well, you just don’t know who’s right in a way. If you hear somebody saying stuff about a group, then you think well it’s like a hatred type thing. It’s supposed to be not like that any more, how it used to be, cause it’s in the past, and you can’t change the past. It should not be
compared so that we don’t have a racial view we should have an open view. I just don’t listen you know, I just sort of tune out, I just think well that’s wrong, I’ll just keep reading. I really like the course and I was thinking of doing it by correspondence because I’m really not liking how the points are put across. I learnt a lot about it in primary school, I know that that’s pretty right, how it was, how I was told then, like comparing it to the notes we get and the sort of opinions that he puts across. But I really like the course and the content in it and it’s really enjoyable, it’s one of my favourite subjects, that’s why I wouldn’t want to drop it but I’m not really liking it at the moment. I have to drop a course at the end of Year 11, and I don’t want to drop it. It’s not the course, its good.

Larissa also felt that that some of the content was presented in a confusing manner and that some content could be offensive.

I find it confusing because of the different opinions he puts across, but he makes it interesting in a way by handing out sheets. Then we can Highlight and stuff and then we can take it in better cause sometimes he just talks and we have to write down what he’s saying. It gets a bit confusing cause then we’ll miss words and he’ll get angry (laughs) and then have to repeat himself. I just feel that he’s one sided at times, and it could be offending some people. If he stated himself a bit better, that’d be not as confusing.

This theme of teacher ethnicity was shown to be of major concern for some students. Although it was a theme that was not identified by many students the fact that it has been raised makes it important. Students rely on their teachers to provide them with true and accurate material and information; if this is not happening in the classroom then students can take away certain attitudes. In this case there was the notion that the teacher could be unintentionally promoting racism in the classroom.

**Results Non-Indigenous Students’ Voices—Limitations of HSC Aboriginal Studies**

**Theme 1: Lack of Resources**

The findings from this theme indicate that resources are not only important to teachers, students can see their worth. Although teachers take the time to prepare materials to assist the students it was still considered to be a disadvantage at the senior secondary level. Materials have been developed to support the Aboriginal
Studies course but much material is out of date and needs to be revised, and of course many teachers and students are not aware of these resources.

**Theme 2: Promotion of the HSC Aboriginal Studies Course**

A non-Indigenous student spoke about the importance of having someone at the same age level to come and speak to other students in promoting the Aboriginal Studies course, as this could be more relevant to the students.

Then you’re getting it from someone your own age it’s not just a teacher saying you should do this subject if it’s coming from another student then you can sort of relate to what they’re saying, cause of the way they’d explain it I guess. I really think that a lot more people would choose it if they knew what was in it and what it’s about (Non-Indigenous Student Dharumba High).

Another student spoke about providing more explicit information about the course through watching teachers in the Aboriginal Studies classroom and gaining first hand information this way.

See the teachers in the class, maybe you can say what it's like in Year 11 and 12 and what things you're going to do and what assessments there will be (Non-Indigenous Student Minjungbal High).

**Theme 3: HSC Aboriginal Studies Course should be Compulsory**

Making Aboriginal Studies a compulsory course has been the topic of discussion for many years. It then comes back to the process that you have to go through to achieve this. A number of students talked about the importance of Aboriginal Studies for the wider community and the reasons that it should be a compulsory course. Martin (Indigenous student, Wiradjuri High) spoke about the importance of knowing Australian history and the connection to being “a better person”.

I reckon it should be compulsory to do, Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals, because Australia’s got its own history and whether you’re non-Aboriginal or not, you still need to know about your country’s history. Just so you have the knowledge of it, so you can be a better person in society and not a racist.
Shay (Indigenous student, Wiradjuri High) saw compulsory Aboriginal Studies as giving non-Indigenous students the opportunity to see what Indigenous culture was like. She also believed that Aboriginal Studies should have some time devoted to it over the school year.

I personally think that Aboriginal Studies should be compulsory for at least a term because Aboriginal people had to stop talking their native tongue when Cook came to Australia and I think that non-Indigenous people should learn Aboriginal Studies as a compulsory subject.

One student, Taryn (Indigenous student, Dharumba High) suggested that a recommendation be made because if Aboriginal Studies were compulsory it would provide an in-depth study of Australian history.

You should recommend that people do Ab. Studies, cause it’s cool. I reckon it should be compulsory. I think people should have a more in depth knowledge to Aboriginal Studies because technically it’s half of Australia’s history.

Another student Megan (Indigenous student, Dharumba High) felt that if less important subjects could be compulsory then why not Aboriginal Studies when it is about the history of Australia.

We have compulsory religion and that’s not even Australian, Aboriginal Studies the original native people, I really think it should be compulsory instead of Religion. You’re learning about someone else’s culture and beliefs and you don’t even know your own. I was learning about other peoples and I don’t know my own…for EVERYONE.

Summary of Theme 3: HSC Aboriginal Studies Course should be Compulsory

The findings from this theme indicate that there continues to be a call for Aboriginal Studies to be a compulsory course in the secondary school. Aboriginal communities have been discussing this issue for many years and it was a major topic across interviewees. The course promotes an education for all students about Indigenous cultures and lifestyles and addresses the need to educate all students about Australia’s shared history.
Table 6.8 Q4. What Changes to the Aboriginal Studies Course Would Have to be Made for you to Choose it as one of your HSC Subjects?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEMES</th>
<th>Non-Indigenous</th>
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Results School Staff Voices—Strengths of HSC Aboriginal Studies

Theme 1: Community Involvement in Aboriginal Studies

Involvement of the Indigenous community is a requirement of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course, with considerable community consultation taking place during the Research and Inquiry Methods section of the course. With this in mind there should be a commitment by the school to provide activities that will establish necessary links with the local Indigenous community.

Richard (Teacher Dharumba High) talked about the “knowledge and experience” that Indigenous Elders bring with them into the classroom and how this should be the focus, rather than the “formal qualifications” that many seek to impose on “community teachers”.

The importance of community, this is where I think just a little bit less of the standard western style education and a little bit more of Elders or community members coming in and making their educational
connection there. I just think that the system should recognise Aboriginal community members that have not taken part in formal education but still realise that traditional Aboriginal knowledge does not require a formal certificate and those people should be recognised and they should be allowed to teach in the schools whether they've gone to uni or not.

He also spoke about a selection process that could take place at a community level inviting Indigenous people to be a part of this process. His suggestion was that Indigenous community organisations could take responsibility for this. There could be some controversial issues attached to this suggestion. These might include which community organisations would take up this responsibility, who would be selected to be part of the selection process and how would they be selected? Indigenous communities are already stretched in their obligations to community; one more obligation as suggested would be a major undertaking.

Putting aside these issues, the importance of using Elders is continually seen. Richard (Teacher Dharumba High) makes it clear that Indigenous Elders are the “holders of cultural knowledge” and therefore their input into the education of students undertaking Aboriginal Studies is paramount. He also acknowledged that working with Elders would make him a better Aboriginal Studies teacher.

Because we recognise their knowledge as certainly not less important than ours and certainly there is a lot more important than ours. They are the true inheritors of the culture. They are the true teachers of the culture where they interpret the culture so I would like to see the community members come into it. They can come in and teach the kids culture. I can sit in with the kids and learn from them. That will make me a better Aboriginal Studies teacher as well. Because I teach Aboriginal Studies, I'm desperate to introduce as much cultural stuff into it but here's a different way of doing it so I haven't given it that much thought. I just support it totally, particularly if there could be community involvement.
**Theme: The teacher**

School staff and parents both talked about the importance of having a teacher who was experienced and easy to approach. Peter, (Principal Wiradjuri High) shared his concerns about inexperienced teachers and the impact this can have on the students of Aboriginal Studies.

No other options, perhaps. We are experiencing issues with year 11 currently. In Year 12, students remain committed because of a number of reasons, one of which would be the experience of the teacher. Year 11 have inexperienced teachers, a situation that came about when the teacher who was scheduled to take the class gained a promotion at the end of 2005.

Robyn and Phil (Parents, Minjungbal High) also spoke about the teacher having a genuine interest in Aboriginal Studies, for if they did not the students would soon know. There was also an indication that if the right teacher is teaching Aboriginal Studies then the students will achieve at this level.

If it's a teacher that's really interested in that subject and not just thrown in there, if they take as much interest in the subject, what they're teaching, the kids are going to pick up on that. If the kids pick up well, they're just here to teach, they're not interested, well they're not going to be interested in that. So then again it comes back to the teaching—who is doing the teaching. We've got a fantastic teacher here.

Shayne (Teacher, Wiradjuri High) also identified similar aspects in relation to involving the community in the education of students in Aboriginal Studies. One further important point he does make is that of the status and importance of teachers in the Aboriginal Studies classroom and what students should expect of that teacher.

I would like to see a representative of parents and interested community members, forming links with the school to be able to come in and sit down with the students and share their stories, share their history. I’m not able to teach them everything and with just me out the front of the classroom Aboriginal Studies is going to be highly academic, content driven and skills being rehearsed when it should be a vehicle for connecting with community and actually mentoring and using Aboriginal society as a template within the classroom.
Table 6.9 Staff Responses as to what they see as the Strengths and Limitations of the Aboriginal Studies Course.

### STAFF

#### STRENGTHS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEMES</th>
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<th>MINJUNGBAL High</th>
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#### LIMITATIONS

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<td>T2</td>
<td>T3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assessment base/literacy standards</td>
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### PARENTS

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<td>Community Connections</td>
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Stella (AEA Dharumba High) also spoke about the importance of community, but her ideas were more about establishing networks with Indigenous organisations in the community.

They need to know about all the support networking, inter-agencies, Koori agencies, focus on the Aboriginal community, on the Aboriginal people in that Aboriginal community, within the whole general community. And that these things do link.
For Warren, (Principal, Dharumba High) he could already see the effects of having community involvement in the school. He talked about how a locally established dance group that worked with all students, showed this school the benefits that Indigenous students were gaining. This included respect for themselves and others.

Aboriginal dance style is as legitimate as any other dance style and here we have it in the curriculum. Students can do it for sport. But it's really saying to Aboriginal students, your culture and your dance and your music, your celebration is as valid as anybody else’s. And I've watched the students performing and practising and I can see there's real enjoyment there and the fellows that come in and run that program run a very hard line—you've got to have respect for yourself; you've got to have respect for your Aboriginality; you've got to have respect for your school and families. The whole notion of respect is essential to what they do and they're quite firm about it. If the students are fooling around and don't respect and don't do it properly, you've got to have respect for the dance and culture as well, then you go. The students respond to that by doing the right thing they don't want to be excluded from the activity.

Stella, (AEA Dharumba High) also based in the same school, talked about the importance of the dance group but added comments about the importance of community Elders and their impact on the younger generation. She also talked about the importance of gaining funding to support the Elders when they visit the school as guest speakers. The dance group was also an incentive for students to move into Aboriginal Studies, to extend their knowledge.

They’ve brought other kids in and got them involved in the dance, which means that when they choose their subjects they nearly always choose Aboriginal Studies, because it’s connected to what they’re learning from the two older men that are teaching them, so they can see the connection. It gives them a link too and they learn a lot about each other, they learn a lot about others, they learn to respect themselves, they learn to respect other people, they learn about other people’s space, and it’s all about learning and keeping that respect.

Natalie (Principal, Minjungbal High) spoke of another community connection, that of an ongoing relationship with an Indigenous community outside New South Wales. This commitment has had positive impacts on all students undertaking Aboriginal Studies and has received ongoing funding from the school to continue
happening every two years. This is a major commitment made by the school and shows a commitment to Aboriginal Education.

Well, it goes ahead every two years and we support particularly through funding and making sure that it happens. It's not a sort of question if it will go ahead, it's just one part of our school culture and community at Minjungbal High school that they go every two years and whatever we need to do to support it.

**Results Parents’ Voices—Strengths of HSC Aboriginal Studies**

*Theme 1: Community Involvement in Aboriginal Studies*

Parent responses to the importance of community connections were also clear that the information that comes from books is superficial, and that that the students can learn much more through authentic experiences in the community. Robyn’s (Parent Minjungbal) response indicates that the community experience is a much more important strategy than getting information from books.

But the thing is the kids are learning too what's in the books. That's where they're learning from—what's in the books. Well, a lot of it I don't believe. I reckon kids really need to learn from the (Community) experience.

Both parents interviewed at this site were most concerned about the lack of support from a local Indigenous community organisation that could provide cultural experiences. The issue of the cost involved to participate in activities was a major issue. They did believe that students should not have to leave their own community to find the educational experiences they needed, especially when they were available locally.

Phil: They should have something set up out here or they can go there and see.

Robyn: You've got your bora rings there; you've got your walls; you've got things in them inside the museum like artefacts and things like that—like plants, bush tucker over there. But as I was saying, the teachers are not going to take the kids there because it's too expensive. It’s a real big letdown they charge the school full price to go in, which is $6 to get in. There's no concession.
Phil: Hands-on thing over there on a regular basis. You go over there and there's hands-on activities all the time.

Summary of Theme 1: Community involvement in Aboriginal Studies

Across responses it is clear that support for the inclusion of the Indigenous community in Aboriginal Studies is very important. It allows Indigenous students to feel like they belong and non-Indigenous students to gain links to the local community that can provide benefits. Students are provided opportunities in and outside their community.

Results School Staff Voices—Limitations of HSC Aboriginal Studies

Theme 1: Lack of Resources

The teachers interviewed spoke about the lack of resources and what could be done to assist, in particular, new teachers to Aboriginal Studies. There was a major discussion about the development of a textbook but also about the loss of support services provided in the first implementation of Aboriginal Studies. Colin (Teacher Wiradjuri High) talked about the importance of having a resource available, not only to teachers, but something that would assist students in covering the content areas of the syllabus.

To some extent I think it is fairly under-resourced, by that I mean in particular, a new teacher coming in to it, [will ask] what do I use? Where do I get the info for this? What can I fall back on? And there isn’t a lot of good stuff to fall back on. The teacher training packages that were put out a number of years ago, and I’ve sort of made those into booklets corresponding mainly to main sections of Ab. Studies course and that becomes a lot of their content. So the kids have got something to use, teachers have got something to use. I know it’s difficult to write a text book because you’ve got to have your local area study, a book wouldn’t be bad if it had a number of the alternate studies in it, the other region, the other Australian Indigenous group. Cause you’d think if you got hold of the local area study for the Minjungbal mob, the local area study from here and the local area study from somewhere else in NSW, and a couple of Northern Territory and QLD ones, and shoved them all into a book, well, all those could very well support the secondary study. In some cases they will also support the local area study in the local area for it as well. So if it was better resourced, I think it would be easier for kids to do better in it. Cause I think sometimes, kids who don’t have a lot of organisational ability or a lot of literacy skills flounder when they’re
constantly flooded with new bits of paper and different layouts and it
doesn’t have that consistency that a textbook has. So if you’ve got a
book that’s got everything in it, not everything in it sorry, it may not
even have your local area in it, it might have the other study in it done,
it may have a study of the Sioux Indian or an Inuit group and some
other Indigenous group. If it’s got that material in it then it makes life
so much for the teacher and the kids too to do better.

