

***STRONG AND SMART:***

***REINFORCING ABORIGINAL  
PERCEPTIONS OF BEING  
ABORIGINAL AT CHERBOURG  
STATE SCHOOL***

## **DECLARATION**

*I declare that this thesis 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.*

*Chris Sarra*

*21 September 2005*

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This thesis is dedicated to the Strong, Smart, Young Black and Deadly children of Cherbourg State School. What a ripple they started.

I acknowledge the efforts of their parents, Elders and other community members. I also acknowledge the efforts of the exceptional team that worked with me at Cherbourg State School and in particular that of the teacher aides who never gave up because they believed in something better for their community's children. I make special mention of those special colleagues who have now passed; Michael Blackman, and the late great Richard 'Hooper' Coleman.

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The pelican has landed!

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## INTRODUCTION

This introduction is designed to contextualise this study and to flag key issues for later explication. The complete thesis is designed to examine the more positive Aboriginal perceptions of 'being Aboriginal' and the impact of reinforcing this in an Aboriginal school setting.

During this introduction I will outline some very personal reasons for pursuing this particular line of research. It is hoped the research will make a positive contribution to related literature as well as provide some guidance in the development of Australia's social and psychological landscape. For me as an Aboriginal person, an Aboriginal academic, and Aboriginal educator, there are some key objectives of this entire research project.

The key objectives of this thesis are to:

- identify some Aboriginal perceptions of 'being Aboriginal';
- identify some white perceptions of 'being Aboriginal';
- challenge white Australia's perception of 'being Aboriginal';
- challenge Aboriginal perceptions of 'being Aboriginal';
- facilitate access to a more accurate and more positive perception of 'being Aboriginal';
- examine the impact of reinforcing a positive Aboriginal identity in schools;
- examine how to reinforce a positive Aboriginal identity in schools.

To a large degree it is hoped this research will be utilised for emancipatory purposes.

According to Hugh Lacey:

emancipatory activity is collaborative activity, engaged in by people who experience oppression and by those in solidarity with them, that is expressive of their effective agency and that aims both to alleviate the sufferings being experienced and to create conditions for the effective agency (or freedom) of everyone (2002: 10).

Against this background this work will enhance the role of both players in the emancipatory process. This work will provide some insight to what Lacey would call 'the oppressed' by identifying and challenging mechanisms and processes of oppression. The role of those, whom Lacey would refer to as 'in solidarity with' the oppressed, will be enhanced through explicit discussion about effective means to alter the oppressive structures which they are a part of. Such emancipatory processes will be discussed throughout this thesis, and in more specific detail in Chapter Three.

To many this research project will appear at times somewhat different in its approach, and in many ways it is these differences that are indeed a key feature of the research topic. Before proceeding, one must understand why an Aboriginal PhD thesis may look different from others.

Aboriginal literature does not exist in an aesthetic vacuum, but within the context of Aboriginal affairs. It must be seen holistically within a cultural, historical and social context. To try and approach Aboriginal writers and their literature as things existing apart from their communities would be a falsity" (Narogin, 1990: 3).

As I approach the task of writing this thesis it is sobering to heed the following warnings offered by Narogin (1990: 170). He notes the development of genres as 'a European way of categorising works of literature', which are designed to lead the reader away from an intuitive to logical responses. He further notes the dangers facing Aboriginal writers who eventually subscribe to the notion that there are fixed categories of literature to which one must conform. In more explicit terms the following advice is presented:

If we as (Aboriginal) writers accept this we, in effect, dilute the Aboriginality of our work. If we consider ourselves as existing in an Aboriginal cultural matrix, then we must know that part of our culture lies outside European conventions.

It is precisely this part, this Aboriginality, that is missed by the European editor who because he or she belongs to another culture, finds it wrong to construct a narrative prose work (a novel or life story) according to an unfamiliar structure.

Accordingly, as an Aboriginal writer, it is crucial that I outline my personal context and provide a personal narrative for this work. Naturally this approach must be negotiated within the confines of academic rigour, but not to the point where the Aboriginality of this work is compromised. It is argued that such an approach will undoubtedly provide an insightful perspective on issues of Aboriginality from an extremely crucial vantage point: from the inside.

At this level then the research provided is somewhat unique. Kearney, DeLacey and Davidson (1973) in their discussions about what they call 'the psychology of Aboriginal Australians' provide an extensive insight into white observations Aboriginal psychology. They provide an account of the findings and observations of many non-Indigenous researchers, as well as detailed analyses of methodologies used to draw observational conclusions. As detailed and methodologically precise as they may be however they are always conducted 'from the outside'.

There are several points worth noting here.

To begin with Kearney et al present their observations as if their work were unproblematic. There is, to draw upon a concept from Critical Realism, no indication of 'meta-reflexive self-totalisation' (Bhaskar, 1993: 149-50). In other words they give no indication of any recognition or consciousness of the totality to which their observations belong. One could begin to uncover aspects of that totality by noting that Kearney & Co are not Aborigines. Indeed their observations could correctly be called 'white observations of Aboriginal psychology'. One should also note the absence of reciprocity. There is no equivalent text published by Aborigines and titled The Psychology of White Australians. It is not that Aboriginal Australians have not thought about and formed distinct impressions, which would properly belong to such a topic, but Aboriginal observations of the psychology of white Australians have never, to my knowledge, been recognised and codified or been set as required reading in any tertiary institution.

The absence of an Aboriginal equivalent of Kearney et al's work is also indicative of the difference in power between the white community and the Aborigines. It is this asymmetry in the underlying power relationship between whites and Indigenous Australians that allows Kearney and his co-workers to present their whole approach as unproblematic.

Of equal importance is the observation that Kearney et al's work can be seen as belonging to the long tradition of observations and examinations by white Australians of the Indigenous inhabitants of this land. We will see in Chapter Two that Tuhiwai Smith labels this as “research” and charges that it has long been a tool of colonial conquest (Smith 1999). A trip to the British Museum to see the skulls and other remains would suffice to show that for a long time now white people in Australia and elsewhere have expended a great deal of effort in the enterprise of knowing Aboriginal Australians. Lest one should argue that Kearney et al's project is entirely different in that their work is 'scientific', it should also be pointed out that the skulls etc. were collected according to the precepts of the then prevailing norms of scientific knowledge.

One could then legitimately ask, “What has been the purpose of all this knowing? Who has benefited most from it?” The official answer of course has always been that such research has been undertaken to direct policy to benefit Aborigines. Thus Cowen notes in his foreword to the work of Kearney, DeLacey and Davidson (1973: v) that if policy on Aboriginal matters is to be effective, then ‘we need to know a great deal about Aboriginal society and Aboriginal people’.

Such policies, processes and understandings would be even more effective, however, if they reflected perhaps less on observations from the outside, and more on sound analyses from the inside. It is also worth noting that if the story is coming from somewhere different, that is from the inside rather than the outside, then it is likely to ‘look’, feel, and be presented in a different way. This in no way implies that it is presented in a lesser

quality or sub-standard framework, but rather within a different framework, that, if acknowledged and embraced, can provide deeper, more useful insights into knowledge. A feature of this difference will be the way in which the research is contextualised, and with more of a focus on ‘the story’.

Indigenous academics Hughes and Buckskin (cited in Sarra, 2003: iv) lend weight to the notion of Indigenous approaches to writing a PhD thesis by describing it as ‘a new genre’ developed essentially against the frameworks of academic and oral history style. They add to this by questioning which is more useful, academic references and rigour, or the story. There is no attempt to give a definitive answer to this question; but, rather, it remains as a useful point upon which to reflect.

The discussion here is not designed to generate excuses for a departure from ‘traditional’ academic approaches to thesis writing, but rather to validate Indigenous approaches to writing. At another level, it is also incumbent upon me to avoid ‘selling out’ on Aboriginal ways of ‘sharing a story’ without providing some insight into my own personal narrative and the equally personal narrative of the entire story of this thesis.

My personal context is as follows.

I am the youngest of ten children. My mother is a strong Aboriginal woman, and my father was a proud Italian who came to this country in the fifties in search of work. My siblings and I take great pride in our Italian origins, yet our lifestyles and development were considerably more ‘Aboriginal’. Fortunately for us there seemed to be many similarities between ‘Aboriginal’ ways of being, and ‘Italian’ ways of being. Unfortunately we had very little intimate knowledge of my father’s people.

On my mother’s side my grandmother and great grandparents were descendants of the Gurang Gurang people north of Bundaberg. My grandfather and his people were descendants of the Taribelang Bunda people who lived in an around where Bundaberg is now located. In fact, according to our mother, the house where we all grew up is located very near to where traditional corroboree grounds were to be found. There is probably

no way we would have realised it at the time, but for me there is some richness and strength about knowing that you grew up in a place where your people walked for thousands of years. To some extent I am certain that this made us solid when it came to questions of Aboriginal identity.

In Australia more generally the question of Aboriginal identity is vexed by its association with government programs and funds. In 1984 the Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (AEDP) launched by the Hawke Labor Government gave rise to a threefold definition of the term Aboriginal for the purposes of determining an individual's eligibility for various types of employment, education, training, and economic development programs. Its definition of 'Aboriginal' is one who is:

- of Aboriginal descent;
- identifies as Aboriginal; and
- is accepted as such by the Aboriginal community in which they live.

(Miller, 1985)

Chapter Two will scrutinise this somewhat clinical definition in more detail. It is presented here however to make clear the fact that my research **does not** seek to direct decision makers about assessments of one's Aboriginal identity and its relation to accessing Government programs or funds. It is acknowledged that some unscrupulous individuals may rort such programs by falsely claiming to be Aboriginal. Personally I am disgusted at those who would execute such a rort. It must be pointed out, however, that such is the stigmatised nature of being Aboriginal in Australia, that there are many, many more people who deny their Aboriginality than people who claim it falsely. My interest however, is not in such individuals. Rather, I seek to assist young Aboriginal people who already know they are Aboriginal to develop a more positive and meaningful sense of 'being Aboriginal'.

Being Aboriginal starts with 'just knowing' that you are a descendant of one of the oldest and perhaps most sophisticated groups of people in the world: the first Australian human beings. From there on there are no limits to the journey along which one can explore

one's own Aboriginality. This research is intended to assist young Aboriginal people with a means to progress further along in that journey if they choose to.

The reason I am so concerned about this issue is that 'being Aboriginal' for Aboriginal people is certainly a much more salient issue than 'being white' is for white people. For many it is a daily occurrence to receive some type of reminder from society that one is Aboriginal. Some of these types of incidences will become apparent throughout the discussion here, of my personal context. It is more often the case that such reminders are presented by society with a negative connotation. For instance, this could be in the form of blatant racial abuse, or in the more subtle, yet equally offensive questioning of one's academic qualifications. Against this background, and as argued by this research, is the propensity for many Aboriginal people to formulate a quite negative and inaccurate perception of what 'being Aboriginal' is.

For me personally, I started to understand from a very young age that I was Aboriginal. On school holidays we would go to Berajondo, a special place in the bush, where we would stay with Uncle Jim and Aunty Mabel. At the time I probably had no idea of the meaning of this place, but it is a place of spiritual significance to me. As children we were free there. The old people would sit around on a blanket out the back maybe and play cards, while we would just run free with all of our cousins, exploring every part of the place. It is a place where we had many, many extended family gatherings. It is a place where some of our ancestors are buried.

Although my father's ancestry is Italian, my mother would often tell us that we were Aboriginal and that we should be very proud of it. Notwithstanding, we are all extremely proud of our Italian heritage, but we certainly felt more Aboriginal than we did Italian. This research will elaborate on those things that made us 'feel more Aboriginal'. The reinforcement from inside our home was I guess the first place at which I encountered the notion of 'being Aboriginal'. The reinforcement from outside of our home was certainly impressionable, but not nearly so positive.

At the back of our house we had a neighbour that would call us 'fucking black cunts', 'black bastards', and he would tell his children not to play with us at school. At the side of our house we had a most wonderful lady as a neighbour, who at one stage worked with my older sister, but had a husband who would call us 'little black bastards' and once accused us of trying to choke his chooks. All of this despite the many times we would help him get home when he would be too drunk to make it back on his bike.

Another place that being Aboriginal had salience was at school, and again it was not positive. I clearly remember being called 'black coon', 'black nigger', 'black boong', and 'black chocolate', all of which carried the negative connotation that being Aboriginal was something inferior. There were also times when being Aboriginal was outlined as something inferior in a more direct way. For instance, I recall my older brother and sister speaking of a teacher they had who once said in front of the entire primary class, and in reference to them, 'Tomorrow I am going to bring a big bath tub and wash these Aboriginal kids because they stink!' Clearly not all teachers were stupid enough to make such remarks, but one cannot help wondering what the entire class, against the background of such comments, learned about Aborigines that day. And what did my older brother and sister learn about being Aboriginal on that day?

I recall very clearly, in early primary school, the formal lessons we had about 'Aborigines'. On reflection it was quite an unnerving experience. The teacher with textbook in hand would say, 'The Aborigines lived in gunyahs and ate snakes and goannas!' All the white children in the classroom would screw their faces up and say 'Ooooh Yuck!!' and then turn to look at my brother and me. Later we would go out and collect things to make a gunyah. When the gunyah was complete other children would say 'I suppose you will want to sleep here tonight hey?' The strange thing for me was that I knew I was Aboriginal, but this stuff that we were learning about just wasn't me! In fact it wasn't anybody that I knew in my family. I did, however, have a sense that it was maybe the people who had come before my grandparents.

We were a sporting family and this would present us all with another arena in which we would be reminded that we were Aboriginal. Again we would be called 'black cunts' and

'black bastards' on the hockey or rugby league field. On reflection it seemed to be a sledging ploy designed to maybe put us off our game. It seemed they imagined that if they somehow made me realise I was Aboriginal, then I would be distressed by this, and this in turn would inhibit my sporting prowess. For me, though, it reminded me that I should be proud, and even more so if the opposition could not contend with my athletic ability, and so had to resort to attacks on my identity. They did this because they thought my Aboriginal identity was something that I should be ashamed of, and when reminded that I was Aboriginal, I should somehow feel down and out about it. For me, though, it was something I felt truly great about, and their poorly motivated reminders about being Aboriginal had the paradoxical effect of making me feel even better.

Primarily I had my mum to thank for constantly reinforcing the notion that being Aboriginal was something great and that we should take immense pride in. There were times when we would go home upset and crying to her about people who had been trying to put us down because we were Aboriginal. She would say to us 'Yes...you are Aboriginal, and you be proud of it! Don't let anyone put you down!' My family is extremely fortunate to have had such firm direction on this type of matter; but again on reflection, I could not help wondering how many other Aboriginal children were not as fortunate as us and really suffered to the detriment of their own being, in the face of such callous taunts.

Whilst my mother provided tremendous support and direction to us in terms of what it meant to be Aboriginal, there were still some things I had to learn for myself. At the end of secondary school I had no idea what I would do after leaving. At the time the other white students were all busily making appointments to see the Career and Guidance Counsellor, I was left to wonder what it was all about. It didn't seem to me like the place an Aboriginal student would go, and nobody ever said to me 'Make sure you go and see the Guidance Officer'.

Strangely enough I decided to go and check things out for myself. I remember clearly the experience. I said to him 'So what is this all about ... this QTAC stuff?' QTAC is the Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre. By way of fluke I had enough Board subjects to

qualify for entry into a tertiary centre. At the time of choosing my senior subjects I had no idea that one required 5 Board subjects to qualify for tertiary entry. The Guidance Officer explained the process to me. He asked me, if I could do anything I wanted, what would I do? I said I would love to be a Physical Education teacher. He said to me 'You will never get into that course but just put it down in first place and then put these down after it'. The courses he had picked out for me were all at an Agricultural college.

In January of the following year I received, unexpectedly, an invitation to participate in an interview process in which I would be considered for special entry into college, given that I only had a Tertiary Entrance (TE) score of 750, an average score for that year, and the TE score for Physical Education was 910. The interview process was part of a program designed to get more Aboriginal teachers into the school system. At the time I probably did not fully appreciate the importance of the program but fortunately for me I was a successful applicant.

In 1985 I left home and moved to Brisbane to attend Kelvin Grove Teachers' College and complete a Diploma of Teaching. I consider myself lucky to have been given such an opportunity, particularly as I was given 'special consideration' for entry. I approached the course with some degree of trepidation, as I could not help feeling somewhat out of my league, given my TE score of 750 in a course that required an entry score of 910 (the highest score one could get was 990). These feelings of inadequacy were coupled with the anxiety of being in what seemed like a foreign place, college, and the need to explain to lots of people why I was sitting in the same classroom as them. To make things easier for me my particular course of study was spread out over three and a half years instead of the regular three years as it was for the white students. Accordingly I would start the first year on a lesser workload in order to get the feel for college life. Despite these efforts to settle me in, the college was another place that looked and felt to me like one where Aboriginal people did not go.

Despite the feelings of alienation I was well supported by a great academic mentor, Dr Gary MacLennan, who opened my eyes up to the extent to which 'the system' seemed to make me accept a lesser place in the world because of being Aboriginal. From there the

fire in my belly started to burn. Within the first year I had learned that at high school I was actually smarter than I was prepared to believe. I started to recall how, because of my lack of understanding about the tertiary entrance procedures, I thought it was good enough to 'just pass' school subjects when in fact I should have been trying to push myself as hard as I could. On reflection there was no place to really learn such crucial information as none of my siblings had completed any tertiary study, and I was not aware of any other Aboriginal people participating successfully in tertiary study. In fact, I didn't seriously entertain the notion of tertiary study, as it didn't seem to me like a realistic option for me as an Aboriginal person. As a result, I ended up selling myself short. I also came to realise that I wasn't the only one selling themselves short.

My reflections on school made me realise that while I didn't necessarily see myself as an academic achiever, many teachers probably never saw me as an academic achiever. I recall in senior school a teacher handing my test papers back to me saying to the whole class, 'Sarra got 75%! It must have been an easy test!' At the time we laughed, thinking that he was sending out a funny message to us all. Beneath the comedy though was the real message that said, '*I don't really believe you can achieve 75% or better*'. Somehow, without even knowing, I was thinking that I should be pleased if I got 75%, and that I should not realistically hope to achieve higher than that. The reality was that I would achieve just over 50% on most of my tests, because I came to believe that was what I could do as a young Aboriginal boy and that was my place.

Notwithstanding, school was a fairly positive experience. My brother and I were well received by our white peers, and it must be noted that we were also well received by most teachers. The problem for us though was that we were embraced as good young boys and great rugby league players, but hardly any teacher acknowledged or nurtured within us any academic potential. In fact I remember only one teacher, Mr Mick Rimmer, who pushed me to work harder, and acknowledged my efforts with the grades of a high academic achiever. Most others just saw us and graded us as average or below average academic achievers, and we just went along unquestioningly and maintained our place.

As I would come to realise, though, I was establishing 'my place' in accordance with what many white people believed was my place. This place they had for me was based on very limited perceptions of Aboriginal people. Unfortunately, and without any awareness, I was subscribing to those same limited perceptions. The revelation of realising I was selling myself short, and being sold short, would change my life forever, and anchor my future career. As I looked back and around me in anger and frustration, I could not help wondering about how many other young Aboriginal children had fallen into the same trap I had, without even realising it. I developed an enormous sense of determination to generate awareness among young Aboriginal children, about the restrictive constructs that surround them and subtly stifle their potential.

Heavily armed with this new sense of determination I approached the people who organised my course, and the spread out workload, and demanded to complete my course in the same time as did the white students. I had a point to prove to myself, to white people, and to other young Aboriginal students. In order to complete the course in the regular time of three years meant I would have to catch up on subjects that I had missed in the first year.

A regular study workload would demand that I did 50 credit points per semester for 6 semesters, or 3 years. In my first year I completed 30 credit points in semester one and 45 credit points in semester 2. To complete the course in the remaining four semesters and at the same time as my white peers I had to complete 3 semesters of 55 credit points, and 1 semester of 60 credit points. Whilst it was a very demanding two years, I completed the task successfully and graduated with my white peers despite starting on a reduced workload. I also noted with interest that some of my peers, with the TE of 910 or greater, had failed in places where I had succeeded. While I was certainly very glad to have completed the Diploma course I couldn't help feeling angry and wondering how it was that I could complete high school with a TE score of 750, which gave tertiary institutions an insight into my 'academic ability', yet after being given special consideration, I performed at an academic level that was seemingly better than that worthy of a 910 TE score. The entire college experience, albeit inadvertently, changed my life forever.

In my time at college my identity and sense of being Aboriginal was clearly reinforced. For others though, it seemed that after participating successfully in tertiary education and becoming a fully qualified and professional classroom teacher, I had become in some mysterious way not Aboriginal, or at least not a 'real Aborigine'. After several years teaching and working in other areas of education I engaged in further study, completed a Masters and became a career and guidance counsellor. I deliberately chose this as a career option so that, unlike when I was at school, I would guide as many Aboriginal children as possible, to ensure they understood how to work the school system to their advantage, and to set goals according to their own dreams and beliefs about what they could achieve.

On my first day as a guidance counsellor in a school I visited the staffrooms of teachers to introduce myself to my new colleagues. At one staffroom a young female teacher said to me 'Are you the new teacher aide here?' For me this comment registers my Aboriginality. I said to her 'No, I'm the new guidance counsellor!'

My response surprised her as she asked 'Oh... are you like ... a "real" guidance officer?'

As I held back the response I would have preferred to give, I said, 'Yes.'

With continued surprise she said, 'So you've been a teacher?' Again I replied, 'Yes'.

Finally in our exchange we established that I had many years experience in the field of education and that I had a particular interest in Indigenous education, given my Aboriginal heritage.

Then she said to me, 'But you're not "real Aboriginal" are you?' And she placed her arm next to mine and said, 'Look, I'm just as dark as you!'

As she drew whatever conclusions she chose, I thought to myself, 'I wouldn't have to answer such bullshit questions if I was lying under a tree drunk with a flagon of wine.' If

indeed I were doing that, there would be very little question about what group of people I belonged to.

In other similar and interesting life experiences, it seems that the notion of a professionally qualified Aboriginal person seems to confuse some white people, as they just do not fit into the accepted white parameters of being Aboriginal. Against the background of my personal experiences it appears that many white people harbour some degree of incongruence about 'being Aboriginal' and 'being professional'. For instance, several years ago a colleague and I boarded a plane to fly to Cairns from Brisbane. To our delight our seats were upgraded to business class. We settled into our seats, styling up and smiling at each other when the flight attendant walked past, gave us a lovely smile, and asked, 'Have you got the right seat?' Such comments yet again give salience to being Aboriginal and in this context it seemed to us to be subtly manifested in the attendant's apparent understanding that Aboriginal people just do not sit in business class.

Again other situations are not so subtle. In the early 1990's I worked in Bundaberg as an Aboriginal Education Officer for the Department of Employment, Education and Training. At the time I had a white girlfriend who was getting a hard time from her mother. The mother gave her an ultimatum. She said, 'Either you choose between your family or this guy because I don't want my daughter going out with a coon!'

In later years I would move to live in Brisbane. When my friend and I were out looking for place to live one landlord asked us 'Are you two Aboriginal are you?' On our admission that we were both Aboriginal he responded by telling us how he was '... a bit dubious about Aboriginal people!' Of course we were never given the opportunity to live in that place. It didn't seem to matter that we were both highly qualified individuals and both working in highly respected positions.

As a lecturer at a University, and to my disgust, my Indigenous colleagues and I were asked on numerous occasions by undergraduate students about whether or not we were qualified academics, and/or had experience as teachers in schools. Even today, as Principal of our school, I still have people come to me and ask if the Principal is around.

Clearly to me, it is highly unlikely that such questions would be directed to those who were not Aboriginal. As I am reminded of this issue through similar experiences, I realise it is an issue that white people must address within themselves to stop perpetuating such ignorance and stupidity. Notwithstanding, many Aboriginal people within themselves also have some perception issues, which must be addressed.

To illustrate this point there are several personal experiences worth reflecting on. In my college days I experienced some degree of isolation from Aboriginal peers who sometimes would describe me as 'too flash'. It would hurt when people close to you would suggest that you thought you were 'too good all of a sudden' or 'Big time now'. These of course were pejoratives and suggested that because I went to college I somehow felt superior to my peers. I remember being criticised about not mixing it with the 'real blacks' or 'the grass roots blacks' when declining invitations to go drinking, or 'on the charge'.

My reality was that against the background of what I had learned about my people, and myself, and how we had been systematically sheep-railed downwards, I became very focussed on completing my studies so I could be a role model for other young Aboriginal people who were unwittingly headed down the same track. And whilst such taunts were unpleasant and hurtful, I remained unperturbed, mainly because I didn't believe that 'getting on the charge' was an inevitable characteristic of being Aboriginal.

Working in schools I observed many experiences that suggested similar degrees of confusion about that sense of 'being Aboriginal'. Sadly, and on many occasions, I would see young Aboriginal students try very hard to perform academically well in school, only to be subjected to taunts from other Aboriginal peers who would say things like 'You think you're too good for us now!' or 'You're trying to be white!' Sometimes hardworking Aboriginal students would be referred to as 'coconuts', which is by design an attempt to insult them by suggesting that, like a coconut, they are white on the inside and black on the outside. Sadly it seems for many Aboriginal people, that *successful*, *hardworking*, and *Aboriginal* are mutually exclusive terms. Often this unfortunate

phenomenon is manifested in a way that is so subtle that we do not even detect it when we exhibit it ourselves.

Several years ago I attended a national children's convention and I took several children from our school. I met an Aboriginal lady from South Australia there and she asked me what I did at the school. I told her I was the principal. She said to me 'Oh don't fuck around! What do you really do there?' Even though she worked in a school herself, where she would tell young Aboriginal children to believe in themselves, it seemed she harboured some restricted beliefs about the role Aboriginal people can play in a school environment. If Aboriginal adults harbour restricted perceptions about who we are and where we fit, then it follows that children are likely to do the same.

In the first few weeks as principal at Cherbourg State School I was dissatisfied with the lack of urgency of children getting to class after the bell rang. In response I instigated a very simple process whereby there would be two bells to indicate the resumption of class. The first bell would be a warning and by the time the second bell rang I expected every child to be in class and ready to learn. After several days with this arrangement, one student who had been away for several days asked me why there were two bells before class time. I explained the purpose to him. Interestingly he responded by saying with a tone of displeasure 'You're trying to run this school like a white school.' Somewhere in his mind he had established that even characteristics like getting to class on time was 'a white thing', and taking your time and getting to class late was somehow 'an Aboriginal thing'. This brings us back to one of the key concerns, which underpin the need for this research.

This thesis will argue that many young Aboriginal children can develop a negative or confused sense of what it means to be Aboriginal. It will demonstrate that the genesis for this inaccurate and negative perception of being Aboriginal is mainstream Australia. It is highly unlikely that such a negative and destructive perception existed in a traditional Aboriginal society. Notwithstanding, a positive perception of being Aboriginal remains, despite efforts to convince us otherwise. The tragedy is that many young Indigenous children are seemingly subscribing to the notion that being Aboriginal means being

inferior. The tragedy is exacerbated by the notion that schools, which arguably are an ideal institution in which to remedy this situation, harbour many mainstream Australians with negative and inaccurate perceptions of being Aboriginal.

I will attend to this concern by clearly demonstrating that schools are indeed a great place in which to challenge young Indigenous children's beliefs about being Aboriginal. I will also provide conclusive evidence that demonstrates a school can in fact stop young Indigenous children believing that being Aboriginal means being inferior, and start them thinking, believing, feeling and acting like being Aboriginal is something truly great.

I will argue that young Aboriginal people can 'be Aboriginal' and get to class on time; study at university and become professional; get better than 75% on any tests in school; and be a Principal of a school and not just a teacher or teacher aide. I will suggest that young Aboriginal children can aspire upwards to do anything they choose.

A necessary part of this journey is to provide some insight into Aboriginal notions of 'being Aboriginal' at the same time. I will also identify and challenge white notions of 'being Aboriginal', by challenging 'mainstream' Australia's perception of Aborigines as 'the tea-towel blacks', living a traditional Aboriginal lifestyle in the outback leaning against a spear with one leg cocked against the other; or as the anti-social blacks, powerless, yet making trouble for the rest of society.

Chapter One will outline in greater detail, and justify the methodological approaches adopted. It will discuss various approaches to research and identify what forms of data will be utilised to direct this research. A rationale for the selection and use of this data will be presented.

As will be discussed in Chapter One, I have attempted to construct a methodology that draws upon two traditions. Most importantly for me I have endeavoured to recognise Aboriginal epistemologies or ways of knowing. Thus according to Aboriginal protocols I have begun this thesis by locating myself in terms of time and place. For us as Aboriginal

Australians, where we are from and how long we have been there are matters of vital importance. So what might seem to Western eyes the merely autobiographical and the anecdotal are crucial in terms of gaining trust within the process of communication. So I have begun this thesis with an account of my time and place.

The other methodological paradigm I have drawn upon is that of Critical Realism. This enables me to take up an alternative position in the ongoing debate between positivistic empirical realism with its emphasis on the collection of facts and postmodernism which in some guises would strive to deny the existence of any facts at all. Moreover Critical Realism with its emphasis on ontology complements, as I hope to demonstrate, the epistemologies which I have drawn upon.

Chapter One will also discuss the notion of identity formation. There will be particular emphasis on the formulation of cultural identities, and discussion about the minority identities. Within this chapter a more detailed analyses of identity from a critical realist perspective is presented along with a rationale for the adoption of this theoretical framework. Notions of ‘otherness’ are presented for consideration, and a new sub-categorisation of ‘otherness’ is introduced.

Chapter Two will consist of a critique from a Critical Realist perspective of a number of important theorists who have been to at least some degree influenced by the Poststructuralist paradigm. These authors are Catherine McConaghy, Marcia Langton, Martin Nakata, and Tuhiwai Smith. My intention here is to justify ontology and to highlight the problems associated with working with an explicit emphasis on epistemology combined with an implicit ontology.

Chapter Three presents literature research and empirical data outlining ‘mainstream’ Australia’s perception of Aboriginal identity. The data will draw on research developed in focus group sessions on this topic and provide a very clear perspective on mainstream Australian perceptions of being Aboriginal. The genesis of these perceptions will be

closely scrutinised and rigorously challenged to reveal the extent to which they are potentially flawed and/or highly problematic.

Chapter Four presents literature research and empirical data outlining Aboriginal perceptions of being Aboriginal and will discuss each component of the research in great detail. I will demonstrate that there are several core features that Aboriginal people consistently nominate in discussions about being Aboriginal. The role of schools in developing, reinforcing and maintaining a positive Aboriginal identity will be discussed as a lead in to Chapter Five.

Chapter Five is presented in two distinct parts. In Chapter 5a the reader is asked to view the 28-minute documentary entitled ‘Strong and Smart: The rise of Cherbourg State School’. Chapter 5b provides a historical analysis of Cherbourg State School up until the late 1990s. From here the school will be located in its current context and its development and progress over the last four years will be closely examined as an integral part of the overall research. In this chapter I will discuss how the school was anchored by restricted white perceptions of being Aboriginal. I will outline the complexities of re-aligning the school vision to a more positive and more Aboriginal perception of being Aboriginal. This chapter will also discuss in greater detail many of the specific intervention strategies designed to generate a more positive Aboriginal identity in a positive school context. These are strategies that I have facilitated as Principal of the school, and in essence they will be discussed from a practitioner’s perspective. Such a perspective could be considered as another type of ‘from the inside’ giving the reader insights that are often not easily accessible.

Chapter Six examines in great detail the impact of these strategies by presenting quantitative and qualitative data which confirm my argument that schools can play a positive role in reinforcing Aboriginal identity and can also use this as a means to pursue greatly improved Indigenous student outcomes.

It is worth noting that the most of the material presented in Chapters Three, Four, Five (a & b) and Six have, in various forms, been presented and discussed as a part of keynote

addresses and workshop presentations at local, national and international conferences.

These include:

- Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) *Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program (IESIP) Conference*, Gold Coast Qld 2000 (Keynote Address);
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization UNESCO *Human Values in Education International Conference*, Puttaparthi, India 2000 (workshop session)
- *Opening Doors Community Conference*, Maryborough Qld, 2000 (Keynote address)
- *Gympie Reconciliation Conference 2001* (Keynote address and workshop session)
- *Sunshine Coast Reconciliation Conference 2001* (Keynote address)
- *Australian Association for Research in Education AARE Conference 2002* (Keynote Address and workshop session);
- *International Association of Critical Realism Conference*, Bradford, UK 2002(Workshop session)
- *New Zealand Principals' Association Conference*, Wellington 2002 (Workshop session)
- *Australian Indigenous Teachers' Union forum*, Adelaide SA 2003 (Keynote address)
- *Townsville Indigenous Education Workers' forum Qld 2003* (Keynote address)
- *Townsville School Principal's forum Qld 2003* (Keynote address)
- *Canning Education District Principals' Conference*, Perth, Western Australia 2003 (Keynote address and workshop session)
- *Somerset Literacy Conference*, Gold Coast, 2003 (Keynote address)
- *International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement*, Sydney 2003 (Workshop session)
- *Darwin School Principal's Conference NT 2003* (Keynote address and workshop session)

- *Alice Springs School Principal's Conference NT 2003* (Keynote address and workshop session)
- *IESIP Schools Forum, Sydney NSW 2003* (Keynote address)
- *Dare to Lead Principals' Forum, Brisbane, Queensland, 2003* (Keynote address)

A great deal of content discussing the progress of Cherbourg State School and the concepts argued by this thesis has been published as a result of extensive media enquiry. Numerous articles about the progress of the school have appeared in the local newspapers, the *Cherbourg News* and the *South Burnett Times*, as well as in Queensland's state newspaper the *Courier Mail* (10/7/2002: 1) (29/7/03: 26), and also the national newspaper, the *Australian* (19/2/03: 6), (24/4/03: 25).

Similar discussions have occurred on local radio stations as well as on ABC's Radio National. These include:

- *Life Matters - 23/08/1999: Teaching How to Be Black;*
- *Encounter – 23/3/2003: Dance, Desk and Didgeridoo (Part 2 of a 3- part series on the education crisis facing Indigenous kids in Australia, and what's being done to turn things around)*

In addition to this, the core essence of the content, particularly that of chapters five and six, has previously been published by the Australian College of Educators as the following paper:

*Sarra, C. (2003). Young and Black and Deadly: Strategies for Improving Outcomes for Indigenous Students Quality Teaching Series: Practitioner Perspectives (No. 5) Australian College of Educators.*

I am also pleased to note that a short documentary has been made about the progress of Cherbourg State School, and again this provides an extremely good insight to the complex issues argued by this thesis. The documentary is entitled '*Strong and Smart: the rise of Cherbourg State School*' and was presented on ABC national television as part of their 'Message Stick' program on 19 October 2003. As noted earlier the documentary is presented at Chapter Five (a) of this thesis.

In addition, I include as Appendix One the transcript of *Good Morning, Mr. Sarra*, a documentary made on the school by the ABC's Australian Story team and which went to air on 4 October 2004. Their introduction to the film states:

Six years ago, the primary school at Cherbourg, in southwest Queensland was 'a disaster area'. Many children didn't turn up to school and those that did learnt very little, as discipline problems were rife.

Without an education, the future of the children in the Aboriginal community was bleak.

Against the advice of his mentors, Chris Sarra, a frustrated academic, took on the challenge of becoming the first Aboriginal principal of the school.

He overcame resistance from the community and the teaching staff and implemented a unique program of rewarding children for attendance, encouraging them to be proud of being Aboriginal and 'growling' misbehaving children.

Today, children enjoy learning and literacy and numeracy standards have improved dramatically. According to Chris Sarra's mentor, QUT academic Dr Gary MacLennan, 'hope has arisen' in Cherbourg.

Chris Sarra has been acknowledged for his remarkable achievements by being named this year's Queenslander of the Year.

However, since then, Chris has come under fire for his discipline methods, with allegations of rough treatment of students. In this story, Chris defends his actions and answers his critics (*Australian Story*, 2004).

The response to this film has been very positive and among the responses the following meant a lot to me.

Name	Ryan Barratt
Subject	Chris Sarra
Visit Time	9/10/2004 2:47
Remark	G'day Chris, you're doing a great job mate. I'm 9, Aboriginal and proud of it. I hope you continue what you're doing.

---

Name	Blake Barratt
Subject	Chris Sarra
Visit Time	9/10/2004 2:22
Remark	Thank you! I am a 9 year old Aboriginal boy who loves school and I want other Aboriginal kids to have a chance to love it too. You're Great!

The conclusion of this thesis will draw together the preceding discussion and will attempt to present an overall analysis to both education practitioners and academics. It will argue that schools have a crucial role to play in reinforcing a positive sense of Aboriginal identity for Aboriginal students. The conclusions will offer to practitioners sound advice that is firmly anchored by life experience and practice. In addition to this I will provide some useful discussion about system and system relationship accountabilities in relation to the pursuit of improved outcomes for Indigenous children in schools. It is worth noting that the information provided here has already been published and presented in a report to the Minister for Education in Queensland and her Ministerial Council for Educational Renewal.

Clearly, the argument presented by this thesis has been extensively considered and extremely well embraced by both the general public, and those within the academic arena. To date I have ensured a great deal of coverage of the issues argued in this thesis. This has been in the interests of validating the arguments and concepts presented by my research and practice, but more so, in the interests of challenging mainstream Australians, particularly those who work in education, as well as Indigenous Australians, to

understand and embrace a more accurate and positive perception of what it truly means to be Aboriginal.

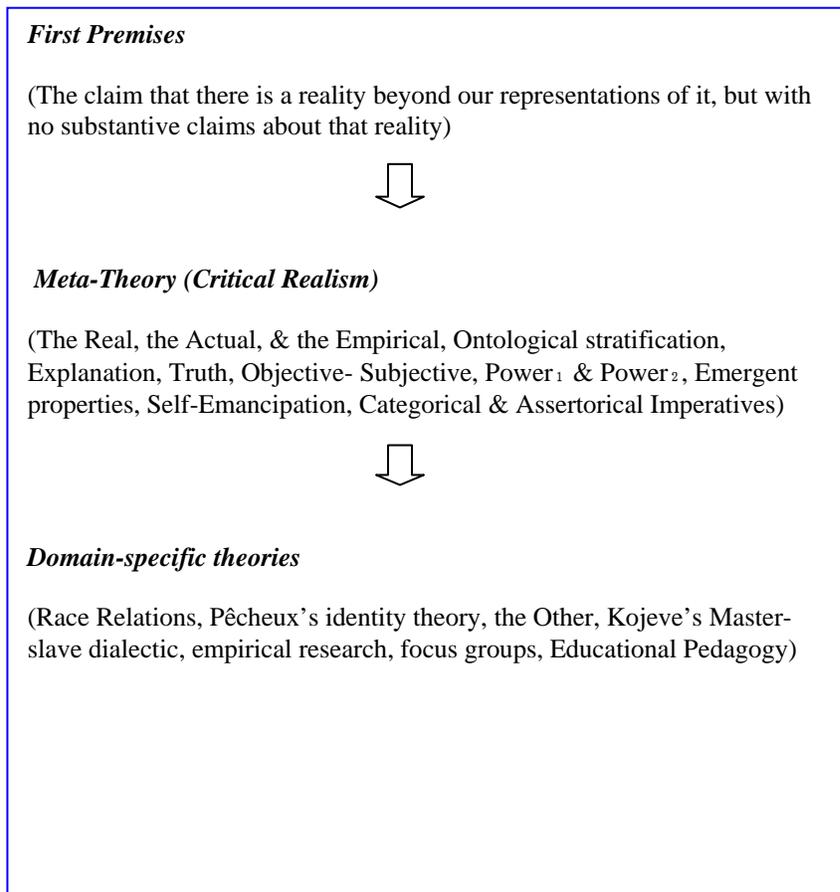
## **CHAPTER ONE - METHODOLOGY**

In this chapter I attempt to outline and defend the basic features of my methodology. There are two distinct but hopefully overlapping aspects of my methodology. Firstly I acknowledge and defend my attempt to work and write as an Indigenous researcher. Here Linda Tuhiwai Smith's pioneering work has provided me with a justification for much of what I have attempted to do (Smith, 1999). However, as we will see when we come to discuss her work in greater detail in the following chapter, her approach falls within the post-structuralist, neo-Nietzschean tradition. While sympathising deeply with Smith's fundamental orientation as an Indigenous woman, I have serious reservations about the post-structuralist basis to her approach. This dissatisfaction with poststructuralism has led me to the second element in my methodology. In this case I have attempted to maintain what I would argue are the most helpful parts of Smith's approach, while replacing the Post-structuralism with an approach based largely on Roy Bhaskar's Critical Realism.

In this chapter, then, I outline the methodological basis of my approach to the thesis question. Here I principally utilise Critical Realism to provide the theoretical basis for my subsequent arguments. I will follow this with a chapter devoted to the refutation of the poststructuralist model, which is becoming increasingly dominant within the domain of education. Here I take as a paradigmatic case Cathryn McConaghy's important work *Rethinking Indigenous Education: Culturalism, Colonialism and the Politics of Knowing* (2000).

### **1.1 Methodological Preliminaries**

This thesis will adapt the approach to methodology outlined by Justin Cruickshank (Cruickshank, 2002). His model (Figure 1.1) consists of three levels.



**Figure 1.1 Summarising Critical Realist Methodology; Adapted from Cruickshank 2002.**

To begin with we have **First Premises**. These are the working assumptions that the researcher brings to the topic under investigation. In this case the crucial assumption is that there is a reality and that we can get to know it, even if that knowledge is fallible and partial.

Such considerations bring us to the second level in Cruickshank's model, which consists of a meta-theory. This in the case of my thesis is the Critical Realist Paradigm outlined by Roy Bhaskar. The latter's work is astonishing in its depth and range and ambition. It has evolved from a theory of science to a philosophy which attempts to encompass all being. Rather than essaying a rigorous account of Bhaskar's work, an endeavour that

would take me well outside the parameters of my thesis, I have had recourse to the strategy of drawing, in a systematic way, on those concepts that I feel are most helpful in addressing my thesis question. If the underlying premise is that there is a reality, which we can come to know fallibly and partially, the meta-theory level functions to provide us with a fuller working out of that underlying premise – a task to which I now turn.

## 1.2 Underlaboring for Science

In his revolutionary work, *Realist Theory of Science*, Roy Bhaskar re-positioned the philosophy of science by restoring and vindicating ontology (Bhaskar, 1978). The purpose of this was to ‘underlabor’ for science by clarifying the theoretical issues surrounding science. Most important here was Bhaskar’s insistence that the Critical Realist ontology, as a layered depth ontology, was the only ontology which was capable of accounting for the successive nature of the progress of science. This layering of reality can be described as in Fig. 1.2

	<b>Domain of Real</b>	<b>Domain of Actual</b>	<b>Domain of Empirical</b>
<b>Structures &amp; Mechanisms</b>	✓		
<b>Events</b>	✓	✓	
<b>Experiences</b>	✓	✓	✓

**Figure 1.2 – The Domains of Reality**

Reality in Fig 1.2 is divided into three domains – the Real, which encompasses the other two domains; the domain of the Actual; and the Domain of the Empirical. The crucial aspect of the Real is that it consists of underlying, and often very abstract, structures and mechanisms. These can be realised in the Actual as events. These same events may also be experienced. However, and this is a very important point, the underlying structures and mechanisms are still real, even though they may not be realised as events, or even as experiences.

For instance, water has a tendency to boil at 100 degrees Celsius at sea level. This tendency, which is due to the atomic structure of water, would still be real even though water never actually boiled. The full meaning of this phenomenon is that the world and its underlying mechanisms and structures exist independently of our knowledge of them. So Jacques Derrida's notorious claim that there is nothing outside the text (*in n'y a rien hors du texte*), and the notion that we create reality in our stories and discourses, are deeply mistaken.

An important corollary to ontological depth is epistemic relativism. If we think of the creation of knowledge in terms of digging down through the layers of reality, we can see that at any one stage in the 'dig', it is possible for someone else to dig further. That is, the knowledge we create can always be surpassed. It is this notion of epistemic relativism that provides at least a partial antidote to the sort of epistemological triumphalism rightly targeted by Tuhiwai Smith and others.

Although epistemological relativism is acknowledged, Critical Realism rules out judgmental relativism. If we have two accounts of a particular phenomenon, it is in principle possible to judge rationally that one account is superior to another, even though both are relative. Thus Ptolemy's account of the universe was correctly judged inferior to Copernicus' account even though the latter account was in its turn to be surpassed by the Newtonian system.

What, though, about the reality of the social world? Obviously we humans are not contingent in this case. For instance, there would be no Indigenous education without Indigenous people. Nevertheless, there was in the social sciences a very widespread feeling that they were 'soft' compared to the 'hard' natural sciences. It was to address such problems that Bhaskar, having underlabored for science, next undertook the task of underlaboring for the social sciences in an endeavour to provide them with a rigorous philosophical and theoretical basis. In *the Possibility of Naturalism*, he addressed the question as to what extent the social sciences could be similar to the natural sciences. The

following features of his findings are particularly relevant to my research. Here our meta-theory, Critical Realism, states that:

...people do not create society. For it always pre-exists them and is a necessary condition for their activity. Rather, society must be regarded as an ensemble of structures, practices and conventions which individuals reproduce or transform, but which would not exist unless they did so. Society does not exist independently of human activity (the error of reification). But it is not the product of it (the error of voluntarism)...

Society, then, provides necessary conditions for intentional human action, and intentional human action is a necessary condition for it. Society is only present in human action, but human action always expresses and utilizes some or other social form. Neither can, however, be identified with, reduced to, explained in terms of, or reconstructed from the other. There is an ontological hiatus between society and people, as well as mode of connection... (Bhaskar cited in Archer et al :217).

Most critically, like the natural world, the social world is also stratified. This has the effect that the object of the social sciences is not events but the underlying relations, which generate these events. For instance, much of my research has been into the relationship between white and black Australians. It is in the nature of the underlying relationships between these two groups that I have sought an explanation of the state of Indigenous Australians.

The relationship between the individual and society is known as socialisation. This is the process by which the 'stocks of skills, competences and habits appropriate to given social contexts' is passed on (Bhaskar cited in Archer, 1998: 216). However, individuals can acquire and employ those skills etc. which will reproduce society, or they can accumulate the skills to transform society. A large part of our work at Cherbourg is designed to impart the ability to transform and not to reproduce the societal reality that the children of Cherbourg grow up in. Simply put, the whole thrust of the 'Strong and Smart' philosophy

is in Bhaskar's terms transformative. I do not want the children of Cherbourg to reproduce the values and structures which has positioned them as a despised minority at the bottom of the social pile.

The recognition of both the reality of society and of individuals is crucial to understanding how to set about improving the quality of the society-individual relationship. Here errors and prejudices persist. Constantly I run across, for instance, echoes of the classic denial of the reality of society. This had perhaps its most famous statement in 1987 by the then Prime Minister of Britain, Margaret Thatcher. Her views are worth revisiting because unfortunately they still resonate. She said:

I think we've been through a period where too many people have been given to understand that if they have a problem, it's the government's job to cope with it. 'I have a problem, I'll get a grant.' 'I'm homeless, the government must house me.' They're casting their problem on society. And, you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first. It's our duty to look after ourselves and then, also to look after our neighbour. People have got the entitlements too much in mind, without the obligations. There's no such thing as entitlement, unless someone has first met an obligation

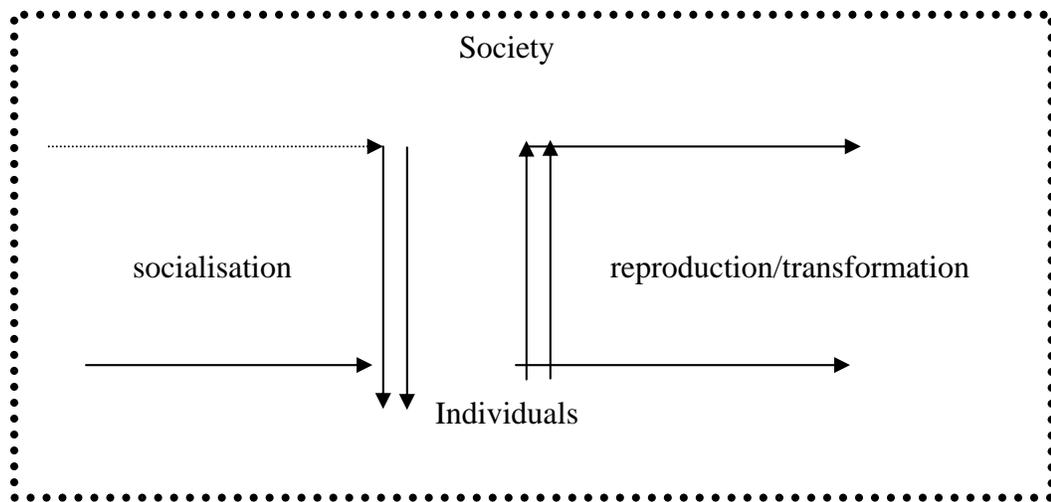
(Thatcher cited at Deer <http://briandeer.com/social/thatcher-society.htm>)

The confusion and prejudice behind statements like this would be laughable if not for the damage that has resulted as a consequence. On the one hand we have the extreme endorsement of individualism, but this is contradicted by the recognition of one collective, namely the family. I doubt moreover if Thatcher would ever have said or agreed to the proposition, 'There is no such thing as "the society"'. The objection to the word notion of 'society' is perhaps because, if we recognize the existence of societies, then we have to ask ourselves what kind of society do we want, and what is the relationship between the individual and society? To repeat, our work at Cherbourg is

firmly based on the recognition of the reality of society and a determination to transform that same society to one where the free development of each is a condition for the free development of all.

Social systems are open and therefore prediction is not expected of the social sciences. What they are expected to do, however, is to explain.

Particular social phenomena like the family or the community are concept dependent. That is, if there were no concept of the family then families would not exist. However, and this again is crucial, we do not invent phenomena such as families: they may not exist without human beings, but any one individual is born into a family. The individual not create the phenomenon. Accordingly, at any one moment in a piece of research, the social phenomena under investigation are independent of the particular researcher's concepts of them.



**Fig 1.3 The Transformational Model of the Society/Person Connection (Bhaskar, 1979: 46)**

Fig 1.3 captures the notion that society pre-exists individuals. It is a necessary precondition for their activity. People do not create it. Bhaskar here defines society as

... an ensemble of structures, practices and conventions which individuals reproduce or transform, but which would not exist unless they did so (Bhaskar, 1979: 45).

Socialisation for Bhaskar consists of the 'skills, competencies and habits appropriate to given social contexts, and necessary for the reproduction and/or transformation of society'. (Bhaskar, 1979: 46) By and large it is the function of the education system to provide these skills, competencies and habits. It is an important part of my argument in this thesis that traditionally the Indigenous children at Cherbourg and elsewhere were not given the skills or competencies necessary to transform society but that they were, unconsciously at times perhaps, given the habits needed to reproduce it. The arrows in Fig 1.3, which go from left to right, are meant to indicate that society and individuals are in dynamic movement. This introduces the element of time into the model. People and society change. So the model can account for history. The arrows linking society to individuals indicate the process of socialisation. The arrows linking individuals to society are meant to represent the processes of transformation and/or reproduction.

The third level of Cruickshank's model consists of **specific theories and empirical data**. For this, I will draw in this chapter upon Pêcheux's identity theory; a re-reading of the concept of the Other; Kojève and Bhaskar's account of the master-slave dialectic; and, in later chapters, I will outline the results of a series of qualitative surveys and focus groups. But firstly I will return to the level of the meta-theory to discuss critical realist notions of totality, criteria for reality, and truth. This will be followed by a discussion of the domain specific theories.

### **1.3 Meta-theory and Totality**

It must be noted here that the Critical Realist totality is a radically open one and not the classic expressive totality of much Marxism where one reads off from the economic base

what will occur in the superstructure (Jay, 1984). By contrast, the open totalities of Critical Realism are

...intra-actively changing embedded ensembles, constituted by their geo-histories (and/or their traces) and their contexts, in open potentially disjointed process, subject to multiple perspectival switches, and in structured open systemic flux.  
(Bhaskar, 1993: 126)

A revival of the notion of totality seems a controversial move in these postmodern times when totality rewrites as totalising and totalising rewrites as totalitarian. Nevertheless the move toward totality is necessary because Critical Realism's emphasis on totality is necessary to an understanding of the connection between what is happening at Cherbourg and the rest of the relationship between white and black Australia.

To investigate a totality one can pursue two lines of inquiry - the intensive or the extensive margin (Bhaskar, 1993: 125). Within the domain of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships the intensive margin, for example, would consist of phenomena such as the Aboriginal studies curriculum at Cherbourg, while the extensive margin would, for instance, deal with matters such as the dynamics and contradictions of the Federal Government's policy on issues such as Aboriginal self-government, or the attitudes of white Australians towards Indigenous Australians. It is the latter aspect of the extensive margin that I have chosen to concentrate on. In this case I will argue that the attitudes of white Australians at the extensive margin can account for many of the distinctive features of Cherbourg culture at the intensive margin. Indeed it is the importance of the relationship between the intensive and the extensive margins of the totality in which we Aboriginal Australians are inserted that is the justification for this study.

#### **1.4 Meta-theory and Realism**

Before we proceed, however, it is worth noting that throughout this research we spend a great deal of time discussing what have traditionally been treated under the rubric of a

distinction between *perceptions* and *realities*. This of course raises the question of the ontological status of perceptions, with the assumption being that perceptions are somehow not real. Again underpinning this assumption is an implicit positivism where the real is equated with that which we can touch or see or hear. However, our conception of reality needs to be much more complex and it must spring from a rigorous interrogation of our underlying philosophical assumptions. What does it mean to describe something as 'real'? Are perceptions real?

Briefly, I follow Roy Bhaskar in acknowledging that science employs two criteria for ascribing reality. The first of this is the traditional conceptual one. However, there is also a causal criteria which states something is real if it has an effect, that is brings about changes (Bhaskar, 1989 : 69). For instance, we cannot see, hear or touch a magnetic field or a gravitational field, yet they are both real.

Within the social sciences there has generally been what Bhaskar terms a 'fork' or a distinction between the perceptual and the conceptual with the former being regarded as the prerogative of the natural sciences, while the social sciences confine themselves to the conceptual. However, if we ignore this traditional marking out of territory and adapt a causal criterion for ascribing reality then, as Bhaskar says, possibilities do open up. These questions are worth considering given the extent to which perceptions, about ourselves and/or others, have a very real influence on how we are treated, how we treat others, or indeed how we let ourselves be treated by others.

By perceptions I mean what Bhaskar terms 'beliefs about social objects' (Bhaskar, 1986: 153). In the case of this thesis, the social objects are Indigenous and white Australians. My thesis endeavours to demonstrate both that there is a discrepancy between Aborigines as they essentially are and can be, and white perceptions and beliefs about them, and also that negative white perceptions and expectations do damage to Aboriginal Australians.

## 1.5 Meta-theory and Truth

The Critical Realist approach is to be sharply distinguished from the postmodernist approaches to the humanities – approaches which have been so widespread and dominant since the late 1970s. Whether these approaches be labelled as post-structuralist, post-Marxist, post-feminist or post-colonialist, they share a common core of scepticism, which can be regarded as an often unacknowledged working out of the project begun by Frederic Nietzsche. In terms of the trajectory of this thesis, the aspect of Nietzsche's work that I feel must be challenged and refuted is his scepticism about the possibility of truth.

Famously in *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense* he asked:

What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding.

Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions—they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins.

