Participation of Indigenous students in education: an exploration of the significance of place in an Indigenous community school

Parmesh Mudhan
B.A. (Hons), Grad.Dip.Ed., M.A.

This dissertation is the report of an investigation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Murdoch University.

2008
I declare that this dissertation is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary institution.
Abstract

This study explores the pedagogical significance of life experiences of Indigenous students from an Australian community school and its relation to school participation. In particular the study focuses on the implications of students’ associations with ‘place’ on school curriculum. With the rate of participation of Indigenous students in education currently lower compared with non-Indigenous students, this study further informs our understanding of this phenomenon.

The study is interpretive, based on the perspectives of students, staff and parents of an Indigenous community school successful in improving participation of Indigenous students to Year 10, and informed by the researcher’s own lived experiences teaching Indigenous students in three different countries. During this time, it was observed that Indigenous students’ association with place was a significant factor in their participation in education.

Gruenewald’s multidimensional framework for place-conscious education is employed to guide the analysis and interpretation of data as it provides a means of addressing two important issues revealed in the review of literature on participation. First, participation is examined and interpreted in different ways, and second, a common thread in the differing interpretations is the concept of place. Analyses of the data reveal two overarching dimensions: Place and Aboriginality. Further analysis, informed by notions of place-conscious education reveal five identifiable elements for
enhancing participation of Indigenous students in education: Curriculum Method, Curriculum Content, Careers, Partners and Identity. Educational programs that recognise how these elements are related to place and action them are likely to be more effective in enhancing participation of Indigenous students in education.
Acknowledgements

I am grateful to a number of people who have made it possible to complete this dissertation. My supervisors, Dr Judith MacCallum and Dr Peter Wright, have continually challenged me while providing ongoing support and invaluable feedback.

Murdoch University has enabled me to undertake this study full-time through a PhD Scholarship.

My wife Jennifer, mother Dhana, daughter Keturah and son Caleb have given me their unwavering support over the years. Thank you, too, for your patience as I spent many hours at my desk.

Staff members at Altone Public Library have provided me with an environment conducive for writing.

Finally, I would like to thank the Governing Board, staff, parent and students of the case study school for making this study possible. To the Governing Board, I would like to express my gratitude for being given permission to conduct the study. To the staff, parents and students of the school, I would like to acknowledge them for the time they gave to participate in the interviews.
Short Contents

ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................... I
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ............................................................................................... III
SHORT CONTENTS ........................................................................................................ IV
EXPANDED TABLE OF CONTENTS ........................................................................ V
LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES ................................................................................ IX

PART I: BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY .................................................................. 1
PROLOGUE .................................................................................................................... 2

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH ........................................... 10
CHAPTER TWO: PARTICIPATION OF INDIGENOUS STUDENTS IN EDUCATION ...... 37
CHAPTER THREE: PLACE-CONSCIOUS EDUCATION FOR INDIGENOUS STUDENTS ... 59
CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY .......................................................................... 95

PART II: FINDINGS OF THE STUDY .................................................................... 126

CHAPTER FIVE: CURRICULUM METHOD AND CONTENT AS KEY IDENTIFIABLE ELEMENTS IN PARTICIPATION ................................................................. 127
CHAPTER SIX: CAREERS, PARTNERS AND IDENTITY AS KEY IDENTIFIABLE ELEMENTS IN PARTICIPATION .............................................................. 153

PART III: DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS ....................................................... 178

CHAPTER SEVEN: EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION OF INDIGENOUS STUDENTS IN EDUCATION ......................................................................................... 179
REFERENCES ............................................................................................................... 211

PART IV: APPENDICES .......................................................................................... 230
Expanded Table of Contents

ABSTRACT ....................................................................................................................... I
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ................................................................................................. III
SHORT CONTENTS ........................................................................................................... IV
EXPANDED TABLE OF CONTENTS ................................................................................... V
LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES ................................................................................... IX

PART I: BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY ........................................................................ 1
PROLOGUE: COUNTRY TOWN – A SENSE OF PLACE ............................................ 2

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH .............................................. 10
SITUATING THE RESEARCH ....................................................................................... 11
MY LIVED EXPERIENCES AND THE EMERGENCE OF PARTICIPATION AND PLACE AS SIGNIFICANT THEMES IN INDIGENOUS EDUCATION ........................................................................................................ 15
South Africa – Experience One .................................................................................... 15
  Levels of discrimination .......................................................................................... 15
  Spatial separation .................................................................................................. 16
  Political transition ................................................................................................. 18
  Curriculum challenges – the emergence of place as a significant consideration ................................................................. 19
New Zealand – Experience Two ................................................................................. 21
  Curriculum issues related to Maori students’ discontent .................................. 22
Australia – Experience Three .................................................................................... 26
  Participation of Indigenous students ..................................................................... 26
  Realigning the curriculum ..................................................................................... 29
  Adding relevance to the curriculum ....................................................................... 30
CONCLUSION ............................................................................................................... 33
SYNOPSIS OF REMAINING CHAPTERS ...................................................................... 35