Richard (Teacher Dharumba High) also spoke about a textbook more
specifically in relation to his introduction to Aboriginal Studies. He talked further
about the support materials and how they assisted in his own development as an
Aboriginal Studies teacher. Like Colin (Teacher Wiradjuri High), he also discussed
the need for the development of a book. On the other hand, Richard did identify that
there could be issues like “time, effort and finance” in relation to developing such a
resource.

Textbooks are like a security blanket or a teddy bear sometimes. I
mean when I first started teaching Aboriginal Studies that was my first
thing. I'd throw my hands up in the air and go: What! There's no
textbook. What am I supposed to do? And in the process you go out
and do the research and you find stuff that probably it's impossible to
have a true textbook to teach the subject. You could design a textbook
that could teach one part of it, i.e. Aboriginality in a national sense,
but how are you going to get the textbook to show all the local stuff?
So really to teach the subject, you either need a series of textbooks and
one of those textbooks would only be applicable to the local area that
you're in. So the textbook might stop some type of learning from
happening rather than encouraging it in certain areas. The support
documents that I've used so far I found to be very useful. The only
way I could think of improving the support documents, once again,
would be to get the local aspect—which means you're going to have to
have—I don't know, what, 50, 60 different little support documents.
See, you might have one general text that every school in the State
gets, but when that general text is handed to the local community, that
would be accompanied with a more localised thing. And how—that's
going to—a lot of time, effort and finance to do that. Well, that would
mean that a lot of people taking the subject are non-Koori. That's why
you're getting your numbers up.

Jennifer’s (Teacher Minjungbal) response indicated that previous support
coming from the NSW Department of Education and Training had stopped and was
sadly missed. What was once a way of connecting to other Aboriginal Studies
teachers had been taken away.
The information that came out because there isn't a textbook, but in a range of information delivered by really dedicated people over the years, we've had newsletters that different schools had combined to put out. The Department did it for a little while but they ran into problems with copyright or money or just lack of interest.

Summary of Theme 1: Lack of Resources

The findings from this theme indicate that teachers consider the Aboriginal Studies course to be severely “under resourced”. Discussion of developing a text that would support teachers, particularly those new to the subject area, was evident in all responses.

Theme 2: Promotion of the HSC Aboriginal Studies Course

Promotion of the Aboriginal Studies course was also a concern for staff within the schools. As a school Principal, Peter (Wiradjuri High) saw that information provided about Aboriginal Studies needed to be more accurate to assist students in their choices.

Accurate information about the course will help to encourage students who are interested for the right reasons.

By contrast, Colin (Teacher Wiradjuri High) felt it was the way it was being promoted, particularly to the non-Indigenous students.

Maybe there is something in how it’s marketed to non-Aboriginal kids, might encourage kids to look at it.

Interestingly, Stella (AEA Dharumba High) felt that promotion was happening in her school through the interaction between students and the visible signs of Aboriginal culture throughout the school.

It is promoted it’s everywhere in this school. It’s the language, I mean a lot of the non-Indigenous kids are picking up the language, just moodge and things, mates and things like that, in that playground area. It’s promoted not just from the staff, but the kids talk about it too.

Summary of Theme 2: Promotion of the HSC Aboriginal Studies Course
The findings from this theme indicate that schools are thinking about how the Aboriginal Studies course can be promoted. Better marketing and more accurate information could be the encouragement non-Indigenous students need to elect Aboriginal Studies.

**Theme 3: Aboriginal Studies Course should be Compulsory**

Coral (AEA Minjungbal High) believed that there should be a period of time over which Aboriginal Studies should be taught.

I personally think Aboriginal Studies should be mandatory for at least a year anyway.

Whereas a teacher, Richard (Teacher Dharumba) spoke about Aboriginal Studies being a compulsory subject and talked about the links Aboriginal Studies have to another subject area.

Without a doubt, in Australia, it should be a compulsory subject, Aboriginal Studies. Why wouldn't it be compulsory? Why wouldn't you find out about the culture of the land? I teach geography as well and the Aboriginal culture speaks through the landscape.

Richard, also spoke about the options for compulsory Aboriginal Studies.

Well there's a couple of ways you can go about that. You could make the subject Aboriginal Studies compulsory, that would be ideal because then you'd know it's being taught from the Aboriginal perspective. That would be wonderful. So you either have Aboriginal Studies where everybody is a compulsory thing or where it's being used in components of history and geography, it's being done from an Aboriginal perspective. So if you're going to do it for three weeks in history, that three weeks is from the Aboriginal perspective, not some Anglo perspective trying to interpret the Aboriginal perspective. So there's two ways you can do it and the kids have to take either geography or history. So if you can force it into one of those components from the Aboriginal perspective, you can get them all.

**Theme 3: Aboriginal Studies Course should be Compulsory**

It is interesting that teachers too think about the prospect of making Aboriginal Studies compulsory. They have thought this through by looking at the best options and the benefits to schools and students.
Results Parents’ Voices—Limitations of HSC Aboriginal Studies

Theme 1: Lack of Resources

Across responses, resources have become a major focus area. Limited access to high quality materials and students working from teacher-made workbooks has been primary concerns. For Phil and Robyn (Parents Minjungbal High) a textbook for the students of Aboriginal Studies was seen as a must. There were conditions placed on how the resources would be developed and that it was imperative that Indigenous people be involved in its development.

Phil: I think they still should have textbooks. I reckon they should.
Robyn: A textbook that's written by Aboriginal people, backed by Black people, people who've lived that.

Theme 3: Aboriginal Studies Course Should Compulsory

Marion (Parent Wiradjuri) felt as a parent that Aboriginal Studies should not be an elective and felt that if the whole subject could not be compulsory then maybe some components could be.

I truly would think that at this stage of the game that wouldn’t be an option, an elective that it would actually have been mandatory for other students to do, or at least some components.

She went on to say that the school should be taking some responsibility for this to happen.

To me it’s a reflection on the school and how in the early years of High school they should be exposing non-Aboriginal children to the reasons why it’s important to learn about other cultures.

Robyn and Phil (Parents Minjungbal) talked about the importance of knowing about the history of Australia, more importantly from an Indigenous perspective as this would lead to respect.

Robyn: I really think it should be a compulsory component of school—same as English.
Phil: If you live in Australia and you don't know your culture … so it should be compulsory for every child.
Robyn: I mean they've had historical stuff that non-Koori people aren't getting.
Phil: Everybody will have the same sort of respect.

Research Question 3.1: Summary of Participant Responses to the impact of the HSC Aboriginal Studies Course on Indigenous Students’ Self-concepts (Aim 3)

Overview

Research Question 3.1 sought to identify if the impact on students self-concept when undertaking the Aboriginal Studies course is positive or negative. The data collected from the three schools identified that Indigenous students have a sense of pride because they are undertaking Aboriginal Studies.

Results Indigenous Students’ Voices

Impacts on their Self-concept: The Positives

Cultural pride is a key issue for Aboriginal youth and recreating lost pride is a significant component of this. 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. For Jacob (Indigenous student, Wiradjuri High) it was learning about everything that impacted on how he felt.

Everything I learn makes me real proud of my culture.

Another student Denise (Indigenous student, Wiradjuri High), spoke about how she felt in relation to undertaking the course and the knowledge she had gained.

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.

One Indigenous student, Martin (Indigenous student, Wiradjuri High), saw that feeling proud about yourself could lead you on a path away from the racist stereotypes portrayed through the media.
Yeah, you feel more proud about yourself. I reckon if you don’t know anything about (your culture) you go into the world not knowing anything., You’re most likely going to follow what the white fellas say about it. Like if there’s a racist person that’s saying something like they’re just drunks all the time. That’s what you probably think about yourself and you probably hate yourself.

Elsewhere, links to the “traditions in the community” upheld by the Elders was something that made students feel good about being an Aboriginal person. Consider Shay’s (Indigenous student, Wiradjuri High) comments.

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.

It is clear by these responses that Aboriginal Studies does make a difference in students’ sense of wellbeing. The indications are that Aboriginal Studies does offer something to Indigenous students, where they feel proud about themselves as Indigenous people.

**Parent Voices**

Marion’s (Parent Wiradjuri) pride in her daughter’s growth in Aboriginal Studies was clear in her responses. She talked about Shay “growing” in knowledge and that she was sharing her knowledge with others.

I think it’s great that she’s sharing that knowledge, with the younger cousins. I just see it as an Aboriginal child is not only doing English learning about all the other things she’s actually learning about her people and the pride that it’s given her. I would say I’m proud … I can see her growing in other ways, and like I said, when she’s actually got to go and look at different texts and things she’s actually finding stuff that I wasn’t even aware of. I think if that’s one Aboriginal child doing that how much more can be done.

**School Staff Voices**

In identifying that Aboriginal Studies is a rigorous academic course, Paul (Principal Dharumba High) acknowledges that Indigenous students would feel proud about their achievements in completing the course.
They are probably proud to have completed the course because it is an academic and demanding course.

Watching and listening to the Indigenous students in the Aboriginal Studies class has shown Stella, (AEA Dharumba High) that they can become “empowered” as Indigenous people. Her observations clearly show that there is a pride attached to being successful in Aboriginal Studies.

Depending on the question if one of the Koori kids have got an answer and the teacher goes, ‘That’s exactly what I mean’, you see that kid’s chest swell, lift that head and they are looking straight ahead. You can see it in the body language, maybe it’s me, but I really see them become empowered by what little knowledge they have. They do become empowered by it, and to me, that’s a real boost, because that child has said something that’s worthwhile, and it’s been acknowledged.

Coral (AEA Minjungbal) spoke about a sense of ownership in the Aboriginal Studies class, coming from being in a small group.

They're quite proud of their ownership that Year 12 have. It's quite interesting. They're a very strong little group.

Summary

Although many of the Indigenous students came from different schools and areas they all have one thing in common, their Aboriginality. Their sense of pride based on their Aboriginality was evident in their responses about the impact of the Aboriginal Studies course on them, something that was identified as not being evident in other school subjects.

Research Question 3.2: Summary of Indigenous Students’ Responses as to the Impact of the HSC Aboriginal Studies Course on Educational Outcomes (Aim 3)

Overview
Research Question 3.2 sought to identify if the impact on the educational outcomes of Indigenous students are positive or negative in regard to undertaking the HSC Aboriginal Studies course. The data collected from the three schools identified two recurrent significant themes as motivating factors to select the HSC Aboriginal Studies course: 1) to learn more about Aboriginal culture and; 2) prior knowledge learned through undertaking previous Aboriginal Studies courses. As shown in Table 6.1, knowledge of Aboriginal culture is a motivating factor in Indigenous students’ choice and in one school this was the most significant finding. Responses clearly indicate that Indigenous students felt a loss of cultural knowledge and that undertaking Aboriginal Studies was a means of reclaiming this knowledge.

**Results Indigenous Students’ Voices**

**Theme: Achievement**

How Indigenous students are performing in Aboriginal Studies has not been measured by any research to date. However, there is anecdotal information from Indigenous Education workers that Indigenous students are not performing at the same level as their non-Indigenous peers. There is no hard evidence to support this claim.

Students spoke about how they felt they were performing in the Aboriginal Studies course. Shay (Indigenous student, Wiradjuri High) felt that if she had all her assessment tasks in then she was “going ok”.

I’m going ok when I’m sitting and doing my work, I’m up to date with all my assignments and my work.

There were times for Taryn (Indigenous student, Dharumba High) when she was struggling with new content; she found it difficult to understand “new” things and therefore she had trouble remembering them.

I thought it’d be easy, it is kinda easy but then in some things I kinda struggle. It’s just like I didn’t know it, like I know some stuff but when I learn something new I’m like, whoa I never knew that happened. It just makes it harder to understand and remember things.
The Indigenous students spoke about how they were participating in Aboriginal Studies and how the content of the course was assisting their learning. Jacob (Indigenous student, Wiradjuri High) spoke about how he considered Aboriginal Studies to be a more serious subject and that students in this class were not “stupid or mucking up”. He felt this made it a much more enjoyable learning environment to be in.

Cause we all concentrate and we’re all learning, there’s no-one being stupid and mucking up, and we just learn more. I go well in Ab. Studies better than I do in most of my other subjects. I enjoy Ab. Studies more than most other subjects, so why do I enjoy it? I go well in it pretty much, if I don’t enjoy it I don’t really go that well.

Martin (Indigenous student, Wiradjuri High) saw Aboriginal Studies as a place to learn with others, “working together” to gain knowledge.

You work together, and you do things, and, at least you know that after coming out of it, it goes to good use, all that learning.

To ensure she was better educated in Aboriginal issues, Marilyn (Indigenous student, Wiradjuri High) felt that it was important to gain as much information from the course as possible. This, in turn would enable her to be a better person in her chosen career.

It makes you feel like you want to know all about it so you can help it. If you wanted to become a lawyer or something you’d have to learn all about it before you’d become one. You’d have to know all about the Aboriginal history and all that sort of stuff if you wanted to move forward and make a difference with Aboriginal people and stuff. I want to work with Aboriginal people, hopefully, when I leave school.

Summary of Theme: Achievement

The findings from this theme indicate that because the students enjoy Aboriginal Studies then they are more likely to complete their work. This in turn has a positive effect on their performance in the subject. Indications are that Aboriginal Studies can be thought of as a serious subject where everyone is learning. This can provide an ideal learning environment for some students who do not feel valued in other subjects.
Theme: Attendance

Indigenous students spoke about how attendance in Aboriginal Studies offered an incentive to attend class. Cody (Indigenous student, Minjungbal High) saw it on a deeper level, in relation to school attendance overall.

It doesn't really make you want to go to school but it doesn't make you want to leave or anything.

Even though there was not an incentive to attend school there was an incentive to attend Aboriginal Studies. In saying this, students also considered that it was a much more important subject than others they had to attend.

It makes you want to go to class but if it was English I wouldn't go at all (Indigenous Student Minjungbal High).