(Nietzsche cited at <<http://thenietzschechannel.fws1.com/popular.htm>>)

To deny the possibility of truth one has to be, I am inclined to think, a tenured academic. Certainly in every day life we encounter lies, so there must be truth as well. So the thesis that truth does not exist or is impossible, is frankly counter intuitive. Besides, the claim that it is true that there is no truth cancels itself out, does it not?

For Nietzsche the solution to the contradictions behind the impossibility of truth argument was the ad hoc one of forgetting that truth was impossible. So he claimed, 'Only through forgetfulness can man ever achieve the illusion of possessing a "truth" ...' (Nietzsche, 1978: 45).

Influential as these theses of Nietzsche's have been, they still must be rejected. As Bhaskar has pointed out, in equating truth with metaphor Nietzsche is confusing meaning and truth (Bhaskar, 1993: 136). Moreover, in arguing for the necessity of forgetting that truth is impossible, he is making the mistake of saying that just because we need the notion of truth it must be untenable (Bhaskar, 1993: 148). Accordingly, this thesis will reject the Nietzschean approach to truth and instead turn to the model of truth advanced by Bhaskar.

In 1993 Bhaskar produced his *magnum opus*, *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom*. There are many aspects of that work which have a direct bearing on my research. Not least of these is the Bhaskarian four-tiered model of truth. In these days of postmodernist scepticism and the now increasingly dominant neo-positivist backlash, truth is an extremely important matter not only at the level of abstract research but at all levels of our society. Indeed, arguably the current 'history wars', which are raging in Australia at the present moment, are fuelled in part at least by conflicting views of the truth (McIntyre, 2000, Windschuttle, 2002). I will return to this point when I attempt to address Keith Windschuttle's approach to Indigenous history, but for the present I will simply assert that a sophisticated model of truth is a methodological necessity.

Bhaskar's truth model is four-fold. The first level is the normative-fiduciary. This is a reminder to us that truth is communicative. I say that something is true and in so doing I ask you to trust me and to believe that I am telling the truth. Thus in the first chapter of this thesis I outlined aspects of my schooling. I did so in the expectation that I would be trusted and believed. Without such expectation of and the return of trust, communication between humans is impossible. What, however, occurs when the normative-fiduciary aspect is violated? What, for instance, if I lied about my schooling and was caught out in that? The consequences for my credibility would be extremely serious. Once trust has been betrayed, then future communication becomes overshadowed by scepticism and doubt. It is at just this level that Windschuttle has been so devastating in his critique of Lyndal Ryan's work on the fate of Tasmanian Aborigines. Windschuttle has been able to establish that Ryan used her sources incorrectly. As a result her entire, work on Tasmania is now in doubt (Windschuttle, 2002).

The second level of the truth is the epistemic level. This is a vital reminder to us that truth is produced. There is a truth effect. We do research and we produce our findings. Again it is important to acknowledge that at this level truth is relative. Knowledge can always be surpassed. It is upon this productive aspect of truth that postmodernists have seized to argue (following Nietzsche) that we have only a series of competing perspectives.

The third level of truth is ontological. We establish the truth about some aspect of reality. Here truth is absolute. Thus I would argue that in my thesis I have been able to establish that white Australians perceive Indigenous Australians in a particular way. It is absolutely vital that this not be seen simply as *my* perspective, which I will endeavour to make the dominant perspective through rhetorical flourishes or other means. Truth in this instance becomes a very serious matter, as the ‘history wars’ are demonstrating at this moment.

The fourth level of truth within the Bhaskarian schema is that of *alethia* or truth as the reason for things, not simply propositions. This is of course the deepest level of truth and, not surprisingly, the most difficult to establish yet in the area of white-black relations which this thesis addresses. We must strive to achieve alethic truth.

Let us now try and apply Bhaskar’s truth model. Take, for instance, the following example:

In August 1920, the Australian Medical Congress met in Brisbane to discuss pressing national concerns about ‘Tropical Australia’. After reviewing the physiological research of the Australian Institute of Tropical Medicine at Townsville, the meeting declared that ‘the opinion of the medical practitioners present was overwhelmingly in favour of the suitability of North Queensland for the successful implantation of a working white race’. Laboratory results and vital statistics suggested no ‘inherent or insuperable obstacles’ in the way of white occupation, and the delegates thought that, on microbial grounds, ‘the absence of semi-civilised coloured peoples in the northern Australia simplifies the problem

very greatly'. Tropical settlement and development was, according to the congress, 'fundamentally a question of applied public health in the modern sense'. Some improvements in diet, clothing, housing and personal hygiene evidently were necessary in the north, and the congress concluded that such reforms should be...organised by a new federal department of health... Anton Breinl and his colleagues had detected few diseases and no signs of degeneracy in tropical whites. Immigration restrictions had worked wonders, but now, in addition, a federal department would be required to ensure constant vigilance against the introduction and spread of disease. It is all very well to have a white Australia, he [J.H.L. Cumpston, the federal director of quarantine] announced, 'but it must be kept white. There must be immaculate cleanliness' (Anderson, 2002: 127).

Let us assume that Anderson has followed scholarly norms and that the Congress he describes did meet in Brisbane in 1920. It is of course theoretically possible that one could 'do a Windschuttle' and detect errors in Anderson's work. The impact as I have indicated would be similar to that in the Windschuttle versus Ryan case. The important point to grasp in this instance is, however, that Anderson advances some truth claims and these are eminently falsifiable. So we can in principle establish whether Anderson has violated the normative-fiduciary level of truth.

At the second level, that of epistemology, Anderson has clearly worked to achieve the truth. He has done the primary research and carefully selected details and matching quotations. This is of course not a simple matter. An alternative account of the congress is at least theoretically possible. Let us for example say that another researcher (Researcher B) argued that the 1920 congress in Brisbane was concerned not primarily with the advancement of the white race but rather with humanity as a whole, in that what was good for the white race was good for humanity. Let us call this Account B. Such an account would diametrically oppose Anderson's, which we will call Account A.

So we have two clashing or competing accounts. Within postmodernist thought this clash would be interpreted as an instance of the Nietzschean will to power. Neither account or perspective could lay claim to the truth, because as we have seen truth is simply a

metaphorical and rhetorical matter within Nietzschean thought. However, within Critical Realism it is possible to acknowledge both the relativity of both accounts and also to argue that one can judge rationally between them. There is of course ample evidence that the 1920 congress was motivated by racial notions. Indeed, the participants would scarcely have thought to deny that.

What of the third level – that of ontology? Here it is vital to grasp that we are not simply dealing with competing discourses. Anderson has produced an account about something that happened in the real world. In Bhaskar's terms it existed at the level of reality, actuality and for the participants also at the empirical level. So *contra* Derrida, there is a world outside Anderson's text. At this level there can be no talk of truth as a game. Either the medical congress took place or it did not. Either Cumpston called for 'immaculate cleanliness' or he did not.

What, then, of the level of Alethia, the reason for things? Anderson's thesis is a complex one. He attempts to outline medical and 'scientific' (primarily biological) visions of what it was to be Australian. He writes:

Scientific visions of white Australia commonly conjured up an ideal of biological homogeneity, a fantasy of organic integrity and stability. There were, as we have seen, many paths to the common destination, to this imagined community. Some experts postulated a Lamarckian alteration and convergence of national type; others pointed to a continuity of the white germ plasm, regardless of surroundings; still others proposed the submergence in the white gene pool of related Aboriginal elements. For some the ideal type was British; for others it was old white; for many it was new white; and for a few, after the 1920s, it might be Caucasian. In any case, the result would be a biologically homogeneous national body and mentality (Anderson, 2002: 247).

There can be little doubting then that at the alethic level, Australia as a nation was driven by racist fantasies and governmental policies. This played a role in determining the nature of the deep relationship between Aboriginal Australians and white Australians. To put

this simply, white colonial racism was one of the reasons why white Australians did what they did to my people. Hopefully this example instances that by taking truth out of the realm of clashing discourses and by giving it instead an ontological basis one can produce a rational account of what is taking place in the social realm.

## **1.6 Domain Specific Theories**

At this point it is worthwhile reflecting on a range of Domain Specific Theories starting with Pêcheux's notions of Identification, Counter-identification and disidentification, and from there moving on to other categories such as notions of Otherness, and finally the Master-Slave Dialectic.

### **1.6.1 Identity theory: Michel Pêcheux's Identification, Counter-identification and Dis-identification**

One of the problems that we have grappled with constantly at Cherbourg is the type of behaviour, that lives up to and reinforces mainstream white perceptions of Aborigines. There is a danger that this behaviour can be romanticised as 'resistance'. Far from being an example of resistance I would argue that behaviour such as vandalism, glue sniffing, or truancy is anything but truly rebellious. To establish my point in theoretical terms, I turn to the work of the French Althusserian Michel Pêcheux. The latter attempted to address the problem of how subjects come into being and also how agency might be possible. It is not necessary for us here to enter into a full account of Pêcheux's work nor to accept it in its entirety. I will, moreover, when I come to discuss McConaghy's work, be critical of the irrealism of discourse theory. However for my purposes it will be useful, I feel, to draw upon his distinction between 'good' and 'bad' subjects. I hope to be able to show that this distinction, though abstract, over-simplified and deterministic, still enables me to think through much of what I have experienced at Cherbourg.

For Pêcheux, like Louis Althusser, subjects were called into being through discourse or language. The dominant discourse, that is the way of looking at the world adopted by the powerful or dominant groups, attempts to create good subjects by projecting an image

of what 'good' might mean. In turn the good subject accepts the image of the self, which is projected by the dominant discourse. Pêcheux provided a historical example:

France is in danger / We are all Frenchmen / We are at war! [or] `A French Soldier never retreats!' `To the last man!' " (Pêcheux cited in Martin & Allen, 1992).

In this case the good subject would attempt to do his patriotic duty. He would, in other words, have identified with and happily occupied the subject position offered to him by the dominant discourse. This is the process of **identification**.

What would a 'good' Aboriginal subject be in the terms of the dominant discourse? It is only since 1967 that we have been recognized as citizens of this nation, so there have been relatively few calls upon us to do our national duty as in Pêcheux's example above. The history of white-Aboriginal relations would suggest a pattern of genocide-assimilation, followed by a more liberal experiment in Aboriginal self-government. This has now been shelved under the present Howard government.

So what is Howard's version of a 'good' Aboriginal subject? There is much rhetoric here, but Howard's persistent refusal to say 'sorry' to the Aboriginal people for the wrongs of the past, would suggest that for him the 'good' Aboriginal subject is very much like the 'good' subject of the days of assimilation.

Here the current 'history wars' and the overall construction of a conservative climate are having an impact. Kanishka Jayasuriya has argued that what we are seeing is what she terms the 'Tampa project'. This project, named ironically after the ship that rescued drowning refugees on their way to Australia, consists of

a strategic mix of enthusiastic commitment to the values and policies of economic liberalism with an equally assiduous propagation of illiberal policies that draw on reactionary and nostalgic understandings of community and culture ...There is more to this project than the sheer political opportunism of John Howard. Foot

soldiers in these new culture wars include the talk-back hosts with their cozy suburban fascism as well as a broad range of conservative social columnists, academics, and writers who fulminate against feminism, multiculturalism, and Aboriginal affairs. Under the guise of challenging 'political correctness' these foot soldiers of various hues represent a kind of 'intellectual' anti-intellectualism (Jayasuriya, 2003).

I am persuaded by Jayasuriya's account of the current political and cultural climate in Australia. So much so that I believe that once again the 'good' Aboriginal subject is for the Howard Government what we Aborigines pejoratively and colloquially name as the 'coconut' - someone who is black on the outside and white on the inside.

Where does the 'bad' subject come in? This subject refuses the dominant discourse and begins to exhibit negative behaviour. Pêcheux gives the following example of slogans which resist the call to patriotism:

It is always the same people who get killed' / 'Down with war!' / 'Long live peace!' (Pêcheux cited in Martin & Allen, 1992).

So, to counter the pro-war patriotic slogans we have the slogans for peace. This position is called by Pêcheux, **counter-identification**. This is the mode of the trouble-maker who turns back these meanings 'lived' by the good subjects. (Pêcheux cited in MacDonnell, 1986: 39). It is vital to grasp that the subject positions of identification and counter-identification, while seemingly in opposition to each other, actually constitute a dialectic of mutual support and complicity. By this I mean that the counter-identifier mirrors back in a negative way the authority that he appears to be challenging.

As Ron Strickland puts it

... the 'bad' subject ... simply denies and opposes the dominant ideology, and in so doing inadvertently confirms the power of the dominant ideology by accepting the 'evidentness of meaning' upon which it rests (Strickland).

In Bhaskarian terms, counter-identification is an instance of 'dialectical counterparts or contraries' where we have phenomena which while apparently in opposition, are mutually complicit in that they share a common ground (Bhaskar, 1993: 11).

Is there a way out of this dance of the identifier and the counter-identifier? For Pêcheux there was, and it is represented by the third position of **disidentification**. Here the subject works not simply to challenge the role of good subject, but to transcend and overthrow the underlying power relations which produce the roles of identification and counter-identification. The example that Pêcheux gives is from the war-peace opposition. Here, instead of countering war-mongering slogans with peace slogans the disidentifier works to build a society where there would be no calls for patriotic wars. For Pêcheux that meant a socialist society. As he put it

... a struggle for peace which [is] not also at the same time a struggle for socialism is a nonsense, because pacifism is an illusion so long as socialism has not been established" (Pêcheux cited in Martin & Allen, 1992).

Let us attempt now to return to the intensive margin – that is Cherbourg state school. How would the Pêcheux model help us here? Let us take the problem of truancy. This plagues Aboriginal education and is one of the most important obstacles in the path of Aboriginal educational advancement. As I indicated above such behaviour could be romanticized as resistance to white colonial education. In Pêcheux's terms, however, it would be seen as mere counter-identification. The truant does not challenge the power relations that set up the colonial system. Actually, as my research shows, the truant reinforces white perceptions about Aboriginal behaviour. Aboriginal truancy is no threat at all to white supremacy. What would threaten colonial power relations is for the Aboriginal child to come to school and to do the hard yards to become strong and smart. This would provide him with the power to contribute to the transforming of this society into one where we all can flourish.

My point can perhaps be more readily grasped if we take the example of native Americans. In his complex discussion of the formation of identity among the Lakota people James V. Fenelon makes the following argument:

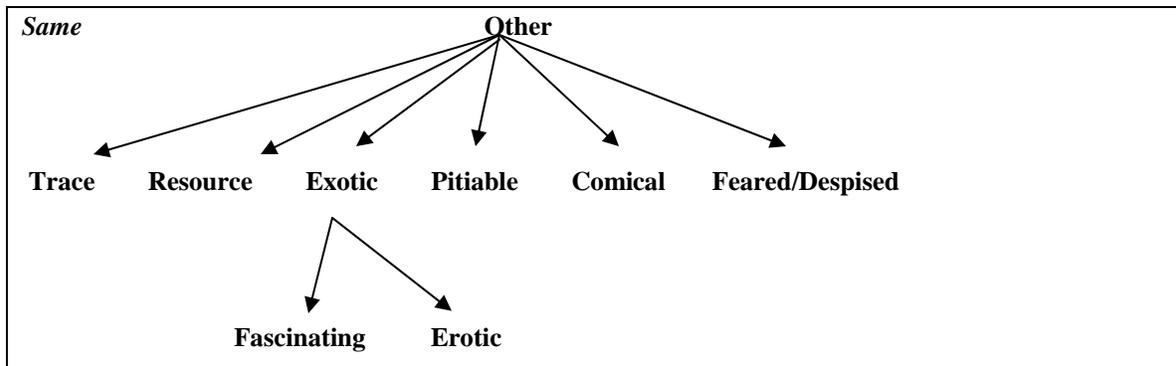
Therefore, I distinguish between *external* identity forms, primarily coming from the U.S ... and *internal* forms of identity and knowledge-building traditions ... resulting from changes in traditional Lakota social practices (Fenelon, 1997, emphasis added).

The Lakota people are subject like Aboriginal Australians to the process of external identity formation. This can be read in terms of Pêcheux's model as the process of identification and counter-identification. We can either accept or be complicit with the identities created by white Australia. Or we can undertake the process of internal identity formation or disidentification. This is exactly what we have been trying to do at Cherbourg with the Strong and Smart philosophy.

### **1.6.2 The Other**

This is one of the most important concepts in postcolonial and poststructuralist theorising and it figures very prominently in Cathryn McConaghy's approach to Indigenous education. As such it must be addressed. However I will note that though the concept is universal in theory it is not without its detractors. For instance, Marsha Hewitt describes it as 'abstract and meaningless' (Hewitt, 1997). Nevertheless, though Hewitt's approach is somewhat tempting, I will engage with the concept here and attempt to indicate some new ways in which it can be read and deployed.

To begin with, the Other is part of a binary: Same-Other. That is the clue to understanding why in so much poststructuralist and postcolonial thought it is a mark of criticism to say to someone that you are treating, for example, Aborigines as Other. I will return to challenge this point but to proceed I will adapt the approach outlined by Gary MacLennan and Maria Mitropoulos (2000). They start by differentiating the Other as in Fig 1.4.



**Figure 1.4 Differentiating the Other**

If we proceed from the right to the left we find that the first subdivision of the Other is that of the **Feared/Despised**. If we turn to Irving Goffman's work on stigma and identity, we can interpret the feared/despised Other as an individual with an attribute which has been stigmatised. Goffman explains what happens in this context:

The attitudes we normals [those without the stigmatised attribute] have towards a person with a stigma, and the actions we take in regard to him, are well known, since these responses are what benevolent social action is designed to soften and ameliorate. By definition, of course we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances. We construct a stigma theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents, sometimes rationalising an animosity based on other differences, such as those of social class. We use specific stigma terms such as cripple, bastard, moron in our daily discourse without giving thought to the original meaning. We impute a wide range of imperfections on the basis of the original one ... (Goffman, 1986: 15-16).

The feared/despised Other then is the slot of the *untermensch* - the less than human. As the word suggests, it is a very dangerous slot to occupy. In truth my people have often occupied this subject position. It is here that we find the explanation for the genocide and the

kidnapping and institutionalisation of our children. The following is a classic expression of the indigene as feared/despised other and the attitude behind it goes a long way to explaining the genocide practised on Native Americans.

They [Native Americans] are savage men and differ little from animals in their way of life and conduct. Both males and females go around naked. They have no fixed abode, no laws, no form of government (Stansilav Arlet, Jesuit missionary, America 1697 cited in Mason, 1990,153

Moving to the left we encounter the slot of the Other as **Comical**. Here the Other is laughed at as harmless, and as the clown who is good for a few giggles. This Other is often palatable to the dominant 'Same' and having them in their presence to entertain promotes a sense of freedom from guilt.

Next on the left is the category of the Other as **Pitiable**. This is the Other that features in advertisements for organisations such as World Vision. Here the Same looks on the Other in pity. The Aborigine has been in this slot too. It is also the slot where we are patronised and subjected to the tender mercies of charities.

The next category/slot is that of the **Exotic**. MacLennan and Mitropoulos subdivide it into the **Fascinating** and the **Erotic** (MacLennan & Mitropoulos 2000). This is the Other of the ideology of romanticism. Here the Aborigine becomes the noble savage, the last relic of the world before modernity, the sign that the world was once thoroughly enchanted. It is, as MacLennan and Mitropoulos point out, the staple diet of the tourist industry. The Other as the erotic Exotic can be seen in the barely repressed desire underlying this description of Indigenous Americans by the explorer Amerigo Vespucci:

The women, as I have said, go about naked and seductively, but their bodies are attractive and clean enough. Nor are they as shameless as one might perhaps suppose, because the fact of the being well filled out makes their shamelessness less apparent, since it is covered for the most part by their excellent body structure. We were surprised to see that none of them had sagging breasts and that those who had

given birth did not differ at all from virgins with respect to the shape and size of the bellies. The same is true for the other parts of the body, which I shall gloss over for decency's sake. When they had the opportunity of having intercourse with Christians they were driven on by excessive lasciviousness and threw all decency to the winds (Amerigo Vespucci cited in Mason, 1990: 171).

The next slot is that of the Other as **Resource**. Here the Same attempt to exploit and use the Other for their own aims. I think of the Aborigines who cleared the trees around Cherbourg for the settlers in Murgon and Wondai. Often they worked for meagre wages or rations or for nothing. In his history of the settlement Thom Blake supplies us with a typical instance:

One person in the Murgon district who took full advantage of settlement labour was the Barambah [Cherbourg] Superintendent, Albert Tronson. Six months after his arrival at Barambah, his wife acquired two 65 ha blocks at Cloyna, fifteen miles away from the settlement. With the help of at times eight men from the settlement, rapid progress was made on the Tronson selection. He admitted that in just six months he was able to have a house, barn and pigsty erected, as well as having cleared 'about 36 hectares of scrub...and planted about 20 ha of corn and pumpkins' (Blake, 2001: 122).

I think also of the wages that were stolen by successive Queensland governments from 1897 to 1992 under the so-called Protection Acts. It is estimated that

Thousands of Aboriginal workers across several generations lost an estimated **\$500 million** because of the Queensland Governments' negligence, through diverting withheld wages to raise government revenue, and through misuse of Trust monies (NTEU, 2004)

The Other as Resource is also, as Tuhiwai Smith reminds us, the slot where our culture is traded and appropriated (Smith, 1999). Writing of the 'spirituality industry' she says:

... spirituality will continue to expand as people, particularly those in First World nations, become uncertain about their identities, rights, privileges and very existence.

New Age groups currently appropriate Indigenous spiritual beliefs at will; some claim to be inhabited by Indigenous spirit guides while others merely interpret their own (individualized) dreams as an Indigenous spiritual experience. Writers and poets have also created a mystique around their work which, as Wendy Rose has argued, aspires to 'embody the Indian', in effect 'becoming: the "real" Indian'. Despite protestations that spirituality is an experience through which non-Indigenous people aim to help people, it is clearly a profitable experience (Smith, 1999: 102).

I will bracket off discussion of MacLennan and Mitropoulos' final category, the Other as **Trace**, until I come to explain how we should deploy the concept of the Other. For the present I want to examine an account of one of the very first encounters between Europeans and Aborigines. It is by William Dampier (1652-1715), the English explorer who came to Australia in 1697 and 1699. I quote at length because arguably this first encounter can be taken as paradigmatic of so much of the interaction between Europeans and us.

### **1.6.3 Deploying the Other: William Dampier**

These People speak somewhat thro' the Throat, but we could not understand one word that they said. We anchored as I said before, *January* the 5th, and seeing Men walking on the Shore, we presently sent a Canoa to get some Acquaintance with them; for we were in hopes to get some provisions among them. But the Inhabitants, seeing our Boat coming, ran away and hid themselves. We searched afterwards three Days in hopes to find their Houses; but found none; yet we saw many places where they had made Fires. At last, being out of hopes to find their Habitations, we searched no farther; but left a great many Toys ashore, in such places where we thought that they would come. In all our search we found no Water, but old Wells on the sandy Bays.

At last we went over to the Islands, and there we found a great many of the natives; I do believe there were 40 on one Island? Men Women, and Children. The men at our first coming ashore threatened us with their Lances and Swords; but they were frighted by firing one Gun, which we fired purposely to scare them. The Island was so small that they could not hide themselves; but they were much

disordered at our Landing, especially the Women and Children: for we went directly to their Camp. The lustiest of the Women snatching up their Infants ran away howling, and the little Children run after squeaking and bawling; but the Men stood still. Some of the Women and such People as could not go from us, lay still by a Fire, making a doleful noise, as if we had been coming to devour them; but when they saw we did not intend to harm them, they were pretty quiet, and the rest that fled from us at their first coming returned again. This their place of Dwelling was only a Fire, with a few Boughs before it, set up on that side the Winds was of.

After we had been here a little while, the Men began to be familiar, and we cloathed some of them, designing to have had some service of them for it; but we found some Wells of Water here and intended to carry 2 or 3 Barrels of it abroad. But it being somewhat troublesome to carry to the Canoas, we thought to have been made these Men to have carry'd it for us, and therefore we gave them some old Cloaths; to one an old pair of Breeches, to another a ragged Shirt, to the third a Jacket that was scarce worth owning; which yet would have been very acceptable at some places where we had been, and so we thought they might have been with these People. We put them on them, thinking that this finery would have brought them to work heartily for us; and our Water being filled in small long Barrels, about six Gallons in each, which were made purposely to carry Water in, we brought these new Servants to the Wells, and put a Barrel on each of their Shoulders for them to carry down to the Canoa. But all the signs we could make were to no purpose, for they stood like Statues, without motion, but grinn'd like so many Monkeys, staring one upon another: For these poor Creatures seem not accustomed to carry Burthens; and I believe one of our Ship-boys of 10 Years old, would carry as much as one of them. So we were forced to carry our Water our selves, and they were very fairly put the Cloaths off again, and laid them down, as if Cloaths were only made to work in. I did not perceive that they had any great liking to them at first, neither did they seem to admire anything that we had (Dampier cited in Kenny, 1995: 312-3).

Here we see the colonial mindset at work. Dampier encounters people in a land far from England yet somehow it is their fault that they do not speak English. That the expectation is quite frankly stupid does not occur to someone born to explore and exploit. He leaves 'toys' for the natives, in hope of a better exchange for here the Aborigines are seen as a potential **Resource**. This category fades into that of the Aborigine as the **Feared/Despised Other** as the gun is brought out to signal the true basis of this explorer-native relationship. In turn this category makes way for the Aborigine as the Pitiable Other who does not live in a house, does not wear clothes and is not grateful for the explorer's bountiful gift of rags. Again there is an attempt to construct the Aborigine as **resource**, when they are asked to carry the water. The natives, however, seem to have been quite smart and, having seen the gun being discharged, they placed themselves in the Other as **Comical** slot by standing and grinning as if they did not comprehend what they were being asked to do. However the final proof that the Aborigine is at best to be pitied comes with the astonished realisation on Dampier's part that the Aborigines did not value anything the white man had. What better proof could an explorer have of the moral and intellectual inferiority of the Australian Aborigine?

History does not record what my ancestors thought of the white men who came bearing toys and rags, fired off a gun, marched around the place looking at everything and acting as if they owned it all and then wanted them to carry their water barrels. They must have been deeply puzzled as to the significance of this experience. They were to find out all too clearly what it portended.

#### **1.6.4 The Other as Trace**

It is time now to redeem my promise to examine the category of the Other as Trace. This category was added in an unpublished paper in 2003. It is an attempt to incorporate the work of Emmanuel Levinas with the meta-reality philosophy of the later Bhaskar. It seems to me that what MacLennan and Mitropoulos have done is to construct the Other as Trace as an ethical category. Here they are trying to see the Other (as Levinas does not) as a limitation on the Same, not as an obstacle, but as an opportunity. As Levinas puts it:

The face in which the Other - the absolutely other - presents himself does not negate the same, does not do violence to it as do opinion or authority or the thaumaturgic supernatural. It remains commensurate with him who welcomes; it remains terrestrial. This presentation is preeminently nonviolence, for instead of offending my freedom it calls it to responsibility and founds it (Levinas cited in MacLennan & Mitropoulos, 2003).

MacLennan and Mitropoulos then resort to the Bhaskarian notion of the stratification of reality to argue that the contradiction between the Same and the Other can be resolved by the realisation that we are both, but at differing levels. Here they employ the Bhaskarian motif of the cosmic envelope. This for Bhaskar is an idea which

... developed from an argument which made use of a concept ... of an ultimatum, an ultimate or basic level of the universe which would have to be ingredient or immanent in all other levels of the universe emergent from it. This idea of an ultimatum is developed in the philosophy of meta-Reality into the idea of all beings having a *ground state*, which both embodies the qualities necessary to bind the universe together as a whole and at the same time is always specifically differentiated in the species or being concerned. Thus every species, and every being within a species, will in principle have a different ground state, but they will be united with every other ground state through, and at the level of the ultimatum, what I call the *cosmic envelope* (Bhaskar, 2002a: xiii).

So the cosmic envelope is the element beyond our differences, which allows us to show total respect for the other, but also to recognize that element in us which transcends our otherness. The solution seems an elegant one and it is in the tradition of the Enlightenment. It can also be derived from Bhaskar where he posits a 'core universal humanity' underlying 'particular mediations and rhythmic' and 'concrete singularity of the individual' (Bhaskar, 1993: 266). However, I feel that the common core humanity approach runs the risk of encouraging a kind of liberal paternalism that claims to be 'blind to colour' but in reality is bent on assimilating that very Otherness which is vital to our identity and to our survival.

The solution I prefer is to deepen the meaning of **Trace** and to argue that here the Other is a trace of the ultimate Other which some call God. Rather than having a ‘core universal humanity’ underpinning us, I would substitute the notion of a **common core Otherness** as constituting the essence of human being. Just as Bhaskar has argued that the ‘positive ...[is] a tiny, but important, ripple on the surface of a sea of negativity (Bhaskar, 1993: 5), I would argue that we should regard the **Same** as a tiny ripple on the sea of **Otherness**. This enables us, I think, to enshrine the right to be other and also it captures something of the sense of the wonder and strangeness of being that is an essential part of Aboriginal spirituality.

This, I believe, is the wondrous Otherness, which is evoked at the battle of Kurukshetra when Krishna allows Arjuna a glimpse of his being. Arjuna looks and says:

For seeing you  
ablaze with all the colors of the rainbow, Touching the sky, with gaping  
mouths and wide, flaming eyes, My heart in me is shaken.  
O God, I have lost all certainty, all peace.

Your mouths and their terrible tusks  
evoke the world in conflagration.  
Looking at them  
I can no longer orient myself.  
There is no refuge.  
O Lord of Gods, dwelling place of the world, give me Your grace.

(Bhagavad Gita 11.3-25)

The same sense of wonder and fear at the Otherness of being is expressed in Isaiah’s vision of Yahveh in the temple at Jerusalem in 741 BCE. Here the angels appear and announce that Yahveh is *kadosh*, that is, ‘Yahveh is Other! Other! Other! (Armstrong, 1993: 40-1).

My argument here may seem to be overly religious. That is not my intention. Rather, I seek to work within a framework where ‘the essence of a person is ... discussed in

relation to Indigenous concepts of spirituality' (specifically in my case of Aboriginal spirituality) (Smith, 199: 74). I also wish to defend our Otherness and also the Otherness of white Australians. For it is this Otherness that holds ultimately the key to whether humanity will transcend and transform our present actuality or remain stretched out as victims on the slaughter bench of history.

### **1.6.5 Master–Slave Dialectic**

The final category, which I wish to draw upon, is that of the master-slave dialectic. This is referred to several times by Tuhiwai Smith, but always as an instance of the greatly despised binarism. However, the concept as enunciated by Hegel and subsequently developed by Alexandre Kojève and Roy Bhaskar cannot be condemned simply as another foray into the world of the binary opposites. The master-slave dialectic appears in Hegel's *Phenomenology* and there deals with the struggle of self-consciousness for recognition because, as Hegel argues, self-consciousness 'exists only in being acknowledged' (Hegel, 1977: 111). This struggle has to be conducted with another self-consciousness. It, in turn, wants to be recognized by the Other. In the ensuing struggle one self-consciousness emerges as the master and the defeated self-consciousness emerges as the slave.

It is not clear, to me at least, if Hegel is describing some abstract internal process or whether the dialectic can be generalised into social terms. Certainly this is the step that Bhaskar takes when he thematizes 'structures of domination, exploitation, subjugation and control ... as *generalized master-slave (-type) relations*' (Bhaskar, 12993: 60, original emphasis). What particularly interests me, as an Aboriginal educator struggling with the legacy of conquest and colonisation, is the working out of the dialectic. The slave is put to work on the world and it is that work which transforms his status as slave. As Kojève puts it:

He [the slave] must become *other* than what he *is*. Now, in contrast to the warlike Master who will always remain what he already *is* – i.e., Master – the working Slave can change, and he actually does change, thanks to his work (Kojève, 1989: 50-1).

We Aborigines can then find in the master-slave dialectic grounds for hope. The process of conquest does not mean that one is permanently doomed to servitude. We work on the

world and come to know it, while the master is ultimately doomed to irrelevance. The master has had his dream of conquest. Nevertheless, the slave dreams of freedom and absents his bondage. It is better far to dream of freedom than luxuriate and stagnate in conquest, for it is the slave after all who gets to say:

When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! free at last! thank God Almighty, we are free at last!" (Martin Luther King, 1963).

It is indeed this general vision of freedom for all that motivates Bhaskar's reading of the master-slave dialectic and his generalisation of it to relations of nationality, ethnicity, gender, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, age, health and bodily disabilities generally (Bhaskar, 1993: 331).

It is also the same desire to generalise the pulse of freedom that has guided the development of the moral curriculum at Cherbourg State School. Here we have struggled to alert our students to the temptation slaves have to seek compensation for their status as slaves by becoming the masters of others be that through domestic violence or child abuse. Power relations, be they between master and slave or the slave who is the master of other slaves, form an ensemble, that must be dissolved for emancipation to take place.

In this chapter I have endeavoured to outline the methodological and philosophical basis of my thesis. In the following chapter I attempt to use this as a critique of poststructuralism, which is showing every sign of becoming the dominant paradigm in the field of education,

## CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE ANALYSIS

I have chosen in this chapter to devote the first section to refuting the arguments and approaches outlined in Catherine McConaghy's influential book *Rethinking Indigenous Education: Culturalism, Colonialism and the Politics of Knowing* (McConaghy, 2000). This will be followed by an examination of Marcia Langton's influential *Well I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television...* (1993); an engagement with Martin Nakata's preface to McConaghy's book; and a discussion of the relevance of Tuhiwai's Smith pioneering work on Indigenous methodology. My intention in this chapter is to engage with the influential poststructuralist paradigm, to acknowledge its strengths but at the same time point out what I feel are debilitating weaknesses.

I feel it is important to acknowledge that, although none of the four authors I deal with make any direct reference to the philosophy of Frederic Nietzsche, I follow Glen Rikowski in his claim that Nietzsche is the seminal influence on the 'postmodern Godfathers: Foucault, Deleuze, Baudrillard, Lyotard, Derrida and the rest' some of whom are directly referred to. (McLaren & Rikowski, 2001). Accordingly, I have tried to draw out especially in McConaghy's work the Nietzschean connection.

### 2.1 Analysis of McConaghy

Let me begin this engagement with McConaghy's work by emphasising that there is absolutely no personal animus in anything that follows. Rather like Martin Nakata, whose work I will engage with below, I wish to

*depersonalise the arena, to lay grounds for open and mature discussion of ideas, to eliminate the patronisation, defensiveness and hostility that is sometimes resorted to, to level the playing field (Nakata, 1999b).*

Let me be clear then that I do not doubt McConaghy's sincerity nor her sympathy for us Aboriginal Australians. However, in theoretical terms I believe she has produced an important and influential work that must be engaged with not least because, although extremely influential, it is, as I hope to show, extremely inadequate. In what follows I will first engage with the meta-theory that underpins her work and I will then address the

particulars of her book, paying attention to her approach to liberalism, radicalism and also to her summation where she seems to attempt to outline what ought to be done.

## **2.2 Meta-theory**

Crucial to an understanding of McConaghy's thesis is her dependence on the meta-theory of poststructuralism. Within this paradigm it is the ontology that is secreted, which proves decisive in her discussion of Indigenous issues. Here John Lyle has provided us with a useful summary of poststructuralism's ontology and methodological priorities:

Postructuralism sees 'reality' as being much more fragmented, diverse, tenuous and culture-specific than does structuralism. Some consequences have been,

1. poststructuralism's greater attention to specific histories, to the details and local contextualizations of concrete instances;
2. a greater emphasis on the body, the actual insertion of the human into the texture of time and history;
3. a greater attention to the specifics of cultural working, to the arenas of discourse and cultural practice;
4. a greater attention to the role of language and textuality in our construction of reality and identity (Lyle, 1997).

The ontology constructed by poststructuralism owes much to the Heraclitean fragment:

41, 42. You cannot step twice into the same rivers; for fresh waters are for ever flowing in upon you (Heraclitus cited in Warner, 1958: 26).

Here reality is seen as in perpetual flux. Attempts to fix it are vain, and liable to deconstruction. However, there is another fragment of Heraclitus, No. 81 which would appear to contradict 41 and 42. It says:

81. We step and do not step into the same rivers; we are and are not (Heraclitus, cited in Warner, 1958: 26).

I would interpret fragment 81 as an anticipation of Bhaskar's argument.

There must be sufficient stability of kinds and individuals, of structures and structurata, of mechanisms and their instances for intelligible praxis, sense – perception or identifiable (presupposing re-identifiable) entities to occur. The world must be such that it can be to a degree consistently described and acted upon (at least within our zone of being) (Bhaskar, 1993: 75).

This emphasis on relatively enduring structures is not of course to deny the reality of change. The point is not, as Bhaskar puts it, to replace the Heraclitean caricature of perpetual flux with the Parminedean caricature, where

One path only is left for us to speak of, namely, that *It is*. In this path are very many tokens that what is is uncreated and indestructible; for it is complete, immovable, and without end. Nor was it ever, nor will it be, for now *it is*, all at once, a continuous one (Parminides, cited in Warner, 12958: 31).

Of the remaining points in Lyle's list, it is the role of the local and the specific and of language that most impact on McConaghy's work. The emphasis on the local is to be welcomed. For instance the history of Cherbourg, its location and its social make-up have all been crucial in terms of the trajectory of the school, and no progress could have been made without the active involvement of the community. However, Cherbourg is not an island and it exists within a national and international totality. It is necessary then not to privilege the local at the expense of the totality within which the local has been inserted.

In terms of the importance of language within the poststructuralist paradigm, it is here that we get close to what Bhaskar has termed the 'linguistic fallacy' – 'the analysis of being as our discourse about being' (Bhaskar, 1993: 206). Here we should note that throughout her book McConaghy draws upon poststructuralist discourse analysis to 'identify narratives and discursive constructs in Indigenous education and to disrupt them' (McConaghy, 2000: 267). To be fair to McConaghy, she is aware that something more is needed and she does talk of turning to postcolonial theory to address the need for 'understanding ... particular sites of colonialism and its material and social consequences' (McConaghy, 2000: 266). However, for all her obeisance to the 'particular',

McConaghy's text tends to be very general and vague. I will return to this point when I consider McConaghy's concluding chapter.

In general terms, I will follow a middle course and attempt to avoid the Heraclitean ontology adopted by McConaghy. I will attempt to address the relatively enduring structures and underlying relations that make up the lived experience of Australian Aborigines. I will, for instance, prove that racism is one of the enduring structures impacting on the lives of Aboriginal Australians. Nevertheless I am sensitive to the changes that have taken place and also the changes brought about by the implementation of the kind of program outlined in the chapters that follow.

Alongside these basic assumptions, Lyle provides us with definitions of three of the key elements in poststructuralism's critical armory. Moreover, these are elements that McConaghy draws upon repeatedly.

Post-structuralism is marked by a rejection of totalizing, essentialist, foundationalist concepts.

- a **totalizing** concept puts all phenomena under one explanatory concept (e.g. it's the will of God)
- an **essentialist** concept suggests that there is a reality which exists independent of, beneath or beyond, language and ideology-that there is such a thing as 'the feminine', for instance, or 'truth' or 'beauty'
- a **foundationalist** concept suggests that signifying systems are stable and unproblematic representations of a world of fact which is isomorphic with human thought (Lyle, 1997).

The attack on totalizing or totality is a familiar one within poststructuralist thought, and McConaghy draws upon it repeatedly. The slippage here is from totalising to totalitarianism with the implication that if one works with a totality then one is somehow authoritarian. By contrast, to employ a notion of totality within Critical Realism is

... to see things existentially constituted, and permeated, by their relations with others; and to see our ordinary notion of identity as an abstraction not only from

their existentially constitutive processes of formation (geo-histories), but also from their existentially constitutive inter-activity (internal relatedness) (Bhaskar, 1993: 125).

However, the post-structuralists have got hold of half a truth in their critique of totality. As Bhaskar points out:

It is the drive for totality that begins discursive argumentation, inspires participatory democracy, the Habermasian ‘public sphere’, but it is also at the root of colonialism, neo-colonialism, capitalist accumulation, and empire-building generally (Bhaskar, 1993: 273).

So we can have good and bad totalities. The point is to move towards a good one where the individual enjoys the maximum amount of freedom and dignity possible; the limit being that one cannot exercise one’s dignity and freedom at the expense of someone else.

The notion of ‘essentialism’ is crucial to McConaghy’s endorsement of what she terms ‘post-Aboriginalism’. I will return to this later in the chapter. Here I will be content with acknowledging that Critical Realism is essentialist, in that it contains a theory of human nature, where the human is driven by a conatus to freedom (Bhaskar, 1993: 169). A conatus that springs from the truth that to

... exist is to be able to become, which is to possess the capacity for self-development, a capacity that can be only fully realized in a society founded on the principle of universal concretely singularized human autonomy in nature (Bhaskar, 1993: 385).

Critical Realism is also essentialist in terms of its view of reality. The natural world has pre-existed us and may well endure after us. In terms of social reality, it is marked by the following features:

1. Its *conceptuality*, the fact that it is *dependent* upon but not *exhausted* by agents’ conceptualisations of the activities in which they engage.

2. its *activity-dependence* (or axiologicality) that it does not exist independently of (although again it is not exhausted by) conscious human agency; and thus
3. it is also dependent on the stratified nature of human beings and the stratification of the ... social totality in which they act (and in which they are at least in part formed) (Bhaskar, 2000: 34-5).

It is this stratification of reality, of social beings and the social totality that provides us with a solution to a number of the problems that, I would argue, McConaghy fails to solve. For instance, she repeatedly attacks the notion of binarism as in Indigenous and non-Indigenous. For her, as a poststructuralist, binaries are artificial impositions on the flux of reality.

Contra McConaghy I would argue that binaries do exist. For example, one is either an Aborigine or not. However, if we adapt a stratified notion of human beings one can see that one can be an Aborigine and also other things. I will return to this question when I discuss the notion of identity.

In relation to the third notion, Critical Realism is not foundationalist in terms of the definition Lyle provides. Critical Realism, especially in its early formulations, makes a marked distinction between epistemology (knowledge) and ontology (being). Reality exists independent of our knowledge of it. We can, however, get to know it but we may never know how much of reality we do know. Knowledge is also relative in that it can always be surpassed. But we can at any stage make a rational judgement that a particular account of reality is more adequate than another account.

### **2.3 McConaghy's Politics of Knowing**

McConaghy's book is subtitled 'the Politics of Knowing'. A potential danger with this emphasis on epistemology is that it can preclude attention from the politics of ontology. She follows Nietzsche, Foucault and Said into the equation:

a) knowledge = power

where the act of achieving knowledge is the securing of power over the subject being investigated. Power and knowledge are related but knowledge cannot be reduced to power. However, for freedom or emancipation to be possible, we must have, as Bhaskar points out, 'informed desire'. It is the knowledge of the power relations that oppress them that will enable Australian Aborigines to be free (Bhaskar, 1993: 169). It is just this relationship between knowledge and freedom that I attempted to capture in the "Strong and Smart" philosophy.

Within poststructuralist thought truth, possibly because it must have an ontological base, is confined to the domain of scare quotes. Thus within the poststructuralist paradigm:

b) truth = 'truth'.

Here there is no such thing as the truth and the quotes are employed to show that 'truth' implies a perspective, and no mechanism exists for saying that one perspective is more valid than another, or even what it is or might be that two perspectives clash over. Such clashes are resolved not by appeals to the adequacy of representation of reality, but rather through the exercise of the 'will to power'. Moreover as truth has been equated with power, we have regimes of 'truth' where someone has succeeded in imposing their 'truth' or perspective.

There is a danger here that this reduces science to rhetoric. Moreover, this danger is not always clearly acknowledged. In the preface to her book we can detect some aspects of the dilemma that McConaghy's theoretical position has trapped her in. She describes an epiphanic moment when she was filming an interview as part of an investigation into 'how Yolngu students like to learn'. The inappropriateness of what she was doing was brought home to her in a failed attempt to film a student. The failure was due in part to the student's inability to parrot back what was supposed to be the learning styles of the Yolngu. As a result, McConaghy tells us:

During a moment in Galiwin'ku in 1986, the violence of both the ethnographic gaze and the truth claims of ethnography were evident to me ... In subsequent

years, as each new theoretical tradition emerged to challenge another, and as each successive wave (of mostly white male) theorists argued for the greater truth of their claims, I became increasingly wary of the patterns and repetitions which were being revealed. Each time I read of a new approach or new idea, I was reminded of the face at the end of the lens which said, 'this is not of my experience'.

The discussions which constitute this book have grown out of this realisation. I am aware that my views will not be any closer to the 'truth', nor necessarily closer to the experiences of the person at the end of the lens, than the traditions which I critique. However, unlike the traditions that I critique, the discussions in this book do emanate from my own lived experiences (McConaghy, 2000: xiv).

I am extremely sympathetic to the spirit of McConaghy's preface. I have known something of the violence of the ethnographic gaze. Moreover, her survey of the processes and consequences of what she terms Early Culturalism (pp. 70-78) is magnificent in its outrage and anger against injustice.

Nevertheless there are methodological questions that are important. She critiques a particular approach and offers one of her own. She brackets off the possibility of truth and so does not claim that her approach is more true. This is the necessary gesture for a poststructuralist. Then, however, she makes an appeal to her own personal 'lived experiences'. This sounds to me like the kind of truth claim you make when you are not making a truth claim.

Perhaps this wouldn't matter, if one were not underlabouring for emancipation. In other words one is not playing an intellectual game. Issues around Indigenous education are serious, often deadly so. Moreover, the case of Clarrie Diefenbach shows there is a lot at stake. Diefenbach pioneered the study of racist attitudes among teacher trainees in the 1970s. He also initiated programs to train Indigenous teachers. One examiner failed his PhD thesis. There is indeed a politics of knowing here (Diefenbach, 2004).

## 2.4 Culturalism and Its Various Manifestations

The major part of McConaghy's book (2000, 251) is an attempt to identify and disrupt the major discursive traditions of knowing Indigenous education in Australia. These are characterised in depth as 'culturalist traditions' of pastoral welfarism, which institutionalises Indigenous incapacity; assimilationism, which institutionalises phenomena that, following Homi Bhaba, McConaghy describes as colonial mimicry; cultural relativism, which is based on liberal notions of institutionalising colonial tolerance; and radicalism, which institutionalises the inversion of colonial relations. A chapter on each tradition concludes with an examination of that tradition's various attempts 'to secure epistemic authority within the field.' McConaghy claims that her investigation 'makes a contribution to an understanding of the production of disciplinary knowledges in Australian colonialism.' Certainly the value of her work lies, I believe, in challenging one to think through and defend one's own position. In what follows I pay particular attention to McConaghy's critique of the radical tradition.

## 2.5 Radicalism

McConaghy, in her grand clearing of the field, claims that '*radicalism*' ...[is] a tradition within Indigenous education which has its roots in early traditions of critique in education' (McConaghy, 2000: 218). For McConaghy, radicalism is both 'oppositional' and 'complicit with culturalist projects'. Its complicity is seemingly due to its acceptance of 'the "two race" binary of Indigenous and non-Indigenous in relation to education'. McConaghy stresses that radicalism attempts to 'invert' this binary. Presumably the criticism here is that it does not attempt to dissolve the binary. I will return to this point because it does contain the vital difference between the approach advocated in this thesis and in McConaghy's.

I will deal in turn with McConaghy's major criticism of radicalism. Firstly, under the heading *Pedagogy and Politics* (220-23) she says 'One of the major contributions of the radical tradition within Indigenous education has been the re-insertion of the political into issues of scientific research and pedagogy' (McConaghy, 2000: 220). The downside is that radicalism has led to a 'politicisation of Indigenous culture' (McConaghy,

2000:222). Clarity deserts McConaghy once more at this juncture, so I am forced to more or less guess what she means by ‘politicisation’. Examples given are the teaching of Indigenous religions and spirituality and cultural practices. To teach these is, it would seem, to give power to ‘the realm of the institutions and processes of the neo-colonial state’ (McConaghy, 2000: 223). The ghost of the de-schooling movement flits briefly onto the stage here. Is McConaghy advocating the de-schooling of Indigenous Australia? If she is, I have news for her. Indigenous Australia is thoroughly de-schooled. A cursory glance at attendance figures for Indigenous students would reveal that quite clearly.

The second of McConaghy’s objections to radicalism is entitled *Power and Disadvantage* (223-226). In many ways this is the most confused and confusing part of her critique because in methodological terms she is wedded to a Nietzschean-Foucauldian analysis of power. She begins by caricaturing the radical position of power as one that says it is ‘vested in some social groups and not others’ (McConaghy, 2000: 223). For McConaghy the radical position is to seize power from the dominant class. She does not canvass the possibility that the radical position could be the abolition of power. For a Foucauldian the abolition of power is impossible. Thus Foucault writes:

*The formula “They have the power” may have its value politically; it does not do for an historical analysis. Power is not possessed, it acts in the very body and over the whole surface of the social field according to a system of relays, modes of connection, transmission, distribution, etc. Power acts through the smallest elements: the family, sexual relations, but also: residential relations, neighbourhoods, etc. As far as we go in the social network, we always find power as something, which “runs through” it, that acts, that brings about effects. It becomes effective or not, that is power is always a definite form of momentary and constantly reproduced encounters among a definite individuals. Power is thus not possessed because it is “in play”. Power is won like a battle and lost in just the same way. At the heart of power is a war-like relation and not that of an appropriation (Foucault cited in Morris & Patton, 1979: 60).*

The confusion around the notion of power can be settled if one adapts a critical realist position. Here there is a distinction made between Power and Power. Power is ‘the transformative capacity analytic to the concept of agency’, while Power consists of ‘relations expressed in structures of domination, exploitation, subjugation and control’ (Bhaskar, 1993: 60). Power (agency) includes Power, but the relationship between them is not as the Foucauldian paradigm would suggest. Just as we can have a world without lies, but never a world without truth, so we can have a world without exploitation and domination, but never a world without agency. In other words Power can be abolished, but Power (agency) cannot. I will return to this question when discussing the human values program at Cherbourg State School, but I will point out here that a substantial part of the aim of the values program, which I initiated at Cherbourg, is to get the children to use their Power (agency) to abolish within the school and the community, Power, that is relations of exploitation and domination.

Following her attack on radicalism’s view of power, McConaghy launches in *Colonialism and Hegemony* (226-37) a lengthy critique of important radicalist notions such as hegemony and emancipation. Her critique of hegemony, as elsewhere in this chapter on radicalism, tends at times to the caricature. For instance, she charges that the focus on hegemony detracts radicals from understanding the complex changes and flows that characterise Indigenous education in these globalising and postcolonial times (McConaghy, 2000: 228). Moreover she seems to doubt the very existence of a hegemonic class, group or bloc as

... one of the most significant characteristics of these new postcolonial times is that the processes and technologies of social legitimation are now being called into question on numerous fronts and in numerous ways (McConaghy, 2000: 229).

We will leave to one side how new these times seem to Indigenous Australians, to point out that McConaghy does not seem to understand how hegemony operates. Nowhere is this more apparent than with her fleeting and underdeveloped reference to ‘popular and working class racisms and black racisms, phenomena for which hegemony has limited

analytical use/value' (McConaghy, 2000: 230). Contra McConaghy, divisions and tensions among those outside the hegemonic bloc are part of the process of establishing and maintaining hegemony.

The key aspects of McConaghy's critique that I wish to take on board are use of the terms 'victim', and 'emancipation'. Victim is alleged to be a construct of the white radical intellectual (McConaghy, 2000: 235). Radicalism is supposed to regard victims as 'powerless' (McConaghy, 2000: 233). McConaghy comes close here to denying that there are any Indigenous victims. The Royal Commission into Black Deaths in custody, surely established that there are indeed black victims within Australia (Johnstone 1991). But this is not to say that they are powerless or devoid of the potentiality for agency to transform the social structures that oppress them.

If her use of the term 'victim' is problematic, then McConaghy's notes on 'emancipation' are doubly so. She quotes Ernest Laclau, to the effect that 'there is no emancipation without a corresponding oppression. Further he observes that otherness is the founding act of emancipation' (cited in McConaghy, 2000: 236). I am unsure what to make of these remarks. Of course the whole process of emancipation is a struggle against oppression. Is McConaghy suggesting that Aboriginal Australians have not been oppressed? Is this too simple a statement for these 'postcolonial times'?

I will return to the concept of the Other and advance an alternative reading to that offered by McConaghy. Here she seems to be arguing that if one engages in emancipatory acts one first must Other oneself, and presumably she thinks that is a bad thing. However, if one differentiates the concept of the Other then, as we will see, a different picture emerges. In any case as my research shows the Aboriginal Australia is already Othered by white Australia and that as the Feared and Despised Other.

McConaghy's next section deals with *Resistance and Indigenous Agency* (237-42). Here she alleges that colonialism and radicalism are 'two sides of the same coin' because radicalism is the negation of the affirmation of colonialism (McConaghy, 2000: 237). In methodological terms we seem to be dealing with some version of the dialectic, but it is

not exactly clear which dialectic we have here. Bhaskar has advanced the notion of the 'dialectical counterpart' where two entities appear to be in opposition but instead share a common ground and so are mutually supporting (Bhaskar, 1993:). This appears to be what McConaghy is suggesting about radicalism and colonialism. But these two elements do not share a common ground. Colonialism it is true calls into existence opposition, that is forces which try to negate it. However, this does not automatically imply complicity with the structures of colonialism as McConaghy avows. McConaghy is possibly being misled here by her phobia of binarism. She seems to equate any pair, even that of oppressor and oppressed, as something to be avoided. Thus she quotes with approval Homi Babha:

*Can the aim of freedom of knowledge be the simple inversion of the relation of oppressor and oppressed, centre and periphery, negative image and positive image? Is our only way out of such dualism the espousal of an implacable oppositionality or the invention of an originary counter-myth myth of radical purity? Must the project of our liberationist aesthetics be forever part of a totalising Utopian vision of Being and History that seeks to transcend the contradictions and ambivalences, that constitute the very structure of human objectivity and its systems of cultural representation (Babha cited in McConaghy, 2000: 238)?*

To begin with, the struggles around Indigenous knowledge can not be simply compared to a struggle around 'freedom of knowledge'. Moreover, whenever and wherever we meet oppression I would argue strongly that, yes, we should be implacable in our opposition. I would also emphasize that this is not simply a struggle over aesthetics, liberationist or not. The cognitive and the ethical will also be involved. As for contradictions and ambivalences, we should seek to exploit those contradictions which can be turned to help Aboriginal children. Where we meet ambivalences we must seek to turn these to total commitment to justice for those same children.

Again I would point out that here, through Babha, McConaghy has secreted an ontology. Once more it is that of the Heraclitean flux. To act as if there are enduring structures and

mechanisms of oppression is (it would seem) to deny the very structure of ontological flux, and so to incur the wrath of the post-structuralists for indulging in a ‘weak form of oppositional practice’ (McConaghy, 2000: 238).

This secretion of an ontology, that is never explicitly canvassed in her work is, as I have had occasion to note, accompanied by an unacknowledged Nietzscheanism. Here, following her citation of Babha, she allows the ears of the Nietzschean donkey to appear briefly when she says:

*The metaphors of oppressor and oppressed, centre and periphery must now relate to shifting rather than fixed constructs: the oppressor and oppressed can no longer be pre-determined in history.*

On reading that ‘oppressor’ and ‘oppressed’ are ‘metaphors’ I am reminded of Nietzsche’s description of truth as ‘a mobile army of metaphors’ (Nietzsche cited in Kaufman, 1968: 46). Need it be said that the truth of the oppression of Aboriginal Australians is far from being metaphorical? Once again McConaghy, in her anxiety to adhere to a Heraclitean ontology, comes very close to denying the lived experience of the very people, Aboriginal Australians, whose cause she has espoused.

