

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Whilst literacy research in communities culturally different from dominant societies is common in other countries, research concerning urban/rural Aboriginal people in Australia is sparse. Not only is there little knowledge concerning literacy development and Aboriginal people in a cross-cultural sense, there is almost no research describing Aboriginal children's emergent literacy skills. It is clear, however, that Aboriginal children are less likely to become literate than other groups in Australian society {Budby 1986; Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) 1995; Gale, McClay, Christie & Harris 1982} as later discussion in Chapters 2 and 3 indicates.

Before significant work can be done in relation to researching the cross-cultural aspects of Aboriginal literacy, there is a need to describe the nature of Aboriginal children's literacy development at a range of levels from early childhood through to Year 6 and beyond. There is also a need to establish relationships between the nature of children's emergent literacy development and their later literacy competence. This study aims, therefore, to contribute towards a body of knowledge which increases awareness of the nature of Aboriginal literacy in contemporary Australian society.

Examining the early literacy abilities of young Aboriginal children in relation to their later literacy performance in middle primary school is thus a relevant activity for any school or education system concerned with children making successful transitions to literacy.

Background to the Study

As noted above, there is little research into the nature of the reading and writing skills of Aboriginal children. The few studies which have been conducted look principally at the learning styles and literacy skills of traditionally-oriented Aboriginal people living in remote areas of Australia (Harris & Malin, 1994; Walton 1986).

Aboriginal people make up about 1.5 percent of the Australian population (DEET 1994). They form a significant ethnic minority set apart from the mainstream. Most Aboriginal people live either in urban areas or in rural towns and are not traditionally oriented. It should be understood that this does not mean that these people are not aware

of their Aboriginal heritage or their Aboriginality. Nor does it make them any the less Aboriginal. It simply means that their lifestyles are similar to many others in cities and towns throughout Australia and that most have English or Aboriginal English as their first language (Eades, 1995).

The signal failure of Australian education systems to deliver appropriate literacy education to Aboriginal children whatever their background is well documented {DEET 1993; DEET 1994; Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DEETYA) 1997; Malin 1994}. Their literacy problems contribute to low retention rates, high numbers of Aboriginal children in remedial classes, low attendance rates at school, and low numbers in tertiary institutions (DEET 1993; DEET 1994; McKeown & Freebody 1988; Trouw 1994).

Large amounts of special funding have gone into Aboriginal education programs in an effort to improve literacy competencies and to improve secondary school retention rates. This has been to little avail (DEET 1993; McKeown & Freebody 1988). Many enthusiastic and innovative teachers of high calibre introduce programs which may be successful but unknown or which founder because of non-recurrent funding. Other programs fail for reasons of cultural difference, social and family crisis, prejudice and teachers' and schools' inability to implement effective culturally-oriented programs (Eckermann 1994; Malin 1994).

Scope of the Study

As will be elaborated in later chapters, theory and research suggest that early literacy development has far-reaching effects on literacy competence in middle childhood and into adulthood. The significance of literacy competence to success at school, and the difficulties Aborigines experience in both these areas, suggests there might be a link between the early literacy development of Aboriginal children and their level of competence at school in middle childhood. The research reported in this study falls in this area of investigation.

The project was undertaken with the purpose of contributing to the body of knowledge about Aboriginal children and their literacy development. It is a study which hoped to establish a baseline for further evaluative research on Aboriginal literacy.

More specifically, the purpose of the study was to determine the early literacy competence that a specific group of children developed in a specific period of time over a range of specified literacy skills (both high-level and low-level) determined from the

literature. The objective was to find out which of these skills was a good predictor of later reading success and to relate these to emergent literacy knowledge designated by the literature to be important for later literacy competence.

Whilst the study used some comparisons with Australian and overseas norms which confirm low levels of literacy in comparison with mainstream children (see DEET 1994), its major focus is not to confirm this. Such comparative studies invariably disadvantage minority groups because they frequently give rise to deficit model conclusions and involve simplistic assumptions that the minority group is in some way inferior and must be brought up to the standards of the dominant group, thus masking systemic inefficiencies and deep-seated social problems. Rather, the study expected to find variability within the group of children studied and part of its focus was thus to examine the nature of that variability, its origins and characteristics. In doing so, pathways for future development may be more easily facilitated.

As Kemp (1987) points out:

A prime focus of assessing children's language competencies is that these assessments should provide information about where teachers' energies should be directed. (Kemp 1987, p. 6)

As the purposes of the present study were not principally concerned with comparison between minority and mainstream children, the data collection and analyses focused on examining relevant information about the target group - Aboriginal children.

A major focus of this project was to provide teachers with specific literacy information about the Aboriginal children they teach. Thus it was also hoped to provide information which would affect future educational programs for Aboriginal children in the local community. It was decided to provide literacy information about their children to parents. The project was endorsed by the local Aboriginal community which recognised the importance of research into Aboriginal literacy.

Statement of the Problem

The aim of this study was to determine the nature of the emergent literacy development of a pre-school cohort of Aboriginal children, and to compare these children's competencies with those demonstrated by the same children in middle primary school. Whilst oral language forms an integral part of emergent literacy, in this case study, only reading and writing skills were examined in detail.

Emergent literacy skills were determined by giving the children a range of literacy tasks which examined story knowledge, print knowledge, book handling knowledge, reading and writing knowledge. Over a period of eighteen months children did the same tasks five times - in the middle of their pre-school year in 1990, at the end of it, and at the beginning, middle and end of their Kindergarten¹ year in 1991. At the completion of these five data gathering sessions, a picture of the emergent literacy competencies of the children could be developed. In 1995, a final data gathering session occurred in which children completed a range of literacy tasks to determine the nature of their later literacy competence. Emergent literacy competence was then compared with later literacy competence in order to determine whether characteristics exhibited in the emergent literacy phase had implications for later literacy development.

Significance of the Study

The study was seen as significant in a number of ways.

- (1) It should yield information about the emergent literacy development of a group of rural Aboriginal children, about which little is known.
- (2) The techniques developed for the study (based on theory and research) could provide a base for literacy assessment in the classroom.
- (3) Teachers and parents could be informed about the literacy development of individual children and an overview provided of group aspects of literacy.
- (4) A baseline could be established for further literacy studies.

Focus of the Study

Given the nature of literacy development, in cross-cultural settings, the politics of literacy and the position of Aboriginal peoples in Australia today, the key areas of concern appeared to be:

What is the nature of emergent literacy as it occurs in this particular context?

What changes occur over time?

¹ Kindergarten, in this case, means the reception or entry year into primary or elementary school

How are the skills evident in early childhood related to skills evident in later primary school?

In the light of the above, what implications does this have for teachers and schools in facilitating literacy for Aboriginal children in this community?

What issues arise which may be pertinent to other Aboriginal communities?

The remainder of this report falls into a number of broad areas:

- (1) Chapter 2 examines the nature of racism in Australian society and its effects on Aboriginal people in terms of education and literacy. It also outlines other complex social issues which impact on Aboriginal literacy in Australia.
- (2) Chapter 3 surveys the nature of research into the development of reading and writing. This includes discussion of key influences in literacy development, the interdependence of reading, writing and oral language, cross-cultural issues in language and emergent literacy development. From this survey of relevant literature the range of tasks which the present study used to examine emergent literacy was developed.
- (3) Chapter 4 deals with the choice and justification of the study's design and procedures.
- (4) Chapters 5 and 6 determine the nature of emergent literacy development at Djannara Pre-school in the 1990 pre-school cohort, identifying trends in literacy development through to middle childhood and examining the literacy development of individual children.
- (5) Chapter 7 discusses the conclusions of the study and the implications for both further research and teaching.