Jacob (Indigenous student, Wiradjuri High) felt that to have an enjoyable day at school Aboriginal Studies would have to be a part of the day.

If I have Maths I don’t really like coming I just go and then I got Ab. Studies straight after it. So it makes me want to come to school pretty much, so I can enjoy my day.

Megan (Indigenous student, Dharumba High) spoke about the impact on her attendance in the junior years of High School.

Not Year 11 and 12, but I think a little bit younger, I think that was like a huge thing for me at the time and I think for about 3 of the other guys in my class too.

Aboriginal Studies was also an incentive for Michael (Indigenous student, Wiradjuri High) although as well, he saw friends being in the class as another reason to attend classes. Michael was also concerned about the impact that non-attending Indigenous students would have on non-Indigenous students undertaking Aboriginal Studies.
It makes me want to go to class cause you know a friend in class, sometimes you don’t want to go, you just wag. I come most days, but sometimes there’s only two in our class, Aboriginal students don’t even turn up for class and that might turn the white population off. Aboriginal students aren’t gonna turn up to class why would they turn up?

Many Indigenous students were aware of the impact on others when attendance dropped. Jacob (Indigenous student, Wiradjuri High) talked about students totally dropping out of school rather than just in Aboriginal Studies.

They started coming at the start of the year but then just started to drop out of school, a couple of them did, yeah, just dropped out.

Shay (Indigenous student, Wiradjuri High) also spoke about students she knew who had dropped out of school.

I’ve only talked to a couple of Year 12’s, but, they said that they’ve done it for a little while and then they dropped out. I don’t know why they just said that they didn’t like it.

Many students spoke of their enjoyment of Aboriginal Studies classes and that this impacted on their decision to attend school. Jacob (Indigenous student Wiradjuri High) spoke of the excitement of Aboriginal Studies and that he enjoyed participating in the course more than in other subject areas.

Don’t like most other subjects and then I like this and I just want to learn more about it. It’s more exciting than most of my other classes cause we’re doing more research and that makes it a better class. I’m enjoying it, I don’t enjoy Maths, but I’m only doing Maths cause I have to. I enjoy Ab. Studies more than most other subjects. I go well in it pretty much. If I don’t enjoy it I don’t really go that well.

Shay (Indigenous Student Wiradjuri High) also spoke of her enjoyment of Aboriginal Studies and that it was her “favourite subject”.

I look forward to it more than other subjects, cause I just enjoy it, learning about my culture, and other cultures. My favourite subject would be Aboriginal Studies. I just want to learn a lot of my culture.
Summary of Theme: Attendance

This was a major finding in that it demonstrates that Indigenous students do start off enjoying the Aboriginal Studies course but then are confronted with the academic demands of the course. From some of the responses there is an indication that students do attend school for the purpose of attending Aboriginal Studies classes. It was also suggested that if Indigenous students are struggling academically in school then it does not take long for them to be absent from classes, leading to totally dropping out of school.

School Staff Voices

Theme: Achievement

Richard (Teacher Dharumba High) spoke about the performance of the students in his Aboriginal Studies classes. The Indigenous students were considered to be doing poorly, with the exception of one student who was achieving at a high level. He talked about the connections between poor literacy levels and successful completion of school.

The Year 11 Aboriginal Studies, we have one Aboriginal identified student that we know for sure is in the top four. She probably came third or fourth in class. The performances of the Aboriginal identified students in Year 12 is in the bottom half of the class.

Richard suggests that the location of the school can impact on the students and their performance in Aboriginal Studies and school.

For our school and from what I tell from the Aboriginal Studies conferences, our schools are more typical schools rather than the schools that get the really good marks. So for our schools, and schools that are more rural and have more Aboriginal people, there's too much literacy base. And at the same time, they are going to have their UAI marks knocked down.

He talks about the challenges students face in regard to literacy levels and getting through the HSC.
That means they're getting discriminated on both ends. They're going to knock both ends. So I'd like somehow that to change. Yes. That is for our school with more kids that are taking Aboriginal Studies are more challenged with the literacy side of things. That's a significant thing. That's the bit that turns them off. That's when I'm losing their interest when they've got to go through page after page of government document. They just—they know that the country's racist. To actually sit down and read through the documents and pull it apart and logically point the finger at the government and logically work out why that was a racist system so that we can prevent it from happening in the future, that's very difficult to get through. Just in Aboriginal Studies. See the whole aim of that is to try—the Department's telling us here ... academic style stuff and the literacy so high, so we're saying to ourselves: How can we help the kids that aren't so literate. How can we—It wasn't my idea; it was my predecessor's idea to say respect for others is going to be a qualitative marking component in the junior school. I don't think you'd be able to get that through the senior school

Stella (AEA Dharumba High), on the other hand, saw that the students were “coping” in Aboriginal Studies, more particularly in the cultural aspects of the course, but she also identified the need for assistance with the more “formal” curriculum that required an appropriate level of reading and writing skills.

The Koori kids I don’t think are struggling at all because it’s very close to them. As far as the culture, their heritage, the dance, the songs, they’re right on top of that. The older ones, the seniors they’re coping. There’s seven in Year 12, and I think we’ve got maybe out of that seven there’s four that are doing Ab. Studies. Whether or not they’re up there with all the work they have to do, but I think they’re coping. They cope very well with what goes on in the classroom, I think it’s just the structuring of it, if there’s anything formal that they have to do. They do participate, answer questions, talk about different things, not on a personal level, but they do talk about them, I think it’s just the formal academic parts of it, where they have to write an essay, how they formalise it, what the proposals going to be, how that’s structured. But the actual subject matter, I think they cope with it fine.

Theme: Attendance and Retention

Attendance in Aboriginal Studies was seen to be better than attendance at school overall. Jasmine (AEA Wiradjuri High) spoke about the good attendance in Aboriginal Studies at her school but felt that getting them into the class was just one issue; getting the students to participate in class was another issue.
The kids that are taking Ab. Studies, their attendance is the highest in the Ab. Studies class than what it is the general classes, you know like English, Maths, things like that. They’re here at school, but they just bum around in school. Not all the time, the percentage is 85%. Most of them are 100% in Ab Studies. They’re in there it’s more getting them to participate. If they’re not just hanging around the school and not being in the class we’ve got to get on top of that first, try and get them in the class, and then from there to participate, like you can lead a horse to water, you can’t make the bloody thing drink.

One of the teachers also talked about the attendance of Indigenous students in Aboriginal Studies classes. Richard (Teacher Dharumba High) spoke about the students turning up to classes in the first instance but as school became more difficult, across other subjects they were absent more often.

In fact, because of their Aboriginal background, they tend to turn up to Aboriginal Studies and miss out on the other subjects first and then as they become dissatisfied with school, then eventually Aboriginal Studies, you start to see absenteeism and they just won't turn up. Aboriginal Studies will encourage more Aboriginal kids to come to school, without a doubt. In the Year 12, we started off with five Aboriginal identified students. We are now down to nil in the thing so three of our Koori students have dropped out during the course of Year 12 and end of Year 11. Their attendance is—there's not other word for it—disgraceful. I've got some kids who've attended 20% of their lessons another Aboriginal kid about 25%. Yeah attendance is the big thing.

He went on to point out that:

Once they're at the lower level, well there's a tendency for those kids to drop out of school regardless if it's Aboriginal Studies or not.

When they do come to school the Koori kids that I teach in Aboriginal Studies are looking at me and interested, engaged compared to when I have had to teach in the maths room or in other areas. So that is obvious. My intuitive response is that when I look at kids' faces at the beginning of the lesson, we're going to talk about this, they're interested—but by the time we have to go through a whole lot of text and then write a written response, the kids are bored. They're not engaged. That's the kids who have troubles and drop out. That's what I'm seeing on their faces as I'm teaching those through the lesson. So that the nature of our learning isn't engaging Aboriginal students as it would non-Aboriginal students.
Stella, (AEA Dharumba High) from the same school, also spoke about her concerns about the attendance of Indigenous students in Aboriginal Studies. She felt that the students were not coping with the academic work even though the students had access to tutors.

We’ve got a couple of kids that if they sat in the classroom a little bit more they would understand and they would learn more, it’s just getting them to stay in class at school. So it’s an attendance thing sometimes they are coping with their studies while they’re in the classroom. We do have tutors here we try to get them to get the kids in their sport times to help them if they’ve got work that they have to get through, it’s just hard to get them.

At Wiradjuri High there was a major issue with the retention of Indigenous students. Brian, a teacher in the school, discussed that it was believed the contributing factor to the retention rates was the low level of literacy of many of the Indigenous students. It was considered to be a much bigger issue because the majority of students undertaking Aboriginal Studies were Indigenous. He also identified that it was a much broader issue than just in his school.

It’s been suggested by other people within the school that it has to do with the level of English, and it not being at an appropriate level. Our retention of students in Aboriginal Studies is directly proportional I would think to our retention of Aboriginal students, because our Aboriginal Studies classes are made up entirely of Aboriginal students. So while you’ve still got that wider issue in the school, while the fact that a lot of students who drop out of Aboriginal Studies don’t just drop out of Aboriginal Studies they drop out of school, I think you would probably reduce the problem a little but it’s not going to do the whole story because it still comes down to a wider school issue, and I think a wider state issue. Aboriginal retention has got to be addressed by much more, someone out there’s got to have a radical idea that no-one has thought of.

The attendance and retention at Minjungbal High was completely different. It was considered that the ongoing support in the school, through the Aboriginal Studies teacher and the AEA, is what enabled the students to get through their HSC years as can be seen by Jennifer’s (Teacher Minjungbal High) response.
We're probably in a better situation than a lot of schools when they get to Year 9, 10, 11 and 12 and they do Aboriginal Studies in Year 11 and 12 because they've got a lot of support and they go to Aunty Coral’s room and work on the computers and they get help with the work.

Summary of Theme: Attendance

For two of the schools attendance and retention was a major issue, as was the belief that literacy levels of Indigenous students play a major role in their success in Aboriginal Studies. For teachers of Aboriginal Studies this impacted on what and how they teach to ensure the success of Indigenous students, not always an easy thing to do when there are other students to cater to.

Curriculum and Teaching Issues

There were also issues raised by students responding to the difficulties that the teacher may be facing in the classroom and identifying that different levels of learning needs were present in the Aboriginal Studies classroom. Indications are that some students who elect Aboriginal Studies experience low literacy levels; therefore, they are “slower at learning” and it can be “difficult for them”. The teacher would need to cater for these learning needs, but this could have an adverse impact on those students who are performing well. Megan (Indigenous student, Dharumba High) felt that with the teacher dealing with these issues, those who were doing well would be brought down.

It’s also hard for the teacher, half of our class has done it for 4 years and half of them only just started last year. So he’s got to try and catch the other people up and teach us stuff that we’ve already learnt, so there’s that thing. The matter which I think he has to take into account is some of the people in our class are slower at learning and it is a bit difficult for them. He is trying to get those people up to scratch, as well as keep enough work for the others in the class; I guess you’d say he’s trying to cater for everyone. Which I understand would be hard, but sometimes it brings the rest of us down that are already ahead. But I don’t know what else he’s to do really.

Other issues were raised by staff and students in relation to Indigenous student engagement at school and the effects of this on other students. Warren (Principal,
Dharumba High) spoke about the importance of having Aboriginal Studies in the school as a means of addressing disengagement, particularly in the junior years.

I think we need to be providing opportunities for Aboriginal kids in schools. Because one of their major issues is there's disengagement there. The children come through from primary school really enthusiastic about school in the main and then somewhere between Year 7 and Year 9, there's a real turn-off for Aboriginal students—not all of them—and there's a turn-off for a lot of students, but when you look at it statistically, it's the Aboriginal students that probably represented far Higher percentage-wise than they should be. And I think having something like Aboriginal Studies in the curriculum gives them a hook to stay involved with the school.

Richard (Teacher Dharumba High) also spoke about Indigenous students being disengaged, more particularly in Aboriginal Studies.

When they do come to school the Koori kids that I teach in Aboriginal Studies are looking at me and interested, engaged compared to when I have had to teach in the maths room or in other areas. So that is obvious. My intuitive response is that when I look at kids' faces at the beginning of the lesson, we're going to talk about this, they're interested—but by the time we have to go through a whole lot of text and then write a written response, the kids are bored. They're not engaged. That's the kids who have troubles and drop out. That's what I'm seeing on their faces as I'm teaching those through the lesson. So that the nature of our learning isn't engaging Aboriginal students as it would non-Aboriginal students.

**Research Question 4.1: Summary of Results as to the Extent to which Indigenous students compare their abilities in the HSC Aboriginal Studies course to other Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (Aim 4)**

**Overview**

Research Question 4.1 sought to identify to what extent Indigenous students compare their academic abilities to that of their non-Indigenous peers. The data collected from the three schools indicated that, of the Indigenous students interviewed, there was a view that their academic performance in the Aboriginal Studies course was better than or the same as the non-Indigenous students.

When the question of comparing oneself to others in Aboriginal Studies was raised there was resistance from some of the students, who were more inclined to say
that they were performing at the same level, especially when they were asked to compare themselves with Indigenous students. Denise (Indigenous student, Wiradjuri High) saw everyone being the same:

No, I think we’re all about the same. Me, I wouldn’t put myself anywhere. There are a lot of Kooris that do it, but it’s different because a lot of Kooris think it’s easy, and they think they got to know it all but they don’t and it does get hard but they do keep doing it.

Another student, Janet (Non-Indigenous Student Wiradjuri High), felt particularly uncomfortable with the question:

I really can’t do that because I see us all as equals and when someone knows something someone else doesn’t we share our information.

**Results Indigenous Students’ Voices**

It was clear from responses from Indigenous students that they felt good about their performance in Aboriginal Studies, particularly when they were performing at a level above non-Indigenous students. In a group interview with Indigenous students they had this to say:

I’m doing good you know. There are those that sometimes slack off, but then they slack off all the time … sometimes you get it too good. I’ve asked the others how they’re going and towards the end they seem to be doing alright. (Indigenous Student Wiradjuri High)

When asked about how she was doing in Aboriginal Studies, Megan (Indigenous student, Dharumba High) responded by talking about her “position” in the class first and identifying that the top two students were non-Indigenous.

I think I’d be in the top 5 cause I know that there’s like at least, there’s definitely, definitely, definitely two who are way above me, and probably about 3 of us are on the same level. And then the rest didn’t do it, and they’re like way behind. Well actually, the top two people in our class are non-Aboriginal.

I then asked Megan to compare herself with an Indigenous student in the class;
I’m probably just a little bit above, but not much, sort of level I think.