The next section of her critique of radicalism is entitled *Radicalism and the Essential Black Subject* (242-48). Here once again is the attack on the notion of essentialism. I will return to this topic when I come to discuss the concept of ‘post-Aboriginalism’ in McConaghy’s concluding chapter. Here I will focus briefly on her use of Paul Gilroy’s attack on ‘survivalist discourse’. She writes:

*Radical Survivalist discourse, in Paul Gilroy’s ... estimation barely disguises “the crudity with which racial identity is conceived, nor even the sad inability to see beyond the conservation of racial identities to (the) possibility of their transcendence” (McConaghy, 2000: 243).*

Words almost fail me here. We Aboriginal Australians have been subjected to the processes of genocide. Rightly we are proud that we have survived. Nor is there anything crude about how we conceive our identity. Contra McConaghy and her fellow poststructuralists, we know that Aboriginal identity is a creative dynamic living project, but it is one which we are determined to control. It is not that we reject “transcendence”: it is that we are determined to seize control of our own destinies. Moreover Gilroy and McConaghy cannot seem to understand that it is our very ability to survive the genocidal onslaught that means we will be able to emancipate ourselves.

In *Securing Authority within Radicalism* (248-49) McConaghy acknowledges that radicalism has correctly perceived ‘Indigenous education as a site of conflict and struggle’ (McConaghy, 2000:249). Again, however, she believes that it is not a struggle between colonised and coloniser. Once more the Heraclitean ontology is secreted, causing McConaghy to argue that the ‘two race binary’ means that radicalism fails to identify and so take advantage of the complex or ‘varied encounter’. Who between she does not say, perhaps because that might reinstate a binary.

Her final section *Conclusion: Radicalism and Indigenous Education Disciplinary Production* (249-250) reinstates her objections to radicalism and adds a complaint that radicalism silences and distances ‘many people who would otherwise be valuable members of coalitions working to disrupt contemporary oppressions and racisms on their many fronts’. This point like so much in McConaghy’s work is thrown in and not developed or explicated. Presumably she means that insistence of the process of self-emancipation means that Aborigines demand and take precedence in speaking about their fate.

McConaghy’s methodology is essentially deconstructive; that is, it seeks to identify the language categories that underpin a project or a program. Implicit here is an ontology which has it that language constructs the world. Bhaskar has called this the linguistic fallacy (Bhaskar, 1993: 112). In general terms this methodology can be grasped through the metaphor of tree-felling. The deconstructor identifies a target, isolates and identifies

the roots of the target, and that is sufficient to bring the tree down. The deconstructor then moves onto another target and so eventually the whole forest is cleared.

Before considering this question in some detail, I would like to point out another weakness of the deconstruction methodology. This is directly related to its underlying ontology – and the linguistic fallacy that reality is created through discourse. Quite simply the deconstructor herself can be deconstructed. The biter can be bitten. Her discourse can be challenged as yet another attempt to construct a reality, with no more validity than any other discourse. For McConaghy has, like a good deconstructor, ruled out the only potential defence. She cannot argue that her discourse is truer than any other discourse, because she has already quoted with approval Harris and Christie to the effect that ‘various discourses don’t stand in different relations to truth, but in different relations to power’ (McConaghy, 2000: 251). Moreover she has compounded the problem by drawing upon Edward Said to denounce what she terms as culturalism as being an aspect of the *will to power* (McConaghy, 2000: 252; emphasis added). There is unfortunately no acknowledgement of the Nietzschean roots of this concept, nor of the consequences of the reduction of truth to power.

The antinomies of poststructuralism are further illustrated by McConaghy’s repeated challenges to the attempts to ‘secure authority’ by other traditions. For instance, she cites as a crucial weakness of radicalism, its inadequate theorizing. Later she extols the virtues of deconstruction. Both these moves can and should be read as her attempt to secure authority. But why is her attempt more valid than an other? How is one to judge between competing accounts?

Such dilemmas cannot be resolved within a paradigm so indebted to the linguistic fallacy as poststructuralism is. At times the aporias assume almost comic dimensions. Thus in her discussion of ‘colonial desires’, she pauses to ask

Are there such things as ‘colonial desires’ and do they constitute aspects of the characteristic features of an ‘imperial culture’ (McConaghy, 200: 58)?

Here the dilemma is the ontological status of the categories McConaghy wishes to employ. She cannot say the categories are real, because she is committed to irrealism, that is, in her terms, to anti-essentialism. Nor, because she is also committed to absolute contingency, within ontological flux, can she say there is such a thing as an imperial or colonial culture, which typically has these features, and then go on to attempt to account for the same features. She must instead maintain that she is merely using the category of 'colonial desire' to discuss 'specific historical moments' (McConaghy, 2000:58). At best then she can describe but not achieve explanatory power. Again we are dealing with the unacknowledged influence of Nietzsche. This can be seen clearly if we look at the latter's discussion of the concept of cause and effect. I will quote at length because Nietzsche at least has the virtue of clarity and consequently one can come to grips with what he is saying.

*Cause and effect* – We call it 'explanation' but it is 'description' which distinguishes us from earlier stages of knowledge and science. We describe better – we explain just as little as any who came before us. We have revealed a plural succession where the naïve man in investigator of earlier cultures saw only two things, 'cause' and 'effect' as they were called; we have perfected an image of how things become, but we have not got past an image or behind it...We operate with nothing but things which do not exist, with lines, planes, bodies, atoms, divisible time, divisible space – how should explanation even be possible when we first make everything into an *image*, into our own image! ...Cause and effect, such a duality probably never occurs –in reality there stands before us a continuum of which we isolate a couple of pieces ... An intellect which saw cause and effect as a continuum ... which saw the flux of events – would reject the concept cause and effect and deny all conditionality (Nietzsche, cited in Hollingdale, 1986: 61-2).

For Nietzsche, then, explanation is impossible because reality is a flux. There is no concept of ontological depth, so one cannot isolate a phenomenon and look at the underlying causes and in turn examine the causes of these causes. Yet this is precisely how science proceeds. For instance, it has been discovered that 'injecting heart attack

patients with stem cells taken from their bone marrow really does aid their recovery' (New Scientist, July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2004: 14). It is not clear how this process works and this is now the site of a new round of investigation.

Debilitating as the Nietzschean inspired rejection of explanation is, arguably the crucial weakness of the deconstructive methodology becomes apparent at the end of the clearing process. The forest has been laid waste and what then? It is no coincidence that the weakest chapter in McConaghy's book comes at the end when she attempts to consider, 'What is to be done?' There is the almost apologetic 'Rather than a comprehensive treatment of the subject area ... '(McConaghy, 2000:209). This is followed by the rhetorical device of posing a series of six questions of the brave new world, which the deconstructor has called into being by felling the discourses of 'race', 'difference', 'enlightenment' and 'progress' (McConaghy, 2000: 270).

The most interesting of these questions from the point of view of my thesis is the following:

What will emerge out of the productive potential of the nexus of identity politics and ideology politics, particularly in relation to consideration of the contributions of black and white women and men in the field (McConaghy, 2000: 270)?

## **2.6 Strategic Identity**

In her approach to identity McConaghy is compelled by her theory to argue that identity is unreal or unreal in Critical Realist terms. This has a disastrous impact on her discussion of the relationship between "Aboriginalism" and identity. Aboriginalism is a concept developed by Bob Hodge to parallel that of Edward Said's 'Orientalism'. Aboriginalism would at first seem to refer to 'anthropologists' representations of Aboriginality' (McConaghy, 2000: 26). The confusion comes when McConaghy grapples with the problem of whether 'Aboriginality' is simply a 'construction of the West' or whether it might be at some level real. There are after all 'Indigenous bodies' (McConaghy, 200: 27). In typically poststructuralist fashion she attempts to solve the dilemma by

introducing the notion of post-Aboriginalism. The latter notion would appear to consist of the critique of the ‘images or representations of identity’ that make up Aboriginalism (McConaghy, 2000: 26).

McConaghy then has a spasm of doubt when she turns to Tim Rowse’s work to ask if it possible to ‘speak from outside Aboriginalism’ (McConaghy, 2000: 28)? Rowse argues that we cannot because we use language and language essentialises. The limits of poststructuralism are painfully obvious here, but McConaghy gallantly turns her back on reality to say.

The issue is whether we believe this essentialism to be indicative of an epistemological reality or a constituted and strategic one (McConaghy, 2000: 28).

Her argument here is in effect that identities are constituted (i.e. unreal) but that it is necessary to forget that in the political arena. Thus she argues:

*So often, reified social categories, essentialisms, tribalism and nativism articulate to contain and limit Indigenous subjectivities. This is the project described previously as Aboriginalism. Where essentialised identity categories may remain useful in legislative and political arenas, the most urgent of these being in relation to the assertion of Indigenous land rights and sovereignty. The need to retain reified categories of ‘Indigeneity’ relates to the task of providing evidence of continuous Indigenous associations with land, of origins. Until land rights for Indigenous people in Australia are fully resolved, the use of fixed categories of Aboriginality and Indigeneity will remain an urgent task. (McConaghy, 2000: 38)*

Once again in McConaghy’s work the unacknowledged influence of Frederic Nietzsche can be detected. Her advocacy of the ‘strategic’ use of Aboriginal identity is directly analogous with the Nietzschean **forgetting** strategy. Nietzsche says there is no such thing as the truth but strategically at times we need to forget that.

And, moreover, what about these conventions of language? Are they really the products of knowledge, of the sense of truth? Do the designations and the things coincide? Is language the adequate expression of all realities?

Only through forgetfulness can man ever achieve the illusion of possessing a “truth” in the sense just designated.” (Nietzsche cited in Kaufmann, W. (Ed) 1978: 45)

The argument against Nietzschean forgetting and by implication against McConaghy’s ‘strategic identity’ approach has been well put by Bhaskar:

The paradigm of the tradition of writing *sous rature* –under erasure – is that of the Nietzschean theses of the necessity and impossibility of knowledge, requiring an active forgetting of the illusory character of truth. *But what is necessary is not what is untenable*. It is not science, experience, signification, etc. which are untenable but metaphysical conceptions of them, on which the Nietzschean tradition imposes a quite appropriate dialectical comment (Bhaskar, 1993: 148).

For McConaghy a key objection to Aboriginal identity is that it limits that identity. She says:

My argument against the use of essentialised categories of Aboriginality relates to the unproblematic construction of these essences in texts ‘about Aborigines’. Aboriginality is not a static phenomenon, but is something which Indigenous Australians negotiate in their everyday lives, a process of ‘presencing’, connecting and on-going positioning (McConaghy, 2000: 242-3).

Again the influence of the Heraclitean ontology of flux is evident in the above and also when she speaks of the ‘performative and fluid nature of social identities ... [being] particularly evident in the complex conditions of emerging neo-colonialisms’ (McConaghy, 2000: 243). The argument, however, is a false one. That Aboriginal

identities change is a condition of their very possibility, but as always with poststructuralist thought this condition of possibility becomes a condition of their impossibility.

My final word on McConaghy advocacy of the strategic use of identity for political purposes is that it is exactly what the racists of this land accuse us of doing. They say in effect that we become Aborigines when there is land to be claimed. I cannot think of a more disastrous approach than that proposed by McConaghy. Moreover, with her embrace of the notion of Post Aboriginalism, in my opinion, she comes close to the elimination of the Aborigine in theory, something the Chief Protectors essayed in practice.

## **2.7 Analysis of Marcia Langton: the Need for an Explicit Ontology**

Marcia Langton's essay on the politics of representation provides us with an interesting counterpoint to McConaghey's poststructuralist vision with its dependence on the linguistic fallacy (Langton, 1993). What distinguishes Langton's approach from McConaghey's is that Langton's concerns are based on a strong if implicit grasp of ontology. As we will see she deals with the reality of the lived experience of Aboriginal Australians.

McConaghey, however, makes a concerted effort to recruit Langton to the post-structuralist critique of 'Aboriginalism'. Thus she quotes Langton to the effect that

...the category 'Aborigine' is an artefact of the colonial process. Before colonialism there were no 'Aborigines': there were only Yolngu, Warlpiri, Wakka Wakka, Mer and so on, or whatever these groups called themselves (McConaghey, 27).

The point is made rather more clearly by Langton herself:

Moreover, the creation of 'Aboriginality' is not a fixed *thing*. It is created from our histories. It arises from the intersubjectivity of black and white in a dialogue...Before Cook and Philip, there was no 'Aboriginality' in the sense that is meant today...the term 'Aboriginal', and the colonial and post-colonial implications of the concept, began to take shape in Australia to some extent in 1770, but more so in 1788.

Before contact, there were Yongu, Pitjantjatjara, Warlpiri, Wakka Wakka, Guuugu Yimidhirr, or what ever the Gadigal or Eora actually called themselves and so on (Langton, 1993: 32).

The argument being advanced here is hardly a controversial one. The term 'Aborigine' has a history, in much the same way as 'German', 'French', 'American' etc. do. For Langton, 'Aborigine' arises from the 'intersubjectivity' of black and white. I would prefer to say that the term Aborigine is a product of the underlying relationship of black and white. Moreover, the choice of the term 'dialogue' is unfortunate. It suggests reciprocity where in reality the relationship between black and white has been characterised by the exercise of power relations of domination and subjugation.

Nevertheless, the basic point that the term 'Aborigine' is historical and therefore is potentially subject to change is correct. Indeed my whole thesis can be understood as an attempt to recognize the reality of the meaning of the term 'Aborigine' and the forces that shape its meaning and to advocate that Aboriginal people endeavour to give a positive direction to the evolution of the meaning of what it is to be an Aborigine.

As such my concerns dovetail neatly with Langton's own reading of the central problem, which for her

...is not one of racial discrimination, although I do not deny that it might be a factor in specific or general encounters. Rather the central problem is the need to develop a body of knowledge on representation of Aboriginal people and their concerns in art, film, television and other media and a critical perspective to do

with aesthetics and politics, drawing from Aboriginal world views, from Western traditions and from history (Langton, 1993: 27-8).

Langton's contribution to the development of this critical perspective can be seen in her reading of Charles Chauvel's film *Jedda* (1955). For Langton, Chauvel's film is false in that it 'inverts truth on the black/white frontier, as if none of the brutality, murder and land clearances occurred' (Langton, 1993: 46). I would like to emphasise here that there is nothing perspectivalist at all in Langton's position. Nor is she simply deploying a 'mobile army of metaphors'. She is rather speaking truth to power. It is exactly this that I have tried to do throughout this thesis.

This tacit recognition of the need for ontology is echoed in Langton's discussion of Dennis O'Rourke's *Good Woman of Bangkok* (1991) where she discusses the impact of this tale of a prostitute and her filmmaker sex tourist lover on male audiences.

For Langton the film is difficult for men because

To be forced to identify with those lecherous yobbos and declare some similarity with them is to be forced to recognize and state – in public - some of the really ugly things about being an Australian male (Langton, 1993: 57).

Here we note that this is in poststructuralist terms an 'essentialist' response based on the claim that there really is an Australian male identity independent of our representations of it.

In a similar but more positive way Langton, in her discussion of Phil Noyce's film *Backroads* (1977), starring Essie Coffey, notes approvingly the glimpses we get of the reality of the life of Aborigines.

The subversive theme allows the Aboriginal people of the Brewarrina reserve, notably Coffey, to convey a sense of the real them: grog, cynicism, resistance and all (Langton, 1993: 42).

Just as there is a reality to the white Australian male identity there is a reality to that of the Australian aborigine.

Nor is Langton's position to be distinguished from McConaghey's solely on the basis of her implicit use of ontology. Though critical of western epistemology, she does not seem to subscribe to the extreme epistephoria that mars McConaghey's work. Thus for Langton

The central problem is the failure of non-Aboriginals to comprehend us Aboriginal people, or to find the grounds for *an* understanding. Each policy – protection, assimilation, integration, self-management, self-determination and, perhaps, reconciliation – can be seen as ways of avoiding understanding (Langton, 1993: 39, original emphasis).

I endorse this call for the need for understanding, but I would emphasise that such an understanding can only be based on greater knowledge. So the problem is not that White Australians seek to know Aborigines which, as we have seen in the previous chapter, McConaghy comes very close to suggesting. The problem is twofold: the purposes to which such knowledge is put; and the accuracy of that knowledge, where accuracy is judged by the reality of the Aboriginal ontology or lived experience.

I have argued here that Langton uses an implicit ontology when she comes to discuss the plight of Australian Aborigines and I have given examples above. However, I would stress that there are problems because she does not theorise ontology explicitly. This can be seen most clearly when she comes close to discussing the ontological status of the representations of Aborigines:

Representational and aesthetic statements of Aboriginal people by non-Aboriginal people transform the Aboriginal reality. They are *accounts*. It is in these representations that Aboriginal as subject becomes, under the white gaze imagining the Aboriginal, the object. The audience, however, might be entirely

unaware that they are observing an *account* usually by the authorial We of the Other. The creative efforts of filmmakers, video producers, broadcasters and artists to represent some particular Aboriginal 'reality', even if there is an attempt at involving the Aboriginal subject in the production is always a fictionalisation, an act of creative authority (Langton, 1993: 40, original emphasis).

What is missing to give this account clarity and consistency is an explicitly theorised ontology, of the kind I attempted to provide in the previous chapter. Langton has two entities in her model - account and in (implicit form) reality. She also perceives that 'accounts' whether true or not do have an impact and are thus real. What is missing is the notion of a gap between an account and the reality it attempts to describe. Here what would be of use is the notion of epistemological relativism, which stresses that all knowledge or accounts can potentially be surpassed but at any one time we can come to a rational judgement as to which account we should prefer.

I believe that the term 'epistemological relativism' is preferable to that of 'fictionalisation' because the latter term suggest that accounts are mere fictions and not accounts *of something*. 'Fictionalisation' also betrays to my mind a confusion about the nature of truth. All truth has to be produced. We develop an account and make truth claims. But our claims can be fictions or they can be true. In either case they have to be produced. They involve work. However, to repeat this point, as it is much misunderstood: because truth is produced does not mean that it has the same truth status as a piece of fiction. In the following chapters my research will reveal that white Australians have in many cases developed accounts of Aboriginal Australians as the Feared/Despised Other. These accounts are real in that they have an impact on our society, but they are essentially false in that they deny the reality of Aboriginal people. It is just such an understanding that is implied by Langton's work, but which perhaps needs to be emphasised in an explicit manner.

## 2.8 Analysis of Martin Nakata

Martin Nakata, the first Torres Strait Islander to be awarded a PhD, is currently Professor and Director of Indigenous academic programs at Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning, University of Technology, Sydney. His whole career springs from a deep commitment to the welfare of Indigenous people, especially those of his native Torres Strait. In theoretical terms his would appear to be a position close to that of the poststructuralist paradigm. Thus he supplied the Foreword to McConaghy's book. I will discuss that text later but I would first like to suggest that Nakata's position is at times closer to Langton's than McConaghy's in that he operates with an implicit ontology.

Let me begin first with an area of agreement between Nakata and myself. In his call for the improved teaching of English to Torres Strait Islanders he is concerned to attack what he describes as the 'cultural preservation' model. According to Nakata this model maintains that to call for more English teaching is to be assimilationist. Similarly it advocates literacy in Indigenous languages. For Nakata

... the most damaging aspect of the principle of culture preservation and promotion ... is that it has not only become a panacea for all our ills but has also become so regulatory that it precludes Islanders such as myself and Indigenous people all over this country from pursuing the issues that we want to pursue (Nkata, 1999a, 14).

Nakata argues that the emphasis on Indigenous cultures ignores the imperative for Indigenous people to be able to use English to negotiate their position within what he terms the 'cultural interface'; that is, the contact zone between the cultures. Moreover

... continuity of culture (Knowledge and practice) and identity rests on being able to make and keep coherent pathways through the passage of time, through disruptive chaos of events like colonial contact and periods of rapid change so that the historical knowledge that has contributed to current Knowledge systems can carry though. The denial of this to Indigenous peoples, or the reduction of it

to cultural tradition, ensure the ongoing project of 'rescuing' Indigenous peoples from the catastrophe of colonial contact (Nakata, 2002: 236).

Nakata is grappling here with an influential current of thought about Indigenous cultures. Internationally it has been given expression by thinkers such as Jerry Mander who has argued that Indigenous people should abandon modern technology. For Mander the central evil is television:

What I say is that we should have *no* television at all. The same could be said of computers. I argue that life would be better, power systems would be more egalitarian, we would have a more even playing field in terms of information flow, and our media would be more democratic, if there were no television (Mander cited in Ingram, 1991).

I disagree strongly with Mander's position here and indeed have striven very hard to ensure that the pupils of Cherbourg State School get full access to new technology. My basic attitude to technology and Mander has been well expressed by Lou Proyect:

To the contrary, it is "dangerous nonsense" for Indigenous peoples to avoid using computers in this manner. Anybody who has been following the Zapatista struggle for the past few years understands how crucial the Internet has been. Not only has it served to educate people all around the world about what these Mayan peoples are fighting for, it has also provided an emergency response mechanism when the Mexican government has attempted to repress the movement. Immediately after the massacre in Chiapas last month that took the lives of 44 people, the Internet became a beehive of activity as word circulated. Demonstrations, picket-lines and other forms of protest forced the Mexican government to open up an investigation and public awareness will surely make it more difficult to repress the movement in the future (Proyect, 2003).

A further point of agreement between Nakata and myself comes in his valuable discussion of the role of the Indigenous researcher. Nakata outlines what he terms the separatist position:

One Indigenous response is **intellectual separatism**: the full and separate development of Indigenous knowledge and control over its production. Whilst I understand this push and the reasoning behind it, and understand it has a justified role to play, I think that there is also another role for an Indigenous scholarship (Nakata, 1999b).

As I have said, I share Nakata's characterisation and albeit reluctant rejection of the separatist 'push'. However, as we will see, I think it is fair to regard Tuhiwai Smith as being at least very close to the separatist position (Smith, 1999: 184). I also agree with Nakata's call for an engagement with non-Indigenous research. Such an engagement is vital because as Nakata points out this research has

contribute[d] to the shape and form of both popular understanding and intellectual understanding of what it has meant historically and what it still means to be a Torres Strait Islander [and an Aboriginal Australian] (Nakata, 1999b).

Indeed my research has been aimed specifically at the unearthing of popular 'understanding' of Indigenous Australians.

How is this engagement with non-Indigenous research to take place? Here Nakata says:

Within the academy, one of the key aspects of an Indigenous scholarship needs to be the extension of dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics. Dialogue can and should be opened up *beyond the contestation of content, and of truth*, which invariably forces academics either to take up an anti position or meekly succumb to the accepted position. Dialogue has to occur also at the level of *theory and methodology*, which helps us all to question our practice. It may then become, on the one hand, less oppositional and, on the other hand, less

acquiescent and so more constructive in shaping practice in process (1999b, emphasis added).

I agree with the need for dialogue. I also share a wish for that dialogue to avoid being trapped between oppositionalism and acquiescence. However, I disagree strongly with Nakata when he calls for that dialogue to go beyond the 'contestation of content, and of truth'. To begin with there is no evidence that I can see to justify his belief that academic disputes about theory would be less polarised than those about content. Moreover and more importantly, the history of all oppressed peoples is that truth matters. One has only to think here of the Holocaust denials or the recent debates over the fate of Tasmanian Aborigines to realise that it is dangerous to concede the terrain of truth to one's enemies, and I make no apology for using that word.

Moreover, in Nakata's desire to shift the debate from truth and content to theory, I detect, if I may say so, the baleful influence of poststructuralist theory with its rejection of the notion of truth. But Nakata's position here is contradictory. Thus, in his discussion of the Haddon Reports, he is at pains to expose the standpoint from which they were written following the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Strait in 1898 (Nakata, 1999b). Nakata calls for an Indigenous standpoint 'from which Indigenous scholars can read and understand the Western systems of knowledge'. So we have as it were two standpoints – the Haddon versus the Indigenous standpoint. But what are these standpoints clashing over? Here Nakata, speaking from the Indigenous standpoint, is rightly very critical of the Haddon team's methodology:

The inferences drawn from the data belong not so much to the data but are possible because they are in the vicinity of the science. The inferences and conclusions in Haddon's psychological and physical testing are in a much closer relation to the prescribed categories of 'normal' European and 'half-civilised' Islander than to the actual data. In this way, we see Islanders posited in a secondary relation to the European because the data can be consistently interpreted to explain why the results are significant enough to explain the characteristics of the 'savage', 'savage' already the secondary of 'civilised' (Nakata, 1999b).

Elsewhere Nakata has characterised the Haddon standpoint as belonging to ‘...the historical archive of outdated thinking about “primitive savages”, records and collections of materials, and so on.’ (Nakata, 2002). One would think then that it would be logical to conclude from this that the Haddon standpoint did not provide the truth about the lived experience of the Torres Strait people. An Indigenous standpoint equipped with the sure knowledge that Indigenous people are not ‘savages’ and also with an understanding of the flawed methodology of Western approaches would then be in a strong position to refute and reject the content of Western approaches, and it is just this that I have sought to do throughout my thesis.

But Nakata hesitates to take this step. Thus, in his Foreword to McConaghy (2000), he begins by making the obligatory obeisance to the poststructuralist rejection of the ‘ideology of the black-white binary that underpins all culturalist practices’ (Nakata, 2000: vii). This leads to a generous endorsement of McConaghy’s work.

Her methodological approach and her use of various theoretical positions to unravel the links between the politics of knowledge production and the legacy of colonialism in Australia brings coherence and clarity to a complex, contested, broad and unwieldy topic. Far from presenting another simplistic analysis that reifies the binary of ‘us’ and ‘them’ oppositions, she has drawn on an array of theoretical explanations to address the many contested and competing ways of ‘knowing’ Indigenous education. These ways of knowing *are not dismissed or overwritten but are held up for interrogation* (Nakata, 2000: vii-viii, emphasis added).

Is it necessary to point out that there is a binary inherent in Nakata’s own work based as it is around the Indigenous standpoint versus the Western standpoint; or that a binary emerges when when he passionately and angrily defends his own status as a Torres Strait Islander in the face of the taunts of non-Torres Strait Islanders in the following?

And if anyone in the field of Indigenous education ever asks me again what I know of the Torres Straits because I no longer reside there, I’m going to forget

every ounce of Western reason and logic that I've ever learnt, then I'm going to harness all the cultural capital I can and punch them out, because without the English language, that is the only resource to power and control that I, and my fellow Torres Strait Islanders, have (Nakata, 1999 :19).

But Nakata will not follow though the logic of his own position as an Indigenous researcher and educator. Once again theory proves to be a bad master. Thus in the Foreword to McConaghy's book he calls for the 'interrogation' of the 'ways of knowing Indigenous education'. Nakata makes it clear that he does not want these ways of knowing to be dismissed or overwritten. But what is the point of interrogation? By what criteria are these competing ways to be judged? What indeed are they competing over? For all his valuable insights and advocacy for Indigenous peoples, Nakata is trapped here within the theoretical bubble or time warp and he wants us to join him. Thanks but no thanks. Having proscribed truth and content, what is the point of disagreeing with any way of knowing? Once again the Nietzschean denigration of the concept of truth can be detected here.

## **2.8 Analysis of Tuhiwai Smith**

Tuhiwai's Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* is a remarkable book in the forthrightness and indeed fierceness of its polemics. Thus she begins a book on research with the following salvo:

The word 'research' itself is probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world's vocabulary (Smith, 1999:1).

A little later, researchers are defined as 'the human carriers of research' (Smith, 1999: 3). The metaphor will not have been lost on many of Smith's readers. Her attack on and hatred of research is due to the fact that it has played an integral role in the processes of imperialist conquest and colonization of Indigenous peoples throughout the world. Smith's backs up her polemics here with a good deal of detail. With regard to Australia I do not feel that her case can be refuted, whatever the state of the current history wars. I share also much of Smith's anger. Her account of how the Maori have had to deal with

the Waitangi tribunal to get 'justice' from their conquerors is a justly indignant one (Smith, 1999: 46-7). We Aboriginal Australians are having similar experiences in the Post-Mabo world when we have pressed our claims for Land Rights. The Mabo judgement in the Australian High Court on 3 June 1992 recognized native title, but the years since have shown that Indigenous property rights are very different from and inferior to white property rights.

Where I do have disagreements with Smith is in aspects of her use of the work of the neo-Nietzschean, Michel Foucault. This leads her to privilege epistemology over ontology, although throughout her work ontology keeps breaking out. Thus she writes:

*The question of whose knowledge was being extended by research was of little consequence, as early ethnographers, educational researchers and occasional 'travellers' described, explained and recorded their accounts of various aspects of Maori society. Distortions of Maori social reality by ethno-centric researchers overly given to generalisations were initially apparent only to Maori people. While this type of research was validated by 'scientific method' and 'colonial affirmation', it did little to extend the knowledge of Maori people. Instead it left a foundation of ideologically laden data about Maori society, which has distorted notions of what it means to be Maori (Smith, 1999: 170).*

Here implicitly Smith's attacks research for giving an inaccurate account of Maori ontology. These inaccurate accounts do have real effects on Maori people, but their adequacy as accounts on Maori reality have been called into question by Maori. Much the same picture has been revealed by my own research. White perceptions of Aborigines are grossly inaccurate but that inaccuracy does not mean that they have not had a very bad effect on Aboriginal people.

Smith's use of the term 'distortion' suggests that she has a model of the truth in that it leaves open the possibility of a non-distorted i.e. true account. Nevertheless, she still employs the Foucauldian concept 'regimes of truth' (Smith, 1999: 58). Within this schema truth is equated with power (Foucault cited in Morris & Patton, 1979: 29-48).

Similarly in her discussion of the role of history, there is a tendency to confuse truth and power:

*History is also about power. In fact history is mostly about power. It is the story of the powerful and how they became powerful, and then how they use their power to keep them in positions in which they can continue to dominate others. It is because of this relationship with power that we have been excluded, marginalized and 'Othered'. In this sense history is not important for Indigenous peoples because a thousand accounts of the 'truth' will not alter the 'fact' that Indigenous peoples are still marginal and do not possess the power to translate history into justice (Smith, 1999: 34).*

The use of quotes around 'truth' and 'fact' betray yet again poststructuralist inspired uneasiness about ontology. Moreover, it is accepting defeat in advance to concede history to one's opponents. Curiously, Smith is willing to contest the field of theory but she seems to advocate despair when it comes to disputing the truth about the interaction between the colonizers and the colonized. Yet she is aware of the importance of history, for she says:

*The problem is that constant efforts by governments, states, societies and institutions to deny the historical formations of such conditions have simultaneously denied our claims to humanity, to having a history, and to all sense of hope (Smith, 1999: 4).*

If Smith prevaricates about fighting over history, she is, as I have pointed out, much less defeatist when it comes to theory. Though heavily influenced by poststructuralism, she does endeavour to rescue the concepts of authenticity and essentialism, which have been proscribed by poststructuralist theory. Though inclined to adapt this position as strategic rather than ontologically real, she does have this to say:

*The term 'authentic', for example, was an oppositional term used in at least two different ways. First, it was used as a form of articulating what it meant to be*

*dehumanised by colonisation; and, second, for reorganising 'national consciousness' in the struggles for decolonialisation. The belief in an authentic self is framed within humanism but has been politicised by the colonized world in ways which invoke simultaneous meanings; it does appeal to an idealized past when there was no colonizer, to our strengths in surviving thus far, to our language as uninterrupted link to our histories, to the ownership of our lands, to our abilities to create and control our own life and death, to a sense of balance among ourselves and with the environment, to our authentic selves as a people (Smith, 199: 73).*

I support fully this endorsement of the notion of an authentic and essential Indigenous self that can be recovered from the wreck of the colonial experience. It is just such a recovery that I believe we have begun at Cherbourg State School.

In this chapter I have endeavoured to come to grips with the poststructuralist paradigm as it has been applied to Indigenous education. I have argued that the crucial weakness of the poststructuralists is the refusal to engage directly with ontology and with truth. In what follows I endeavour to demonstrate an alternative approach which fully acknowledges the lived experience of Aboriginal Australians and also acknowledges the reality of their capacity for transcendence of the status quo.

## **CHAPTER THREE - WHITE PERSPECTIVES ON ABORIGINAL IDENTITY**

This chapter will examine white perspectives on being Aboriginal by exploring the ways we Aborigines have been described in the past and comparing this to the ways we are being described today. Data will be presented as a means to explain current perceptions of Aboriginal people.

As I showed in Chapter One with the analysis of William Dampier's account of one of the first encounters between whites and Aborigines, early descriptions of Aborigines reveal a thoroughly negative perception of who we were. Anderson (2002) presents a range of historical viewpoints in which the Aborigine emerges as the Feared/Despised or at best the Pitiabile Other. Thus H.L. Wilkinson describes Aboriginal people as 'primitive people who ... could not absorb the newcomer's higher civilisation' (cited in Anderson, 2002: 184). Similarly Darwin suggested that Aboriginal people were 'utterly degraded beings' destined for destruction (cited in Anderson (2002: 186). Tatz's research provides some insight into early white perceptions of Aborigines who were '... considered wild animals, vermin, scarcely human, hideous to humanity, loathsome and a nuisance' (1999: 15). Tatz goes further here to shed some light on the motives for such descriptions by reflecting on private comments made the British High Commissioner, Arthur Hamilton Gordon:

The habit of regarding the natives as vermin, to be cleared off the face of earth, has given the average Queenslander a tone of brutality and cruelty in dealing with "blacks"... I have heard of men of refinement, of the greatest humanity and kindness to their fellow whites ... talk not only of the wholesale butchery, but of the individual murder of natives, exactly as they would talk of a day's sport, or having to kill some troublesome animal.

(in Tatz, 1999: 15)

It seems that in earlier times, if Aborigines are considered as simply 'vermin' or 'scarcely human', then their forcible removal from their land, or complete slaughter, is somehow justifiable. This tendency to describe Aborigines with pejorative and highly derogatory

terms to justify exceptionally poor treatment and tremendous disrespectfulness by white people is not something that remains in early times. Even today this practice is clearly observable.

In more recent times, Pauline Hanson, the leader of the right-wing One Nation Party, when in Federal Parliament had this to say of the struggles of Aboriginal Australians for justice:

For many years the activists of the Aboriginal industry and those who help peddle their lies have preyed on the collective conscience of other Australians. We have seen the distortion and blame-filled confrontation of the so-called stolen generations, sorry days, sorry books and the list goes on. We are witnesses to the ongoing PR campaign aimed not at reconciliation but at remuneration (Hanson, 1998).

Similarly in the NSW Parliament on 4 December 2003, David Oldfield, a co-founder of the Pauline Hanson's right wing One Nation Party, which rocketed to political prominence in Australia fuelled by racism and hatred (Adams, 1998; Kelly 1998; Sheridan, 1998), offered his understanding about Aboriginal people:

I acknowledge that the Aboriginal people, as a people in the past, are an anthropological oddity and are no doubt significant and worthy of study... They have nothing of any import to offer in the way of consultation.

The Aboriginal civilisation, if it could be referred to as that, is Stone Age. Apart from anthropological study and historical knowledge, there is nothing that can be offered. Aboriginal culture and its teaching helps keep Aboriginal people living progressively in the past. It does not serve Aboriginal Australians in any way to keep on pretending they are in some way special.

Their history is a simple matter. The same thing happened day after day for thousands of years. The only thing unique about the Aboriginal people is that they never got out of the Stone Age, and without intervention never would have.

(Legislative Council of New South Wales, 2004 in Hansard)

Here, Oldfield provides this retarded description of Aboriginal people as a means to assert his belief that a New South Wales government agency, the Natural Resource Commission and the Catchment Management Authorities, should not have to consult with local Aboriginal people. The motive here is clearly to diminish and undermine the status of Aboriginal people by describing us in simplistic, pejorative and diminished terms.

At this point it is useful to reflect on some theoretical basis for such negative and oppressive assumptions. Young (1990: 48), in her discussions about the politics of difference, describes five faces of oppression: exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. Young (1990) notes the inter-relatedness of these faces of oppression by establishing a causal link between cultural imperialism and marginalisation and powerlessness. This connection is particularly relevant in white observations of Aboriginal people and worth exploring.

The phenomenon of cultural imperialism sees the dominant group stereotypically defining another group and labelling it as the 'Other'. There are some luxuries attached to this. One of these luxuries is that while labelling the 'Other' and rendering it inferior, the dominant group abrogates itself from any need to examine, describe or justify itself. Nancy Fraser (1987 cited in Young 1990: 59) underlines this point of privilege by signalling their exclusive access to any means of interpretation and communication in society. This is reinforced by a tendency to 'measure' and/or judge the 'Other', with yardsticks developed by those doing the dominating. Against this background, the dominant group, armed with exclusive access to the major means of distributing interpretation and communication, as well as a close affinity with the measuring

instruments, readily assert themselves as superior. These assertions, as we have seen in our discussion in Chapter Two of the work of Tuhiwai Smith, are presented then, by the dominant group, with a seemingly sound theoretical basis, because they are the ones who define what a 'sound theoretical basis' is. It is frighteningly true then, that these sound theoretical bases influence the dominant groups' school of thought, and the human and social policy directions that are a product of the political systems they dominate.

This is clearly illustrated in personal reflections from the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (1997).

There was a big poster at the end of the dining room and it used to be pointed out to us all the time when religious instruction was going on in the afternoon. They had these Aborigine people sitting at the end of this big wide road and they were playing cards, gambling and drinking. And it had this slogan which they used to read to us and point to us while they're saving us from ourselves and giving our souls to the Lord. It had, 'Wide is the road that leads us into destruction', which led up into hell. The other side they had these white people, all nicely dressed, leading on this narrow road, and 'Narrow is the road that leads us into the kingdom of life or the Kingdom of God' (1997: 157).

Clearly the motive here is to reinforce the notion that 'white is right'. Although questionable, white Australia would have considered this a necessary motive as it provided some justification for the tragic policies and process involving the removal of children from their families. The underlying objective was to destroy any trace of Aboriginal society, or as Wilson describes it ... genocide (1997).

Given that the context of this research relates significantly to Cherbourg State School it is worth reflecting on early white perceptions of the Aboriginal people of this particular community. From the outset it was clear that Aboriginal people of the time were not perceived positively in any way. Blake (2001: 37) notes that at the time of establishing the community, several aims existed.

The primary aim was to ensure separation of Aboriginal people from white people. Already this implies a sense of Aboriginal inferiority, or some notion that Aboriginal people were not capable of mixing with white people. But from an alternative stance, did this reflect Aboriginal inability to mix with white people, or white inability to mix appropriately with Aboriginal people? Here we are reminded of Nancy Fraser's (1987) assertion that the dominant society gets to set the norm, without really having to reflect on or examine their own practices and behaviour. In this case white people decide that Aborigines cannot mix with white people, when the Aboriginal reality appears that white people were much too afraid to embrace a group of people different from themselves. Fraser's assertions also explain the sense of arrogance and contempt which underpins assumptions that there is nothing that white people can learn from Aborigines.

Blake (2001: 37) draws on archival data to reveal that while the primary aim was to separate Aboriginal people and whites, only those Aborigines were selected whom the whites considered 'of no economic value or posed a threat to the health and wellbeing of the local community'. Another aspect to this apparent need for separation was the concern about maintaining the purity of 'white blood'. J. W. Bleakley, the Queensland Protector of Aborigines, in 1928 notes that Aborigines with more than 50 per cent of Aboriginal blood, '... no matter how carefully brought up and educated ... will drift back to the black' (in Tatz, 1999: 26). While this concern registered highly enough to influence social policy directions of the time, it is a shame the same concern was not manifested at the community level. This may well have resulted in less raping of Aboriginal women.

Ostensibly, the second major aim of policies that saw the establishment of Aboriginal reserves was, according to Blake, about protection of Aboriginal people (Blake, 2001). On reflection, however, it is argued that this protection had less to do with protection, and just about everything to do with *control*. Crucially for the purposes of this thesis, the control both inside and outside of the missions and reserves established the extent to which society could dictate to Aboriginal people, who we should be, in a way that suited white Australians. This degree of control ensured that we could be used as cheap labour at little or at no cost, to clear the land and build the economic industries such as the pastoral and sugar cane industries that still flourish today. As well it ensured that

Aboriginal wages could be collected and used to build important state infrastructure such as local hospitals (Kidd, 2002). It ensured, moreover, that white people had a convenient scapegoat for crimes that could not be solved (Blake, 2001: 41). It also ensured that we were kept at the bottom of the pile and that white society's actions could not be questioned.

As noted by Wilson's 'Stolen Generation' report, Aboriginal reserves or missions had a more direct influence over how Aboriginal people developed perceptions about themselves.

We were told our mother was an alcoholic and that she was a prostitute and she didn't care about us. They (foster family) used to warn us that when we got older we'd have to watch it because we'd turn into sluts and alcoholics, so we had to be very careful. If you were white you didn't have that dirtiness in you ... It was in our breed, in us to be like that (Wilson, 1997: 157).

Such were the views pedalled by those that formed the ruling layers of the overall institution of the reserves. What of the institutions within such institutions? To what extent were these views interiorised by Aboriginal people and what role did schools play in perpetuating notions of Aboriginal inferiority?

For many Aboriginal people, schools it seemed were the drawcard for allowing their Aboriginal children to become a part of the overall white institution of missions and reserves. Stanner reflects on the intentions and motives of an Aboriginal man he described as a 'supremely competent hunter ... who could have stayed in the wilderness for the rest of his days' (Stanner, 1969: 55). This 'supreme hunter' told Stanner that the reason he decided it was best to send his children to an Aboriginal reserve, 'was that he had heard about something called 'a school', and that it was good for children, so he took them in to let them find a new life and a new identity' (ibid). The hunter probably did not realise at the time, that this was the point at which both he and his children would cease to be described as 'supreme'.

Even the supreme athlete Cathy Freeman was made to feel ‘not so supreme’ in her time at school. She describes the sense of shame one feels when nobody wants ‘to dance with the boong next!’ (Freeman, 2003: 21). Freeman also reflects on her time in an exclusive boarding school in Toowoomba, Queensland, and describes it as a place where she felt completely out of place, and where there was very little belief in her capacity as an academic achiever (2003: 31). Sadly many schools in Queensland continue to find challenging the notion that Aboriginal children have the capacity to perform as well as white children in schools (Sarra 2003: 3).

There is of course a long history behind these assumptions of Aboriginal inferiority. Thus Blake reports of the early days at Cherbourg State School:

Within the classroom, the basic objectives were to give ‘very elementary knowledge of reading, writing and arithmetic’. The state school syllabus was used as a guide as to what subjects were taught and how the curriculum was organised. To accommodate the native mind, the amount of time spent in each grade was considerably longer than the usual twelve months’ (Blake, 2001: 61, emphasis added).

The ‘native mind’ hypothesis, that is, that Aborigines were intellectually inferior, still guided policy when the school principal, Robert Crawford, drew up a modified syllabus for Cherbourg State School in the 1930s. Crawford argued that his lower expectations were justified given

The difference in environment and mental ability between the Aboriginal child and his white brother (Crawford cited in Blake, 2001: 62).

At the same time as the educational authorities doubted Aborigines’ mental ability, provision for their education tended to guarantee the fulfilment of the native mind hypothesis. Thus Blake reports:

Compared with children attending state schools, the Barambah children were clearly disadvantaged. Barambah classes were on average twice the size of classes in state schools, and during the period 1910-20 were three times as large (Blake, 2001: 60).

The endurance and longevity of limited perception of what Aboriginal children in school can achieve is directly reinforced by personal experiences at my commencement as principal of Cherbourg State School in August 1998. This will be discussed in greater depth at a later stage in this thesis; however, it is worth making some personal reflections at this point to demonstrate that the 'native mind' mentality, as discussed in the previous chapter, persists.

In 1999 the school established a technology committee to determine the school's strategic directions in terms of computer use. The District Office distributed an Information Technology framework for students containing a range of certificates outlining basic IT competency skills. The competency levels and specific skills were quite basic and listed what one would expect from regular primary school students. The Level One competency certificate listed skills such as:

- *The student can identify the keyboard, monitor and printer*
- *The student knows how to turn the computer on.*

The Level Four competency certificate listed skills such as:

- *The student can produce a poster using the word program*
- *The student can create their own folder to file documents*

I forwarded the competency certificates to the technology committee and suggested to them that I would like to adopt this framework within our school as a means to track and direct student progress and competence. The technology committee considered the framework against the background of my expressed intention, then responded by insisting the District's framework was 'too advanced and did not suit the needs of our children'. It is my argument here that within the committee a mindset existed that manifested itself in

restricted perceptions of what the children could achieve, and what experiences they were prepared to offer as a consequence.

For them it was a reality that the children were simply not able to achieve at the same level as other children within the district. Reflection on this experience, and the fact that today every child in the school from grade 3 to grade 7 has already developed on the computers their own websites and power point presentations reveals that a different reality is readily observable. This differing reality suggests that, sadly, the mindset of the technology committee at the time was severely retarded and did not suit the needs of our children. In Bhaskarian terms what we are dealing with in this instance and in the case of Robert Crawford's approach, is that there is a claim that the syllabus is ontologically determined by the ability level of the children. However, my entire thesis and indeed life's work is dedicated to showing that what we are dealing with is epistemological predetermination rather than ontological determinism (Bhaskar, 1993: 52).

Many other similar experiences at this time clearly demonstrated this point. For instance on another occasion a grade seven girl whose attendance was extremely poor, came into my office to discuss her concerns about the teacher she had had for the last two years. She told me that one of the reasons she stayed away from school so much was that she was bored with what was happening in the classroom, and that they had done the same thing last year. I expressed the views of this girl to the classroom teacher in question. She refuted the claims by saying the girl did not know what she was talking about. In subsequent discussion about her teaching performance the teacher explained that she was being responsive by ensuring flexibility within her classroom.

She explained that she set two or three tasks relating to literacy and numeracy. All students had until lunchtime to complete the tasks. In the hour after lunch those students who had not completed the morning's tasks could do so in that time. Other students who completed the set tasks were allowed to have free time to do whatever they chose. As a consequence, on many occasions students would not come back to school after lunch. Clearly the bar was set at an extremely low level. While the teacher believed she was being responsive to the needs of the children she was more, accurately, responding to her

own limited perceptions of what the children could do in a school day. The children responded by giving the teacher what she expected from them: poor behaviour, limited attendance, and limited school performance. As for the girl who raised her concerns in my office, she left school at the age of 13 and became a mother at the age of 15 - just as the teacher expected.

For this girl, and many other Aboriginal young people, it becomes seemingly impossible to push beyond these limited perceptions, given it is reinforced from many angles. Here members of the community outside the school play their part in perpetuating such limited beliefs about Cherbourg's young people. In some ways it is amusing, yet frighteningly tragic to reflect on the views of some white people of the nearby township of Murgon. Whilst dining at the local roadside restaurant I came across a throwaway journal entitled *The Stirrer*. Whilst the journal seems to be anchored by anger, fear and ignorance and is void of positive value, it does, nonetheless, provide some insight into how some white locals perceive some Cherbourg Aboriginal children. The following is an extract from this 'journal'.

The main reason for low literacy among Aboriginal children is because unlike white kids they are not forced to go to school. But when they do they are a law unto themselves, no teacher will discipline an Aboriginal kid if they value their peace of mind. To do that will bring swift retribution in the form of harassment of their family, stones on their roof and the like.

Most Aboriginal kids are taught that they are better than white kids, that their country was stolen from them and that they can do what they like and will not be punished.

(Esson, 2000)

In another area of the same 'journal' the writer describes Aboriginal youth as '... gangs of children who prey on anything that is not guarded or nailed down' (Esson, 2000). One hates to even dignify such views by referring to them at all, however it is tragically true that such views are prominent among many white people within the region. Even the

region's elected Member of the State Parliament presents a very restricted and racist perception in the local newspaper (Pratt in South Burnett Times, 2000: pp).

### A Voice for All

(A column by the member for Barambah on issues of interest to the electorate)

The headline read "When truth is wrong" and referred to comments from two federal Members of Parliament who referred to Aborigines not inventing the wheel and not being inclined to education.

History and statistics have proven both of these statements to be true ... If we cannot admit the truth openly how do we address and solve the obvious problems such as the need to structure education processes in a way that would see the hundreds of thousands of other Australians (including Aborigines) who find the education system so unattractive.

Here the notion that Aborigines 'are not inclined to education' is presented as some form of 'truth' which we should be not be afraid to speak of. Of course Pratt could probably produce a range of statistics to reinforce her notion of 'the truth', and these statistics would outline clearly that Aboriginal children have failed in education. The same statistics, however, examined from a broader mindset would reveal just as clearly that education has failed Aboriginal children. While one is dumbfounded that such views could gain some degree of credence in a local newspaper, it provides an unfortunate insight into the newspaper, the MP and the people of the region who buy the papers and elect such representatives. Sadly, these views are not restricted to local country town newspapers and self-generated manifestos. At a national level they also receive some exposure as referred to in earlier discussion about remarks, made by the Hon David Oldfield in the NSW Upper House (Oldfield, 2003).

It would be extremely easy here to suggest that these views should simply be ignored and that they are just the perceptions of some small-minded people. The problem is, however,

that these small-minded perceptions form the basis of a very uncomfortable and unfair reality for many Aboriginal people. It does not make sense then, that while there is a very negative repercussion for those who are the subject of such small-minded perception, there is very little or no repercussion for those who harbour and traffic such stupidity and ignorance. Again we are reminded of one of those luxuries of whiteness referred to by Fraser (1987; in Young 1990: 59), where the dominant group is not aware of, and simply does not see, any need to examine or justify itself.

This is not a phenomenon occurring just in the Burnett region. Over the past three years I have conducted 30 information sessions to discuss issues affecting young Aboriginal people in schools. As part of each session I explored, for the purposes of this study, the perception of Aboriginal people harboured by that which many would call *Mainstream Australia*. Table 3.1 presents the range of forums and the number of participants.

**Table 3.1 Discussion forums on ‘Mainstream Australia’s perception of Aboriginal people**

Forum	Description	No. of participants
1	Student workshop – Trinity Bay SHS, Cairns	48
2	Remote Area Teacher’s Conference, Cairns	53
3	Teacher In-service – Bremer SHS, Ipswich	36
4	Principals’ Forum at Univ. of Southern Qld	33
5	Behaviour Management Conference for Teachers, Townsville	64
6	District Office Staff Inservice– Darling Downs, Toowoomba	29
7	Teacher In-service – Harristown SHS, Toowoomba	24
8	Teacher In-service – Harlaxton State School, Toowoomba	34
9	Univ. of Southern Qld Lecture – Indigenous Studies	280 approx.
10	Teacher In-service – Wilsonton State School, Towoomba	18
11	Univ. of Southern Qld Lecture – Indigenous Studies	320 approx.
12	Teacher In-service – Centenary Heights SHS, Toowoomba	22
13	Teacher In-service – Dunwich SHS, Stradbroke Island	14
14	Univ. of Southern Qld Lecture – Indigenous Studies	320 approx.
15	Univ. of Southern Qld Lecture – Indigenous Studies	22
16	Univ. of Qld Lecture – Indigenous Education Studies	42
17	Univ. of Southern Qld Lecture – Indigenous Studies	28
18	Univ. of Southern Qld Lecture – Indigenous Studies	18
19	South Qld Doctors’ Forum on Indigenous issues, Toowoomba	14
20	Teacher In-service – Murgon SHS	22
21	Wide Bay Principals’ Conference, Hervey Bay	38
22	Student Workshop – Murgon SHS	54
23	Conference on Multiculturalism, Gympie	68
24	Reconciliation Community Conference, Sunshine Coast	40
25	Teacher In-service – Murgon State School	26
26	Univ. of Qld Lecture – Indigenous Education Studies	45
27	QUT Lecture – Indigenous Education Studies	32
28	Opening Doors Community conference	120 approx.
29	Labor Party Branch Forum, Bundaberg	12
30	QUT Lecture – Indigenous Education Studies	21
Approximate number of participants in overall discussion about <i>Mainstream Australia’s</i> perception of Aboriginal people.		1919

As reflected in Table 1, participants in the forums at which this issue was explored ranged from University and school student sessions, to conferences and teacher in-services. At every session I had been invited as a guest speaker or lecturer to discuss either issues about Indigenous education, or Indigenous issues generally. Before engaging

in discussion about Mainstream Australia's perception of Aboriginal people I would explain that because of my PhD studies, this was an area that was of great interest to me.

As part of the overall session it was always the case that it was necessary to justify the exploration of Mainstream Australia's perception of Aboriginal people, as a part of the overall learning experience of Aboriginal children. I explained to participants the value of reflecting on such perceptions, and then made it extremely clear that I was not in pursuit of their 'personal' perception of Aboriginal people, but rather, Mainstream Australia's perception of Aboriginal people. This was a necessary part of the process in order to relieve participants of any anxiety at the prospect of having their personal perceptions of Aboriginal people being scrutinised by the group, and also by an educated Aboriginal. The second aspect of this manoeuvre was to ensure the pursuit of a more honest account from the participants. Strangely many found it easy to expose the ignorance of an entity we all called Mainstream Australia, while indicating quite clearly that they considered themselves to be Mainstream Australians.

At each forum I would say, "What are some adjectives that Mainstream Australia would use to describe Aboriginal people? Remember I am not looking for *your* personal perceptions of Aboriginal people. I want to know how Mainstream Australia sees Aboriginal people". From this point members of the forum would present adjectives that they thought Mainstream Australia would use to describe Aboriginal people. On each occasion I would record each adjective on a white board and note them for later discussion. Table 3.2 presents a list outlining the entire range of adjectives presented at each of the 30 forums in question, and details the frequency at which each adjective occurred. Adjectives that I consider similar or same in meaning are listed together.

**Table 3.2 Adjectives that Mainstream Australia uses to describe Aborigines**

<i>Adjectives</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
Alcoholics, Drunks, Heavy drinkers	30
Boongs, Coons, Niggers, Black Cunts, Abos, Porch monkeys, Blacks, Gins, Darkies, Black bastards	30
Got it good, Privileged, Well kept by the government, On the gravy train	30
Lazy, Won't work	30
Welfare Dependant, Dole bludgers, Handout syndrome	30
Aggressive, Violent, Troublemakers, Disrespectful	29
Good sportsmen/women, Good footy players	26
Unreliable, Can't be trusted, Untrustworthy, Irresponsible	25
Dirty, Unclean, Smelly	25
Racist, Anti-White	23
Good artists, Artistic	22
Uneducated	21
Ungrateful	19
Good dancers	14
Dumb	14
Family oriented, Value family	12
Scary, Intimidating	11
Sharing people, Not materialistic, Sharing, Look after each other	9
No sense of time	8
Thieves	6
Different, Different values	5
Cheeky	4
Nomads, Wanderers, Drifters	3
Spiritual	2

On every occasion it was considered by many that Mainstream Australia's perception of Aboriginal people is that they are alcoholics, drunks or heavy drinkers. On every occasion, many considered that Mainstream Australia uses pejorative terms such as 'coon', 'nigger', 'boong', 'black cunts' and 'black bastards' in relation to Aboriginal people. It was also widely accepted by many that Mainstream Australia sees Aboriginal people as privileged or in some way 'got it good'. Aboriginal people, according to many participants, are regarded by Mainstream Australia as 'welfare dependant', 'dole bludgers' as well as 'lazy people who won't work'.