CHAPTER 2. THE CONTEXT OF ABORIGINAL LITERACY

Introduction

The position of Aboriginal people in Australian society today is a direct result of their experience of colonisation and concomitant racism. For at least 40,000 years Aborigines have lived on the Australian continent (McGrath 1995). During a time of relative social and physical isolation from the rest of the world, a society developed which was socially and culturally diverse depending on the climate and landscape and the idiosyncratic needs and preferences of the various groups.

This chapter will present an overview of the complex and deep-seated historico/ societal factors which relate to education and the position of Aboriginal people in contemporary Australian society. A brief analysis of the place of literacy in relation to this position will also be presented. Thus the specific literacy skills researched in this study may be seen in a context which explains how present skill levels are the effects of longstanding historico/societal factors.

When Europeans came to Australia's shores a little over two hundred years ago, the impact of their coming changed traditional Aboriginal society in a sudden and violent manner. The history of colonisation in Australia is well documented and it is not the purpose of this chapter to explore, in detail, its processes, or the aftermath of colonisation. Using Eckermann, Dowd, Martin, Nixon, Grey and Chong's (1995) framework, the discussion in this chapter will focus on those aspects of colonisation which directly affected (and still affect) Aborigines' access to education, participation in education and the quality and nature of educational provisions for Aboriginal people. Thus the chapter will examine the influence and aftermath of colonisation, including scientific racism, religion, socio-economic and political factors, *in relation to Aboriginal Education* in a brief historical overview. It will then move onto an analysis of racism in Australia and its effects on education for Aborigines in terms of individual and institutional racism, systemic bias and structural violence. Within this framework of education for Aborigines, issues concerning literacy will be explored. Relationships between politics, power and literacy in contemporary Australian society and the concomitant processes of exclusion will be discussed in terms of critical thinking and literacy.

In order to understand the complexities of the factors impacting on Aboriginal education, Eckermann et al.'s (1995) conceptualisation of the issues is presented as a

framework for discussion (see Figure 2.1). The global effects of the colonisation activities of European powers in particular, between the Seventeenth and Twentieth Centuries can hardly be underestimated in social terms. In the case of Australia, British colonisation was to have far-reaching and deleterious effects on the indigenous population. Eckermann et al. (1995) have chosen to identify colonisation as the initiating causal factor in the enactment of racism in this country. As demonstrated in the model, justified in part by the intellectual orientations of scientific racism, colonisation firstly dispossessed Aboriginal people of the land which supported them and then proceeded to institutionalise that dispossession in the fabric of social institutions in the new country. Consequently, in contemporary Australia, as Eckermann et al.'s (1995) model shows, racism is bred and perpetuated through social organisations which maintain Aboriginal people in an interacting cycle which includes poverty, prejudice and systemic bias. Clear evidence of structural violence through the destructive interaction of these processes may be demonstrated through such phenomena as low levels of education and literacy and higher levels of health problems than the general population. These, then, are the concerns of this chapter.

Racism and the Processes of Exclusion and Oppression

Racism involves, firstly, the possession of prejudiced attitudes and secondly, the expression of these attitudes as some form of behaviour. Racism is a particular kind of prejudice. Lippmann (1973, p. 21) defines racism as "the ideology of racial inferiority and the practice of discrimination and unequal treatment against particular racial, ethnic, religious or class groups."

Racism may be manifested in a number of ways: through individuals and their actions and through social institutions and their organisation (institutional racism). Eckermann et al.'s (1995) model of the interaction of racism and colonisation is concerned with an analysis of these constructs in an Australian societal context (Figure 2.1). The model also includes recognition of the devastating effects of individual racism (see prejudice and discrimination Figure 2.1).

Individual Racism

Individual racism can be expressed overtly by direct acts of discrimination perpetrated by individuals or groups of individuals, such as refusal to serve Aborigines in cafes and hotels or racist namecalling in school playgrounds.

Many studies confirm the fact that individual racism is very active in contemporary Australian society (Catchpole 1982a; Eckermann 1977; Edwards & Read 1989; Keen 1988; Larsen et al. 1977; Lippmann 1973, 1994; McConnochie, Hollinsworth & Pettman 1988; McGrath 1995; Rowley 1978; Taft 1970; Western 1973). Thus, it can be assumed that Aboriginal people experience individual racism on a regular basis wherever they live and whatever they attempt to achieve (see Figure 2.1 Eckermann et al. 1995). The experience of individual racism at school is certainly widespread and well-documented over a long period of time (Eckermann 1994; Green 1982; Ngarritjan-Kessarlis 1994).

The Influences and Aftermath of Colonisation

Dominant groups such as the Chinese, Roman, Greek, Inca and Moghul Empires have practised colonisation throughout world history. Colonisation can thus be seen as a global phenomenon. It was, however, Western European man who first colonised on a large scale. The reasons for this are complex but may be partially attributed to superior technology which included the mastery of extended ocean travel and to well developed methods of extermination such as the possession of superior weapons and armoury (Tawney 1966).

Closely associated with Western European colonisation is industrialisation in the Seventeenth, Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries. With the Industrial Revolution came the necessity to obtain raw materials and establish markets for manufactured goods. Thus the large scale industrialisation of Western Societies may be seen as dependent on materials and markets obtained through colonisation. Tied to the changes in social structure (which included a less rigid class system), and the distribution of power (political and economic), the Industrial Revolution supported the rise and dominance of the Protestant Ethic (Tawney 1959).

The advent of the Reformation in Europe brought great changes in the ethos of the times. Economic transactions came to be characterised by individualism, temporal values and rationality; social class distinctions became less rigid. Christianity was the only legitimate religion, and in politico-economic terms, its Protestant form was particularly important. God had given his Chosen People wealth and success in economic ventures as a demonstration of his choice (Eckermann 1980; Tawney 1966). Consequently, those who were *not* richly endowed with worldly goods and superior technology were considered heathen and inferior and had obviously been cast aside by God (Eckermann 1980). This kind of thinking can often be found in Seventeenth and

Eighteenth century literature and was frequently used as a justification for the slave trade (Harris 1968; Tawney 1966) .

Worldwide imperialism was at its peak when Australia was first settled in the late Eighteenth Century and European powers were engaged in a 'grab' for land on a scale never seen before in global history. Thus Britain, in establishing a penal colony as a dumping-ground for criminals she had previously sent to America, was ensuring that New Holland would not be taken first by the French, Germans, or Dutch (Cathcart 1993; Reynolds 1982; Yarwood & Knowling 1982).

Undoubtedly, as pointed out previously, the need for raw materials and markets for the resultant manufactured goods contributed to the establishment of the various Australian colonies. These factors, combined with the need to engage constantly in national prestige-building activities, made the invasion of Australia inevitable (Cathcart 1993).

The colonisation and invasion of Australia saw protracted guerrilla warfare waged by Aboriginal people. Their numbers were decimated through battle and disease, their way of life destroyed, their languages forgotten, their religions denigrated as heathen savagery. Enslavement, imprisonment and exclusion from an increasingly prosperous society was their fate (Attwood 1989; Lippmann 1994; Markus 1990; McGrath 1995; Reynolds 1990). In such a manner, Aborigines were established as an 'outgroup' in Australian society (Allport 1982).

Colonisation was supported by bodies of scientific, intellectual and religious thought developed in Western Europe. The intellectual pre-occupations of the times thus established views of white superiority and justified expansionist political and economic activity. Throughout the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, such notions found expression in scientific racism and contributed to the basis for the exploitation, exclusion and extermination of Aboriginal people (Evans, Saunders & Cronin 1975).