She then discussed how she knew she was doing well in Aboriginal Studies;

Just from exams, session tasks, knowledge in class, like when we’re talking and stuff like that. It’s usually the same 4 people saying everything. We have just got more to say and we’ve probably got more confident personalities. They’re probably even just a little bit intimidated because we have got four years and they’ve only got two.

Taryn (Indigenous Student Dharumba High) is in Year 11 and the only Indigenous student in this Aboriginal Studies class. She knows she is doing well by comments made to her by the teacher. She ranked herself fairly high in relation to others in the class:

Mr R told me that I am coming fourth in the class … if 10 is the highest I reckon that person (non-Indigenous) is about 8 ½. In relation to myself I don’t know we’re all pretty equal, I reckon I’m like right beside them—8 ½.

There were Indigenous students who felt that they had an advantage over non-Indigenous students, in their learning in Aboriginal Studies as voiced by Ben (Indigenous student, Minjungbal High).

I feel I have an advantage.

However, Tammin (Indigenous student, Minjungbal High) felt the opposite and that she was no further ahead in Aboriginal Studies than the non-Indigenous students.

I'm not advantaged in any way to non-Indigenous people in the class because I know about as much as they do, so we're both at the same learning point.

Non-Indigenous Students’ Voices

The non-Indigenous students interviewed also felt that they were achieving more closely to other students in their Aboriginal Studies class. Larissa (non-Indigenous student, Dharumba High) spoke of being “average” and those others were “smarter” than her.
I just find I like to be average I don’t really like to be up High, or at the bottom, just in between. He’s non-Aboriginal and he’s probably above me, that person’s really smart. not really smart, they just know a lot about the subject and a lot about everything in general, in all subjects.

When comparing herself with an Indigenous student Larissa felt they were at the same level and rated herself as being at 5-6 on the scale.

Amanda (non-Indigenous student, Minjungbal High) is also in Year 11 and, based on her exam results, she is performing well in Aboriginal Studies.

In my exam I came third overall in the class. Compared to another non-Indigenous person they are about 6 or 7 on the scale.

When asked to compare herself to an Indigenous student Amanda’s (non-Indigenous student, Minjungbal High) response was;

But…they're coming first.

School Staff Voices

Teachers talked about how the students saw themselves in relation to the rest of the class. Colin (Teacher Wiradjuri High) talked about how the students would be more of aware of their own individual performance and Whether or not they were keeping the teacher happy.

I think they already have a fair idea of where they fit in the pecking order of things so to speak, and are just content to ask themselves, “Have I kept them happy? Have I got over this hurdle? Has he said a few good things about what I’ve done on this task?” So I don’t see a lot of comparison inside classes, between kids.

In the same school Shayne (Teacher Wiradjuri High) was aware that students were starting to compare themselves in relation to their academic performance.

More recently they do, yes they do compare each other, particularly how well they’re doing and they do get a little bit competitive in the subject.
Table 6.10 Q2. Did you consider aboriginal studies as one of your HSC subjects?

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On the other hand Richard (Teacher Dharumba High) saw the Indigenous students in his Aboriginal Studies class as not performing well at all and ranked them quite low in relation to others.

The performance of the Aboriginal-identified students in Year 12 is in the bottom half of the class.

**Summary of social comparison processes in Aboriginal Studies.**

The findings from this question of social comparison processes, indicate that the Indigenous students see themselves as performing at the same level or better than their non-Indigenous peers. This in turn had a positive impact on their identity self-concept and their academic self-concept in relation to Aboriginal Studies content.

**Summary**

This chapter has presented the findings from an analysis of interviews carried out with Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, school staff, and Indigenous parents. Clearly, some comments support the need for Aboriginal Studies as a valued course in the senior secondary curriculum of NSW schools. For Indigenous students undertaking Aboriginal Studies has led to enhanced identity (pride) and Aboriginal Studies self-concepts. For example, most of the Indigenous students interviewed believed they were performing the same or better than their non-Indigenous peers, almost as good as the top non-Indigenous students, and much better than Indigenous students who were not fully participating in the HSC Aboriginal Studies course.
The major findings of this study in relation to Indigenous students and their participation in HSC Aboriginal Studies indicate that Indigenous students are seeking a cultural course to learn more about their culture. They also want their opinions acknowledged and respected and this is what they find in the Aboriginal Studies classroom. They also want a quality teacher who is knowledgeable in the field, caring, and understanding but preferably Indigenous. Non-Indigenous students were also seeking a course to learn more about Aboriginal culture, a means for them to gain a better understanding of Australian’s “shared history” and for some more knowledge of their Indigenous friends’ background. Furthermore, Non-Indigenous students, staff, and parents identified the importance of a “good teacher”, knowledgeable, experienced, and approachable and that these qualities would assist in the success of the Aboriginal Studies course in the school.

Weaknesses were also identified in that the course is considered to be under-resourced in that unlike other subjects it does not have a textbook; the Aboriginal Studies course is poorly promoted particularly to non-Indigenous students hence enrolment is not stable; and the course is not meeting the specific needs of Indigenous students both culturally and academically.

This chapter has presented the findings obtained from an analysis of student, staff, and parent interviews and survey responses from students not undertaking the course. The following chapter discusses the major findings; their implications for theory, research, and practice; and the strengths and limitations of the present investigation.
CHAPTER 7
SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

Historically, Aboriginal education has been less than satisfactory in providing a standard of education for Indigenous students that has been comparable to that of the education standards provided for other students. Hence, this has lead to the recurring identification of Indigenous students being the most disadvantaged group in Australia. Consequently, research to identify areas of need have been undertaken but with minimal success achieved from recommendations. Therefore, this investigation was initiated in a field that has an identifiable gap within research and in literature pertaining to Aboriginal education, specifically the curriculum area of Aboriginal Studies and its impact on the self-concept of Indigenous students who undertake the course. In the past there has been anecdotal information that has informed the development of Aboriginal Studies programs and other curriculum. This current research confirms some anecdotal information but raises other questions in relation to the implementation of Aboriginal Studies and its impact on the self-concept of Indigenous students.

The present investigation had four overarching aims to: ascertain the rationales senior secondary Indigenous students have for electing or not electing HSC Aboriginal Studies; identify the perceptions held by Indigenous students as to the strengths and limitations of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course; critically analyse the impact of undertaking the HSC Aboriginal Studies Course on Indigenous students’ self-concepts and other desirable educational outcomes (achievement in Aboriginal Studies, motivation, attendance, enjoyment of school, aspirations), and finally identify if Indigenous students compare themselves with non-Indigenous students and their academic performance in Aboriginal Studies. To achieve these aims the study was guided by six research questions:

1. What factors influence Indigenous students’ decisions to enrol and continue to participate in the HSC Aboriginal Studies course?
2. Why do some Indigenous students choose not to take HSC Aboriginal Studies as a HSC subject, and are these rationales similar or different to the reasons that non-Indigenous students choose not to undertake this course?

3. What do Indigenous students, non-Indigenous students, teachers, Principals, and Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEAs) perceive as the strengths and limitations of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course?

4. To what extent does the HSC Aboriginal Studies course impact positively or negatively upon Indigenous students’ self-concepts?

5. To what extent do Indigenous students, non-Indigenous students, teachers, Principals, AEAs and the Aboriginal community consider that the HSC Aboriginal Studies course impacts positively or negatively on other desirable outcomes?

6. To what extent do Indigenous students compare their abilities in the HSC Aboriginal Studies course with other Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, and are these comparisons parallel, upward, or downward in nature?

In an attempt to capture data from students not undertaking Aboriginal Studies a survey was administered in the three participating schools and covered questions pertaining to each of the research aims. The results of this study demonstrate that the HSC Aboriginal Studies course has a positive impact on those Indigenous secondary students’ who elect and continue to participate in the course to the completion of the HSC. Identity self-concept and Aboriginal Studies self-concept were shown to be positive particularly in the areas of participation in school, positive relationships with other students (more prevalent with Indigenous students), and engagement in education overall.

There are clear indications that the presence of Aboriginal Studies in the school curriculum is valued not only by Indigenous students, Indigenous parents and communities, but also by many non-Indigenous students and school staff members, with direct links to the Reconciliation process. It is envisaged that the results of this initial investigation will serve to address the present limitations of the course and inform future self-concept research with Indigenous senior secondary students, predominantly in relation to Aboriginal Studies curriculum.
This chapter presents the findings of this study which sought to discover if undertaking the HSC Aboriginal Studies course has a positive or negative impact on Indigenous students’ self-concept and educational outcomes. The structure of the chapter is presented in sections under each research question. Firstly, the major findings are presented and summarised in relation to each participant group. Secondly, the strengths and limitations of the research are presented, and finally the implications for theory, research, and practice are presented. Following is a summary of the findings in relation to each research question.

**Review of Findings**

*Research Question 1.1: Indigenous Students’ Rationale for Participation in the Aboriginal Studies HSC course (Aim 1)*

**Indigenous students.** The responses of the Indigenous students interviewed in this study indicated a feeling of ‘loss’ relating to a lack of knowledge in aspects of Aboriginal culture, a contributing factor of this is the limited access to Elders and others in the community who could pass down cultural knowledge. Therefore, Aboriginal Studies was a significant choice for these students in their quest to reclaim cultural knowledge and that as holders of this new found or extended knowledge they would be able to pass this onto younger family members and friends.

Although Indigenous students identified the need to learn more about their culture it was evident that their Aboriginality also played a key role in their choice with responses emphasising the importance of being with other Indigenous students and some identifying family members as major motivators for electing the Aboriginal Studies course. Whilst being with family was important being with friends, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, was equally important and was seen as a means of educating not only themselves but others on the importance of Aboriginal culture, in turn promoting Reconciliation within the school and the wider community. Furthermore, the positive feedback provided about the Aboriginal Studies course by past and present students suggests that recommendations made by others can influence the decision to elect Aboriginal Studies. Consequently, this passing on of knowledge about the course signifies that this is an area that needs
further investigation to ascertain its value as a promotional tool of the Aboriginal Studies course.

Whilst recommendations from past and present students of Aboriginal Studies were a contributing factor for some Indigenous students to elect the course as a HSC option, others suggested that the teacher of the course was also an incentive to choose Aboriginal Studies. Discussion about the Aboriginal Studies teacher identified that some students based their choice on knowing who the teacher was. In many schools the teacher of Aboriginal Studies has remained the same for a number of years thus, students’ prior experiences with a particular teacher and their ‘enjoyment’ of learning through the teaching style employed by that teacher were considered contributing factors in the choice to undertake Aboriginal Studies. Although this was important for some students others made it clear that it did not really matter who the teacher was but rather if they were approachable, caring, had extensive knowledge of subject matter and were committed to continued learning in the field.

Despite the major role teachers play in the life of Aboriginal Studies in schools, their commitment to the course and their continued efforts to recruit students, it was identified that at times teachers were conveying what has been identified as what the school really wants, in that "what parades as guidance for students is in fact channelling in the interests of the school and of impersonal social forces" (Stables, 1997, p. 198). An example of this is presented in Chapter 6 whereby a teacher made a recommended choice for the student based on the fact that the student is Indigenous. This “channelling” often happens in small schools where the majority of students are Indigenous, at least two of the students identified that this happened in the previous school they attended reinforcing the assumption that if a student is Indigenous then they should elect, or be placed in, Aboriginal Studies.

**Non-Indigenous students.** Non-Indigenous students’ reasons for undertaking Aboriginal Studies were not dissimilar to that identified by Indigenous students, learning more about Aboriginal culture, and the influence of significant others were all identified. Therefore, it was interesting that the most evident theme to surface was
that of learning more about Aboriginal culture, especially for those non-Indigenous students who voiced that the education they were receiving in relation to Australia’s “shared” history, to them, was inadequate. Clearly, there was an expectation that Aboriginal Studies would educate them in an area of Australian history that was lacking in other subject areas, particularly History. Some responses indicated that relationships with Indigenous people were most important, particularly as a means of building on knowledge shared with them by Indigenous community members, especially Elders. Electing Aboriginal Studies gave some non-Indigenous students the opportunity to explore the cultural background of Indigenous friends, whilst raising awareness about how historical events have impacted on the current situation in Indigenous affairs.

In addition to Indigenous friends being influential on the choice non-Indigenous students made to undertake Aboriginal Studies there were those significant others, such as family members (who had previously undertaken the course), parents (those interested in Indigenous affairs), and teachers (particularly those that students had a good relationship with), who provided support and encouragement when students were making their HSC course selections. Generally, the importance of the teacher as an incentive for the choice to undertake Aboriginal Studies was evident in responses made by non-Indigenous students. There were those who saw the teacher as a friend, who was respectful as well as respected but above all a “good teacher of Aboriginal Studies”. These qualities in the Aboriginal Studies teacher were instrumental in the choice some students made in electing Aboriginal Studies. Even though it was clear that some students had selected Aboriginal Studies based on knowledge of who they thought the teacher would be they continued to participate in the course after being made aware that there was a change of teacher.

School staff. School staff identified Aboriginality as the main reason that they believed Indigenous students made the choice to elect Aboriginal Studies, compared to non-Indigenous students who made their choice because they had an interest in the subject and wanted to learn more about Aboriginal history and issues. They also expressed concern in relation to this as the HSC Aboriginal Studies Course focuses on shared history as opposed to culture. For some non-Indigenous students a genuine interest in Aboriginal Studies and a commitment to achieving Reconciliation
across society was identified as reasons for electing Aboriginal Studies. In contrast, and consistent with the views espoused by Indigenous students, school staff also noted that Indigenous students wanted to learn more about their own culture. School staff indicated that many students undertook Aboriginal Studies due to a lack of cultural knowledge and feelings of discomfort in not knowing their own cultural background.

Responses from school staff also indicated that teachers can play an important role in the selection of Aboriginal Studies. It was interesting that the AEAs were the members of staff who had considered the role of the teacher as being a major incentive on the choice students made to undertake Aboriginal Studies. There was also an indication that it was the popular teacher who taught Aboriginal Studies and that as such made student’s feel comfortable in the Aboriginal Studies classroom, this was also seen to be a factor in increasing enrolments in the course.

Some teachers identified that there were Indigenous students who do consider Aboriginal Studies as connecting to their career aspirations. However, only a small number were identified and this was more likely when they thought that Aboriginal Studies had a significant connection to their career options and the type of work they want to do.