Many agreed that Mainstream Australia sees Aboriginal people as aggressive or violent troublemakers, who are seemingly untrustworthy, unreliable and irresponsible. On a

somehow, more positive note, it was agreed that Mainstream Australia see Aboriginal people as good sports persons.

At this point it is worth revisiting the process for the purpose of coaxing out this information. You will recall the initial prompt was ‘What are some adjectives that Mainstream Australia would use to describe Aboriginal people?’ To repeat, it was made extremely clear that I was not after ‘personal’ points of view but rather what they thought was Mainstream Australia’s perception. It is clear from this data then, that Mainstream Australia has quite a negative perception of Aboriginal people. What is interesting to reflect on, however, would be the number of participants in the forums, who would consider themselves to be the real Mainstream Australians.

Whilst they are not listed, some other interesting questions and/or comments related to the notion of ‘real Aboriginal people’ were presented for discussion. My capacity to quantify these discussions is restricted but they are nevertheless worth considering at some level. The following examples of comments taken from some of the sessions are representative of the discussions around this perception of ‘real Aboriginal people’:

“Yes, but that’s not the real Aboriginal people, that’s only the ones that live in the towns”,

“The real Aboriginal people are happy. It’s only the half-caste or half-educated ones that make trouble for everyone”.

“The real Aboriginal people would be happy to be just left alone in the bush to get on with their life. They don’t want white people interfering in their life!”

“You’re not a real Aboriginal though are you?”

From this point in the forums, it is essential to critique the data. As the data was challenged, some interesting dynamics were usually observed. In my efforts to speak out and challenge the data as an academic, I risked the notion of reinforcing myself as being ‘half-educated’ Aborigine and a ‘trouble maker’. It is worth examining this dynamic and

its motives. Obviously in my challenges to these very negative perceptions of my people, my intention was to reveal their inaccuracy, ignorance and stupidity. This had the effect of making Mainstream Australia feel some discomfort.

Mainstream Australia, or any dominant group in the face of such criticism, can adopt a strategy of discrediting those presenting the criticism, particularly when the one presenting the criticism does so by utilising their own processes and mechanisms against them. In the case of the forums, it was typically attempted by raising their own doubt about the authenticity of my Aboriginality.

John Ah Kit, the first Aboriginal person to be elected to the Northern Territory Parliament, was also subjected to the strategy, which questions whether one is a 'real Aborigine'. In his first speech to the parliament he makes reference to this perception:

There are also 'real' Aborigines: those who live out in the bush who are somehow more real than those who live in towns. If the 'unreal' Aborigines are not 'trouble makers' they are dismissed as lazy, drunken long-grassers who give the place a bad name with the tourists' (cited in Hartley, 2000: 141).

For Mainstream Australia it is a convenient strategy to deflect criticism by suggesting that one becomes less Aboriginal if one is 'half-educated' or not 'left out in the bush'. The strategy is convenient because those who are not educated and/or 'out in the bush' have been indeed less likely to complain or challenge the status quo. The absence of a challenge can, however, be regarded as not due to the authenticity of their Aboriginality. Rather it seems reasonable to suggest that they are not very happy living in impoverished conditions with a lower life expectancy than the rest of Australia. The difference is, perhaps, that the 'half-educated' or 'city' blacks have the capacity and access to mechanisms to do what they should do: that is, continually confront the status quo on behalf of all of the oppressed.

It is to be expected that many Mainstream Australians do not like the exposure or criticism of their ignorance, particularly by an 'educated Aborigine'. At such forums, as

I have described, I expect some attempt to discredit me by suggesting that I am not, as they say, a ‘real Aborigine’. For many this perception is exacerbated by the fact that I do not fit within the perceptions presented earlier. This is generally enough to convince them that the views presented here are not valid, because my sense of being a ‘real Aboriginal’, according to them, is not genuine. My Aboriginality, then, is questioned. The reality is, though, as referred to in my introduction, that if I were lying under a tree drunk, on welfare with no job, my Aboriginality would not be questioned even for a moment.

Further to this it should be noted that Mainstream Australia cannot pick and choose times at which to acknowledge someone’s Aboriginality. For instance, one cannot acknowledge my Aboriginality by doing things like refusing access to a rental property; denying that I am a ‘real guidance officer’ or Principal; say things like ‘I don’t want my daughter going out with a coon!’; and then turn around in the face of criticism and suggest my views are invalid because I am not a ‘real Aborigine’. Clearly this approach to criticism is flawed.

While Fraser notes the dominant group’s luxury of not having to examine or justify one’s own point of view, there comes a point when the minority becomes conversant enough with their mechanisms and processes so that they can be utilised and exposed (cited in Young, 1987). That point is now!

We are indeed at a time when Mainstream Australia must justify, if it can, its destructive perspective on Aboriginal Australians, or embrace the reality of who we really are. It is hoped that this research can shed some light on the details of that reality. Aboriginal perceptions of being Aboriginal will be discussed in more detail at a later stage in this thesis. Before we get to this point, however, it is necessary to address the range of misconceptions that clearly exist when it comes to Aboriginal people. In doing so, those perceptions presented most frequently are identified for closer scrutiny.

### **3.1 ‘Alcoholics, Drunks, Heavy Drinkers’**

Clearly, from the forums data, it is held that Mainstream Australia sees Aboriginal people as a group of people who consume alcohol to excess. The frequency with which this

perception was presented suggests that for Mainstream Australia, it is indeed a reality that Aboriginal people are alcoholics, drunks or heavy drinkers. But just how true is this reality?

According to an Commonwealth report commissioned by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, a significant proportion of Aboriginal people refrain from drinking alcohol, and further, that in many Indigenous communities, alcohol is completely banned (1998: 67). The report also notes the results of National Drug Strategy surveys which indicate that in 1994, 45% of the general population indicated they were regular alcohol drinkers, while only 33% of Indigenous people surveyed indicated the same.

The Commonwealth Report suggests that there is a tendency among those Aboriginal people who actually do drink to do so much more excessively (1998: 67). It further suggests that Mainstream Australia's perception is likely to be reinforced by a greater inclination for Aboriginal people to drink alcohol in a much more public domain. This inclination should be understood against a background of increased homelessness among Aboriginal people, racial discrimination in pubs and clubs, and possibly greater social or cultural comfort with drinking outside.

Moreover, those who come in contact with drunken Aboriginal people may be left with quite an intense impression that can sometimes be hard to see past. It may also be noted that, while 'some' of these impressionable experiences and images can be quite unnerving, this does not constitute a reason for labeling 'all' Aboriginal people as alcoholics, drunks or heavy drinkers.

Further to this, it is worth reflecting momentarily on some of the deeper historical causes of alcoholism. The *Stolen Generation* Report (1997) presents some tragic insights into why some Aboriginal people became alcoholics. A Western Australian mother of two explains what it was like for her when her two sons were taken away from her in the 1950s:

It has left me sick, also my son sick too, never to be the same people again that we were before, being separated from one another, it has make our lives to be nothing on this earth. My sons and myself went through a lot of pain an heartbreak. It's a thing that I'll never forget until I die, it will always be in my mind that the Welfare has ruined my thinking and my life.

I felt so miserable and sad and very unhappy, that I took to drinking after they took my sons. I thought there was nothing left for me. (1997: 214).

Other accounts from the Stolen Generation Report reinforce further this insight into some of the causes of Aboriginal alcoholism.

I'm not under the influence of alcohol any more, you know. Because then you used to sort of deal with it more or less in drink and I thought I could solve my problems in a bottle, you know. That's the only way I could deal with my feelings for my kids not living here... My kids are with me today, but I've lost a lot. (1997: 215)

Undoubtedly in these cases the trauma of having one's children taken away from them has underpinned, to some extent at least, their alcoholism. Dr Jane McKendrick and Judith Hermann support this conclusion by clearly stating that those experiencing severe psychic pain are likely to turn to alcohol and/or drugs as a means of escaping the intense pain associated with such intensely traumatic incidents (McKendrick & Hermann, 1997: 199). Their submissions to the Stolen Generation Report also refer to alcoholism as an intergenerational legacy of such trauma.

I drank a lot when I was younger, y'know. I still do I guess. I don't drink as much now, but I still do and there's never been anything ... any pleasure in it. I guess I don't know whether it's a hangover from seeing the old man do it ... whether it's because of that or whether it's because of other issues which I just wouldn't, couldn't confront ... I'd have nights where I'd sit down and think about things. There was no answers. (1997: 199)

Even the best Mainstream Australians, when located in a similar context, and faced with the same trauma of having children stolen from them, with the same sense of unknown or lost identity, with the same continued harassment or rejection from any access to employment, might turn to alcoholism as a way of easing such pain.

### **3.2 ‘Boongs, Coons, Niggers, Black Cunts, Abos, Porch Monkeys, Blacks, Gins, Darkies, Black Bastards’**

These epithets are to be understood in terms of the model of the differentiation of the Other advanced in Chapter One and discussed earlier in this chapter. Within the worldview indicated by such names, the Aborigine is perceived as the Feared/ Despised Other. This as I have noted is a dangerous location within the spectrum of the Other. The Feared/Despised Other is the site of ‘final solutions’ and slogans such as *Arbeit Mach Frei*. Here the Aborigine is perceived as *üntermensch* or sub-human and accordingly one is under no obligation to treat them humanely.

The function of regarding the Aborigine as the Feared/Despised Other is also, I would argue, to provide a mechanism that would assert the racial superiority of Mainstream Australia and fulfil the manifest destiny of Mainstream Australia.

### **3.3 Got it Good, Privileged, Well Kept by the Government**

A popular catch cry in Australia is that ‘All Australians should be equal!’ On the surface who could argue with such a comment? This notion is particularly affirmed in discussions about targeted Indigenous education and employment programs. At a deeper level, though, many issues are argued. This paper will engage in some of the debate about Indigenous programs that are designed to remedy existing education and employment discrepancies.

One of the major political issues concerning Aboriginal people in Australia is the notion of self-determination through empowerment at the individual level, right through to the community level. In the past twenty years these notions have surfaced in Government

priorities as a result of major political developments such as the Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (AEDP), and the National Aboriginal Education Policy (NAEP). Both policies identified major discrepancies in comparisons between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in terms of meaningful participation in employment and education programs.

The AEDP was developed in 1984 and included specific Aboriginal education and employment programs with an overall purpose:

... to promote Aboriginal economic independence from Government and to reduce Aboriginal dependency on Welfare in accordance with growing Aboriginal demands for employment and the capacity to control their own destiny. The overall objective is to assist Aboriginal people to achieve broad equity with other Australians in terms of employment and economic status.

(Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1989: 91)

The NAEP emerged in 1989 and had four main purposes:

- to ensure Aboriginal involvement in educational decision-making;
- to provide equality of access for Aboriginal people to education services;
- to raise the rates of Aboriginal participation in education to those for all Australians; and
- to achieve equitable and appropriate educational outcomes for Aboriginal people.

(Department of Employment, Education and Training: 1989)

It is logical that the AEDP and the NAEP are designed to compliment each other, as the issues they address are highly related. Among the key strategies of the AEDP and AEP are a series of programs that positively discriminate in favour of Aboriginal people. AEDP programs included the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) Scheme, which basically allows unemployed members of Aboriginal communities to elect to work for their respective communities in return for wages, (some refer to this as 'working for the dole'); the Training for Aboriginals Program (TAP), which is primarily

designed to facilitate through wage incentives and skills development, access for Aboriginal people to the mainstream labour market.

NAEP programs include the Indigenous Strategic Initiatives Program (IESIP), which provides direct financial support to educational institutions in order to facilitate increased Aboriginal educational outcomes. This program sees universities able to offer special consideration for tertiary entry, and support to Aboriginal tertiary students. Other programs that are a part of the NAEP include the Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ATAS) which provides additional educational tutoring to enhance academic outcomes of Aboriginal students and the Vocational Educational and Guidance Assistance Scheme (VEGAS), which aims to facilitate access to enhanced career and education opportunities for Indigenous children.

While both the AEDP and the NAEP have contributed to a broad range of positive change for Indigenous people, many discrepancies identified twenty years ago continue to exist. They are reflected in a range of areas as follows:

#### *Education*

- Only 32% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children completed schooling compared with 73% of all Australian youth in 1998.
- In 1996, 23.6% of Indigenous adults possessed post-school qualifications, compared with 40.2% of non-Indigenous adults.
- Indigenous students are 1.3% of students in higher education but 40% of these are in non-degree courses such as diplomas and certificates, compared with 5% of non-Indigenous students.

#### *Employment*

- The unemployment rate at the time of the 1996 census was 23% for Indigenous adults, compared with 9% for non-Indigenous adults.

- In 1996, 14.9% of all Indigenous employment was through participation in the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP), which is a forerunner of the 'work for the dole' program.
- The mean weekly income in 1996 for Indigenous individuals 15 years and over (\$190) and families (\$502) was lower than that for non-Indigenous individuals in the same age group (\$292) and families (\$730).

### *Criminal justice system*

- The imprisonment rate for Indigenous adults in 1997 was over 14 times that for non-Indigenous adults, with almost 19% of the adult prison population being identified as Indigenous.
- In 1996, an Indigenous youth was 21 times more likely to be detained in custody than a non-Indigenous youth. In 1998, the rate of imprisonment for Indigenous males aged 20-29 was 1 in 20 compared to 1 in 200 for non-Indigenous males of the same age.
- The Indigenous prisoner population has doubled since 1988, increasing by an average of 6.9% per annum, which is 1.7 times greater than the rate for the non-Indigenous prisoner population.

### *Health*

- Life expectancy for Indigenous people in the year 2000 is the same as it was for non-Indigenous Australians in 1900. Life expectancy in 1996 was estimated to be 56.9 years for Indigenous males and 61.7 years for Indigenous females, compared to estimates of 75.2 years for all Australian males and 81.1 years for all Australian females.
- Indigenous infant mortality is 3-5 times higher than that for other Australian children.
- Infectious diseases are 12 times higher among Indigenous people than the Australian average.

(Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2001)

Despite such continuing social discrepancies, criticism remains of any effort to ameliorate them through targeted positive discrimination programs. On occasions, such programs have been described as ‘not fair’, ‘racist against white people’. It has also been argued ‘that it is not fair that white people should have to miss out on opportunities just for the sake of an Aboriginal person’, hence the suggestion that Aboriginal people have ‘got it good’, are ‘privileged’, ‘well kept by the government’, and on the gravy train’.

We are dealing here with the phenomenon of what Nancy Fraser (1995) has termed “misrecognition”. In an interesting article on the “Dilemmas of Justice” she argues that the politics of affirmative action and affirmative recognition can provoke a backlash. For Fraser the problem is that affirmative does not go far enough and as a consequence:

fails to engage the deep level at which the political economy is racialised. It fails to attack the racialised division of exploitable and surplus labour, nor the racialised division of menial and non-menial occupations within paid labour. Leaving intact the deep structures that generate racial disadvantage it must make surface reallocations again and again. The result is not only to underline racial differentiation. It is also to mark people of colour as deficient and insatiable recipients of special treatment (1995: 90).

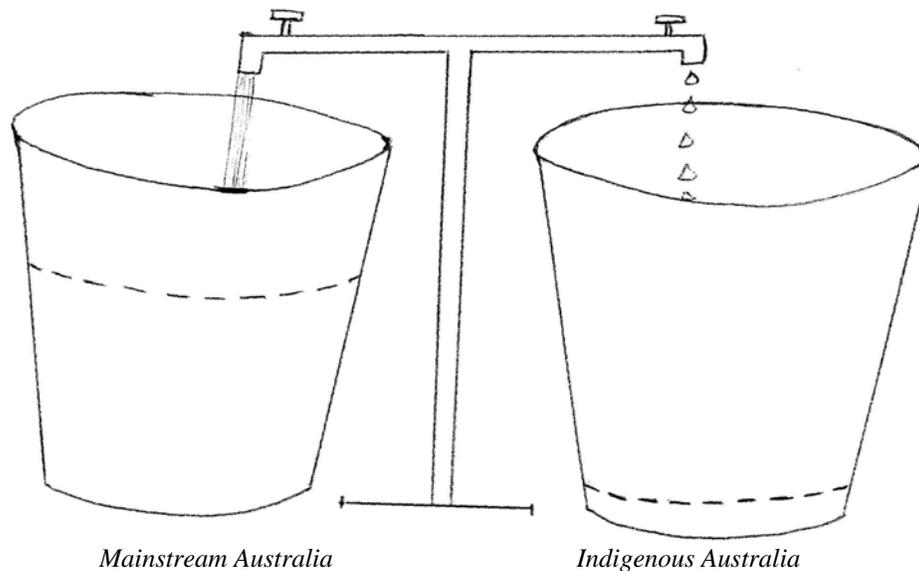
Fraser’s preferred alternative is to transform the economy along democratic socialist or anti-racist social democratic lines. Few of those who enjoy the luxuries of whiteness may readily subscribe to Fraser’s somewhat Utopian views. In any case those from oppressed groups, or those harboring related concern, are unlikely to live long enough, or have the patience to wait around for the amount of time required for her desired outcome, a ‘democratic socialist society’. Put simply, the scale of change desired would just take too long to come about.

Programs developed under the AEDP and the NAEP do positively discriminate in the interests of better outcomes for Indigenous people and as a means to address the discrepancies presented earlier. Fraser is correct to argue that the notion of positively discriminating in the interests of a particular group does, on occasion, generate

resentment among those who do not benefit from such programs and, to some extent, embarrassment among those who do. Consequently there is a necessity to generate better understanding about the need for such programs, and to encourage Aboriginal people to make use of such programs without feeling guilty.

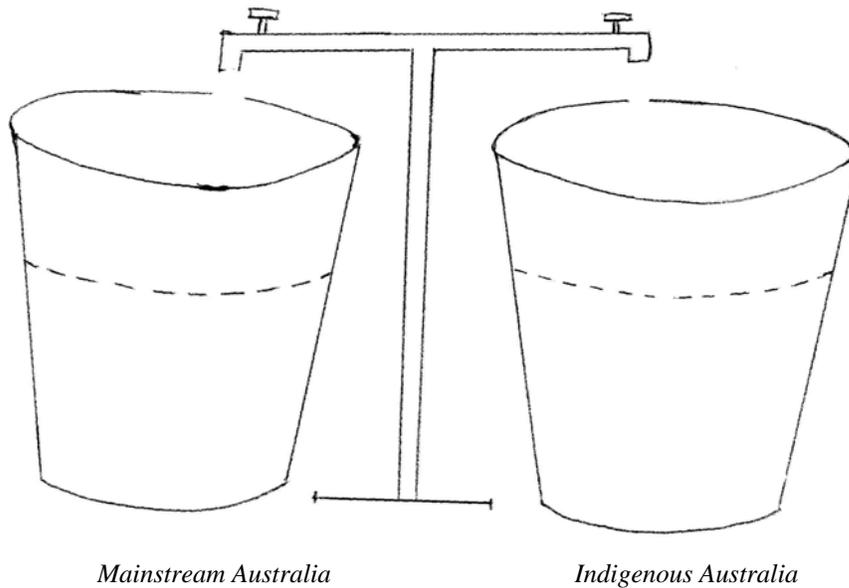
In an effort to address this degree of misunderstanding in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal focus groups, I have discussed this situation using the following analogy presented at Figure 3.1. Imagine two buckets into which flow opportunities. One bucket represents opportunities for white Australia while the other is for Aboriginal Australia. In this context when I say ‘opportunities’ I mean opportunities in terms of access to education, enterprise, employment, health and housing. In addition to this I mean access to human rights such as equal wages, rightful access to wages earned, and the ability to do things such as own property, or move around freely within society without restriction.

Historically then it is clear that in ‘the lucky country’ where we say ‘fair go for all’, white Australia has enjoyed a much greater flow of opportunity than Aboriginal Australia. Given this flow of access to opportunity in comparison to very restricted Aboriginal access to the same, the two buckets are comparatively at quite disparate levels.



**Figure 3.1 Historical Buckets of Opportunities**

Reflection on the discrepancies provided by this diagram simply provides a different way of observing those discrepancies in education, employment, health and criminal justice statistics presented earlier in this chapter. If as many Mainstream Australians say, they want ‘all Australians to be equal’, then clearly both buckets must be at the same level as presented in Figure 3.2.



**Figure 3.2 Buckets of Equal Opportunities**

For this level of equity to realistically occur, and both buckets eventually enjoy the same levels, one of four things would need to occur.

Firstly, one could take opportunities out away from the Mainstream Australia bucket to the extent that it is aligned with Aboriginal Australia. We could just tip some out while maintaining the flow into the other. As we extrapolate from the analogy this means taking opportunities away from white Australia so that their unemployment rate is 23%, the same as in Aboriginal Australia, and their school completion rate is brought back from 73% to 32%. Mainstream Australia’s infant mortality rates would have to increase 3-5 times. Realistically this could never occur. It is interesting to note that while Mainstream

Australia harbors this perception that Aboriginal people are privileged, I could never see them line up to be 'this privileged'. It is also worth noting that many Aboriginal Australians, having experienced the frustration of access to opportunity, would not want other Australians to endure the same demoralizing experience.

A second option to bring about 'equality' would be to tip some out of Mainstream Australia's bucket, and increasing the flow into the other until they become even. To extrapolate again this would mean restricting access to, or taking opportunities away from Mainstream Australia while increasing access for Aboriginal Australia. Again this is not realistic, and clearly, it is inhumane to see human beings denied access to such opportunity; even if white Australia did this to Aboriginal Australians for many years.

A third option is to stop the flow into Mainstream Australia's bucket and retain or increase the flow into Aboriginal Australia's bucket until the levels are aligned. Again, any effort to stop a human being's access to education, enterprise, employment, health and housing is inhumane. It is inhumane to stop access to human rights such as equal wages, rightful access to wages earned, and the ability to do things such as own property, or move around freely within society without restriction.

The fourth option is to maintain the existing flow of opportunity for Mainstream Australia, but then increase, above Mainstream Australia, the flow of opportunity to Aboriginal Australia, until both levels are the same. Once both levels are the same, we then ensure the flow to both is equal. If we do not increase the flow to Aboriginal Australia, it will never catch up to Mainstream Australia. Maintaining the existing flow to both buckets will see the discrepancies perpetuated. As we extrapolate this option we see that Mainstream Australia is not being denied any access to human rights and opportunity. We are not turning their tap down or off.

In the interests of achieving equity, it is necessary however, to increase the flow of opportunity to Aboriginal Australia. We need to turn that tap on faster until the levels are the same. In real terms this means things like financially supporting Aboriginal families so their children can participate fully in school, providing special places in university

courses for Aboriginal people and providing specific employment and enterprise programs that target Aboriginal people. The programs in question do not represent a crutch for Aboriginal people to lean on, but rather they are, a means to emancipation - insufficient perhaps, but still necessary

It must also be understood that failure to address Aboriginal disadvantage via such programs will see such levels of inequality perpetuated and perhaps increased to inflict an intense burden on Australian society as a whole through increased financial and social costs, as well as deteriorating Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations and continuing negative attitudes and perceptions about Aboriginal people and the roles they play in Australian society.

Mainstream Australians cannot on one hand complain about Aboriginal people and the challenges and degrees of social dysfunction we face in some of our communities, and on the other hand, complain about efforts to address such concerns. Ideally those who are not well informed and who are without a full appreciation of the extreme complexity of such issues, should endeavor to educate themselves before participating in the kind of name-calling my forums revealed. It is all too apparent that it is very easy to say what the problem is in relation to issues touched upon in the forums. Real leadership and true worth, however are to be found in efforts to make realistic and informed contributions to the solutions.

### **3.4 Welfare Dependant, Dole Bludgers, Lazy, Wont Work**

While unemployment statistics suggest that there are more Aboriginal people out of work in Australia, the same statistic certainly does not suggest that Aboriginal people do not want to work. The latest unemployment figures in Australia tell us the unemployment rate for Indigenous Australians is 17.6% in comparison to 7.3% for non-Indigenous Australians. (Indigenous Australians: The Facts, 2004, located at <http://www.work.asn.au/Indigenous/info/statistics.cfm>, accessed 6 October 2004.) They do not tell us about attitudes towards Aboriginal people and how this impacts upon the desire of employees to engage an Aboriginal person. Earlier we reflected on the very

negative perceptions of Aboriginal people. While it is impossible to pin point the extent to which this impacts upon employment statistics, it stands to reason that such a negative perception is bound to influence one's desire to have an Aboriginal person in their workplace (Commonwealth of Australia, 1998: 62).

There are other factors contributing to disproportionate levels of Aboriginal unemployment. These include:

- Limited employment market in remote areas where Aboriginal people choose to stay on their own country;
- Past limited educational opportunities and poor retention rates, contributing to a low level of skills compared with the non-Indigenous population;
- A decline in rural industries that have traditionally been employers of Aboriginal labour.

(Commonwealth of Australia, 1998: 62)

These factors aside, Aboriginal reality still refutes the notion that we are lazy and do not want to work. It is fair to say that Aboriginal people were the backbone of the pastoral industry in Queensland. Without them the industry would never have flourished. The same is true of the fishing and pearling industry despite the fact that many were not paid their wages (Commonwealth of Australia, 1998: 62; Kidd, 2000).

In 1977 many Aboriginal people from remote communities demanded the opportunity to work rather than receive 'sit down' money. Such demands saw the development of the CDEP (Community Development Employment Program) in which Aboriginal people consciously chose to 'work' for their dole rather than receive it for nothing. When white Australia was first presented with this option the notion was flatly rejected. Today more than 30,000 Aboriginal people actively participate in the CDEP program on their local communities (Commonwealth of Australia, 1998: 62). Against this background it is somewhat audacious to suggest that Aboriginal Australia is lazy and does not want to work. It is equally audacious for Mainstream Australia to describe with pejoratives the extent to which Aboriginal people are welfare dependent. To any Mainstream Australian

who looks with disdain upon the mess of Aboriginal welfare, I would suggest they not be too hasty to pour scorn. The mess they look upon is a mess they created themselves.

In Queensland alone the extent to which Aboriginal people were underpaid, or not paid at all in the first part of last century, is well documented. Consider the following information presented by Dr Ros Kidd (2002):

- Since the 1897 Protection Act the Queensland government could declare any Aboriginal a ward of state and control every aspect of their lives. People were forcibly interned on reserves;
- From 1904 all employment, wages and savings were controlled by government under compulsory labour contracts. Workers' wages went direct to a police protector apart from 'pocket money' retained by the employer for distribution during the work period;
- From 1910 government took levies from wages of people living on reserves;
- From 1919 government took levies from wages of those not living on reserves. Government set pastoral wages at 66% of white wage. 'Every Aboriginal' on a reserve must work for rations and shelter;
- In 1943 government set up Aboriginal Welfare Fund to receive wages, levies and profits from reserve enterprises, to be used to develop enterprises on reserves;
- From 1950s government pays a few shillings to a few key workers on reserves;
- In 1968 government starts wage economy on reserves; workers paid 50% state minimum wage. Equal wages in pastoral industry; forced contracting ceases;

- From 1972 forced control over wages and savings (bank books) ceases, although people have to request to be free from financial management;
- From 1979 government knows underpaying reserve workers is illegal; wage 72% of state minimum;
- In 1986 government paying reserve workers only 75% of award. In 1985 seven Palm Island workers start action in Human Rights Commission for legal wages;
- From 1987 government hands control of communities to Aboriginal councils while the budget is insufficient to cover award rates.

The degree of poverty and welfare dependency we observe today was engineered by Mainstream Australia. Clearly at the time Aboriginal people were not paid the correct wages owed to them. One must also note the extent to which persons other than the correct recipient controlled the entitled wages. As one speculates on what could have been, had Aboriginal people been afforded their human right of access to hard earned wages, it is impossible to imagine that as many Aboriginal people would find themselves in today's situation. It is not a social position one would consciously choose to be in and, if afforded basic human rights such as correct wages and access to wages earned, many Aboriginal people would have had the resources and capacity lead more much dignified lives.

There is little dignity in being stuck on welfare or having to depend on the government for your livelihood. As noted, it is not necessarily a situation in which one would choose consciously. Many offer simplistic solutions as Pauline Hanson did when she went to Palm Island. She suggested that all the problems that Palm Island faced could be fixed if they just cleaned the place up and started up a good tourism industry.

It is a pity she didn't come on the scene earlier. She could have solved all of these issues a long time ago! Of course one can't help being facetious in the face of such simplistic

solutions that to many seem so obvious. The problem is, however, that while many outsiders think the answers are easily seen, the insiders don't even know that there are questions presented. When one grows up in a household where harmful and toxic social issues such as alcoholism, domestic violence and child abuse is prominent, it is difficult to imagine a life, or that there even is a life, without these forces. In a sense many children grow up just assuming that these are normal traits of life. Tragically, some children grow up assuming that alcoholism, domestic violence and child abuse are normal traits of being Aboriginal.

What is at issue here is the persistent refusal by Hanson and others to see the problems within a totality or to see them as generated by the underlying relationship between White and Aboriginal Australia. Again to put this in terms of the model of the Bhaskarian model of reality outlined in Chapter One, the attention is all on the empirical rather than the real.

### **3.5 Aggressive, Violent, Troublemakers, Disrespectful**

As a child at school my brothers and I were always told by our mother 'You are more of a man if you walk away from a fight'. Usually we were told this when we were angry, sad or upset that someone at school had called us 'black coon, black nigger, black bastard', or somehow teased us because we were Aboriginal. Looking back, we know our mother was very right in her advice, but I guess as a child it was hard to process such advice while experiencing such emotion. Often we would walk away from such racist taunts, but sometimes, the annoying persistence of others would see us fight back with our fists. To many I am sure we appeared 'aggressive' or 'violent'. While it is difficult to quantify, I suspect many Aboriginal people will know the intense frustration of feeling that punching someone in the face is the only way to stop such harassment.

I am certain that many Aboriginal people will also relate directly with the next level of frustration and anger that emerges when you have a fight with a white child at school or in the street, and you are the one that gets the blame for it. As a child in school I have seen this occur on many occasions, and as a teacher in schools I have witnessed the same. Having experienced this next level frustration, I understand how easily one can appear to

be a 'troublemaker' or 'disrespectful'. This, however, is only schoolyard dynamics. What then of the anger and frustration felt at the hands of broader societal issues that have a much more intense impact on one's life?

Perhaps Dr Ros Kidd (2002) has provided the best vantage point from which other white people can reflect upon such tense emotion:

If you are driven from country which has sustained you for generations, if you are denied access to rental housing or casual accommodation, if those of you in work are denied the cash you are earning, if you are thereby struggling in shanties without the clean water, sanitation, shelter, food, clothing and schooling that is mandated for all other Australians - how does it feel to be told it is your failure to provide a good home environment that alerts authorities to the need to 'rescue' your children from your negligence. How does it feel to know, from experience, that you might never see your little ones again? To realise, from the cold hard facts of your position, that you can't afford to follow to be near them? To know, from bitter experience, that the authorities will neither listen to your protests nor respect your heartache?

Any human being faced with such circumstances could be forgiven for harbouring a degree of anger. Some of the world's greatest and most highly regarded human beings such as Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi have demonstrated that it is possible to emerge from such a point in a dignified way. These, however, are quite exceptional people and not everyone is a Mandela or a Gandhi. Some may say they provide evidence that it can be done, and use this to suggest there is no reason for Aboriginal people to harbour such anger, hatred and mistrust. Here again we are reminded of one of the luxuries of whiteness, which allows one to cast judgement without any need for justification. For many Mainstream Australians this is, as I have said above, a convenient stance, but one that is not productive, nor sustainable.

My initial reaction to allegations, that Aborigines are violent, would be to say “Well let us put you in the same circumstance and see how your reaction would appear to everyone!” Conveniently for some this is not a realistic proposition. One can hypothesise that few who were subjected to the lived experiences of Australian Aborigines would not get to a point as a result where they felt angry and intensely frustrated, and so appear to others as aggressive, violent or disrespectful troublemaker. Of course there can be no clarity about such a hypothesis. What must be made desperately clear, however, is that the emotions of fear, anger and frustration emerging from those who live such circumstances, is very, very real. It must also be noted that any efforts to deny, not acknowledge, or pretend they have no credible basis serves only to intensify the anger and frustration.

Any psychologist would understand that the reason we express anger is to have our situation acknowledged. The reason we express fear is so someone knows we are scared. The reason we express anger and aggression is so others know we are angry. We express pain so someone knows we are hurting and suffering. When our emotions are acknowledged we can do something about the situation and move on. Sadly, within Australia it seems we still have difficulty moving on because we still indulge in the destructive processes of denial (Hall, 1998: 203). This denial is clearly reflected in efforts to present Australia’s history as a ‘black armband view’ which must be tucked away and never seen again. Perhaps one of the best at reflecting such denial is the current Australian leader and Prime Minister John Howard who has suggested that:

The ‘black armband view’ of our past reflects a belief that most Australian history since 1788 has been little more than a disgraceful story of imperialism, exploitation, racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination (Hall, 1998).

As one reflects on the realities of Australia’s tragic and disgraceful history it is not surprising that some want to pretend it never occurred. Such pretending, however, clearly fails to acknowledge emotions of hurt, anger and immense sadness. Failure to acknowledge these emotions escalates the emotion and fuels it with rage. Is it any wonder that one might appear aggressive and violent, or a disrespectful troublemaker?

A similar effect is likely to emerge when a group of people make a tremendous contribution to society, only to be subjected to perceptions that they do not contribute to society at all. Earlier in this chapter the extent to which Aboriginal people contributed to early industries in Queensland was discussed. Implicit within the perception that Aboriginal people are 'lazy', 'welfare dependent' is the notion that they do not deserve access to opportunities developed and presented to address the levels of poverty engineered. Here it is worthwhile reflecting on just some areas in which Aboriginal people have contributed to society in Queensland.

Again Kidd (2002) provides some insight into the extent to which Aboriginal Queenslanders have contributed to their society despite the perception that they have not. From 1933 the Queensland State government froze most of savings in investments to earn extra interest.

- 1940 \$9.6 million invested – interest bonus to government \$119,652 pa;
- 1950 \$7.3 million invested – interest \$127,366 p.a. to Welfare Fund;
- 1960 \$10.4 million invested – interest \$286,673 p.a. to Welfare Fund;
- 1970 \$7.3 million invested – interest \$143,544 p.a. to Welfare Fund;
- 1975 \$2.7 million invested – interest \$97,419 p.a. to Welfare Fund.

While many Mainstream Australians complain about the extent of Aboriginal welfare dependency, they do not realise that millions of dollars that rightfully should have gone into the pockets of Aboriginal people, were actually syphoned off by governments to build essential social infrastructure such as state hospitals. Many who harbour a perception that Aboriginal people do not contribute to society should in fact understand that many Aboriginal people, to their personal detriment, contributed greatly to society. Reflection on such diabolical process does make one angry and perhaps appear aggressive to others. A sense of disrespect is also fostered. Again, failure to acknowledge this sense of anger and disrespect escalates the feeling to a point where one could certainly appear aggressive and a troublemaker.

### **3.6 Good sportsmen/women, Good footy players**

Some might think it is great to be described as a great footy player, or a great sports person. And for those who dream of being a great sportsperson, it probably is a good thing. For those who do not necessarily aspire to become a professional sportsperson, it may even be detrimental to be described in this way. You will recall, from the introduction to this thesis, my own personal experience at high school where teachers would describe my brother and me as 'good footballers'. At the time we probably both enjoyed it. I know I did because if anything it probably overstated my ability as a rugby league player.

These descriptions, however, were at the expense of any perception about me as an academic achiever. Because most teachers at school, who probably thought they were doing the right thing, seemed more intent on my ability as a football player, my academic potential was something that would lay dormant for several more years until it was discovered and shown to me by Gary MacLennan, my lecturer Kelvin Grove Teachers' College. The rest of this story is largely encapsulated within the introduction to this thesis, but it is useful to consider once more just how many other Aboriginal intellectuals have not been heard, simply because many were more interested in their sporting prowess.

At this point it is worth noting that being considered a great sports person doesn't necessarily mean one is respected by all. The late Charles Perkins, a tireless Aboriginal campaigner for equal rights, played soccer for Australia, and probably enjoyed many tough encounters with his teammates on the field. Off the field there were other, perhaps tougher encounters with racism. He had to stand outside the pub while his teammates would pass his beer out to him. Eddie Gilbert played Sheffield Shield cricket for Queensland, bowled the great Sir Donald Bradman for a duck, and still had to eat separately from his teammates (Coleman & Edwards, 2002).

In contemporary times it is tremendous to see Aboriginal people, like Gordon Tallis, playing in the Australian Rugby League team. It seems he is fairly well respected by

mainstream Australia for his achievements. Up with him are many other accomplished Aboriginal athletes, including the supreme Cathy Freeman. All are seemingly embraced and respected by Mainstream Australia. As long as they keep their mouth firmly shut on issues affecting Aboriginal people! One recalls here the controversy aroused and the criticism from Arthur Tunstall, senior Australian Commonwealth Games official, when Freeman carried the Aboriginal flag and the Australian flag in a victory lap after winning at the Commonwealth Games in 1994 (Hudson). Such controversy exists within other realms of Australian sport.

Anthony Mundine, a very proud young Aboriginal man, and former world middleweight boxing champion has done little to revere himself with the Australian public. He is obviously a gifted sportsman, having quit a major contract with the National Rugby League, to turn his hand to boxing. Mundine set about deliberately using his increased profile to speak out about issues of racism in Australia, and the discrepancies that exist between white and Aboriginal Australia, as discussed earlier in this chapter. While it is part of the Australian fabric to embrace our sports stars, Mundine, who definitely is a sports star, is just too unpalatable it seems. The reason for this is very clear. He is an outspoken young Aboriginal man who will stand up for his people, and he will point out to Mainstream Australia, what he believes is wrong. This generates a sense of discomfort for Mainstream Australia and accordingly Mundine does not enjoy the public support that he deserves.

It seems Mainstream Australia likes the opportunity to embrace Aboriginal people as great sportsmen as long as they remain 'just sportsmen' and not make anyone feel uncomfortable by using their high profile to expose or make Mainstream Australia look or feel bad. One should acknowledge here that being talented at sport has not always guaranteed acceptance for us Aborigines. Here the legendary Aboriginal Rugby League Arthur Beetson who has played many tests for Australia since, and had a long and prolific career from 1966 to 1981, says:

Sadly, there are many stories of people who chose to deny their Aboriginality, and pretended they were Maoris or South Sea Islanders, presumably because such

a pretence boosted their chances of being accepted, or getting ahead. Frankie Reys, who won the 1973 Melbourne Cup on Cola Supreme, is one such example from the world of sport. A good, tough fighter of the 1950s named Cec Meredith, who came from Cherbourg but was promoted as the 'Maori Warrior', is another.

(Beetson, 2004: 294)

Throughout this chapter I have examined white perceptions of being Aboriginal. In my efforts to do this I have presented a range of data which asserts the notion that Mainstream Australia has a very negative and quite inaccurate perception of what being Aboriginal means. To some degree these perceptions have been necessarily challenged.

One of the great tragedies of this data is that the perception Mainstream Australia has of Aboriginal people is a long, long way from the realities of who we really are. One cannot help feeling a sense of frustration upon hearing such negative perceptions and adjectives presented so consistently. Particularly as I know from my own life experiences that the type of people Mainstream Australia is describing, is not that of the dignified old people who nurtured my spirit and my pride in being Aboriginal. In many ways the development and perpetuation of such appallingly negative and incorrect perceptions is just as unfair as the discriminatory behaviour that has accompanied it. What is also unfair is that very few people, realistically, have ever been made to be accountable for such behaviour in the past, and furthermore, that it continues today in a way that is not questioned or critiqued seriously. Throughout this chapter I have emphasised that the white perceptions that I have uncovered are not what we really are. What I would like to stress in this context is that, in a philosophical sense, the problem is due to the denial of ontological stratification. The actuality of Aboriginal Australia is confused with the reality of Aboriginal Australia.

My research shows that Mainstream Australia is deeply committed to the view that we Aborigines are at best what might be termed basket cases. In Bhaskarian terms we are regarded as being without emergent properties, or the capacity for change. Bhaskar notes that:

in emergence, generally, new beings (entities, totalities, concepts) are generated out of pre-existing material from which they could have been neither induced nor deduced (Bhaskar, 1993: 49)

For Bhaskar in emergence there is a dialectic of the actual and the real (Bhaskar, 1993: 237). But this is precisely what is denied. What I have tried to establish in this chapter is that Aboriginal Australia is indeed plagued with constraints, which prevent us from ‘absenting absences (ills, constraints, untruths etc)’ (Bhaskar, 1993: 297).

My own experience of being Aboriginal is that we Aboriginal people have what Bhaskar terms ‘an inner urge’ to be free from these constraints (Bhaskar, 1993: 299). Indeed this whole thesis is dedicated to countering the untruths about my people. Perhaps the greatest tragedy though is that these untruths have in a very destructive way, directly influenced the development of Aboriginal perceptions of being Aboriginal. It is to this topic that we now turn.

## **CHAPTER FOUR – ABORIGINAL PERCEPTIONS OF BEING ABORIGINAL**

*It doesn't matter how much milk you put in coffee, it's still coffee!*

Inevitably people change and cultures change as a result of technological and sociological influences and other influences. In this regard Aboriginal society is no different to any other society throughout the world (Commonwealth of Australia, 1998: 63; Craven, 1999: 28). Clearly, white Australia has been and still is a major technological and sociological force surrounding and influencing Aboriginal Australia. As we saw in our discussion of Martin Nakata's work in Chapter Two, he calls this the 'cultural interface' (Nakata, 2002: 236). Marcia Langton uses the term 'intersubjectivity' to describe much the same phenomenon (Langton, 1993: 32). I have used the term 'contact zone' for the same purposes. What is vital to understand though is that this underlying relationship between white and Aboriginal Australia is the source of the structures and mechanisms that generate much of phenomena that belong to the domains of the actual and the empirical. Moreover, and this is of the utmost importance, it is not a matter of differing epistemologies or perspectives as the poststructuralists would have us believe, but rather of a relationship which is truly real.

It is crucial to consider, against the background of the information presented in Chapter Two, the direction of this force and the extent to which it influences the developments of Aboriginal Australia. It is my belief that Aboriginal Australia must be extremely cautious about the extent to which our development is influenced by a sociological and technological force that harbours a very negative and inaccurate perception of who we really are. What can and does occur is that because mainstream Australia generates highly negative perceptions of what being Aboriginal is, Aboriginal people end up internalising this very negative perception. This influences how some Aboriginal people conduct themselves, and in a cyclical way, this in turn reinforces mainstream Australia's negative perception of who we are. This is manifested in a number of ways.

In the first part of this chapter I discuss my perceptions of the ways in which Aboriginal people relate to, as Sacks says, 'doing being Aboriginal' (1984). I do not pretend that these observations are in some sense, a scientific overview, nor that the strategies discussed have in some fashion been validated according to conventional scientific canons. Rather, following the example of a noted sociologist such as Goffman (1960), here I outline my observations of my interactions with Aboriginal people, as an Aboriginal man, over many years. That is, I what I seek to do here follow in the footsteps of Goffman (1960), and describe commonalities of experience across a range of circumstances.

The extent to which some Aboriginal people seemingly conform to mainstream perceptions of being Aboriginal is perhaps the greatest tragedy, particularly when this phenomenon is observed amongst young Aboriginal people. Casual observations suggest that such behaviour is seemingly more pronounced as you observe Aboriginal youth with lighter coloured skin. It would seem they know from their parents and grandparents they are Aboriginal, but perhaps because of their lighter coloured skin, they feel they need to prove it more to themselves and others. They do this in a range of ways. They may have that extra 'twang' in their Aboriginal accent, which is much more pronounced than that of their peers, or they may have their body encumbered by red, black and yellow: the colours of the Aboriginal flag. Neither of these manifestations would give undue cause for concern. What is disturbing, however, is the tendency to behave in the generally accepted way that Aboriginal people are meant to behave through the process of counter-identification, which has been discussed in chapter One. Confronted with this phenomenon and its inevitable reaction from white Australia, we must ask: who has the strongest influence over the perception of who Aboriginal people are and how we behave? The answer, I would maintain, is Mainstream Australia: and the previous chapter has given us a very clear insight into how they have defined us in the past, and how they perceive us today.

Here lies the central and most crucial point of this entire thesis. Aboriginal Australia must not be dominated by mainstream Australia's perception of who we are. We as Aboriginal people must define who we are, based on our own Aboriginal terms of reference. The

consequences of not doing this are dire. If we fail to engage this issue now then we run the very real risk of losing our Aboriginal identity to the extent that we are either indistinguishable from white Australians, or caged by the very negative identity they have developed for us.

This thesis attempts to identify and discuss a range of ‘ways of being’ in relation to notions of ‘being Aboriginal’. This is an extremely complex discussion and one which will be conducted outside the force field of empiricism, though the chapter will have its empirical moment. However, I will attempt initially a wide-ranging discussion of the field of black–white and black relations. This discussion will deal with the lived experience of Aboriginal Australians and will adapt many of their ways of speaking and categorizing. A great number of the categories I will employ may be regarded as being outside normal philosophical discourse. Some of them may even be taboo in ‘polite society’. I do not apologize for this because my primary intent is to present a discussion, which is not **about** Aboriginal Australians, but rather is meaningful **to** them and to accomplish that I have to engage with how they make sense of their world.

Historical and sociological processes have clearly challenged psychological notions of being Aboriginal, and some of these challenges will become apparent throughout this chapter. From here on, this chapter will discuss the ways of being of those who:

- are biologically Aboriginal, but seemingly reinforce their identity by subscribing to the very negative mainstream Australian perceptions of being Aboriginal;
- are biologically Aboriginal, but have been reluctant to admit it until a later stage in their life;
- are biologically Aboriginal, but are ashamed, pretending that they are not, and choosing to live within a white man’s framework;
- are biologically Aboriginal, but for various reasons were brought up away from Aboriginal family and Aboriginal ways of being;

- are simply not Aboriginal, but pretend that they are to be advantaged by affirmative action policies;
- are biologically Aboriginal; have actively rejected mainstream Australian perceptions of being Aboriginal; have identified with Aboriginal perceptions of being Aboriginal all of their lives; and have never pretended to be anything else.

Importantly this chapter will focus mainly on the latter by synthesising what they describe as notions of being Aboriginal. As noted in the introduction, Chapters 5 and 6, will discuss how to reinforce such notions in a school setting, and what outcomes arise from their reinforcement.

Firstly, let us consider those who are biologically Aboriginal, but seemingly reinforce their identity by subscribing to the very negative mainstream Australian perceptions of being Aboriginal. One might refer to them as a ‘white man’s black fulla’. In presenting the term ‘white man’s black fulla’, I refer to the notion that some Aboriginal people evolve into a way of being, that white people engineer and control. This perception of being Aboriginal has been so cleverly engineered that some subscribe to it, to the extent that they criticise other Aboriginal people for not doing the same. Somehow they have managed to get us to turn on each other in a way that is much more destructive than the use of native police. Historically the native police were recruited and convinced to take on the role of catching other Aboriginal people on the behalf of white people.

Though it attempts to be balanced in its account of the role of the police, the Reconciliation and Social Justice Project gives the following account of their work:

The first experiments with ‘native police’ forces commenced in Victoria in 1837, with subsequent forces set up in 1839 and 1842. Paramilitary in character, the prestigious Port Phillip Native Police Corps were proudly uniformed and mounted on good horses. As well as providing a deterrent to Aboriginal attacks on pastoral properties, they played a wider policing role, capturing non-Aboriginal offenders,

and later policing the diggings and escorting gold into Melbourne. Their story was one of cooperation with Europeans; leading Aboriginal men applied for recruitment and then actively pursued their position to their own advantage. They refused to capture kinsmen by claiming inability to track them, while eagerly pursuing someone from an 'enemy' group. It seems they were also involved in some murders of other Aboriginal people (Reconciliation and Social Justice Library, 1996).

Today, many Aboriginal people are seemingly recruited, without being aware of it, not for the purposes of 'catching', but for the purposes of 'dragging us down' to where mainstream Australia believes we should be by conforming to the negative perceptions discussed in the previous chapter.

Many Aboriginal people who achieve success in mainstream society can illustrate this point easily by reflecting on the many times when other Aboriginal people accuse them of being 'too flash' or 'up town' or a 'coconut'. When one is referred to as a 'coconut' the suggestion is that they are black on the outside, but white on the inside. In a similar vein, the notion of being too flash or up town suggests that because one is successful they have become like in the tall poppy syndrome, too good for their peers. In a sense they might be considered to have grown 'too big for their boots' when, in fact, they may just have grown too big for the boots that mainstream Australia insists that we wear.

It would seem that those not conforming to negative perceptions of being Aboriginal are perceived by those who do, as conforming or colluding with mainstream Australia. Implicit within this, is a degree of expectation that we all be like the so-called 'real blacks', and make mainstream Australia uncomfortable by living out the 'wild Aboriginal' stereotype they have prepared for us. But while there may be some degree of discomfort inflicted by a sense of 'bucking the system' it is only to a degree that can be easily dismissed. After all, who can take seriously the concerns of one who is described as a drunk, lazy, aggressive, welfare dependant etc? It seems this way of being Aboriginal has been engineered by mainstream Australia to ensure they can proceed without being made too uncomfortable, or accountable for their actions of the past,

present or future. What does make mainstream Australia extremely uncomfortable is an Aboriginal person who does not conform to the negative perception of being Aboriginal, and is very strongly anchored by Aboriginal perceptions of being Aboriginal. This will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

In my own personal circumstances other Aboriginal people have tried at times to suggest I am not Aboriginal because I am a 'coconut' or 'too flash' or I choose not to get drunk with them. If having to get drunk was a true aspect of being Aboriginal, then personally I would not be interested in maintaining and/or developing this aspect of my identity. Realistically, being Aboriginal has nothing to do with how much alcohol one can drink, how we can stand over our women and children, or how we can wallow in self-pity at the bottom of society. Putting others down and believing that we must aspire downwards in order to be more Aboriginal, is being no more than a 'white man's black fulla'.

Those conforming to this particular notion of being Aboriginal, or interiorising the negative stereotype, have a complex journey to make. The need for external assistance to undertake such a journey is probable, albeit extremely difficult to provide. It is though highly simplistic for anyone to sit at the edge and judge such people. Often questions are presented along the lines of 'Why don't they just get off their arse and do something about their situation? Or 'Why don't they just give up the drink, get a job, and save some money?'

To many, such questions seem obvious, and indeed so too do the solutions. It is likely, however, that many who have interiorised the negative perceptions, which we discussed in the previous chapter, not only fail to see the answers, they may not even know that such questions exist! Implicit here is a sense of powerlessness, which is symptomatic of the beliefs harboured. To some end, this sense of powerlessness transposes itself into 'victim status', as a means of survival.

Victim status as a means of survival has some Aboriginal people interiorising mainstream Australia's negative perception of being Aboriginal to the extent that they can see themselves in no other way, and are seemingly not ready or willing to embrace the

challenges of moving beyond such status. There is a tendency here to wallow in self pity, or perpetuate being Aboriginal as ‘an excuse’ for things such as indulgence in alcoholism and other forms of social dysfunction. It is not my intention here at to suggest in any way that all cases of alcoholism and other forms of social dysfunction are simply ‘just’ the result of people feeling sorry for themselves, or desiring to be victims. It does, however, assert the need for many Aboriginal people who are intent on remaining society’s victims, to challenge the status quo that they have established for themselves. The status quo referred to here is the one in which many Aboriginal people take the easy option by rendering themselves powerless, and continually blaming white people for their own situation. In this circumstance some will make comments such as:

*You’re just picking on me because I am black!*

Sadly, this has become a convenient excuse for some Aboriginal people who exercise such processes to point the ‘blame’ elsewhere, rather than reflecting inwards and prompting some personal change. Notwithstanding, these comments must be understood within the complexity of the context of interiorising a negative identity here. As alluded to in the previous chapter, it is often too easy just to latch on to the part of the discussion that suggests Aboriginal people must stop feeling sorry for themselves and get on with life. I feel obliged to state clearly that the challenges presented here are intended only to those who interiorise negative perceptions of being Aboriginal, and not for the purposes of colluding with mainstream Australia sink the boot into Aborigines. It is no part of my intention to partake in the process of blaming the victim.

Those who are biologically Aboriginal, but seemingly reinforce their identity by subscribing to the very negative mainstream Australian perceptions of being Aboriginal, can be destructive to the extent they continually pull other Aboriginal people down. This is of particular concern for many young Aboriginal people who often are subjected to such pressure to internalise the negative identity created for them, rather than stand up and be successful, and in so doing, run the risk of being accused of being a ‘coconut’ or ‘too flash’. Sadly, in many cases, young Aboriginal people often find it much easier to run with their peers, or the community pressure, and fall back into living out the negative

perception of being Aboriginal. For some this result becomes highly problematic and self-destructive. However, it is perhaps not nearly as destructive and problematic as what happens to those who are biologically Aboriginal, but have been reluctant to admit this until a later stage in life.

Historically it has seemingly been easier for some Aboriginal people to deny their Aboriginal identity. As one Aboriginal person notes:

*In school it wasn't talked about and I can remember Dad saying if anybody asked when we were young, 'Just say you're Indian.' It was only for protection (Tweedie, 2001: 43).*

This person is quoted from a book entitled *Indigenous Australians: Standing Strong*. There are some issues one cannot help wondering about here. For instance, did this person pretend they were Indian when they signed up to receive an Aboriginal study grant from the federal government? One must also wonder about just how one can 'stand strong' when they pretend their foundation does not exist. Aboriginal Australia would call such people 'Johnny come latelys'. Put simply, these are people who grew up and acted 'like white' within a white man's framework. This includes subscription to a negative perception of what being Aboriginal is. They do, however, admit they are Aboriginal, but may not have done so before affirmative action type programs were established to remedy social imbalances in areas such as education, employment and health.

Reflection on personal experience reveals that there are countless incidences of Aboriginal people pretending not to be Aboriginal and it is worth exploring the motives here. I firmly believe there are two reasons for this.

Firstly, one can assume that historically life was genuinely easier and conflict was avoided, when one pretended to be something other than Aboriginal, particularly in a country where Aboriginal children were stolen from their parents and where, as we have seen in the previous chapter, to be Aboriginal was to be the Feared/Despised Other. In the

introduction to this thesis I discussed personal accounts of abuse directed towards my family simply because we were Aboriginal. In many instances these forms of abuse went well beyond verbal and emotional abuse, to the extent that peoples' lives were certainly endangered. In addition to this many Aborigines have been and still are discriminated against in so many ways. Against this background I cannot help feeling some empathy for those who choose to deny being Aboriginal.

The other reason one might choose to deny being Aboriginal is that they, too, like the 'white man's black fulla', subscribe to mainstream Australia's negative perception of being Aboriginal. Unlike the former, they choose not to internalise the negative perception, and find it easier to grow up and act 'like white' Australians. In many ways these people sell out on their Aboriginal identity and they become assimilated. One of the problems here is this type of person enjoys identifying with mainstream Australia, by being a good mainstream Australian, and in so doing, turns on their own people. This becomes highly problematic in many ways.

One of the ways such people get themselves to fit better into mainstream Australia is to do the things that mainstream Australia does. In terms of the Pecheux model, this is called 'identification'. One of the things that mainstream Australia does is keep Aboriginal people down, or colloquially, 'kick us in the guts'. As those striving to fit into mainstream Australia do the same, 'kick us in the guts', they become very well supported quite readily by those who they aspire to be with, thus sugaring a relationship that, however, may never ever achieve the status of full equality.