Scientific Racism

McConnochie et al. (1988, p.15) describe Scientific Racism as "a 'scientific' argument which was used to justify the flagrant denial of human rights to many of the non-white victims of western expansion and colonialism." Such arguments claimed to 'prove' that white men were superior to other races and were therefore bound to rule over them. William Dampier, a very early explorer of the west coast of Australia wrote about Aboriginal people in 1689:

The inhabitants of this country are the miserablest people in the world ... (they) have no Houses and Skin Garments, no Sheep, Poultry, and Fruits of the Earth, Ostrich Eggs etc ... and setting aside the Human Shape they differ but little from the Brutes ... I did not perceive that they did worship anything. (Stone 1974, p.15)

Such ethnocentric views of different societies were common in Western Europe. Europeans believed themselves to be the ultimate in human evolutionary terms. An early cultural theorist, Tylor, could write in 1899:

It may perhaps be reasonable to imagine as last-formed the white race of the temperate region, least able to bear extreme heat or live without the appliances of culture, but gifted with the powers of knowing and ruling which gave them sway over the whole world. (Tylor cited in Harris 1968, p.140)

Scientific racism was related to three major theoretical positions, all of which are evident in colonial Australia and affected educational provisions for Aboriginal people over a long period of time. These were Instinct Theory, Social Darwinism and belief in the Great Chain of Being.

Instinct Theory maintained that intelligence was a function of environment (Kardiner & Preble 1961). The closer humans were to nature, the more their actions were governed by fixed patterns of instinctive reactions tied to direct sensory stimuli - like animals (Harris 1968). The opportunity to apply this thinking to Aboriginal people was irresistible. For example in 1872 Walsh argues:

To speak of intellectual phenomena in relation to Australian Aborigines is somewhat of a misnomer. The race presents, in fact, hardly any of what are usually understood as the phenomena of intelligence. When I speak of intellectuality I refer to that simple activity of mind ... which may be supposed to result from the reflective exercise of the mind on external objects as distinguished from merely instinctive thought of the animal ... (Chase & von Sturmer 1973, p.8)

Mathew in 1910 also strongly supports 'instinct' theory:

In all matters relating to their own mode of life they show enough intelligence ... but they are unreflective and averse both to abstract reasoning and sustained mental effort. (Kearney, de Lacey & Davidson 1973, p.8)

Similarly, Smyth in 1878 comments:

The Aborigines differ from one another almost as much as Europeans differ ... but while in the latter the capabilities of improvement are very great, in the Australian Black they are limited. (Kearney et al. 1973, p.9)

Closely allied to the instinct theorists was the development of what is known as *Social Darwinism*. Basically, Social Darwinism postulated that humanity was composed of a small number of racially and biologically differentiated groups (McConnochie et al. 1988). Ability and culture were biologically determined and therefore some racial groups were superior in culture and intelligence to others. Darwin's Theory of Evolution was adapted to human beings and a large body of literature developed which maintained the idea that genetically distinctive human races have evolved through the process of natural selection and the survival of the fittest. In the same way, cultures developed and survived or died. People who belonged to those cultures also survived or died on the basis of natural selection and the survival of the fittest (McConnochie et al. 1988). It is not difficult to see how this became the perfect justification for the extermination and/or subjugation of those 'races' who were 'weakest'.

The third aspect of scientific racism which affected colonial Australia was the theory of the *Great Chain of Being*. Proponents believed that all primates were located on a continuum at one end of which were the apes and the other end of which was British man. Aborigines were located at the lower end of the continuum (Miller 1985; Reynolds 1989). Along with Social Darwinism and Instinct Theory, the Great Chain of Being provided both overt and covert reasons for denial of access to education to Aboriginal people. Scientific racism also ensured that what education was provided was inferior.

Further, colonial society could not identify any social or governmental structures in Aboriginal society which were similar to or comparable with Western European structures. Inability to find compatible societal structures contributed to the justification for invasion, extermination and oppression. Exterminating and dispossessing a group of naked savages not far removed from animals, was much easier than destroying an understandable social structure such as a village system. There were no crops, villages, public buildings, houses, roads, schools or other such visible proofs of 'civilisation' (McConnochie 1973). Consequently, since Aborigines could not demonstrate ownership of the land in western terms, colonists simply took over the land as if it were empty.

As may be inferred from previous discussion, early settlers had views about what a 'worthwhile human being' was and about what constituted ownership, government, religion and education (Yarwood & Knowling 1982). Aborigines and other groups did not fit these ideas. In terms of Aborigines in particular, and ethnic minorities in general,

there is ample evidence of both real and perceived value conflict concerning the concepts just mentioned, and many others. Hartwig for example, quotes a NSW squatter in 1838:

*... every man of common experience knows that the Aboriginals of my native country are the most degenerate, despicable, and brutal race of human beings in existence ... a scoff and jest upon humanity - they are insensible to every **bond which binds a man to his friend - husband to wife - parents to its child - or creature to its God.** (Hartwig 1973 in Stevens 1974, pp.12-13. My emphases)*

Nowhere is this clash of values clearer than in the conflict generated by colonisation in Australia.

Stone (1974), Chase and von Sturmer (1973) and Rowley (1972) present detailed analyses of scientific racism in Australia. In terms of physical development, intellectual capacity, culture, religion, arts, government, morals and technology, the Aboriginal Australian was 'proven' to be far down on the progression from 'barbarism' to 'civilisation' (Eckermann 1981a). Christianity as it was then perceived by its proponents, played a clear part in the destruction of Aboriginal cultures. This will now be explained.

Religious Factors

The idea that the just rewards of Christian life were riches and wealth dominated Nineteenth Century religious and secular thinking. Economic development and the rise of a wealthy middle class in Western Societies was supported by Protestant religions; work, material success and achievement developed as values of paramount importance (Tawney 1966).

To Nineteenth Century Christians, Aborigines did not fit western ideas of 'humanness', they were 'instinctive', close to being animals, they had no acceptable religion and they did not perceive that hard work for one's master and belief in a Christian God would result in heavenly rewards (McConnochie 1988; Chase & von Sturmer 1973). In addition, they indulged in heathen practices and therefore needed to be converted and their children taken from them and raised and educated in a Christian and civilised manner (Attwood 1989).

if the children were to be desocialised as Aborigines and resocialised as whites, they would have to be removed from their parents. (Edwards & Read 1989, p. xii)

These ideas provided the justification for the removal of thousands of Aboriginal children from their families for education and 'civilising' purposes during the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries (Edwards & Read 1989). To ensure such 'civilising', colonial governments developed policies of institutional racism to contain and control Aboriginal people.

Institutional Racism

Institutional racism is racism perpetrated through institutions which by their nature and methods of functioning exclude various ethnic groups. As the following discussion implies, it is covert in nature, is enshrined in a nation's legal, political economic and social systems and is frequently accepted by the victims themselves (Eckermann 1994).

In the case of Australia, government legislation and policies, and their related institutional systems became the major vehicles for oppression of Aboriginal people.

Government Policy and Aborigines

Between 1788 and the 1840's Aborigines were gradually dispossessed of their land in NSW. Eckermann et al. (1992) and Reynolds (1987) call this the "uncontrolled frontier" when Aboriginal people fought a sustained guerilla war against invasion and the European government was able to maintain only loose control over Aboriginal people.