*Parents.* Responses from parents indicated that having Aboriginal Studies in the school was a bonus and that they were pleased that their children had chosen to undertake Aboriginal Studies. It was considered that Aboriginal Studies would assist their children in building on the knowledge they already possessed but also that they learned new things in relation to not only Aboriginal culture but also other Indigenous cultures. The course had the additional role of supporting their children not only as learners but up and coming educators in their own communities passing shared knowledge on to others.

Based on the recommendations of others choices could also be influenced made, often family members had previously undertaken the course but parents also acknowledged that their child had always wanted to undertake Aboriginal Studies, often in relation to career aspirations.
Summary of results for Research Question 1.1.

Consistently, across all participants similar themes were identified, with learning more about Aboriginal culture a major finding. Non-Indigenous students were seeking more in the way of establishing their knowledge of the shared history of Australia and believed that the Aboriginal Studies course was providing this to them. School staff, more often the Indigenous staff, saw that Indigenous students felt that they did not know enough about their own culture therefore would be more inclined to elect Aboriginal Studies. Although it was raised that Aboriginality played a major role in the choices made by Indigenous students it was also seen to be detrimental to some Indigenous students who felt that they did not have a choice but were rather “forced” into the course, the assumption being made that as Indigenous students they would want to be enrolled in the course.

Promotion of the course seems limited and most often came through recommendations made by past and present students of the course, whether they are friends or family it quite often made an impact on the choices made. Yet again, the importance of how others can “sell” the course to prospective Aboriginal Studies students should not be ignored, this identifiable promotional strategy needs further development in establishing how it can be better implemented across schools. Finally, the importance of an effective teacher was most definitely a theme that came through in all responses, there was also evidence in some responses that students saw the teacher as not being as committed as others or that the content being provided was not what the students were seeking.

Overall, in answering this question on why Indigenous students select Aboriginal Studies it is evident that the majority of Indigenous students are seeking a cultural course and while the syllabus does not identify this as one of its aims it does acknowledge the importance of cultural affirmation for Indigenous students. Hence, the aim of the Aboriginal Studies course is to provide all students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, with an understanding of and pride in cultural heritage since the beginning of the Dreaming, and this important part of Australian heritage and history (NSW Board of Studies, 1999, p. 6).
Research Question 1.2: Rationale for Not Selecting to Enrol in the Aboriginal Studies HSC course (Aim 1)

Indigenous communities across New South Wales have continually stated that Aboriginal Studies was considered only for Indigenous students, despite the Aboriginal Studies syllabus making clear statements that Aboriginal Studies is for all students. In an attempt to identify why students are not selecting Aboriginal Studies, students and school staff were asked what they believe influenced the choice of others not to elect Aboriginal Studies, answers from a survey question put to students not undertaking Aboriginal Studies was also included. Similar themes arose across participants and whilst all themes are important the most significant were; students not being Indigenous; disinterest in learning about Aboriginal culture and history; no connection to future career plans and clashes with other subject choices.

**Indigenous students.** Responses given by Indigenous students indicate that if students did not elect Aboriginal Studies it was because they were not interested in learning about Aboriginal culture and history. Hence, for the majority of Indigenous students, there was a sense that Aboriginal culture was not valued especially by non-Indigenous students. In saying this there was the continually held perception that Aboriginal Studies was only for Indigenous students, based often on the number of students undertaking the Aboriginal Studies course. An indication of this was when more Indigenous students than non-Indigenous students were in the class, the latter might feel uncomfortable, this is an area that needs further exploration. It was also alarming to discover that some Indigenous students perpetuated this notion (as presented in Chapter 6) leading many non-Indigenous students to believe this was indeed true, in turn reinforcing this widely held misconception.

While the misunderstanding that Aboriginal Studies is only for Indigenous students was upheld there were those students who identified that career aspirations was a major influencing factor in HSC subject choice. Indigenous students’ responses indicate that there is quite often a connection between students not electing Aboriginal Studies and the career they hope to follow. It was suggested that subject timetabling contributed to students reconsidering their choice to undertake Aboriginal Studies in that subjects considered university entry courses were offered
in direct competition to Aboriginal Studies. The impact of this is that students do not see a link between their career path and Aboriginal Studies.

**Non-Indigenous students.** The non-Indigenous students interviewed in this study all believed that most students did not elect Aboriginal Studies based on perceptions that the history of Indigenous Australia did not relate to Australian history. The general feeling of those interviewed was that there was total disinterest in learning about Indigenous culture, history, and contemporary Indigenous issues.

Whilst it was clear that disinterest was considered the major influencing factor on not electing Aboriginal Studies, non-Indigenous students also identified that as a course developed for all students there were those students who believed that if they were non-Indigenous this prevented them from undertaking Aboriginal Studies. It was interesting that in some of the responses non-Indigenous students talked about how their friends were surprised that they had elected Aboriginal Studies when they were not Indigenous. Again, the myth that Aboriginal Studies is only for Indigenous students continues to be upheld. Therefore, many non-Indigenous students do not consider or choose it as a HSC subject, even if they are interested.

While it was suggested that there were students interested in electing Aboriginal Studies the impact of subject timetabling in the school was identified as a factor in subject choice. As with the Indigenous students, non-Indigenous students also spoke about the choices students make in relation to the career path chosen and that most often Aboriginal Studies did not cater to their future plans. Again, there is the misconception that Aboriginal Studies is limiting in linking to career options.

**School staff.** Interviews with school staff also identified that being non-Indigenous prevented students from electing Aboriginal Studies. There was a suggestion that the way the course is promoted in the school and the number of Indigenous students in the class leads others to believe that Aboriginal Studies is only for Indigenous students. Some staff also indicated that teachers can perpetuate this belief when they are recruiting students by only targeting Indigenous students when promoting the course.
Some staff also suggested that too much Aboriginal Studies in the junior years led to disinterest in the subject and therefore many students did not want to build on the knowledge they had gained previously. There was an indication that this could then directly link to the career path that many students had chosen and that Aboriginal Studies did not offer the content to achieve the necessary marks to access relevant university courses. This in turn was evident in responses identifying the importance of where Aboriginal Studies is offered on elective timetables within the school. There was an indication that when students know what they want to do when they leave school they do not necessarily see the benefits in undertaking Aboriginal Studies as a link to their future career plans.

Summary of Results for Research Question 1.2.

Results of this question indicate that similar connections have been made in response to why students do not elect Aboriginal Studies. It is not unusual that those interviewed saw that many would not elect Aboriginal Studies given they were non-Indigenous, as this has been a long held belief within Indigenous communities. It would seem that this is a myth that is continually reinforced by how the school promotes Aboriginal Studies both as an interest course and also a pathway to further education and particular careers. It is interesting that these identified themes were significant across the schools and that developing promotional materials at the school level could be a means of addressing this shortfall.

Research question 2.1: Perceived Strengths and Limitations of the Aboriginal Studies HSC Course (Aim 2)

Since its inception there have been suggestions from Indigenous community members, teachers, and students about the strengths and limitations of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course. Within this study was an opportunity for students, staff and parents, to voice their opinion about what they felt was “good and/or bad” about the course and to provide suggestions as to what could improve the Aboriginal Studies course to benefit students in the future.

A major strength identified by all participants was the significance of community involvement and the benefits that could be derived by not only the
students in Aboriginal Studies but across the school and the community. A second strength was related to the importance of the teacher of Aboriginal Studies with most responses being positive in relation to the support teachers provided to students and the Indigenous community. Students, staff, and parents suggested that a strong, positive relationship with the teacher could almost certainly impact on the educational outcomes being achieved by students.

In relation to the limitations of the Aboriginal Studies course, the most significant themes related to the lack of resources for the course, the need for appropriate promotional processes, and a strong call across participants for the Aboriginal Studies course to be made compulsory for all students. These findings suggest it may be time to identify changes as to how the course is resourced and promoted to potential candidates.

**Indigenous students.** All Indigenous student responses in relation to community connections identified that educationally and culturally they could learn more through visits into communities. In conjunction with these visits were those from highly respected Indigenous Elders and community members coming into schools to provide opportunities to share knowledge, both culturally and in relation to contemporary issues. Indigenous students in particular enjoyed these events and voiced strongly that more of these types of activities should be included in the Aboriginal Studies curriculum, as these experiences provided valuable information above and beyond what books and other resources could offer.

The provision of these experiences was considered to be a direct outcome of the planning and hard work undertaken by the teacher. Responses indicated that the teacher, who went out of their way in providing these types of learning experiences, endeavoured to be inclusive of community within Aboriginal Studies. Students spoke about how quite often these were the teachers in the school who displayed enthusiasm, understanding, and were supportive in establishing links with the Indigenous community and therefore willing to be seen as a learner as well as a teacher.
As identified under Research Question 1.1, a motivating factor for choosing Aboriginal Studies was in some cases a consequence of who the teacher was, in turn a strength of the course whereas Aboriginal Studies teachers were seen to have a strong background in the subject but were also aware of the needs of their Indigenous students (Frigo, 1999). In addition to this Indigenous students were keen to talk about what made their teacher unique, identifying positive aspects of a “good” Aboriginal Studies teacher as being “fair, caring, and encouraging” allowing for a relationship that was based on mutual respect.

In relation to the limitations of the Aboriginal Studies course, as a group, the Indigenous students saw the lack of resources as a major disadvantage in the course. The importance of a textbook came up in most responses with statements that implied other courses were valued more than Aboriginal Studies because resources were plentiful in those areas. In further discussion there was a realisation that alternative texts could be utilised with strong support from the local Indigenous community allowing Aboriginal Studies to be based on current issues taking place in the local and wider community.

Although Aboriginal Studies is a course that is ever changing in its provision of up-to-date information it is disappointing that students, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, appear not to get the information they need to make the choice as to whether Aboriginal Studies is a course that they should undertake. Hence, Indigenous students felt that there could be more interest in the Aboriginal Studies course if it was promoted in ways that targeted a wider audience, particularly the non-Indigenous student population.

Non-Indigenous students. Responses from non-Indigenous students suggest that many benefits were gained through contact with Indigenous communities and community members. Students talked about how their enhanced knowledge took on new meaning in their education particularly in other subjects as they acknowledged the skills, values, and attitudes learned from Indigenous Elders, building on what had been learned from texts and other materials. Whilst these are important responses these learning experiences directed by the teacher, especially those involving
community ties, are seen to be critical to the success of the course, again suggesting
the pivotal role teachers play in the implementation of Aboriginal Studies.

Limitations for non-Indigenous students were also related to firstly, the lack of
resources with discussion revolving around the absence of a text book for
Aboriginal Studies. Although this was seen to be a disadvantage for the students
they also acknowledged that resources developed by teachers within the school can
be a disadvantage as information was not always current. Secondly, non-Indigenous
students spoke about the promotion of Aboriginal Studies and that information was
limited and more than likely targeted Indigenous students. There was an indication
that this needed to be investigated further and strategies need to be developed that
promoted the Aboriginal Studies course in a positive way to a wider group of
students so that those who wanted to could access the course.

The third theme identified was that Aboriginal Studies should be made a
compulsory course, something that has been a controversial topic for many years,
particularly within Indigenous communities across New South Wales. Responses
from the students identified the importance of Aboriginal Studies for all students
and within the wider community as a step in the Reconciliation process, something
students considered could only be achieved if the Aboriginal Studies course were
compulsory for all students.

School staff. In responses from school staff there was an indication that the
school needed to make a commitment to Aboriginal Studies by providing activities
that established necessary links with the local Indigenous community as well as those
in other areas. Community ties was again identified as the main strength of
Aboriginal Studies, for school staff there were opportunities to be learners in the
classroom with Indigenous Elders and other community members building on the
local knowledge they possessed. For many staff it also became a process of
strengthening their network in the Indigenous community allowing it to become
wider and broader. Teachers also identified the benefits for students undertaking
Aboriginal Studies, more specifically role models for young Indigenous students
enabling them to feel good about their identity as Indigenous students while for non-
Indigenous students it is a means of promoting and valuing Aboriginal culture within the school.

Yet again teachers were seen to be an essential link between the community and the school; in particular Aboriginal Education Assistants identified the importance of a committed Aboriginal Studies teacher while principals also acknowledged their importance in their role as teacher and community networker. For some principals there were the positives of a good Aboriginal Studies teacher but they also voiced concerns about inexperienced teachers and the impact this can have on the students of Aboriginal Studies.

One of the many issues that can impact on the newly appointed, inexperienced Aboriginal Studies teacher is the lack of resources available. The findings indicate that teachers consider the Aboriginal Studies course to be severely “under resourced”, with a call for a textbook. Although most staff acknowledged that teaching materials need to be developed at the local level so that they are more relevant to the local Indigenous community responses indicated that relevant materials need to be made available through the NSW Department of Education and Training, including support in networking with other Aboriginal Studies teachers. In view of this, networking across schools was seen as a way of assisting in the development of strategies to promote the Aboriginal Studies course. Some staff spoke about their concerns that non-Indigenous students were not electing the course and that student numbers were often so low that the course could not be offered. It was also suggested that the information that is provided to students needs to be accurate and clear so as to allow students to make an informed choice about whether they elect Aboriginal Studies as a HSC option.

While the discussion about the promotion of Aboriginal Studies indicates that students should be given accurate information staff also spoke about the prospect of making Aboriginal Studies compulsory. It was considered a means of educating all students about the “shared history” of Australia whilst providing a way of achieving Reconciliation within the school and wider community.

Parents. Parent interviews acknowledged that community connections were important but it was also identified that the school should begin with the local
community and not always seek communities outside their own for students to experience “Indigenous culture”. It was considered to be a positive component of the Aboriginal Studies course as parents made clear that some information that comes from books is superficial, and what students can learn through the community are much more authentic experiences.

Although community visits in and outside of the school were seen to be beneficial for all involved parents, parents also voiced their concerns about the lack of resources for the Aboriginal Studies course. Again, the lack of a textbook was discussed and that if one were to be developed Indigenous educators and community members should be involved in its development. This in turn was seen to be the first step in making the course compulsory, although parents saw this differently then other participants as they spoke about making components of the course compulsory for all students if the whole course could not be compulsory. There were no indications as to how this could be achieved.

Summary of Results for Research Question 2.1.

The findings related to this question indicate that for the majority of responses the identified positives and negatives of the Aboriginal Studies course are not dissimilar. The most significant finding is the importance placed on the involvement of the Indigenous community in the implementation of the course. Although this was seen to be a major strength of the course there were those who identified that in their particular situation it was not done well. This would need to be investigated alongside of how the course is promoted, as it would seem that Indigenous community involvement in the development of promotional strategies at this time is limited. Here is an opportunity for schools to develop stronger links with the Indigenous community leading to the community becoming actively involved in the implementation of Aboriginal Studies.