The problem then for Aboriginal people who are not looking to fit into mainstream Australia, and rather, retain the truer and more positive aspects of being Aboriginal, is that we must be subjected to the stupidity of a mainstream Australia that thinks it knows about aspects of being Aboriginal, just because they are in cahoots with an Aboriginal person who is prepared to gain acceptance by 'kicking other Aboriginal people in the guts'. In America such people were referred to as 'Uncle Toms' based upon the fictitious character created by Harriet Beecher Stowe, who was intent on diligently attending to the demands of his white master. Eventually the term 'Uncle Tom' evolved beyond being a

character, to becoming a construct, typified by an identity crisis amongst black people who wanted to enjoy the trappings of being white, even though they could never be white (Younge, 2002).

In Australia what these people do is give mainstream Australia an excuse to ignore the realities of Australia's ugly and complex Aboriginal history. They also help mainstream Australia legitimise their own inaccurate and often racist perceptions of Aboriginal people. At the very worst what they do is disenfranchise Aboriginal perceptions of being Aboriginal.

Many white Australians feel vindicated in their racist views when they can say, One of my friends is Aboriginal! Of course one of their friends may indeed be Aboriginal; but they have grown up and/or acted 'like white' people. Even still this does not provide their mainstream Australian friends with a licence to harbour racist points of view, or exhibit disgustingly racist tendencies. Such mainstream Australians would not be so vindicated if they did not have an Aboriginal person beside them harbouring the same viewpoints. Put simply, when Aboriginal people kick other Aboriginal people in the guts, they justify mainstream Australia's efforts to do the same.

A classic example of this was when Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party dug up some poor old Aboriginal man who was saying that Aboriginal people should wake up to themselves. He was highly critical of Aboriginal people and seemingly without any real understanding of the complexities of the issues presented. Having him aligned with the One Nation Party meant they, too, could feel justified in expressing their racist attitudes, without any need to explore the fullest context of the issues they discussed. So when an Aboriginal person says, 'Aborigines should all get off their arse and wake up to themselves!' white people run quickly to support them. This is because, firstly, people have a tendency to be drawn to those who reflect similar views, and secondly, because it lets them think that such association validates their inaccurate and negative perceptions. Against this background Mainstream Australia can pretend that the notion of 'fair go mate' is real.

In America there are some interesting parallels worth observing. One is the role of Chief Justice Thomas who was appointed to the Supreme Court of the USA in 1991. Himself the beneficiary of affirmative actions programs, Thomas has consistently opposed affirmative action for other minorities throughout his career. (Merida & Fetcher, 2002)

Here Ransby and Harris (2001) comment on the manner in which ... brown faces are recruited to the top as long as they go along with the silencing of black sentiments at the bottom. Despite this political manoeuvre, they warn that:

... neither Clarence Thomas, Colin Powell nor Condoleeza Rice can disguise the sentiments of the overwhelming majority of African-Americans. Ninety percent of the black electorate voted against George Bush in this election. They did so with good reason, given that his policy objectives portend even deeper retrenchment in the areas of civil rights enforcement, economic justice and other areas of concern to black communities all over the country (Ransby and Harris, 2001).

Despite knowing or sensing that the great Australian notion of a 'fair go mate' seems only to exist for those who are Caucasian, it will not be challenged by those Aboriginal people who find it easier conforming and being 'like white'. To a degree this is already observable as we examine the practice of some of today's black bureaucrats who are more focussed on doing things 'by the book' rather than seeking to change or challenge ways of doing things. And of course 'the book' that they so rigorously attend to is a manifesto largely developed by mainstream Australia. In these situations, and with these types of Aboriginal people, mainstream Australia is left largely unchallenged when indeed they should be challenged. If those Aboriginal people who have grown up and act 'like white' are not willing or able to challenge mainstream Australia, then perhaps they are better off doing what some Aboriginal people do, and pretend they are not Aboriginal at all.

This phenomenon of choosing not to identify as Aboriginal is observable, yet perhaps not so readily. In Australia, where there is a tendency to idolise sportsmen and more

particularly football players, one of the countries best-known rugby league players, and one of our most renowned ex-soccer players, are indeed of Aboriginal descent. Yet when approaching the issue of identity in their published autobiographies, both seemed to uncomfortably avoid discussion about being Aboriginal, to assert quite strongly that they saw themselves as 'Australian'. For many young Aboriginal children who cheer loudly for these two as their favourite footballers, it is a shame to lose such an opportunity to be a much-needed role model with whom they could identify directly.

The tragic case of the talented Cherbourg cricketer, Eddie Gilbert, is a paradigm for the treatment of Aborigines. In his short first class career, he took 87 wickets in 23 matches for Queensland, but was never picked for Australia.

Gilbert's development was affected by the prevailing attitude to Aboriginals in white Australian society. At a time when good fast bowlers in that country were scarce, he would have been a valuable spearhead to the Australian attack before Grimmett and O'Reilly took over. This was never to be (Cricinfo Australia).

Such injustices help explain perhaps why one would completely deny being Aboriginal. As discussed earlier in this chapter, there are again seemingly two main reasons for this. Firstly, and rightly or wrongly, many may simply find it makes life easier by pretending to be something other than Aboriginal, and secondly, many may simply be tricked into believing that being Aboriginal is something bad. And as for mainstream Australians, it is a part of their 'truth' if you like, that being Aboriginal is apparently an extremely negative thing. Therefore it becomes a part of the 'truth' of those Aboriginal people who are growing up and living 'like white' Australia. Though there are some who unashamedly pretend publicly to be something other than Aboriginal, but in the seclusion of an office where one must fill in forms to access government programs, that discriminate positively for Aboriginal people, they somehow find a way to own their Aboriginal identity. There is a major issue emanating from this that is worth discussing.

The affirmative-action type programs in question here are designed to facilitate improved access to education and employment areas, as well as career paths where Aboriginal

people have tended to have limited involvement. The philosophy is that by giving people access to such areas we create role models that eventually will inspire other young Aboriginal people to move into the same area, and without the assistance of affirmative action policies and programs. Paramount in this philosophy, though, is the need for young Aboriginal people to be able to 'connect' with those who are supposedly the role models. Here then lies a fundamental problem.

If those acting as the role models have grown up in and act within a 'like white' framework, then it is extremely difficult for young Aboriginal people to identify or connect with them. Even those who have grown up in an Aboriginal framework, but, with their new found 'status', forget about where they have come from, and start acting 'like white' people, then again it is difficult for young Aboriginal people to identify with them, thus defeating the purpose of the affirmative action strategy. The notion of Aboriginal people accessing such programs and forgetting where they have come from is not the only problem with such policies and programs.

There is of course another 'type' that are simply not of Aboriginal descent but claim that they are, in order to access advantages from Government initiatives to create opportunities for Aboriginal people. Their degree of unscrupulousness warrants investigation more than discussion.

Growing up in Bundaberg I recall my mother coming home from community meetings angered and disgusted about a particular family who were claiming benefits from Aboriginal programs on the grounds that they were Aboriginal. The reason she was so disgusted and angered was that prior to the existence of these Aboriginal programs, the same people in question vehemently denied being Aboriginal. The reason they denied being Aboriginal was because at the time issues such as racial abuse were more obvious and less questioned. Shopkeepers and hotel owners could refuse access to Aboriginal people without retribution. The family in question went to the extent of placing an ad in the local paper to state publicly that they were 'not Aboriginal' but rather they were Senegalese.

In the mid to late 1970s the Commonwealth developed and implemented programs designed to address Aboriginal disadvantage. All of a sudden, this particular family declared they were Aboriginal and lined up to access the benefits of these Aboriginal programs. I am sure this story is not uncommon throughout Australia, and while I am unaware of any colloquial term for them I can describe them as little more than 'unscrupulous fakes'.

The 'Uncle Toms', the 'Johnny come latelys' and the 'unscrupulous fakes' create many challenges to our ability to nurture that sense of being Aboriginal. In many ways they have the effect of disenfranchising any sense of Aboriginal identity or being Aboriginal. Potentially this could contribute greatly to the quest for assimilation of Aboriginal people into mainstream Australia to the extent that we are indistinguishable from any other Australians. This would be a tragedy not only for us but also for all of Australia.

Of these types I have most sympathy for the 'Uncle Toms' and acknowledge the complexities that might drive them to such a way of being. Earlier I discussed the extent to which mainstream Australia bombards all of us with their negative perception of what being Aboriginal is, and extent to which Aboriginal people were and in many ways still are subjected to poor treatment and poor social conditions. Aboriginal people were, and still are, getting in fights at school and kicked out of pubs, being refused access to shops and services, having their movements controlled by Governments, and dying at a much earlier age than other Australians. I also discussed with reference to 'the Stolen Generation Report' the way in which Aboriginal people were actively taught that being Aboriginal was somehow 'evil' or bad. Against this background who would want to identify as being Aboriginal when there was some chance they could somehow get away with identifying as something else?

Nevertheless, the psychological damage done by refusing to acknowledge one's Aboriginality must be considerable. In this context is hoped that the above discussion and the research and the concepts which I will present below can show a 'way back' for those Aboriginal people who are Aboriginal, and who have somehow, actively or passively, chosen to be something other than Aboriginal for the purposes of social survival. It is also

hoped that they can see just how their inhibitions about 'being Aboriginal' are the result of being tricked by mainstream Australia into subscribing to a negative perception of being Aboriginal. Consequently, they could use the concepts provided here to develop an understanding of a more positive and accurate sense of being Aboriginal that they should feel proud to identify with. Notwithstanding, should they choose to embrace a newer, more accurate and positive Aboriginal identity, they must be prepared to make a substantial personal journey before claiming to be an expert on all matters Aboriginal.

As in traditional times one must still demonstrate knowledge, skill and maturity before being invited to the circle by those who are already well respected. This is one of those aspects of being Aboriginal that is extremely difficult to explain in a white man's language, but it is a cultural protocol that one seemingly 'just knows' as a result of growing up within an Aboriginal framework. The breach, if you like, of this cultural protocol is a particular trait of those who 'all of a sudden' decide that because they want access to Aboriginal programs, or reconnect with their family, or for whatever reason, want to identify as being Aboriginal. This breach is characterised by a tendency to be over-aggressive on Aboriginal issues, in the same manner as a reformed alcoholic is staunchly against people touching a drop of alcohol, or a reformed Christian insists we all live by the bible. It is as if they try to make up for the time they lost by pretending to not be Aboriginal by developing themselves into the red, black and yellow, or even exotic Aborigine. Sadly this is not a dignified process and clearly not aligned with ways of being Aboriginal.

The greatest tragedy reflected in this discussion is that somehow many Aboriginal people, too, have developed, as a part of their truth, the notion that being Aboriginal is a negative thing. Of particular concern is that many young Aboriginal children have been 'tricked' into believing that being Aboriginal means conforming to mainstream Australia's negative perception of being Aboriginal.

#### **4.1 Reflections on Research**

In the previous chapter I discussed some research in which I asked a broad range of people, ‘How does mainstream Australia describe Aboriginal people?’ In a similar way I asked many young Aboriginal people ‘How does mainstream Australia describe you, or describe Aboriginal people?’ Not surprisingly, their answers were quite similar. What is of great concern though is that on every occasion, as I would write their responses in front of them, I would deliberately write the word ‘intelligent’ for them all to see. On every occasion upon seeing the word ‘intelligent’, there was some gesture of laughter. It was as if the notion of Aboriginal people being described as intelligent was some kind of joke. This perhaps says something about how young Aboriginal people see themselves, or maybe how they see mainstream Australia’s perceptions of them, or both. Whichever way there is great cause for concern.

Against this background, it is crucial that we reflect on what has been said by those Aboriginal people who have identified as being Aboriginal all their lives, regardless of the discomfort of owning their Aboriginal identity. It is extremely beneficial to establish some sense of what they say is ‘being Aboriginal’, and get young Aboriginal people to connect with that. Notwithstanding, there is unquestionably some degree of urgency around the need to do this, given the extent to which young people are greatly influenced by an extremely broad and complex range of mediums.

So what do Aboriginal people, who have never in their lives, regardless of its complexity, had any hang-ups about being Aboriginal, have to say about being Aboriginal? What do Aboriginal people, who have never pretended to be anything other than Aboriginal, say being Aboriginal is? Those Aboriginal people who have never been tricked into believing that being Aboriginal is something negative; those who have never been tricked into interiorising mainstream Australia’s negative perception of being Aboriginal; what do they describe as being Aboriginal?

Given that the remainder of this thesis will examine the impact of reinforcing Aboriginal perceptions of being Aboriginal in a school setting, it follows then that most of those

interviewed are from close to the school in question. To some extent this study may have been enhanced by soliciting insights into notions of being Aboriginal, from Aboriginal Australians around the country. This, however, was not possible and I would question whether the extent to which the features of discussion would have gone too far beyond what is presented for discussion here. Moreover, this thesis acknowledges the need for further research to compare my findings with research conducted with metropolitan Aboriginal people, urban Aboriginal people and those who live in remote communities where some traditional Aboriginal languages and ceremony remain intact.

To reiterate, however, such a study is well beyond the scope and capacity of this thesis, and as such, a more discrete focus group was finalised via snowball sampling techniques. In total I engaged in conversations with 18 Aboriginal people. Of these 18 people, 6 worked as teacher aides, 2 worked as teachers, 4 worked in labouring occupations, 2 were housekeepers, and 4 worked in the higher education arena. Of the participants, 10 were male and 8 were female.

On each occasion I recorded the interviews and later had the discussions transcribed for analyses. In selecting individuals to participate in a focussed interview I really only established one criteria for those selected to be a part of the discussion: namely, that they were Aboriginal, and identified as such. From then on I set out to explore, with each participant, a deeper sense of what being Aboriginal meant to them. Each interview lasted for approximately 20 to 30 minutes.

The participants were presented with some very simple questions in an effort to explore some very complex thought processes. The questions presented to most of the interviewees were:

What is it that makes an Aboriginal person Aboriginal in today's society?

What is it that makes Aboriginal people different to mainstream Australians?

What do today's young Aboriginal people need to understand about being Aboriginal in today's society?

From here on in this chapter their responses will be discussed, and particular emphasis placed on those concepts identified by all of the respondents. The relationship between their responses and Aboriginal literature about Aboriginal identity will also be analysed.

Perhaps the first and most obvious feature of being Aboriginal is that one must be of Aboriginal descent, that is, a descendant of Australia's first people. As noted in the introduction to this thesis, the Commonwealth of Australia (1998: 60) acknowledges this as part of its three-part administrative definition which suggests that an Aboriginal person is one who:

- i) is of Aboriginal descent;
- ii) identifies as an Aboriginal person; and
- iii) is accepted as such by the community in which he or she lives.

Given this definition's somewhat 'administrative' nature and purpose, it obviously fails dramatically to articulate the richness, complexity and sophistication of what it truly means to be Aboriginal in a contemporary society. This richness, complexity and sophistication is one shared by Aboriginal people throughout Australia regardless of their geographic location. Importantly too, it is strongly suggested that the degree of richness, complexity and sophistication is also shared regardless of temporal location in terms of the extent to which one is separated from purely traditional ancestry. 'Aboriginal people in Blacktown, Redfern, Fitzroy and Musgrave Park are no less Aboriginal than the cultures of their counterparts in Cape York, Arnhem Land or the Kimberley' (Commonwealth of Australia, 1998: 61).

More specifically these features relate to extremely strong relationships with family, and a sense of sharing, as well as notions of respect for land and for Elders. They also relate to notions of ceremony and, in particular, funerals. There is a degree of unity around perceptions of history and, more specifically, a sense of 'doing it tough'. At another level there is consistent discussion about ways of relating and ways of connecting to other Aboriginal people. From here this thesis will elaborate on features that are consistently identified by Aboriginal people as crucial components of Aboriginal ways of being.

## 4.2 A feeling about Being Aboriginal

Reflection on all of the interviews reveals that clearly articulating the notion of ‘being Aboriginal’ can be a difficult thing to do. Like many aspects of culture, the characteristics of being Aboriginal can be things that you know, without knowing that you know them. On various occasions, several respondents discussed the notion of being Aboriginal as a way of ‘feeling’ rather than a way of being. As one person notes:

‘I think we feel... we feel different. I think it’s a feeling that you get ... it’s something that’s in you.’

(Extract 1)

Along similar lines, another person refers to that sense of feeling about being Aboriginal.

‘When you’re Aboriginal you just feel different to white people. I don’t think I know what they feel like, but it wouldn’t be like us. It’s like when you’re in a special place ... special country you know ... and you got family around and you think: ‘Yeah, this is what it’s all about. It’s great to feel black. It’s great to be Aboriginal’.

(Extract 2)

Already one can observe the difference here in white perceptions of being Aboriginal compared to Aboriginal perceptions of being Aboriginal. The previous chapter notes extensively the manner in which being Aboriginal is largely discussed pejoratively. In this chapter being Aboriginal is discussed as an intrinsic feeling of being ‘different’, but also significantly, it is discussed within the parameters of being ‘special’, and ‘great’. When one suggests ‘It’s great to feel black. It’s great to be Aboriginal’, we immediately get a sense that Aboriginal people who have been Aboriginal all their lives, and never pretended to be something else, clearly see being Aboriginal as something very positive. In terms of the model of the Other outlined in Chapter One, I would argue that what we are dealing with here is an acceptance by the Aborigine of being Other to the White Same. But simultaneously this is accompanied by a rejection of the particular slot of the

Feared/Despised Other, which as we have seen in the previous chapter is the slot to which many white Australians assign the Aborigine.

### **4.3 A sense of pride**

Whilst those who commented on that sense of ‘feeling’ Aboriginal had difficulty in clearly articulating what that phrase meant, it was extremely clear that one of the feelings about being Aboriginal is a very definite sense of pride in who we are as Aboriginal people. Indeed on every occasion when asked about what it is that today’s young Aboriginal people should know about being Aboriginal, the need to be proud about being Aboriginal was expressed:

‘They need to be proud to be Aboriginal and not feel ashamed or inferior or like they are not as good as someone else because of their colour. That strength that they have is worth being proud of and it’s not about having strength to fight in the streets. It’s about getting strength and pride from knowing that we been here for thousands of years.’

(Extract 3)

‘I would say not to try and be somebody else because you are always going to be Aboriginal so respect yourself and be proud.’

(Extract 4)

‘To me Aboriginal ... you’re sort of born with... that’s a gift for me. Really you got to be proud of who you are.’

(Extract 5)

‘I’m really proud of who I am and where I come from... that’s something that mum and dad really pushed into us. It’s being proud of who you are and finding out where you fit.’

(Extract 6)

‘I think kids have got to be proud of who they are and you don’t have to squawk about it and you don’t have to get up on a soapbox. You got to be strong. I think

we are a hell of a lot smarter than white fullas...we can live in a white man's world and we can still communicate with them ... whereas they can't understand what we are talking about. It's like we can mix it in your world but you can't really come into ours.'

(Extract 7)

It is worth reflecting here on what those interviewed imply we must take pride in as Aboriginal people. In some cases it seems the assertion of pride is to be presented in spite of the negative perceptions being generated around us. As one person notes, '... be proud to be Aboriginal and not feel ashamed or inferior', and another reinforces the need to '... respect yourself and be proud', these views appear to be presented as means to attend to forces or perceptions designed to assert that being Aboriginal is not something to be proud of. It is perhaps worth reflecting, then, on whether or not this sense of pride has evolved defiantly as a result of living alongside a white society determined to suppress it, or whether or not it has existed prior to the arrival of white man in Australia.

At another level the final comments presented for analyses here deliberately refer to Aboriginal existence alongside white society, but provide a slightly different insight into why one should feel proud to be Aboriginal. Here we are described as '.. a lot smarter than white fullas' and that 'we can mix it in (their) world, and (they) can't mix it in ours'. The sense of defiance about being proud to be Aboriginal is very clear here. This defiance indicates in my opinion a struggle with the kind of stereotyping I revealed in the previous chapter. My informants seem to have emerged from the struggle with dominant stereotypes with a sense of pride emerging from the notion that we can access a white world and white ways of being, yet in addition to this, we can practice and have access to Aboriginal ways of being. The crucial point here is that while Aboriginal people can access a white world and white ways of being, this level of access can never be entirely reciprocated. In a very real sense we have an acting out of the dialectic of the master and slave where the slave gets to work on the world and becomes more competent than the master.

Given the extent to which the notion of ‘pride’ emerged in conversations about being Aboriginal, it is fair to conclude that it is a significant and necessary feature of being Aboriginal—necessary because without it one is locked into fulfilling the stereotype. Again my research here has revealed a level of complexity in the matter of Aboriginal identity, which is in complete contrast to mainstream Australian perceptions of being Aboriginal, presented in the previous chapter. Those, I would argue, provide one with very little to feel any sense of pride about.

#### **4.4 Respecting Elders**

Coupled with the notion of pride in one’s self, is the notion of respect for one’s self. In discussions about being Aboriginal, this extends into having a sense of respect for others, particularly Elders, to the extent that it stands alone as a very important feature of being Aboriginal.

‘I stayed at my cousin’s house and her 17-year-old son looked after me. From the moment he jumped in the car he said ‘How are you aunty?’ and gave me a big hug...carried my stuff up and all that and he was so attentive to me...this 17 year old kid who is just wonderful ... it was respectful’.

(Extract 8)

‘We have to have that respect you know ... especially for our Elders. Otherwise it’s no good if we got kids talking cheeky to their Elders like white kids on TV ... that’s no good ... that’s not our Aboriginal way.’

(Extract 9)

‘... she is 67 years of age and I respect her for that because she’s an older woman who has done stuff ... I admire and respect that. In Aboriginal society age has got to do with honour and wisdom and we gotta keep that going because it’s being lost and we got to not take on false values of white fellas.’

(Extract 10)

‘When white people get old they stick them in an old peoples’ home and they might go see them with their kids maybe Christmas time if they’re lucky ... I just couldn’t do that ... I don’t know how they do it ... There’s no dignity or respect in getting old ... It’s like you are a burden to people, when in our way if you’re old you got all sorts of knowledge and wisdom ... and what’s the point of locking all that away? That’s not respectful.’

(Extract 11)

‘You got to have that respect for your old people. It’s like if you’re having a wedding or 21<sup>st</sup> or something and you have to invite this one that one ... them ones that mum or uncle or aunty say ... even if you never met them. If the old people say you gotta invite them to the party then it would be rude to say no.’

(Extract 12)

On reflection, the notion of respect for Elders is quite clear. Yet it is worth focussing on the suggestion that respect for Elders is registered as ‘our way’, and the assertion that we have to ‘keep that going’. The comments provided here also provide a very clear insight into how this notion of respect, that is discussed so readily, is also practised within contemporary Aboriginal societies. For instance, being ‘attentive’, talking respectfully and even simple tasks such as carrying an older person’s ‘stuff’ up the stairs, and inviting their guests to a party or ceremony are some of the ways in which respect is demonstrated. One could wonder here about the scope to extrapolate back to traditional Aboriginal times when the Elders would have made the decisions about exactly who attended and participated in traditional ceremonies. Other deeper ways of demonstrating respect for Elders are by acknowledging and respecting their age with its associations of ‘honour and wisdom’, and ensuring their ‘dignity and respect’ by attending to them as they age, rather than ‘stick(ing) them in an old peoples’ home’.

It is also worth commenting on the role that the relationship with white society plays here. This is an instance where yet again Aboriginal Australia compares itself to white Australia, but for once does not find itself wanting.

## 4.5 Family

In addition to this, acknowledging, honouring and attending to the needs of family is another key feature of being Aboriginal that is reflected in all of the commentary.

‘There was this Aboriginal girl from Cooktown at our university. She stayed at the college and one day she said “I can’t stay with those white girls there ... they’re so childish and they talk about girly things and boyfriends and all that.” She was 17 and she helped raise 6 younger brothers so she had a maturity and insight of someone twice her age.’

(Extract 13)

Family. Growing up and visiting other families on your father’s side and your mother’s side ... That’s just a part of growing up.’

(Extract 14)

‘Family is the big thing. It’s that sharing thing, that family thing ... having a very close family unit, extended family and wanting to be with family.’

(Extract 15)

‘I know a lot of Murri people that have got that sporting talent and if they want to achieve something or make it big in that sporting world they have to leave home... they have to go to Brisbane or Sydney and a lot of them don’t fulfil their potential because they have to go away and leave their family ... they have to make a choice between family or fame and fortune and the family wins out. That’s what’s important ... the material stuff just isn’t that important.’

(Extract 16)

‘I think it’s when the whole family pulls together. A lot of Aboriginal families have extended families. You got your immediate family and then you got all your extended family ... it’s sort of like kinship ... sort of supportive to everyone.’

(Extract 17)

‘I think what makes me Aboriginal is the connection to my family. Mum and dad always taught us where we come from and who we belong to. They talked to us about it all the time ... where my family is and who they are ... and we do anything for family.’

(Extract 18)

The importance of family was articulated by all of those interviewed. Clearly the notion of family is one that is an integral part of being Aboriginal. The discussion here asserts the importance of remaining in close proximity to family, or at least having regular contact with family. As one person notes, if one has to ‘make a choice between fame and fortune and family ... family wins out’. It also makes it clear that ‘family’ is much more than just mother, father and siblings. The notion of family will often see a much tighter and very respectful relationship among extended family in comparison to white families.

Again, we find the phenomenon of Aboriginal Australia comparing itself to white Australia and once more deciding that Aboriginal Australia is superior in this instance, something that would seem impossible in terms of the stereotypes revealed in the previous chapter.

#### **4.6 Ways of Connecting**

Indeed, locating another person in the context of their family becomes an important way of initiating contact with other Aboriginal people. Against this background it is worth reflecting on discussion about this ‘way of connecting’ as another facet of being Aboriginal.

‘When you go to another community the first thing they usually ask you is who you are and where you are from. It seems like that’s the first thing that people usually talk about ... You lead into a conversation by getting all that sorted out first ... and it’s like ... once you got some sort of connection, or you figure out someone from that mob you know ... then you can move on with the discussion,

or the business you have to talk about ... but it's like nothing happens until you make that common connection.'

(Extract 19)

'When you meet someone or when you meet a new Murri person the first thing you ask is 'Where you from?' or 'Who are your people?' and that's sort of part of our belonging, knowing where we're from.'

(Extract 20)

'When you meet up with other Aboriginal people they'll ask you 'Who you belong to?' or 'Who's your mother or father?' and a name will come up and they say 'Oh yeah ... such and such is your uncle' or 'Your grandfather is this one'. Where it's based on the knowledge of family trees and that's where a lot of Aboriginal people get to know more and trust each other.'

(Extract 21)

'It's a different thing when you meet a certain person for the first time and you figure them out if they're true by figuring out where they're from and you know his mob and where they come from. You find out through talking 'Oh yeah, he's related to him and eventually you become connected somewhere in that circle.'

(Extract 22)

'It's a funny thing ... you sit down and talk and as soon as I walk into a place and you see Aboriginal people then you sort of sit down and talk and the first thing you say is 'Where you come from ... Who's your people?' And then bang ... you connect all the way back ... and then you can get onto business.'

(Extract 23)

#### **4.7 Connections to the Land**

As well as locating Aboriginal people within a family context, there is also obvious importance about locating other Aboriginal people within a spatial or geographical context. As reflected in the discussion here one of the first questions upon meeting is

‘Where are you from?’ While all of the Aboriginal people identified this greeting process of locating another within a geographical, or ‘country’ context, and within a family context, there was very little in terms of deeper analyses or discussion about why this actually happens. Again it seems to be one of those facets of being Aboriginal that one knows without knowing how or why we do it. Despite this, it is clearly identified as an Aboriginal way of connecting.

Many Aboriginal people will say that one of the sad things about connecting with others, particularly family, is that these days it seems to occur mostly at funerals. The importance of attending funerals to pay last respects to others is yet another facet which occurs repeatedly in conversations about the dimensions of being Aboriginal. One can easily examine the importance of funerals to Aboriginal people simply by comparing the number of times an Aboriginal person has been to a funeral, to the number of funerals a white person has attended.

‘Say if a person close to you lost someone...it’s not only the first immediate family that suffer, the cousins and all the families and you sort of don’t see that in a white society ... and everyone makes sure they get to the funeral to support each other ... you sort of don’t see that in white society.’

(Extract 24)

‘Sometimes when you’re black you go to funerals of people you don’t even know ... might be you never even met them. But you go because they might be related to a good friend of yours and so you go to pay respect and to be there for your friend.’

(Extract 25)

The discussion here provides some insight into how Aboriginal people attend to death in the family in a collective way. To some extent grief is shared broadly throughout the family and extended family. Indeed the notion of sharing, whether it is sharing grief, or sharing money and food, is something that Aboriginal people often discuss as an essential part of being Aboriginal.

‘It’s about the relationship ... the collectiveness you know. There is also that connectiveness of humanity that white fullas seem to have lost ... where we might give someone 2 bob, or give them a feed or something, that’s collectivism that’s been taught, whereas white people seem to think if they’re starving well that’s their fault.’

(Extract 26)

‘When you’re Aboriginal you make sure everyone around you is alright ... You don’t want to be styling up in a real flash way while your own brother or sister is struggling and down on the bottom. That’s not our way. That’s not how we were brought up.’

(Extract 27)

It is also interesting to note that this sense of sharing amongst each other transcends simply sharing amongst Aboriginal people and is extended to other people. This notion of sharing often includes others who are down or simply in need. In that sense Aboriginal Australia has been very giving to white Australia. Aboriginal Australia has also been giving, albeit reluctantly, when it comes to surrendering land. When it comes to land, history shows that white Australia was more into taking than sharing. Despite this, a sense of attachment to land, and respect for land, remains as a crucial component of being Aboriginal, even for those who have lived somewhat detached from their ancestral lands.

‘It was about having that special place that we used to go to when we were kids and you’d always go back there from time to time visiting and staying up there for a few days ... it was good ... like you had a feeling of you had a place to go.’

(Extract 28)

‘The link with the land, the different view, even with the land black people feel a closeness with it whereas it seems like white people see it as a way to make money. I talk to people around here who had to go out and walk the line and they come back saying after they got the chance to go and walk their country they

come back saying how much they were touched spiritually ... just to have that connection back.'

(Extract 29)

'It's like if you respect the land it will respect you. Through the food it provides and lots of plants for medicines and things. And if you are struggling for food you could always go down to the creek to fish or gather food. The more knowledge and respect you have of the land the more you are going to survive.'

(Extract 30)

'I think what makes me Aboriginal is the connection to my family and to my country. I was real happy when I was brought up because mum and dad always taught us and showed us where we come from, and talked to us about it all the time ... so it's knowing where I come from and where my country is.'

(Extract 31)

'I don't think you have to wear all the red, black and yellow and you don't have to play the didgeridoo...I just keep coming back to knowing where you are from.'

(Extract 32)

Amongst the discussion about being Aboriginal, some insight into the ramifications of being taken away from one's land was provided.

'We were fortunate we weren't taken away from our land and we've always had that connection of who we are and where we're from and I've just noticed that my uncle and aunty's family ... they still struggling there battling their kids, our cousins. We all connect but then we look at those fullas and some of them haven't got jobs and some are alcoholics...some of them suicide, those sort of things they still haven't got it whereas all of us have never been taken away ... We know where we fit.'

(Extract 33)

‘We were never taken from our land so we were lucky ... of course our language was destroyed and that which is sad ... but we still grew up around where our people have been for thousands of years. The place where we would go camping and for holidays is around the place where our ancestors are buried there ... We always had that kind of connection and we are much stronger today because of that.’

(Extract 34)

Clearly, the removal of Aboriginal people from their respective land has had a devastating impact upon groups of people and upon individuals. The Stolen Generation Report notes clearly the extent of the trauma and its inter-generational affect on Aboriginal people. Removal from the land is just one of the types of trauma inflicted upon Aboriginal people. Other injustices include being subjected to various forms of overt and institutional racism. For some Aboriginal people, these historical injustices and sense of fighting have somehow weaved their way into the fabric of being Aboriginal.

‘If people are going to identify as Aboriginal then they should also suffer the consequences of what being Aboriginal means I think.’

(Extract 35)

‘I get wild when I see these so called black fullas today big noting themselves when you know that when we were kids they were pretending to be Indian or something else ... They didn’t have the guts to be Aboriginal back then and if they didn’t want to do it tough back then they shouldn’t be claiming up now.’

(Extract 36)

‘If you’re Aboriginal you have to know our history and how we had to fight for where we got to today. That’s where I think these young ones now got no appreciation for the things we had to go through. If they are going to be Aboriginal then they have to understand what it means that we had to fight to keep our pride and our dignity.’

(Extract 37)

‘We had to fight to stay Aboriginal and not be assimilated. We still have that fight now and I worry that some people don’t even know there is a fight on. It’s no good if in ten, maybe twenty, thirty years we are all running around acting like white fullas.’

(Extract 38)

One must understand the distinction here between a sense of ‘fighting’ to retain Aboriginal identity and the need to at least empathise with the struggles that Aboriginal people faced historically, and the need to maintain some form of victim status as a means of reinforcing identity today. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the tendency to reinforce identity through victim or ‘poor bugger me’ status is somewhat misguided. There is, however, a real sense that one must acknowledge and empathise with the equally real notion that historically Aboriginal people had to fight in Australian society. Further to this, and in the same way that we respect our Elders, we must also acknowledge and respect the efforts of those who fought the fights so that today’s young Aboriginal people do not have to fight anywhere near as much as in the past.

As with many cultures it is as if we have to retain a sense of our history to retain our sense of identity into the future.

#### **4.8 Spirituality**

So far in this chapter many of the features of being Aboriginal that have been presented for analysis are quite clear and easily detected in the discussions with others. One feature that has been discussed quite frequently, but not necessarily articulated particularly clearly, is the notion of spirituality. This should not be surprising, however, given the extent to which many people would have difficulty articulating what ‘spirituality’ meant to them. Notwithstanding, the following comments provide some insights worth reflecting on:

‘I said to her “If you don’t hurry you’ll miss the plane,” and she’s like “Oh well if I miss the plane I miss the plane ... we can get another one can’t we?” Like her

spirit wasn't bothered at all ... and I just think that's so Aboriginal ... it's like well I'm here today and I need to go there, it might take another 24 hours so what?'

(Extract 39)

Here the notions of 'time and location' find their way into conversation about Aboriginal spirituality. In Queensland the term 'Murri Time' is frequently expressed, often jokingly, to explain why meetings of and with Aboriginal people often do not get started right on the designated time. For many this is a frustrating phenomena, yet is one which is manifested extensively to the extent that it is worth contemplating beyond 'slackness' or disorganisation. As a principal of a school and often bound by time constraints, the notion of 'Murri Time' is a source of frustration. However, I often find myself so bound up in the 'here and now' that I find myself late to subsequent commitments.

On reflection one could consider this within the context of Aboriginal ways of relating to others, and ways of relating to place. Earlier in this chapter I discussed the importance and distinctness of ways of relating to others, and connectedness to land and place. In a sense it is like one runs the risk of dishonouring the here and now, as well as the people we are with, by cutting short the processes of relating to place, and to one another in an Aboriginal way of being.

Whilst honouring the here and now, time and place is important, and so too is the need to honour the past and our ancestors who went before us:

If you want to learn about the Dreaming then you have to visit the Dreaming with an Elder who has it, and they will not say a thing about it but you'll see the whole ... the energy come from that guy and boost on that spirit thing. It's like ... animals and the land came up, ancestors came up. That was at the time of the Dreaming and it was the spirits that were around at that time.

(Extract 40)

'When we think about that spiritual stuff it's like we go back to connect and honour our ancestors and the land where we come from. That's probably why

white people here can't relate to that deep sense of culture because their land is somewhere else and their ancestors were convicts or slaves.'

(Extract 41)

Even in general discussions with colleagues about notions of being Aboriginal, it is easy to detect a link between notions of creation, our ancestors, and who we are today. This is perhaps one thing that distinguishes Aboriginal spirituality from western schools of thought. In western discussion about spirituality there is seemingly a distinction between the spiritual, and what is real. Aboriginal spirituality is seemingly as real as what is 'real', with 'the Dreaming' as discussed here in extract 40 (*You have to visit the Dreaming with an Elder*) just as much a part of today as it is a part of the time of creation. Pattel-Gray (1997:179) describes the Dreaming as:

'... the eternal link between Ancestral Spirits and Aboriginal Humanity. It is the creation of life and the sustaining of life ... not only a memory of the past, it is also a reality of the present and the creator of the future.'

Traditionally it may not have been so difficult to articulate, but given our current location within a western society, and the resulting tendency to suppress understanding and development of spirituality, we as Aboriginal people face many challenges in understanding, nurturing and developing our own sense of Aboriginal spirituality. Understandably this is one area that people have difficulty with, as it is indeed an area where no clear parameters exist. Nevertheless, it is however a notion which for some Aboriginal people is somehow detectable.

'It's like some of these young ones who have grown up white and it's hard to detect the sense of free and lively and respectful spirit about them. Spirit I reckon is the stuff that if you haven't been raised as Aboriginal at all then it is hard to feel on detect that in people. Maybe it's there but it hasn't been nurtured.'

(Extract 42)

Aboriginal spirituality, like any spirituality, is bound by a sense of personal journey and its connection to greater life forces, past, present and future. For some, religion provides a framework within which to practice spirituality at some level, for others it does not.

‘I’m not a very Christian person but then I was into Aboriginal culture and the rainbow serpent but I don’t really understand that. When I went to Brisbane I read a book about Biimi ...there’s a lot of people where my ancestors come from ... they talk about Biimi.’

(Extract 43)

On this occasion the spiritual journey is altered by reading a particular book (Extract 43). Indeed any spiritual journey is directed somehow, whether it is by a book, life experiences, contact with particular people, or even a different sort of contact with one’s self. Against this background, Aboriginal people are no different in terms of how their own spiritual journey is influenced or directed.

This thesis would not ever pretend to define Aboriginal spirituality, and of course it is quite impossible to categorically suggest what ‘being Aboriginal’ is. It does, however, attempt to provide some direction, if you like, by exploring and unpacking some of the things that other Aboriginal people discuss about this topic. Unquestionably, there is much more to add to this discussion, and I am certain that it is not possible to cover such a profound topic completely in this forum, or any other for that matter.

Of course there is a great deal that one could discuss about notions of Aboriginal spirituality. It is worth reiterating, though, that it was never my intention to go too far beyond the discussions held with participants for the purposes of this research. It was always my intention to discuss with ‘some’ Aboriginal people, what it is that they consider are important aspects of ‘being Aboriginal’. I would strongly encourage other researchers to consider exploring this facet of being Aboriginal more deeply.

Reflection on the previous two chapters reveals that - while Mainstream Australia tends to describe Aboriginal people more pejoratively with references to notions of alcoholism, laziness, welfare dependency, and aggressiveness - Aboriginal reflections on being

Aboriginal are more inclined to relate to notions of pride and respect, family and ways of connecting, as well as connections to land and spirituality. Aboriginal reflections on notions of being Aboriginal, are as expected, heavily reinforced by a broad range of Aboriginal literature (Coombs, 1978: Gilbert, 1978: Huggins & Huggins, 1996: Morgan, 1987: Peris, 2003: Perkins, 1975: Reay, 1964).

It seems that the two perspectives are almost diametrically opposed. Given the extent to which white Australia's perception as discussed in the previous chapter is so inaccurate and negative, and the extent to which this has the capacity to influence the reality of young Aboriginal people, the need to reflect on Aboriginal perceptions of being Aboriginal is extremely crucial. From here we must contemplate exactly to how set about reinforcing the more positive Aboriginal perceptions of being Aboriginal.

## **CHAPTER FIVE (A) – SCHOOL STRATEGIES TO REINFORCE ABORIGINAL IDENTITY**

At this point the reader is asked to view the documentary – *Strong and Smart: The Rise of Cherbourg State School* produced by Mark Newman, QUT Brisbane (28 Minutes). The documentary provides a deeper and audio-visual insight into the strategies and directions of Cherbourg State School since the development and pursuit of the Strong and Smart vision. A copy is contained within the inside cover of this thesis.

## **CHAPTER FIVE (B) – SCHOOL STRATEGIES TO REINFORCE ABORIGINAL IDENTITY**

Given the discrepancy between white perceptions of being Aboriginal, and Aboriginal perceptions of being Aboriginal, institutions such as schools become inherently vexed and problematic since they are a major aspect of the contact zone where these perceptions meet. Added to this complexity are the differing cultural values and beliefs brought to school by Indigenous children and the predominantly non-Indigenous school personnel. The extent of this complexity is indeed well researched and extensively reviewed. Appendix Two provides an overview of all of the major reports and reviews into Indigenous education.

Often the extent of these differences result in conflict. Ultimately this often manifests in poor inter-cultural relationships and misunderstanding resulting in Aboriginal student failure to engage productively with school (e.g. poor student performance outcomes, poor attendance). Barth (2002) would describe this type of school environment as highly ‘toxic’. Barth’s description more than adequately describes Cherbourg State School when I inherited it as the first Aboriginal principal to be appointed there.

To understand the school in historical terms, one has to understand the totality within which it was inserted, a totality that includes not only the Cherbourg/Barambah mission reserve but that of all the reserves within Queensland and indeed Australia. It is not my intention nor is it indeed the place to undertake a thorough examination of that totality. Kidd and Blake have, however, provided us with useful overviews. The picture that emerges from their accounts is frankly a grim one. Blake in particular makes it abundantly clear that Cherbourg Reserve was a ‘dumping ground’ for Aborigines. It was never intended to be a place where they could advance towards self-emancipation. To be frank, to put it like this, is almost to do an injustice to the suffering of the people.

If the reserve was intended as a ‘dumping ground’, what of the school? Again Blake, as we saw in Chapter Three, in his short history of the school details overcrowded and ill-

equipped class rooms, poor teachers, and syllabi that were adapted to the so-called 'Native Mind'.

This then is legacy of the past. Certainly, when I came to Cherbourg it was a past that loomed large in the present. However, in more recent times the profile of the school has changed quite dramatically. A more detailed profile of the school is provided in Appendix Three.

Clearly, and essentially, a journey of change has occurred. For the remainder of this chapter I will discuss this journey by outlining the challenges I faced as the Principal of a highly toxic school environment which, knowingly or unknowingly, was dramatically reinforcing a very negative perception of being Aboriginal.

I commenced duty as Principal at Cherbourg State School in August 1998. To say that the school presented many challenges would be quite an understatement. On reflection I recall things like children running on top of 2-storey buildings, in and out of the main office, staffroom and Principal's office. It was impossible to leave your lunch in the staffroom fridge because students would steal it well before lunchtime.

More seriously, academic performance was extremely poor. School classrooms looked like and indeed functioned as baby-sitting facilities that saw children coming and going as they pleased. Class attendance out of an official enrolment of 20 usually dwindled down to about 4 children on average by the afternoon session. The year 7 students left for high school, like many did in previous years, like lambs to the slaughter, with no idea about how to conduct themselves in a regular classroom, and nowhere near the personal skills, or the literacy and numeracy skills, to survive. Sadly, as I had expected, and like many graduating from our school before them, most would drop out before the end of grade eight and disappear into the oblivion of society. Detailed analyses of 4,260 student record cards of Aboriginal students leaving Cherbourg State School to attend Murgon State High School reveal that of all of these students stayed enrolled at high school for an average of 9 months instead of the expected three to five years (Schmieman, 1995: 34).

The school grounds were covered in papers thrown and left there by the children and the many community people who would use the school as a thoroughfare. To me this reflected a severe lack of pride in the school.

Many non-Indigenous staff had been at the school for a lot of years and seemed to enjoy being there. Several had been there for longer than expected periods in such a school (ranging from 4-15 years) and had no desire to move on because they believed they were performing satisfactorily given the complexities of the school and the community. They would describe their performance to me as something that should be valued, despite the desperately poor student outcomes generated by the school. For me it was difficult to value such efforts when, as noted earlier, they resulted in abysmal outcomes.

Several Indigenous teachers were on staff as well as several Indigenous teacher aides, but they had very little say in the operations or strategic directions of the school. As crazy as it may sound, their classrooms were never as well resourced as other classrooms that boasted many flash computers and the latest classroom resources. When I asked them why they would tolerate such unacceptable circumstances they expressed a sense of despair and powerlessness to make any meaningful and productive change.

Members of the Cherbourg community also expressed this same sense of despair and powerlessness. The frustration associated with this state of affairs was reflected in declining student enrolments, with student numbers in the primary school dropping by approximately 60%. Concerned parents 'voted with their feet', as Murries<sup>1</sup> often do, and transferred their children to a nearby State school where they believed their children would receive a better standard of education. Those who kept their children in the school said that they wanted change, but indicated they had no idea about how to pursue that goal. Some said they didn't know they could bring about change.

In broad terms the following was reflected at the school:

- Extremely poor school attendance rates;

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<sup>1</sup> Murries: A term used by Aboriginal people in Queensland to describe Aboriginal people

- Very low expectations of student behaviour and student performance;
- Acceptance of very poor student behaviour and student performance that was described by some staff as a social and cultural legacy;
- Very low and decreasing enrolments with many Cherbourg parents sending their children to nearby Murgon State School to get a better deal for their children; and sadly,
- Lack of student pride in self, school, and a negative perception of their own Aboriginal identity.

This very negative perception of being Aboriginal was highly aligned with the discussion occurring in Chapter Three about white perceptions of being Aboriginal. It must be noted, however, that this perception was being reinforced by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal members of the school community. It was as if a sense of collusion existed between them.

White teachers at the school seemingly believed that all of the school's Aboriginal children were destined to return extremely poor student outcomes and student behaviour. The staff were seldom scrutinized or questioned about this, and if they were, they could easily blame the complexity of the social and cultural context of the children. Aboriginal children in the school colluded with the negative perception of being Aboriginal by simply conforming to the negative stereotype, and if or when this was scrutinized, they could easily blame the white teachers at the school for their poor student outcomes and disgraceful student behaviour.

What I found at Cherbourg was a complex dialectic of power<sub>2</sub> relations of domination and subjugation where all parties performed the roles of dialectical counterparts (Bhaskar, 1993: 11). Thus the teachers claimed to care for the children, but their actions ensured that few came. The children rebelled in a myriad of ways but their rebellion only conformed to and reinforced the expectations of the teachers. No one seemed to believe that anything could be done about all this.

In Bhaskarian terms I was confronted with ‘... ideologies of deagentification, of the impotent and the empty, of radically decentred and fragmented selves (Bhaskar, 1993: 237).’

My task, as I saw it, was to seek ways to help bring about a dialectic of liberation. I was conscious of the need for ‘recenterification and reempowerment’ (Bhaskar, 1993: 237). For me this entailed getting young Aboriginal children to stop seeing themselves as something in terms of the very negative perceptions of being Aboriginal presented in Chapter Three and to start seeing themselves as embodying the more positive perceptions of being Aboriginal as discussed in Chapter Four.

These positive perceptions constitute what Bhaskar’s terms ‘informed desire’ (Bhaskar, 1993: 169). It is this desire that has driven my own personal praxis as I have outlined in the introduction to this thesis and it was informed desire that I was determined to foster among the children in my charge. Effectively I had to lead the school in such a way that it would *challenge* the children about how they perceived their Aboriginal identity. We had to get our children to reflect on, or sometimes confront honestly, the negative perceptions that they were willingly or unwillingly colluding with. In the face of such a challenge, it was incumbent upon us to help and guide them to *develop* and understand a more positive perception of being Aboriginal. In a sense we had to get our children to subscribe to an alternative identity which was much more aligned with that discussed in Chapter Four and one which they would have hardly considered previously. In doing so, we all had to challenge, understand, and ultimately reject the very negative perception of being Aboriginal presented in Chapter Three.

This alternative Aboriginal identity was to become the ‘Strong and Smart’ Aboriginal identity.

The next part of the challenge was for the school to become an environment that genuinely embraced a new ‘Strong and Smart’ Aboriginal identity. Our school had to be more than just a place that developed a strong and smart identity: it had to be a place that

*embraced* a strong and smart identity; a place where strong young Aboriginal children could *be!*

At this point it is argued that indeed all schools with Aboriginal children have a role to play in terms of :

- Challenging Aboriginal identity;
- Developing Aboriginal identity; and
- Embracing Aboriginal identity.

### **5b.1 Challenging Aboriginal Identity**

Challenging Aboriginal identity in a school means confronting, or getting young Aboriginal children to confront, their beliefs about being Aboriginal and to reflect on how these beliefs are manifested in their own behaviour and attitudes towards working hard in a classroom. At another level it is necessary to challenge school staff perceptions about Aboriginal identity, and to get them to contemplate whether or not they truly believe that Aboriginal children can be something other than the very negative perception of an Aboriginal identity in school that is often manifested in poor behaviour and poor school performance.

### **5b.2 Developing Aboriginal Identity**

Any school engaged in the process of challenging a young Aboriginal child's negative perception of being Aboriginal must nurture and provide opportunities to develop a more positive perception of being Aboriginal. Again at a school personnel level it is likely that there is some need to develop staff understandings about the more positive Aboriginal perceptions of being Aboriginal, as discussed in Chapter Four.

### **5b.3 Embracing Aboriginal Identity**

Given the discussion in Chapters 2, 3 and 4, this puts schools and societies in new territory essentially, and into a realm of being that to date has not properly been contemplated, that is where suddenly Aboriginal people are asserting themselves with power drawn from deep within themselves, as noted in the documentary at Chapter 5(a). As we play our part in challenging Aboriginal children to reflect more positively on their identity, as well as doing whatever we can to nurture and develop that identity, we must then ensure our institution is one which can embrace a more positive Aboriginal identity. The challenge for school staff here is to move beyond what is often an entrenched mindset about Aboriginal identity and to reject collusion with poor performance.

From this point I will discuss the strategies that were part of the process of bringing dramatic and essential change at Cherbourg State School, within the context of their role in challenging negative perceptions of being Aboriginal, or developing and/or embracing a strong and smart Aboriginal identity.

### **5b.4 Facilitating Change**

Suffice to say things in our school had to change and it was never going to be easy. It would call for different, yet imaginative approaches to schooling. Freire and Shor would suggest that such approaches ‘... can be exercised as a resource to expel dominant ideology and open up some spaces in consciousness for transcending thinking’ (cited in Slee, 2001: 174).

This notion underpins the very first requirement in facilitating the extent of change required: that is, the shift in the mindset that seemingly had accepted Aboriginal underachievement as normal to one in which we had to all believe we could get better outcomes from our children. Clearly, the mindsets and beliefs of staff had to be challenged.

The first twelve months as Principal at Cherbourg were extremely difficult because the key players at the school accepted the appalling degree of underachievement and poor student behaviour. Attempts were made to explain to me that this was the best we could expect from our children, given their cultural and social complexities. This made a very convenient smokescreen for an under-performing school and to me it seemed the blame lay more readily on the children and the community. Whilst efforts were made to attribute blame to Indigenous children and communities, by contrast the literature notes the systemic contributions to such underachievement (Beresford & Omaji, 1996: Bourke et al, 2000: 19).

It seemed to me that several key teachers harboured acceptance of this poor achievement and extremely poor behaviour as ‘an Aboriginal thing’. There was little evidence to suggest the school was scrutinizing its own practice, to reach an understanding of what it was that we in fact were doing to contribute to such drastic underachievement.

As Principal of the school I recognized the great challenges that lay ahead and, specifically, the need to reflect on our own teaching practices and our own beliefs about what Aboriginal children could achieve in the classroom. As an Aboriginal person I was very disgusted at having to tolerate such poor student performance and outcomes, and indeed, poor school performance. As Principal, I was also disgusted by suggestions that I should somehow tolerate, or even appreciate such poor school performance.

Clearly, if change was to occur, the school had to change its beliefs about what our children could achieve, and our children had to change their beliefs about what they could achieve. This meant everybody in the school had to change their perceptions about what being Aboriginal was really all about.

I believed that, in time, and with hard work, our children could perform at a level that was comparable to other children from any other school in Australia, and that they could develop a strong and positive sense of what it means to be Aboriginal in today’s society. Aboriginal staff members, the local community, the local community Elders, and the

local community council shared this belief. All that remained was to establish an entire staff team to share the belief, and get the children to believe it as well.

In a school staff meeting we stated our beliefs about what we could achieve as a school. We outlined the extent to which our beliefs were aligned with the local community, local community Elders, the Aboriginal people on staff, and the community council. The belief that our children could improve academically and socially to become 'stronger and smarter' was crystallising.

At the staff meeting I said to the staff:

I truly believe, the Elders of the community believe, most of the Aboriginal people on staff believe, and the community council believe, that our children can leave our school with academic outcomes that are comparable to any other school around Queensland, and that they can also leave here with a strong and positive sense of what it means to be Aboriginal in today's society. If any of you do not believe that this is possible, then it is time for you to get out!

Five teachers and some teacher aides left the school.

This was the starting point for articulating, with no uncertainty, the beliefs and vision that we as a school team and school community would pursue rigorously.

New teachers would soon join our team. Months before they even arrived at the school I rang them personally to congratulate them on their appointment and to give them some insight into the challenges they would face. They were told:

The school will be like no other school you have taught at ... it will be tough going ... but if we all work hard on effective learning and teaching ... stick together ... and have high expectations of the children ... then we will each play an exciting part in changing the directions of the school, and the community.

In anticipation of the new teachers, the school staff team developed an induction book that provided teacher insights into a range of aspects of teaching at Cherbourg. The induction book was simply entitled *The A–Z of teaching at Cherbourg* and listed and commented on various school and community issues alphabetically.

On their first day at the school we worked intensively on asserting a collective belief about what we wanted for the children and establishing what we had to do to achieve this. It was clearly identified that effective learning and teaching that embraced and was responsive to the children's cultural and social context would underpin much of the change required. We had had lunch with the local community council and their expectations of us as a school reinforced our notions of what was required to get the school to progress. In the months that followed I would seize any opportunity to connect teachers to parents and encouraged them to get out into the community. I asked teachers to allow themselves to be directed by their Indigenous teacher aides or the family support workers, to ensure they observed and respected local community protocols (Education Queensland, 2001: 8).

The new team members embraced the challenge readily and, most importantly, had high expectations of the children and made them work hard. Positive results in the classroom soon followed.

With a new team with high expectations of the children, it was time to really get on with the toughest part of the challenge: getting the children and the community to believe they could be as smart as any other child from any other school, and could develop into strong, young, black, powerful people.

The role of Principal is crucial to the extent that it can influence the whole culture of a school (Bourke et al, 2000: 22). The need to engage in meaningful dialogue with the community MUST be recognized and met (Boston, 1999: 35; Collins, 1999: 45). Therefore, if a Principal of an Indigenous school experiences discomfort at the prospect of engaging with the community, then he or she simply should not be there. Indigenous

communities, like any other community, have the right to expect a school principal who is prepared to engage meaningfully and respectfully with them.

As Principal of Cherbourg State School it was incumbent upon me to consolidate a school vision. I use the term 'consolidating' the school vision rather than 'establishing' or 'developing' a school vision, as it was very clear that we all knew what we wanted for our children and Aboriginal people had been making this clear for many years. A brief analysis of some of the documents listed at Appendix Two clearly demonstrates this. It was important to consolidate a school vision that was aligned with the power brokers in the community (i.e. the Community Council, Community Elders, parents). To do this I talked extensively throughout the community about what I wanted for the children of Cherbourg and they spoke about what they wanted. This was via a range of forums including school meetings, meetings with agencies, talking on the local radio station, and sitting down on the front veranda having cups of tea.