After the 1850's, however, Aborigines came under full state control and were made wards of the state (Eckermann 1992). Their hunting grounds were fenced off and they were excluded from them (Cook 1982). Deprived of food sources, they killed settlers' cattle and in return were killed themselves. Very quickly, the numbers of Aboriginal people around what is now Sydney were also decimated by such diseases as smallpox, the common cold, measles and whooping cough to which they had never before been exposed (Rowley 1978). Later, added to these were leprosy and sexually transmitted diseases resulting from the sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women in British settlements often devoid of Non-Aboriginal women. Children of mixed European and Aboriginal descent were born (McGrath 1995).

Throughout the Nineteenth Century and into the 1930's sporadic massacres occurred across Australia along with 'pacification by force' and dispossession (Cook 1982). Thus after European settlement Aborigines died in great numbers as a result of the combined depredations of dispossession, extermination and disease (Lippmann 1994). By the early Twentieth Century numbers of Aboriginal people had been so decimated it was thought

they were "dying out" (Eckermann 1992). This fitted conveniently with the Social Darwinist notions of scientific racism and the survival of what was considered to be the fittest society (European) as Lippmann describes:

Aborigines, being 'primitives', were destined to die out before a superior 'civilisation', equally destined to supersede them.
(Lippmann 1994, p.13).

Governments then began to introduce policies of protection designed to 'smooth the dying pillow' and, in addition, to establish total control over the lives of remaining Aboriginal people by systematically excluding them from the rights of ordinary citizens (Eckermann 1992). Thus Aborigines were institutionalised in Australian society as an 'outgroup' (Allport 1982), and the scene was set for institutionalised oppression on a scale rarely seen in global history.

Protection

During the late Nineteenth Century, 'Protection' policies were established in various states (Australia was, until 1901, a collection of separate British colonies). Many Aboriginal people were rounded up, regardless of their traditional groupings, and placed on government run reserves controlled by a white manager, where, it was thought, they could be looked after until they died out (Markus 1990). Others lived on missions, fringe settlements or on pastoral stations. They lived in poverty with little prospect of employment, frequently dependent on the government or charity for food and with no rights of citizenship (Eckermann 1992).

Aborigines were considered to be low on the scale of humanity. They were not considered fit to raise children who were of mixed European and Aboriginal descent since they were uncivilised and close to being animals (Lippmann 1994; Catchpole 1982a). Between 1883 (the beginning of the Protection era) and 1934, 1500 children were removed from their families in New South Wales alone. By the end of the Protectionist era (late 1940's), more than 5000 children had been taken, raised and educated in white families or at such institutions as the Cootamundra Girls Home or the Kinchela Boys Home (Edwards & Read 1989). Today, Aboriginal children are still seven times more likely to be taken from their parents than white children (Edwards & Read 1989).

By the time of the Protectionist era (1909 onwards in New South Wales), schooling was compulsory for the general population until the age of fourteen (Cook 1982). All Aboriginal children became wards of the Aboriginal Protection Board and henceforth, most received their education in the reserves in which they now lived. They could be

excluded from attendance at state schools if white parents objected to their presence. For example, Miller (1985) documents cases in and near Warbrook in 1937 where Aboriginal children were excluded from state schools. The then Minister for education, D. Drummond stated clearly accepted policy in these cases:

*It is desirable that where a number of aboriginal children are attending the school they should be segregated from the ordinary school pupils and provided with education in a school set apart for the purpose preferably at an aboriginal settlement. I am of the opinion that the policy of this department should at all times have due regard to the underlying theory that because the children of marked **aboriginal characteristics and parents of aboriginal blood belong to a child race**, their exclusion from any school should be authorized not because they are an offence to white people or to white children, but that in their own interests they might receive **a suitable training** under conditions which are conducive to their highest welfare. (Drummond quoted in Miller 1985, p.178. My emphases.)*

The influence of scientific racism can clearly be seen in the kind of education provided for Aboriginal children on reserves as late as the 1940s and 50s. In the reserve schools, Aboriginal children were taught by untrained teachers, frequently the white manager of the reserve or his wife. Schooling did not go beyond Grade Three since Aborigines, being a "child race" (see above quote), were not considered intelligent enough to cope with higher level learning and children often finished their schooling illiterate or, at best, semi-literate (McConnochie 1988; Lippmann 1994; Catchpole 1982a; Harris 1976b). Indeed curricula in Aboriginal reserve schools were confined to preparing children for menial jobs such as manual labour for the boys and domestic work for the girls (Reynolds 1990). This is also reflected in the training children received in state-run homes after removal from their parents (Edwards & Read 1989). Thus "a suitable training" (see above quote) meant that Aboriginal people were destined to receive an education inferior to those who belonged to the "superior" race.

In the 1930s, in response to pressure from more concerned social attitudes and in the knowledge that Aborigines were not a "dying race", governments began to introduce 'assimilationist' social policies (McGrath 1995) which were supposed to assist Aboriginal people to live in the same way as other Australians (Lippmann 1994) but which in fact, continued the process of oppression.

Assimilation and Integration

Assimilationist policies were designed to result in Aboriginal people assimilating European and Anglo-Celtic cultures and lifestyles to the point that their indigenous cultures and lifestyles would disappear (Lippmann 1994). Children continued to be

taken from their families to be raised in 'homes' to speed the process of assimilation (Edwards & Read 1989; Cummings 1992).

In this policy period (1940s - 1960s) schooling for Aboriginal children was (and still is), an agent of assimilation and control rather than one of self development and improvement. Christie says:

Education for Aborigines, as for poor whites, was seen as a means of instilling obedience and compliance to the dictates of state and church. Through education, the Aborigines would be assimilated into mainstream white society and take their place on the lowest rung of the social order as obedient, well-mannered and effective workers. (Christie 1990, p.118)

When the policies of assimilation and integration were established, increasing numbers of Aboriginal children appeared in public schools, often in the face of determined opposition from white parents (Miller 1985; Harris 1976b). In accordance with the administration of government policies, school systems expected Aboriginal children to change their behaviours and lifestyles to those acceptable to white society. Retention rates were poor and under assimilation in 1964, for example, only 9% of Aboriginal students went beyond the second year of high school (Lippmann 1994). Thus a high rate of failure and a resistance to participation in schooling was established and, as will be argued later, still exists today.

In the 1960s government policies changed from assimilation to integration. Integrationist policy claimed to allow Aboriginal people to join the dominant community on equal terms and at the same time retain their own cultural identity. In retrospect, integration is frequently seen as merely an extension of the assimilationist period (McConnochie 1988; Rowley 1972) since the prevailing attitudes were the same. As in other parts of the world, perceptions of minority groups and policies directed towards them affected educational attitudes and policies.

Assimilationist policies fitted influential educational thinking of the Sixties very well. Research into the effects of disadvantage, cultural difference and low socio-economic status concerning children in schools was predicated on the idea that such children suffered from 'deficits' of one kind or another (Eckermann 1994). The solution to disadvantage was to establish compensatory educational programs which would bring those considered to be so stricken up to the levels of dominant middle-class white society (Eckermann 1994).

Deficit Model Education

During the 1960s, schooling systems' responses to cultural difference in classrooms were frequently dominated by deficit theory and children who were culturally different were perceived as disadvantaged. Explanations of unsatisfactory performance centred principally around the so-called inadequate environments of children (Eckermann 1994). The resultant compensatory education programs were based on perceptions of cognitive, linguistic and cultural poverty.