For both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students there was an opportunity to reinforce the learning that had taken place in the classroom through contact with Indigenous Elders and/or other Indigenous community members and through visits to communities outside their own. The majority of students spoke about “better learning” because it was “real” and “hands-on” identifying the importance of cultural
excursions and access to those who could provide answers to questions about Indigenous services within the community. This was further reinforced in responses from school staff and parents who also spoke about the importance of making links with communities as a means of providing students with opportunities to experience Indigenous culture in another community and to seek important answers to questions about the situation of Indigenous peoples in Australian society today. There was an indication that for Indigenous students their identity was valued in turn raising self-esteem and confidence, this was also identified in relation to the teacher’s efforts in establishing community networks and their role in the successful implementation of Aboriginal Studies.

The importance of the Aboriginal Studies teacher came from positive responses in relation to the support teachers provided to students and the Indigenous community. Students, staff, and parents suggested that a strong, positive relationship with the teacher could almost certainly impact on the educational outcomes being achieved by Indigenous students. Whilst the teacher was identified as a strength of the course there were responses that indicated that some teachers do not provide the support that students are seeking within the Aboriginal Studies course. For some the teacher’s particular focus on course content could be misconstrued and in one particular case a student saw the teaching strategies of one particular teacher as perpetuating racism.

In relation to the limitations of the Aboriginal Studies course, the most significant theme related to the lack of resources for the course, across responses resources had become a major focus. Responses indicated that there was limited access to high quality materials and students spoke about working from teacher-made workbooks as not being effective resources. Suggestions came about the development of an Aboriginal Studies textbook but conditions would be enforced, in that it was imperative that Indigenous people be involved in its development.

Findings also suggest that it may be time to identify changes as to how the course is resourced and promoted as the issue of low student enrolments becomes problematic for many schools, if the numbers are low then the course is not offered. The need for appropriate promotional processes and a strong call across participants
for the Aboriginal Studies course to be made compulsory for all students was a solution put forward to address this issue.

Research question 3.1: Impact of the HSC Aboriginal Studies Course on Self-concept (Aim 3)

A positive self-concept is influenced by the interest and satisfaction students’ attain at school (Marsh & Hau, 2003) providing both individual and collective benefits in pathways beyond schooling. Self-concept theory is most important with educational questions relating to Indigenous students and in this case participation in the HSC Aboriginal Studies course and how it makes Indigenous students feel. Results from this question indicate that those Indigenous students actively participating in the Aboriginal Studies course felt proud about their identity as Indigenous people, parents also identified the positive impact Aboriginal Studies was having on their children and their further development as young Indigenous adults. Although staff saw positivess they also identified that Aboriginal Studies is a particularly academically rigorous course and those Indigenous students who completed the course felt positive about themselves as Indigenous people and capable students. However, there is a gap in relation to those students who do not complete the course and the impact on their self-concept, an area that requires further investigation.

Indigenous students. Aboriginal Studies clearly provided for some Indigenous students a place where they could assert themselves as Indigenous people, where they felt that Aboriginal culture was surviving in relation to past events, and being respected by others in the class. With this respect came pride in being Indigenous supported by other Indigenous students in the Aboriginal Studies learning environment. For many Indigenous students in this study Aboriginal Studies was providing a “place of belonging” in the school whilst enabling them to feel comfortable as Indigenous people.

Links to the traditions still existing within the community and upheld by Elders was also an important aspect in students feeling good about being Indigenous. Some students spoke about racist stereotypes portrayed through the media and the negative
impact these can have on Indigenous people, but stated that Aboriginal Studies was a means of addressing this negativity, instilling pride as Indigenous people while learning about everything that impacts on how they feel.

**School staff.** In identifying that Aboriginal Studies is a rigorous, academic course, it was acknowledged that Indigenous students would feel proud about their achievements in completing the course whilst empowering them as young Indigenous people in the wider community. Indigenous staff saw students display pride in the classroom more often when students could convey something about their own culture, an opportunity for them to demonstrate the knowledge they did hold.

**Parents.** Parents reported that as their children gained more knowledge their pride in being Indigenous increased. These parents saw that their children were provided with, and taking up, opportunities to educate younger Indigenous children following the oral tradition of sharing knowledge with others.

**Summary of Results for Research Question 3.1.**

What the Indigenous students in this study have in common is their Aboriginality; their sense of pride based on their Aboriginality was evident in their responses about the impact of the Aboriginal Studies course was having on them. It was clear by these responses that Aboriginal Studies does make a difference in students’ sense of wellbeing. The indications being that Aboriginal Studies offers a place were they felt accepted and respected something not evident in other school subjects. These results suggest that for the Indigenous students who participated in this study the HSC Aboriginal Studies course enhances their identity self-concept, an underlying goal of the Aboriginal Studies syllabus.

**Research Question 3.2: Impact of the HSC Aboriginal Studies Course on Other Educational Outcomes (Aim 3)**

In identifying if and how the Aboriginal Studies course impacts on the educational outcomes of Indigenous students interviews from two participant groups produced the most relevant data. Indigenous students and school staff identified some positives in relation to the importance of Aboriginal Studies on the attendance
and retention of Indigenous students to Year 12. While these positives acknowledge that the Indigenous students participating in this study were enjoying the course, performing well and wanting to attend school there were Indigenous students who elected Aboriginal Studies but for reasons unknown have discontinued the course or even worse, left school all together. It was reported that many Indigenous students were struggling with the content of Aboriginal Studies as the high academic expectations of the course were seen to be beyond those with low literacy skills.

**Indigenous students.** Responses from Indigenous students indicated that they enjoyed Aboriginal Studies, were more likely to attend classes and complete work on time in turn having a positive effect on their performance in the course. Many of the students indicated that Aboriginal Studies was considered to be a serious subject whereas everyone’s opinion was respected and learning from each other was important to all. Furthermore, this provided a learning environment where all in the class were valued which they felt was something that was not always evident in other classes. Due to the respect given in the Aboriginal Studies classroom it was considered, in most cases as an incentive to attend classes. Being with friends and family and enjoyment of the course were reasons for attendance in class. On a deeper level, some students saw Aboriginal Studies as significant in relation to school attendance whereas the incentive to attend school was, in the first instance, to attend Aboriginal Studies as it was considered to be much more important than other school subjects.

While this sounds positive there were those students who spoke about their concerns in relation to the impact of non-attending Indigenous students and how this was perceived by the non-Indigenous students undertaking Aboriginal Studies. For some it was sending a clear message that it was acceptable to miss Aboriginal Studies classes. In addition students identified that their classmates had become disengaged in Aboriginal Studies and spoke about the possible links to the academic rigour of the course. Many were disturbed by but identified that this could be what leads to Indigenous students dropping out of school.

**School staff.** For school staff a number of issues arose, as with Indigenous students there was the issue of attendance in Aboriginal Studies, although more
importantly the concerns of the literacy needs of Indigenous students and their total disengagement from, firstly Aboriginal Studies and then school. Staff across the schools spoke about the attendance of Indigenous students and overall attendance was better in Aboriginal Studies than at school generally. Furthermore, it was identified that attendance in Aboriginal Studies was good but this did not mean that the students were engaged in learning. An interesting aspect to this is that Indigenous staff indicated that they felt the Indigenous students were “coping” in Aboriginal Studies (this related more specifically to cultural content). Nevertheless they raised concerns about the low literacy skills of some of the students and that additional support was available to the students to assist in the development of appropriate academic skills. Hence, connections made between poor literacy levels and the academic rigour of the Aboriginal Studies curriculum had staff concerned about the performance of some Indigenous students in Aboriginal Studies and ultimately retention to Year 12.

For two of the schools attendance and retention was a major issue, as was the belief that literacy levels of Indigenous students play a major role in their success in Aboriginal Studies. For teachers of Aboriginal Studies this impacted on what and how they teach to ensure the success of Indigenous students, not always an easy thing to do when there are other students to cater to. Other issues were raised by staff and students in relation to Indigenous student engagement at school and the effects of this on other students, although there were those who spoke about the importance of having Aboriginal Studies in the school as a means of addressing disengagement, particularly in the junior years.

Summary of Results for Research Question 3.2.

Hence, the HSC Aboriginal Studies course can be seen as impacting positively on students who feel that they are doing well in the course (have high Aboriginal Studies self-concepts) and who attend school to participate in Aboriginal Studies classes. Conversely, it may impact adversely on those struggling academically (low Aboriginal Studies self-concept due to low literacy levels). With no hard evidence identified to ascertain whether Indigenous students are struggling with the content of the Aboriginal Studies course it is necessary for further research to be undertaken to establish if this is in fact a reality. Additionally, both staff and students identified that
the academic rigour of the Aboriginal Studies course could be a contributing factor in
disengagement in the course and ultimately school.

Research Question 4.1: Extent to which Indigenous students compare their
abilities in the HSC Aboriginal Studies course to other Indigenous and non-
Indigenous students (Aim 4)

When the question of comparing oneself to others in Aboriginal Studies was
raised there was resistance from some of the students, who were more inclined to say
that they were performing at the same level, especially when Indigenous students
were asked to compare themselves with other Indigenous students. It is interesting
that although the students voiced their discomfort with making comparisons all were
able to identify that their academic performance in the Aboriginal Studies course was
the same or better than the students in their class.

Indigenous student. It was clear from responses that Indigenous students felt
good about their performance in Aboriginal Studies, particularly as most were
performing at a level above non-Indigenous students. The majority of Indigenous
students spoke about where they ranked in the class saying that they were either in
the top of the class or average, no students indicated that they were at the “bottom of
the class”. Much of these rankings were based on feedback received from the teacher
and passing comments about how they had performed in class tests and other
assessments tasks. Even when students did talk about where non-Indigenous students
were placed most often Indigenous students were in the top 3-4 students.

Non-Indigenous student. The non-Indigenous students interviewed also felt
that their achievements were commensurate with other students in their Aboriginal
Studies class. Most spoke of being “average” and that there were others who were
“smarter”. When comparing with Indigenous students they identified being at the
same level and rated them as being at 5-6 on a scale of 1-10. It was interesting that
non-Indigenous students were surprised when asked to make comparisons with an
Indigenous student as it was voiced, “But…they're coming first”.

School staff. Teachers talked about how students saw themselves in relation to
the rest of the class and how as the year progressed students were more aware of
their own individual performance. In addition to this teachers talked about the Indigenous students who were not performing well, based on assessment tasks and participation in class, and were ranked quite low in relation to others.

Summary of Results for Research Question 4.1.

The data collected from the three schools indicates that, of the Indigenous students interviewed, there was a view that their academic performance in the Aboriginal Studies course was better than or the same as the non-Indigenous students. This in turn had a positive impact on their identity self-concept and their academic self-concept in relation to Aboriginal Studies content.

Strengths and Limitations of the Present Investigation

Strengths

Based on past experiences there have been times when Indigenous people have been reluctant to participate in research, this study was no exception. A major strength of this study was that it was conducted by an Indigenous researcher who could quickly establish rapport with Indigenous participants. As an Indigenous researcher with connections to a number of local communities, I found that Indigenous parents and some students were reluctant at first to participate in the study but when they realised that I was Indigenous researcher were happy to be involved. There were opportunities for open dialogue between myself and the participants, which many took full advantage of.

A qualitative approach has allowed for Indigenous participants to have their say, and these views can be placed along side of those from teachers and parents so that similarities and differences in themes across the groups could be identified (Fetterman, 1998, p. 2). Triangulating the findings across multiple groups to compare and contrast findings also enhanced the validity of the findings and allowed the unique perspectives of Indigenous students to be elucidated. Including survey data from students who did not elect the Aboriginal Studies course was also strength of the research design in that it enabled access to a larger group.
Limitations

Measuring self-concept using qualitative methods was both challenging and exciting in the sense that developing questions that would determine the impact of undertaking the Aboriginal Studies course on self-concept of Indigenous students has lead to missing data. In undertaking future research in this area I will heed the suggestion made by (Craven & Tucker, 2003) AECG members in that it would be useful in future research to utilise an existing self-concept quantitative instrument to measure multiple domains of self-concept that specifically relate to the HSC Aboriginal Studies course.

A major limitation was that of student absenteeism, this is not a new phenomenon as many previous studies have identified. Absenteeism in one school held up the progress of the study for a period and therefore that school had to be withdrawn early in the research. Absenteeism could also be another variable impacting on identifying how these students compared their self-concept and achievement in the class with others. Perhaps those Indigenous students choosing to continue to participate in the HSC Aboriginal Studies course had higher a self-concept than those continuing to be absent from the course and therefore made downward comparisons that served to enhance their self-concept and persistence in the course. This issue needs to be explored further in future research.

Only three Indigenous parents participated in the study, this is not surprising given that many Indigenous parents do not participate in school activities or functions. Due to budgetary and time constraints non-Indigenous parents were not included in the research design. Hence it would be useful for future research to utilise a larger sample of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous parents.

Implications for Theory, Research, and Practice

This investigation provides insight into the curriculum area of HSC Aboriginal Studies and its implementation since it was first introduced in 1991. Indigenous communities across NSW have voiced their concerns about many of the issues that this study has addressed.

This investigation had four overarching aims:
1. to ascertain the rationales senior secondary Indigenous students have for electing or not electing HSC Aboriginal Studies;
2. to identify the perceptions held by Indigenous students as to the strengths and limitations of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course;
3. to critically analyse the impact of undertaking the HSC Aboriginal Studies Course on Indigenous students’ self-concepts and other desirable educational outcomes (achievement in Aboriginal Studies, motivation, attendance, enjoyment of school, aspirations); and
4. to identify if Indigenous students compare themselves with non-Indigenous students and if these are influenced by downward or upward or other social comparison processes.

The findings of this research provide many avenues for future research in Aboriginal Studies in the school curriculum and also self-concept research with Indigenous secondary students. Future research could also address the need to undertake studies with a larger sample size as suggested by Mellor and Corrigan (2004, p. 46) in relation to exploring the impact of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course. A recommendation would be to incorporate more groups and schools across NSW to make comparisons between classes with a majority of Indigenous students to those with a majority of non-Indigenous students. This could then measure on a larger scale if differences in both self-concept and achievement in the course are evident. This approach would allow more rigorous comparisons of the processes that underlie different types of class compositions that could not be teased out within the research design of the present investigation. A more fine grained analysis of the BFLPE could then be obtained.