The prospect of venturing out into an Aboriginal community may seem daunting. For me it was made easier by Mrs Long. Mrs Long is an Elder in the community who worked in the school as a community liaison person. Like many people in Indigenous communities, she harbours an intense desire to see Indigenous children gain power through education. The first three to four months saw Mrs Long working directly alongside me for most of the time, helping to establish:

- who was who in the community;
- who I needed to make contact with;
- who I needed to stay away from;
- who was the right person to get in when a particular child played up;
- when was the right time to visit people (e.g. not when someone was 'on the charge'); and
- what were the 'hot issues' of school concern that were festering in the community.

As the new Principal, these matters were far more crucial than things like school curriculum programs etc. Mrs Long was my eyes and ears to the community. Clearly it was wise of me to embrace her and what she had to offer. While she may not have had any formal educational qualifications, she had something, which was far more valuable at the time: she was highly respected and she knew the community inside out. At another level, this strategy was just as much about embracing Aboriginal identity, as it was embracing Mrs Long. Mrs Long's Aboriginal identity offered something different to the school that was of immense value, which had clearly been considered as not worthy, or tragically, not considered at all.

Any new Principal in an Indigenous school should find their own Mrs Long before doing anything else. I have not been to any Aboriginal community in which one does not exist. And Principals should not be too concerned if they are not sure about how to find them. It is more than likely that they will find the new Principal first. Any new Principal though must be ready to recognize them and their extreme value. Those who are serious about establishing some form of collective understanding about what the community expects must be prepared to work extensively alongside them, and afford them the credibility and dignity they deserve.

Collectively we agreed that the people of Cherbourg had every right to expect their children to perform academically at a level of any other child from any other school, and to have a strong and positive sense of what it means to be Aboriginal. The vision is now firmly encapsulated in the new school motto, 'Strong and Smart', which is echoed by all staff and children in all classrooms, and anchors everything that occurs in the school, including school attendance and academic performance.

The pursuit of 'Strong and Smart' is closely aligned with what Slee (2001: 175) articulates as the conditions and rights for new and essential directions in schooling. Slee (2001: 175) suggests that schooling should ensure individual enhancement, thus ensuring conditions in which to build confidence. He argues further for the individual right to social, cultural, and intellectual inclusion, and strongly asserts that notions of assimilation and/or absorption must not be implied.

### **5b.5 Changing the Culture of the School**

Changing the culture of a school is a complex process indeed. One of the greatest challenges was taking on the children's own negative perception of who they were as Aboriginal children. A recent Department of Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) study (2000: 25) notes the extensive impact teachers have on the development of a child's self-identity. As discussed earlier, our school had teachers that were in the habit of accepting underachievement as an 'Aboriginal thing'. This dangerous and highly toxic perception had to be addressed as it clearly has the effect of children subscribing to the same negative perception of who they are, and subsequently aspiring downwards as some means of proving to their peers that they are 'Aboriginal' (Pedersen & Walker, 2000: 8).

As a school with a new team, and in pursuit of a new Strong and Smart vision, we adopted a range of strategies, some of which may appear to be extremely simple, yet on deeper analyses were designed to really challenge, at a much deeper level, any negative perceptions that children may have held about who they were as Aboriginal children. The combination of this entire suite of simple yet complex strategies discussed here were, from my perspective, designed to 'rock the psyche' of the children and prompt them to change what they were prepared to believe about themselves. Challenging the children collectively and generating a sense of solidarity in our new school was an important part of the challenge.

### **5b.6 Generating a Sense of Solidarity**

Christie (1996: 303) notes that 'where communities are disrupted, schools are an important way to build up solidarity'. Groome and Hamilton (1995: 37) further highlight the need for children to feel a sense of worth about their identities. Some very simple yet powerful strategies to generate this strong sense of solidarity and feeling of worth about who we were as Aboriginal people were the development of our school song, the introduction of a school uniform and the collective cleaning up of our school grounds.

## 5b.7 School song

A school song was developed to create pride and unity in our school and most importantly, to give us all a time together in which *we all felt great*. All of the children know the song well and sing it with great enthusiasm. The lyrics to our school song are:

Jingle bells Jingle bells  
Cherbourg School is here  
We're young and black and deadly  
So come and hear us cheer, hey!  
Bring on every challenge  
And put us to the test  
We're from Cherbourg State School  
And you know we're the best, Hey!

Whilst the lyrics make it special and purposeful, it is also made special by the fact that only children from Cherbourg State School can sing it because *it is our song*. The children of Cherbourg State School have power: it is our song, and it is about *us*. Whilst it is difficult to measure the impact of simply singing a school song, the extent of their enthusiasm to sing, the volume at which the song is sung, and the faces of the children when they sing the school song clearly suggest they do actually feel *young and black and deadly*; that they are indeed ready to face challenges and be *put to the test*; and further, at least at that point in their lives, they certainly feel like they are *the best*.

Having all of the children owning our school song and its lyrics provided me with the leverage required to 'bring on challenges' and 'put them to the test'. Over the last five years I have challenged them on a range of issues. As reflected in the Strong and Smart film at Chapter 5(a), it is clear that given all of the children sing our song with enthusiasm, I have had enough of the necessary leverage to say to them on school assembly on many occasions:

We can't sing a song about being young and black and deadly, and not act young and black and deadly. It has to be more than just words coming out of our mouth. If we sing 'Bring on every challenge' then we have to be ready to take on those challenges ... and the challenge I am bringing you today is this...

These challenges have included many key and personal issues for children such as improving attendance, cleaning up the school grounds, being able to walk away from teasing, resisting the temptation to follow other children who are doing the wrong thing.

At one level this strategy is just about making up a song for children to sing. At a deeper level, however, it is a strategy designed to nudge their own perception of being Aboriginal and prompt them to reflect on it more positively. It provides a means to embrace our new 'strong and smart' Aboriginal identity.

### **5b.8 School Uniform**

On my arrival there was no uniform for the children of our school. Staff articulated a belief that the people of Cherbourg couldn't afford it. While this gesture of declaring the school would have no school uniform may have provided some financial relief, or scope to spend money on things other than school requirements, it affected the children at another level, and this was particularly noticeable on visits with our children to other schools. The behaviour of our children and their comments suggested a sense of shame when they went to visit other schools where children looked nice in *their* school uniform.

As a school we decided on what would be the design and colours of our new school uniform. They, of course, selected maroon and yellow, the colours of one of Queensland's best known National Rugby League teams, the Brisbane Broncos. From there the Cherbourg State School uniform became the hottest selling item at the local sports store. Informal feedback from parents suggested the school uniform was greatly appreciated. The perceived financial barriers simply were proven not to exist. These same barriers were borne out of what I would argue was a variation of the 'native mind' hypothesis.

To some degree a uniform realistically says very little about one's sense of worth, yet at another level, it certainly does help individuals establish a sense of presence in a particular area, and further it helps to establish both inwards and outwards, a sense of who we are and where we come from. Developing the school uniform became another means to contributing to and embracing a sense of being Strong and Smart: the children felt they looked very strong and very smart.

### **5b.9 Cleaning up the school grounds**

For several years prior to my appointment as Principal, Cherbourg State School I had some involvement with the school as a lecturer at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ). At USQ I lectured to undergraduate Bachelor of Education students in a subject called Australian Indigenous Studies. As part of this course students were asked to engage in fieldwork studies of Indigenous community issues. For interested students we organized a day trip to Cherbourg and, as part of this visit, we took students to the school to examine its operations.

As noted in earlier discussion, one of the more visible things for me, and indeed for many of the students on the field trip, was the amount of rubbish in the playground. There were very few bins about and those that were out were drastically under-utilised. In the presence of teachers children would simply throw their litter on the ground rather than put it in any bin that might have been close by. In addition to what would be the regular 'school playground' litter, a great deal of 'community' rubbish was left in the playground by people from the community who were just passing through the school grounds either on the weekend, or during school time. This included empty beer bottles and cans.

To me the amount of litter on the school grounds reflected a lack of pride in the school and a limited sense of the type of environment we as Aboriginal people deserved to have on a daily basis. The restricted mindset was harboured both by the Aboriginal children in the school and non-Indigenous staff members. Getting the school grounds clean was an issue I was not happy with. Staff members told me that I would have to endure this

situation because it was not likely to change. They would not ask children to pick up papers during lunchtime and there were no observable efforts to encourage the children to maintain a tidy playground.

School Tidy Zones for each class were established. On parade each Friday I would give a prize to the class that maintained the best 'tidy zone'. While the strategy at one level appeared as if it were just about extrinsic rewards, the issue being challenged existed at a much deeper and more complex psychological level.

I would say to children on parade:

'Hands up if you are Aboriginal here'.

All hands would go up.

'Put your hands up even higher if you think that it is deadly to be Aboriginal'.

All hands would go even higher. Then I would say something like:

'All of us here are Aboriginal ... and this means we should be proud! Being Aboriginal doesn't mean we have to have a second rate, dirty looking school ... We deserve to have a school that looks nice... and we can't wait for someone to come and make it nice for us... let's make the school look nice for ourselves ... like we deserve!'

Within a few weeks the appearance of the school improved dramatically, and children were more thoughtful about how they disposed of their rubbish. This is because we started to understand that we deserved it! We managed to get the children to believe that they, as Aboriginal children, deserved to have a school playground that was tidy, well maintained, and as good as any other school playground in Queensland. There was an understanding that being Aboriginal did not mean we had to tolerate an unsatisfactory school environment. On the surface this was a strategy that was extremely simple, yet designed to address the very complex issue of self-perception.

### **5b.10 School Calendar**

The school calendar project was another strategy that, on the surface, was extremely simple, although the motives were designed to address the very complex notion of how the children see themselves. Again our interest was to present the very real perception of our children as ‘strong and smart’ and ‘young and black and deadly’ as opposed to the ‘other’ perception that had been presented.

For this project we contracted the services of a professional photographer to come into our school, get to know the children, and take pictures that would capture, in black and white photographs, images of the children being ‘strong and smart’ and ‘young and black and deadly’. The pictures were then sent to a printer to be placed on a school calendar. This was a very simple strategy in which the primary objective was to get the children to see themselves in print as something that was anything but the perception of Aboriginal people that many mainstream Australians subscribe to.

### **5b.11 Expecting Improved Attendance**

The literature reinforces the great importance of regular attendance at school as a means to improved student learning outcomes (APPA Inc. 2000: Bourke, et al, 2000; Collins, 1999: 43; Groome & Hamilton, 1995; Herbert, J. et al, 1998: Hughes, 1988: Purdie et al, 2000). Clearly, if children want to perform better at school, or teachers and parents want better student outcomes from the children, then all have to buy into the challenge of getting children to school regularly.

Of great concern to me was that student absenteeism was unacceptably high, and at a point where positive student outcomes could not be contemplated seriously. I was also extremely frustrated by the notion that, for several years, we as a school could readily articulate that ‘attendance was a problem’, yet we had clearly made very little or no effort at all, to suggest what a possible solution could be.

In discussions with parents many would suggest they sent their children to school in the mornings, but it was clear they were not getting to their classrooms. Of further concern was that parents had no idea that their children were not at school, or where they were exactly. As a school it was necessary to make the children accountable for their non-attendance at school and we did this via some extrinsic motivation.

In Term Three 2000 we got the children to start monitoring their own 'Unexplained Absences' as a class. Every Friday on parade each class presented their class's number of unexplained absences for the previous week. The class with the lowest number would all win a free iceblock from the tuckshop. At the end of the term, the class with the lowest number of unexplained absences would get a trip to McDonald's. In order to reduce the number of unexplained absences for their class, and win the iceblock or McDonald's trip, children had to ensure they were either at school, or if they were away, they had to return a note signed by their parents to explain their absence.

This strategy saw the number of 'Unexplained Absences' go from 1,185 in Term Three, 2000, down to 68 ½ in Term 4, 2001, a 94% improvement.

The delivery of the unexplained absenteeism strategy is visible in the *Strong and Smart* documentary at Chapter 5(a). When we first commenced with the strategy of getting classes to report on parade the number of unexplained absences, classes would report numbers above 60 with no sense of shame or surprise. At one part of the *Strong and Smart* film one class reports their number of unexplained absences at 33. A collective school sigh and expression of disbelief and embarrassment clearly notes a dramatic cultural change in the student expectations about absenteeism. It is obvious that the students have a much higher expectation about their own levels of attendance at school.

Each year we have managed to increase this level of expectation to the extent that we will soon be able to abandon the attendance incentive strategy altogether. More recently we have focussed more on individual absenteeism by offering rewards to children who have zero unexplained absences. In March 2004, 130 out of the 147 children enrolled in year's

1 – 7 participated in a trip to the local swimming pool for a swim and a barbeque because they had zero unexplained absences for the year.

On the surface the attendance strategy appears to be very basic albeit with exceptional results. I believe, however, that the real progress here was due to our efforts to address this issue at a much deeper level in which we challenged the identity of our children and got them again to reflect on who they believed they really were as Aboriginal children. At a deeper level it was necessary to challenge directly and explain to our children that if we were going to believe in the notion of ‘Strong and Smart’ then it had to be more than words coming out of our mouth.

If we were going to sing in our school song, *We’re young and black and deadly* then we had to act ‘young and black and deadly’. This meant coming to school every day. On a daily basis teachers would reinforce this message within the classroom.

We adopted a similar approach in our efforts to positively influence student behaviour.

### **5b.12 Expecting Improved Student Behaviour**

The improvement in student behaviour occurred much more quickly than I had expected. This was largely due to the support from parents and grandparents in the community who, I think, had sensed that at long last things would really change in the school and our children would have a genuine chance at education. For the first three to four months I spent a great deal of time out in the community talking to parents and grandparents about any inappropriate behaviour, and agreeing that it was not unreasonable to expect more from them. In this time I relied heavily on the support of Mrs Long to put me in touch with key people in the community.

It didn’t take long for the children to realise that if they were doing the wrong thing, then parents would support me when I had to ‘growl’ at them at school. On every occasion after ‘growling’ at them, I would explain that everyone in the community, including me, wanted them to go to high school and ‘look the white kids in the eyes and know they are

just as good as them'. I would explain that many children had left Cherbourg State School only to get picked on and walked on because they couldn't read and couldn't match the other children at the High School. I explained that we did not want to see them go down the same track because we knew they could do better.

In 2004 I sent a letter home to parents and guardians explaining that it was time to 'raise the bar' in terms of student behaviour. The letter was generated out of concern that the school had changed dramatically, and we had attempted to be as flexible as we could to respond to students with obvious complexities manifesting as poor behaviour, yet there were still some students who were apparently not trying to change. In term one of 2004 there were only 6 students demonstrating the poor behaviour that had been so prolific five years prior. The letter about student behaviour explained that:

The students of Cherbourg State School deserved to have a classroom that was safe, productive, and free from distractions of other students not wanting to learn. Students not respecting this right could expect to be removed from the school.

Most parents and guardians responded positively by agreeing with the intent of the letter sent out. Interestingly, though, a few criticized the intent, albeit indirectly, by suggesting that we were trying to turn the school into a white school. This response underlines the nature of the discussion presented in Chapter Four, whereby some Aboriginal people have somehow established in their own minds that negative things like poor behaviour at school is seemingly an Aboriginal thing. I made a point of addressing this in the following newsletter:

Last week I sent out a letter explaining that as a school we would be 'lifting the bar' as far as student behaviour in our school goes. I have received good feedback from parents and grandparents supporting this idea. I have heard indirectly, some criticism coming from people who are suggesting that we are trying to be like a 'white' school. This could not be further from the truth. We are, in fact, trying our best to be like a great Aboriginal school.

Being an Aboriginal school does not mean that we have to have low standards and low expectations of our children. It is important that we all understand that getting stronger and smarter at school, and getting better behaved at school, does not make our children less Aboriginal. In fact, our children celebrate being Aboriginal 'every day', not just during NAIDOC week.

### **5b.13 Expecting Improved Academic Performance**

Any teacher expecting improved academic performance from children must offer classroom experiences that observe all of the *Principles of Effective Learning and Teaching* (Dept of Education QLD, 1994: 1). According to the *Principles of Effective Learning and Teaching*, effective learning and teaching:

- is founded on an understanding of the learner;
- requires active construction of meaning;
- enhances and is enhanced by a supportive and challenging environment;
- is enhanced through worthwhile learning partnerships; and
- shapes and responds to social and cultural contexts.

Put simply these principles suggest that if the teacher knows a lot about the context of the learner and their social and cultural context, than there is greater chance that more meaningful learning and teaching will occur. Against this background, building good teacher-student relationships becomes paramount. Related literature heavily reinforces this assertion (Bourke et al, 2000: 25; Commonwealth of Australia, 2000: Harris & Malin, 1994; MCEETYA, 2000: NBEET, 1995; Purdie et al, 2000: 46; Osborne, 1996).

As noted in the documentary in Chapter 5(a), I had, in discussions with the new team, made it extremely clear that I expected to see 'effective learning and teaching' in the classroom that was designed to get the best out of children. I did not want to see baby-sitting, children watching videos, colouring in, or playing games with no educational purpose.

It was clearly established that on my visits to classrooms I wanted to see children fully engaged, and, given the extent of progress that was required, I wanted to see them working extremely hard. I also did not want to see classrooms in which the expectations of children were watered down.

Nevertheless, it was crucial to get the children to 'buy into' the push for improved academic performance. Again on school parade I would reflect on our motto, 'Strong and Smart', and ask the children straight out if they wanted to just keep going the way we were going, or work harder to get stronger and smarter. I was very pleased, and very proud to note that all children responded by saying they wanted to get stronger and smarter. Having made this connection, the extent to which we made them work extremely hard in the classroom became clear to the children. The importance of raising expectations of Aboriginal students is well recognized (Gray, 1999: in Bourke, 1999: 17; Purdie et al 2000: 25). In our efforts to recognize the efforts of Aboriginal children who have responded to the challenge of raised expectations, the children are acknowledged at the end of year awards night.

#### **5b.14 Awards Night**

The awards night again is a new and simple strategy designed to embrace a new sense of positive Aboriginal identity, and to challenge the community to embrace and nurture a strong and smart sense of Aboriginal identity. At the awards night each class presents some performance to the community to demonstrate the confidence, knowledge and skill they have developed throughout the school year.

In addition to this trophies are presented in four categories:

- Improvement Award - for the student who has made the most progress;
- Achievement Award - for the student who is highest in the class;
- Encouragement Award - for the student who has worked the hardest;
- Attendance Award - for the student with the least days absent.

In overall terms the awards night is now one of the biggest nights of the year in Cherbourg and is designed to celebrate education, and to celebrate being strong and smart.

### **5b.15 Focussing on Improved Literacy Standards**

At our school, student performance in literacy could only be described as rock bottom. On my arrival in 1998 more than 87% of children were being ‘caught in the net’ for Reading in Year 2. This meant they were not at ‘expected’ literacy standards. There was no use comparing our school’s performance to other schools because we were embarrassingly way behind. When it came time for children to participate in the Year’s 3, 5 and 7 tests for Literacy and Numeracy, most students would simply get up and walk out of the room, or not bother to turn up for school in the first place.

Whenever the Year 7 children had to ‘read’ anything on school parade, or at any other public forum, they would always have a ‘teacher’ standing behind them whispering the words that appeared on the page. Clearly this could not be described as reading or any form of literacy competence, no matter how hard we tried to disguise the reality that most of the children in our school were desperately illiterate.

The team that I inherited would readily provide excuses about the extremely poor literacy performance of the children and the school. In their efforts to provide a rationale for such dismal performance they would say things like, ‘The community is very complex’; so it was the community’s fault. ‘The social and cultural issues of the children are too complex’; so it was the children’s fault. ‘The parents just don’t value education’; so it was the fault of the parents. ‘The tests are not culturally appropriate’; so the tests are to blame. ‘We are not getting the right professional development from the Department’; so let’s blame the Department.

At no stage did we scrutinize such dismal performance and ask, ‘What is it that *we* are doing that is contributing to such dramatic underachievement?’ To me this was crucial.

Clearly we had very little control or influence on the external forces of the children's social and cultural context. We did, however, have control over our own. If under our control, we developed and embraced within our school a culture of dismal failure, then clearly this was what we were destined to return.

As noted earlier, one of the Principles of Effective Learning and Teaching developed by Education Queensland (1994: 1) states that 'Effective Learning and Teaching shapes and responds to the social and cultural context of the learner'. Accordingly, in schools we must *shape and respond* to a child's social and cultural context, *not blame it!*

What frustrated and angered me most about this tendency to externalise or blame forces other than our own is the reality that for a teacher in an Aboriginal community school, regardless of student outcomes, *life goes on!* Children and adults with extremely poor literacy skills, really suffer in life. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1998) found that, of all of those young Aboriginal people who died in some form of incarceration, most were illiterate and had very limited education.

For some Aboriginal young people with extremely limited or no literacy skills, *life doesn't go on!*

At this point I do not want to be seen to overstate the importance of having sound literacy skills, but I certainly do not want to understate them either. I recall in the first few weeks at Cherbourg School walking around visiting classrooms when I dropped into the Grade 7 room. The children were, as usual, playing up quite a bit and were being led by one of the school's renowned 'tough guys'. He was very big in comparison to the other children in the school. He was also very sharp and had a sense of charisma about him that ensured other children would follow him. In a sense his size and charisma allowed him to basically control most others in the classroom, even the teacher. This boy was extremely smart, but not in the type of 'smart' that schools value.

I called him over to me for a chat. He glanced around to all of the other children, put on a wry smile, puffed his chest out, and came over to see me. His face and demeanour changed instantly when I said to him 'I want to hear you read to me!'

I insisted on hearing him read as vigorously as he protested against me. Eventually he grabbed a book, 'The Three Little Pigs', and 'read' the story to me. Clearly he wasn't reading but rather just memorizing it from another time and repeating it in a way one would expect a four-year-old to do the same. His occasional glances over to his classmates clearly revealed his embarrassment about the whole situation. I then said, 'OK, lets read another one, and this time I will pick the book.' In response he got up and shouted, 'I'm not going to fucking read any more!'

In a state of rage he got up, opened up a nearby fridge, and kicked the inside of the door, smashing one of its components. He then walked out of the classroom and disappeared from school for the rest of the day.

It is always disturbing to be confronted by such poor behavior. What disturbed and saddened me most though, was knowing that this child, the biggest, toughest, most charismatic leader in the whole school, would rather create a scene and get into trouble, than have to read to me. He would prefer to be kicked out of school than have to admit that he just couldn't read. To me this is a tragedy. And at times when I think of this boy and this situation, I genuinely fear that one day before he is 21 years old, someone is going to tell me that he has either ended up in jail, committed suicide or died as a result of petrol, glue or paint sniffing.

Against this background the need to develop good literacy skills remains complex yet paramount. The issues affecting Aboriginal student performance in literacy are well documented (APPA Inc. 2000: Batten et al, 1998: Bourke, 1999: Commonwealth of Australia, 2000: Commonwealth of Australia, 2002). They include a multitude of complexities ranging from differences between home languages and school languages, contextual relevance, and even institutional racism. Among them are issues which are

equally as complex yet seemingly so basic. These include attendance at school, child nutrition and access to literature.

Indeed, while many of the issues underpinning poor Aboriginal literacy are well documented, so too are many strategies.

Among some of the general strategies for teaching literacy Batten et al (1998: 148) present the following:

- Collaborative learning, small group work;
- Oral discussion, particularly before starting a work task;
- Practical work, hands-on work;
- Use of computers;
- Modeling;
- Clear explanation;
- Relating activities to children's experience;
- Negotiation;
- Variety of tasks, working in short segments;
- Good relationships with students;
- Encouragement, support.

While these strategies may appear basic, they are nonetheless intrinsically complex. They are sound in their rhetoric, but can only be effective if they are anchored by a genuine belief that Aboriginal children can achieve good literacy outcomes, and an uncompromising intent to 'get on with the job'. An integral part of this was surrounding the children with other Aboriginal role models who showed they could get on with the job as well as anyone.

### **5b.16 Valuing and Utilising Indigenous Staff Within the School**

A key strategy in any Indigenous school is employing and meaningfully engaging Aboriginal staff (MCEETYA, 2000: 29; Kemp, 1999: 15). As noted earlier there were

several Aboriginal teachers, and quite a few Aboriginal teacher aides. For many years, Aboriginal staff, like Mrs Long, had worked in Cherbourg State School, yet had not been consulted about strategic or operational matters. For me it was necessary to listen to their advice on such matters as many of them were local community people, and whilst some may not have had the academic qualifications (although many did), they knew the children and the community far better than I ever did.

When the Aboriginal staff members became accustomed to having a genuine say in strategic and operational matters, the school changed dramatically. This in turn impacted upon the psyche of the children who were starting to see, and feel and believe in Aboriginal leadership, underpinning a more constructive belief about that strong and positive sense of what it meant to be Aboriginal.

In 2002 I made arrangements to re-establish within our school, RATEP (the Remote Area Teacher Education Program). This is a program designed to let Aboriginal people remain in their community, and engage in formal study that would eventually see them graduate as qualified teachers. In 2002, 14 Aboriginal Teachers Aides commenced their own teacher training in our school. These teacher aides, while paid for 25-30 hours, would work with students in classrooms every morning, and after lunch were given time to pursue their tertiary studies.

For me, providing such time for professional development was a means of challenging the Aboriginal identity of the teacher aides, by getting them to reflect on what level of education they should aspire to. In addition to this, it was also a means of nurturing and developing within them, a different sense of being Aboriginal. It was also a means of embracing a different Aboriginal identity that they had chosen to pursue. This is not to say that formal education was 'improving' their identity, but rather that it changed their sense of 'being Aboriginal' in terms of seeing themselves as rightfully engaging in formal educational processes. In turn this would prompt the children to reconsider the way they saw themselves and their sense of being Aboriginal. A key strategy that would contribute to this process was the development of a locally focussed Aboriginal Studies Program.

### **5b.17 Whole of School Aboriginal Studies program**

For many years Aboriginal people have wanted Aboriginal studies as part of the curriculum and it is also recognized as a key strategy for any school contemplating positive Indigenous student outcomes (APPA Inc. 2000: 7; Bourke, 2000: 29; Groome & Hamilton, 1995: 11; MCEETYA, 2000: 43; Purdie et al, 2000: 42; School of Teacher Education, 1996). Any school that is serious about delivering an Aboriginal Studies Program must present it in a credible format and not just as an add-on activity, or something to do during NAIDOC week. Accordingly we developed an Aboriginal Studies Program that is delivered to children from Preschool to Year 7. Each child in the Primary school participates in Aboriginal studies for 2 hours per week. The program is recognized as an integral part of the school's curriculum framework and focuses on the local area upon which Cherbourg is located. The objectives of the program are at Appendix Four.

It is fair to say that life at Cherbourg presents many tough challenges for our children. Like many Aboriginal communities, issues such as unemployment, alcoholism, domestic violence and child abuse challenge the community. The Aboriginal Studies program is designed to take an honest look at these issues, and to generate an understanding within our children that these issues are often the legacy of historical and sociological processes, *and not the legacy of being Aboriginal*. As our children come to grips with this level of understanding, it is anticipated that they will be empowered enough to make personal choices about the extent to which the systems in which they are located, can impact positively or negatively upon them. The implication for the whole community is that they can move more positively into the future, and hopefully leave behind less negative disruptions of the past.

Clearly the Aboriginal Studies Program is designed to challenge Aboriginal identity by 'taking on' existing perceptions so that these can be better processed and understood. Against the background of these understandings the program is designed to develop and

embrace a newer, more positive Aboriginal identity. In overall terms the program changes the way the children see themselves and see their community.

Another way that we changed the way our children saw their own community was by promoting greater opportunities for positive community involvement in our school.

### **5b.18 Promoting Community Involvement**

As noted early the literature heavily reinforces access to positive Indigenous role models as an effective strategy for positive student outcomes (APPA Inc. 2000: 43; Bourke, 1999: 28; Bourke et al, 2000: 48; Commonwealth of Australia, 2000: 23; Eldridge, 2001: 61; Purdie et al, 2000: 43). On most occasions it is nice to have a visit from the big time flash role models who come into a school and get the children glowing. The next day, though, the glow starts to diminish, and after a few days it can completely disappear. What is more powerful is when you can get the children looking at role models who come into the school everyday and work alongside them ... every day, and who also come from the same place they come from.

One way we did this was to switch our school maintenance contract so that local Aboriginal people working for the local community council conducted all of our school repairs and maintenance work. Prior to this the school would get white contractors from the nearby township of Murgon to conduct school maintenance. In the first few months of my time as Principal I would spend the first half hour of each Monday checking all school buildings and counting the number of broken windows that had to be repaired. The broken windows were the result of many young people in the community with apparently not much better to do but to loiter on the school grounds with friends.

On many occasions I would count more than 20 broken windows or louvres on the school buildings. We would then have to complete a maintenance request form to fax to the state's maintenance contract organiser. They would then contact a local contractor from Murgon who would then arrive at school to complete the necessary repairs. On his departure the window repair contractor would sometimes say 'See you next Monday!'

The reality was that we always did see him the following Monday, although he was not complaining. As Principal, and as an Aboriginal person, I could not help complaining though, particularly when the Cherbourg Community Council ran an award-winning housing construction company capable of performing any school maintenance requirement.

Again this to me reflected limited perceptions about the role Aboriginal people could play in the community and a lack of confidence in the notion that Aboriginal people could perform such maintenance requirements. It was logical that the Cherbourg Community Council should be commissioned to perform all maintenance requirements in the school. There were several reasons for this.

Having the local community council performing all school maintenance provided ready access to local role models on a regular basis. The change in contract allowed the children to see their own people, sometimes uncle, sometimes dad, doing positive work in the school. Such arrangements had the potential to influence the way the children of the school saw themselves as adults. If a child sees their uncle or father working productively as a plumber or carpenter in the school, then there is some chance that will formulate similar aspirations within their own minds. The need to get positive role models directly in front of our children was paramount. Of equal importance was the need to reduce the levels of vandalism occurring at the school, and this too, underlined the importance of having the local community council as the school's maintenance contractor.

Members of the Cherbourg Council construction team are indeed members of the local community, and in many instances, have children attending our school. Accordingly the notion of having a deeper interest in the school is obvious. It also stands to reason that if local community people are performing the repairs then they are more likely to have some idea about who is vandalising the school, and take whatever preventative action they see fit, (Sometimes this meant a kick in the pants for some children). Conversely, it also stands to reason that when those responsible for the vandalism know and respect the people performing the maintenance, they are less likely to continue such destructive

behaviours. It also generated a higher level of respect for the school and a diminished desire to vandalise our community school.

In more recent times there are occasional incidences of nuisance vandalism, but nowhere near the extent of what it was originally. As a school we demonstrated our belief in local Aboriginal people as capable of performing maintenance tasks in our school and we were prepared to embrace them. Having local Aboriginal people from the local community council is not the only way we as a school embraced Aboriginal identity. We embraced the skill and capacity of parents and grandparents by ensuring their involvement in student behaviour management processes.

### **5b.19 Empowering Parents to Participate in Student Behaviour Management Processes**

*The National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* notes that ‘parenting skills ... and the capacity to deal with schools ... have been damaged by earlier policies of removal (1997: 557). Cherbourg is an Aboriginal community affected historically by such policies. As we noted in Chapters Three and earlier in this chapter, the school at Cherbourg was established with very limited objectives. Blake notes that ‘children were taught only what was considered necessary for farm labourers and domestic servants’ (2001: 65).

Even today some Aboriginal people harbour apprehensions about the purpose of education. A recent study by Bourke reveals that ‘some parents saw schools as “white fella” places which their children were sometimes reluctant to attend, and this often confirmed their own (negative) experience of schooling’ (2000: 23). Purdie notes that education is often seen as ‘a way forward’ by some parents, yet on the other hand, it is not valued because as one parent suggested, ‘it never got me anywhere’ (2000: 22).

Against this background, it is great that some Indigenous parents are keen to embrace education as that ‘way out’ for their children, yet it becomes understandable that some still house resentment and apprehension. Where, then, does this leave schools, given their

questionable role in disrupting Indigenous communities in the past, and their capacity to offer a way out in the future? Christie argues that schools play an important role in rebuilding communities that have endured disruptions and emphasises the need for educational programs that account for 'social reconstruction' (1996: 303).

The notion of involving parents in student behaviour management processes becomes crucial then for a number of reasons. Firstly it ensures that outcomes in relation to inappropriate student behaviour are negotiated, and therefore any complaints about an unfair process simply do not arise. Secondly, and at a different level, it sends a message from the school (a government agency) to parents and Elders, that they have a valid and real say into the control and direction of their own children, and that these views are indeed well respected.

In my efforts to put these principles into practice, I have arrived at a positive outcome on every occasion.

To outline the process more clearly it is useful to reflect on an example of how such processes have unfolded in the school. Where an incident involving two students emerges, both sets of parents or grandparents are called in for a meeting to discuss the situation. With both sets of parents or grandparents present, each student will outline their involvement in the situation in question. As Principal I would explain then, that any consequence that is established must be negotiated between both sets of parents or grandparents. I would also explain that if for some reason both parties could not agree on an appropriate consequence, then I as Principal would make a decision about this based on our school's behaviour management process. To date there has never been an occasion where agreement is not reached and on every occasion both parties have left satisfied that the right outcome has emerged.

Interestingly, one thing that has become clear as a result of such a mediation process is that all parents or grandparents involved have always been extremely reluctant to see Aboriginal children suspended or excluded from school. Engaging parents/guardians and grandparents at this level was a means of meaningfully embracing the very positive

aspects of being Aboriginal. It also contributed to the development of student identity by reinforcing that crucial aspect of being Aboriginal that notes we should demonstrate respect for our parents and Elders and what they tell us to do. At another level we embraced positive aspects of being Aboriginal by engaging purposefully with the local community council.

### **5b.20 Meaningful School/Council Partnerships**

The Cherbourg Community Council is obviously the lead agency within the community of Cherbourg, given they are elected by the local community like any other council. As a school it was important that we acknowledged and embraced their role and, further, their potential to work in partnership to pursue the best possible outcomes for the children of the community.

Earlier in this chapter I discussed the process of engaging the local community council to provide a maintenance service to the school. This change in process established a sense of appreciation and good will with the council as a means to commence a productive partnership. Another strategy to ensure a productive and meaningful partnership was simply by placing a signature block for the elected council chairperson on all of the school's operational and strategic documents. Having this signature ensured the council had direct input into the directions of the school and the performance targets it sets.

For the school this provided some leverage to negotiate some shared resources to assist the school. For instance, the local council administers a CDEP (Community Development Employment Program) in which local people 'work for their dole'. Historically the council has never allowed CDEP workers to be placed in the school, but given the development of the School/Council partnership, it was agreed that it would be appropriate to have them working with us. Most CDEP workers would only work 15 hours per week as part of the program but as part of the arrangement with the school I gave an undertaking that I would pay each worker an additional 10 to 15 hours so that they were in fact working for 25 to 30 hours per week in the school. As well as that I also gave an undertaking that I would ensure that each worker had access to relevant

professional development opportunities, which would be paid for out of the school budget. This was done partly by getting them involved in the RATEP program discussed earlier.

Effectively what this meant was that as a result of the partnership we were taking people who were on a work for the dole program, and getting them engaged in full-time work with an educational career path that could eventually see them as registered classroom teachers. Of course there were obvious benefits for the students as well, because having the additional personnel in the school meant that each classroom had a teacher, a full-time Aboriginal teacher aide from the community and full-time Aboriginal reading tutor from the community. Apart from the obvious benefits of having additional adults in each classroom, there was the highly significant benefit of having local Aboriginal community people in the classroom that were from precisely the same community context as the children that were sitting in the classroom. This importance of this is discussed in the documentary *Strong and Smart*, presented as Chapter 5 (a).

We are not the experts on the children of the community. The people from the community are the experts ... they come from the same lounge rooms, the same kitchens as the children in our classrooms.

This is beneficial at two levels. At one level it is beneficial in the sense that the children have local community role models on a day to day basis, who are also engaged in a form of study, and provide an explicit example of someone who is from the same community context and is modelling daily a sense of being strong and smart. The children no longer use the line 'You're not from Cherbourg!' as some form of excuse to get out of doing work. The assertion here is that while I am an Aboriginal Principal, there is no point in me trying to get children to work, because I did not grow up on a mission and supposedly would have no idea of what is a realistic expectation to have of students. Put simply, if many people from Cherbourg are working in the school and they are working to exceedingly high expectations, then there is no reason why we cannot expect the children to work to exceedingly high expectations.

At another level, having more local Aboriginal workers in the classroom provides an extremely useful medium through which teachers can develop a much deeper understanding of the children's community context.

As noted by Grace Sarra in the documentary at Chapter 5 (a):

Having Lew in the classroom is a big help because he knows the children better than I do ... if something is not quite right with a child ... or doesn't seem right, Lew might know what is wrong ... or at least he would be able to find out what is wrong with that particular child.

Clearly having local Aboriginal community people as well-regarded colleagues in the classroom provided a much better scope with which to attend to the effective learning and teaching rhetoric discussed earlier which suggested we must 'shape and respond to the student's social and cultural context'.

In overall terms this strategy of engaging with the local community council and giving them a real say into the strategic and operational directions of the school, as well as employing and sponsoring the training and development of more local Aboriginal people, is yet another means of *embracing* a positive Aboriginal identity. Local Elders were the other important people in the community that we had to engage, not only for the purposes of having the young Aboriginal children of the community *embracing* them, but for the purposes of *challenging, developing and embracing* their own sense of being Aboriginal.

### **5b.21 Elders in School**

In the mid 1990s I had completed a project for Education Queensland that explored the extent to which Elders could become involved in student behaviour management processes (Dept. Education Queensland, 1998). The project involved consultations with Elders from various communities throughout Queensland. The key findings of the project were a way of defining Elders in Indigenous communities, and a set of Guiding Principles for student behaviour management processes in schools.

### **What constitutes an Elder ?**

Many factors... personal experience, someone you have the upmost respect and trust in.

An Elder is a person who has earned respect from community people for their credible guidance and wisdom and knowledge.

An Elder is some person who through their role model experience reflects honesty, compassion and integrity.

An Elder is not a political tool that embraces their position to wield power over people.

An Elder is a person free of accusations in terms of biblical prophecies.

An Elder is a person who can give sound advice and counselling where situations are difficult.

An Elder is a person who as a supportive arm, instills in people a feeling of worth, a feeling of self-esteem, pride, dignity, and identity.

An Elder shows appreciation for other peoples' values and religion.

Uncle Albert Holt (1996)

### **Guiding Principles**

The following principles are the result of statewide consultations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders and must be acknowledged by schools and communities.

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, in particular Elders, should be included in decision-making processes about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
- Schools must recognize and be inclusive of productive partnerships within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education. Schools are accountable to communities.
- School decisions, implementation strategies and plans must reflect the views and concerns of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and the shared outcomes of the decision-making processes must be implemented to ensure improved participation and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.
- Schools must be accessible and prepared to regularly negotiate a variety of behaviour management strategies that are specific to local needs.
- Positive behaviour must be modeled by all including parents, Elders, teachers and other school personnel, students, and extended families with agreed expectations.
- Schools must use a wide range of consultation processes to be inclusive of the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- Schools and communities must work together to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, Elders, caregivers and communities to confidently participate in decision-making processes.
- Education must be valued by the community and involvement is crucial.
- Schools must acknowledge, respect and be sensitive to the fact that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people value family members and this must be demonstrated in school practice.

Having had such key involvement in this type of project and having grown up Aboriginal one readily understands the high level of respect that must be afforded to our Elders within our family and within respective communities. To me, coming in as the school's first Aboriginal Principal, it was an obvious tragedy that the Elders within the Cherbourg community were an incredible resource that were basically being ignored in a way that was highly disrespectful. There may have been some one off-gestures here and there to get people involved in school processes, but nowhere near the extent that made it clear that what they had to offer was highly valued.

Within the first week at school I had set up a time to meet with Elders from the community to signal to them the extent to which I valued what they had to offer, and to ask for their much needed assistance to turn the school around. Their response was very positive and there was almost a sense of relief and gratefulness that finally the school had recognized their power in the community and what could be gained from that.

Within the first few months at the school the then Minister for Education visited our school to launch the publication that was the result of the project discussed previously. At this function we as a school presented to all of the Elders of the community, a gold key attached to a stick designed with Aboriginal art. This gesture was designed to symbolise traditional and contemporary means of providing access to places. The stick symbolised a message stick that traditionally would be carried to ensure access to particular areas. The key was symbolic of a contemporary means of that which provides access to particular areas. The underlying message was very clear. All of the Elders in the community had free access to all areas of the school.

This meant they could come into the school at any time and sit in at any classroom whenever they chose.

To underline our appreciation of the Elders and to demonstrate our respect for them we would have an Elders' Special Parade once every term to show them the work that we had been doing in our classrooms. We also adjusted the school's enrolment forms so that when parents completed the details for their children, they would be sure to list which

community Elders they were related to. This was often handy information to know, particularly when stern assistance was required for particular children.

### **5b.22 Developing a School CD**

Like the school calendar strategy, the development of a school CD with their own songs is another simple yet complex strategy designed to confront, at some levels, the way children see themselves as Aboriginal people. As part of the school's music program children make up their own songs which eventually are recorded on CD for distribution around the community and especially to be played on the local community radio station.

At one level the CD project is just to get the children to have a CD they can put into a CD player and hear themselves singing and think to themselves, 'Hey that really is us on there!' It is expected that this would bring some sense of pride and achievement to children. At another level it is designed to get song lyrics that say something positive about being Aboriginal into their heads. The children have also developed and recorded songs about being strong and smart, coming to school every day and having respect. The following example provides an insight into the issue the children write and sing about with the assistance of their music teacher.

*My Best Everyday - by Maynard Heap and students from Cherbourg State School*

*I do my work so I can learn  
I'm strong and smart,  
I take my turn.  
Like doing sums in my book,  
I'm young and proud, just take a look.*

*Yes I'm trying to do my best  
Every day.*

*Heard Mr Sarra on Parade,*

*With strong and smart, you've got it made.  
The message turning in my head,  
Thinking about the things he said.*

*Yes I'm trying to do my best – every day.*

The songs are put to catchy music by the music teacher and is designed to get 'caught in the head' of students. We figure that if children are singing such positive songs inside their head then this is destined to influence their behaviour and performance at school and in the community. Most importantly though, and as for many of the strategies discussed here, this strategy is designed to challenge or influence the way the children see themselves as Aboriginal persons. It challenges them to question whether or not they are the perception that mainstream Australia projects, or whether or not they are 'young and black and deadly', as we say in our school song.

More recently the songs that the children write and sing about are anchored by a framework presented by the Human Values in Education program.

### **5b.23 Human Values in Education Program**

Earlier in this chapter I discussed the extent to which children had very little sense of self-pride in themselves. This was clearly evident in the way they related to each other, to other teachers, and perhaps most profoundly, to themselves. Somehow we had to challenge the way the children embraced and delivered a sense of negativity, and we did this by implementing a human values in education program. As noted by Dr Pal Dhall, the key advisor to our program:

Human values are the values we choose to practise if we wish to cultivate our humanness by following an inner path to happiness, positive emotions, good social relationships and personal fulfilment leading to self-actualisation (Dhall & Dhall, 2003: 44).

Whilst we as a school continued with the Strong and Smart mantra, this represented only the platform upon which they could stand. *The Human Values in Education* program allowed us to develop around our children, a positive values framework with which they could interpret and evaluate perceptions or stimuli ‘coming in’ to them as human beings and as Aboriginal persons. Given that such perceptions or stimuli pass through a values framework that we continually try to develop, they will get to a point where they can either embrace or reject those stimuli according to their own positive values.

It also follows that their outward response to such stimuli, potentially, will be filtered by the same positive values framework and, accordingly, be much more positive. For example, when children are confronted by bullying or teasing, they are more likely to reject it after considering it via the values framework, and respond by not engaging with it and getting caught in the same negative and downward spiral, like they would have done previously.

The *Human Values in Education* program is anchored by five core human values:

- Love
- Peace
- Truth
- Right Conduct
- Non-violence

The program has been adopted from the Sathya Sai Institute of Education which runs similar programs in its schools all over the world. Each value then has a range of sub-values, which are actively taught across the whole school. As a school team we all sit down to discuss and agree what will be the value of the week to be taught across the whole school. All teachers are expected to embrace the program and deliver learning experiences in the classroom based around some key teaching pedagogies, namely:

- Silent sitting (a type of meditation to allow for quiet reflection);
- Quotation (analyses of key quotes relating to the chosen value (e.g. ‘Good manners cost nothing but are worth a lot’);
- Mind Maps (exploring key questions such as what is patience, what does it look like, feel like, what is it like without patience, etc.);
- Creative Visualisation (a type of meditation while imagining things like what it is like to have good friends around you);
- Songs and stories (singing songs and telling stories that are about positive human values).

The challenge to the teacher is to induce the children to use a language of values, engage in positive thinking and problem solving with positive attitudes to learning. The program enhances our children’s emotional and spiritual intelligence and they develop an increasingly holistic and positive personality. They become focussed and concentrated, allowing teachers to get on with the task of teaching and creating school as a place of learning, fun, enjoyment and creativity rather than conflict, tension, stress and anxiety.

The impact of the human values in education program will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter. Most importantly, though, it has made our children gentle and compassionate with each other, and just as importantly, gentler and calmer with themselves.

In early 2004 many Australians witnessed the horrific scenes of the Redfern Riots in which young Indigenous youths were expressing intense anger and frustration. The country watched in horror as young Aboriginal boys and girls threw rocks, sticks and petrol bombs at a barrage of police. Initial analysis would suggest that it is the response to the death of a young Aboriginal man resulting from a police chase. A much deeper analysis reveals a more intense sense of anger and frustration resulting from despair and disengagement, as well as a justifiable mistrust of white society (Pilger, 2004).

The Redfern story is indeed one that could easily be that of many Aboriginal communities throughout Australia, including Cherbourg. The story reminds us that for Aboriginal people there are still some fights that must be fought. For the children of Cherbourg, there are many fights that still must be fought.

The strategies discussed throughout this chapter are designed to develop, challenge and embrace an Aboriginal identity that is ready and armed for such a fight ... not with rocks, sticks and petrol bombs... but heavily armed with courage, confidence and skill, and with intellectual, psychological and spiritual integrity.

## **CHAPTER SIX – IMPACT OF STRATEGIES TO REINFORCE ABORIGINAL IDENTITY**

This chapter will examine the extent to which we have been successful in our pursuit of the strong and smart vision, and the extent to which we have started arming our students with courage, confidence and skill, and with intellectual, psychological and spiritual integrity. It is worth noting the research developed to inform this chapter was utilised for other important purposes as well. In 2003 the Queensland Government's Minister for Education, Ms Anna Bligh, requested a review by exception to examine what was contributing to such dramatic positive change at Cherbourg State School. This review was the first of its kind for Education Queensland, in which a school has been identified for review because of positive progress.

Historically, all schools are usually identified for review by exception when they are performing particularly badly, and their practices must be changed. In our case, Cherbourg State School was identified for a review by exception so that our practices could be identified and extrapolated into other schools and also to explore whether or not it would be better for students to continue junior secondary schooling at Cherbourg rather than have to go into Murgon State High School. The prospect of expanding the school here is significant when one notes that seven years earlier senior bureaucrats in Education Queensland were suggesting the school should be closed down.

Earlier discussion in Chapter 4 outlined the desperate need for 'transformation' as opposed to perpetuating or tolerating an unsatisfactory 'status quo'. Some of the results discussed throughout this chapter will in fact demonstrate that within some areas of schooling there has indeed been a sense of transformation, while other areas demonstrate somewhat slow but steady progress. It is pleasing to note that on reflection there is no single parameter on which there has been any sense of negative change or regression since 1998.

In recent years the school and its staff have been widely recognized with a broad range of media coverage about its positive progress, most recently in the Australia's national

broadcaster, the ABC's series *Australian Story* (ABC, October 4, 2004). A transcript of the program is available in the Appendices. Whilst receiving such media can be very nice, there is absolutely no misunderstanding the 'real deal' in our school. The real deal in our school is unquestionably about developing students with academic outcomes that are comparable to any other school around Queensland, and a strong and positive sense of what it means to be Aboriginal in today's society. This is a real deal that the community of Cherbourg, and indeed any Aboriginal community, can genuinely value.

From this point this chapter will briefly outline the methodologies for collecting and collating school progress data, and then discuss in more detail specific areas in which the school, staff and students have made progress in our efforts to get stronger and smarter students.

## **6.1 School Review Methodology**

In 2003 an extensive and expert review team was assembled to conduct specific research to identify the impact of the strong and smart vision, and the processes of reinforcing in our school, Aboriginal perceptions of being Aboriginal. The research team consisted of:

- Principal, Cherbourg State School
- Executive Director, Schools, South Burnett, Education Queensland
- Principal Education Officer, Performance Measurement, Education Queensland
- Director, School Performance, Education Queensland
- Queensland University of Technology Researcher
- Community partnerships Team, South Burnett District Office, Education Queensland
- Cherbourg State School Ancillary and Teaching Staff.

Whilst continuing discussion about school strategies pursued by the team at Cherbourg State School is likely, the research presented in this chapter is primarily designed to provide some analyses of school and student performance outcomes.

These outcomes are examined via a range of mediums including:

- Systemic data collection from Education Queensland's Corporate Data Warehouse
- School-based data collection;
- Focussed and open conversations and surveys with
  - All teaching staff, teacher aides and other ancillary staff, (conducted by the QUT as part of a community-based action research project);
  - Students in Years 5, 6 and 7, (conducted by Cherbourg State School teaching staff);
  - Most parents (conducted by Cherbourg State School Community Liaison staff and the South Burnett District Education Partnerships Team);
  - A sample of Elders and community members, conducted by Cherbourg State School Community Liaison staff and the South Burnett District Education Partnerships Team;
  - Cherbourg Community Council by the Executive Director, Schools for the South Burnett region.

Reports about the impact of the strategies outlined in the previous chapter are presented within the framework of Education Queensland's major corporate components:

- Learning
- Schools
- Workforce

## **6.2 Learning**

Most of the systemic data available via Education Queensland notes the *current location* of Cherbourg State School in terms of Student Performance presents its mean as *below* in comparison to other state school means. Such data, however, does little to provide a sense

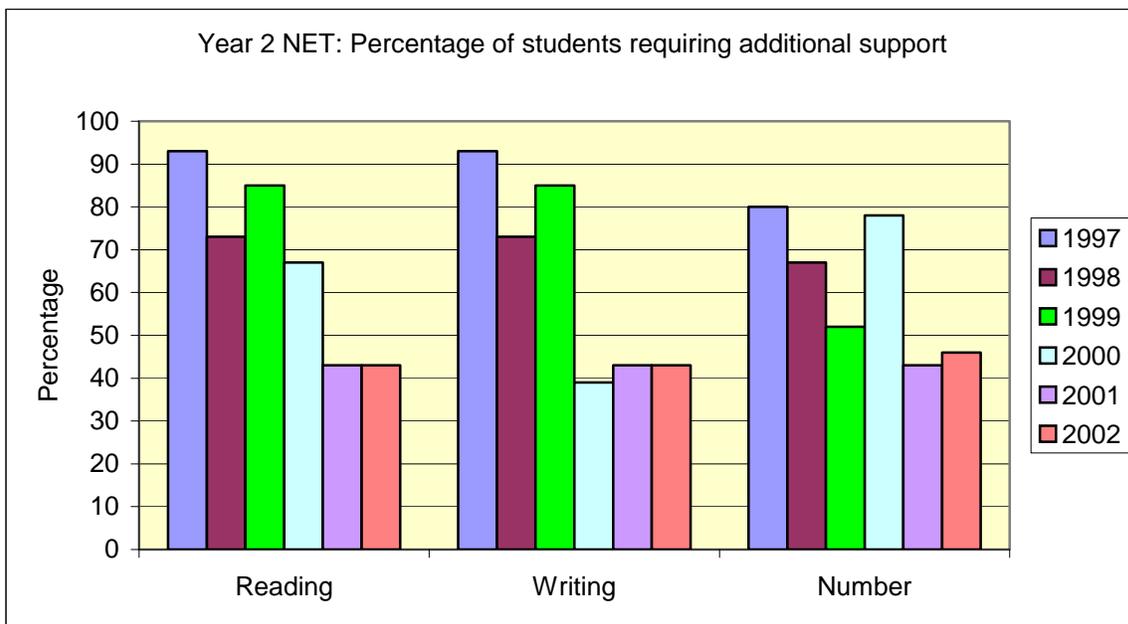
of distance travelled, and on face value, does little to reflect the entire story behind the data.

### 6.2.1 Year 2 Net Data

Figure 6.1 provides an overview of progress in relation to Year 2 Net Systemic Data. Every year, all Year 2 Queensland state school students are assessed to determine their ability level in Reading, Writing and Number. In Queensland schools, if a Year 2 child is not at a level that one would reasonably expect a Year 2 child to be at for Reading, Writing and/or Number, then they would be what we call 'caught in the net'. The 'net' here, is a diagnostic net.

Figure 1 clearly indicates reductions in the number of students 'caught in the net' or not at the expected student performance standards for Year 2.

**Figure 6.1 Year 2 Net Results**



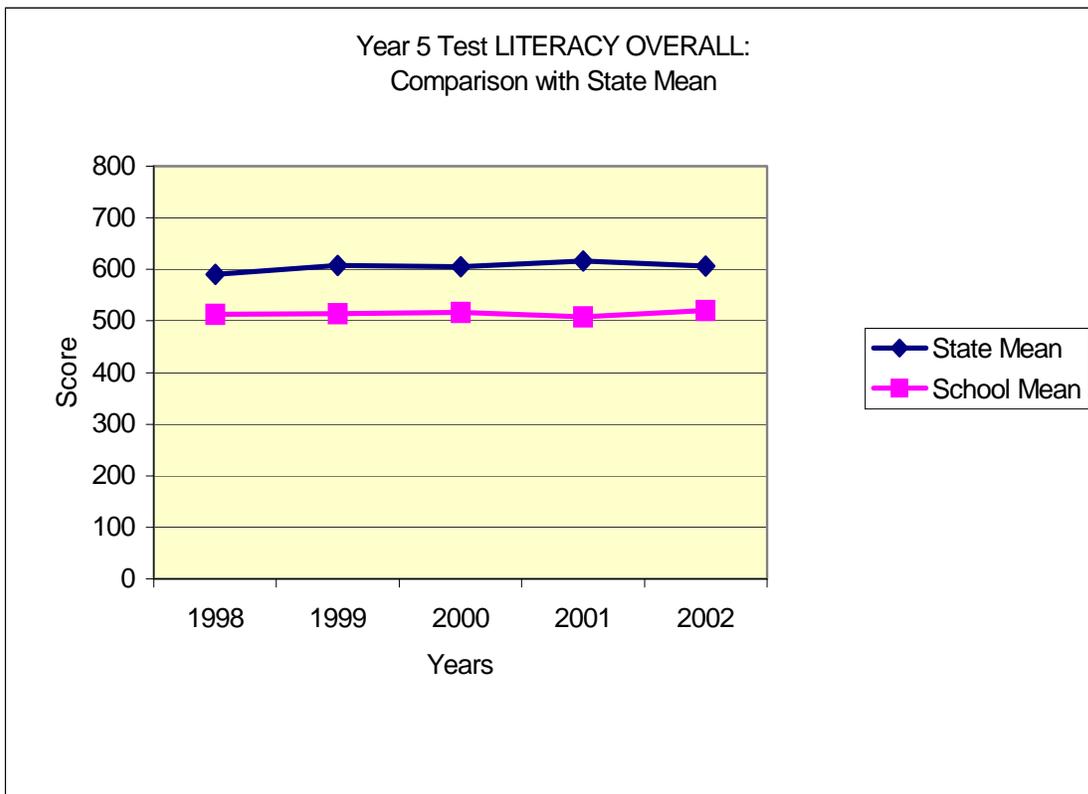
The chart indicates the percentage of students identified as requiring additional support from 1997 to 2002.