When groups, whether defined in terms of gender, race or class, are labelled as outsiders by those in power, a discourse is available that not only rationalizes the process but proceeds to turn a difference into a deficit. The victims of unequal distribution of power in our society, rather than the structural features of the society itself can thus be blamed. (Walton 1993, p.59)

Teasdale and Whitelaw (1981) document a number of programs for Aboriginal children based on deficit model thinking in Australia including a pre-school education project at Bourke in Western New South Wales. Such programs, predicated on the idea that children possessed "family or cultural values, traditions, beliefs and behaviours which inhibit later achievement" (Eckermann 1994, p.15) were common and it is not difficult to connect these theories with the persistent residual effects of 'instinct' theory and Social Darwinism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (Lippmann 1994). Aboriginal people frequently saw compensatory education programs as essentially assimilationist in nature (Eckermann 1994).

Green's (1982) survey of attitudes in schools found that teachers were concerned with identifying child deficit, family deficit and environmental deficit as the major problems in teaching Aboriginal children. Such results confirmed the previous research of Makin and Ibbotson (1973) and Tannock and Punch (1975). Deficit theory and associated compensatory education programs persisted through the 1980s. Indeed both Lippmann (1994) and Eckermann (1994) found that many teachers were still influenced by deficit model thinking in relation to Aboriginal people in the 1990's.

With a new Labor government in power in the early 1970s and the mandate given by the 1967 referendum, the scene was set for major changes in policy and legislation concerning Aboriginal people.

Self-Determination and Self-Management

The 1967 referendum gave the Federal government the right to enact legislation concerning Aborigines nationally. Aboriginal and human rights groups began to agitate

for the introduction of non-racist government policies (Lippmann 1994). In 1973 the labour government in Canberra declared a new policy in relation to Aboriginal people in order to "restore....their lost power of self-determination in economic, social and political affairs" (Hansard 1973). Because of clearly expressed racial hostility towards Aborigines, refusal of some state governments to cooperate, and vested industrial/mining interests, self-determination policies and the growing Landrights movement were frustrated (McConnochie 1988). In 1976, with a change of government came the policy of "Self-Management". Under the Whitlam government, however, supposedly self-managing Aboriginal organisations were closely supervised and compelled to operate under government regulation (Lippmann 1994).

Contemporary Education

There is a large body of literature which claims that the nature of Australian school systems is racist and discriminatory in relation to Aborigines. Organisation, methods of teaching, curricula, textbooks and other literature are commonly cited as evidence of institutional racism (see DEET 1995; Eckermann 1994; Freebody & Welch 1993; Lippmann 1994; McConnochie et al. 1988; Menary 1981; Sherwood 1982). When Australian education systems are examined in the light of assimilationist government policies practised in the 40s, 50s and 60s, a clear picture of the nature of institutional racism emerges.

It should be noted here that education is not the only social institution which exhibits features of institutional racism. Aspects of health care organisation and administration, the legal system, the social welfare system, also show clear evidence of it (see Eggleston 1976; Fitzgerald 1976; Gilbert 1973; Markus 1990; McConnochie et al. 1988; Stevens 1974; Wilson 1982).

Since the 1970s, Aboriginal participation in education has continuously remained at lower levels than the rest of the population supporting the contention that systemic exclusion has been perpetrated against Aborigines (see Table 2.1 and Lippmann 1994). Pre-school education for example, was available to only 50% of Aboriginal children in 1992 whilst it was available to 90% of the population as a whole (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and TSI Affairs 1992). Government perceptions of delivery of education to Aboriginal people, however, were still limited to viewing the symptoms of the disease rather than its causes. Thus Kerr, launching the report, *Mainly Urban* (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and TSI Affairs 1992), said:

Amongst the barriers to improved educational performance are poor self-esteem, alcohol and substance abuse, health problems, violence within families, the poverty cycle, poor service delivery, racism and discriminatory practices, and inadequate access to transport and childcare. (Kerr 1992, p.4)

Whilst these factors are certainly important in children's education, there is still no mention in this 1992 government report (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs 1992) of the failure of school systems to provide suitable education for Aboriginal children.

By the 1970s, changes in government policy from assimilation and integration to self-determination and self-management and changes in educational theory relating to bicultural education and empowerment cleared the way for more involvement of Aboriginal people in the education process (Lippmann 1994). Social, political and ideological dimensions of schooling provided broader contexts for the rhetoric of developing theories of cultural difference as an explanation for educational disadvantage (Walton 1993). The explanations for failure, however, were still the same - children were disadvantaged because they were different. Very little of the rhetoric of failure was concerned with the failure of teachers, schools and school systems to provide an appropriate education for Aboriginal children or any other children who were different from the norm (Walton 1993). Whilst changes in thinking occurred during the 1970s and 80s, notions that cultural difference and disadvantage were closely connected persisted in schools despite important research evidence to the contrary (see previous discussion on Deficit Model Education).

In a landmark literacy study, Scribner and Cole (1981) found that it was not the possession of decontextualised literacy skills which supported cognitive development but the social context of schooling and the addition of urban living that explained superior literacy performance in the test situations described. Thus Scribner and Cole (1981, pp. 251-252) maintain that "literacy is not a surrogate for schooling with respect to its intellectual consequences."

The myth that literate cultures show more complex cognitive development than non-literate ones (such as Aboriginal ones) is also debunked by Gee (1990). Thus, because Aboriginal people as a group belong to oral cultures by and large, does not mean that their intellectual development is in any way less than that of people from literate cultures although such assumptions were and are rife in education systems in Australia (Walton 1993).

In Australia, education practice lagged behind research evidence. The Disadvantaged Schools Commission in the 1970s targeted Aborigines and other groups in the lower socio-economic order for special programs which were to lift levels of participation and success in the school system.

However, during this period schools were able to develop curricula more responsive to local situations and philosophies concerning 'valuing difference' developed (Walton 1993). But valuing difference did not necessarily lead to appropriate action. This is clearly reflected in participation and retention figures (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and TSI Affairs 1992; DEET 1995; see Figure 2.2). Thus institutional routines did not change in important ways, underlying structures remained the same, pedagogies did not change and expand in appropriate ways, methods of communication did not change and expand, teachers did not provide for a range of operational and learning styles in their classrooms and 'different' children were even more isolated and marginalised in classrooms because of the attention focused on differences. The rhetoric of respect for cultural difference thus did not result in changes in fundamental systemic power structures (Walton 1993). Aboriginal children continued to fail at school in much higher proportions than Non-Aboriginal children (DEETYA 1997).

Consequently, such changes in policy and thought saw few changes in systemic structures and therefore in systemic bias and institutional racism generally in Australian education (Lankshear 1991; Eckermann 1994). Thus few structures were created in which self-determination could be exercised and education systems themselves have not basically changed (DEET 1995).

In the past twenty years much effort on the part of schools has been expended unsuccessfully on 'bridging the gap between home and school' in order to address the low success rate of Aboriginal students (Catchpole 1982b). Bridging-the-gap activities have failed, firstly, because the complex nature of institutional racism and the powerlessness of Aboriginal people in Australian society has not been recognised or understood by schools and teachers in general (Eckermann 1994). Secondly, schools essentially perceived the task as parents and community moving to school rather than school moving to parents, or school and parents moving together (Walton 1993). Thus bridging the gap activities have been essentially assimilationist in nature and an agent of systemic bias.