CHAPTER TWO: PARTICIPATION OF INDIGENOUS STUDENTS IN EDUCATION ...37
INTRODUCTION .............................................................................................................. 37
CONCEPTIONS OF PARTICIPATION OF INDIGENOUS STUDENTS ................................................................. 38
  Aspects of participation ........................................................................................... 38
  Added dimensions to conceptions of participation .............................................. 39
    Rurality ................................................................................................................ 40
    Inflexible education programs ........................................................................... 43
  Employment trends ................................................................................................ 44
  Cultural composition of communities ................................................................... 45
  Family influence .................................................................................................... 46
CONCLUSION .................................................................................................................. 124

PART II: FINDINGS OF THE STUDY ........................................................................... 126

CHAPTER FIVE: CURRICULUM METHOD AND CONTENT AS KEY IDENTIFIABLE ELEMENTS IN PARTICIPATION ......................................................... 127
INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................. 127
CURRICULUM METHOD ............................................................................................ 127
Contemporary understandings of perceptual place and Indigenous education ......................................................... 128
Empirical dimension of perceptual place .................................................................................. 129
Empirical dimension of Aboriginality .................................................................................... 131
Relationships with family and friends ................................................................................ 131
Relationship with the outdoors .......................................................................................... 137
CURRICULUM CONTENT ............................................................................................. 142
Contemporary understandings of ecological place and Indigenous education ......................................................... 142
Empirical dimension of ecological place ................................................................................ 143
Empirical dimension of Aboriginality .................................................................................... 144
Localised lived experiences ............................................................................................... 145
CONCLUSION ................................................................................................................. 150

CHAPTER SIX: CAREERS, PARTNERS AND IDENTITY AS KEY IDENTIFIABLE ELEMENTS IN PARTICIPATION ........................................................................ 153
INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................................. 153
CAREERS ....................................................................................................................... 154
Contemporary understandings of ideological place and Indigenous education ......................................................... 154
Empirical dimension of ideological place ................................................................................ 155
Empirical dimension of Aboriginality .................................................................................... 156
PARTNERS ..................................................................................................................... 163
Contemporary understandings of political place and Indigenous education ......................................................... 163
Empirical dimension of political place .................................................................................. 164
Empirical dimension of Aboriginality .................................................................................... 166
Christian basis of the school .............................................................................................. 167
Tension between Christianity and Aboriginality in participation ............................................ 168
Ownership ....................................................................................................................... 170
IDENTITY ....................................................................................................................... 171
Contemporary understandings of sociological place and Indigenous education ......................................................... 172
Empirical dimension of sociological place ................................................................................ 172
Empirical dimension of Aboriginality .................................................................................... 174
CONCLUSION ................................................................................................................. 175
List of Tables and Figures

TABLES

Table 4.1: Categories and themes of questions in the interview guide .................111

FIGURES

Figure 1.1: Summary organiser of Chapter One .......................................................35
Figure 2.1: Summary organiser of Chapter Two ......................................................58
Figure 3.1: Conceptual framework of contemporary understandings of place and Indigenous education .................................................................90
Figure 3.2: Summary organiser of Chapter Three ...................................................94
Figure 4.1: Empirical dimension of place ...............................................................116
Figure 4.2: Empirical dimension of Aboriginality ..................................................118
Figure 4.3: Key identifiable elements for participation emerging from interaction and interception between dimensions of data .................................................121
Figure 4.4: Summary organiser of Chapter Four ....................................................125
Figure 5.1: Curriculum Method as a product of interaction and interception between the conceptual framework and dimensions of data .........................128
Figure 5.2: Curriculum Content as a product of interaction and interception between the conceptual framework and dimensions of data ......................142
Figure 5.3: Summary organiser of Chapter Five ....................................................152
Figure 6.1: Careers as a product of interaction and interception between the conceptual framework and dimensions of data .................................................154
Figure 6.2: Partners as a product of interaction and interception between the conceptual framework and dimensions of data ..............................................163
Figure 6.3: Identity as a product of interaction and interception between the conceptual framework and dimensions of data ..............................................171
Figure 6.4: Summary organiser of Chapter Six ......................................................177
Figure 7.1: The study’s findings and the research question .....................................181
Figure 7.2: Sites of action emerging from literature reviews and the contributions by findings in this study .................................................................186
Figure 7.3: Summary organiser of Chapter Seven ..................................................210