- The percentage of students requiring additional support in Reading and Writing has decreased by 40%.
- The number of students identified as requiring additional support in Number has decreased by 33%.
- 

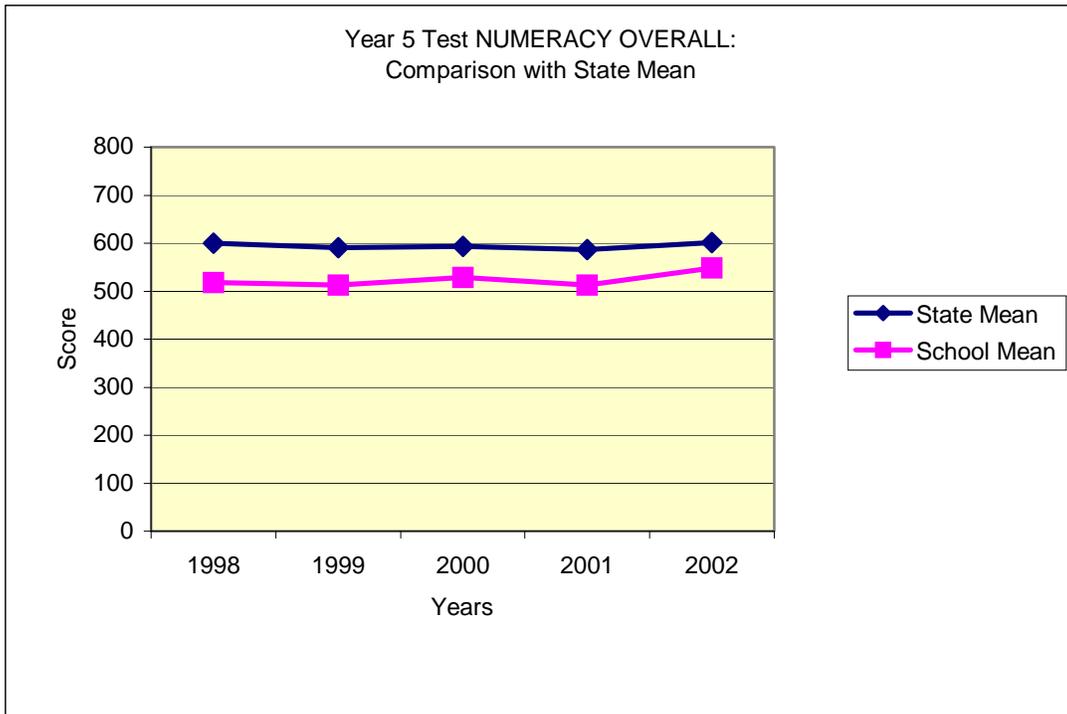
### 6.2.2 Year 5 Diagnostic Data

Figures 6.2 and 6.3 reveal that in terms of Year 5 performance on systemic tests for Literacy and Numeracy overall, student performance reflects slight improvement, yet continues to remain below the State Mean in comparison.

**Figure 6.2 Year 5 Literacy Results**



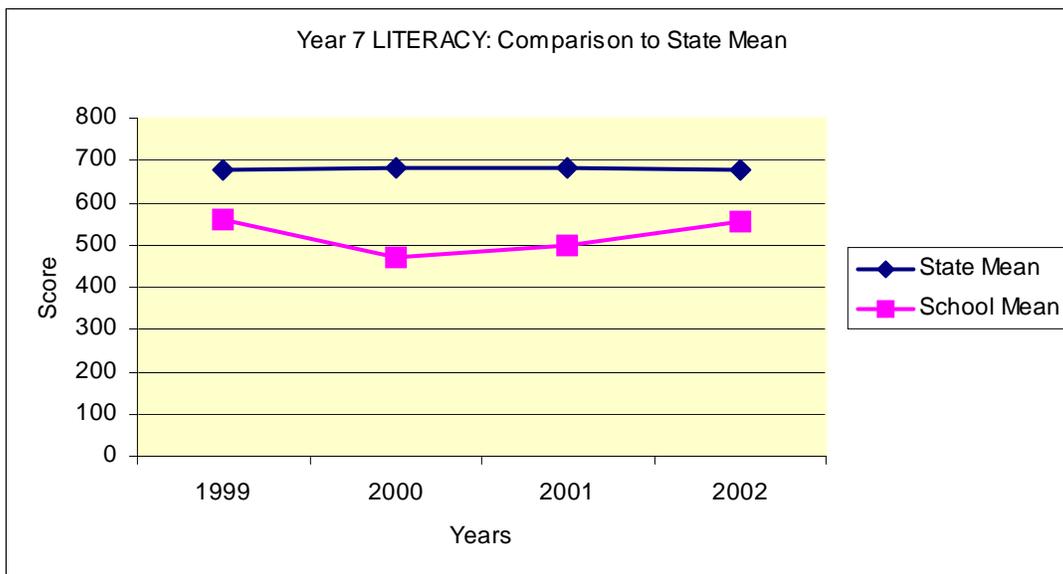
**Figure 6.3 Year 5 Numeracy Results**



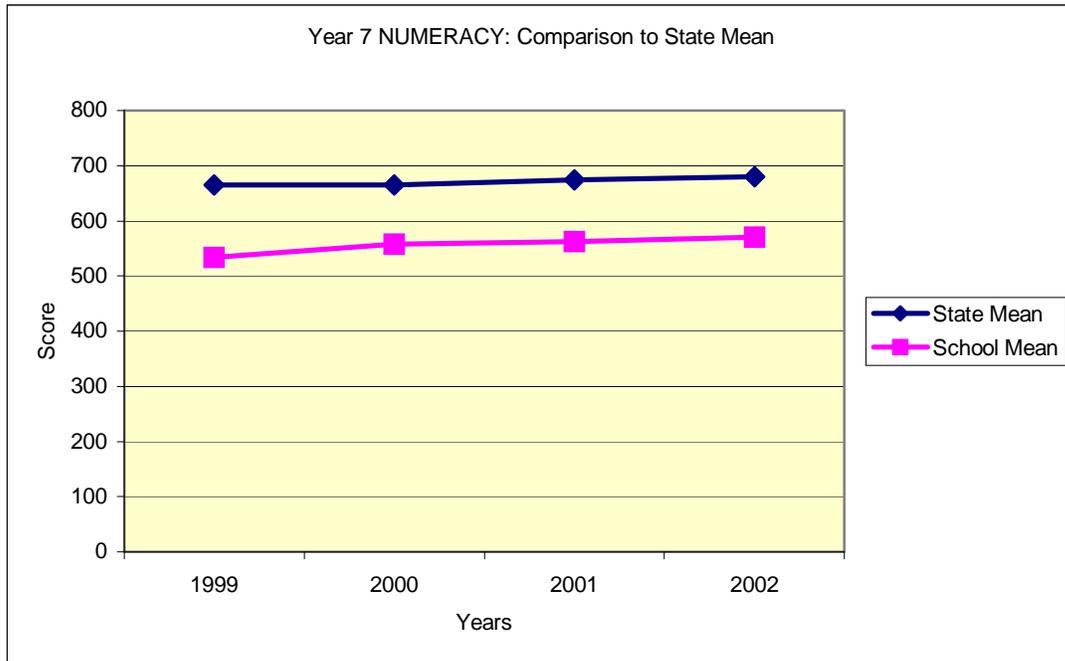
**6.2.3 Year 7 Diagnostic Data**

Figures 6.4 and 6.5 reveal that in terms of Year 7 performance on systemic tests for Literacy and Numeracy overall, student performance again reflects slight improvement, yet continues to remain below the State Mean in comparison.

**Figure 6.4 Year 7 Literacy Results**



**Figure 6.5 Year 7 Numeracy Results**



As noted, reflection on both the Year 5 and Year 7 data reveal some positive change, but not nearly to the extent that would see the school realise its aim of having ‘student outcomes that are comparable to any other school around Queensland’. It is worth emphasising though that these children have had a limited time in school under the Strong and Smart vision, and some exposure to the watered down expectations of the previous teaching team. One suspects that the Year 5 and Year 7 test results of children who have spent their entire school life under the Strong and Smart vision and in a climate of very high expectation should show dramatically improved results in comparison to previous years.

### **6.3 Schools**

The strategies discussed in the previous chapter have had a significant impact on specific aspects of school. This section will discuss this impact against a range of variables namely:

- Unexplained student absences

- Student absenteeism
- Student enrolments
- Retention into high school
- Parent Opinion Surveys
- General school progress
- Parent/community partnerships
- Principal/teacher leadership
- The Strong and Smart Vision
- Student Opinion Surveys.

### 6.3.1 Unexplained Absences

Unexplained absenteeism was readily acknowledged as a major issue in Cherbourg State School. Many children were either not attending school, or disappearing from school at various stages throughout the day. When a child did not attend, or disappeared from school, we as a school just did not know the whereabouts of the child. Extensive consultation with parents and guardians revealed that they too didn't know. Many would indicate that they sent their children to school; however, they were obviously not getting there.

As a school we changed the reporting processes for absenteeism. Rather than expect parents to send a note to explain student absenteeism on a child's return to school, the teachers would present students with a note to take home and get parents to sign. The note was made very simple for parents and read as follows:

*(Student Name)* ... was away on *(date)*  
because he/she:

- was sick
- family reasons
- don't know
- other ... please comment.

***Parent Signature***

The pursuit of explanations for student absenteeism was initiated by the school in a format that would be easy for parents to attend to.

As discussed in the previous chapter we developed an incentive program that would encourage all students to reduce the number of unexplained absences. This strategy basically involved recording, on school assembly, the number of unexplained absences for each class, and giving a free iceblock to the class with the lowest number. At the end of each term the class with the lowest score overall would be rewarded with a bus trip to the nearby township of Kingaroy to go to McDonald's for lunch.

- Unexplained absences in Term 3, 2000 were recorded at 1,185. In term 4, 2001 unexplained absences had dropped to 68.5. This represents a reduction of 94 %.

After 2001 we applied a greater focus on 'real attendance' rather than unexplained absences. Rather than have a class focus, we told children that all children with fewer than 5 days real absence would be eligible to go to Kingaroy to have lunch at McDonald's. In Term 1 of 2004, 125 children out of a total enrolment of 145 went to Kingaroy to have lunch at McDonald's.

It is worth reiterating this point. In Term 1, 2004, 86% of children in our school had fewer than 5 days absent from school. Against the background of this dramatically improved attendance one could easily assume that at some stage improved numeracy and literacy outcomes, and indeed broader academic outcomes, should surely become inevitable. That is, if 86% of children are coming to school regularly, then surely they are destined to learn?

### **6.3.2 Absenteeism**

Table 6.1 provides sample analyses of student absenteeism of the most senior class for each year from 1996 to 2002. The table was developed by calculating the percentage absenteeism of the most senior class at week 5 of every term (that is, considering the

number of students on the class roll against the number of recorded absences for that week).

**Table 6.1 Percentage Absenteeism of Most Senior Class**

<b>Year</b>	<b>1996</b>				<b>1997</b>				<b>1998</b>			
Term	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
% absenteeism	54	62	48	52	61	56	51	54	60	59	48	45
Average %	<i>54%</i>				<i>56%</i>				<i>53%</i>			

<b>Year</b>	<b>1999</b>				<b>2000</b>				<b>2001</b>				<b>2002</b>			
Term	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
% absenteeism	34	52	41	24	26	38	26	21	24	10	24	15	10	18	11	12
Average %	<i>37%</i>				<i>27%</i>				<i>18%</i>				<i>12%</i>			

Table 6.1 clearly reflects a 44% reduction in absenteeism for the most senior class in the school from 1997 to 2002 – a reduction from 54% to 12%.

It is acknowledged that this data could be more comprehensive, but given time and resource constraints I had to settle for this level of analysis. It is argued, however, that in spite of the limited depth of the data presented here, it is indeed deep enough to expose a very clear pattern of school attendance behaviour.

In an effort to provide deeper analyses of attendance data I have examined some individual attendance data to clearly reinforce the assertions that student attendance behaviour has changed dramatically.

Table 6.2 presents some analyses of some individual students with continuous enrolment at Cherbourg State School during the period from 1999 to 2002. Only the student's initials are presented in the table.

**Table 6.2 Absenteeism of Students with Continuous Enrolment**

<b>Student Initials</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2002</b>
V.A.	51	44	24.5	18
M.D.	71	94	13	15.5
G.F.	19	27	2	4
M.G.	18	26	5	35.5
H.M.	44	44	5	5
L.S.	1	1	3.5	2.5
L.D.	97	146	31.5	46
S.A.	72	128	3.5	31
S.M.	135	50	39	25
W.M.	49.5	96	20.5	12
K.B.	16	27	7	6
N.C.	64	124	5	34
D.C.	14.5	12	3	10
N.G.	48.5	65	17.5	18
D.J.	54.5	140	15	18
C.S.	46	120	23.5	36
M.M.	57.5	79	70	7.5
C.G.	55	47.5	11	23.5
J.A.	34	21.5	1	14
<b>Total Absences</b>	<b>947.5</b>	<b>1,292</b>	<b>300.5</b>	<b>360.5</b>

Clearly some individuals have made extremely significant improvements to attendance patterns and this influences the overall school absenteeism data.

Worth noting specifically are:

- MD down from 94 in 2000 to 13 in 2001
- LD down from 146 in 2000 to 46 in 2002
- SA down from 128 in 2000 to 3.5 in 2001
- WM down from 96 in 2000 to 12 in 2002

- NC down from 124 in 2000 to 5 in 2001
- DJ down from 140 in 2000 to 18 in 2002
- CS down from 120 in 2000 to 36 in 2002
- MM down from 79 in 2000 to 7.5 in 2002.

It is also worth observing that many of the students listed here would generally be considered to be somewhat chronic truants in any school. Given that the overall school attendance strategy has had such a dramatic impact on this type of student, one could also safely assume that there has been a positive impact on the many students who, whilst not considered chronic truants, still missed a substantial number of school days.

### **6.3.3 Enrolments**

In 1998 a significant yet unknown number of students that were living in Cherbourg were attending Murgon State School. In discussions with parents about such a choice many parents articulated a high degree of dissatisfaction with the standard of educational delivery at Cherbourg State School, as well as a perception that the school offered a 'community' or 'watered down' curriculum.

Whilst technically the school was a regular State school, which should have been delivering a regular school curriculum, it was seemingly true that the school was in fact delivering a 'watered down' curriculum, or at the very least, harboured very 'watered down' expectations of its students.

Since 1998 enrolments at Cherbourg State School have significantly increased.

- Total school enrolments have increased from 144 students in February 1998 to 265 in February 2003.
- In grades 1-7 enrolments have increased from 89 in August 1998, to 146 in 2004.

To some degree, the trend which saw students from Cherbourg traveling into Murgon for school on the premise that they would get a better education, has been reversed to the extent that several students living in Murgon now commute to Cherbourg every morning to attend Cherbourg State School, believing that they would get a better education.

#### **6.3.4 Retention into High School**

Earlier discussion in Chapter 4 indicated that student retention into secondary school has historically been a major concern for those students leaving Cherbourg State School to attend Murgon State High School. More recent analyses reveals some degree of progress in this regard, although the issue firmly remains as one of major concern.

Destination data that tracks all Cherbourg State School students that have left Year 7 since 1998 reveal that:

- *of the 10* Year 7s of the 1998 cohort from Cherbourg State School, ***9 have dropped out of high school***. Four dropped out of high school in year 8, 4 dropped out in year 9, one dropped out in year 10, and one has continued and is currently in year 12. Four of the children who dropped out have spent time in a detention centre.
- *of the 11* Year 7s of the 1999 cohort from Cherbourg State School, ***8 have dropped out of high school***. One dropped out in year 8, 4 dropped out in year 9, and 3 dropped out in year 10. Of those remaining in school 2 are participating in the Annex program<sup>2</sup>, and only 1 is participating in a regular Year 11 program. All 3 students reportedly have high levels of absenteeism.
- *of the 17* year 7s of the 2000 cohort from Cherbourg State School, ***9 have dropped out of high school***. Five students dropped out of high school in grade 8 and 4 dropped out in grade 9. Three students remain at Murgon SHS but only participate in the Annex program. Four students are participating in a regular secondary school program but in high schools other than Murgon.
- *of the 12* year 7s of the 2001 cohort from Cherbourg State School, ***1 has dropped out and 1 has been excluded***. One is in Grade 9 in Townsville. Of the remaining 9 students at Murgon SHS, one is participating in the Annex program. One student is in a special needs program. Of the remaining 7 students participating in

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<sup>2</sup> The Annex Program is an alternative education program offered by Murgon SHS for children who have great difficulty coping with the demands of a regular high school program.

a regular secondary program at Murgon SHS, 3 reportedly have high levels of absenteeism.

- ***of the 13*** year 7s of the 2002 cohort from Cherbourg State School, ***2 have dropped out of high school***. Three students are attending secondary school away from Murgon, although 1 of these did not enrol until term 2. Of the 8 students remaining at Murgon SHS, 4 are participating in a special needs program.

It could easily be argued that the student outcomes data, such as Numeracy and Literacy outcomes, absenteeism, enrolment and retention data, is often the most important data for any school. It is also useful though to reflect on data that reflects parent, student and staff opinions.

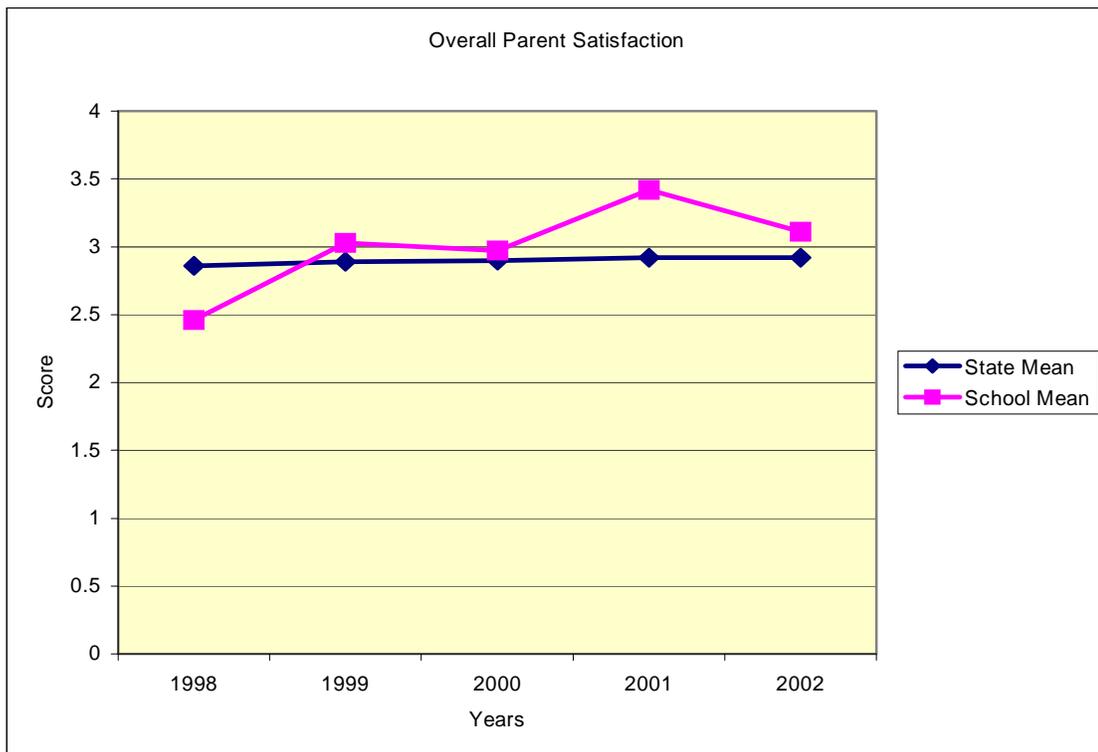
Every year all State Schools must conduct School Opinion Surveys to examine the extent to which parents, students and staff are satisfied with the progress of the school. Parent Opinion Survey results are presented here for discussion. Student and Staff Opinion Survey feedback is presented later in this chapter.

### 6.3.5 Parent Opinion Survey

Figure 6.6 compares the overall parent satisfaction from 1998 to 2002 with the State Mean.

- Overall Parent satisfaction increased from 2.46 in 1998 to 3.03 in 1999 to be comparable with the State mean
- Overall Parent satisfaction increased to 3.42 in 2001 and 3.11 in 2002 to be flagged above the State mean

**Figure 6.6 Overall Parent Satisfaction**



More comprehensive information relating to parent satisfaction is reflected later in this chapter in discussion about community perceptions of the Strong and Smart vision.

### **6.3.6 Community Surveys on the Strong and Smart Vision**

In July 2003 a consultation team was established to conduct face-to-face surveys to determine the extent to which the people of Cherbourg were happy with the progress of the school. Those participating in the survey were asked how they felt about the school now compared to how it was prior to the development of the Strong and Smart vision. More specifically they were asked questions relating to:

- the school progress in general
- parent/community partnerships
- principal/teacher leadership
- the Strong and Smart vision.

There were 154 people who participated in the survey. They consisted of 70 parents/caregivers, 23 Elders and 61 general community people. For all three question areas survey participants were asked to rate their perceptions against the following Ratings Legend.

<b>Ratings Legend</b>	
0	No response
1	Very Poor
2	Poor
3	Satisfactory
4	Good
5	Very Good

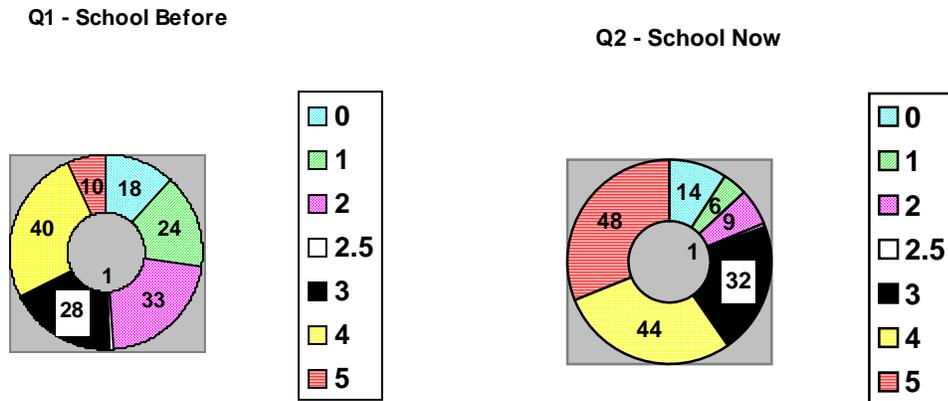
The precise survey questions and subsequent tables and discussion are presented here for analyses.

#### **6.3.6.1 General School Progress**

In analyses about general school progress the following questions were presented to those surveyed.

- Q1 What was the school like before?

- Q 2 What is the school like now?
- Q3 What is the main difference?



**Figure 6.7 General School Progress**

Figure 6.7 notes that when asked generally about the school *before*, 78 (50.6%) people provided a positive response compared to 124 (80.5%), who provided a positive response when asked about the school *now*.

Forty-eight (26%) of the participants surveyed described the school as very good *now* compared to only 10 (6%) when commenting on the school *before*.

In commenting on the main difference (Q3) between school now and before, participants commented on a broad range of issues. Most prominently though were suggestions that the school has improved because attendance has been dramatically improved, expectations and performance of students seems to be higher, and further, that there are more Aboriginal people on staff at the school.

Individual responses include:

Children are learning more (do more things, kids more interested, curriculum is better, picked up a lot).

Children like going to school a lot more; enjoy learning (attendance levels are much higher).

They are being taught discipline and respect and it shows in some children.

More interaction and consultation between staff and parents/community members.

More understanding of student needs, culture and community.

More incentives for kids to learn.

Children are achieving and developing not only intellectually but artistically and culturally as well (e.g. producing their own music).

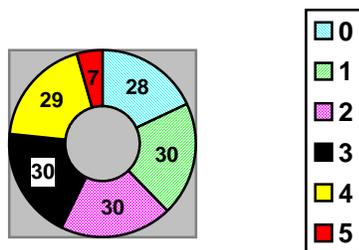
Clearly there is an overwhelmingly positive community sense of satisfaction with the general progress of the school. This is also reflected in discussions about parent/community partnerships.

### 6.3.6.2 Parent/Community Partnerships

In analyses about parent/community partnerships the following questions were presented to those surveyed:

- Q4 What were the school and parent/community partnerships like before?
- Q5 What are school and parent/community partnerships like now?
- Q6 What is the main difference?

Q4 - Partnerships Before



Q5 - Partnerships Now

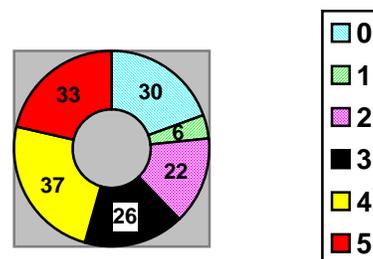


Figure 6.8 Parent/Community Partnerships

Figure 6.8 notes that when asked specifically about school partnerships *before*, 66 (42.8%) people provided a positive response, compared to 96 (62.3%) who provide a positive response when asked about the school *now*.

- 33 participants (21.4%) surveyed described the school as **very good** *now* compared to only 7 (4.6%) when commenting on the school *before*.

Individual responses include:

The staff makes me feel more welcome.

There's a more welcoming feeling in the principal's and teachers' attitudes towards the parents and community members; they feel part of the school, they encourage involvement.

You can talk straight with Chris.

School is being recognized by the outside world.

School and grounds are cleaner.

Aboriginal staff; Mr Sarra and more black men on staff (kids from single parent families show more respect to male staff).

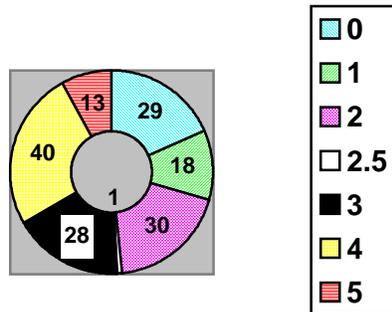
Again when commenting on the main differences (Q6), participants provided a broad range of responses. Significantly though, many again felt that the main difference is the increased presence of an Aboriginal principal, Aboriginal teachers and teacher aides. It is worth noting that many participants noted the particular significance of having more Aboriginal males on staff at the school.

### **6.3.6.3 Principal/Teacher Leadership**

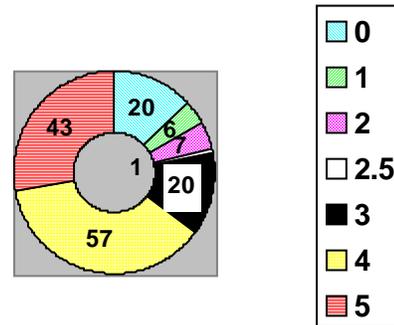
In analyses about Principal/teacher leadership the following questions were presented to those surveyed:

- Q7 What was the principal/teacher leadership like before?
- Q8 What is it like now?
- Q9 What is the main difference?

Q7 - Leadership Before



Q8 - Leadership Now



**Figure 6.9 Principal/Teacher Leadership**

Figure 6.9 notes that when asked generally about school partnerships *before*, 53 (34.4%) people provided a positive response, compared to 100 (64.9%) who provided a positive response when asked about the school *now*.

- 43 participants (27.9%) surveyed described the school as **very good now** compared to only 13 (3.2%) when commenting on the school *before*.

Individual responses include:

Better staff – (they show they care a lot about our children’s education; they want better outcomes for our children; they support our children)

Better behaviour management

Communicate well – (teachers are more likely to have relationships now, than before; they talk to parents)

Shows that a lot more can be done when the students’ education is a priority (more than just a job)

Principal now respects community input

It's good that more Murri ways are being taught at school by Mr Blackman

Chris encourages positive attitudes in children and his staff – standards are set high

The white teachers have a better understanding of Murri kids

Not surprisingly, most respondents again refer to the increased presence of Aboriginal staff and Aboriginal leadership within the school as the main factor contributing to positive leadership. Many refer specifically to an improved sense of communication between the school and the community, and again this is linked to a greater presence of Aboriginal people in the school.

#### **6.3.6.4 The 'Strong and Smart' Vision**

In analyses about the Strong and Smart vision the following questions were presented to those surveyed.

- What do you think of the Strong and Smart vision at Cherbourg State School?
- What does it mean to you, your children, your family, your community?
- What difference does it make (or has it made) to the children?

Nearly all of the 154 people surveyed described the school's Strong and Smart vision as very good to excellent. Many commented that it made students feel a sense of pride and respect in themselves and their Aboriginal identity.

When asked what difference it makes to the children many suggested it makes them feel stronger and more positively about themselves.

Individual responses include:

It gives them confidence.

The children bond together.

Makes us parents feel proud.

They respect their culture.

I get more respect (from the children).

It's very powerful and strong.

It's very good – It's excellent.

Yes I know this is a good vision. If a person is not proud of being black then they are not honest with themselves and have got low self-esteem.

It's good to keep on an equal par with other schools in Queensland.

I think it is an ideal vision – one that recognizes the children's' culture and traditions as well as looking into the future.

We didn't have the vision when we went to school – It would have been good.

Clearly the community responses discussed here note an extensive appreciation for the Strong and Smart vision pursued by the school. Student opinions also note that the 'strong and smart' vision is also embraced enthusiastically.

### **6.3.7 Student Opinion**

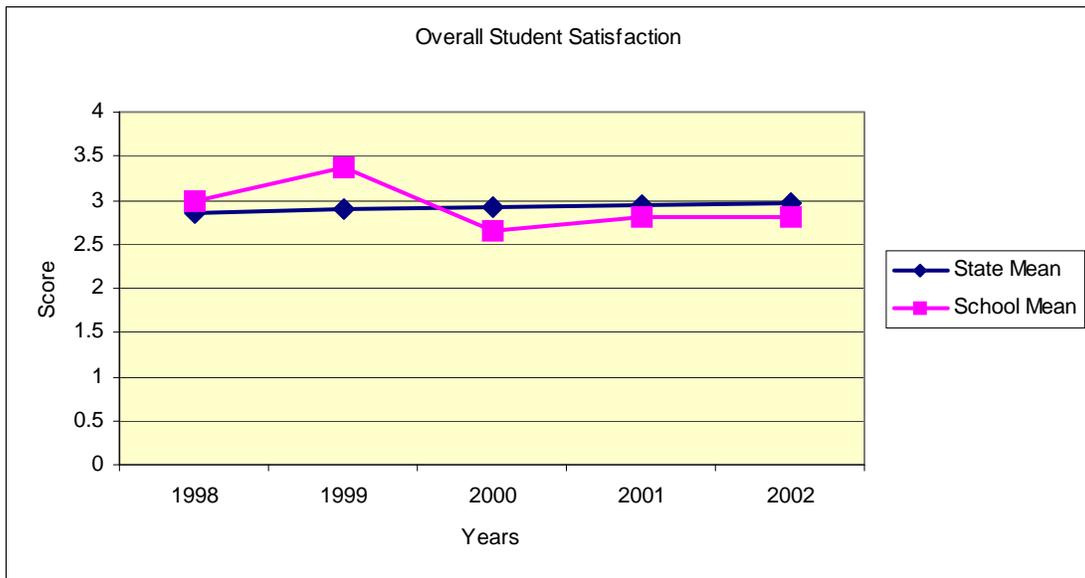
Student opinion presented here is articulated via two data collection processes. These include the Student Opinion Survey, and a survey about student perceptions of the Human Values in Education program.

### 6.3.7.1 Student Opinion Survey

Figure 6.7 is a chart comparing the overall student satisfaction from 1998 to 2002 with the State Mean.

- Overall student satisfaction increased from 2.99 in 1998 to 3.36 in 1999 to be flagged above the State mean
- Overall student satisfaction decreased to 2.66 in 2000, 2.82 in 2001 and 2.82 in 2002 to be comparable to the State mean

**Figure 6.10 Overall Student Satisfaction**



Further analyses of student opinion are provided by the Human Values in Education survey.

### 6.3.7.2 Student Survey on Human Values in Education

In August 2003, 17 students were surveyed in relation to their perceptions of the Human Values in Education program at Cherbourg State School. Of course one could argue that

the sample size is not particularly significant; however, this represents all of the senior students in that particular year.

In terms of *Academic* performance most students believe:

- they can work longer
- they can learn things faster; and
- children are getting smarter.

In terms of *Student Behaviour* most students believe:

- their teacher doesn't have to tell them what to do as much;
- they feel safer playing in the playground;
- the classroom is quieter now;
- children follow classroom rules more often; and
- the classroom is a more calm place to be.

In terms of *Intrapersonal skills* most students believe:

- they are better than they used to be;
- they like trying new things;
- they are more likely to finish assignments;
- they are better at getting their work finished;
- children don't get as angry as they used to;
- children wait in lines better;
- they more often do their best work; and
- they tell the truth more often.

In terms of *Social skills* most students believe:

- students get along better;
- children don't fight as much;
- they do more things in the community;
- they hear the words 'please' and 'thank you' more often;
- the school grounds are cleaner;
- other children show them more respect now;
- there is less graffiti on the school grounds;
- children are better at taking turns;
- people use their manners more;
- people listen better; and
- classmates get along better.

Already the analyses of community, parent and student data reveals a great deal in terms of the extent of change within our school. Analyses of staff data reinforce the sense of transformation already discussed.

#### **6.4 Workforce**

The complex nature of the Cherbourg State School community ensures that, while it is unanimously perceived by staff as an extremely rewarding environment in which to work, it is an extremely challenging workplace, and one in which positive staff morale and a great sense of teamwork is crucial. This section presents some analyses of the workforce of Cherbourg State School, based on Staff Opinion Surveys, and a review of teacher and teacher aide perceptions.

Importantly this section attempts to provide some insight into the 'lived experience' of teachers and teacher aides at the school. Three sources of data are examined in an effort to articulate workforce perceptions: the Staff Opinion Survey; a review of staff perceptions of the Human Values in Education program; and transcripts of one-to-one interviews.

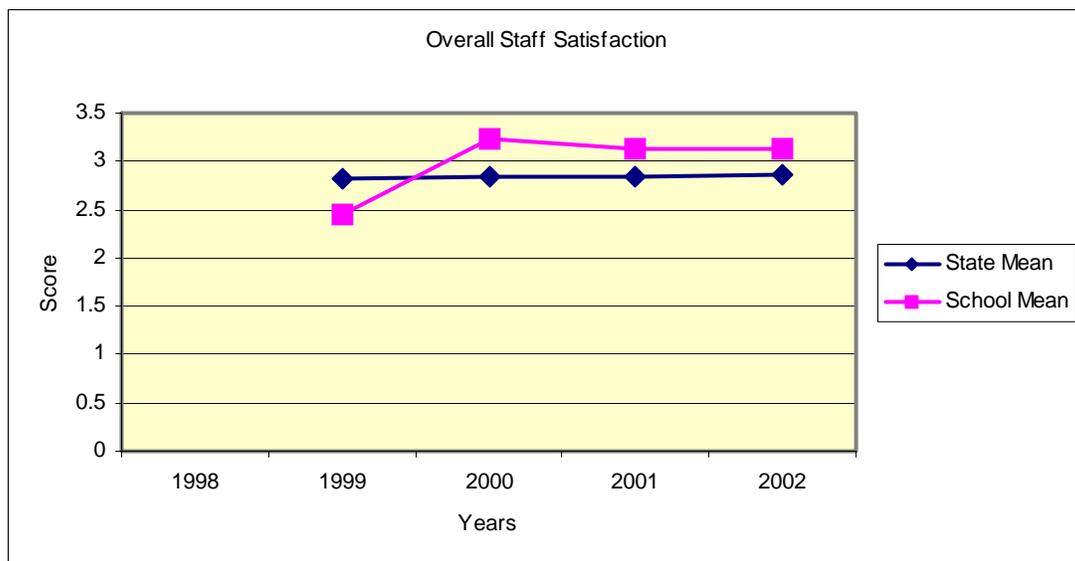
### 6.4.1 Staff Opinion Survey

Figure 6.8 is a chart comparing the overall staff satisfaction from 1999 to 2002 with the State Mean.

- Overall staff satisfaction increased from 2.46 in 1999 to 3.24 in 2000 to be flagged above the State Mean.
- Overall staff satisfaction was 3.12 in 2001 and 3.13 in 2002 to remain flagged above the State Mean.

Interestingly the 1999 Staff Opinion Survey result reflects the view of staff at the time when a culture of high expectation was introduced. Many teachers surveyed here had been at the school for lengthy periods ranging from 4 to 15 years. The new culture being introduced meant high expectations of staff as well as students. Clearly some staff were not particularly receptive to the notions of increased professional accountability that comes with increased staff expectation. The new staff team which was assembled in 2000 clearly appreciated such a challenge.

**Figure 6.11 Overall Staff Satisfaction**



#### **6.4.2 Staff Survey on Human Values in Education**

Eleven staff were surveyed in relation to their perceptions of the Human Values in Education program at Cherbourg State School.

In terms of *Academic* performance all staff surveyed believe:

- children are more receptive to learning;
- children are better able to stay focussed on tasks;
- children grasp academic concepts faster;
- children's academic results have improved; and
- children are getting smarter.

In terms of *Student Behaviour* all staff surveyed believe:

- they send fewer children to the office for behaviour issues;
- playground behaviour has improved;
- they are more confident that behaviour will be appropriate on excursions;
- the classroom is quieter when teaching;
- children more often follow classroom rules; and
- the classroom is a more calm place to be.

In terms of *Intrapersonal skills* all staff surveyed believe children:

- are more confident to speak in front of the classroom;
- are more confident at tasks;
- are more likely to take risks with learning;
- are more likely to work independently;
- are more likely to complete assignments;
- complete independent work to a higher standard;
- have greater control over their emotions;

- show more patience towards others;
- show greater leadership skills;
- are more likely to tell the truth; and
- will reflect on their work.

In terms of *Social skills* all staff surveyed believe children:

- *resolve conflict in a more peaceful manner;*
- *participate more often in community activities;*
- *use the words 'please' and 'thank you' more often;*
- *are more likely to help their classmates;*
- *keep the school grounds cleaner;*
- *show more respect for others' opinions;*
- *are more likely to take turns;*
- *use values in their actions*
- *use better listening skills in the classroom;*
- *work more cooperatively; and*
- *are more likely to use manners around adults.*

To some extent the data presented here, whilst seemingly qualitative by nature, is arguably quantitative. It was considered a highly valuable exercise to dig much more deeply into some qualitative analyses of what staff had to say in their detailed reflections on the school's progress.

### **6.4.3 Teacher and Teacher Aide Interviews**

In term 4, 2002, teachers and teacher aides were engaged in 45-minute interviews to get a deeper insight into their perceptions about working at the school and being involved in the Strong and Smart vision. To some end it is worth discussing the perceptions of teachers separately from that of the Indigenous teacher aides. The following provides a collective account of their stories.

#### **6.4.4 Teacher Perceptions**

In overall terms the teachers discussed a range of issues including improved attendance and behaviour, expectations, what it was like at the start of their teaching time, and what it could be like in the future for the children they taught. In all of the discussions with teachers there was a very genuine sense of being an integral part of the school's progress.

Many teachers commented on the importance of setting high expectations for children and how this had contributed greatly to progress at the school.

The key here was setting high expectations of children. Previously, especially in the case of children with learning difficulties, the teacher asserted no or very low expectations.

Everyone worked hard and was convinced that the kids could do it. This was a sharp contrast from when (I) arrived when the staff seemed only to be united by a feeling that the kids were not capable of anything.

Key focus proved to be the overall emphasis by the school on pushing expectations and not letting the kids sink to a lowest common denominator.

When (I) first came to Cherbourg State School a regular practice was the setting of 'Free Play'. In practice this meant the abandonment by the teacher of any attempt to educate the children. It also reinforced an attitude in the kids that if they acted up they could avoid work and the teachers were colluding in that. 'Free Play' was so indicative of low teacher expectations that it locked teachers into a vicious cycle of self-fulfilling prophecies ... 'Free Play' is now a thing of the past. Kids finish their work and come to the teacher and ask for more.

Previous Principals had allowed kids to do what they wanted. As a result they had run wild.

It is pleasing to note that all teachers overwhelmingly appreciated and valued the knowledge, skill and expertise of the Indigenous teacher aides, as well as the need to connect with parents and the broader community.

(My) advice to any teacher coming to Cherbourg would be to talk to (Family Support Worker) Hooper Coleman and establish contact with the community.

... getting to know the parents through parent-teacher interviews was invaluable  
... (I) stress the importance of getting to know the parents of the children and to form a partnership with them in the education of their children.

Teachers also referred to a great sense of teamwork.

The school is a real team school.

It was important to get to know the rest of staff and work as a team.

One of the best things that happened was when a colleague had come and said (I) am doing a good job with the class. This truly made my day.

2001 had been a very good year for the school. The staff were riding high on a curve. It was for everyone concerned 'a very productive year'.

Within those discussions about teamwork there was reference to the notion that together as a team, and in partnership with the community, we had changed the culture of the school from one which was largely quite negative, to one that was extremely positive.

The emphasis was on the child coming to school not to be minded, but to work and achieve.

Cherbourg kids now go to high school having done year 7 work.

... there had been a change in the peer culture. Previously students had used the peer culture as a cop out. They didn't have to work; they didn't have to care about the consequences of not working and not attending. Now the peer culture had been transformed into a 'pro-school culture'. Kids no longer hunted teachers in packs with the collective aim of destroying the lesson.

It has been good to be on board ... In (my) opinion the staff had performed work for the kids and the community that personally feels 'historic' in terms of the education that has been provided.

One student had gone from struggling through one book to 'storming' through 65. A student phoned me up to talk about the books he had read and how he was progressing with his reading.

What had been achieved here was the creation of a different 'we' from that which used to rule at Cherbourg. The old anti-study solidarity had made way for a work culture, where pupils enjoyed each other's success... solidarity now was created at the point of scholastic achievement rather than at the point of misbehaviour or absenteeism.

The kids now know when they are not being 'strong and smart'. It may be true that kids from other schools may be smarter, but they could never be 'stronger' than the kids from Cherbourg.

As noted earlier it is worth considering teacher aide perceptions separately from those of teachers. The perceptions of Aboriginal teacher aides are made very distinct by a sense of knowing that while teachers will come and go from Cherbourg State School, they are essentially there for 'the long haul'. Against this background the notion that their role in the school is crucial, is clearly and readily underlined.

#### **6.4.5 Teacher Aide Perceptions**

Most of the teacher aides on staff are local Aboriginal people from Cherbourg. During the survey and interview process many took time to reflect on their own experiences in school. Several attended Cherbourg State School as children.

The curriculum of course was Euro centric ... so Captain Cook had discovered Australia and no one was here before him ... It was clear the desired outcome from the school was 'tame black fullas' who could be a source of cheap labour.

In terms of the attitude of staff, formerly this had been one where the school was 'just a black school'. They had stuck with it for the money. Those staff with that attitude have been weeded out. Now the staff is genuinely here for the kids.

... (I) wondered why I was learning about the tall ships and not about my mother tongue. The school was negative and against Aboriginal culture. In many ways it was like a boot camp.

An appreciation for renewed approaches to teaching and more culturally relevant curriculum programs is clearly evident.

The Aboriginal Studies Program is central to the change in the kids. The Elders used to come to the school infrequently and now they come every day ... This helps give the children their identity.

Respect for Indigenous culture is crucial to all of this. The staff have to know about and understand Aboriginal culture. Formerly this was not so. For instance a former member of staff had pushed non-Indigenous culture aggressively. That would never happen at Cherbourg State School now.

The Aboriginal Studies Program was vital to the school's success. It told the kids where they came from. It told them about what their grandparents knew and had been through. They did not want to lose that part of their culture.

The role of the teacher aide in the school has a tendency to be of 'higher stakes' and this is clearly recognized. This means that Aboriginal teacher aides who work in the school, have a different and arguably much more intense level of accountability that applies to them. They are invariably more directly accountable to the community in which they live, and they are reminded of these accountabilities well beyond the end of the school day.

Without (teacher aides) the teachers would not be able to bridge the gap between themselves and the community. They are part of the way of thinking and they help the teachers understand and give feedback from the community.

As a member of the community (I) can talk to parents if the kids had a problem with drinking at home. The majority of kids do come to the teacher aides and talk to them about their problems. They rely on the aides for support and to do something for them if there is a problem.

The role of the teacher aides was vital. They belonged to the community. They had done it. Their nephews and nieces were everywhere in the school. The family bonds between the aides and the kids were very important and this helped the teachers to do their jobs.

In many ways (I) didn't feel like a teacher aide but more like a parent or a father figure. A very important part of gaining respect from the kids was the fact that the aides knew the parents.

All of the teacher aides reflected positively on the changes at the school.

The new values that the school was promoting were becoming embedded in their brains. They learned them and lived them. This can be seen in the new school

gardens and the performance of the kids in cleaning up the school. Now they are proud of their school.

The community could see the difference in the kids. They saw them smiling and happy to go to school. Bullying was being stamped out and the parents appreciated that. The school was now becoming a 'safe house' for the kids. Added to this the encouragement from the staff, the rewards for efforts, the free lunches at McDonald's, and the iceblocks had all added excitement and fun to the experience of trying to do well.

When he started working at Cherbourg things were totally different. There was no school parade, uniform or school song. The kids just played and ignored the bell. They simply would not go into classes. Now it is a different story. All the smaller kids and the smarter kids from the older classes know that it is their school. So there is less vandalism. The smashing of windows is no longer a regular occurrence. Stealing has been stamped out. The kids in Year Five have been at the school since they were babies. They say it is 'our school'. They tell other kids 'Don't wreck it'.

Cherbourg State School is 'top of the charts' in Aboriginal community schools and moving up to the 'Top 20' of all state schools.

Parents respect the teacher aides because they can see results. One parent bought (me) a six pack of beer because his child was happy. Previously the child had been stuck in the house in front of the TV. Now his son was out at school and was not afraid to talk to his parents about what was happening at school. When (I) get feedback like this from the community (I) feel proud.

A new and much more positive sense of hope for the future of the children of Cherbourg is reflected.

The kids had worked out under the previous system that if they really misbehaved then they got extra attention and got taken on trips and got made a fuss of. It never occurred to the people that were running the previous policies that the misbehaviour was learned behaviour and they had done the reinforcing of that same bad behaviour ... maybe that at the heart of previous policy was the expectation that Aboriginal kids would be delinquent. Now the school and the staff expects the kids to behave as Aborigines, not as delinquents.

The teachers had once just been there for the money. Now they were there to support and help the children. They genuinely cared ... gradually the kids are learning that if you are strong and smart you can overcome any problem.

The school motto *Strong and Smart* is the theme for the kids, which makes them proud and not 'myall'<sup>3</sup> with their heads down as if they were beaten. We drum it into the kids constantly and they are beginning to react. No one wants to be "weak and stupid". Now the kids are saying it to each other. Recently (I) met an ex-pupil who was now at Murgon High and he said that he now understood what Mr Sarra was talking about. He saw white kids laughing at Aboriginal kids when they failed at school. He now felt he had to be Strong and Smart and not let white people put him down.

Clearly a sense of change and indeed transformation permeates all of the data presented for discussion in this chapter. In closing, it is probably pertinent to offer some personal reflections on the progress of the school under my leadership and the Strong and Smart vision. Some of these reflections have already been articulated throughout this report, but are worth revisiting:

- Children these days are much happier at school than when I first started. There is less putting each other down, and more praising each other up;

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<sup>3</sup> Myall: a local Aboriginal word which means feeling shame about yourself

- Children borrow a CD player to practice dance moves in front of everyone at lunch time. This would have never occurred previously as most would be putting each other down;
- New children who come to the school and ‘play up’ are ostracized to the extent they have to conform to being Strong and Smart so they can fit in with the others;
- Children are no longer afraid to read to the school on parade;
- Children are no longer embarrassed to receive ‘Student of the Week’ Awards;
- Most children are highly competent in the use of computers and other Information Communication Technologies;
- One student (in Year 5) rang her mum on Palm Island a few years ago to say ‘Mum, I read a book today! The following year she had read 60 books by the end of Semester One;
- Children stay in class all day unlike in the past when there would only be about 4 or 5 students in classrooms for the last session;
- Children run to class when the bell goes;
- Children have fun and are actively engaged in learning;
- Classrooms look and feel like classrooms, and not like baby-sitting facilities;
- Classroom curriculum now goes way beyond basic Literacy and Numeracy;
- Many children in classrooms are working at their rightful and respective year levels;

- Today we have a special needs class and can attend to children with special needs much more effectively;
- The school grounds are cleaner;
- Five years ago I would have to report more than 20 broken windows every Monday; more recently I might report about 2 to 3 a month;
- Before I had to discipline children at least 3 to 5 times a day. Today I would discipline children 3 to 5 times a fortnight;
- Teachers come to work early and go home late;
- Teachers mix and get out in the community in a much more positive way;
- Teacher aides are highly committed and much more reliable;
- Much less parent conflict and dissatisfaction;
- Visitors have difficulty telling the difference between who are the teachers and who are the teacher aides;
- There is a 'real' sense of Aboriginal ownership and control of the directions of the school;
- The children feel stronger and smarter;
- The children act stronger and smarter;
- They are proud to be Aboriginal;

- The place feels like a school.

Sometimes people in Cherbourg, or visitors to our school, say to me that they are happy that *I* have been able to make such changes. However, the extent of the changes that have occurred at Cherbourg State School in the past three years cannot be attributed to just one person. There is no way that just one person could have achieved all that has been achieved.

As I reflect on the dramatic changes within the school, I think the most important things I did was *believe* in the people already at Cherbourg, as well as the new teaching team that was established, and be prepared to value and act upon what they had to say, to the extent that it *truly* influenced the directions of the school.

Of course, it is true that many of the people at Cherbourg did not have all of the flash education degrees, but they, like the teachers and me, harboured an intense passion and desire to see change in the school, and to see our children become ‘young and black and deadly’.

At Cherbourg State School we are all highly committed to our work; we are all highly committed to our school; and we are all highly committed to the children of our school. This has been enough to change the direction of the school. Day (1994:101) notes the importance of making the learning environment purposeful for children.

Our purpose is to get them Strong and Smart.

## CHAPTER SEVEN - CONCLUSION

Originally it was my intention to complete this thesis in 2002, and so, as it approaches completion in 2004 there is something of a two-year delay. Whilst it may have been good personally to have the workload completed two years ago, I believe the delay has been beneficial to the entire process. In fact I had deliberately set about factoring in a twelve-month delay, to allow for a deeper analysis of the impact of the strategies I set about implementing. In a sense then, the delay in completing the thesis, while it may have caused me two more years of grief and anxiety about not being finished, has actually enhanced the overall process and indeed the scope for analysis.

It is personally very satisfying, however, to look back on the process and know that the incredibly hard work and effort that has been put in will make some positive changes to the lives of many young Indigenous children from the school. It is also very satisfying to anticipate that my own efforts to articulate the journey in the form of this thesis, can potentially challenge other educators to have higher and more positive expectations of Aboriginal children in schools throughout the country. To some extent this part of the process has already commenced. For example, having seen the impact of our approaches to Aboriginal schooling, and talking consistently about being Strong and Smart, Woorabinda State School, another Aboriginal community school that faces similar challenges to what we did, is now working under a new motto, *Proud and Deadly*. To some end this is a testimony to the success of the processes articulated by the thesis.

The key objectives of this thesis as outlined in the Introduction were to:

- identify some white perceptions of ‘being Aboriginal’;
- identify some Aboriginal perceptions of ‘being Aboriginal’;
- challenge white Australia’s perception of ‘being Aboriginal’;
- challenge Aboriginal perceptions of ‘being Aboriginal’;
- facilitate access to a more accurate and more positive perception of ‘being Aboriginal’;
- examine the impact of reinforcing a positive Aboriginal identity in schools;

- examine how to reinforce a positive Aboriginal identity in schools.

The conclusion of this thesis, then, is designed to reflect on the extent to which these objectives were attended to adequately. Given the nature of the topic examined here it will also be useful to examine the outcomes of this entire research project within the broader context of Indigenous<sup>4</sup> education in all Queensland state schools, and the issues they face.

In my own mind I could never see the point of writing an entire thesis to sit on a shelf and collect dust with the many others. The notion of challenging other educators of Aboriginal children was always my clear and deliberate intention from the start. Part of this is born out of the frustration I faced at feeling that I had some ideas to share about how to make positive progress in Aboriginal education, but not really being listened to. The reality, as discussed in the introduction, is that the ideas and strategies discussed here are very much the same as what I was trying to convince white teachers and white principals to try many years ago. Hopefully now more people will listen, take some notice, and be directed by Aboriginal thoughts about progress in education because frankly, there is a desperate need to do so.

Clearly, overall progress in Aboriginal education is severely limited, and must continue to be challenged at many levels. White Australia would never accept the rate of progress and/or the student outcomes that Aboriginal Australia is expected to tolerate. Recently I chaired a steering committee on Indigenous education that developed a paper for Queensland's Minister for Education (Sarra, 2003). This paper (The MACER<sup>5</sup> paper) noted that 15 years ago the very first major inquiry into Aboriginal education stated:

that '... successive Governments and their education systems ... have failed to provide the environment and the resources to allow Aboriginal Australians to

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<sup>4</sup> Most of this thesis discusses the term Aboriginal, as all of the children are Aboriginal. Broader discussion about issues beyond Cherbourg State School requires the use of the term 'Indigenous' as this incorporates Torres Strait Islander people as part of the discussion.

<sup>5</sup> MACER Ministerial Advisory Council for Educational Renewal – A council established by the Queensland Minister for Education to provide advice on a broad range of education issues.

attain a level of education of their choice, whilst maintaining their unique cultures and traditions’

(Commonwealth of Australia, 1988: 1).

That same report highlights deep concern

‘... about the extent of the inequities between Aboriginal people and other Australians with respect to educational opportunities’ (1988: 41), and ‘signals a crisis in the provision of education to Aborigines’ reflecting, ‘the inadequate way in which education systems, schools and other institutions have faced up to their responsibilities to Aboriginal people’ (1988: 7).

The report also states quite clearly,

‘There is an urgent need to redress this situation (1998: 7).

Today the concerns are very much the same as what they were 15 years ago. In the meantime Indigenous education policies have come and gone with limited impact (See Appendix Two), and as noted in Sarra (2003) those policies have essentially said what they have needed to say. In other words, there has been nothing wrong with the rhetoric of these policies, but the desired realities just have not emerged. In broad terms the policies, such as those listed at Appendix Two, called for things like greater community participation, improved literacy, improved school attendance, and a more culturally inclusive curriculum and learning experiences. Today’s Indigenous Education policies are calling for exactly the same thing.

In my own reflections on this situation, and on my own role as a principal of a school that faced many dramatic challenges, it became very clear to me that what was missing from these policies was any sense of accountability. If the policies were to have some tangible impact on Indigenous education outcomes then there should have been some credible way of identifying who was responsible for what responsibilities and outcomes, and articulating what were the consequences for not attending to those.