There have, however, been more sympathetic developments evident in education systems. Consultative structures have been established in New South Wales and other

Table 2.1
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Secondary School
Enrolments 1985 to 1993
 (adapted from DEET 1995, p.69)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Secondary School Enrolments, 1985 to 1993									
Year	Australia								
	1993	1992	1991	1990	1989	1988	1987	1986	1985
Government									
7	2,101	1,814	1,872	1,680	1,595	1,734	1,447	1,576	1,710
8	5,454	5,337	5,226	4,818	3,383	3,488	3,411	3,400	3,527
9	4,816	4,785	4,692	4,311	3,968	3,244	3,241	3,212	2,997
10	3,975	3,953	3,943	3,538	2,463	2,743	2,362	2,359	2,313
11	2,424	2,482	2,359	2,155	1,308	1,236	946	856	824
12	1,130	1,587	1,457	1,237	669	557	393	310	242
Ungraded	132	724	665	546	474	309	441	439	522
<i>Total Secondary</i>	<i>20,832</i>	<i>20,682</i>	<i>20,295</i>	<i>18,335</i>	<i>12,965</i>	<i>13,351</i>	<i>12,241</i>	<i>12,212</i>	<i>12,135</i>
<i>* Adjusted Apparent Retention Rates</i>									
10	77.4%	83.5%	77.8%	70.0%	67.1%				
11	51.2%	46.5%	41.3%	35.6%	34.1%				
12	24.2%	24.6%	21.1%	17.3%	14.6%				
Non-government									
7	143	115	91	90	101	92	113	135	139
8	766	795	719	739	725	676	688	715	659
9	635	710	665	623	667	598	625	612	655
10	619	591	614	574	601	556	517	551	472
11	424	388	345	390	345	303	345	298	281
12	307	233	260	234	214	205	166	183	156
Ungraded	570	393	233	222	73	106	119	128	93
<i>Total Secondary</i>	<i>3,464</i>	<i>3,135</i>	<i>2,930</i>	<i>2,872</i>	<i>2,726</i>	<i>2,536</i>	<i>2,573</i>	<i>2,592</i>	<i>2,455</i>
<i>* Adjusted Apparent Retention Rates</i>									
10	86.7%	80.0%	84.9%	84.6%	94.0%				
11	57.4%	38.8%	43.5%	45.7%	32.2%				
12	32.3%	27.3%	27.0%	20.0%	13.3%				
All schools:									
7	2,244	1,929	1,963	1,770	1,696	1,826	1,560	1,711	1,849
8	6,220	6,042	5,941	5,557	4,108	4,164	4,099	4,115	4,186
9	5,451	5,495	5,357	4,934	3,735	3,842	3,866	3,824	3,652
10	4,594	4,544	4,557	4,162	3,369	3,299	2,879	2,910	2,783
11	2,848	2,870	2,696	2,545	1,653	1,539	1,291	1,184	1,105
12	1,837	1,820	1,717	1,471	883	742	559	472	398
Ungraded	1,102	1,117	898	768	547	475	500	558	615
<i>Total Secondary</i>	<i>24,296</i>	<i>23,817</i>	<i>23,633</i>	<i>21,482</i>	<i>15,894</i>	<i>16,199</i>	<i>14,814</i>	<i>14,804</i>	<i>14,590</i>
<i>* Adjusted Apparent Retention Rates</i>									
10	78.5%	83.0%	78.7%	71.7%	70.1%				
11	52.0%	45.5%	41.6%	36.8%	33.9%				
12	25.2%	24.9%	21.8%	17.6%	14.4%				
<i>* in Government Schools</i>									
10	85.7%	88.8%	85.5%	83.4%	81.6%	82.4%	82.0%	82.5%	83.2%

* Adjusted Apparent Retention Rates are to compensate for the lack of data in Queensland and Victoria

Source: NSSC and Schools and Curriculum Division, DEET, 1985 to 1993

states in the form of Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups. There is also a network of regional advisory groups on Aboriginal education issues. The National Aboriginal Education Committee advises on a national basis. In New South Wales, an Aboriginal Education Policy has been in existence since 1982, an anti-racism policy also exists and Aboriginal Studies is now mandatory for all children in New South Wales. Where appropriate, Aboriginal perspectives are incorporated in course syllabi (see, for example, the Modern History Syllabus, the Year Ten History Syllabus and English Syllabi in New South Wales and many others).

Previous discussion has examined developments in Aboriginal society using social constructs viewed through a predominantly historical perspective. The following discussion attempts to place these developments in the context of the concept of systemic bias as shown in Eckermann's (1995) model (Figure 2.1).

Systemic Bias

If systemic bias {see Eckermann's (1995) model Figure 2.1} exists in a society, then certain groups in that society are excluded from power or from success because they do not have the skills and possessions necessary for membership of the power elite. The social system and its structures are thus biased in favour of that power elite. The skills and qualifications needed in Australian society include such things as being white and middle-class; understanding and responding appropriately to particular rules, regulations and practices; being aware of particular norms and values and associated behaviour, possessing certain levels or kinds of education (such as high literacy levels), using 'correct' language or the language of power and access to high levels of income (Eckermann et al. 1992).

Those in power are able to maintain their power because they have access to the range of necessary and desirable qualifications and the ability to use those skills in controlling others (Lankshear 1991). It is not difficult to demonstrate that Aboriginal people in contemporary Australia have very limited access to that power because of the history of exclusion and oppression over the past two hundred years.

Studies in pedagogy in relation to the literacy education of Aboriginal children completed by Walton (1986), Christie (1987b), Malin (1994), Trouw (1994) and Eckermann (1994) have revealed that pedagogical practices of teachers and their use of language systematically exclude Aboriginal children from participation in classroom activity and the life of the school. For example, Walton's (1986) study found that the social construction of the writing process was ignored because of the emphasis on

structure in implementing process and model in creative writing lessons. Assumptions were made about the writing/literacy background of children (who were from an oral cultural tradition) which prevented effective participation in process writing. Thus process writing procedures assumed children came from a literate background and that their first language was Standard Australian English. Walton (1993) also raised questions of broader concern about the applicability of progressivist pedagogy based on models developed from literate traditions to cross-cultural contexts. Luke, Baty and Stehbens (1989) raise this point in their critique of Cambourne's (1988) "Natural Learning" model (see Chapter 3).

Malin's (1994) study documents the process of exclusion of Aboriginal children from reading knowledge. The language of teachers in her study is illuminating in terms of their exercise of power to exclude certain participants in the class through language. Malin (1994) reports that Aboriginal children in the "bottom" reading group were excluded from such teacher acts as probing questions; relating content back to previous lessons; and constructive responses to student initiatives. For these students, too, there were few displays of affection, indications of high expectations or expressions of camaraderie. Other studies on the use of classroom questioning techniques and cultural appropriateness show clearly the operations of systemic bias in the classroom talk employed (Trouw 1994).

Differences in personal interaction styles, learning styles and orientations towards verbal learning in Aborigines have been identified by Harris (1985) as factors in systemic bias. Coombs, Brändl and Snowdon (1983) and Malin (1990) identified reticence on the part of Aboriginal children to take expected public risks in the classroom as a factor in systemic bias. Malin's (1990) study also found that the independent decisionmaking expected of Aboriginal children at home was inappropriate in schooling systems which do not value such independence. In addition, whilst some Aboriginal groups allow their children independent decisionmaking from an early age, it may be wrong at home to ask direct questions or draw attention to oneself as an individual (Harris 1984). Christie (1987b) found that Aboriginal children frequently treated school as a ritualistic endeavour where participation and attendance are seen as ends in themselves rather than learning. Thus their perceptions of schooling and its purposes were very different from the way education systems view themselves. It should be noted here, however, that perceptions of schooling vary widely between Aboriginal groups as Day (1994) clearly shows in his account of variations in student and parental attitudes towards schooling in Darwin.