The present investigation also offers some implications for educators in order to develop Aboriginal Studies further as a valued subject for all students. There were recommendations made as to how the Aboriginal Studies course could be promoted so that students could make informed choices about electing the course. Participants suggested that teachers who are teaching the Aboriginal Studies course could present to potential students’ information about the course including the aims and content as a means of enticing more students into the course.

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Many non-Indigenous students who do not take the course inaccurately perceive the course to be only for Indigenous students whilst Indigenous students seem to think the course is about Aboriginal culture. A number of students who did not take the course also felt that their HSC marks would be scaled down if they took this subject. These and other misconceptions could be readily addressed if potential students were provided with a more accurate overview of the nature of the course.

Participants also suggested that opportunities should be made available for students to attend classes to “get a feel” for the content and an invitation extended to current or previous students to talk to potential students about their experiences with the course. Based on the results of the present investigation whereby only a few students could identify the link between undertaking this course and their future aspirations, it would also seem useful to consider providing more information on how the course can be linked to career aspirations. Some students also felt that they already knew all there was to know about Aboriginal Studies. These results imply that it would be useful for schools to review what Aboriginal perspectives are being taught across the curriculum in an endeavour to regulate the material. This process is similar to what happens in primary schools where knowledge is built upon throughout the curriculum. In turn schools could convey to students how the HSC Aboriginal Studies course is different in relation to previous courses. For some of the Indigenous students interviewed there was the belief that all Indigenous students should undertake Aboriginal Studies regardless of other factors relating to subject choices. This then linked directly to what the staff perceived to be negative attitudes toward Aboriginal Studies and

**Summary**

This research stemmed from persistent concerns, from Indigenous community and teachers, that Indigenous students were not performing as well as their non-Indigenous peers in the HSC Aboriginal Studies course. This in turn was perceived to be having a negative effect on Indigenous students’ self-concepts, more so their identity self-concepts. It is hoped that the results of this investigation will serve to
address some of the present limitations of the course and inform future research investigating the impact of the HSC Aboriginal studies course. In response to the four aims of the study it has been identified:

a) further refinement of promotional strategies for the HSC Aboriginal Studies course needs to be undertaken, particularly at the school level (Aims 1, 2);

b) appropriate course materials, both for teachers and students could address concerns re resourcing the subject (Aim 2);

c) that those Indigenous students actively engaged in the Aboriginal Studies course have high self-concept in both their identity (whereas they feel secure in their identity as Indigenous people) and in Aboriginal Studies (whereas they achieve success in Aboriginal Studies through motivation, attendance, enjoyment of school, aspirations) (Aim 3); and

d) Indigenous students undertaking the Aboriginal Studies course rank their participation and overall performance in the course as equal to or better than their non-Indigenous peers (Aim 4).

The focus of this research was on the self-concepts of Indigenous students who are undertaking the HSC Aboriginal Studies at the senior secondary level, seeking to discover if undertaking the course has a positive or negative impact on Indigenous students’ self-concept and educational outcomes (Craven, Marsh, & Burnett, 2003; Craven & Parente, 2003). The findings demonstrate that the HSC Aboriginal Studies course has a positive impact on Indigenous secondary students’ identity and Aboriginal Studies self-concept, their participation in class, their friendships with other Indigenous students, and classroom engagement.

It was also identified that some Indigenous students do start off enjoying the Aboriginal Studies course but then are confronted with the academic demands of the course. The results of the present investigation suggest that both a reflected glory effect (being good at Aboriginal Studies like the other Indigenous students in the
class and almost as good as the top non-Indigenous students) and a contrast effect (doing well in Aboriginal Studies in comparison to non-Indigenous students not doing so well and especially other Indigenous students who are not participating fully in the course) are present in the Aboriginal Studies classroom. These results suggest that further examination of the Big-Fish-Little-Pond Effect (BFLPE) may be helpful in determining if Indigenous students compare their performance in the Aboriginal Studies course with their non-Indigenous peers but also to ascertain if these comparison processes impact on Indigenous students’ self-concepts, more so their identity self-concept. It is also evident from the current investigation that self-concept research in relation to Indigenous students’ performance in specific curriculum areas is both valuable and interesting.

Although the focus of this research was to determine if undertaking the HSC Aboriginal Studies course has a positive or negative impact on Indigenous students’ self-concept and educational outcomes, what the findings illustrate is that the presence of Aboriginal Studies in the school curriculum is valued not only by Indigenous students, Indigenous parents, and communities, but also by many non-Indigenous students and school staff members. It is anticipated that the results of this investigation will serve to address some of the present limitations of the course and inform future research investigating the impact of Aboriginal Studies curriculum on the self-concept of Indigenous students.
REFERENCES


Curtain, R. (2003) *How Young People are Faring: Key Indicators 2003. An update about the learning and work situation of young Australians Including an analysis of how young Indigenous people are faring* Dusseldorp Skills Forum, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services (ATSIS), Glebe


Department of Education, Science & Training, (n.d.)


Forrest (1998) In G. Partington (Ed.), *Perspectives on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education.* Katoomba, NSW: Social Science Press.


and adjustment (pp.131-198). Orlando, FL: Academic Press.


Appendix 1: Approval from the NSW Department of Education and Training to Conduct the Study

To be inserted on approval
Appendix 2: Approval from UWS Ethics Committee
Appendix 3: Invitation to Principals

To be printed on Letterhead

Dear Principal,

I would like to invite your school to participate in a study funded by the Australian Research Council entitled:
HSC Aboriginal Studies: Strengths, Limitations and Impact upon Aboriginal Students’ Self-Concepts and Educational Outcomes

This study is being conducted in 4 Department of Education and Training schools with invitations being extended to schools identified by an advisory committee of representatives from the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc. (AECG), Aboriginal Programs Unit – NSW Department of Education and Training, Board of Studies (NSW), Aboriginal Studies Association, and Aboriginal Education Council. The Department of Education and Training has approved our request to approach your school (see Attachment 1).

The primary purpose of the study is to investigate the positive impact of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course on desirable educational outcomes for Aboriginal students valued by Aboriginal communities and educators, why students’ decide to select or not select the course as a HSC subject, and the strengths and limitations of the course from the perspectives of Principals, teachers of the course, AEA’s, students, and parents (see Attachment 2 for further information).

The participation of your school would involve:

Yourself, your school’s HSC Aboriginal Studies teacher, and AEA, agreeing to participate in a one hour interview on the issues above with myself (see Attachment 3 for interview questions),

- Allowing me to meet with your ASSPA committee to explain the nature of the study;
- Forwarding to parents of students enrolled in your HSC Aboriginal Studies course, and nominated by your school, a letter posted to their home address inviting their participation in the study through a focus group interview. Their child’s permission will also be sought to participate in the study by considering participating in a one-hour in-depth interview. I will supply stamped envelopes containing these materials (see Attachment 4)
- Allowing me to interview participating students individually at your school for a period of an hour;
- Forwarding to parents of students not enrolled in your HSC Aboriginal Studies course, an information letter inviting their child’s participation in the study by considering completing a survey. I will supply stamped envelopes containing these materials (see Attachment 5).
- Facilitating the completion of a simple survey by Year 11 and 12 students with parental consent.

Participants will be provided with an oral and written explanation of the study before confirming willingness to participate. Participation is voluntary and participants can withdraw at any time without penalty or prejudice. Interviews will be recorded on a tape recorder and the data transcribed. Only the research team will have access to the data and no names will be recorded on interview transcripts. The identity of your school and the participants will not be identified in any written report. Please advise of your participation decision by completing the participation advice form

I will telephone you to ascertain if you require any further information or clarification on the above request. May I also extend my appreciation to you for your professional consideration of supporting this important initiative.

Yours sincerely,

Debbie Wray
M.Ed. (Hons) student,
SELF Research Centre
University of Western Sydney
Email Address: debbie@koori.usyd.edu.au
Telephone: 9351 7002 or Freecall 1800 622 742

NOTE: This research has been approved by the University of Western Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, should contact the Executive Officer of the UWS Human Research Ethics Committee, Ms Kaye Buckley (tel 02 4570 1136). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

Attachments:
1 Approval from the State Department of Education to Conduct the Study
2 Participant Information
3 Interview Questions
4 Invitation to participate letters to parents/students
5 Survey
Appendix 4: Consent Letter to Schools

Please return the following signed consent form in the enclosed envelope.

Consent Form: Schools

I …………………………………… consent to allowing my students to participate in the study of HSC Aboriginal Studies: Strengths, Limitations and Impact upon Aboriginal Students’ Self Concepts and Educational Outcomes being conducted by the SELF Research Centre of the University of Western Sydney.

Signed: ……………………………………Principal.

Date……/…./………

School: ………………………………………
Appendix 5: Letter to Teacher/ AEA

Dear Teacher/AEA,

As an Aboriginal researcher I seek your assistance with my UWS Higher Research Degree project that aims to find out more about the strengths and weaknesses of the Stage 6 HSC Aboriginal Studies course. This study is being conducted in 4 NSW Department of Education and Training schools and is entitled:

**HSC Aboriginal Studies: Strengths, Limitations and Impact Upon Aboriginal Students’ Self-Concepts and Educational Outcomes.**

The primary purpose of the study is to investigate the positive impact of the HSC Aboriginal Studies course on desirable educational outcomes for Aboriginal students valued by Aboriginal communities and educators, why students’ decide to select or not select the course as a HSC subject, and the strengths and limitations of the course from the perspectives of Principals, teachers of the course, AEAs, students, and parents.

In the first instance I seek your assistance in nominating students, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, to undertake in-depth interviews. Your nomination should include:

- 6 Aboriginal students undertaking the Aboriginal Studies course (2 below average, 2 average, 2 above average);
- 3 Non-Aboriginal students undertaking the Aboriginal Studies course (1 below average, 1 average, 1 above average);
- 6 Aboriginal students not undertaking the Aboriginal Studies course (2 below average, 2 average, 2 above average).

Secondly, your participation would involve an in-depth interview with me for 1 hour discussing your views on the Aboriginal Studies course and the impact it has had. The discussion will be recorded on a tape recorder, with your permission, and typed. No names will be recorded on the typed discussion and only the research team will have access to this. You will be able to discuss the study with me before the discussion. You will be free to stop the discussion at any time, you can ask for the tape recorder to be turned off at anytime and you can request that all or sections of the transcript be erased. Participation is voluntary, so your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with the school.

If you have any questions about the study and what participation will involve, please feel free to contact me (contact details below).

Please return the consent form attached in the supplied envelope to advise me of whether or not you would like to participate. May I also extend my appreciation to you for your professional consideration of supporting this important research.

Yours sincerely,

Debbie Wray
Med. (Hons) student,
SELF Research Centre
University of Western Sydney
Email Address: debbie@koori.usyd.edu.au
Telephone: 02 9351 7002
Freecall: 1800 622 742

NOTE: This research has been approved by the University of Western Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, should contact the Executive Officer of the UWS Human Research Ethics Committee, Ms Kaye Buckley (tel: 02 4570 1136). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.
Appendix 6: Teacher/AEA Consent form

I have read the information letter and understand what is involved by my participation in the *HSC Aboriginal Studies: Strengths, Limitations and Impact upon Aboriginal Students’ Self-Concepts and Educational Outcomes* study.

I agree to participate in a one-hour interview with the researcher to discuss my professional views of the Stage 6 HSC Aboriginal Studies course.

I understand that interviews will be recorded on a tape recorder as outlined in the Participant Information Statement.

I understand that participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time without penalty or prejudice.

Signature: ........................................ Printed Name: ........................................

Participating Teachers/AEAs please advise the following:

Contact Telephone Number: ........................................

I will contact you to arrange a convenient interview time.

Please return this form in the enclosed stamped addressed envelope

Thank you for your co-operation.
Appendix 7: Invitation to Parents and Students

To be printed on Letterhead

Dear Parent and Student,

As an Aboriginal researcher I seek your help and support with my UWS Higher Degree research project that aims to find out more about the strengths and weaknesses of the Higher School Certificate Aboriginal Studies course. This study is being conducted in 4 NSW Department of Education and Training schools and is entitled:

**HSC Aboriginal Studies: Strengths, Limitations and Impact upon Aboriginal Students’ Self-Concepts and Educational Outcomes.**

The main reason for the study is to find out:
- More about the HSC Aboriginal Studies course and how this course has benefited students,
- Why students’ decide to choose or not choose the course as a HSC subject, and
- What students, parents, and teachers see as the strengths and weaknesses of the Aboriginal Studies course.

**Parents,** if you agree to be part of the study, your role will involve talking with me and other parents in a focus group for 1 hour about your views on the Aboriginal Studies course. Our conversation will be recorded on a tape recorder, with your permission, and typed.

**Students,** if you agree to be part of the study, your role will involve talking to me for 1 hour about your views on the Aboriginal Studies course. Our conversation will be recorded on a tape recorder, with your permission, and typed.

**NOTE:** For both parent and student interviews no names will be recorded when our talk is typed and only the research team will have access to this. You will be able to discuss the study with me before we start our discussion. You will be free to stop at any time, you can ask for the tape recorder to be turned off at any time and you can request that all or some parts of the tape be erased. Participation is voluntary, this means that whether you decide to participate or not it will not affect your relationship with the school.

If you have any questions about the study and what participation will involve, please feel free to contact me (contact details below).

Please return the consent form attached in the supplied envelope to advise me whether or not you would like to participate. Thank you for your consideration of supporting this important research.

Yours sincerely,

Debbie Wray
Med. (Hons) student,
SELF Research Centre
University of Western Sydney
Email Address: debbie@koori.usyd.edu.au
Telephone: 02 9351 7002

**NOTE:** This research has been approved by the University of Western Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, should contact the Executive Officer of the UWS Human Research Ethics Committee, Ms Kaye Buckley (tel 02 4570 1136). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.
Appendix 8: Parent Consent form

I have read the information letter and understand what is involved by my participation in the *HSC Aboriginal Studies: Strengths, Limitations and Impact upon Aboriginal Students’ Self-Concepts and Educational Outcomes* study.

☐ I agree to participate in a one-hour focus group with the researcher to discuss my views of the Stage 6 HSC Aboriginal Studies course.

☐ I agree to my child/children indicated below being interviewed.

☐ I understand that interviews will be recorded on a tape recorder as outlined in the letter to parents and students.

I understand that participation is voluntary and I can withdraw at any time without penalty or prejudice.

**Signature:** ……………………………………… **Printed Name:** ………………………………………

Participating parents please advise the following:

Contact Telephone Number: ………………………………………

I will contact you to arrange a convenient interview time.