As an Aboriginal educator it is often frustrating to hear white educators talking romantically about the time they spent in an Aboriginal school, and as the team that I initially inherited did on their departure, comment on how the experience had completely changed their lives. Of course it is probably true that the experience did indeed change their lives. The frustrating part, however, is wondering what it is that changed about the lives of the Aboriginal children they were employed to educate. Current statistics suggest that very little has changed (Sarra, 2003). It is frustrating, and almost wearisome to reflect on such stories, where individuals have been principals of a highly proportionate Aboriginal school for 20 years and yet not one Aboriginal child graduates from year 12; where some teachers have been in Aboriginal schools for many years and there is very little improvement in terms of Aboriginal student outcomes. In many cases, educators have gone into Aboriginal schools, achieved very little in terms of student achievement, and got promoted out. Such levels of student underachievement would never be tolerated in a white school, yet somehow we get away with expecting Aboriginal communities to tolerate it.

Education Queensland's broad corporate aim suggests that:

Education Queensland is committed to providing quality education to ALL state school students in Queensland.

There are no brackets or sub-clause after this that suggest 'unless those students are Aboriginal!'

In my efforts to attend to the concern about limited degrees of accountability, I developed, in consultation with the MACER Indigenous Education Steering Committee, an accountabilities matrix which outlines what can and should reasonably be expected at various relationship levels within an education system. It is worth emphasising that the matrix is not essentially about enforcement and compliance per se, but articulates when and how it should be, particularly in the face of tolerance of continuing poor performance in terms of Aboriginal student outcomes.

The Accountabilities Matrix (see Appendix Five) suggests that, for any officer in an education system, there is a range of action categories that we all must attend to if we are intent on delivering positively on any Aboriginal education policy. In fact, it is possible that the matrix could be extrapolated for use in any other area concerned with the delivery of good policy. The action categories are presented as follows and discussed with examples within the context of my own accountabilities as Principal of an Aboriginal school:

- Supporting – as Principal I must ensure that teachers on my staff team are supported by community people so they can get a better insight into the children in the classroom.
- Developing – ensuring that the teacher and teacher aide team are skilled enough, or have the opportunity to develop required pedagogical skills, to rigorously pursue positive student outcomes.
- Monitoring – ensuring that student performance progress is adequately tracked and evaluated by the teaching team.
- Challenging – ensuring that the teaching team has high expectations of Aboriginal children, and does not set the bar too low.
- Intervening – ensuring that those of the teaching team who are not performing and/or facilitating positive student progress are either counselled for improved teaching performance, moved on, or reprimanded.

Here, the matrix is presented in its fullest form and within the context of accountabilities and responsibilities for delivering positive Indigenous education outcomes as part of Education Queensland's Indigenous Education policy, known as Partners for Success (P4S).

It is argued by this thesis, and the MACER paper, that these responsibilities and accountabilities, anchored by real and credible authority, should underpin the pursuit of constructive change in Indigenous education and dramatically improved Indigenous student performance outcomes. The MACER paper also notes several other key issues worth discussing here.

## **7.1 Challenging Mindsets**

The sub-committee identified that, as a system, Education Queensland, and indeed other education systems, have demonstrated a tendency to readily accept Indigenous underachievement in schools as somehow ‘normal’ or ‘given’. Disturbingly, there has been little outrage from within the system about dramatic and continuing levels of underachievement.

This phenomenon is underpinned at best by ignorance about what Indigenous children in schools can achieve, and at worst by racist beliefs that the learning capacity of Indigenous children is somehow inferior to that of other categories of students and therefore not worth the effort needed to improve performance. Institutional racism is realized in a range of failures such as continuing poor student attendance, apathy about fostering Indigenous leadership in schools, or in the less than rigorous interrogation of Indigenous student performance data for continuous improvement. At a district and school level, ignorance or racism or both are manifest in the system failure to challenge principals in schools and teachers in classrooms about continuing Indigenous underachievement.

It has seemingly been easier for education authorities to hold Indigenous communities culpable for failing to engage with schools for the purposes of education. It is easy to describe Indigenous communities as a complex social and cultural context and to attribute student failure as a direct consequence of the context. However, the professional challenge for classroom teachers and their support infrastructure is to reflect inwards and evaluate the effectiveness of their own teaching practice and ask what it is that they are doing or not doing as a teacher that contributes to Indigenous student failure.

## **7.2 Quality Teacher Practice**

The MACER paper (2003) verifies what has long been known: ‘that some schools and principals, some teachers and approaches to teaching can make a significant difference in

the quality of student learning outcomes'. Put simply, quality teachers create quality outcomes. More generally,

... teacher and classroom variables account for more of the variance in pupil achievement than school variables. Also, in general, more powerful classroom level variables are found that account for between-class variance than school-level variables in accounting for between-school variance.'

(Scheerens, 1993)

'Carrots' as well as 'sticks' are needed to ensure that the focus of classrooms is on producing the best quality educational experiences for Indigenous children. At the core of 'quality education' is the achievement of learning gains. Central to the provision of quality education for Indigenous children is the provision of quality learning and development opportunities for teachers. Such quality learning and development should promote teaching as about meaningful engagement with the learner's context, regardless of where they come from. Teachers must be encouraged and supported to go beyond their classroom to develop more contextual knowledge in the interest of facilitating better Indigenous student outcomes.

### **7.3 Strengthening school leadership**

Analysis of Indigenous student performance reveals that schools with high proportions of Indigenous students are in the greatest need of quality teachers and quality leadership. The reality, however, is paradoxical to what is considered necessary here. That is, schools whose data clearly demonstrate a need for exceptional teachers and school leaders are seemingly staffed with inexperienced teachers and principals. It should be made clear, though, that we must not automatically assume that teacher inexperience does not correlate with teacher exceptionalism.

At this point it is worth reiterating that any education system contemplating the pursuit of significant positive change in Indigenous student outcomes should seriously understand and rigorously pursue the need to ensure real and credible accountability mechanisms for

improved outcomes; challenge mindsets so that Indigenous student underachievement is not tolerated and not considered normal; ensure quality teacher practice that can and will attend to Indigenous student needs; and strengthen school leadership so that the complex challenges of improved Indigenous student outcomes are genuinely pursued. Education system however, can only signal improvement when individual schools and their respective principals and teaching teams embrace such a challenging journey.

At our local school level, I believe that the thesis and indeed the entire research process have made for an interesting and successful journey. The journey we undertook as a staff team clearly had to go in a dramatically different direction, and this change in direction required a degree of risk and boldness to attempt things that had perhaps never been attempted before.

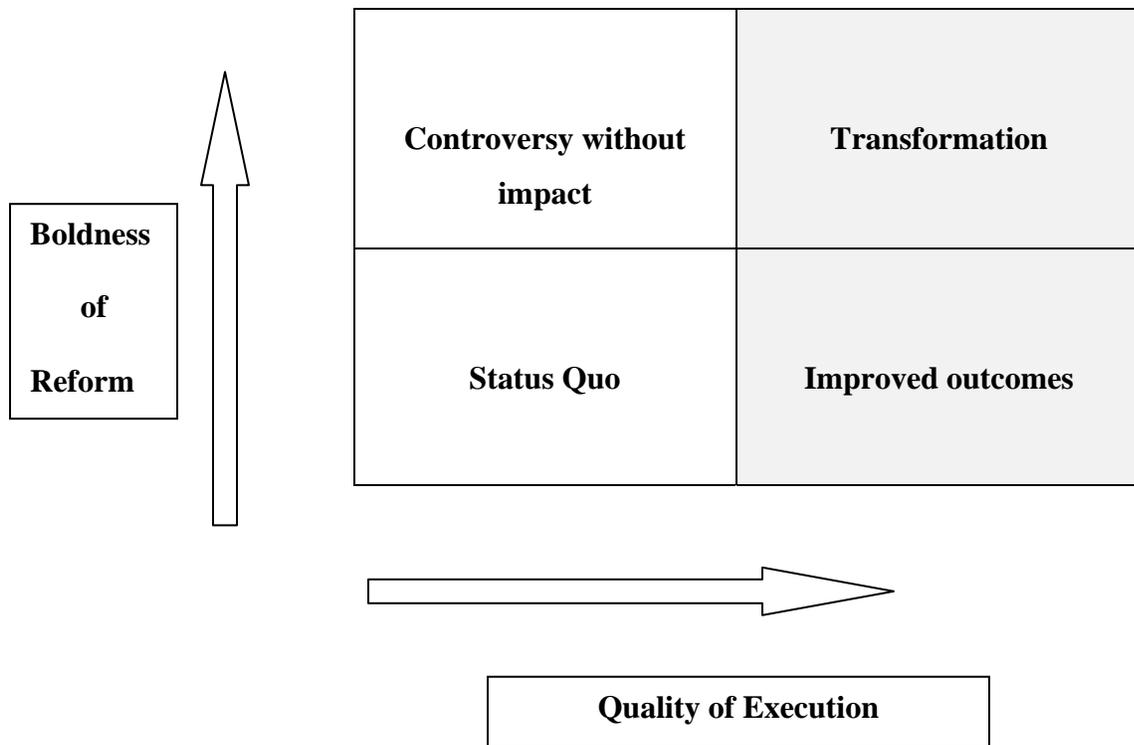
If you always do what you always did, then you will always get what you always got.

Our need to do something different to get something better was obvious.

## 7.4 Boldness

Professor Michael Barber (2003) provides a useful matrix at Figure 7.1 that defines the situation in which we found ourselves as a school. His matrix made it clear to us as a staff, that if we were seeking transformation and improved outcomes, which we were, then we had to be bold about the reforms we were attempting, and deliver them skilfully and with high quality of execution.

**Figure 7.1 Boldness Matrix**



(Barber, 2003)

As a staff team we have reflected on this matrix on many occasions. I have indicated to all staff that I would rather see them trying something different and failing, then trying the same old strategies that we know have failed many times previously.

Barber (2003) then presents some key questions that are worth considering.

## 7.5 Key Issues/questions for schools/school leaders

1. Who are your key stakeholders in the local community? Do they understand your vision?
2. Have you established as a core belief that every pupil can achieve high standards? Have you reorganised all the other variables (time, curriculum, teaching staff, other staff, other resources) around the achievement of that goal?
3. Does each teacher know how his/her impact in terms of results compares to every other teacher?
4. Have you decided in what aspect of education your school should lead the country?
5. From which sources do you seek inspiration and best practice? How many of these are outside education? How many outside the country?

(Barber, 2003)

Reflection on these questions, and others like them, provided a useful framework with which to commence a tough, yet exciting journey. This journey is one that is not yet complete, and in fact one that will always have further to go. Looking back, it was necessary to rigorously set about the task of changing the school, armed with the knowledge I had from experience, and the hypothesis that if we made the children aware of the more positive Aboriginal perceptions of being Aboriginal and to feel great about being Aboriginal, then some very positive change would occur.

Before starting at the school I had already established, quite easily, that mainstream Australia had a very negative perception of who we were as Aboriginal people, and my extensive experience in a range of schools had given me a very clear insight into how this impacted negatively up our children. Empirical research presented by this thesis clearly

reflects the notion that mainstream Australia has a very negative perception of what being Aboriginal is. When asked to provide adjectives to describe how mainstream Australia describes Aboriginal people, the adjectives provided always have a negative connotation, and are highly pejorative and derogatory. These adjectives include terms such as lazy, alcoholic, welfare dependant, coons, boongs and niggers. We are also described by mainstream Australia as aggressive, violent, unreliable and dirty. Strangely enough it is also suggested that we as Aborigines are on some sort of gravy train and 'have it pretty good', although I doubt that many mainstream Australians would line up to be described as we are, and have it as good as we have it. Perhaps the only positive adjectives to emerge as part of the research is the notion that we are good sportspersons, and/or good artists, although, as discussed in Chapter 3, this tendency can often be problematic for some Aboriginal people. These perceptions of Aboriginal people are highly complex and seriously problematic in many ways.

In one way they are problematic in the sense that they are completely inaccurate and stereotypical when compared with day-to-day lived experience of Aboriginal people. We are faced then with the phenomenon of something (a perception) being real but false. I believe that Chapter One, with its account of Critical Realism provides us with the theoretical basis for understanding and acting upon this phenomenon. Chapter Two also plays a role here in that it is a polemic against the increasingly fashionable poststructuralist approach to education. Here I have shown that, largely because of its admittedly unacknowledged neo-Nietzscheanism, poststructuralist scepticism about the truth cannot provide the basis for an understanding of how white perceptions of Aborigines can be at once real but also false.

This falseness was clearly exposed in subsequent discussion in Chapter 3, which closely scrutinised and challenged the white perceptions by comparing and contrasting them within the context of the truths which exist about Aboriginal Australians. For instance the results of National Drug Strategy surveys (1998: 67) clearly refutes the perception that Aboriginal people are alcoholics and heavy drinkers despite the extent to which mainstream Australia believes this. Chapter 3 also notes that of those few Aboriginal people who in fact are heavy drinkers and/or alcoholics, the cause is often anchored by

mistreatment by white Australia. This mistreatment could be in the form of institutional or overt racism, or trauma caused by a range of government policies which stripped many Aboriginal people of power, pride and dignity.

In another way this derogatory and false perception is problematic because it can be so widespread to the extent that even some Aboriginal people subscribe to it as a way of being Aboriginal. Put simply, some Aboriginal people, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, actually think they are reinforcing their sense of Aboriginal identity by acting like the negative stereotype discussed. It is as if many Aboriginal people have fallen into the same trap as many mainstream Australians by focussing on the often-sensational negative aspects of Aboriginal society, and, without being able to look beyond it or understand it, start to believe that this is in fact true, rather than being a perception which, though real, is false to its rotten core. This phenomenon leads to many great challenges for Aboriginal people, such as the ones we faced in our school.

This negative perception of being Aboriginal is also highly problematic and intensely frustrating because it is so false and inaccurate and beyond the truth of what Aboriginal people are, and what Aboriginal people say being Aboriginal is. The discrepancy discussed here becomes intensely frustrating when it affects the day-to-day life of Aboriginal people. Here I refer to the many situations throughout Australia when even today Aboriginal people are being refused access to employment, tenancy in rental properties, and entry to night-clubs; or are having their bags checked in stores, and seeing white people served in ahead of them in shops, to name just a few.

From my own lived experience as an Aboriginal person, and from my interest in what other Aboriginal people thought 'being Aboriginal' was, I already had in mind a firm sense of what this was. Clearly though, it was useful to engage other Aboriginal people in formal discussions about this topic for the purposes of this thesis, and importantly, for the purposes of 'getting it right' for our children at the school. On reflection it may have been more useful to establish a somewhat more formalised sense of Aboriginal perceptions of being Aboriginal, before actually setting the new directions for the school. In reality, these parts of the journey occurred simultaneously, although this was not the least bit

problematic. I also believe the process of identifying Aboriginal perceptions of being Aboriginal could have been enhanced by engaging in discussions with more Aboriginal people, and by establishing a broader cross section of Aboriginal people.

For instance it would have been interesting to engage in discussions with more Elders about the topic, and compare this to what younger Aboriginal people had to say. It would have also been interesting to compare the responses of those affected more directly by policies of separation and assimilation, such as those who grew up on Aboriginal missions, to those who were less directly affected and grew up amongst white Australians. Of particular interest here would be some analyses of the impact of growing up in a mission environment, which is to a large degree, mono-cultural and insular, yet subjected to deliberate processes to make one less Aboriginal, versus the impact of growing up as my mother did, in an inter-cultural and non-insular, yet racist and unfriendly environment. This analysis however could be a thesis on its own, time and resource constraints would never have allowed for the detailed research these notions truly deserve.

The key objective, discussed mainly in Chapter 4, was to identify 'some' Aboriginal perceptions of being Aboriginal, and I believe the thesis attended to this objective by offering sound analyses of what some people had to say about 'being Aboriginal'. Clearly, it is a complex task for many to articulate what 'being Aboriginal' is. Despite this, the discussions provided to this research revealed a sense of collective belief about the notion.

In all of the discussions, participants described 'being Aboriginal' as a feeling, and the discussion of this feeling was clearly anchored by a sense of pride. Respecting Elders was also discussed as a crucial feature of being Aboriginal, and so too was the need to know, understand, and attend to the importance of family. A great deal of the discussion also focussed on ways of connecting to people, as a feature of being Aboriginal, which set us apart from white Australians. When Aboriginal people meet other people there is a tendency to have to locate each other within a family and/or geographical context before any new conversation proceeds, or any business is done. This is usually done quite

simply in the form of questions such as ‘Who is your mob?’ or ‘Where are you from?’ until we get to a point where one says ‘Oh yeah, you must belong to ...!’ or ‘Yeah I know .... from up that way!’

As well as the notion of connecting with other people featuring in discussions about being Aboriginal, so too was the very important notion of connecting with the land. This sense of connecting to land was also highly bound up in discussions and references to a sense of spirituality as part of understanding what it means to be Aboriginal. On reflection it is obvious that Aboriginal discussions about being Aboriginal are much more sophisticated and highly complex in comparison to mainstream Australian perceptions of being Aboriginal. Perhaps this is because Aboriginal people have to ‘face themselves’ or ‘look inside themselves’ in a serious way to articulate what it means for them, because they are genuinely affected by this understanding and perception, whereas white Australia can simply latch on to the negative perceptions which abound, with almost no consequence whatsoever to themselves. As discussed in Chapter 3, there exists a certain ‘luxury of whiteness’ that allows this.

Chapter 4 also discussed a very sad yet strange phenomenon in which some Aboriginal people have tried to enjoy the luxuries of whiteness to the extent that they would prefer not to identify as being Aboriginal. This is another way in which the discrepancy between white perceptions and Aboriginal perceptions of being Aboriginal is problematic. Here we have some Aboriginal people, some of whom could clearly be great positive role models for other young Aboriginal people, who have actually been conditioned to subscribe to white perceptions of being Aboriginal, and as such, find it easier to disown their Aboriginal identity.

From here it is clear that there is a need to challenge mainstream Australian perceptions of being Aboriginal, and articulate more broadly, Aboriginal perceptions of being Aboriginal. The discussion throughout this chapter and indeed earlier in this conclusion notes several good reasons for this. White Australia must understand that Aboriginal people are not the negative stereotype that they believe we are, and as such, must be more respectful in its interaction with us. Aboriginal Australia, if they are not doing so

already, must identify with the more positive and more sophisticated Aboriginal perceptions of being Aboriginal, rather than subscribing to an identity that is much less than this. So how is this supposed to happen?

This thesis argues that a school is just one place where mainstream Australian perceptions of being Aboriginal can indeed be challenged, and further, that more positive Aboriginal perceptions of being Aboriginal can be clearly articulated and firmly reinforced. Chapter 5 discusses a range of strategies in which notions of Aboriginal identity are challenged, developed, and embraced. It should be reiterated that the notion of challenging, developing and embracing a positive Aboriginal identity is definitely not sequential, and indeed can often occur simultaneously.

A school that is challenging negative perceptions of being Aboriginal, so that Aboriginal children can reflect on a more positive Aboriginal identity, must be prepared to engage children in positive discourse about what it means to be Aboriginal. In our school this meant we had to:

- talk about/research/examine with the children what it means to be Aboriginal;
- clearly and continually articulate high expectations of Aboriginal children in the school;
- provide/employ positive role models, on a day-to-day basis;
- confront poor Aboriginal student behaviour (including attendance);
- fight racism in the school and in the community;
- talk on school assembly about being Aboriginal and celebrating this.

Clearly one of the key issues here is that if in our school we are setting out to challenge an Aboriginal student's perception of being Aboriginal, then we must be sure we have the right people, armed with the right understanding about the positive aspects of being Aboriginal. This in itself presents a challenge to schools to develop within staff a more accurate and positive understanding of what it means to be Aboriginal, so that a higher level of expectation can be pursued. This becomes crucial, and requires real leadership.

Having low expectations of Aboriginal children in schools and tolerating things like absenteeism and bad student behaviour contributes significantly to the process of engineering a negative Aboriginal identity. Many schools, and many teachers within schools, without realising, are guilty of playing a part in such a process, and such process will not be reversed until mainstream Australians in our schools and communities understand, develop and respond to the Aboriginal perceptions of being Aboriginal discussed here.

It is difficult for Aboriginal people who want things to be more positive to stand up and try to change things amidst a white society that is more readily tolerating and embracing a negative identity that, while to some extent is of nuisance value, can easily be controlled. For example, as an Aboriginal principal, and for the Aboriginal parents in our school, it was extremely difficult to attend to concerns about high levels of absenteeism when the teachers on staff did nothing to follow up and were prepared to accept this as a part of 'being Aboriginal', and the local police did nothing to follow up either, which indicates that to them it was somehow acceptable also. There is no question that the same level of absenteeism would be tolerated in a white community. In the end, we had to do things our own way ... without the police, and without the teachers, who had to be shifted out of the way.

As noted, another important role that schools must consider is that of developing a positive Aboriginal identity. This has particular resonance as we reflect earlier discussion about the phenomena in which some Aboriginal people can somehow be misguided to a very negative perception of being Aboriginal. In our school we developed a more positive Aboriginal identity by:

- developing and implementing a whole school Aboriginal Studies program;
- clearly articulating a positive Aboriginal identity to which children could subscribe;
- discussing with children regularly what Aboriginal people say being Aboriginal means;
- getting children to explore their own sense of being Aboriginal.

In many ways the process of developing a positive Aboriginal identity is quite similar to that of challenging Aboriginal identity. Here we can see how the process challenging Aboriginal identity goes hand in hand with developing. It is crucial to articulate a difference, though. In the process of challenging children about Aboriginal identity it is possible that we can get caught up in simply saying what being Aboriginal is NOT. Developing a positive Aboriginal identity is about articulating and nurturing what being Aboriginal IS.

The *Strong and Smart* film at Chapter 5(a) notes one of the most exciting things is watching children who at one time, felt second rate and like dirt, grow to a point where they are like “Yeah ... we’re strong and smart!” This is the exciting part of being Aboriginal that we should be keen to embrace. Embracing a positive Aboriginal identity is crucial. While schools must play a role in challenging and developing a positive Aboriginal identity, they must indeed provide a positive and respected place for this Aboriginal identity to be.

Chapter 5(b) of this thesis discusses a broad range of strategies for embracing a positive Aboriginal identity. In summary our school embraced a positive Aboriginal identity by:

- openly discussing race and identity issues as part of regular school processes and without any degree of discomfort;
- employing local Aboriginal people in the school;
- establishing and nurturing real (not token) Aboriginal leadership throughout the school;
- having a school vision that highlights our Aboriginality;
- having a school song that celebrates our Aboriginality;
- celebrating being Aboriginal every day, and not just during NAIDOC week;
- ensuring Aboriginal studies is an integral component of the school’s curriculum framework;
- having an open classroom policy for Elders and parents;
- actively rejecting any negative perceptions of being Aboriginal;

- actively reinforcing and embracing a strong and smart Aboriginal identity.

Chapter 6 discussed the impact of delivering such strategies at Cherbourg State School. It is hoped that other educators can reflect on this and strongly consider the prospect of such strategies within their own schools. It is argued that such strategies will see the emergence of stronger, smarter Aboriginal children in schools.

In all schools though, as indeed was the case at Cherbourg, there is and always has been a stronger and smarter Aboriginal identity that existed around us. This is true of all of Australia. Australian society has done very little to embrace this, and subsequently it has been more easy to identify and embrace a negative Aboriginal identity ... both for white and black Australia. Similarly in our school, it was perhaps easier to embrace a negative Aboriginal identity. Embracing a negative Aboriginal identity means the really tough issues, such as chronic absenteeism, extremely poor behaviour, and dramatic underachievement could be ignored, unattended, or explained away as an Aboriginal thing.

Doing the opposite of this tendency to embrace a negative Aboriginal identity, that is, embracing, and insisting on a stronger and smarter Aboriginal identity, actually develops a stronger and smarter identity. Refusing to tolerate or accept a negative Aboriginal identity, actually challenges and develops Aboriginal children, to become more positive ... more strong ... more smart ... like we have been all along!

White leadership, anchored by inaccurate and negative perceptions of being Aboriginal, steered the school into a disgusting situation in which a positive Aboriginal identity was not recognized, and not believed in. It was always going to be Aboriginal leadership that got us out of such a situation. This does not mean having an Aboriginal principal ... this simply means having Aboriginal leadership. Schools can, and some do, have white principals who recognize the immense value of Aboriginal leadership to the extent that they are guided by it. Invariably this is reflected in the performance of those schools in terms of the issues discussed throughout this thesis.

Schools that are led by individuals who have a positive and accurate understanding of Aboriginal perceptions of being Aboriginal, to the extent that they value and ensure they are guided by Aboriginal leadership, will challenge, nurture and embrace Aboriginal students who will undoubtedly become stronger and smarter.

## Appendix One – ABC Australian Story Transcript

# AUSTRALIAN STORY

## Good Morning Mr Sarra

### PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT: Monday, 4 October , 2004

GEORGE NEGUS: Good day. In another life, quite a few years ago now, before I blundered into television, I earned a crust as a Queensland schoolteacher. They tell me that most of the kids I taught survived the experience. But, seriously, to say the least, teaching is too often an underrated profession. That said, we probably all know of that one special teacher who could turn lives around. Well, tonight's Australian Story that I've been asked to introduce is about that sort of teacher - a bloke whose methods might occasionally raise hackles, but who, in fact, has turned around an entire school in a community written off by most as a lost cause.

CHRIS SARRA – PRINCIPAL: I started here in August 1998. The very first thing that I said to our children on school parade was, the most important thing that you will learn from me is that you can be Aboriginal and you can be successful. We're not mongrel dogs or anything like that. We're not second-rate citizens. We deserve to have a nice school. And we're not going to wait for some white people here to come and give us a white school - we have to create that for ourselves.

GARY MacLENNAN – UNIVERSITY LECTURER: Before Chris arrived, it was not a school, it was a disaster area. One senior member of the government said, we were going to close this down before you. Now the thing with Cherbourg is that it is a normal primary school. That's, in so many ways, an enormous achievement. You go to any other Aboriginal community, you do not see that. Is Cherbourg just something that came out of the blue, or is it something, a product of hard work? One man's mission, one man's vision, and a lot of hard work from a lot of people.

WARRY 'JOHN' STANLEY – GROUNDSMAN: He took a lot of knocks, he took a lot of backstabbing, if you want to put it that way, but, uh, he rode the wave. The bigger the wave, the

better he rode it. He had a deep desire in his heart to move these people forward. He was starting to affect the whole community, changing attitudes, and changing people's outlook on life. And what better way to do it than through a child?

CHRIS SARRA – PRINCIPAL: Cherbourg is an Aboriginal community, and it's about three hours drive north-west of Brisbane. It was basically set up as a mission or a reserve kind of place.

There are some ugly issues that we face in Cherbourg. You know, we are confronted by things like domestic violence, alcoholism, issues of abuse. There are children in our school that see things that children shouldn't see, you know? I really hurt for them, you know, when you know about the baggage that they bring to school. We talk about some of the not so nice issues in society, and you look at their faces and you know exactly that they know what you're talking about. And you can't take children out of their homes and bring them all home and look after them. That's probably not even the answer. The best we can do is draw out that sort of strength that exists within them, and get them to understand that, that they have a sense of power in them.

RACHEL 'MUM RAE' LONG – ELDER: I'm tired of our children thinking that it's normal to do what's going on. And to come here to learn, it's the best thing that's ever happened out here.

CHRIS SARRA – PRINCIPAL: I'm the school's first Aboriginal principal. I'm from Bundaberg, not from Cherbourg, which means something. There's something different about being brought up on the mission, I suppose. And that's something that I can never pretend to understand fully.

DEAN SARRA – BROTHER: The Sarra family is quite a large one. There were ten siblings, Aboriginal mother and Italian father. Chris was the baby. We owe a lot to our mother and our father. And when you hear Chris talk, you can hear Ma and Pa coming out through him, in the words that he expresses.

CHRIS SARRA - PRINCIPAL: My father, one thing he taught us was to work extremely hard. And you don't stop until the job's done. My mother would listen to us all the time, and we'd come home and talk about other kids calling us 'black coon', 'black nigger', 'black boong' - all of these sorts of

things. And she'd say, yeah, you are black, but you be really proud of that, and don't let anybody ever put you down because of that. School wasn't really a bad place for us. They liked us being there because we always won the open rugby league, so we were good for the football team. But nobody really pushed us harder to get better outcomes from us academically. In 1984 I finished high school, and I had a TE score that wasn't really worth that much. It was just the average TE score at the time.

GARY MacLENNAN – UNIVERSITY LECTURER: His guidance counsellor wants to put him into a gardening course, 'cause he thinks that's Chris's ability. That's his expectation of Chris.

CHRIS SARRA – PRINCIPAL: Fortunately for me, what is now QUT was starting up a programme where they wanted to get more indigenous teachers in schools. And so I ended up in there quite accidentally, I suppose.

GARY MacLENNAN – UNIVERSITY LECTURER: I was asked to be Chris's tutor. When I met him, I think, you're a bright young kid. Very, very lively, very funny, very witty. I thought that the joking and the clowning was kind of masking a sort of feeling of that maybe he thought he didn't belong there.

CHRIS SARRA – PRINCIPAL: I got through the first semester OK. I was prepared to work hard. I started to believe in myself. I had a few other people around me who believed in me also. And I got through it. I worked hard and I passed everything.

GARY MacLENNAN – PRINCIPAL: And I think that meant a lot to him. The fact that he came in on special entry, but went out exactly the same as every other student.

CHRIS SARRA – PRINCIPAL: It just made me realise that for a long time I'd been selling myself short in school. For a long time I'd been sold short by schools and those people who were involved in schools. So, I guess from that point on I became determined to see that other children wouldn't sell themselves short. I worked in all sorts of places. I worked as a career and guidance counsellor, and prior to coming here, I worked as a lecturer in Toowoomba. I spent a lot of time

out there trying to help other educators of Aboriginal children to achieve greater things for our children. Saying, why don't you try this? You could try this. And it was very frustrating for me in that I didn't really find that people were listening. But I just got a phone call out of the blue. This guy says, we're looking for a principal at Cherbourg State School, are you interested? And I said, yeah.

GARY MacLENNAN: Well, my advice was not to go to Cherbourg at all, not to risk his academic career. Cherbourg was a total shambles. You're being stupid, I said. Mad. Don't do it. Don't go there.

CHRIS SARRA – PRINCIPAL: I guess I wanted to get back into the front line, I suppose, and feel like I was working again. And nobody else was around to accept the job.

GRACE SARRA – WIFE & SCHOOL TEACHER: He came to the school and there was not much teaching happening in the classroom. There were children coming in and out of classrooms when they felt like it, they were outside playing, they were on top of roofs. So there was a lot of work to be done.

CHRIS SARRA – PRINCIPAL: When I went into the school, I said, things are going to change here, and I'm not going to put up with bad behaviour. And if you play up, then there'll be consequences for that.

RACHEL 'MUM RAE' LONG – ELDER: And the talk was out there in the community. Oh, who does he think he is? and all that. A stranger coming in and thinks they can tell us what to do.

WARRY 'JOHN' STANLEY - GROUNDSMAN: Chris took a lot of verbal abuse. He took a lot of physical abuse. He could've went and charged them. But he didn't. He didn't choose to do that, because he was here to do a mission.

CHRIS SARRA – PRINCIPAL: The first year that I was here, I went into the Grade Seven room, I said to this guy, I want to hear you read. He kicked up a big stink about it, swore at me, kicked the door, and said, I'm not effing reading this. And he barged out the door and we never saw him for

the rest of the week. Well, what disturbed me the most was that here's the biggest, toughest kid in the whole school, would rather create a scene and run the risk of getting kicked out of school than admit to me that he just couldn't read. And I saw his father a couple of years after that and said, how's he going? And he said, oh he's in jail. And I genuinely fear the day that somebody's come to me and said, oh, this kid's been found hanged in a cell, or, he's died from petrol sniffing, or something like that, you know? Because he just couldn't read, you know? And it wasn't his fault. And what bothered me was that all of this was being tolerated. And when I asked the staff that I'd inherited, you know, why is it that I'm seeing such dramatic underachievement in our school? Why is this school such an awful place? Their response was, oh, well, the Department doesn't support us, or, there's many social complexities. And I sat in this room here a long time ago and said, look, what I believe, what the elders in our community believe, is that our children can leave here with academic outcomes that are just as good as any other school in Queensland. And that they can leave here with a very strong and very positive sense of what it means to be Aboriginal. And if you don't believe it, then it's time for you to go. And half the teaching staff got up and left.

GRACE SARRA – WIFE & SCHOOL TEACHER: If the teachers didn't believe that the children could learn, then he needed a staff that actually believed in what the children could do. I had started with pretty much a whole new staff. There was about six of us that came on board in 2000.

GARY MacLENNAN – UNIVERSITY LECTURER: New, young, and enthusiastic people who were determined to go the extra mile to help the kids. They came on board, and he created a team.

CHRIS SARRA - PRINCIPAL: Things changed a lot more quickly than I expected them to at the start. We came out firing with the strong and smart vision, and high expectations of the children.

GRACE SARRA – WIFE & SCHOOL TEACHER: One of the first changes that was made at the school was the absenteeism. Some afternoons you might have only had six or eight children in the classroom. You may have had fifteen, seventeen in the morning. Chris decided to implement a rewards system for children who attended school regularly. The class with the lowest number of absenteeism would win an iceblock, and, then, at the end of the term, if they had missed five days or less they would go to McDonald's.

CHRIS SARRA - PRINCIPAL: Some people say that bribing children doesn't work. Well, I'm here to tell you that it does work. The number of unexplained absences in Term 3, of 2000, was one thousand one hundred and eighty-five. In Term 4, 2001, the number of unexplained absences was 68.5. At some point we had to get down to business, and the 'strong and smart' that we talked about in our school, it had to translate to the real deal. And the real deal in any school is results on paper. It meant I had to ride kids pretty hard, and make them get to class. If they played up in class and stopped other children from learning, I growled them, you know, or I would go and see their parents and say, look, your kid's playing up. We're trying to change where we're going with the school, we need your help.

GRACE SARRA – WIFE & SCHOOL TEACHER: It was just this huge turnaround. The learning was happening. The children were here and they wanted to be here, and it was functioning like a normal school.

KEN SMITH – EDUCATION DIRECTOR-GENERAL: The children at Cherbourg have in fact improved dramatically in developing their literacy and numeracy. We've conducted a major review into the achievements there, and there's no doubt that Chris's leadership of a solid team has led to those significant improvements.

CHRIS SARRA – PRINCIPAL: I guess it would have been naive of me to think that I could win such an accolade like Queenslander of the Year and enjoy such a great honeymoon with the media and everything would be great. It's probably naive of me to think that there wouldn't be

somebody out there to try to cut me down because in some ways it's part of blackfellas being crabs in the bucket, and got to pull each other down. There were questions about how I disciplined students and whether or not I was doing the right thing. And it kind of just blew up into a bit of a frenzy.

WARRY 'JOHN' STANLEY – GROUNDSMAN: There were allegations that he was grabbing children, throwing them around. It was horrendous. You'd wonder how a man would stand up to that.

GRACE SARRA – WIFE & SCHOOL TEACHER: We've got wonderful support here from the community. We've got wonderful support from the teaching staff. It was only a handful of people that had caused it.

KEN SMITH – EDUCATION DIRECTOR-GENERAL: There were seven allegations that the Department investigated, and those allegations really related to the way that Chris physically contained some children who were involved in some quite extreme behavioural problems.

GARY MacLENNAN – UNIVERSITY LECTURER: Now, he will not tolerate kids throwing stones at other children who are trying to go to school to study. He will not tolerate that. He will not tolerate kids swearing and cursing at the teacher. He will not tolerate that.

CHRIS SARRA – PRINCIPAL: I guess I had a choice. I could increase the intensity of their reprimand, or I could suspend them for six weeks, and I hate suspending children from school. So I grabbed them from outside the classroom, took them in, grabbed them by the arm, took them inside the classroom in front of the others. I growled them. What that means is I raised my voice at them. I went off, saying, we're not going to tolerate this from you and, other children here are working hard. Why should you be any different? As I'm saying this I'm banging my fist on the desk and on the wall because I deliberately wanted to create a scene to increase the intensity of it all.

ABC NEWS - JULY: Education Queensland says it's upheld four complaints made by students at Cherbourg State School. A further three complaints were dismissed. Mr Sarra was found to have grabbed, held and shouted at the boys.

GARY MacLENNAN – UNIVERSITY LECTURER: He will confront them with their bad behaviour. He has high standards for them. Now, where is the abuse in that? The abuse is in letting them not come to school, and letting them be delinquent, letting them turn to crime.

KEN SMITH – EDUCATION DIRECTOR-GENERAL: Chris has recognised that in those instances he may have overstepped the mark, and has given a commitment that he won't do that in future. One thing I know for certain is that I will always be an Aboriginal person who's the principal of a school. I will never be a white person running a school. I will always exercise and value Aboriginal approaches to doing things.

WARRY 'JOHN' STANLEY – GROUNDSMAN: Whether we be out in the yard working, we still behind him. Alright? Whether we be in the classroom working next to him, we're still behind him. Through all the criticism that he came through, all the media attention that were levelled at him, he came out over and above it, a better person. A person with more vision and more fight to go onwards.

CHRIS SARRA - PRINCIPAL: I guess, given the journey of our school, I mean, we're not all the way there, but we've experienced some success when you compare where we are to where we've come from. Other people are wanting to know about those sorts of things, and I get invited to speak at conferences all over the place.

GARY MacLENNAN: To me Cherbourg's a single candle that shines so brightly in the dark. We can take the Cherbourg model and spread it around Queensland and Australia, and, hopefully, indigenous communities throughout the world.

CHRIS SARRA - PRINCIPAL: There's probably Aboriginal people out there looking at me and saying, who does this fella think he is? Or, that school's getting a bit too big for their boots. Well,

yes, we are getting too big for our boots because those boots are the boots that white Australia made for us a long time ago. We've got every right to be strong and smart, young and black and deadly. That's our human right, and nobody should take that away from us. If you want to stay in those old boots, you do that, but get out of our way. When I came to Cherbourg, I came with a clear notion that I would be there for five years. I've been there for six years now, and I'm probably getting close to that time where the school needs something more than what I've got to offer. But I know it'll be hard to leave.

WARRY 'JOHN' STANLEY – GROUNDSMAN: All the things that he has set out to achieve in the school will not wither. It will not die. His idea is going to live long after he's gone. And, you know, long after he's gone this school is going to still move forward because of what it stands for today.

GARY MacLENNAN: When people are in trouble and people are in crisis leaders and people emerge to help them, and that is what's happened at Cherbourg. A leader has emerged. Hope has arisen. Humanity is lifting itself up, and that's what's inspiring. Of course it's a little school and a remote community, but hope is hope, and it shines out for all of us to see.



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## APPENDIX TWO

### LIST OF KEY REPORTS, POLICIES AND STRATEGIES RELATED TO INDIGENOUS EDUCATION IN THE LAST TWO DECADES

(extracted from Sarra, C. (Chairperson)(2003) *Indigenous Education: A Report to the Minister for Education*, Ministerial Advisory Committee For Educational Renewal.

**1985 Report of the Committee of Review of Aboriginal Employment and Training Programs**

The Mick Miller report documented the low level of Indigenous disadvantage and made recommendations for changes to Aboriginal education and training. The report made the connection between education and employment. It provided evidence that improvement in education and training levels could overcome racism, geographic isolation and cultural difference and produce equal employment outcomes.

**1988 Report of the Aboriginal Education Policy Task Force, Department of Education and Training Employment,**

The Commonwealth established an Aboriginal Education Policy (AEP) Task Force (chaired by Paul Hughes) to advise on all aspects of Aboriginal education in Australia, to assess the findings of recent research and policy reports, and to prepare priorities for the funding of existing programs and new initiatives. The Report of the Task Force made a series of recommendations and called for a new national policy to address concerns with Indigenous education.

**1989** The Review of Aboriginal Employment and Training Programs report (Mick Miller, 1985) and the Aboriginal Education Policy Taskforce (Hughes, 1988) led to the establishment of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy.

**1990 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP)**

From its launch in January 1990, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education policy has committed all Australian governments to work towards educational equity for Indigenous Australians.

The AEP sets out 21 long-term goals under the following aims

- Involvement of Aboriginal people in educational decision-making.
- Equality of access to educational services.
- Equality of educational participation.
- Equitable and appropriate education outcomes.

**The introduction of the Aboriginal Education Strategic Initiatives Program (AESIP)**

The Commonwealth Government passed the Indigenous Education (Supplementary Assistance) Act 1989 which supported the AEP through the Aboriginal Education Strategic Initiatives Program (AESIP), as well as through several direct assistance programs.

**1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC)**

In April, the final report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC) was released. It noted that the lack of success of the formal education system to deliver equitable outcomes for Indigenous people was inextricably linked to the disproportionate representation of Indigenous Australians in custody. The Royal Commission endorsed the AEP goals and

emphasised the importance of the policy as a way of ensuring that Indigenous Australians achieve a greater degree of control over education services.

**1992 The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) was established by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in 1993.**

MCEETYA agreed to undertake a national review of the effectiveness of the AEP in its first triennium in improving access to, participation in, and outcomes from education for Indigenous people. The National Review (chaired by Mandawuy Yunupingu) was undertaken during 1993 and 1994 and its results published in 1995. The MCEETYA then established an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Task Force, which developed a National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples 1996-2002.

**1995 National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples released.**

**1996 A National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, 1996-2002, MCEETYA and Commonwealth**

<http://www.curriculum.edu.au/mceetya/public/pub3312.htm>

The National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (1996-2002) built on the recommendations of the 1995 National AEP Review and recommended reforms in the implementation, evaluation and arrangements relating to the twenty-one national goals of the AEP. The evaluation of initiatives undertaken in all sectors was given high priority, a six-year period of emphasis on financial inputs into Indigenous education came under scrutiny, and MCEETYA joined the Commonwealth in a national effort to focus on educational outcomes instead of inputs.

MCEETYA reaffirmed its commitment to the AEP and governments pledged to endeavour to increase their financial efforts to improve Indigenous education.

**1996 IESIP funding arrangements: a more equitable and needs based system**

In response to the recommendations of the National Review, the *Indigenous Education (Supplementary Assistance) Amendment Act 1996* was passed in May. The amendments to the Act restructured AESIP and resulted in an acceptance of the significantly increased level of funding proposed by the previous government and a greater commitment by the Commonwealth Government. Differential funding rates for preschool, school and VET were paid with higher rates paid to the non-government sector. This resulted in a fairer and more manageable system. It signified that both sides of federal politics recognized that there was an urgent need to address the deficiencies in Indigenous education and to make it a high priority issue. A suite of indicators for the measurement of progress in each of the MCEETYA priority areas for the 1997-1999 triennium was established.

**1996 Introduction of the new IESIP and the first funding quadrennium (1997 – 2000)**

In December 1997, the Commonwealth Government launched a series of Strategic Results Projects (SRPs). They were short, sharply focussed initiatives aimed at improving access to schooling, at improving attendance rates, and at promoting academic achievement in literacy, numeracy and vocational education and training to the non-Indigenous educational standard. They were also a major contribution to the capital upgrading of the educational infrastructure of non-government providers. The DEST publication, *What Works*, details the success of many of the projects.

**1997 Indigenous School to Work Transition**

<http://www.dest.gov.au/schools/Indigenous/publications/schooltowork.htm>

In 1998, the then Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs established a Task Force on School to Work Transitions for Indigenous Australians. As part of this process, the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) was commissioned to produce a Report to inform Departmental policy development as well as assist in the review of its education, employment and training related programs. It also provides data which can be used to adjust program delivery aimed at increasing the level of access to services by Indigenous young people.

**2000 National Indigenous Education Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, MCEETYA**

<http://www.dest.gov.au/schools/Indigenous/nielns.htm>

During 2000, the National Indigenous English Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (NIELNS) was launched. The strategy's objective is to ensure that Indigenous students reach levels of literacy and numeracy comparable with other Australians through methods such as raising school attendance rates, addressing health problems that undermine learning, attracting and retaining good teachers and using the most effective teaching methods. The strategy requires all States and Territories to develop an implementation plan that sets out how they will use their own resources, as well as the Commonwealth's mainstream recurrent grants and Indigenous-specific supplementary funding to achieve the goals of the plan.

**2000 Achieving educational equality for Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (revised April 2000) MCEETYA Taskforce on Indigenous Education**

<http://www.curriculum.edu.au/mctyapdf/reporta.pdf> (462kb)

The Taskforce provided advice to Ministers on making the achievement of educational equality for Australia's Indigenous peoples an urgent national priority.

**2002 What works: explorations in improving outcomes for Indigenous students**

[http://www.acsa.edu.au/publications/whatworks\\_sections.htm](http://www.acsa.edu.au/publications/whatworks_sections.htm)

A set of professional development materials was developed for use by schools drawing on the lessons which had been learnt from the IESIP Strategic Results Projects (SRPs) and from other schools which have been helping their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieve excellent results. This initiative funded 83 projects involving 3,800 students across a broad range of topics, locations and contexts, all designed to explore how improvements in achievement might be made relatively quickly through dedicated resources and effort.

**2003 Second National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training 2002**

<http://www.dest.gov.au/schools/Publications/2003/nrpiet/2002split.htm>

The first National Report to Parliament was in 2001. The Commonwealth Government provides around \$468m each year for Indigenous education. They have agreements in place with education providers around Australia from State and Territory government systems, schools and vocational education providers for the 2001 - 2004 period. These agreements incorporate expectations of educational achievement across a number of measures. This report will help shape priorities for the Government's funding and administrative arrangements for the next quadrennium (2005 - 2008).

**2003 Dare to Lead Coalition**

<http://cust49.metawerx.com.au/servlet/Web?cid=14&cde=21471869&action=start>

With its genesis in a forum of state and non-state school principals in 2000, an on-going coalition of schools, their principals, and education institutions is forming during 2003. Coalition members are publicly committing to improvements in Indigenous education. The most important purpose of the Coalition's work will be to:

- support improved mainstream educational outcomes for Indigenous students, and
- to increase the pace at which the goal of producing equivalence between outcomes for Indigenous students with those of the rest of the Australian student population is reached.

Over 1300 schools nationwide have joined the coalition as at November 2003. The focus is on a new paradigm of professional learning by strengthening and supporting pre-existing networks to work actively on strategies in local areas to meet a few strategic, but realistic, targets.

*Queensland*

**2000 Review of Education and Employment Programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in Education Queensland**, Department of Education, Brisbane.

<http://education.qld.gov.au/publication/production/reports/pdfs/2000/2000-03-revedempltprogs.pdf>

**2000 *Strategy for the Continuous Improvement of Education and Employment Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in Education Queensland*** ('Partners for Success'), Department of Education, Brisbane.

## APPENDIX THREE – CHERBOURG STATE SCHOOL PROFILE

### 2003

Cherbourg State School is an Aboriginal community school in the South Burnett District in Queensland. It caters for approximately 250 local children, with educational programs ranging from Kindergarten to Year 7. As part of the school program, community agency involvement to address relevant community issues such as health, nutrition, safety, child protection and religious education is encouraged.

In 2003 the school was staffed as follows:

- Principal
- Assistant Principal
- 7 Primary classroom teachers
- 1 Special Education Teacher
- 1 specialist Aboriginal Studies-teacher
- 2 Preschool teachers
- 1 Kindergarten teacher
- 0.5 Teacher Librarian
- 1 Remote Area Teacher Education Program (RATEP) teacher

An Indigenous teacher aide supported each classroom teacher. Indigenous teacher aides were also used effectively in the capacity of Family Support Workers.

The school also received specialist support for one day per week in the following areas:

- Music
- Physical Education
- Guidance Officer
- Learning Support Teacher

The school is well resourced by the commonwealth's IESIP program funding to supplement existing educational programs and promote parent and community involvement in school processes. The school's ASSPA committee and the P&C play an important role by further providing an avenue for parents and other interested community members to participate in school decision-making processes.

The development of individual literacy skills continues to be the main priority for the children of Cherbourg State School.

At Cherbourg State School we aim to:

- generate good academic outcomes that are comparable to other schools around Queensland, and
- nurture a strong and positive sense of what it means to be Aboriginal in today's society.

Cherbourg State School Annual Report, 2003



## APPENDIX FOUR - Cherbourg State School – Aboriginal Studies (Program Overview)

CONCEPT	LOWER	MIDDLE	UPPER
Pre-Cherbourg	Recognize elements of traditional Aboriginal society and culture	Recognize that culture influences the values and actions of Aboriginal people	Recognize and develop some understanding of the challenges of maintaining traditional Aboriginal cultural practices in a contemporary Western society
Government Policies and Practices	Develop some understanding about the impact of invasion on past and present Aboriginal people	Analyse the effects of past policies on Aboriginal people of Cherbourg community	Examine in more detail the effects of past policies on Aboriginal people of Cherbourg and how it affects today's people of Cherbourg
Contemporary Cherbourg	Become familiar with useful human and material resources in the local area	Recognize and value the achievements of Aboriginal people from Cherbourg	Examine the impact of control policies on current issues that are relevant to Cherbourg: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Health</li> <li>• Domestic Violence</li> <li>• Alcohol/Drug Abuse</li> <li>• Child Abuse/Protection</li> </ul>
Future Cherbourg	Discuss positive perceptions about the future of Cherbourg	Recognize the essential nature and importance of involvement in local activity in the Cherbourg community	Develop a profile of Cherbourg's future developments in their local community
Racism and Discrimination	Develop strategies to contend with incidences of racism and teasing	Consolidation of strategies to contend with issues of racism and teasing	Explore the origins of racist perceptions and their impact on individuals  Further consolidation of strategies to contend with issues of racism and teasing
Identity	Explore differences between Aboriginal societies and other societies throughout the world	Develop an understanding and appreciation of the values and expectations of a mainstream society while maintaining their own cultural identity	Explore and develop an understanding of what it means to be Aboriginal in a contemporary Western society
Music	Explore and develop traditional styles of Aboriginal music and songs	Further exploration and development of traditional styles of Aboriginal styles of music and songs  Understand and appreciate the stories behind traditional Aboriginal music and songs	Further exploration and development of traditional styles of Aboriginal styles of music and songs  Understand and appreciate the stories behind traditional Aboriginal music and songs
Arts	Explore and develop traditional styles of Aboriginal art forms	Further exploration and development of traditional styles of Aboriginal art forms  Understand and appreciate the stories behind traditional Aboriginal art forms	Further exploration and development of traditional styles of Aboriginal art forms  Understand and appreciate the stories behind traditional Aboriginal art forms
Dance	Explore and develop traditional styles of Aboriginal dance relevant to Cherbourg	Further exploration and development of traditional styles of Aboriginal styles of dance relevant to Cherbourg  Understand and appreciate the stories behind traditional Aboriginal dance	Consolidation of traditional Aboriginal dance skills  Understand and appreciate the stories behind traditional Aboriginal dance  Explore and develop aspects of contemporary Aboriginal dance styles and stories

## APPENDIX FIVE - ACCOUNTABILITIES MATRIX

Key:

P4S – Partners for Success action plan;

IESIP – Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program (Commonwealth funds);

CO – Central Office

EDS – Executive Director (Schools)

MFP – Management for Performance

Accountability	Challenging	Supporting	Developing	Monitoring	Intervening
CENTRAL OFFICE	Asking the hard questions: - To what extent do we committed to/ believe in/support P4S?	Facilitate delivery of Commonwealth agenda	Foster Indigenous Leadership  Ensuring understanding within CO of Indigenous Education agenda	Ensuring strategic expenditure of IESIP funds  Scrutinising Indigenous employee statistics	Negotiating a process to ensure renewed and positive pursuit of P4S agenda  Applying MFP processes in areas where P4S policy and targets are not attended to adequately  Reward and celebrate success
CENTRAL OFFICE – EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS (SCHOOLS)	Asking the hard questions: - To what extent are you committed to/ believe in/ support P4S? - To what extent do you believe Indigenous student performance can be improved? - How will you respond to these beliefs?	Ensuring delivery of clear policy directions  Facilitate delivery of Commonwealth agenda  Providing resources and/or key personnel to assist with delivery of P4S as required	Ensuring EDS's have skills and capacity to engage with Indigenous communities  Promoting P4S strategy  Generating understanding and enthusiasm for P4S strategy	Ensuring strategic expenditure of IESIP funds  Scrutinising correlation between IESIP expenditure and student outcomes in Districts  Scrutinising Indigenous student performance in respective Districts	Negotiating a process to ensure renewed and positive pursuit of P4S agenda  Applying MFP processes in areas where P4S policy and targets are not attended to adequately  Reward and celebrate success
EDS's – PRINCIPALS	Asking the hard questions: - To what extent are you committed to/ believe in/ support P4S? - To what extent is your performance as a Principal contributing to Indigenous underachievement/ absenteeism/ lack of engagement in the school? - To what extent do you believe Indigenous student performance can be improved in your school? - How will you respond to these beliefs?	Providing resources and/or key personnel to assist with delivery of P4S as required  Providing strategic Leadership on P4S agenda within their District and in respective communities	Ensuring Principals have skills and capacity to engage with Indigenous communities  Modelling engagement with Indigenous communities  Promoting P4S strategy	Ensuring strategic expenditure of IESIP funds in the District  Scrutinising correlation between IESIP expenditure and student outcomes in Schools  Scrutinising Indigenous student performance in respective schools  Examining the extent to which P4S is pursued by all Principals	Negotiating a process to ensure renewed and positive pursuit of the P4S agenda, as well as improved Indigenous student outcomes in the school  Applying MFP processes in areas where P4S policy and targets are not attended to adequately  Applying MFP processes in areas where Indigenous student performance is not attended to adequately within the school  Reward and celebrate success
PRINCIPALS - TEACHERS	Asking the hard questions: - To what extent are you committed to/ believe in/ support P4S? - To what extent are you meaningfully engaged with the parents of the Indigenous children in your classroom? - To what extent is your performance as a teacher contributing to Indigenous underachievement/ absenteeism/ lack of engagement in the classroom? - To what extent do you believe Indigenous student performance can be improved in your classroom? - How will you respond to these beliefs?	Providing resources and/or key personnel to assist with Indigenous student/community engagement as required (eg family support worker)  Facilitating productive links between teachers and Indigenous community  Providing strategic Leadership on P4S agenda within their school and community  Ensuring some degree of Indigenous leadership in the school  Assisting teachers to challenge/ understand Indigenous students	Ensuring Teachers have skills and capacity to meaningfully engage Indigenous students in respective classrooms  Ensuring teachers are able to deliver productive pedagogies to Indigenous children  Ensuring teachers develop a meaningful understanding of the context of Indigenous learners	Ensuring strategic expenditure of IESIP funds in the school  Scrutinising correlation between IESIP expenditure and student outcomes in the school  Closely scrutinising Indigenous student performance data in respective classrooms  Examining the extent to which P4S (including reconciliation) is embraced by teachers and pursued in their classrooms	Negotiate a process to ensure renewed and positive pursuit of P4S agenda  Applying MFP processes in areas where P4S policy and targets are not attended to adequately  Reward and celebrate success
TEACHERS – CHILDREN	Helping Indigenous children to contemplate some hard questions: - To what extent do you truly believe you can be as good as anyone else in this classroom? - To what extent do you believe being Indigenous is something to be proud of?	<i>Establishing a classroom environment in which Indigenous children are:</i> - supported - encouraged - challenged - understood - respected	Attending to individual needs  Ensuring high expectations of Indigenous children  Ensuring Indigenous children have access to curriculum programs that are: - meaningful - responsive - challenging - NOT 'watered down'	Maintaining meaningful and reputable Indigenous student data  Informal connections with Indigenous students maintain positive relationships	Administering firm consequences for inappropriate behaviour  Developing alternative approaches to learning if required  Following up on absenteeism  Getting parents and grandparents involved in classroom concerns  Reward and celebrate success

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