There are many other indications of systemic bias in Australian education systems. For example, whilst all people have group and individual orientations, the ways in which these operate in Aboriginal communities may differ from those of school systems (Eckermann 1994). This has clear implications for discipline policy in school systems and incentive/motivational styles in classrooms. Aboriginal expectations in these areas may well be very different from school expectations.

The findings of the studies detailed above are often not generalisable to all Aboriginal populations in Australia, given the diverse nature of their cultures and lifestyles. However, the array of identified areas of dysfunction between Aboriginal children's home cultures and the school culture they encounter, provides good evidence of the prevalence of systemic bias and resultant structural violence in Australian education systems.

Such findings have been confirmed in pedagogical studies involving minority groups overseas who were participating in education in mainstream schools (Delpit 1988). Thus, research is increasingly showing the nature of the inadequacies of pedagogical theory and practice and school organisation in cross-cultural education for Aboriginal children and other children who are culturally different from the mainstream.

Teacher education provides another example of the operations of systemic bias. Despite clear recognition in the past fifteen years of the multicultural nature of the Australian population, teacher education in cross-cultural aspects of teaching has remained at a very basic level (DEET 1995; Green 1982; House of Representatives Select Committee on Aboriginal Education 1985; Hubble 1982). In addition, there are only very small numbers of Aboriginal teachers (DEET 1995). The House of Representatives Select Committee (1985) also makes the point, that because there are often only one or two Aboriginal children in a class, schools frequently see no need to make special curricular provisions for them.

High levels of placement of young and inexperienced teachers in isolated schools with high Aboriginal populations has occurred in NSW schools for many years because more experienced teachers have 'earned' their placements in schools nearer to larger population centres. Teachers stay in these difficult schools for as short a time as possible and then move to easier placements in the east of the state. Incentives are few for the more experienced and competent to stay and children may be taught by teachers in their first year out of university for the whole of their school lives (Eckermann 1994).

Literacy

It is claimed that up to 45% of Aboriginal children in New South Wales have literacy problems as opposed to only 16% of other children (NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group 1996).

In the previous section, a brief review of historico-social factors active in the treatment of Aboriginal people in Australia was presented and related to education. Lankshear (1991) further illuminates this picture by placing Australian society in the context of global economic and social changes. Australia is described as a post-industrial society which is being forced to re-define its position in the world economic order in terms of less concentration on manufacturing and more on provision of services and information (Lankshear 1991; Gee 1993). Employment in Australia's post-industrial economy requires most people to be able to read and count at least at a basic level. Information technology is of increasing importance, not only in highly skilled jobs but in everyday life (Lankshear 1991). Levett & Lankshear (1990) also maintain that the major advances in science and technology this century have been "theory-driven" and these have carried the greatest social rewards in terms of money and status.

On this basis then, employment in post-industrial economies is increasingly polarised. There is employment which requires high levels of education and managerial, technological and related literacy skills. These jobs carry high levels of security, reward and satisfaction. Then there is employment which is frequently part-time, requires minimal qualifications (including only functional literacy), secures minimal wages and carries few of the comforts of high level jobs such as security and union protection (Berlin 1993). In addition, this kind of employment is shrinking. De Castell and Luke (1989, p. 88) support these contentions describing functional literacy in a post-industrial society as "types of reading and writing [which] increasingly involve literal information processing, requiring standardized responses to routine texts." Studies by Heath (1986) and Apple (1983, 1986) are confirmatory. Lankshear also points out that, through changes in government policy, workers at this level have increasingly less access to social security and welfare than previously.

The net effect of such policies is to intensify the vulnerability of those on the wrong end of the new inequality inherent in the post-industrial economic and social order. (Lankshear 1991, p.211)

He maintains that illiteracy is a symptom of powerlessness rather than a cause of it. Kumar (1993) supports this in his analysis of literacy and primary education in India as do Freire & Macedo (1987). In Freire's (1985, p.10) words: "Illiteracy is one of the

concrete expressions of an unjust social reality." Walton (1993, p.57) illustrates this contention in Australia, with reference to the continued destruction of Aboriginal languages and cultures through "the device of schooling". Miller (1985) makes similar points. The effective denial of access to education for thousands of Aboriginal children living in isolated areas (see Walton 1993) further illustrates the conditions to which the powerless are subject.

Anderson and Irvine (1993) maintain that although much modern literacy research recognises the social context of literacy learning, it often fails to acknowledge the complexities of language and power relationships. Gee (1990) too, stresses that literacy must be viewed in the context of society in terms of the perspectives of power, politics and ideology. Previous discussion on educational provisions for Aboriginal people highlights the fact that education was and is not a tool for their empowerment. Rather, education has been a means by which the dominant society ensured that Aboriginal people were kept, firstly, in a position of subservience and secondly, in a position in which success by any definition was virtually impossible. Such positions are also described by Freire and Macedo (1987), Gee (1990), Giroux (1987) and Luke and Gilbert (1993).

James Paul Gee (1990) examines what he calls 'literacy myths' which he sees as agents of social control - the idea, for example, that becoming literate will lead to a better life. Graff's (1979) study, and others cited by Gee (Donald 1983; Gilmore 1985; Levine 1986; Street 1984) demonstrate clearly the falseness of such myths and support the inference that it is the *kind* of literacy which is important in the exercise of social power. Thus language and power relationships and literacy skills related to developing technologies interact in a manner exclusive of Aboriginal people.

In light of the above factors, then, it can be seen that the underlying purpose of literacy education for Aboriginal people has essentially been to maintain the status quo - to maintain their position of powerlessness in contemporary Australian society.

Functional Literacy

In industrial societies of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, mass education and therefore literacy has been said to serve the production of material goods (Freire 1985). Literacy has been described as "that which equipped workers and soldiers to use weapons or machinery" (Bigum & Green 1993, p.5). Thus becoming literate was meant to ensure that workers had the appropriate skills to serve those in power. Literacy was not meant to empower the workers but to help them function in the cause of production.

Freire (1985) maintains that to see literacy merely as the act of reading and writing is naive indeed. He maintains that the traditional concept of literacy as "depositing" words and syllables into the illiterate is inadequate, because this concept ignores the political and ideological nature of literacy learning (1985). As Giroux (1985, p. xv) points out, schools function for:

....the transmission and reproduction of a dominant culture in schools, with its selective ordering and privileging of specific forms of language, modes of reasoning, social relations, and cultural forms and experiences.

Previous discussion of the uses of education as social control in Australia supports also his point.

Today functional literacy may be described as the most basic form of literacy which is needed for living and working in a post-industrial society such as Australia's (see discussion above for the kinds of literacy operations required in a post-industrial society). It is considered that certain levels of literacy are necessary to support and serve competition on world markets (Lankshear 1991; Bigum & Green 1993). Thus literacy is still closely related to the economy and production of a different sort in a post-industrial society. Therefore it is still an agent of economic and social control. Whilst the nature of work in a post-industrial society such as Australia is different from that of an industrial society, those who possess power are able to exclude others such as Aborigines from effective and successful participation in that society.

Lankshear (1991) maintains that to consider the nature of children's home background as a primary cause of illiteracy is to see the issues simplistically. This point is supported by previous discussion of deepseated causes of oppression in relation to Aborigines and Australian society. Thus "pumping up" basic skills in Aboriginal literacy programs or changing pedagogy or content in schools is not likely to improve literacy levels or participation levels in schools unless concomitant social reorganisation occurs. Lankshear's (1991, p.215) point that "..... 'disadvantaged' homes are themselves largely symptoms of wider social practices and relationships" thus fits well with the evidence presented later of structural violence in relation to Aborigines and Australian society.