---

Student Consent form

I have read the information letter and understand what is involved by my participation in the *HSC Aboriginal Studies: Strengths, Limitations and Impact upon Aboriginal Students’ Self-Concepts and Educational Outcomes* study.

I agree to participate in a one-hour interview with the researcher to discuss my views of the Stage 6 HSC Aboriginal Studies course. I understand that interviews will be recorded on a tape recorder as outlined in the letter to parents and students.

I understand that participation is voluntary and I can withdraw at any time without penalty or prejudice.

**Signature:** ……………………………………… **Printed Name:** ………………………………………

Please return this form in the enclosed stamped addressed envelope

Thank you for your co-operation.
Appendix 9: Invitation to Targeted Parents to Participate in Focus Groups and Students to Participate in In-depth Interviews.

To be printed on Letterhead

Dear Parent and Student,

As an Aboriginal researcher I seek your help and support with my UWS Higher Degree research project that aims to find out more about the strengths and weaknesses of the Higher School Certificate Aboriginal Studies course. This study is being conducted in 4 NSW Department of Education and Training schools and is entitled:

HSC Aboriginal Studies: Strengths, Limitations and Impact upon Aboriginal Students’ Self-Concepts and Educational Outcomes.

The main reason for the study is to find out:

• More about the HSC Aboriginal Studies course and how this course has benefited students,
• Why students’ decide to choose or not choose the course as a HSC subject, and
• What students, parents, and teachers see as the strengths and weaknesses of the Aboriginal Studies course.

Parents, if you agree to be part of the study, your role will involve talking with me and other parents in a focus group for 1 hour about your views on the Aboriginal Studies course. Our conversation will be recorded on a tape recorder, with your permission, and typed.

Students, if you agree to be part of the study, your role will involve talking to me for 1 hour about your views on the Aboriginal Studies course. Our conversation will be recorded on a tape recorder, with your permission, and typed.

NOTE: For both parent and student interviews no names will be recorded when our talk is typed and only the research team will have access to this. You will be able to discuss the study with me before we start our discussion. You will be free to stop at any time, you can ask for the tape recorder to be turned off at any time and you can request that all or some parts of the tape be erased. Participation is voluntary, this means that whether you decide to participate or not it will not affect your relationship with the school.

If you have any questions about the study and what participation will involve, please feel free to contact me (contact details below).

Please return the consent form attached in the supplied envelope to advise me whether or not you would like to participate. Thank you for your consideration of supporting this important research.

Yours sincerely,

Debbie Wray
Med. (Hons) student,
SELF Research Centre
University of Western Sydney
Email Address: debbie@koori.usyd.edu.au
Telephone: 02 9351 7002

NOTE: This research has been approved by the University of Western Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, should contact the Executive Officer of the UWS Human Research Ethics Committee, Ms Kaye Buckley (tel 02 4570 1136). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.
Appendix 10: Parent Consent form

I have read the information letter and understand what is involved by my participation in the *HSC Aboriginal Studies: Strengths, Limitations and Impact upon Aboriginal Students' Self-Concepts and Educational Outcomes* study.

☐ I agree to participate in a one-hour focus group with the researcher to discuss my views of the Stage 6 HSC Aboriginal Studies course.

☐ I agree to my child/children indicated below being interviewed.

☐ I understand that interviews will be recorded on a tape recorder as outlined in the letter to parents and students.

I understand that participation is voluntary and I can withdraw at any time without penalty or prejudice.

Signature: ........................................ Printed Name: ........................................

Participating parents please advise the following:

Contact Telephone Number: ........................................

I will contact you to arrange a convenient interview time.

____________________________________

Student Consent form

I have read the information letter and understand what is involved by my participation in the *HSC Aboriginal Studies: Strengths, Limitations and Impact upon Aboriginal Students' Self-Concepts and Educational Outcomes* study.

I agree to participate in a one-hour interview with the researcher to discuss my views of the Stage 6 HSC Aboriginal Studies course. I understand that interviews will be recorded on a tape recorder as outlined in the letter to parents and students.

I understand that participation is voluntary and I can withdraw at any time without penalty or prejudice.

Signature: ........................................ Printed Name: ........................................

Please return this form in the enclosed stamped addressed envelope

Thank you for your co-operation.
Appendix 11: Parent/Student Information letter about Survey

Dear Parent and Student,

As an Aboriginal researcher I seek your help and support with my UWS Higher Degree research project that aims to find out more about the strengths and weaknesses of the Higher School Certificate Aboriginal Studies course. This study is being conducted in 4 NSW Department of Education and Training schools and is entitled:

**HSC Aboriginal Studies: Strengths, Limitations and Impact Upon Aboriginal Students’ Self-Concepts And Educational Outcomes.**

The main reason for the study is to find out:

- More about the HSC Aboriginal Studies course;
- Why students’ decide to choose or not choose the course as a HSC subject, and
- What students, who don’t take the course, see as the strengths and weaknesses of the Aboriginal Studies course.

If you agree to be part of the study, the student will be asked to complete a very short survey about the Aboriginal Studies course taking about 5 minutes.

Participation is voluntary, this means that whether you decide to participate or not it will not affect your relationship with the school.

All information provided on the survey will be anonymous, as no names are recorded.

If you have any questions about the study and what participation will involve, please feel free to contact me (contact details below).

Please return the consent form attached in the supplied envelope to advise me whether or not you would like to participate. Thank you for your consideration of supporting this important research.

Yours sincerely,

Debbie Wray
Med. (Hons) student,
SELF Research Centre
University of Western Sydney
Email Address: debbie@koori.usyd.edu.au
Telephone: 02 9772 6202 or Freecall 1800 622 742

NOTE: This research has been approved by the University of Western Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, should contact the Executive Officer of the UWS Human Research Ethics Committee, Ms Kaye Buckley (tel 02 4570 1136). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.
Appendix 12: Parent Consent for Students to Undertake Survey

I have read the information letter to Students and understand what is involved by my child’s participation in the HSC Aboriginal Studies: Strengths, Limitations and Impact upon Aboriginal Students’ Self-Concepts and Educational Outcomes study.

I agree to my child participating by completing a survey about the Stage 6 HSC Aboriginal Studies course.

I understand that participation is voluntary and all information provided on the survey will be anonymous, as no names are recorded.

I understand that my child can withdraw at any time without penalty or prejudice.

Signature: …………………………………… Printed Name: ……………………………………

Student Consent form

I have read the information letter and understand what is involved by my participation in the HSC Aboriginal Studies: Strengths, Limitations and Impact upon Aboriginal Students’ Self-Concepts and Educational Outcomes study.

I agree to participate in a simple survey about the Stage 6 HSC Aboriginal Studies course. I understand that interviews will be recorded on a tape recorder as outlined in the letter to parents and students.

I understand that participation is voluntary and all information provided on the survey will be anonymous, as no names are recorded.

I understand that participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time without penalty or prejudice.

Signature: …………………………………… Printed Name: ……………………………………

Please return this form in the enclosed stamped addressed envelope

Thank you for your co-operation.
Appendix 13: Background to the Project

To be printed on Letterhead

HSC Aboriginal Studies: Strengths, Limitations and Impact Upon Aboriginal Students’ Self-Concepts and Educational Outcomes

Background to the Project

Stage 6 Aboriginal Studies is a Higher School Certificate (HSC) course that was developed to educate students, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, about Aboriginal culture and history in Australia. It has had strong support from Aboriginal communities, the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc. (AECG), the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET), and the Board of Studies (BOS) since it was first introduced into secondary schools in 1991. No research has been done so far to evaluate the Aboriginal Studies course and what it has achieved.

The main purpose of this study is to find out what educational benefits students derive from doing the HSC Aboriginal Studies course, why students’ decide to choose or not choose the course as a HSC subject, and the strengths and weaknesses of the course from the point of view of Principals, teachers of the course, Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEAs), students, and parents.

Participation

This is an invitation for you to be involved in a research project where you get to talk about the Aboriginal Studies course. If you agree to participate in the study the researcher will interview you for approximately 1 hour discussing with you your views on the Aboriginal Studies course and the impact it has had. The discussion will be recorded on a tape recorder, with your permission, and typed. No names will be recorded on the typed discussion and only the research team will have access to this. You will be able to discuss the study with the researcher before the discussion. You will be free to stop the discussion at any time, you can ask for the tape recorder to be turned off at any time and you can request that all or sections of the transcript be erased. Participation is voluntary, so your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with the school.

Further Information

If you have any questions about the study and what participation will involve, please contact Debbie Wray:

Phone: (02) 9351 7002 or Freecall 1800 622 742
Email: debbie@koori.usyd.edu.au

NOTE: This research has been approved by the University of Western Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, should contact the Executive Officer of the UWS Human Research Ethics Committee, Ms Kaye Buckley (tel 02 4570 1136). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

PLEASE KEEP THIS FOR FUTURE REFERENCE
Appendix 14: Information Sheet For Year 11 And 12 Students Not Undertaking
The Aboriginal Studies Course.

| HSC Aboriginal Studies: Strengths, Limitations and Impact upon Aboriginal Students’
  Self-Concepts and Educational Outcomes |

**Background to the Project**

Stage 6 Aboriginal Studies is a Higher School Certificate (HSC) course that was developed to educate students, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, about Aboriginal culture and history in Australia. It has had strong support from Aboriginal communities, the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group Inc. (AECG), the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET), and the Board of Studies (BOS) since it was first introduced into secondary schools in 1991. No research has been done so far to evaluate the Aboriginal Studies course and what it has achieved.

The main purpose of this study is to find out what educational benefits students derive from doing the HSC Aboriginal Studies course, why students’ decide to choose or not choose the course as a HSC subject, and the strengths and weaknesses of the course from the point of view of Principals, teachers of the course, Aboriginal Education Assistants (AEAs), students, and parents.

**Participation**

I invite you to participate in this very important study about the Aboriginal Studies course. If you agree to participate in the study you will be asked to complete a simple survey about the Aboriginal Studies course. Everything you write down is anonymous and private, as your name is not written on the survey. Your written answers will only be seen by the researchers and will not be shown to anyone in your school or your community. The research team will not report the names of students or schools that participate in the study. If you would like to participate please complete the survey. Participation is voluntary, so your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with the school.

**Further Information**

If you have any questions about the study and what participation will involve, please contact Debbie Wray on:

- Phone: (02) 9351 7002 or Freecall 1800 622 742
- Email: debbie@koori.usyd.edu.au

NOTE: This research has been approved by the University of Western Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, should contact the Executive Officer of the UWS Human Research Ethics Committee, Ms Kaye Buckley (tel 02 4570 1136). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

PLEASE KEEP THIS FOR FUTURE REFERENCE
**Appendix 15: In-depth Interview Schedule for Students undertaking Stage 6 Aboriginal Studies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I know you are doing Aboriginal Studies - Why did you choose it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So you are still enrolled in the course, what do you think makes you hang in there?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why do you think students don’t choose Aboriginal Studies as a HSC subject?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why do you think other Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal students don’t choose Aboriginal Studies?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What about the non-Aboriginal/Aboriginal students why don’t they choose it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you had the job of encouraging more students to enrol in the course what sorts of things would you do?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me a bit about the Aboriginal Studies course.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is good about the course?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is not so good about the course?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you had the job of making the course better what sorts of things would you do?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does doing this course make you feel good about yourself?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does doing Aboriginal Studies make you feel bad about yourself?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel good about yourself more often than you feel bad about yourself when you are doing this course?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has doing Aboriginal Studies helped you in other ways? In what ways?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me about the students in your Aboriginal Studies class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How well do you think you are doing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you work out how well you are doing in Aboriginal Studies?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which students do you think do better than you in your class? What makes you think that they do?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does that make you feel?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 16: In-depth Interview Schedule Aboriginal Students not undertaking Stage 6 Aboriginal Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why didn’t you choose Aboriginal Studies as a HSC subject?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why do you think other Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal students didn’t choose Aboriginal Studies?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What about the non-Aboriginal/Aboriginal students why didn’t they choose it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me what you know about the Aboriginal Studies course.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you tell me 3 good things you have heard about the course?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you tell me 3 things you have heard about the course that are not so good?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Appendix 17: In-depth Interview Schedule Teachers of Stage 6 Aboriginal Studies, Aboriginal Education Assistants and Principals**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you know why students choose Aboriginal Studies as one of their HSC options?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you consider to be the major factor in attracting students to the course?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think makes those students still enrolled in the course, hang in there?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you know why students don’t consider Aboriginal Studies as a HSC subject?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why do you think Aboriginal students don’t choose Aboriginal Studies?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What about the non-Aboriginal students why don’t they choose it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think the course has to be promoted a certain way to attract students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me a bit about the Aboriginal Studies course.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To make the course better what sorts of things would you do?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think about some of the students you know that are doing or have completed the course.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think the course has had a positive or negative impact on those students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think that the Aboriginal students who do the course feel better or worse about themselves?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think that the non-Aboriginal students who do the course feel better or worse about themselves?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think they feel good about themselves more often than they feel bad when doing this course?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What educational benefits do you think students gain from undertaking Aboriginal Studies?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think that those students doing Aboriginal Studies have a different view of school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think that doing this course has helped the students to think more about or make decisions about what they want to do in the future?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me about some of the students you know who are doing the Aboriginal Studies course.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do the students compare themselves with other Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal students in the class?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do the students compare themselves with non-Aboriginal/Aboriginal students in the class?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 18: In-depth Interview Schedule Parents of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Students undertaking Stage 6 Aboriginal Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why did your child choose Aboriginal Studies as one of their HSC options?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What has helped your child to continue to hang in there?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you had the job of encouraging more students to enrol in the course what sorts of things would you do?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you know about the Aboriginal Studies course?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think is good about the course?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think is not so good about the course?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a parent what sorts of things could you do to make the course better?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking about your own child:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think doing the Aboriginal Studies course has had a positive or negative impact on your child?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think they have felt good about themselves more often than they have felt bad while doing this course? Can you give me some examples?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What benefits do you think your child has gained from doing Aboriginal Studies?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think that doing Aboriginal Studies has made your child view school differently?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think that doing this course has helped your child to think more about or make decisions about what they want to do in the future?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me how your child is coping in their Aboriginal Studies class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do they compare themselves with other students in the class?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 19: four-Item Survey for Students not undertaking Stage 6 Aboriginal Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I am:</th>
<th>Aboriginal</th>
<th>Non-Aboriginal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What do you know about the Aboriginal Studies course?

Did you consider Aboriginal Studies as one of your HSC subjects?

Why didn’t you choose Aboriginal Studies?

What changes to the Aboriginal Studies course would have to be made for you to choose it as one of your HSC subjects?