Given the polarisation of employment types in a post-industrial society discussed above, it is clear that the relatively low level of literacy attained by Aboriginal people (see Figure 2.2) as a group is a factor in discriminatory social processes which often prevents them from being able to obtain work of any kind let alone that which requires

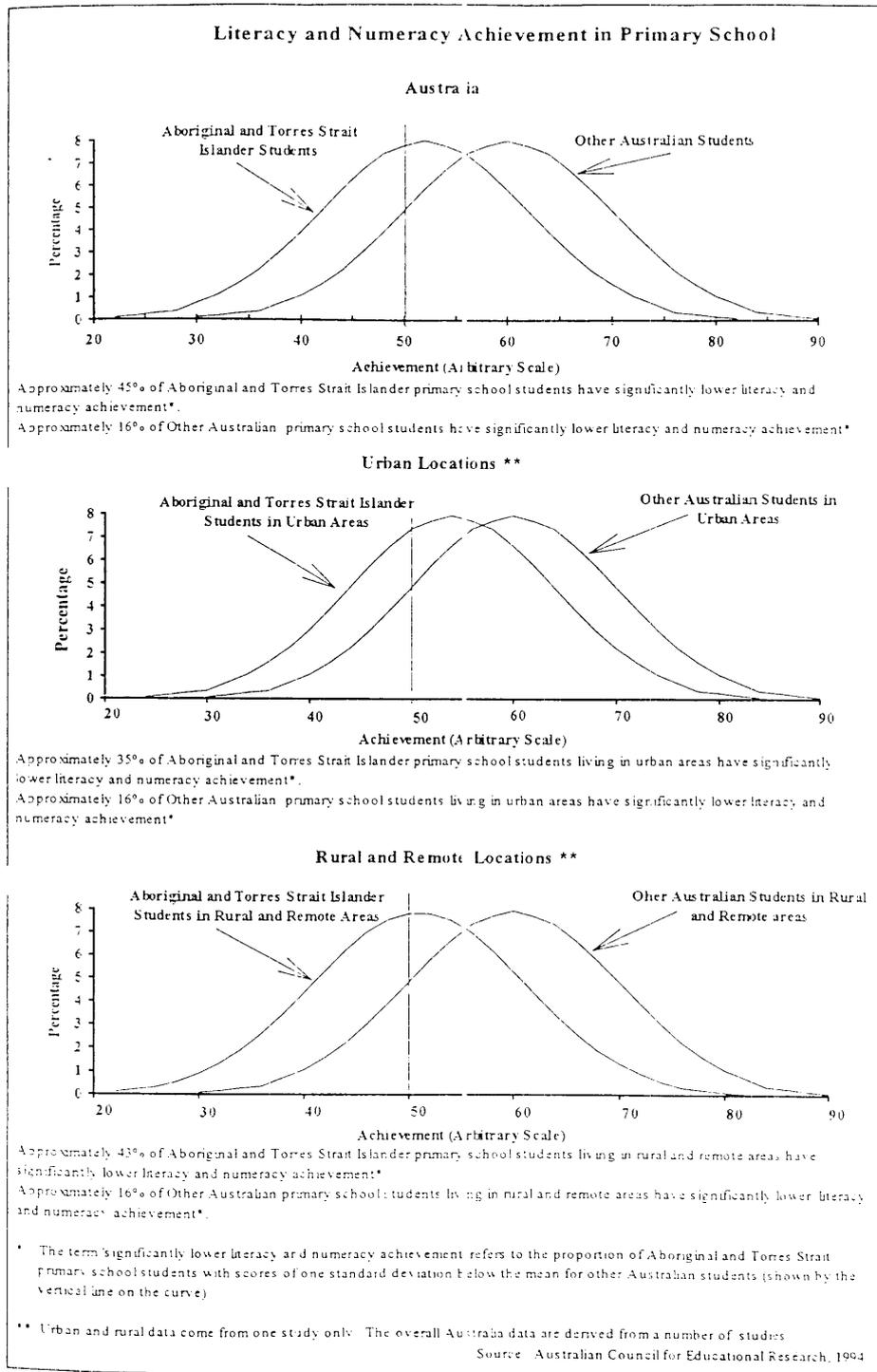


Figure 2.2
Literacy and Numeracy Achievement in Primary School
 (adapted from DEET 1995, p. 56)

more than basic skills. Lack of the kinds of literacy required for high level jobs therefore exclude Aboriginal people as a group from these positions.

The complex interactions of past historical phenomena and institutional racism in Australian social institutions have affected the position of Aboriginal people in Australia and placed them in a position of economic and social marginalisation in Australian society (Lankshear 1991). Evidence of such a position is provided when an examination of an Australian social institution such as education in terms of structural violence is conducted.

Structural Violence and Education

Eckermann (1994, p.34) defines structural violence as "violence inherent in the social order". She maintains that structural violence (see Figure 2.1) can be manifested physically, psychologically and socially and is clear evidence of deepseated racism built into the fabric of Australian social institutions. As Lankshear (1991, p.216) maintains, schooling "is a ritual system in which they (children of 'disadvantaged' groups such as Aborigines) are most likely to be inducted into failure." Low retention rates in schools and universities, fewer educational qualifications and lower levels of literacy attainment than in the general population (Morgan 1987) as well as frustration of group aspirations through systemic bias are evident in all Aboriginal populations in Australia and may thus be seen as illustrative of structural violence (Eckermann 1992). Further, for Aboriginal people, schools often create failure through such institutionalised practices as techniques used to sort children for remedial help or special education (Trouw 1994; Lankshear 1991; Walton 1993).

Structural violence is also evident in relation to the poor health of Aboriginal people and its consequent effect on their education in contemporary Australian society (Eckermann et al. 1992; Lippmann 1994; Lankshear 1991). High infant mortality rates, high levels of morbidity, evidence of stress, alienation and dependency are features of the health of Aboriginal people as a group (Eckermann 1994).

Blindness, respiratory diseases, hearing impairment, sexually transmitted diseases, diabetes, alcohol dependence and abuse, and psychological problems have all been identified as occurring at much higher levels in the Aboriginal population than in the total population (Lippmann 1994). Such a position in relation to health inevitably affects children's performance at school and therefore levels of literacy competence and development, especially when poverty, poor housing and unemployment are part of a position of economic and social marginalisation such as Aboriginal people experience

in this country. For example, in the group of children who participated in this study, a total of 68% were identified as having Otitis Media, an ear complaint common in Aboriginal children which decreases hearing levels and results in a high incidence of speech related problems (Roberts 1996). Hospitalisation rates indicate that high percentages of Aboriginal children miss significant time at school (Lippmann 1994). Many other health conditions such as respiratory infection and eye disease affect the performance of Aboriginal children at school (Eckermann 1992).

Conclusion

Thus, in this chapter, the position of Aboriginal people in Australia has been reviewed briefly in the light of their experience of invasion and colonisation, past and present attitudes towards them and the treatment encountered by them in education as a direct result of those attitudes. Examination of the effects of prejudice and discrimination through institutional racism, systemic bias and structural violence have also been used to illuminate the social context of Aboriginal education. In Shor's (1993) terms, Aboriginal people have been prevented from attaining a state of 'critical consciousness' which would allow them to recognise their position in Australian society through critical examination and then act on it in an informed manner as described by Berthoff (1987).

The experience of social and racial oppression, it is posited, contributes to the nature of Aboriginal cultural difference in relation to contemporary Australian society. Thus, in the next chapter, a general description of literacy development is explored in the light of the possible effects upon such development of being a member of an oppressed cultural minority.